

National elites and EU economic governance: the art of cherry-picking solidarity

All the classic visions of European integration have been built on the idea of an «Elite project». And all the elite-centred visions of a closer European Union have been historically conceived assuming that economic integration would have had lots of positive effects on political integration. Such an optimistic view has started to stumble at the end of the last decade of the XX century, when the costs of emerged in many countries and, on the other hand, the most wealthy Member States imposed severe guarantees to avoid the risks of a lack of stability. Later, the economic crisis has amplified some of the doubts already raised in a few analyses (for instance [McKay 1999](#)) concerning the sustainability of EMU in the absence of stronger political conditions.

As a consequence, the traditionally pro-Europeanist elites have lost most of their grip on European public opinion. The decline of the Elite project has been intensively explored since then, by a number of studies focussing on several aspects of the supranational integration (for instance, [Haller 2008](#); [Best et al. 2012](#); [Conti et al. 2012](#)). However, the crucial aspect of the effective capability of the European political elites to find sustainable solutions to the problems of the European economy transmitting, at the same time, a positive message of integration has been relatively neglected in the literature.

Economic solidarity among the member states still seems to be a rather established principle, while EU policy intervention is instead, on average, a relatively more contested solution

The EUENGAGE project aimed at bridging this gap, exploring in depth the views expressed by the national political elites and the public opinion on the prospects of EU economic integration. In this article, we just cover a specific aspect of the data provided by this project. Indeed, we will explore the attitudes of European political elites towards the future of European economic governance after the economic downturn of the past years, by examining the responses of the members of national parliaments to an elite survey* conducted in 2016 (the first of the two waves provided by the project).

Table 1 presents the number of fully completed interviews reached in each country. The following analysis is based on these interviews.

Table 1. EUENGAGE elite survey. Number of interviews by Country

Country	Fully Completed Interviews
Czech Republic	58
France	46
Germany	47
Greece	51
Italy	74
Netherlands	15
Poland	49
Portugal	69
Spain	65
United Kingdom	41
Total	514

Source: EUENGAGE Elite Survey, Wave 1 (2016)

In order to shed a light on the discrepancies among the attitudes of the European politicians on the topics of Economic Harmonization and Solidarity, we will focus in particular on two questions included in the survey: ***Burden Sharing and Economic Coordination***

1. at first, we explore the problem of *burden sharing*, by considering the respondents' self-positioning, on a 0-10 scale, between resource pooling to cope with the post-crisis imbalances of the member states (value 10) versus preservation of national sovereignty (value 0=;
2. secondly, we look at *EU economic policy coordination*, by considering the alternative options of further shifting policy responsibility to the EU level (value 10) versus a purely inter-governmental competence (value 0).

The data show that a pattern of widespread pro-EU attitudes is difficult to find nowadays in the member states. However, economic solidarity among the member states still seems to be a rather established principle, while EU policy intervention is instead, on average, a relatively more contested solution.

The very fact of being embedded in the national representation systems, from which they derive their legitimacy and mandate, may drive several national politicians to oppose the prospect of tighter coordination of economic and budgetary policies at the

EU level that would reduce national sovereignty and the competence of national legislators

Political elites are, on average, positively inclined toward the effort to pool resources to face the main economic imbalances that affect Europe (overall mean score = 6.4, with a standard deviation equal to 2.9), but they tend to be less prone to delegate policy coordination to the EU (overall mean score = 4.9, with a standard deviation equal to 2.7). In sum, the attitude to show some kind of solidarity in order to promote some kind of shared economic standard confirms the traditional *Europeaness* of the domestic elites of EU member states ([Best et al. 2012](#)). At the same time, the idea to entrust the EU institution with the task to put this solidarity into practice seems much less popular among the same elites.

Two separate dimensions?

Figure 1 plots the positions of national political elites in a bi-dimensional space reflecting the mean country scores on policy coordination (horizontal axis) and burden sharing (vertical axis). Here we find some shreds of evidence of a general separation between these two dimensions, together with appreciable country-by-country differences. It should be noted at first that a significant cluster of countries populates the upper-left quadrant of the figure: that clearly indicates the trend emerging at the aggregate level, especially in Southern and Central-Eastern member states, to score higher on burden sharing than on economic policy coordination. The upper-right quadrant of the figure (reflecting higher scores on both dimensions) is occupied by the traditionally pro-Europeanist elites of four countries (France, Germany, Italy and Spain). In the other cases, in particular, when EU policy coordination is concerned, political elites converge towards relatively (Greece, Portugal, and Poland) or openly (Netherlands, Czech Republic and United Kingdom) Eurosceptical positions.

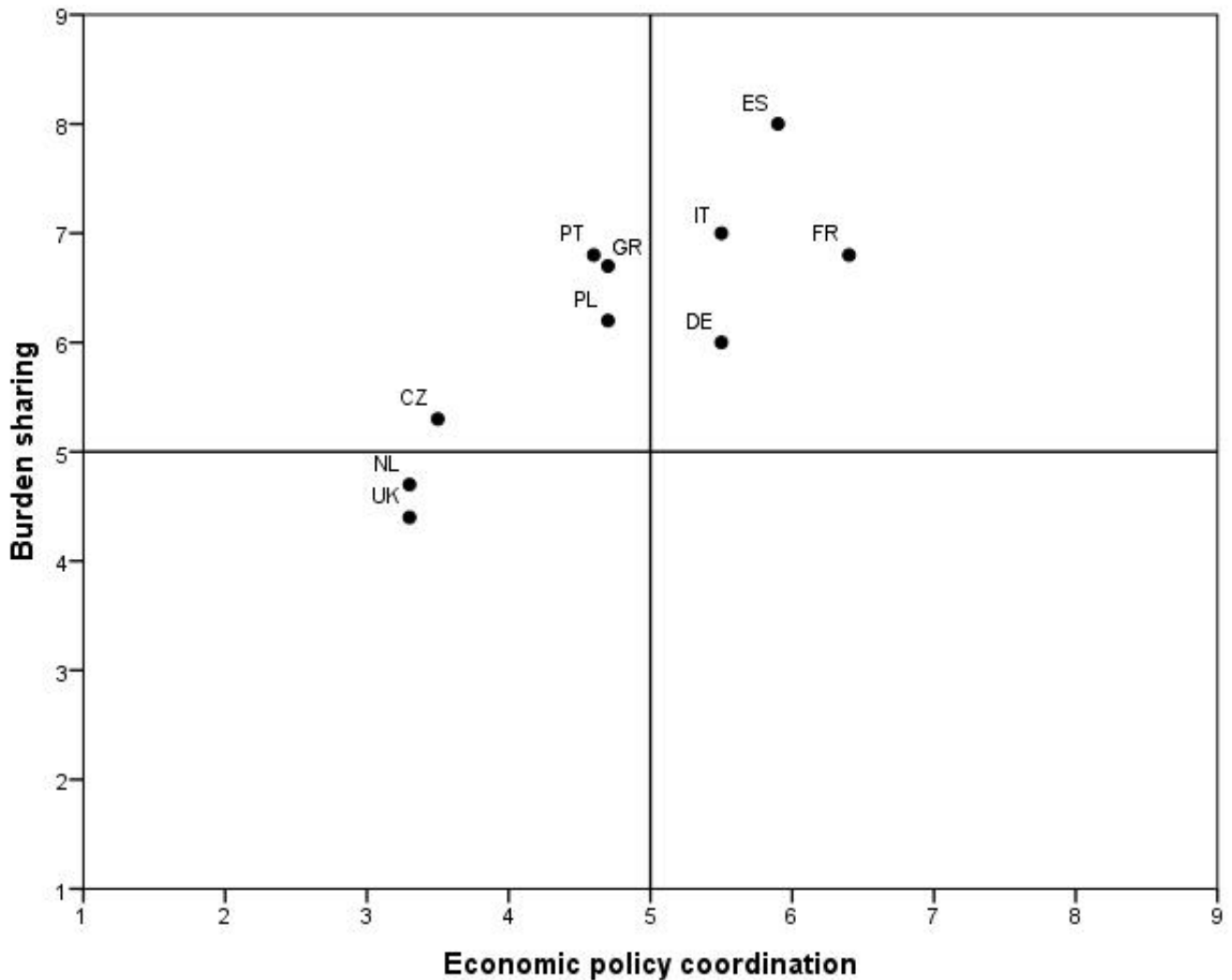


Figure 1 Average positions of interviewed politicians in a bi-dimensional space, by country

The asymmetry between support for burden sharing and EU policy coordination is also confirmed at a different level of aggregation, that is by considering the party proximity of respondents. Figure 2 plots the average positions of national politicians by the European parliamentary group to which their party of election is affiliated. Once again, mean scores are generally higher along the burden sharing dimension than on the EU economic policy coordination. Not surprisingly, the distances between parties are very significant, thus reproducing a gap which would be determined, according to some authors, by the emergence of a *transnational cleavage* ([Hooghe and Marks 2017](#)).

More precisely, we see traditionally pro-Europeanist parties scoring relatively high on both dimensions (being the Popular party less markedly characterized by solidarity and by the attitude toward policy coordination than other mainstream party federations). On the other hand, openly Eurosceptic parties (in particular, the ENF and the ECR groups) display a rather low (average) position on both dimensions, while the clusters of parties corresponding to the radical left and the group «Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy» look more inclined to support

burden sharing that accepting policy coordination to «these» EU institutions.

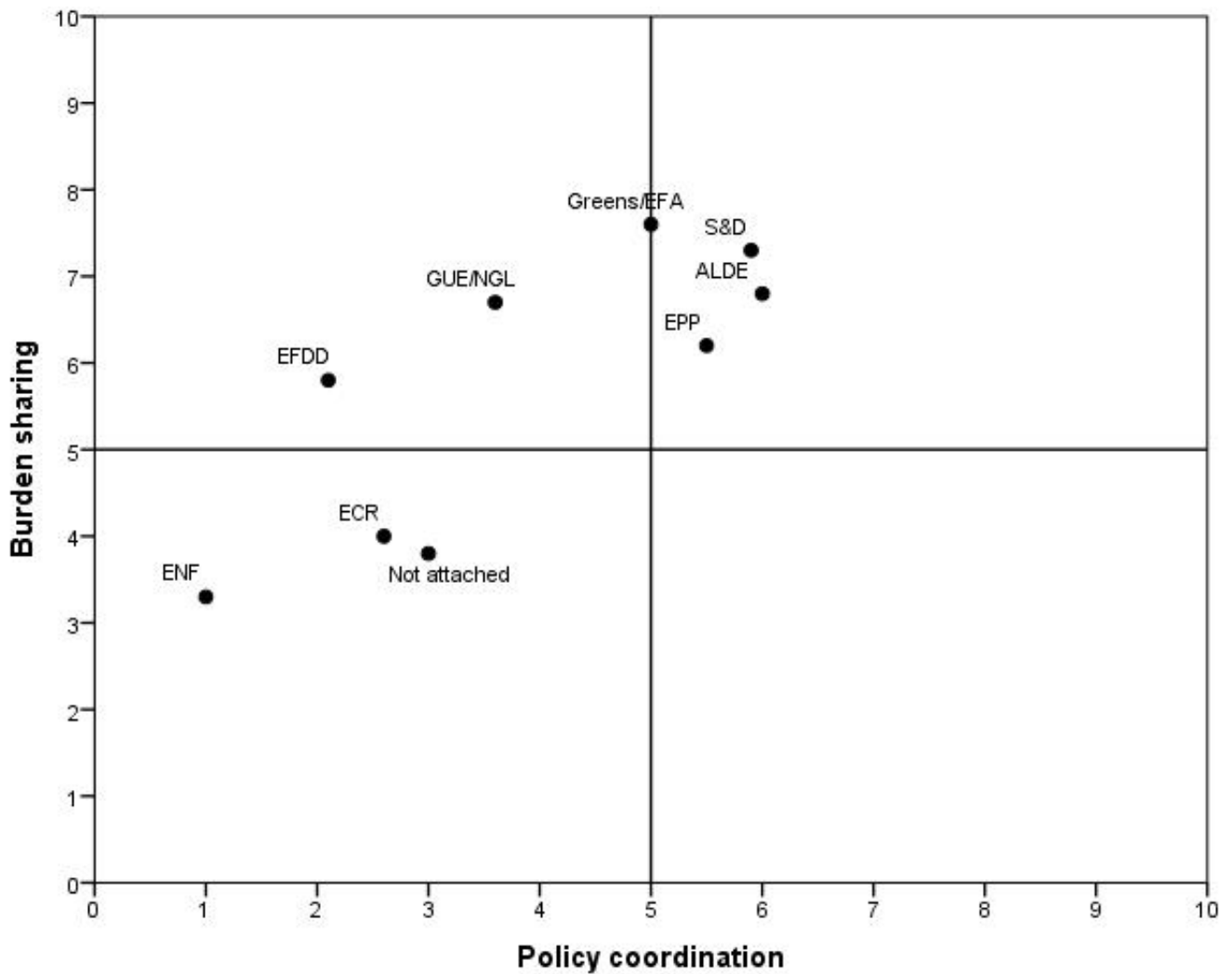


Figure 2 Average positions of interviewed politicians in a bi-dimensional space, by party

These initial aggregate-level pieces of evidence are also corroborated at an individual level (table 2), where we find only weak correlations (the overall Pearson’s r coefficient being equal to 0.26) between the individual scores on the two questions. The main exceptions, in this regard, are UK and, to a lesser extent, Poland, where the attitudes of the respondents on the two issues appears to be more strictly correlated, with a Pearson’s r being equal, respectively to 0.71 and to 0.43.

Table 2. Individual-level correlation coefficients between EU economic policy coordination and burden sharing, by country

Country	Person's r	N
Czech Republic	-0.03	57
France	0.19	45
Germany	0.05	46
Greece	0.12	49
Italy	0.11	72
Netherlands	0.16	15
Poland	0.43**	47
Portugal	-0.05	69
Spain	0.16	64
United Kingdom	0.71***	40
Overall	0.26***	504

Note: *** p<0.01; ** p<0.05

Source: EUENGAGE Elite Survey, Wave 1 (2016)

If national politicians appear more open to the principles of economic solidarity among European countries and mutual support to face the economic imbalances generated by the economic crisis, their support for EU economic policy coordination is more restricted. This is an impressive result when one thinks that the evident opposition to the prospect of a deeper integration happens in a field (the economy) where the EU has already achieved its highest levels of integration.

A new critical tension among political elites?

These preliminary results of the EUENGAGE elite survey seem to reveal **the existence of a tension between the dual role of national politicians as domestic representatives and as active participants of the EU process.**

On the one hand, they cannot easily deny the principles of European solidarity and policy coordination affirmed by the agreements reached with the unanimous consensus of national governments supported by broad majorities of the domestic representatives. This might be the case, also, for niche parties: we can indeed suppose that they should be forced to advance less

naïve (and populist) policy solutions, accepting some degree of economic coordination and solidarity. On the other hand, the very fact of being embedded in the national representation systems, from which they derive their legitimacy and mandate, may drive several national politicians to oppose the prospect of tighter coordination of economic and budgetary policies at the EU level that would reduce national sovereignty and the competence of national legislators. This is an urgent dilemma, in particular, for mainstream parties, whose elected representatives, facing aggressive competition from new parties, may prove to be attentive to the Eurosceptical messages coming from the public that, especially during the crisis years, have become louder in affirming that integration has gone too far in Europe.

Notes:

** The EUENGAGE elite survey (wave 1) has been set up as one of the deliverables of the EU-funded project EUENGAGE (Bridging the gap between public opinion and European leadership: Engaging a dialogue on the future path of Europe) aimed at inquiring into both the current tensions between supranational EU governance and popular mobilisation at the national level and proposing empirically-grounded remedial actions in response to the relationship between public opinion and (national and supranational) political elites. The elite survey has been carried out (through a CAWI design) between March and October 2016 in ten European countries: Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, Poland and Portugal. This wave of the survey involved 696 politicians (members of the lower chambers of national parliaments and members of the European Parliament).*

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