

Voting for Hard Eurosceptic Parties in 2024 European Parliament Elections in the Czech Republic: The Role of Salience and Attitude toward Czexit¹

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Abstract

In this article, we test the applicability of the EU issue voting model to the case of the 2024 Czech European Parliament elections. Given the increasing importance of the issue of leaving or remaining in the European Union, we examine whether voters' attitudes towards this issue affect their electoral behaviour. Furthermore, research on individual-level salience's effects on EU issue voting is limited. To address this gap, we leverage post-election survey data on the importance voters attribute to the issue of leaving the EU to assess whether salience influences turnout and moderates the effect of voter preferences on party choice. We show that voters who judge the issue of Czexit to be highly salient are less likely to abstain. Additionally, we find that in general, voters' attitudes regarding Czexit exert only a weak effect on their decision to support parties that reflect their views on this issue. However, we find that this effect is moderated

¹ Funding: This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project 'Beyond Security: Role of Conflict in Resilience-Building' (reg. no.: CZ.02.01.01/00/22_008/0004595).

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to a large degree by the salience that voters attribute to the issue, in that voters considering the question of Czexit to be highly salient are considerably more likely to support parties that match their preferences (i.e. Czexit supporters vote for hard Eurosceptic parties and remain supporters for non-hard Eurosceptic parties). Thus, the study concludes that voter behaviour largely follows an EU issue voting logic, highlighting the key role played by issue salience in this process.

Keywords: European Parliament election; EU issue voting; salience; hard Euroscepticism; EU membership; voter behaviour; Czech Republic

DOI: 10.5817/PC2025-2-121

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1. Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections occurred amidst a political atmosphere marked by Euroscepticism across the European Union, with membership debates especially salient in Central and Eastern European countries. In the Czech Republic, where Eurosceptic sentiment among political parties has gradually been rising, this context provides a unique opportunity to examine the influence of the issue of leaving or remaining in the EU (which we term the ‘Czexit issue’) on voter turnout and party choice in the EP elections.

This article uses literature on EU issue voting as a theoretical framework for understanding how citizens’ attitudes toward European integration may influence their voting behaviour in these elections. Historically, EP elections have been conceptualized as ‘second-order’ elections characterized by low turnout and driven more by national-level issues (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), often encompassing expressions of dissatisfaction with incumbent governments, rather than issues directly related to the EU. However, recent trends, such as the rise of Eurosceptic parties (Treib, 2021) and major political crises such as Brexit, have led some scholars to challenge this view, suggesting that as the EU has been politicized, the nature of individual countries’ EU membership has emerged as an issue capable of shaping voter behaviour.

Although turnout in EP elections is traditionally lower than in national elections, recent research links rising participation to support for both Eurosceptic and pro-EU parties (Carrieri, 2024). With hard Euroscepticism – conventionally defined as the rejection of the entire European integration project and opposition to the respective country remaining a member of the EU (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004) – gaining attention, the impact of the particular issue of whether to leave the EU on electoral behaviour warrants closer examination. For voters with hard Eurosceptic views, EP elections provide a unique opportunity to express opposition to their country’s membership by supporting parties committed to EU

withdrawal. Conversely, EU supporters have an opportunity to vote for parties defending EU membership or even supporting deeper EU integration.

In addition, while the very idea of voting to express one's preferences inherently relies on the concept of issue salience, in that voters must consider this issue to be highly important to use these particular preferences to guide their vote choice, little previous research has examined individual-level salience as a factor in electoral behaviour at EP elections. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of both salience and support for either Czexit or remaining in the EU on voter behaviour in EP elections in the Czech Republic in 2024. We test hypotheses about the role of salience attributed to the Czexit issue as both a predictor of voter turnout and a moderator of voter support for political parties.

This article is structured as follows: we begin by introducing issue voting theory, with a particular emphasis on previous literature regarding EU-related issues and highlight the debate around leaving the EU as taking on increasing importance in this regard. We then introduce the case of the Czech Republic, presenting political parties' positions on the Czexit issue, and outline our three hypotheses. This is followed by a description of the post-election survey data, measurement, and analytical strategy employed in our study. The results section then presents our findings, and, finally, we discuss the implications of these results.

2. Issue voting theory

In theorizing about the effects of mass-level hard Euroscepticism on voter behaviour in the 2024 EP election in the Czech Republic, we draw upon the considerable literature on EU issue voting (e.g. Hobolt et al., 2009; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; van Spanje & de Vreese, 2011). Issue voting models, in general, suggest that issues matter to voters when choosing who to vote for. In line with a spatial understanding of voter behaviour, voters are thus understood to favour the parties that best match their own ideological preferences (Adams et al., 2005; Downs, 1957). While this logic is highly intuitive, however, it raises the question of which specific issue preferences matter for voters in this regard. Consistent with the literature on issue salience, we may consider voters to be guided by their compatibility with parties concerning the particular issue or issues that they consider to be of primary importance (Lachat, 2011; RePass, 1971). It therefore may not matter to a voter if a party is ideologically distant on an issue of minor importance to them, so long as it remains congruent on more salient issues. As we discuss below, a range of scholars have applied this logic of voter behaviour to understand the outcomes of EP elections, arguing that the election campaign raises the salience of European integration in the minds of voters, thus encouraging them to vote for parties that closely represent their views on this particular issue.

3. Issue voting in European Parliament elections

Historically speaking, in explaining the results of European elections, particularly the generally poor performance of governing parties, the most widely held conception of voter behaviour has been the 'second-order' model. From this perspective, voters in EU elections follow a similar logic to other 'mid-term' domestic elections (Hix & Marsh, 2007; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005). That is, voters tend to make their party choices based on salient national-level issues and cleavages, along with evaluations of the performance of the incumbent national government. Voters' attitudes towards the European Union, meanwhile, are seen as a minor consideration at best.

More recently, however, based on growing support for Eurosceptic parties in recent years, several scholars have made the case that, at European elections, 'Europe matters' (Hix & Marsh, 2007). To the extent that the issue of the European Union has previously been a 'sleeping giant' (van der Eijk & Franklin, 2004) - that is, a potentially polarizing political issue which does not (yet) guide voter behaviour - there is strong reason to expect that the giant has since awoken. As Hooghe and Marks (2009) argue, whereas the EU (and previously the European Economic Community) was once considered too complex and distant from most citizens to be a salient political issue, European integration has since become politicized at the mass level, with many voters holding clear and ingrained positions on the topic and numerous parties (particularly those on the Eurosceptic side) making it a central aspect of their policy platforms. Indeed, crises taking place over the past decade, including Brexit, the Euro crisis and the migration crisis, have likely increased the salience of the EU and thereby encouraged voters to take positions on questions of integration (Carrieri et al., 2024). Therefore, there is widespread recognition that Euroscepticism has entered the political mainstream (Leconte, 2015).

As a result of the politicization of European integration, voters' attitudes regarding the EU may influence their vote choice in any election. However, the salience of this issue is likely to peak during European elections (Hobolt et al., 2009), providing voters with a specific opportunity to support parties that reflect their stance on European integration and express their support or opposition to it. In contrast to the previously dominant view of European elections, then, the EU issue voting model holds that voters' ideological positions vis-à-vis the European Union are of considerable importance in understanding how they choose between the parties on offer at these elections (Hobolt, 2015; de Vries et al., 2011). As Brack and Hoon (2017, p. 175) neatly put it, per the EU issue voting model, '*the eurosceptic vote can best be explained by euroscepticism*'.

Of course, to cast a Eurosceptic (or indeed Europhile) vote in EP elections requires not only choosing a party that reflects these preferences, but also turning

out to vote in the first place. Turnout at EP elections is consistently far lower than ‘first-order’ national elections, a fact that proponents of the second-order model have reasonably put down to there being ‘less at stake’ in these elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Yet this still leaves open the question of what motivates some voters to turn out despite these lower stakes. Per an EU issue voting logic, we can understand the decision to turn out, like the decision to vote for a particular party, to be informed by voters’ willingness (or lack thereof) to express their opinion on the matter of European integration (Mattila, 2003; Braun & Schäfer, 2022). All else being equal, those who feel less strongly about the EU are thus seen as more likely to abstain from voting in European elections than those who consider the issue to be of considerable importance. Thus, in offering an alternative means of understanding the outcomes of European elections to the previously dominant second-order model, the EU issue voting model provides a framework for understanding both how voters choose between parties and whether they vote at all.

Indeed, the EU issue voting model has received considerable empirical support. For example, Hobolt et al. (2009) find that supporters of governing parties are more likely to defect to other parties or abstain entirely at European elections when they hold Eurosceptic attitudes. Van Spanje and de Vreese (2011) show that several different aspects of voters’ attitudes towards the EU influenced their likelihood of supporting Eurosceptic parties at the 2009 European elections, findings which have been broadly corroborated by analyses of subsequent European elections (Goldberg et al., 2024; van Elsas et al., 2019). De Vries and Hobolt (2016), meanwhile, find that dissatisfaction with the EU’s handling of the ongoing economic crisis informed the decisions of voters who defected from mainstream pro-EU parties to their Eurosceptic rivals in 2014. Indeed, issue voting is not necessarily confined to anti-EU voters; strong pro-EU sentiments likewise encourage turnout and support for ideologically compatible parties on this issue at European elections (Carrieri, 2024; Carrieri et al., 2023; Carrieri et al., 2024). Several studies of voter behaviour in individual countries have also found support for the issue voting model (Brack & Hoon, 2017; Morini, 2017; Partheymüller et al., 2020; Reher, 2017; Schüberl et al., 2020).

4. EU salience and voter behaviour in European Parliament elections

Voter positioning on the issue of European integration is central to the EU issue voting model. The typical approach used to test the EU issue voting model is thus to examine the extent to which individuals’ vote choices at European elections can be predicted by such positioning. Alongside this, however, the salience attributed to European integration is an equally important aspect of EU issue voting, despite often being referred to only implicitly in the literature.

Inherently, the idea of EU issue voting only makes sense if the EU is sufficiently salient in voters' minds that they are willing to use their vote to express their preferences on this particular issue. As we have discussed, the development of the EU issue voting model in explaining voter behaviour at European elections is based on the view that European integration has begun to take on more importance in the minds of voters; hence, the issue is no longer a 'sleeping giant'. Studies often invoke this view to explain European election results in specific countries, arguing, for example, that voting patterns followed an EU issue voting logic because of the high salience of European integration at that point in time (Tillman, 2004; de Vries, 2007). Consistent with this, researchers have highlighted associations between aggregate-level measures of EU issue salience and levels of issue voting at European elections. Studies of contextual variation in EU issue voting find such voting to be more prevalent in cases where greater media attention has been paid to the European Union and greater political conflict between parties on this issue exists (de Vries et al., 2011; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016).

This logic should also apply at the individual level. Individual voters who consider the issue of European integration to be of considerable importance to them are more likely to favour a party that accurately represents their view on this issue than those who care little, regardless of their actual positioning. However, little previous research has examined the effect of individual-level salience on EU issue voting, despite the strong theoretical reasons to expect such an effect. In this paper, we fill this gap by investigating the moderating role of issue salience in the relationship between individuals' attitudes towards their country's membership in the EU and their party choice at European elections. Taken together, then, to fully assess the degree to which the issue of EU membership affects individuals' vote choices, we argue it is necessary to consider the importance individuals place on this issue and their stance on it.

5. Hard Euroscepticism: the issue of leaving the EU

Thus far, we have discussed the theoretical and empirical bases for the broad expectation that attitudes towards the EU influence voter behaviour in European elections. To be more specific, however, we theorize that voters should be motivated by the question of whether to leave the European Union as a whole. In this sense, while the EU issue voting model suggests that Euroscepticism (broadly understood as the opposition to EU integration or certain aspects of it) encourages support for Eurosceptic parties, we note that prior studies have distinguished 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism.

As Taggart and Szczerbiak (2004) argue, soft Eurosceptics tend to display hostility towards particular aspects of European integration, such as the adoption

of the single currency, or advocate for the preservation of one's own national interest amidst EU policymaking, but stop short of arguing for the total disintegration of the EU or their own country's withdrawal. In contrast, hard Eurosceptics are inherently opposed to the idea of European integration, viewing it as ideologically incompatible with their own values; Taggart and Szczerbiak (2004, p. 3) give examples of the EU being perceived as too liberal, capitalist or socialist, as potentially underpinning hard Eurosceptic attitudes.

Although this conceptualization of different varieties of Euroscepticism was developed in the context of explaining party positions on the EU, it can likewise be applied to voters' attitudes. Despite most of the studies highlighted above, which test EU issue voting hypotheses, examining the effect of general attitudes towards the EU on vote choice, we argue that hard Euroscepticism, in particular, should constitute a key aspect of EU issue voting. If, as the EU issue voting model suggests, voters use European elections as an opportunity to express their opinions on the EU, those who vehemently oppose the European Union will have a clear motivation to do so. Although it could be argued that hard Eurosceptics may not wish to legitimise the elections by turning out at all, this is less likely to apply in a context where prominent hard Eurosceptic parties are competing for support, as is the case in much of contemporary Europe (Treib, 2014). Under these circumstances, voting for such parties can offer a far greater rebuke to the EU than abstaining.

Indeed, hard Euroscepticism across Europe should be particularly influential in the post-Brexit era. Where previously, the idea of individual member states leaving the European Union would likely have been seen as a remote prospect, hard Eurosceptics now have a clear precedent for their country to emulate. As such, we expect the issue of potentially leaving the EU altogether to occupy particularly high salience in the minds of contemporary voters at European elections, and therefore serve as a key determinant of voter behaviour.

Moreover, the issue of leaving need not motivate only ardent opponents of the EU. As already noted, Carrieri et al. (2024) find clear evidence of issue voting among pro-EU voters. As with hard Eurosceptics, the issue of leaving the EU is likely to be a strong motivating factor among such Europhile issue voters. Both Brexit and the presence of prominent parties advocating either direct withdrawal or a referendum on the subject should thus focus the minds of those who consider it highly important that their country remain in the EU, thus leading them to favour non-Eurosceptic parties at European elections. As such, we theorise that the issue of leaving, and the salience attributed to it, should comprise key aspects of general EU issue voting, capable of motivating both hard Eurosceptic and Europhile voters.

5.1 The case of the Czech Republic

While the argument we have set out above may apply to a wide range of European cases, we note that there is reason to expect it to apply to the specific case of the 2024 European elections in the Czech Republic we analyse in this paper. For one thing, although analyses of earlier Czech European elections have suggested voter behaviour to be dominated by domestic issues consistent with the second-order model (de Vries & Hobolt, 2016; Hloušek & Kaniok, 2020), recent studies indicate that the Czech Republic has become a candidate for widespread EU issue voting. Braun and Schäfer (2022) find the Czech Republic to be one of only two countries (the other being Slovakia) in which European integration was most commonly cited by voters as the issue that made them turn out to vote in the 2019 European elections. Similarly, Maier et al. (2021) show the salience of the European issues among both government and opposition parties in the Czech Republic during the 2019 election campaign was well above the average for all 27 analysed member states.

Indeed, concerning hard Euroscepticism and the leave-remain issue, it is important to note that as of 2024, several Czech parties have either supported leaving the EU or a referendum on the Czech Republic's membership as part of their official platforms. Specifically, we note four parties active during the 2024 campaign have taken such positions. As Havlík and Hloušek (2025) note, the far-right party Freedom and Direct Democracy (*SPD*) had long favoured withdrawal from the EU. It did not moderate this position even in the aftermath of Brexit when other hard Eurosceptic actors were doing so. As such, in their shared European election programme with Tricolour (*Trikolora*), the *SPD* favoured reclaiming national sovereignty from the EU to the point that the union was 'dissolved' (*SPD & Trikolora*, 2024). Another right-wing party, the Freedomists (*Svobodní*), have similarly committed to 'a timely separation of the Czech Republic from the Union' through a referendum vote (*Svobodní*, 2024). The Communists (*KSČM*) have also been consistent opponents of the Czech Republic's membership of the EU. As of 2024, a referendum on withdrawal remains a central pillar of the party programme (*KSČM*, 2024). All these hard Eurosceptic parties, or their respective electoral coalitions, gained more than one per cent of valid votes cast (with the parties together obtaining 17.05% of valid votes). As noted below, further hard Eurosceptic parties competed at the election, but each won less than one per cent of the vote. Beyond this, several other parties took generally Eurosceptic positions during the 2024 campaign, including the electoral coalition between Oath and Motorists (*Přísaha a Motoristé*) and the right-wing populist party *PRO* (Law, Respect, Expertise). However, as they stopped short of outwardly supporting withdrawal or a membership referendum, we do not identify these parties as hard Eurosceptics.

Party supply is a key component of issue voting. For voters to vote in a way that expresses their attitudes on the EU, they must have parties that represent

these attitudes. Evidently, this is the case in the Czech party system, even for hard Eurosceptic voters, who have multiple options to choose between in this regard. Consequently, there is good reason to expect voters' attitudes towards leaving or remaining in the EU to have played a substantial role in determining the outcome of the 2024 European election in the Czech Republic, particularly the sizeable support won by hard Eurosceptic parties.

6. Hypotheses

Based on issue voting theory and previous findings, we introduce hypotheses regarding the role of the Czexit issue in the 2024 EP election. Starting with turnout, we expect that issue salience will be related to voters' decision to vote or abstain, which leads us to the following hypothesis:

H1: *The greater the salience attributed to the issue of leaving or remaining in the European Union, the lower the probability of abstention.*

Turning to party choice, we expect voters' positioning on the issue of Czech membership in the EU to affect their electoral behaviour. The strongest supporters of Czexit should be most disposed towards supporting hard Eurosceptic parties as the best means of conveying their hostile feelings towards the EU, while those who most favour continued membership in the EU should be the least willing to support such parties. As such, we hypothesize the following:

H2: *Voters' position on Czexit will influence their party choice in alignment with their stance.*

In addition, we theorize the salience of the Czexit issue to act as a moderator in the relationship between voters' attitudes and their party choices. If, as the literature on EU issue voting discussed above has suggested, voters have generally become more likely to cast their vote based on EU (as opposed to domestic) issues as a result of European integration having become more salient, then individual voters should be more likely to follow an issue voting logic when they consider such issues to be of high importance. In contrast, those who consider the issue of EU membership largely irrelevant should be more likely to vote based on other issues, and may therefore end up supporting parties that do not reflect their attitudes on the EU. Indeed, we consider this an important test of the applicability of the EU issue voting model: if the effect of EU attitudes on vote choice is not moderated by salience, it raises the possibility that voters are selecting parties based on general ideological similarities, which include but are far from limited to EU issues, rather than specifically opting for parties that will convey their support for, or opposition to, the EU. We therefore hypothesize the following:

H3: *The effect of voters' Czexit attitude on their party choice will be moderated by the salience they ascribe to this issue.*

7. Data, measurement and analytical strategy

Sample

We analyse data from the post-election wave of the *Czech Attitude Barometer*, (Kudrnáč et al., 2024) a longitudinal panel survey using multistage stratified random sampling (strata are NUTS 3 regions and size of the place of residence). The sample is largely representative of the Czech-speaking adult population living in the Czech Republic and includes 1609 respondents (57% female, average age of 51.1 years).

The fieldwork started on Monday, 11th June 2024, right after the 2024 EP election in the Czech Republic (7th and 8th June). Most of the respondents (95% of the sample) completed the CAWI survey by 25th June, whereas the remaining respondents provided their answers by 30th July. Respondents who were not eligible to vote in the 2024 EP election (due to being below 18 years of age or not being eligible to vote in this election due to other reasons) were excluded from the analysis.

Operationalization

Dependent variables. Based on issue voting theory, we consider voter turnout and party choice as two stages of electoral behaviour. Hence, we create two outcome variables for the regression models. Following our first hypothesis, the first outcome variable is a binary variable measuring abstention (0 = turnout, 1 = abstention).

Since our remaining two hypotheses refer to party choice, the second outcome variable is a binary indicator of voting for a non-hard Eurosceptic party and a hard Eurosceptic party. Respondents who reported voting for a party or coalition which did not campaign for direct withdrawal from the EU or a referendum on the Czech EU membership are coded as 0. Respondents who reported voting for a hard Eurosceptic party/coalition are coded as 1. The following subjects belong to the hard Eurosceptic party choice outcome variable category: *Enough!* (a coalition led by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, i.e. *KSČM*); *SPD and Tricolour*; *Freedomists*; *Alliance for the Independence of the Czech Republic*; *Czech Republic in First Place!*; *FOR EU Withdrawal*; and *the Right Bloc*.

Attitude toward Czexit is the key explanatory variable from the EU issue voting model used in explaining party choice in the Czech 2024 EP election. We measure attitude toward Czexit using a semantic differential. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a continuum ranging from the quote ‘*The Czech Republic should remain a member of the EU*’ (coded as 1) to ‘*The Czech Republic should leave the EU*’ (coded as 6). In contrast to previous studies of Eurosceptic voting, which have tended to use questions such as ‘*Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion?*’ as a measure of general attitudes towards EU integration (Camatarri & Zucchini,

2019), our measurement directly targets the essence of hard Euroscepticism (i.e. leaving the EU).

Subjective salience attributed to the Czexit issue is the second key explanatory variable. We operationalize salience by a follow-up question to that measuring attitude toward Czexit: ‘How important is this issue to you?’ Respondents had three answer options to express the subjective importance of the issue: very important (1), moderately important (2) and little important (3). Because 52% of respondents consider the issue of the Czech membership in the EU highly salient (i.e. ‘very important’), whereas only 7% of respondents consider this issue to be of low salience, the subjective salience enters regression models as a dichotomous variable with two values: high salience (coded as 1), and other (i.e. low or moderate salience, coded as 0).

Control variables were selected based on theoretical expectations and empirical evidence from previous studies. Socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, education, and income, have been identified as critical factors influencing both turnout and Eurosceptic party preferences. For example, research on Brexit and Euroscepticism has consistently demonstrated that voters with lower income and education levels are more likely to support Eurosceptic positions (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2017). Including interest in politics accounts for variations in political engagement, which could otherwise confound the relationship between salience and turnout. Similarly, we control for gender-based differences in electoral behaviour, though prior research suggests these effects may be less pronounced in the context of Euroscepticism (Vogel, 2021). By controlling for these variables, the analysis ensures that the observed relationships between EU issue salience, attitude toward Czexit, and voter behaviour are not spuriously driven by socio-demographic or attitudinal confounders.

In testing the EU issue voting model, it is also commonplace to control for factors relating to domestic political matters in line with the second-order model (van Elsas et al., 2019; Goldberg et al., 2024). While our data does not include a direct measure of respondents’ satisfaction with the national government, arguably the key predictor of voter behaviour as per the second-order model, to proxy this measure, we control for respondents’ views regarding the state of the national economy. It is well-established that voters’ economic perceptions are central to their judgements of the performance of the incumbent government (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000), and has further been demonstrated that economic conditions are a key determinant of voter behaviour in second-order elections (Schakel, 2015). As such, we consider this variable an appropriate means of controlling for the domestic factors that may influence voter behaviour at EU elections beyond the issue voting model.

The control variables are measured as follows. *Interest in politics* is measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all interested) to 3 (very interested). Interest in politics is included as it is a well-documented predictor of turnout

and electoral engagement (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). *Economic perceptions* are measured by asking how the economy changed over the previous six months, with responses ranging from 1 (improved a lot) to 5 (worsened a lot). *Gender* is a dummy variable coded as 1 for females and 0 for males. *Age* is measured in years, as younger voters tend to participate less in elections, while older voters may lean toward more conservative or Eurosceptic preferences (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). *Educational attainment* is a binary variable coded as 1 for tertiary education and 0 for lower levels of education. Prior research has consistently associated lower educational attainment with higher Euroscepticism (Krouwel & Kutziyski, 2017; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2017). *Subjective household income* is used as a proxy measure for household income. We opted for subjective household income to address the high proportion of missing data (42%) in direct income measures. This control variable is coded as 1 for households living comfortably on their present income and 0 for those experiencing difficulties. Lower income levels have been linked to higher support for Eurosceptic parties and abstention (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2017).

Analytical strategy

We begin by analysing contingency tables, presented as stacked bar charts with column percentages in Figure 2 and Figure 3, to examine bivariate associations between voter behaviour in the 2024 EP election and two key explanatory variables. We also use the Pearson chi-square test of independence and Cramér's V coefficient for this exploratory analysis. Next, we apply regression models to examine these bivariate associations further while controlling for additional individual-level variables. Specifically, we use binary logistic regression modelling for each of the two binary dependent variables.

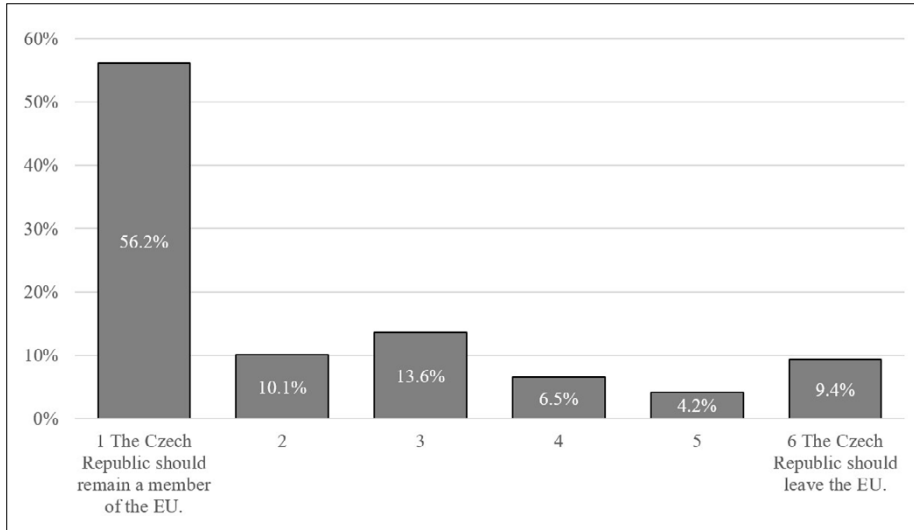
8. Results

Descriptive statistics

Starting with descriptive statistics of our two dependent and key independent variables, 41.9% of respondents reported not voting in the analysed EP election. Of the respondents who cast their vote (58.1% of the entire sample), 82% voted for a non-hard Eurosceptic party/coalition (i.e. all parties which do not explicitly favour leaving or a referendum), and the remaining 18% respondents voted for a hard Eurosceptic party/coalition.

Figure 1 demonstrates that more than half of respondents (56.2%) are very pro-remaining (i.e. against Czexit), having selected the answer option 1. On the other hand, only 9.4% of respondents are strong Czexit supporters, having chosen option 6 on the semantic differential scale. As for the subjective salience attributed to the Czexit issue, 52% of respondents consider the issue to be of high salience, 41% of moderate salience and only 7% of low salience.

Figure 1:
Bar chart of attitude toward Czexit (n = 1580)

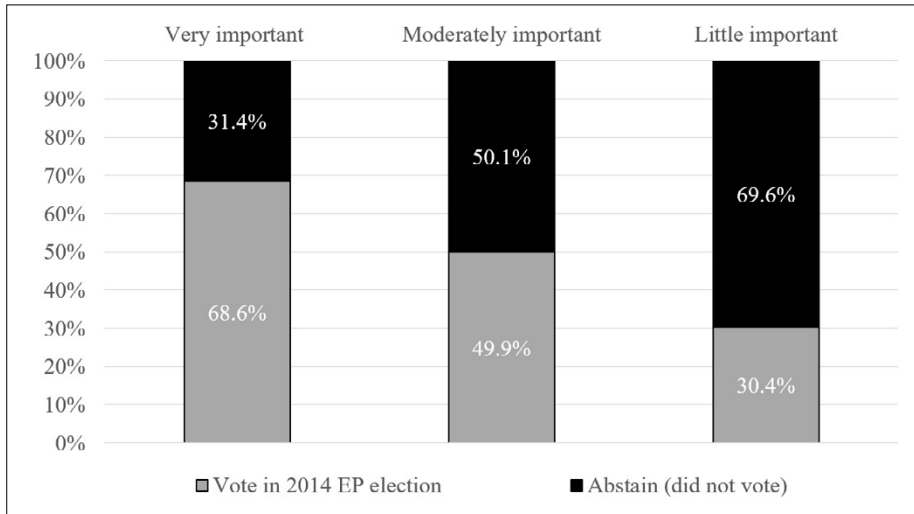


Source: The author.

Bivariate associations

Figure 2 illustrates the association between turnout in the Czech 2024 EP election and the subjective salience assigned to the Czexit issue. The EU issue voting model predicts that voters use EP elections to express their opinions on the EU project. Figure 2 lends empirical support to this prediction. Less than a third of respondents who ascribed high salience to the issue abstained from the election (31.4%). Conversely, seven out of ten respondents (69.6%), considering the issue to be of low salience, abstained from the EP election. Hence, Figure 2 supports our first hypothesis, which postulates an association between salience and probability of abstention.

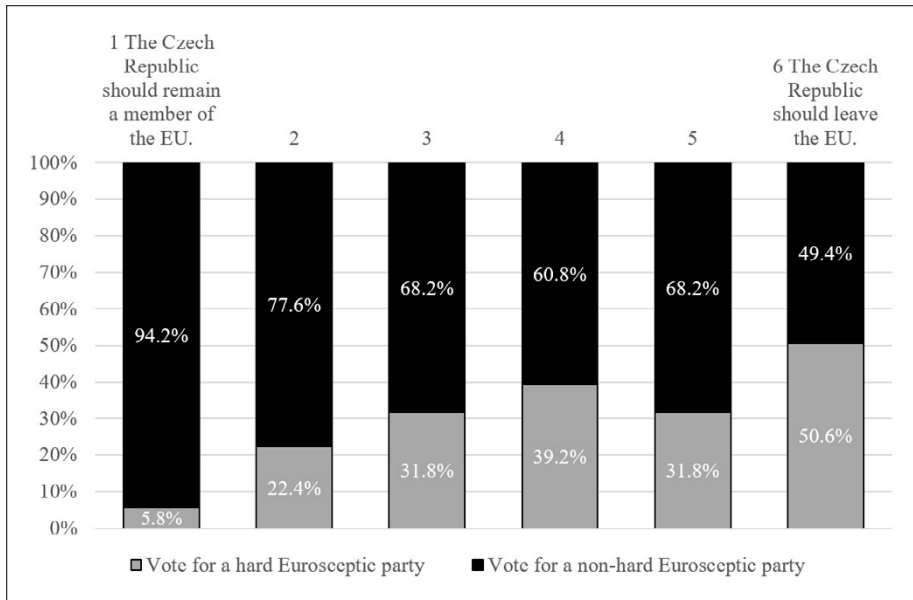
Figure 2:
Voter turnout and the subjective salience of the Czexit issue (n = 1597)



Notes: $\chi^2 = 92$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.24$
 Source: The author.

Figure 3 cross-tabulates the party choice and attitude toward Czexit. Two key observations emerge. Firstly, in line with our second hypothesis, the greater the support for leaving the EU, the higher the proportion of respondents voting for a hard Eurosceptic party. Whereas only 6% of the respondents who strongly support remaining voted for a hard Eurosceptic party, up to 51% of those who believe the Czech Republic should leave the EU voted for a hard Eurosceptic party. Secondly, the greater the support for the Czech Republic remaining in the EU, the higher the probability of voting for a non-hard Eurosceptic party. Almost all respondents (94.2%) strongly favouring remaining in the EU voted for such parties, compared with only half of strong Czexiteers. Consequently, Figure 3 provides strong bivariate evidence for our second hypothesis.

Figure 3:
Party choice and attitude toward Czexit (n = 922).



Notes: $\chi^2 = 155$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.41$

Source: The author.

8.1 Binary logistic regression models

Turnout

Moving to the results of our multivariate analyses, Table 1 presents the binary logistic regression model of turnout. Since our first hypothesis (H1) predicts that high salience attributed to the Czexit issue is associated with a lower probability of abstention, we use electoral participation as a reference category in the model.

In line with our first hypothesis, the high salience of the Czexit issue is associated with a lower predicted probability of abstention. Based on Model 1, the predicted probability of abstention for respondents with high subjective salience attributed to the Czexit issue is 0.36 (with 95% CI [0.33, 0.39]). On the other hand, the predicted probability of abstention for respondents with low or moderate salience is significantly higher, at 0.45 (95% CI [0.42, 0.48]). Although the effect size presented in Figure 2 decreases after controlling for other predictors, the effect of salience on abstention remains substantive. Voters' attitude toward Czexit does not predict abstention.

Table 1:
Binary logistic regression model of abstaining in the 2024 Czech EP election.

VARIABLES	Model 1		SE
Czexit attitude	-0.00		(0.01)
Salience	-0.42	***	(0.12)
Political interest	-0.91	***	(0.09)
Economic perception	0.07		(0.07)
Household income	-0.39	**	(0.16)
University education	-0.01		(0.13)
Age	-0.02	***	(0.00)
Female	-0.03		(0.12)
Constant	1.80	***	(0.32)
Observations	1,513		
Pseudo R-squared	0.127		

Note: reference category = participated in the election, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
Source: The author.

The model explains almost 13% of the variability in voter turnout in the Czech 2024 EP election. The effects of the controls in predicting voter turnout mostly align with theoretical expectations and earlier findings. Interest in politics is positively associated with turnout, such that the lower the political interest, the higher the probability of abstention. High-income people have a significantly higher likelihood of turning out to vote. Younger voters were less likely to participate in the 2024 EP election. Views regarding the state of the national economy, educational attainment and gender had no notable effect on voter turnout in the analysed EP election.

Party choice

Since our remaining two hypotheses postulate associations between party choice and attitude toward Czexit (H2) and the interaction effect of the attitude toward Czexit with the salience attributed to this issue (H3), Table 2 reports coefficient estimates from two binary logistic regression models estimated only on respondents who voted in the 2024 EP election. Model 2 uses the same explanatory variables as Model 1. Consequently, model 2 tests our second hypothesis.

Model 2 provides limited evidence for the hypothesis that voters' position on the Czexit issue correlates with their party choice. When controlling for relevant variables, strong supporters of Czexit are marginally more likely to vote for hard Eurosceptic parties (than supporters of Remain, with the respective predicted probabilities at 0.19 vs. 0.17). Meanwhile, the strong supporters of the Czech Republic remaining an EU member show only a slightly greater tendency to vote for non-hard Eurosceptic parties (compared to the strong Czexiters). Although

the coefficient estimate for the attitude toward Czexit is statistically significant (at the 0.01 significance level), the effect size is tiny.

To test the moderation of salience on the effect of Czexit attitude on party choice (H3), model 3 contains an interaction term between salience and Czexit attitude. In doing so, the model provides clear-cut statistically significant evidence for hypothesis H3, demonstrating a moderation effect which importantly applies to support for both hard and non-hard Eurosceptic parties. Strong Czexit supporters attributing high subjective salience to the issue tend to vote for hard Eurosceptic parties more often than those attributing moderate or low salience to the Czexit issue. At the same time, strong remain supporters considering the issue highly salient are more likely to vote for non-hard Eurosceptic parties than those attributing moderate or low salience to the issue.

Table 2:
Binary logistic regression models of voting for hard Eurosceptic party in the 2024 Czech EP election

VARIABLES	Model 2		SE	Model 3		SE
Czexit attitude	0.02	**	(0.01)	0.02	*	(0.01)
Salience	-0.13		(0.19)	-1.47	***	(0.29)
Czexit attitude*salience				0.48	***	(0.07)
Political interest	0.10		(0.13)	0.12		(0.14)
Economic perception	0.81	***	(0.11)	0.55	***	(0.12)
Household income	-0.52		(0.28)	-0.38		(0.29)
University education	0.36		(0.20)	0.47	*	(0.21)
Age	0.02	**	(0.01)	0.02	**	(0.01)
Female	-0.18		(0.19)	-0.24		(0.20)
Constant	-5.45	***	(0.59)	-4.66	***	(0.61)
Observations	903			903		
Pseudo R-squared	0.137			0.195		

Note: reference category = vote for a non-hard Eurosceptic party, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Source: The author.

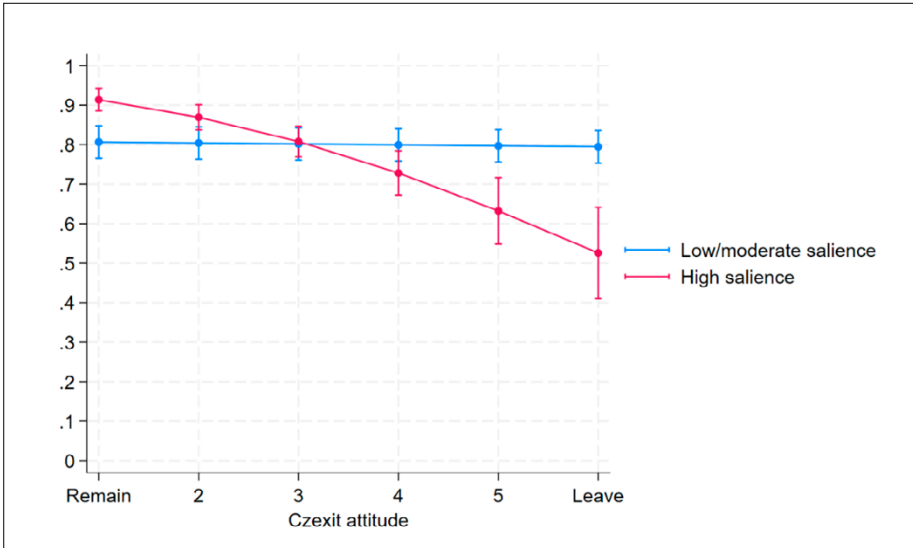
Beyond this, the relatively strong effect of voters' economic perceptions on their decision to support a Eurosceptic party is also worth noting. In other words, those who perceived the economy to have worsened were more likely to favour hard Eurosceptic parties. Notably, none of the parties we identified as hard Eurosceptic were participants in the national government at the time of the election. As such, this finding indicates that alongside the salience-dependent EU issue voting we have presented, second-order election dynamics may also have been at play in the 2024 EP election, with voters who perceived a downturn in domestic economic conditions turning to smaller opposition parties (who tend to hold more Eurosceptic positions) to express their discontent at this situation.

To better visualize the substantial effects of our two key explanatory variables on party choice, Figure 4 and Figure 5 present the predicted probabilities of voting for the respective party type. These figures visualise the moderation of high salience on the effect of attitude toward Czexit tested in model 3. The sample space consists of two events (i.e. vote for a non-hard Eurosceptic party and vote for a hard Eurosceptic party). Hence, the predicted probabilities reported on the vertical axes add up to one for these two outcomes.

Figure 4 provides empirical support for the moderation effect concerning voting for non-hard Eurosceptic parties. Strong remain advocates who attribute high salience to this issue are significantly more likely to vote for a non-hard Eurosceptic party than strong remain advocates with only moderate or low salience. Moreover, Figure 5 demonstrates a strong moderation effect of issue salience on voting for hard Eurosceptic parties. The predicted probability of a strong Czexiteer with high subjective salience to vote for a hard Eurosceptic party is 0.47, whereas for a strong Czexiteer with only low or moderate subjective salience it is just 0.2. The interaction term is statistically significant despite the low number of strong Czexiteers in the analysed sample (as demonstrated by Figure 1 and the width of respective confidence intervals for answer options 5 and 6).

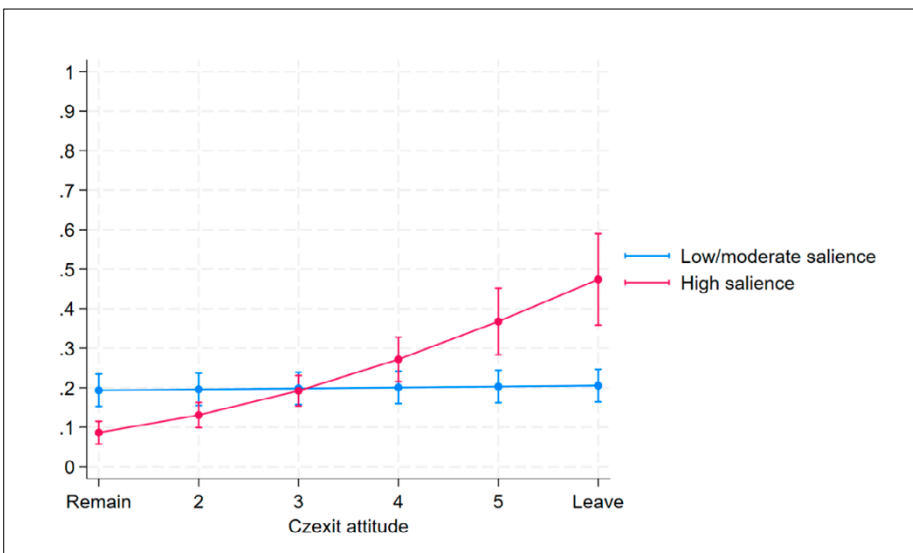
Furthermore, these two figures demonstrate that if the attributed salience of the Czexit issue is not high, then the probability of voting for non-hard Eurosceptic parties and hard Eurosceptic parties is the same for all answer categories on the attitude toward the Czexit. This null effect of the attitude toward Czexit on party choice is demonstrated by the flat straight lines for the low/moderate salience in these figures. In other words, only when voters ascribe high salience to the Czexit issue is their party choice in the EP elections associated with their stance. Consequently, our results provide evidence consistent with the EU issue voting model. Nevertheless, the voters' economic perceptions hint that 'second-order' dynamics are also relevant in explaining party choice in the EP elections.

Figure 4:
Predicted probabilities of voting for a non-hard Eurosceptic party
and attitude toward Czexit moderated by salience (Model 3)



Source: The author.

Figure 5:
Predicted probabilities of voting for a hard Eurosceptic party
and attitude toward Czexit moderated by salience (Model 3)



Source: The author.

9. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the Czexit issue's role in the behaviour of Czech voters in the 2024 EP elections. Based on the EU issue voting model, we examined the role of voter attitudes and the salience attributed to the Czech Republic's EU membership as correlates of turnout and party choice. We hypothesized that the greater the salience attributed to the Czexit issue, the lower the probability of abstention (H1), that voters' positioning on the Czexit issue influences their party choice in alignment with their stance (H2), and that the effect of this issue on party choice is moderated by the salience they attribute to this issue (H3).

Turnout and issue salience

Our analyses showed that the subjective salience ascribed to the EU membership is related to voter turnout. Consistent with H1, higher salience attributed to this issue significantly reduced the likelihood of abstention. This finding aligns with the EU issue voting model, which posits that voters are more likely to participate when they perceive a given issue as central to their preferences or identity (van der Brug et al., 2007; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016).

Party choice and attitude toward Czexit

The relationship between EU membership attitudes and party choice provided only weak evidence for H2. Respondents generally favouring Czexit were slightly more likely to vote for hard Eurosceptic parties, while those favouring remaining showed a slight preference for non-hard Eurosceptic parties. This pattern is consistent with prior studies emphasizing the general role of EU attitudes in structuring party competition in EP elections (de Vries, 2010; Hobolt et al., 2009). However, as we noted, the effect size in this regard was tiny, meaning that based on our evidence, examining only voters' attitudes on this issue without considering their interaction with salience only explains a small amount of the variation in Czech voters' party choice.

Moderation of salience

Notably, our analyses of the interaction between voters' Czexit attitudes and the subjective salience they attributed to this issue strongly supported hypothesis H3. As we have shown, voters' attitudes on the issue of leaving the EU exerted no discernible effect on their decision to support a hard Eurosceptic party or not when they considered this issue to be of low or moderate salience, but a substantial effect when they judged the issue to be of much importance. Voters' decision to support parties that broadly reflect their attitudes depends on considering this question to be of high importance. These results thus highlight the centrality of individual-level issue salience in determining voter behaviour at European elections.

Contributions and limitations

Surprisingly, no previous empirical research had examined the effect of individual-level salience attributed to the issue of the country's EU membership on individual voter behaviour in EP elections. This study thus tests crucial predictions implied by the EU issue voting model using a unique dataset designed to study the interplay between subjective issue salience and attitude towards the leave-remain issue. Our findings highlight the dual role of salience as a mobilizing factor for turnout and a moderator capable of amplifying or downplaying the effect of voters' EU attitudes on their party choice. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature on EU issue voting by extending its application to the Czech context, a country where EU-related issues have become increasingly divisive.

Despite its contributions, the study has some limitations. First, like other post-election surveys (cf. McAllister & Quinlan, 2022), the analysed data suffers from turnout over-reporting. Whereas 36.45% of the electorate voted in the 2024 EP election in the Czech Republic, the reported turnout in the analysed data is 58.1%. Both nonresponse bias (i.e. non-voters being less likely to participate in surveys) and misreporting (i.e. abstaining respondents reporting turnout due to social desirability or other psychological processes) contribute to turnout over-reporting (Dahlgaard et al., 2019; Sciarini & Goldberg, 2017; Selb & Munzert, 2013). While turnout over-reporting presents a limitation of this study, we refrained from weighting the data based on the election results in the presented results. We are studying associations between attitudinal variables stemming from the EU issue voting model and voter behaviour. The overrepresentation of voters of hard Eurosceptic parties in our sample thus enables us to achieve more robust results about this relatively small group. Nevertheless, weighting the sample based on election results does not change the substantive effects of the two key explanatory variables reported here.

Second, we could not fully control for second-order factors, as usually operationalised by variables capturing satisfaction with government. While we consider our use of economic perceptions to be an appropriate proxy in this regard, we recognise that this is not the only means by which voters judge incumbent governments, meaning it is plausible that other domestic determinants of voter behaviour, in line with the second-order model, are not captured by our analytical approach. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow for causal inferences, suggesting a need for longitudinal studies to explore how salience and attitudes concerning the issue of leaving the EU evolve over time, ideally along with voter behaviour over several EP elections. Future research could also examine the interplay between individual attitudes towards a country's EU membership and other EU-related issues, such as migration or environmental policies (e.g. the European Green Deal), to provide a more comprehensive understanding of electoral behaviour in the EP elections and further test the explanatory power of specific factors of the EU issue voting model.

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