

Party Competition and Voter Attitudes in German Border Regions: Evidence From Local VAAs

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Abstract

When studying questions of European democracy, research is still very much focused on national political actors. This can be partly explained by the fact that data on political parties’ positions toward Europe and citizens’ attitudes have been mainly collected at the national level, and because sample sizes at the regional or local levels are too small. However, political parties compete about issues related to Europe on different levels—and especially so in European border regions where the local level coincides even more strongly with the EU level. For the particular case of such inner-EU border regions, home to around one third of EU citizens, little is known about patterns of party competition and citizens’ specific demands and preferences. This study addresses this gap, using innovative data from the voting advice application VOTO, specifically designed for local elections held in Germany in 2024. Focusing on four German border regions—two on the Eastern and two on the Western border—it provides new insights into how European democracy works at the local level by examining political parties’ positions and citizens’ political preferences. In particular, the study investigates the extent to which border-specific features and party cues shape voters’ perspectives on cross-border cooperation and European integration. Our findings speak not only to insights from qualitative case studies, which tell us that citizens living in such border regions have specific preferences in terms of saliency and positions, but also to quantitative research studying Euroscepticism in European border regions.

Keywords

border regions; Europe; Germany; party competition; political attitudes; VAAs

1. Introduction

Research on the transformation of politics in European democracies has mainly been focused on the level of the EU and its connections with the nation-states (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Hutter et al., 2016; Scharpf, 2019). Over the last decades, this vibrant field has produced important insights about the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and second-dimension politics (Bornschieer, 2010), its relationship to Euroscepticism (Treib, 2021; Vasilopoulou & Zur, 2024), and—although less extensively—the repercussions for policy-making at the national and European levels (Debus & Schulte, 2024; Thomas & Jones, 2025). However, as recent scholarship has demonstrated, looking at subnational levels of government allows us to uncover some of the dynamics that underpin current political transformations in Europe. Schraff and Pontusson (2024) show, for instance, how the structure of territorial inequalities influences voting for right-wing populist parties, and similar results have been delivered by Vasilopoulou and Talving (2024) regarding trust in the EU. Still, this emergent literature is mostly based on data on voting behaviour and cannot fully account for the supply side of party competition, namely, how political parties position themselves on European issues on a subnational level (for an exception, see Gross, 2022; Gross & Debus, 2018). This is mainly due to the fact that fine-grained data on party positions, electoral behaviour, and elections on subnational levels is scarce (see Röth et al., 2025), and data collection at the local level is demanding (Gross & Jankowski, 2020). Therefore, most research questions that aim to explore how parties compete for votes on Europe-related issues in specific regional contexts cannot easily be answered.

In this article, we focus on European border regions as the most relevant example of such a specific regional context. To gain insights for such a rarely studied context, we draw on data from voting advice applications (VAAs). Although VAAs are mainly used as tools to help voters find their best-matching candidates or parties (e.g., Dinas et al., 2014), this is not the only way in which data generated through VAAs can be exploited. As Garzia and Marschall (2014) rightly point out, VAAs can deliver interesting data to identify political dimensions (Wheatley, 2016), to study in which way political parties translate their positions into policy-making once they are in power (Fivaz et al., 2014), or to investigate the making of a transnational European voting space (Bright et al., 2016). We show that VAA data can also be efficiently used to study research questions about local—or regional-level problems in a much more fine-grained way. The VOTO VAA (Stecker et al., 2025) on which we base our study was fielded in 2024 at the local government level in 26 German municipalities, including the four border regions analysed in this article, and was followed by a short survey to collect data on attitudes of participants. The data gathered through VOTO allows us to study the following three research questions: First, we examine how political parties position themselves at the local level of border regions toward issues linked to cross-border cooperation and European integration. Second, we investigate whether cross-border issues and EU issues are correlated with the level of VAA participants. And, finally, we explore to what extent participants' attitudes, such as party preferences or ideology, are related to their respective positions on cross-border and EU issues. Zooming in on border regions is particularly promising, as European topics—such as border controls or the common market—are part of people's everyday lives. Moreover, the debate on whether citizens living in border regions are more or less Eurosceptic (Nasr & Rieger, 2024; Rehm et al., 2025) and have more or less transnational attitudes (Kuhn, 2011) shows that focussing on these interconnected areas in which around 30 percent of EU citizens live can deliver relevant insights on how parties and voters compete on EU issues at the local level.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We first provide insights into our theoretical argument that border regions in Europe are exceptional regions that may affect individuals' political preferences. In view of the fact that appropriate data is not available to study these political preferences in these contexts, we describe in a subsequent step how we applied data from the VOTO VAA, specifically designed for local elections held in Germany in 2024, for the study of our research questions. Next, our empirical analyses investigate the extent to which border-specific features and party cues shape voters' perspectives on cross-border cooperation and European integration. Our empirical findings show that not all political parties take similar positions on European integration and cross-border issues in border municipalities, whereas the citizenry is more consistent here: enhanced border integration is linked to more positive attitudes towards the EU. This, in turn, clearly illustrates that VAA data qualify as a valid source to produce new insights for research fields with data gaps.

2. Political Preferences Vis-À-Vis European Issues in Border Regions

For European democracies to function effectively, citizens expect their concerns and policy preferences to be represented by political parties and addressed by government institutions (Dahl, 1971; Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017). However, although in European multi-level governance structures this is true for all levels of governance, with political parties competing about issues related to Europe from the local to the EU level (Braun & Schmitt, 2018), we are still very much focused on the national level when studying European democracy. In contrast, the specific needs of people at the local level often become diluted within larger governance frameworks, such as the regional and national level (Braun et al., 2025), and seem to play a minor role in local election campaigns (Braun & Hommel, 2025). This is particularly problematic for border regions. In these areas, home to around one third of EU citizens (European Commission, 2017, p. 2), the consequences of European integration have a direct impact on citizens' lives, as has recently been illustrated by border closures during the pandemic (Herbig et al., 2025) or by the implementation of stricter migration policies (Weber, 2022). Indeed, the European Commission (2021) identifies inner-European border regions as "living labs" for European integration, where the EU's functioning is tested daily. Also, scholars from border studies widely agree that border areas often have distinct characteristics (Banting et al., 2019) and their residents' specific preferences compared to those in non-border regions, reflecting shared interests such as cross-border mobility, healthcare, economic and political cooperation, and cultural exchange (Bürkner, 2020; Wassenberg & Reitel, 2020; Weber, 2022). Hence, patterns of party competition regarding the EU may be particular in these cases—both on the supply side (parties) and the demand side (citizens).

2.1. The Supply Side of Electoral Competition in European Border Regions

To date, almost no comparative research has looked into the supply side of party competition in border regions (but there are some case studies on specific regions, see e.g., Blatter, 2000; Braun et al., 2025; Lechevalier & Wielgohs, 2013). While this gap can be explained by the lack of data, it is an important limitation of the literature because political parties' attention to certain issues is strategic in nature and can play a key role in the formation of voters' attitudes (Adams et al., 2011; De Sio & Weber, 2014; Feddersen & Adams, 2022). Established theories of party competition as well as research on party competition about European issues in multi-level systems emphasise the relevance of both the saliency and the positioning of political parties toward certain issues (Adams et al., 2005; Green, 2007). Building on this, it seems plausible to expect that while the saliency of EU issues may be higher in elections to the European Parliament than on

other levels of government, party positions on EU issues should be similar across the different levels of government (Braun & Schmitt, 2018). Given that regional party branches reflect similar positions towards European integration as their national counterparts (Adendorf & Gross, 2025), we would assume that parties' positions on European integration at the local level should reflect the general stances of the respective parties.

However, it is less evident whether this general stance can be expected to extend to cross-border issues, given that case studies on the positioning of political parties in border regions did not yield conclusive findings (see also Bürkner, 2020). Although it is certainly true that the EU's vision of a Europe without borders has fostered the development of cooperation across borders, some studies also show negative repercussions of increasing cross-border integration (Durand et al., 2020; Wassenberg, 2010). In line with this, one could thus assume that even at the local level in border regions, Eurosceptic parties from the right follow the overall anti-European stance and oppose more cross-border integration, not only because it goes against the nationalistic ideology that underpins their political positions, but also because cross-border cooperation is not without its critical aspects. In Germany, the case researched in this article, this would lead us to expect that the AfD would oppose cross-border integration and favour policies such as strict border controls. Yet, such negative positions on cross-border issues could also backfire because they contrast with the daily experience of border residents, such as the ability to go shopping in neighbouring countries or having clients from across the border. Also, a strong regional identity linked to the cross-border aspects, for instance, due to a common history, such as in the German-French border region, may impede Eurosceptic parties from positioning themselves strongly against more cross-border integration. To inspect this relationship with our VAA data, we formulate the following first hypothesis:

H1. General party positions on EU integration correlate with the positions of local parties in border regions on cross-border issues.

2.2. The Demand Side of Electoral Competition in European Border Regions

In recent years, researchers have shown increased interest in studying the electoral geography of European integration across regions in Europe (Schraff & Pontusson, 2024) and, in particular, in border regions (for an early work, see Kuhn, 2011; Nasr & Rieger, 2024; Rehm et al., 2025). The specific interest of studying border regions is related to their position as areas where citizens experience the consequences of European integration in their daily lives. In border regions, citizens interact with residents from the neighbouring state(s), their language and culture; they experience the advantages and disadvantages of the single market (such as enhanced possibilities to purchase goods abroad, but restrictions when it comes to accessibility to health services); and they are immediately affected by restrictions to European integration, such as enhanced border controls. Therefore, the theoretical starting point of most of the existing studies goes back to transactional theory (Deutsch, 1953) and argues that both economic transactions (Sohn, 2014) as well as social interaction (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) should make border residents more prone to develop more cosmopolitan attitudes and more positive attitudes toward their neighbours (Kuhn, 2015). However, recent studies that find a negative or no clear-cut relationship between border region residency and attitudes toward European integration have emphasised that the theoretical mechanism that links daily cross-border experiences to pro-European attitudes is more complicated. Indeed, in their recent study using panel data from Germany, Rehm et al. (2025, p. 503) “suggest moving beyond an overly optimistic idea of

border regions as ‘living labs of European integration’ to instead differentiate why some border regions display stronger European identification whilst others do not.”

Reflecting this need for a refined understanding, a very basic, but rarely tested assumption is whether citizens of border regions who are in favour of more cross-border cooperation also support European integration. While, on the one hand, transactional theory suggests that social interactions across borders can encourage more positive cosmopolitan attitudes in general (Mau, 2021; Taubenböck et al., 2023), regional identities do, on the other hand, not necessarily overlap with attitudes toward Europe in general. Whether or not a person has both a regional and a European identity at the same time depends on whether they are an exclusive or an inclusive regionalist (Brigevich, 2016; Praprotnik, 2020). Thus, it could well be that citizens who live in border regions favour increased border permeability to their direct neighbours but not European integration in general. Empirically, due to the lack of data on citizens’ opinions about cross-border issues, most studies could not investigate this question, but simply *assumed* that residency in border regions is related to more transnational experiences, leading to more cosmopolitan attitudes, which then translate into more positive views of European integration. However, with our VAA data collected at the local level in border regions, we are able to clarify whether this relationship actually holds because we can empirically measure how people position themselves to both cross-border issues and EU integration. While acknowledging the possibility of relationships going in both directions and given the strong role that transactional theory plays in the literature, we formulate our second hypothesis:

H2. Citizens who favour increased cross-border integration also support more European integration.

Studying this question, however, comes with the challenge of differentiating between European integration and cross-border integration as both may be driven by the same socio-economic variables. It seems plausible, for instance, that main correlates of Euroscepticism, such as education level, may also be related to attitudes toward more cross-border integration (Rehm et al., 2025). The same is true for political variables, such as left–right positions or political interest. Thus, if we want to study whether citizens who favour more cross-border integration also support more European integration, we need to account for such possible confounders. In fact, the specification of the theoretical model that needs to be tested empirically comes down to investigating a mediation effect. Therefore, as indicated in Figure 1, we expect that attitudes on

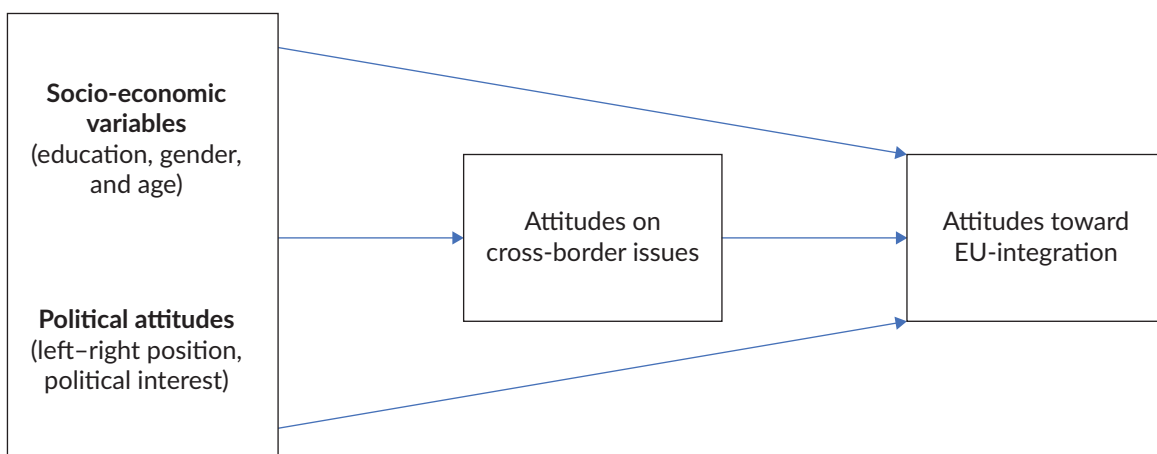


Figure 1. Simplified theoretical model.

cross-border issues mediate the effect of socio-economic and attitudinal variables that have been found to be correlated with EU preferences.

3. Research Design

3.1. Data and Case Selection

We analyse data from the VOTO VAA, which was conducted in 26 German municipalities in the run-up to the local elections held in June 2024, and realised by local teams of political scientists under the coordination of the non-profit enterprise VOTO gUG, which provides a digital platform for VAAs (for more information, see <https://www.voto.vote>). VAAs are digital tools that enable users to compare their personal views on political issues with the positions of political parties and derive a voting recommendation from this comparison (Garzia & Marschall, 2014, p. 377). Thus, they provide important insights into both the supply side of party competition (parties' positions on issues; see H1), as well as the demand side (attitudes, user preferences; see H2). As part of the VOTO project, the data was generated in a multi-stage process. In the first step, local teams of political scientists identified salient topics for their respective municipalities through media analysis, expert consultations, and analysis of electoral programs. Based on that, they developed specific statements relevant to their respective local politics, as well as bridge statements that they considered relevant across municipalities. Then, political parties were asked to rate the statements based on a five-point scale and to provide an explanation for their position in a free-text field. This resulted in a comparable database of party positions at the local level. In the next step, the statements and party positions were fed into an online tool, which was then made available to the public. Finally, the users themselves could rate the statements and receive voting advice based on their content-wise proximity to the parties. For academic purposes, we integrated a survey to collect the users' socio-demographic data directly after the voting advice. This resulted in a second database on the preferences and socio-demographic background of the VOTO users in different municipalities.

With respect to case selection, the analysis draws on VOTO data from five German municipalities (Saarbrücken, Merzig, Konstanz, Frankfurt (Oder), and Greifswald) in four German federal states (the regional political layer of the German federal system). They were selected due to their proximity to national borders, as depicted in Figure 2. Whereas Konstanz, Merzig, Saarbrücken, and Frankfurt (Oder) directly adjoin national borders, Greifswald is located slightly further inland, yet it still forms part of the wider border region with Poland. The Online Appendix A in the Supplementary File provides a short overview of these municipalities.

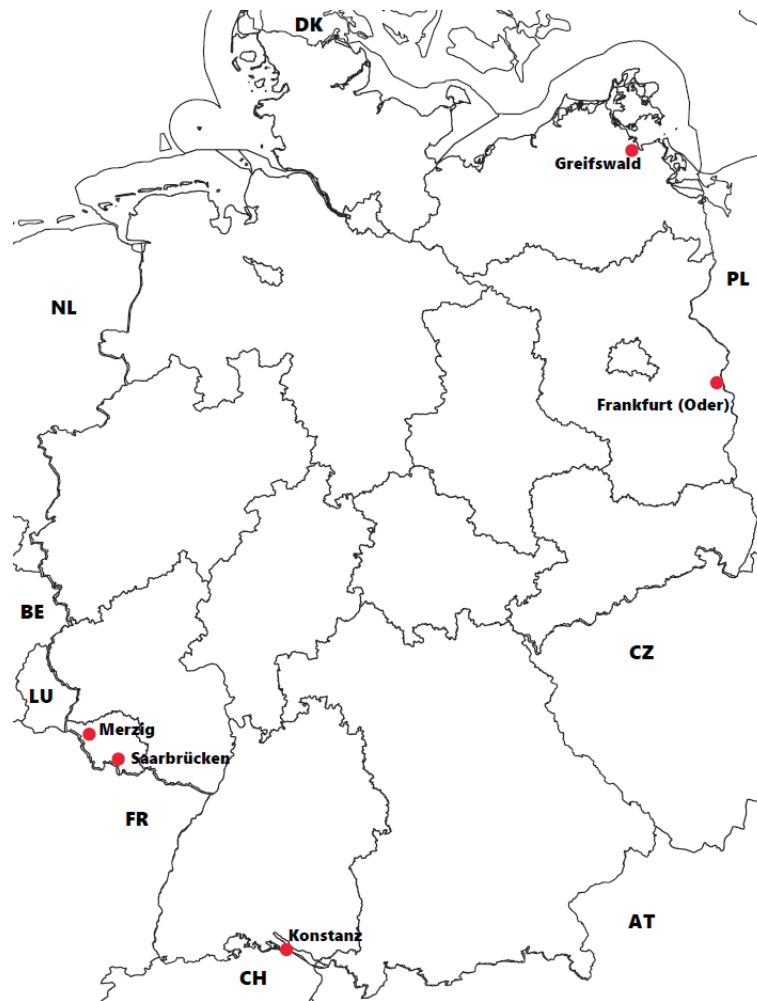


Figure 2. Map of the municipalities included in the analysis.

3.2. Operationalisation and Methods

To study party positions on European and border issues (H1), we use the statements shown in Figure 3. Although the number of EU and cross-border related items varies across municipalities, all VAAs contained two statements that directly relate to European integration, namely “[location] should campaign for more frequent random checks to be carried out near the border” and “The EU restricts the municipalities’ room for manoeuvre too much.” Additionally, for some of the municipalities, further statements on cross-border cooperation were included, such as on realising better cross-border train connections or creating a cross-border health system more accessible from different countries (see Figure 3). Both parties and users responded to these items on a five-point scale (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). Methodologically, after presenting the descriptive findings on party competition in border regions, we compare party positions from VOTO VAA to general party positions on European integration, drawing on national-level data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), an expert survey that measures ideological positioning of political parties across Europe (Rovny et al., 2025).

| | Saarbrücken | Merzig | Greifswald | Frankfurt (Oder) | Konstanz |
|---|-------------|--------|------------|------------------|----------|
| {location} should campaign for more frequent random checks to be carried out near the border. | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| The EU restricts the municipalities' room for manoeuvre too much. | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Seamless cross-border rail transport {between Germany, France and Luxembourg/between Germany and Poland} is more important than road construction/projects. | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ |
| {location} should invest more in a cross-border cycle network. | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ |
| In the daycare centres in {location}, the promotion of the {French/Polish} language should be intensified. | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ |
| In order to bring Europe closer to its citizens, more activities in the area of town twinning should be organised in {location}. | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ |
| Healthcare provision in {location} should be further expanded in order to create a cross-border healthcare corridor. | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |

Figure 3. Statements on European and border issues in VOTO (supply side/party data).

To examine the association between participants' views on border issues and EU integration (H2), we run multiple regression analyses including mediation. To do so, we use both citizens' positions on the VOTO border policy items (see Figure 3) as well as political attitudes and socio-demographics that participants gave in the post-VOTO survey. Importantly, only a subset of VOTO users, 4,407 users, participated in the survey. As descriptive analysis shows that certain groups in our VOTO VAA are significantly over- or underrepresented, we calculate a calibration weight based on the demographic characteristics of gender, age, and education in order to improve the representativeness of the sample. From a methodological perspective, iterative proportional fitting is employed to perform a ranking procedure that iteratively adjusts the weights for the three variables to align with the distribution in the target population (Sand & Kunz, 2020). Using the variables shown in Table 1, multiple regressions were all estimated with clustered standard errors (with municipalities as clusters) and included weights. For mediation analysis, we followed Baron and Kenny (1986) and estimated three models to see how coefficients change due to the inclusion of a mediator.

Table 1. Descriptive information on variables for demand side analyses (attitudinal data).

| Variables | Obs | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|--------|------|------|------|-------|
| EU integration attitudes | 2,171 | 7.4 | 2.6 | 0.0 | 10.0 |
| Border controls (higher: not agree) | 21,764 | 52.1 | 37.2 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| EU restricts municipalities (higher: not agree) | 21,763 | 54.5 | 30.8 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Border policy factor | 8,679 | 0.0 | 1.0 | -2.8 | 1.5 |
| Gender (1 - female) | 3,984 | 0.47 | 0.5 | 0.0 | 1.0 |
| Age | 3,959 | 44.7 | 16.5 | 16.0 | 100.0 |
| Education | 3,853 | 5.4 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 6.0 |
| Political interest (higher: more interested) | 3,812 | 3.7 | 0.9 | 1.0 | 5.0 |
| Left-right position (higher: more right) | 3,295 | 4.5 | 1.9 | 1.0 | 11.0 |
| Satisfaction with government (higher: more satisfied) | 3,145 | -0.9 | 2.8 | -5.0 | 5.0 |

Notes: Border controls and the extent to which the EU is perceived to restrict municipalities are measured on a five-point scale (0, 25, 50, 75, 100), with higher values indicating lower support for border controls and for the statement that the EU restricts municipalities. Political interest is also measured on a five-point scale, with higher values representing greater political interest, while left-right orientation and satisfaction with the government are measured on an 11-point scale, EU integration on a scale from 0 to 10, and education on an ordinal scale with six categories (for the ranges, see the Min-Max columns in the table). Age runs from 16 to 100 years, and the border policy factors range from -2.8 to 1.5 as generated by a factor analysis. The border policy factor was generated via a factor analysis based on participants' attitudes regarding four items of the VOTO: town twinnings, language of the neighbour, more cross-border train tracks, and more cross-border bike lines, all measured on a five-point scale (0, 25, 50, 75, 100). Higher values indicate higher support.

4. Empirical Analyses

4.1. The Supply Side: Party Competition on European and Border Issues in Border Regions

In this section, we provide a descriptive analysis of party positions on questions of European and cross-border integration in the selected border municipalities. Figure 4 illustrates the specific responses of the main parties, broken down by municipality.

In the first step of the analysis, we zoom in on how the parties rate single aspects of European integration in the VOTO VAA, namely the extension of border controls and the restriction of their room for manoeuvre by the EU. We also analyse how they locally differ in their response behaviour regarding each of the aspects presented below:

- *Border controls:* The examination of parties' positions on border controls reveals a heterogeneous landscape. The AfD adopts a strongly affirmative position, advocating unequivocally for strengthening border controls (minimum = 75, 1st quartile = 87.5, median = 100, 3rd quartile = 100, maximum = 100). It is striking that the CDU is strongly divided on the issue; however, on average, local CDU sections indicate that border controls need to be strengthened (minimum = 0, 1st quartile = 50, median = 75, 3rd quartile = 100, maximum = 100). Only in Saarbrücken, the party strictly opposes, while in Konstanz and Frankfurt (Oder), it strongly supports border controls. Equally, the FDP maintains an undecided stance, showing a strong variance across municipalities (minimum = 0, 1st quartile = 0, median = 50, 3rd quartile = 50, maximum = 75). Bündnis 90/Die Grünen expresses clear opposition to the implementation of border controls, except for the two Saarland municipalities

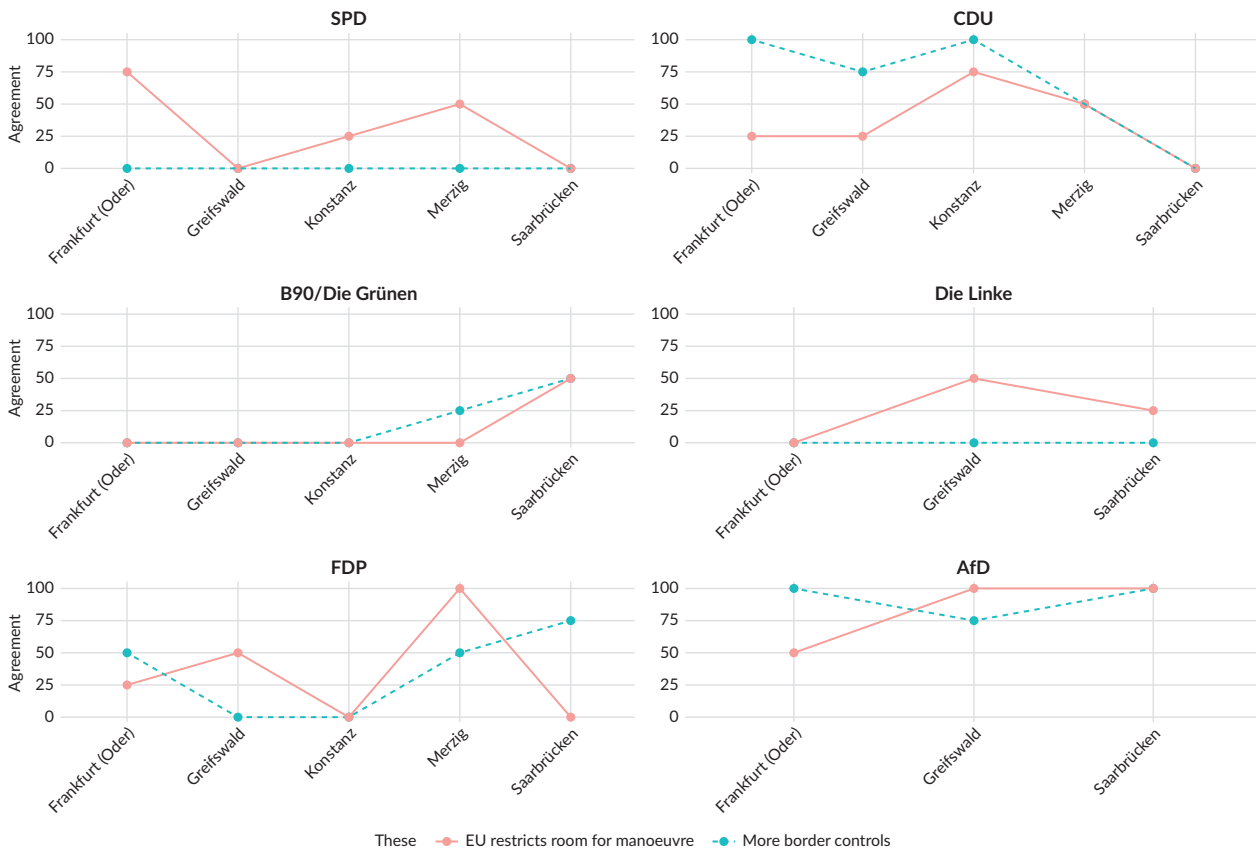


Figure 4. Party positions in the selected municipalities. Source: Own calculation based on VOTO VAA data (Stecker et al., 2025).

(minimum = 0, 1st quartile = 0, median = 0, 3rd quartile = 0, maximum = 25). Finally, both SPD (minimum = 0, 1st quartile = 0, median = 0, 3rd quartile = 0, maximum = 0) and Die Linke (minimum = 0, 1st quartile = 0, median = 0, 3rd quartile = 0, maximum = 0) respond coherently across border municipalities, positioning themselves unanimously against border controls.

- EU restricts room for manoeuvre:** Moving on to the next question of how far the EU restricts the municipality's room for manoeuvre, we observe a maximum variation within the FDP (minimum = 0, 1st quartile = 0, median = 25, 3rd quartile = 50, maximum = 100). While the FDP in Merzig fully perceives the EU as a restriction on the municipalities, it positions itself at the other extreme in Konstanz and Saarbrücken. Overall, the FDP tends not to consider that the EU narrows its room for manoeuvre. Slightly less than FDP, but also divided on this question, the SPD, in sum, equally tends to the view that the EU does not restrict municipalities' freedom of action (minimum = 0, 1st quartile = 0, median = 25, 3rd quartile = 50, maximum = 75). The latter also applies to both the CDU (minimum = 0, 1st quartile = 25, median = 25, 3rd quartile = 50, maximum = 75), with the CDU in Saarbrücken as pro-European and the CDU in Konstanz less clearly pro-European, and Die Linke, which shows less variation (minimum = 0, 1st quartile = 12.5, median = 25, 3rd quartile = 37.5, maximum = 50). Bündnis 90/Die Grünen are unanimously not considering the EU to restrict them, with the exception of Saarbrücken (minimum = 0, 1st quartile = 0, median = 0, 3rd quartile = 25, maximum = 50). In stark contrast, the AfD is united in its opposition to the EU, with the outlier of Frankfurt (Oder) (minimum = 50, 1st quartile = 75, median = 100, 3rd quartile = 100, maximum = 100).

- Mapping local party position clusters:** In the next step, we plot party positions on both issues to identify parties or locations with similar response patterns. Thereby, as depicted in Figure 5, five party clusters can be identified. Firstly, a large pro-European cluster strongly supports the free movement of goods and people, and does not perceive the EU as any restriction on its ability to act. This group includes all local groups of Die Linke; all branches of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, except Saarbrücken; the SPD, with the exception of Frankfurt (Oder); as well as several local lists. The CDU in Saarbrücken and the FDP in Konstanz constitute local outliers within this pro-European group. Two further clusters hold more ambivalent views on questions of European integration: a small cluster on the one hand believes that the EU restricts its freedom to act, and on the other hand strictly opposes the extension of border controls, including the SPD in Frankfurt (Oder), the FDP in Merzig, and JFK in Konstanz. A third cluster wants to enforce border controls, but does feel restricted by the EU. This is the second-largest cluster, comprising predominantly FDP and CDU local groups. What remains are two Eurosceptic clusters: One cluster would like to strengthen border controls and believes that the EU is restricting its room for manoeuvre. This group includes the Frankfurt (Oder) branch of the AfD, the Freie Wähler, and the CDU in Konstanz. Finally, a fifth cluster is severely Eurosceptic, perceiving itself severely restricted by the EU and strictly calling for more border controls. This includes the AfD local branches and local parties in Greifswald. We can thus summarise that, according to our VOTO data, CDU, FDP, and AfD tend to favour cross-border cooperation over European integration, whereas the degree of support for cross-border cooperation and European integration is comparable for both the SPD and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen.

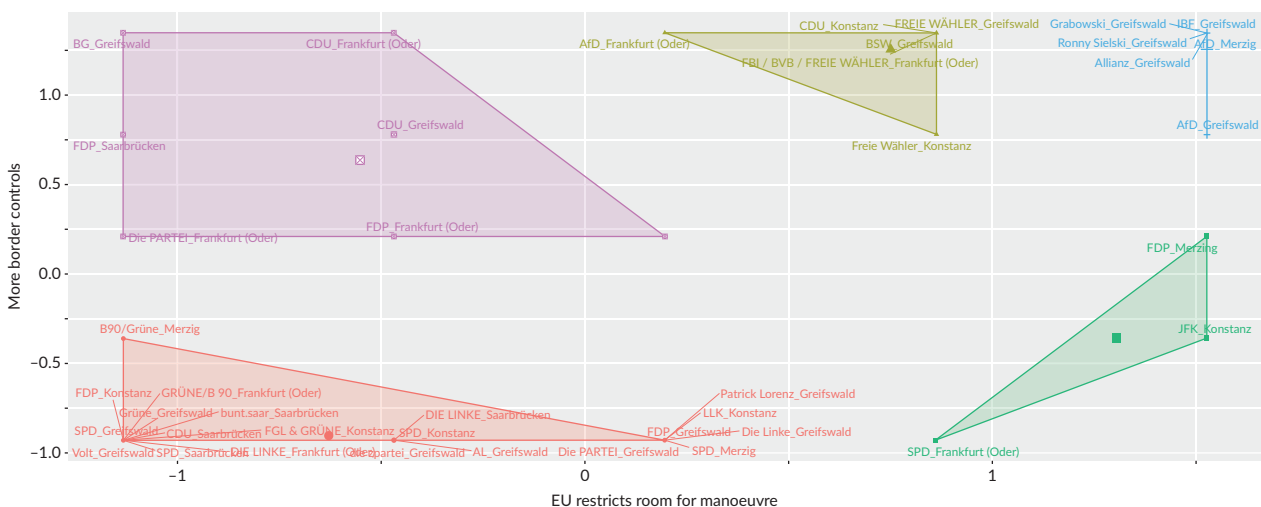


Figure 5. Clustered party positions. Source: Own calculation based on k-means clustering, data from the VOTO VAA (Stecker et al., 2025). Note: Higher values reflect stronger agreement with the items.

In the second step, we zoom out to test our first hypothesis, which assumes that party competition in border municipalities corresponds to general party positions. Figure 6 shows a comparison of party positions at the national level (general position on European integration, as derived from CHES data) with two local-level VOTO variables: first, *party positions on European integration*—mean value of two European issues: (a) border controls and (b) restriction of the municipalities’ room for manoeuvre by the EU—and, second, *party positions on cross-border integration*—mean value of several border issues, use of items where surveyed: (a) cross-border rail transport, (b) teaching of neighbour language, (c) cross-border cycle network, (d) cross-border healthcare, and (e) town twinning.

For some parties, we observe significant discrepancies between party positions at the local and the national level. While Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, SPD, and AfD largely adhere to their national party positions, this is not the case for Die Linke and CDU, and only to a limited extent for the FDP. It is striking that Die Linke in the border municipalities is much more pro-European than at the national level, where the party takes a rather Eurosceptic stance. This may have to do with the fact that members of the party in border regions can feel the direct implications of cross-border cooperation much more strongly in concrete projects whereas the national party program is more on high-politics issues and wants to signal to voters that Die Linke is sceptical when it comes to liberal economic policies or the increased focus on military and defence issues at the EU level. In comparison, for the AfD, also a Eurosceptic party, this pattern seems less pronounced, probably because the general anti-elitist discourse, which also caters to protest voters, looms too large, and the party cannot deviate from the overall stance in border regions. Conversely, the CDU is significantly less pro-European in border municipalities (and especially so in Konstanz) than at the national level, with the exception of Saarbrücken. At least for Konstanz, a possible explanation may be the fact that the municipality's border is with Switzerland—a non-EU country—where at least one of our items used to measure a party's stance toward European integration (border controls) comes with a special note, as Switzerland has never stopped controlling its border.

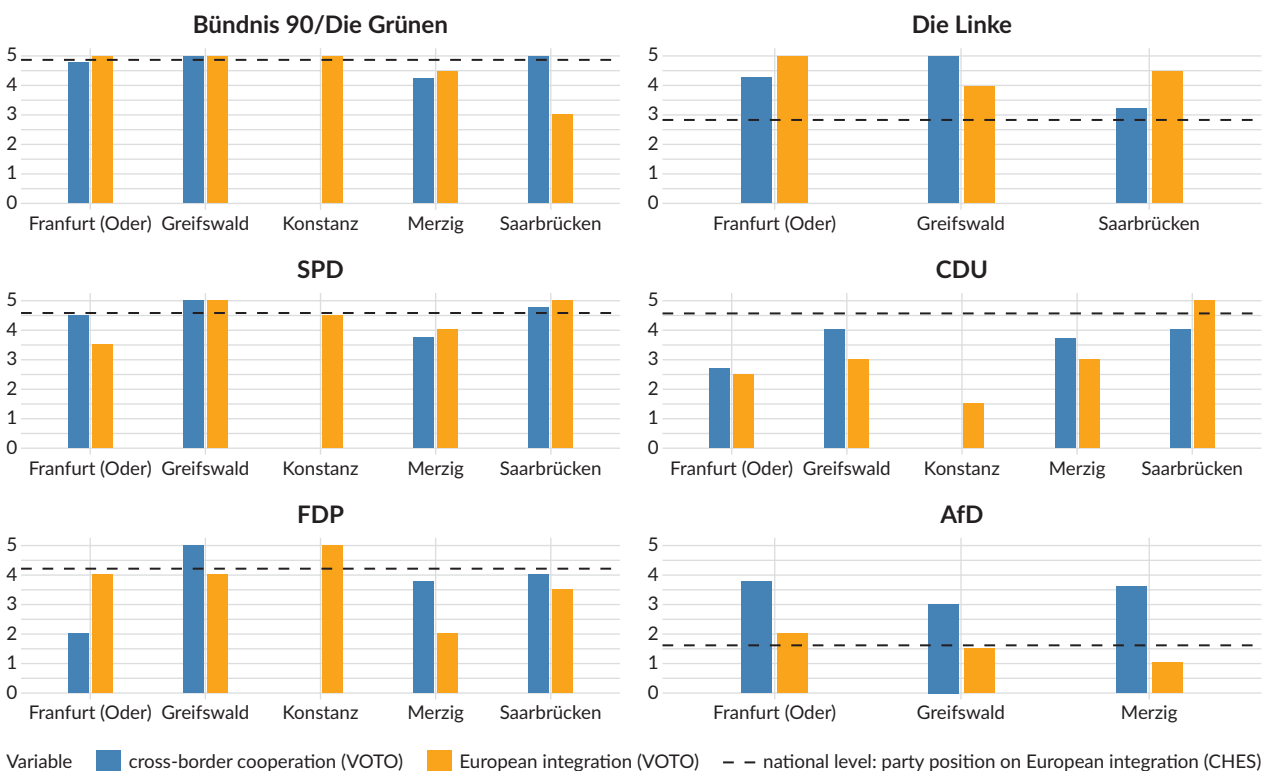


Figure 6. Comparison of party positions in border municipalities and at the national level. Notes: The black line shows national party positions on European integration according to CHES data (Rovny et al., 2025), blue bars represent the mean value for items on border issues based on local VOTO data (Stecker et al., 2025), and orange bars represent the mean value for items on European issues based on local VOTO data, with higher values indicating a more positive view of European and cross-border issues. The illustration includes established parties that exist at both the federal and local levels; lists that only exist at the local level are not included here.

In general, it is important to keep in mind that these results may also reflect mainly the political positions of a party's local branches (and members), which may also be idiosyncratic to a certain extent. Keeping in mind these limitations and given the ambiguous results, we cannot accept H1 without qualification.

4.2. The Demand Side: Voters' Positions on European and Border Issues

Having analysed the supply side, namely party competition on European and border issues, we now turn to the individual level and present results from voters' positions. As discussed in Section 3.1, we draw on two different data sources: First, we use data from the VOTO itself, namely the positions of voters in the municipalities on border issues and European issues. Second, we leverage data from a survey that followed the VOTO (with a restricted sample size) and included attitudinal questions and socio-demographic variables. This allows us to test our second hypothesis and to investigate to what extent attitudes toward border issues are correlated with opinions about European integration.

4.2.1. Correlations of Positions on Border Issues and European Issues as Measured in the VOTO

To give an overview of how citizens who participated in the VOTO positioned themselves toward EU issues and the border region, we have calculated simple Pearson intercorrelations between border-related and EU-related issues (see Figure 3 for wording; the coefficients are to be found in Appendix D in the Supplementary File). The correlations indicate that, first, the different border issues (e.g., attitudes on border trains and border bike lines) are moderately to strongly intercorrelated (those who want more cross-border train tracks also want more cross-border bike lines). The same is true for EU-related issues (those who want more border controls also think that the EU restricts municipalities). In contrast, we only observe a weak correlation between the border issues and the two EU-related variables, although we see no negative associations.

4.2.2. Regression Analysis Based on VOTO and Survey Data: Cross-Border Integration Equals European Integration?

While the correlational patterns already give some slight indication that a positive attitude toward cross-border cooperation may go hand in hand with a preference for European integration, the bivariate associations could also be driven by confounding variables linked to more general political attitudes or socio-demographic characteristics, such as education. In order to account for these possible confounders, we have estimated several multiple regressions using the data collected from the short survey that accompanied the VAA, which includes information on socio-demographics and political attitudes. Combining survey and VOTO data allows us to test our H2, namely, whether citizens who favour increased cross-border integration also support more European integration. All regressions presented in Table 2 were estimated using clustered standard errors (for the municipalities) and weighted for socio-demographics (Appendix B in the Supplementary File includes the same models using non-weighted data). The analyses do not cover Konstanz as no border-specific questions were asked there (see Figure 3). As dependent variable, we used three different measures of attitudes toward the EU: (a) A 10-point scale based on a question of the European Social Survey asking whether EU integration should be further extended or not; and the two variables from the VOTO, namely, (b) citizens' attitudes toward border controls, and (c) their position toward the statement that the EU restricts a municipalities scope of action. As independent variables, we used (a) a factor based on the four items on border policies included above (on transportation, language, and town

twinings) and (b) the town twinings variable alone to increase the number of respondents by including the VOTO in Greifswald.

Table 2. Regression analysis: Border integration and European integration (weighted data).

| | (1) EU integration attitudes | (2) Border controls | (3) EU restricts the municipality | (4) EU integration attitudes | (5) Border controls | (6) EU restricts the municipality |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Border policy factor | 0.88* (8.36) | 5.53** (13.79) | 6.20* (8.75) | | | |
| Twin towns | | | | 0.027** (8.71) | -0.0029 (-0.04) | 0.19 (2.63) |
| Gender (Ref: Man) | -0.018 (-0.07) | 4.98 (1.84) | -1.89 (-0.80) | -0.0020 (-0.01) | 1.34 (0.45) | 2.82 (1.38) |
| Age | -0.012 (-4.31) | -0.14 (-4.09) | -0.051 (-0.81) | -0.0015 (-0.44) | -0.15* (-3.50) | -0.23 (-1.24) |
| Education | 0.26 (3.01) | 5.64* (7.37) | 3.94** (24.01) | 0.24** (5.87) | 6.31** (9.23) | 5.18* (3.66) |
| Political interest | 0.38* (7.67) | -0.094 (-0.11) | 7.79 (3.82) | 0.22 (2.67) | 3.29 (1.28) | 3.97 (1.49) |
| Left-right | -0.17 (-2.45) | -4.31 (-1.59) | -1.76 (-3.25) | -0.31** (-5.75) | -5.68* (-3.15) | -2.06*** (-11.78) |
| Satisfaction government | 0.20* (8.67) | 2.81 (1.58) | 2.37 (3.98) | 0.25** (6.83) | 2.70 (2.49) | 3.13*** (11.65) |
| Constant | 6.10** (22.78) | 53.4** (15.52) | 22.5** (15.06) | 5.07** (7.42) | 45.1*** (22.41) | 23.2 (1.91) |
| N | 974 | 1,034 | 1,034 | 1,383 | 1,474 | 1,474 |
| R ² | 0.363 | 0.256 | 0.303 | 0.345 | 0.284 | 0.297 |
| weights | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes |

Notes: *t*-statistics in parentheses, * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. All regressions with clustered standard errors (clusters are the municipalities).

The results from the regression analyses are rather straightforward: Independent of the measurement of the independent variables used, citizens who prefer more cross-border integration also exhibit more positive attitudes toward the EU and think that the EU does not restrict municipalities' scope of action too severely. While the respective coefficients are highly significant at conventional levels, the relationship with the border control item is not (while still pointing in the expected direction). Hence, controlled for possible confounders, these results support our expectation formulated in H2 according to which an enhanced border integration is linked to more positive attitudes toward the EU. The control variables included in the estimations perform as expected: more politically interested, more educated, and ideologically more left-leaning participants also support EU integration more strongly. The same is true for those who are more satisfied with the government. However, no clear-cut findings emerge for gender and age. In addition to the direct effects uncovered in the regression analysis, which indicate that participants' preferences on cross-border integration are linked with their attitudes toward European integration, a further interrogation concerns the nature of the relationship between those two variables and political attitudes included as

control variables in the regression analysis. In fact, as theorised in Section 2.1 (see Figure 1), it could well be that part of the influence of political attitudes and socio-demographics that have been identified as drivers of Eurosceptic views in the literature is mediated by citizens' preferences on cross-border issues. A full mediation would come down, for instance, to the fact that highly educated people living in border regions only seem to favour more European integration, but mainly want more cross-border cooperation, which is in turn related to positive views about Europe. In this case, cross-border integration would be the key variable in that equation and fully soak up the direct effect between education level and attitudes toward Europe (see our theoretical considerations in Section 2.1).

We have investigated this question in a mediation analysis displayed in Table 3 (only for Frankfurt (Oder), Merzig, and Saarbrücken). The first model shows the direct relationships between our attitudinal variables and support for more EU integration, whereas the second model shows the associations of the same variables with support for cross-border integration, our mediator. Finally, Model 3 displays the full model including the border factors as predictors for European integration attitudes. Following Baron and Kenny (1986), we start by analysing the direct relationship between political attitudes and socio-demographics and EU integration attitudes (Model 1). The results show that more politically interested and more left-leaning persons hold more EU-positive opinions. Interestingly, though, turning to model 2, these variables are not significantly related to the border policy factor that takes up preferences for more cross-border integration. Hence, a pre-requisite for mediation does not seem to be fulfilled. Finally, the third step also indicates that the opinions on border issues exhibit an independent effect on attitudes toward the EU: while political interest and a left position remain

Table 3. Mediation analysis.

| | (1) EU integration attitudes | (2) Border policy factor | (3) EU integration attitudes |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Gender (Ref: Man) | −0.089 (−0.27) | −0.079 (−0.71) | −0.018 (−0.07) |
| Age | −0.012 (−2.36) | 0.00019 (0.09) | −0.012 (−4.31) |
| Education | 0.27 (2.02) | 0.0058 (0.13) | 0.26 (3.01) |
| Political interest | 0.50** (16.42) | 0.19 (3.79) | 0.38* (7.67) |
| Left-right | −0.29* (−11.45) | −0.13 (−1.73) | −0.17 (−2.45) |
| Satisfaction government | 0.24 (5.26) | 0.056 (2.76) | 0.20* (8.67) |
| Border policy factor | | | 0.88* (8.36) |
| _cons | 6.41** (63.40) | 0.074 (0.12) | 6.10** (22.78) |
| N | 974 | 1034 | 974 |
| R ² | 0.280 | 0.178 | 0.363 |
| Weight | yes | yes | yes |

Notes: *t*-statistics in parentheses, * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

significantly associated with attitudes toward EU integration, the views about border policies are an additional variable significantly associated with EU attitudes—a point that is also reflected in the increase of R^2 compared to Model 1. In sum, we can conclude that independently of well-known correlates of Euroscepticism, VOTO participants who favour more cross-border cooperation also tend to want closer EU integration.

5. Conclusions

Due to data restrictions, studies of European democracy still predominantly focus on relationships between the national and the EU level. Studying the field of party competition within the EU's multi-level system, this article highlights the role of European border regions and shows how dynamics in these inner-EU regions provide valuable insights into research questions about European democracy. Despite being home to around one-third of EU citizens, little is known about patterns of party competition, as well as citizens' specific demands and preferences in border regions. We were finally able to address this issue by using innovative data from the VOTO VAA, which was specifically designed for local elections in Germany in 2024. Investigating how European democracy functions at a local level by examining the positions of political parties and the political preferences of citizens on four German border regions—two on the eastern border and two on the western border—our study shows the extent to which border-specific features and party cues influence voters' views on cross-border cooperation and European integration.

Our empirical findings reveal interesting insights into both the supply and demand sides of political competition. Regarding the supply side, the empirical analysis only partially confirmed our initial hypothesis that party competition in border municipalities corresponds to general party positions. This is indeed only the case for certain parties. Both CDU and Die Linke in border municipalities significantly deviate from their respective national-level party position. Notably, we observe considerable variation within a party across border municipalities (e.g., within the FDP). Although the analysis reveals many local outliers, we cannot claim that parties in a given municipality consistently support or oppose European issues. While in Saarbrücken, the CDU is outstandingly pro-European, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen can be considered more Eurosceptic in comparison to the other very pro-European branches of the Greens in other border municipalities. For the demand side of political competition, our findings show that EU preferences correlate with attitudes on cross-border cooperation. Altogether, we can thus conclude that not all political parties take similar positions on European integration and cross-border issues in border municipalities, whereas the citizenry is more consistent here: enhanced border integration is linked to more positive attitudes towards the EU. This, in turn, clearly illustrates that VAA data qualifies as a valid data source to produce new insights for research fields with data gaps.

Based on these findings, we can identify at least three important avenues for further research: First, future studies should take into account the characteristics of different types of (European) border-regions. While our limited sample and the multiple dimensions of differences between the towns do not allow us to draw systematic conclusions, an interesting avenue could be to see how citizens experience the border itself. For example, the German-Polish border experienced border controls during the field period of VOTO, while the German-French border did so only to a limited degree. Second, in our study, we were only able to study positional preferences, but—due to data restrictions—did not address the salience. Given that different party families might have different incentives to emphasise cross-border integration, this perspective could also be insightful. The situation in terms of incentive structures seems to be unclear for political parties—i.e., is it

strategically useful or not for political parties to put emphasis on cross-border issues? In line with theoretical work on party competition, we can act on the assumption that such an environment typically leads to a de-emphasis of such issues, and this is actually what has been shown by a case study in the German-French border region (Braun & Hommel, 2025). Third, future studies should definitely continue to use innovative data sources, such as VAA data, to study research questions with an interest in local- or regional-level problems to overcome the issue of a national bias in studies of European democracy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The full data of the VOTO-project can be found at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/PAH9O1>

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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