

# Do Voters Want Domestic Politicians to Scrutinize the European Union?<sup>†</sup>

## Abstract

In the light of important political topics that go beyond the nation state (e.g., migration crisis, climate change, Brexit), domestic politicians are increasingly pressured to scrutinize and speak out on supranational policy-making. This creates a potential trade-off between allocating effort to domestic and supranational affairs, respectively. We examine how citizens perceive legislator involvement in supranational European Union (EU) politics with a pre-registered conjoint experiment in Germany. Our results show that Members of Parliament (MPs) are not disadvantaged when allocating effort to European affairs. Quite the opposite, MPs are rewarded for their reform efforts in EU policy-making. As demands for legislator involvement in supranational politics are on the rise, we provide empirical evidence that MPs can fulfill this demand without being disadvantaged by the electorate.

---

<sup>†</sup>The design of this study was pre-registered in the EGAP register. An anonymous report of the pre-registration plan is part of the Supplementary Materials. The link to the EGAP register has been submitted to the Editorial Office.

The European Union (EU) is under severe scrutiny by the European public and contemporary populist radical right parties (De Vries, 2018; Schneider, 2019a; Economist, 2019). Especially since the European debt crisis in 2009, the European public has increasingly challenged the European project (e.g. the Brexit referendum), called for a more democratic institutional framework, and urged domestic politicians to speak out and act against European policy-making. This has put enormous pressures not only on the European project but also on domestic politicians, who increasingly have to ask themselves if, and how much, they want to engage in EU oversight.

Interestingly, while the question of how to balance local and national representation has received a great deal of attention in the political science literature (Pitkin, 1967; Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987; Crisp et al., 2004; Shugart, Valdini and Suominen, 2005; Butler, Karpowitz and Pope, 2012; Vivyan and Wagner, 2016; Tromborg and Schwindt-Bayer, 2019), we know relatively little about how much the balance between national and supranational representation matters for both voters and Members of Parliament (MPs).

MPs already review EU legislation when they transpose European policies into national law (Franchino and Høyland, 2009), deliberate about EU proposals in parliamentary committees (Winzen, 2017), and address the EU in debates and questions (Rauh, 2015). Figure 1 shows that MP involvement in European affairs is ever more increasing, but how much do voters actually want MPs to engage in the European project? Even more importantly, does this engagement matter when voters make a decision between candidates in domestic elections? To address these questions we first discuss two contrasting expectations about citizen preferences over legislator effort allocation to supranational work, and then, we present our experimental design and findings.

On the one hand, there are good reasons to believe that European citizens appreciate MP involvement in supranational affairs. During the recent EU crises, major policy decisions were made without consulting national electorates. This left many citizens with the feeling that supranational politics is dominated by non-elected bureaucrats. The involvement of national MPs in supranational politics has the potential to add legitimacy to supranational decision-making (Thomassen, 2009; Bellamy, 2019). MPs are much closer to citizens than government representatives or European representatives and have the potential to enhance democratic accountability through visible debates about multilevel governance (Rauh and De Wilde, 2018). In addition, we know that citizens are not able to use European elections to hold EU decision-makers to account (Hobolt and Tilley,

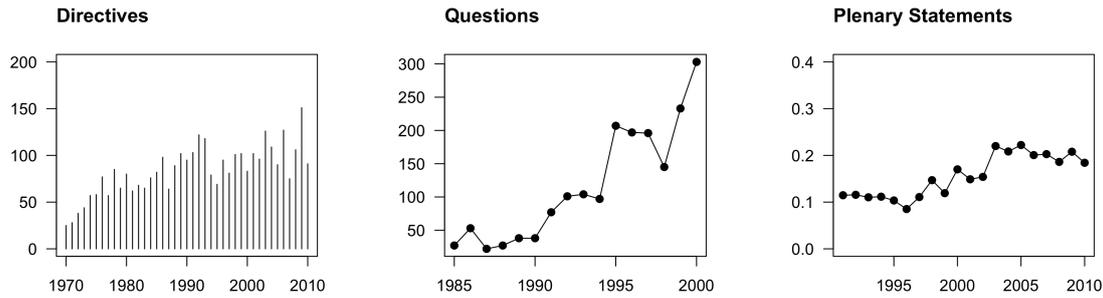


Figure 1: Development of MP involvement in supranational affairs

**Note:** The left panel shows the annual number of EU directives (legal acts that must be transposed by EU Member States) from 1970 to 2010. The center panel shows the number of EU-related parliamentary questions in the Danish Folketing from 1985 to 2000. The right panel illustrates the average share of EU references per plenary statement in the German Bundestag from 1991 to 2010. Please consult Section 1 in the Supplementary Materials for more information about the data.

2014). As a result, citizens might prefer more MP involvement in European affairs, which they can later punish or reward in national elections. This leads to the expectation that *voters prefer MPs who become significantly involved in supranational politics*.

On the other hand, there are reasons to believe that citizens reject MPs who spend too much effort on supranational politics. First, even though MPs have more rights than ever before, they still have little influence on EU decision-making. It is likely that citizens consider MP involvement in supranational politics a wasted effort and want them to focus on domestic affairs that they have a real impact on. Second, citizens elect Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who have the responsibility to represent citizens in supranational decision-making. Even though turnout at these elections is relatively low, citizens are well aware of the European Parliament (European Commission, 2018b). The involvement of MPs in supranational affairs may be considered an unnecessary duplication of work given the role of MEPs. Third, European citizens have very strong feelings of belonging to their country and place of residence, but they feel relatively little attached to the EU (European Commission, 2018a). Citizens may feel that an MP who devotes a great deal of time and effort to supranational politics is out of touch with reality. In sum, the aforementioned arguments suggest that *voters disadvantage MPs who become significantly involved in supranational politics*.

Testing the two contrasting expectations is important because a mismatch between current MP effort allocation and citizen preferences may not only cause dissatisfaction with individual politicians but the political system more broadly. In addition, knowing whether citizens actually put MPs

who engage in supranational affairs at a disadvantage is relevant because it gives instructions to MPs who may wish to fulfill demands to legitimize supranational decision-making. To carefully elucidate the causal relationship between MPs' effort allocation to supranational politics and voter preferences, we designed a choice-based conjoint survey experiment to test our expectations.<sup>1</sup>

## Experimental Design

Classical survey experimental designs are often seen as the 'gold standard' to study causal effects in surveys. However, such designs come with the drawback of identifying one-dimensional treatments only (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). Employing such a design would limit us to a single dimension of MP effort allocation to supranational affairs. Yet, there are many different ways of engaging in European affairs. Moreover, we do not only want to include varying dimensions of MP effort allocation but also additional attributes that are important to voters, such as gender and party label. Conjoint experiments allow researchers to set-up such a multidimensional context without the need to turn away from drawing causal conclusions.

We surveyed 993 German citizens on March 6, 2019, with respondents drawn from the Clickworker online crowd. Germany is a major player in supranational politics but also carries a large burden of costs caused by recent European crises. As a result, questions about legitimate decision-making and parliamentary involvement in supranational politics were particularly salient in Germany. Moreover, they are part of the original mobilization efforts of the radical right party 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD) and its party leader at the time, Bernd Lucke (Arzheimer, 2015). During his reign until July 2015, the party was mostly engaged and known amongst voters for being a Eurosceptic party (Schmitt-Beck, 2017). Given the relevance of European topics in German politics today and the resulting pressures for politicians, we believe that Germany constitutes an excellent case for testing our expectations. However, we discuss the external validity of our results in the final section of this paper. Our sample is not a nationally representative population-based sample. For example, there are more male respondents in the sample than men in the population, our respondents are younger, and more experienced in taking surveys than the general population.

---

<sup>1</sup>Another reason why we turn to an experimental design is the lack of observational data. While information about certain parts of MP involvement in European affairs is observable (e.g., parliamentary questions and debates), exposure to this information at the individual level is not.

We conducted robustness tests to rule out that sampling drives our findings. First, we re-weighted our sample on age groups, gender, and level of education so that it matches the voter population in Germany. Second, we interacted our key treatments with covariates such as age, gender, and voting intention. Our findings are robust to both specifications.<sup>2</sup>

After an introductory screen, respondents were presented with five vignettes, each depicting a contest between two current MPs who run for re-election.<sup>3</sup> The two profiles randomly exhibit information about MP effort allocation to supranational affairs. First, it is shown whether an MP has most knowledge of ‘local’, ‘national’, or ‘European’ problems. Second, the most common reason for absent days in parliament are presented. The three attribute levels are ‘meetings in the constituency’, ‘meetings in Berlin’, and ‘meetings at the EU level’. Third, an MP’s personal effort to reform the Eurozone was stated (‘none’, ‘little’, ‘much’). In sum, these three attributes represent a candidate’s knowledge about European politics, prioritization of supranational affairs, and EU policy engagement. By choosing the three attributes, we provide relevant multidimensional information about MPs’ effort allocation to domestic and supranational politics without presenting overly complex policy details. This is particularly important as EU policy is usually not at the forefront of people’s minds.

As mentioned before, the vignettes include additional MP features that have shown to be of high importance to voters (Horiuchi, Smith and Yamamoto, 2018). These include gender, party label, years in parliament, and motivation for candidacy. A candidate was either ‘male’ or ‘female’ and could be attached to either ‘SPD’, ‘CDU/CSU’, ‘Die Linke’, ‘FDP’, ‘AfD’, or ‘Die Grünen’. The years in parliament were ‘2’, ‘6’, ‘10’, and ‘14’.<sup>4</sup> The values for a candidate’s motivation to run were ‘to serve the party’, ‘to represent ordinary people’, and ‘to impact personally on political decision-making’. The presentation of the various levels of these additional attributes also varied randomly. Respondents were asked to read the characteristics of both candidates carefully and state which candidate they would vote for. We use a factual manipulation check to assess respondent attentiveness to our multidimensional manipulation.<sup>5</sup> Finally, respondents were asked to answer several questions about national and European politics as well as their socio-economic and political

---

<sup>2</sup>Please consult Section 2 in the Supplementary Materials.

<sup>3</sup>A screenshot is provided in the Supplementary Materials (Section 3).

<sup>4</sup>For candidates attached to the party ‘AfD’, the value was fixed at 2.

<sup>5</sup>In the main part of this manuscript, we analyze data from the full sample. In the Supplementary Materials, we illustrate how our results are unchanged when we use the subsample with a successful manipulation test only (Section 4).

background.<sup>6</sup> To address the potential trade-off between priming vs. post-treatment biases (Montgomery, Nyhan and Torres, 2018), half of the respondents were randomly presented to the vignettes along with the choice task after they had answered the additional questions. In the Supplementary Materials (Section 6), we show that the results of the two samples are substantially the same. In sum, our study yields ten observations per respondent, one for each MP profile that respondents engage with across their five choice tasks, leading to a total of 9,993 observations. Needless to say, our survey experimental design cannot replicate a real-world vote choice, but we made efforts to maintain validity by using a multidimensional and reasonably realistic choice setting.

## Results

We first examine the average effect of MPs' effort allocation between domestic and supranational work, and then we investigate how this effect varies across two subgroups. Figure 2 presents average marginal component effects (AMCE) estimates for the levels of attributes that were included in our conjoint experiment. The AMCE can be thought of as the degree to which a given value of a candidate feature increases or decreases respondents' favorability towards a candidate profile relative to a baseline level, averaging across all respondents and all other profile features. The three attributes on the left (lightblue background) show estimates related to an MP's engagement in European affairs as described above. For each level, the dot shows the point estimate for the effect of that level relative to the baseline level. The baseline levels are *constituency* for the first attribute, *meetings in Berlin* for the second attribute, and *none* for the third attribute. The error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

The results show that German voters do not base their voting decision on MPs' awareness of problems, nor MPs' most common reasons for absent days in parliament. We observe no significant differences between the baseline levels and the remaining levels of the two attributes. Importantly, this means that voters do not disadvantage MPs who allocate effort to supranational politics as they are not more likely to prefer candidates who know most about local and national problems over candidates who know most about European problems. Similarly, voters do not prefer MPs who are absent from parliament because of meetings at the local and national levels over MPs who are

---

<sup>6</sup>The full text of our survey is part of the Supplementary Materials (Section 5).

absent because of meetings at the EU level.

Turning to the third attribute concerning an MP's effort to reform the Eurozone, the results show a clear aversion to MPs who show no policy engagement at all. Compared to an MP who shows no policy engagement, MPs who engage 'little' or 'much' are preferred by voters. These estimated effects are statistically significant and substantial in magnitude. Furthermore, the effect of policy engagement appears to be linear. An increase in MPs' policy engagement from the baseline level *none* to *little* leads to a moderate increase in the probability that an MP profile is preferred between 1.1 and 6.0 percentage points. The point estimate shows an increase of 3.6 percentage points. However, an increase from the baseline level *none* to *much* leads to a substantial increase of between 9.6 and 14.5 percentage points. The point estimate shows an increase of 12.0 percentage points.

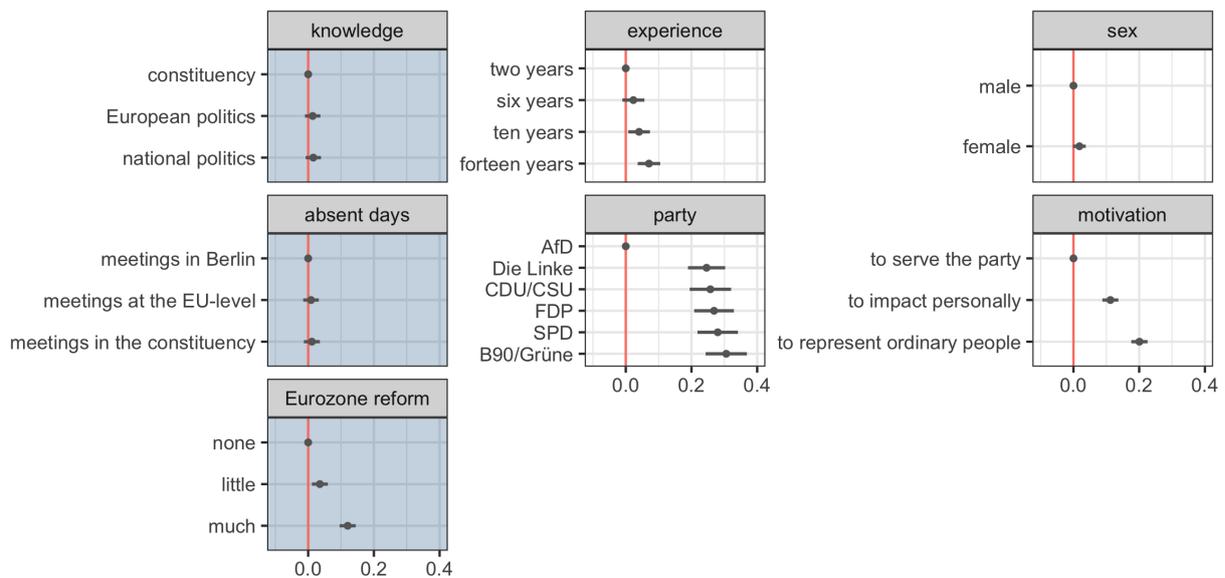


Figure 2: Average marginal component effects

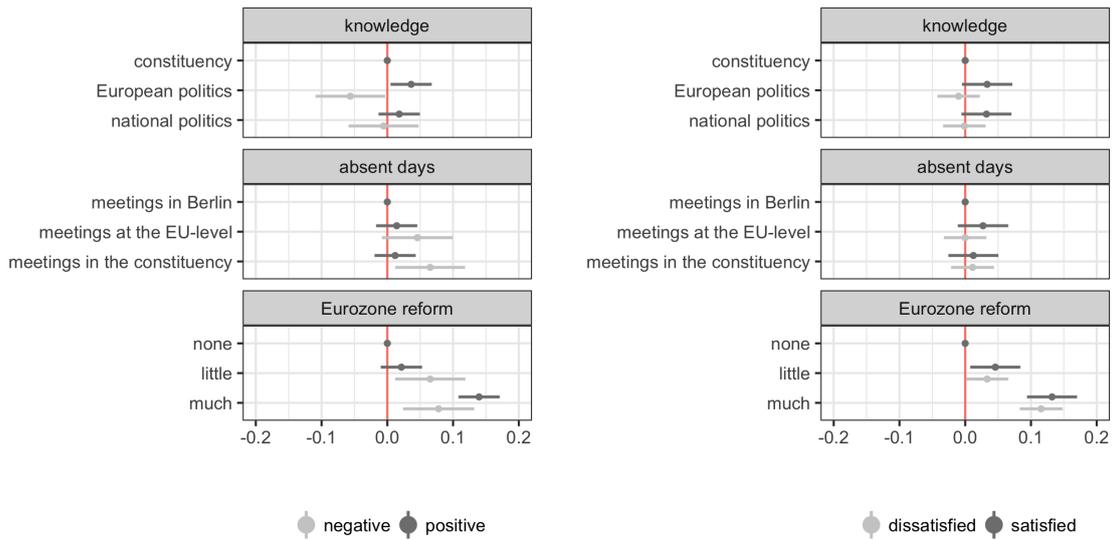


Figure 3: Average component interaction effects

In addition to attributes indicating MP effort allocation between domestic and supranational work, respondents are presented with a range of attributes that have proven to be important in previous studies, including gender, party label, experience, and motivation for running for re-election. We find evidence that party label, experience, and a candidate’s motivation matter to voters. For example, an increase in experience from the baseline level *two years* to *fourteen years* leads to an increase in the probability of choosing the candidate containing that attribute level of between 3.6 and 10.5 percentage points. The point estimate shows an increase of 7.1 percentage points. Furthermore, an MP profile that contains the motivation *to impact personally on decision-making* compared to the baseline *to serve the party* leads to an increase in the probability of choosing that profile of between 8.8 and 13.7 percentage points. The point estimate shows an increase of 11.2 percentage points. We now turn to the presentation of subgroup differences.

In the left panel of Figure 3, each dot and error bar represents average component interaction effects and 95 per cent confidence intervals for citizens who perceive the EU being negatively (combining the categories *very negative* and *fairly negative*) and being positively (combining the categories *very positive* and *fairly positive*). It shows that respondents belonging to the two groups differ in their probability of choosing MPs who know most about European problems. While Eurosceptics dislike candidates who know most about European politics relative to the baseline level ‘constituency’, Europhiles prefer them. However, the display also highlights just how similar the two groups react to the remaining attribute levels. Most importantly, both pro-EU and anti-EU vot-

ers prefer MPs who allocate much effort to EU policy-making over MPs who do not. We observe a similar picture when comparing subgroups by their level of satisfaction with democracy in the EU. Both citizens who are dissatisfied (combining the categories *little* and *not at all* satisfied) and citizens who are satisfied (combining the categories *very* and *fairly* satisfied) with the way democracy works in the EU prefer MPs who engage in supranational policy-making over those who do not.<sup>7</sup> In sum, we find evidence that an MP's reform effort in supranational policy-making matters to voters even when other important candidate attributes are considered.

## Discussion

Recent European crises have put pressure on domestic politicians, who increasingly have to ask themselves if, and how much, they want to engage in EU scrutiny. Our study is the first to examine citizen preferences over MPs' involvement in supranational affairs using an experimental design. We present two contrasting expectations of why citizens are likely to prefer/disadvantage MPs who become involved in European politics. Results from a pre-registered conjoint experiment in Germany show that MPs are not disadvantaged for allocating effort to European affairs. This holds true for MPs who know most about European problems as compared to local and national problems as well as for MPs who prioritize meetings at the EU level as compared to meetings at the national and constituency levels. This is important information for MPs who may want to spend more effort on supranational affairs but have not dared to do so because of the risk of being disadvantaged. In addition, we find that citizens generally prefer MPs who become involved in supranational policy-making over MPs who keep out of it. The finding suggests that citizens are tired of 'politics without policy' at the national level (Schmidt, 2006). The process of Europeanization has shifted more and more policies to the EU level, thereby removing them from the national political arena and depoliticizing them at the same time. The recent European crises have re-politicized certain EU policy areas (e.g., the Euro and migration). Our findings suggest that voters try to pull decision-making back to the national level by demanding engagement of MPs in supranational policy-making. This finding relates to recent research showing that citizens fail to hold European representatives to account via European elections (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014) and demand responsiveness of their national

---

<sup>7</sup>Additional subgroup analyses are included in Section 7 in the Supplementary Materials.

representatives when negotiating at the EU level via national elections (Schneider, 2019b). Our research adds to these findings by suggesting that MP involvement in European politics constitutes a reasonable strategy of citizens to guarantee a high level of responsiveness in supranational decision-making. Nevertheless, caution is warranted as our study has a focus on Germany. While concerns about the legitimacy of EU decision-making are visible across Europe, it could be that preferences over MP involvement vary. A country's electoral system and trust in national politicians are possible factors that may condition citizens' preferences.

In light of our results and the EU being in limbo, future research could elaborate on three important aspects. First, we need to know what kind of legislator involvement in supranational affairs citizens prefer. Do voters want their MPs to review, discuss, and explain supranational policies, or do they also want them to become involved in the decision-making process? Closely related, future studies could examine whether MPs' involvement should be limited to a few salient policy areas or whether citizens want their MPs to become involved in a broad range of supranational policies. Finally, given that citizens want MPs to become more involved in supranational policy-making, it is important to know whether citizens would accept a reduction of local and national policy work in return.

## References

- Arzheimer, Kai. 2015. "The AfD: Finally a successful right-wing populist eurosceptic party for Germany?" *West European Politics* 38(3):535–556.
- Bellamy, Richard. 2019. *A Republican Europe of States: Cosmopolitanism, Intergovernmentalism and Democracy in the EU*. Cambridge University Press.
- Butler, Daniel M., Christopher F. Karpowitz and Jeremy C. Pope. 2012. "A Field Experiment on Legislators' Home Styles: Service versus Policy." *The Journal of Politics* 74(2):474–486.
- Cain, Bruce E., John A. Ferejohn and Morris P. Fiorina. 1987. *The personal vote: Constituency service and electoral independence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Crisp, Brian F., Maria C. Escobar-Lemmon, Bradford S. Jones, Mark P. Jones and Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson. 2004. "Vote-Seeking Incentives and Legislative Representation in Six Presidential Democracies." *The Journal of Politics* 66(3):823–846.
- De Vries, Catherine. 2018. *Euroscepticism and the Future of European Integration*. Oxford University Press.
- Economist. 2019. "Europe's populist insurgents: Turning right."  
**URL:** <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2014/01/02/turning-right>
- European Commission. 2018a. "Standard Eurobarometer 89."

- European Commission. 2018b. “Standard Eurobarometer 90.”
- Franchino, Fabio and Bjørn Høyland. 2009. “Legislative Involvement in Parliamentary Systems: Opportunities, Conflict, and Institutional Constraints.” *American Political Science Review* 103(4):607–621.
- Hainmueller, Jens, Daniel J. Hopkins and Teppei Yamamoto. 2014. “Causal inference in conjoint analysis: Understanding multidimensional choices via stated preference experiments.” *Political Analysis* 22(1):1–30.
- Hobolt, Sara Binzer and James Tilley. 2014. *Blaming Europe? : responsibility without accountability in the European Union*. 1st ed. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Horiuchi, Yusaku, Daniel M. Smith and Teppei Yamamoto. 2018. “Identifying voter preferences for politicians’ personal attributes: a conjoint experiment in Japan.” *Political Science Research and Methods* p. 1–17.
- Montgomery, Jacob M., Brendan Nyhan and Michelle Torres. 2018. “How Conditioning on Post-treatment Variables Can Ruin Your Experiment and What to Do about It.” *American Journal of Political Science* 62(3):760–775.
- Pitkin, Hanna F. 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rauh, Christian. 2015. “Communicating supranational governance? The salience of EU affairs in the German Bundestag, 1991–2013.” *European Union Politics* 16(1):116–138.
- Rauh, Christian and Pieter De Wilde. 2018. “The opposition deficit in EU accountability: Evidence from over 20 years of plenary debate in four member states.” *European Journal of Political Research* 57(1):194–216.
- Schmidt, Vivien A. 2006. *Democracy in Europe: The EU and National Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schmitt-Beck, Rüdiger. 2017. “The Alternative für Deutschland in the electorate: between single-issue and right-wing populist party.” *German Politics* 26(1):124–148.
- Schneider, Christina J. 2019a. *The Responsive Union: National Elections and European Governance*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schneider, Christina Julia. 2019b. “Public Commitments as Signals of Responsiveness in the European Union.” *The Journal of Politics* .
- Shugart, Matthew Søberg, Melody Ellis Valdini and Kati Suominen. 2005. “Looking for Locals: Voter Information Demands and Personal Vote-Earning Attributes of Legislators under Proportional Representation.” *American Journal of Political Science* 49(2):437–449.
- Thomassen, Jaques, ed. 2009. *The Legitimacy of the European Union after Enlargement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tromborg, Mathias W. and Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer. 2019. “Constituent Demand and District-Focused Legislative Representation.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 44(1):35–64.
- Vivyan, Nick and Markus Wagner. 2016. “House or home? Constituent preferences over legislator effort allocation.” *European Journal of Political Research* 55(1):81–99.
- Winzen, Thomas. 2017. *Constitutional Preferences and Parliamentary Reform: Explaining National Parliaments’ Adaptation to European Integration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.