

How Do European Citizens Form their Views of the EU Public Administration? Exploring the Role of Heuristics

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ABSTRACT

Complex multi-level governance systems face a variety of challenges. As one of the most prominent multi-level administrative systems in the world, the EU has experienced a legitimacy crisis for several years, with many citizens displaying skeptical or even hostile views of European integration in general and the EU's central bureaucracy specifically. Despite the prevalence of such negative views of the EU public administration, citizens have almost no direct interactions with or substantive knowledge of this institution. Given these circumstances, my study seeks to answer the following question: How do citizens form their views of the EU bureaucracy? The theory presented here suggests that people use mental shortcuts—specifically a variation of the “representativeness heuristic”—to make inferences about the EU's administrative institutions. Empirically, I focus on the case of Romania and use survey data to show that perceptions of domestic bureaucracies are significant predictors of perceptions of the EU bureaucracy. These findings have wide-ranging academic and practical-political implications.

Keywords: European Union; bureaucracy; public administration; heuristics, Euroscepticism

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Introduction

In recent years, the study of complex multi-level governance systems has received significant attention (Howlett, 2009; Jensen *et al.*, 2014; Piattoni, 2010; Piattoni, 2012). Possibly the most prominent multi-level administrative structure is the European Union (EU) (Börzel and Risse, 2000; Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Marks *et al.*, 1996; Scharpf, 1988; Vogler, 2020). Yet one of its core institutional components—the bureaucracy that is subordinated to the EU’s central political bodies—has been largely ignored in the scholarly literature. While there certainly are some studies on the EU’s administrative framework (e.g., Bauer and Becker, 2014; Bauer and Trondal, 2015; Hustedt *et al.*, 2014; Wessels, 2003),¹ perusing the existing literature, there is practically no research on how citizens form their views of the EU bureaucracy, or how this relates to the important phenomenon of *Eurosepticism*. Yet such a study would be of general relevance because the EU’s bureaucracy is frequently being singled out as a highly negative aspect of European integration in public discourses and the media (Bakshian Jr., 2016; Gould, 2019; The Economist, 2017; Williams, 2019). This is related to the EU’s broader legitimacy crisis, with a large number of citizens displaying euroseptic attitudes.

Interestingly, although many citizens hold such negative attitudes toward the EU’s public administration in particular, few have ever interacted with this bureaucracy in practice. In light of citizens’ minimal interaction with and lack of concrete knowledge about the EU bureaucracy, my research question is: What explains distrust and perceived levels of corruption in the EU bureaucracy at the level of individual European citizens?²

An in-depth examination of perceptions of bureaucracies in general and the European bureaucracy in particular is justified by the fact that these administrative systems play an *essential* role in policy development and implementation. Without bureaucracies, neither executives nor legislatures—at *all* levels of government—would have any real power as they heavily depend on them when it comes to the concrete formulation and subsequent imple-

¹See also the individual chapters by Benz (2015) and Grande and McCowan (2015) in the volume by Bauer and Trondal (2015). Furthermore, for overviews of EU administrative agencies, governance, and regulation, see Bach *et al.* (2016), Christensen and Nielsen (2010), Egeberg and Trondal (2017), Levi-Faur (2011), and Vantaggiato (2020). Finally, for examples of how the European Union supports the building of bureaucratic capacity at the local level within the EU and at the national level in other countries, see Charasz and Vogler (2021) and Shyrokykh *et al.* (2023), respectively.

²My partial focus on corruption is because it is a key inhibitor of democratic legitimacy. When political systems are perceived as corrupt, this can have severe consequences for the extent to which citizens accept and support them. Since the EU is often perceived to already have issues with democratic participation, corruption may have particularly strong negative effects on its perceived legitimacy. Additionally, perceptions of corruption also have the potential to lead to emigration, as Helms (2023) shows. Finally, corruption is also a highly important subject in public administration research (e.g., Kwon, 2012; Olsen *et al.*, 2018).

mentation of policies (Brierley *et al.*, 2023; Vogler, 2019b; Vogler, 2023a).³ These circumstances also directly apply to the European Commission and Parliament, which makes the study of the EU bureaucracy highly relevant from a political perspective.

The related issue of Euroscepticism is a persistent and impactful phenomenon (Raunio, 2007; Torreblanca and Leonard, 2013; Usherwood and Startin, 2013) that has generated intense public and academic interest over the last three decades. It is often understood as a suspicious—if not oppositional (Krouwel and Abts, 2007) or even hostile (McLaren, 2007, pp. 236–237)—view of EU institutions and integration (Leconte, 2010).⁴

My theory, which seeks to explain the strong views that many citizens hold of the EU bureaucracy, is based on insights from psychology and behavioral economics regarding the use of heuristics (Gilovich *et al.*, 2002; Simon, 1957; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974).⁵ Since the vast majority of European citizens do not interact with the EU bureaucracy, most of them have to form their judgments based on inferences. One such type of inference are mental shortcuts based on previous experiences with public administration.

In particular, experiences with domestic (local and central) bureaucratic institutions may shape citizens' general views of public administrations, which then impacts their opinion of the EU bureaucracy. Specifically, people are likely to develop an approximate understanding of the *general* characteristics of bureaucracies (i.e., of the overall “population” of bureaucracies) through (1) their own experiences with and (2) reliable second-hand information about *domestic* bureaucracies. If they are then asked to judge another individual bureaucracy (in this case at the supranational level) that they have little knowledge of, they may transfer their beliefs about what constitutes a “representative bureaucracy” to this other institution. This process of making a judgment about the inherent qualities of object A based only on some external (superficial) commonalities with object B—which is *assumed* to belong to the same underlying population—may be considered a variation of

³For a detailed discussion of the important topic of divergence in policy preferences between political principals and bureaucratic agents, see Turner (2022). Moreover, for an example of how certain bureaucratic characteristics can impede policy implementation, see Cornell (2014). Finally, for an overview of some of the recent literature on comparative bureaucratic politics, see Dahlström and Lapuente (2022).

⁴In this study, I think of Euroscepticism as the entire range from suspicious to hostile views of the EU. In its more extreme forms, this hostility is likely also associated with demands for withdrawal, as exemplified by Brexit, which highlights Euroscepticism's relevance for the continent's future political organization.

⁵The field of public administration has already made use of the concept of heuristics in diverse settings (e.g., Jilke and Tummers, 2018; Olson, 2016; Pedersen *et al.*, 2018; Teodoro and An, 2018).

the “representativeness heuristic” (Kahneman and Tversky, 1972).⁶ In short, because the EU administration also “represents” a bureaucracy, knowledge from comparable (prototypical) domestic institutions may be used to evaluate and form judgments about it.⁷

Importantly, my argument is primarily focused on *bureaucratic* institutions. When evaluating the EU bureaucracy, the use of the representativeness heuristic is *not* expected to be associated with citizens’ views of domestic *political* institutions. Executives and legislatures play a different substantive role in political systems (Vogler, 2023a). In addition, citizens often have at least minimal concrete knowledge of related EU institutions (especially the European Commission and Parliament) and different terminology is used to describe them, reducing the likelihood of a transfer of perceptions via heuristics. A minimum of concrete knowledge also more effectively enables citizens to view EU political institutions as either complementary or substitutable with respect to domestic political institutions.

Although this study deals with distrust in the EU’s bureaucracy specifically, its results are of much wider significance. Distrust in political and administrative institutions can generally undermine the functioning of democracies (Lenard, 2008; Whiteley *et al.*, 2016). For instance, it can do so by fueling perceptions of corruption (Wroe *et al.*, 2013). Thus, this phenomenon can be observed in many political systems and at different time periods (Hart, 1978). In this respect, Rogowski (2020) recently found that a key factor that determines Americans’ trust in their domestic bureaucracy is its perceived competence.⁸ The structures and capacities of public bureaucracies are also central to democracy because public administrations are responsible for the management of electoral processes (Williamson *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, while the “representativeness heuristic” has not been widely used as an explanation in existing studies, comparable dynamics have already been

⁶Importantly, the logic of representativeness at the core of this heuristic is very different from the logic of “representation” when it comes to *political representation*. Political representation can be understood within a principal-agent framework (where the population is the principal and the politician is the agent), while the heuristic merely refers to apparent outer commonalities between two phenomena of interest.

⁷The general notion that citizens may hold views regarding the EU’s bureaucracy as a specific and *distinguishable* institution is supported by the bureaucracy’s frequent mentioning in public discourses, including in popular media and tabloids (without those outlets providing substantive information on it, however). This argument is empirically supported by the fact that more than 85% of our respondents answered specific questions about the EU bureaucracy, meaning a low non-response rate. The combined facts that (1) the EU’s bureaucracy is often mentioned in public debates and (2) a large number of citizens are willing to express their opinions about it, underscores the relevance of an investigation into how their perceptions are formed.

⁸Bureaucratic expertise and the related principal-agent dynamics are key aspects of public administrations’ overall institutional effectiveness (Gailmard and Patty, 2012a; Gailmard and Patty, 2012b).

observed with respect to other aspects of the EU or the broader integration process. For instance, Anderson (1998) shows that “domestic proxies” (e.g., satisfaction with the political system) are frequently involved in forming support for EU integration.⁹ Some studies also demonstrate that such dynamics can be observed in Central and Eastern Europe specifically (Christin, 2005; Cichowski, 2000; Tverdova and Anderson, 2004), which is the region at the center of this study.

To test my theory, I use data from a survey of 1,001 Romanian citizens. I have chosen Romania as a testing ground for a number of reasons that are detailed in the case selection section below. Among others, I suggest that significant variation in the quality of domestic bureaucratic institutions represents a proper foundation for a study based on perceived administrative performance. Furthermore, I argue that Romania plausibly represents a hard test case due to the perceived distinction/conflict between some domestic institutions and the EU (which took place around the time my survey was conducted).

In short, in this study of attitudes toward the EU public administration—which is an important part of one of the most prominent multi-level administrative systems in the world (Hooghe and Marks, 2001)—I connect to the well-known Euroscepticism literature (e.g., Leconte, 2010). Specifically, I investigate the sources of distrust in the EU bureaucracy because it is an essential component of Euroscepticism (Abts *et al.*, 2009). My theoretical argument is that, because most citizens have no exposure to or interaction with the EU’s central administration, people use heuristics—based on views of domestic public administration—to form their opinion of it.

I proceed as follows. First, I review the relevant literature in the fields of political institutions and political economy. Next, I discuss Euroscepticism and institutional distrust in bureaucracy. Then, I develop a theory regarding the application of heuristics. Subsequently, I introduce the empirical approach and data. In the following section, I present the empirical results. Finally, I discuss the findings of my analysis and their theoretical and practical implications.

Literature Review

In this section, I briefly review key contributions to two essential strands of the political institutions/political economy literature, namely contributions on (1) multi-level governance and (2) Euroscepticism. As previously touched upon, research on multi-level governance systems has been burgeoning over the last two decades. Among others, scholars have identified different types of such systems (Hooghe and Marks, 2003), considered the institutional prerequisites

⁹Similar findings are obtained by Brosius *et al.* (2020) and the relationship of their study to my results is discussed in the conclusion.

for bureaucratic control and responsiveness along the administrative hierarchy (Kogan, 2017), and examined the bureaucratic challenges of local governments in multi-level structures (Agranoff, 2018).

Particularly the complex (and sometimes problematic) interplay between central, regional, and local administrations in multi-level systems as well as associated issues have been examined in detail (e.g., Goodman and Howard, 2013; Jones *et al.*, 2016). In this respect, the questions of how these dynamics affect citizens' institutional trust and political behavior have been at the center of several scholarly debates (e.g., Bremer *et al.*, 2020; Krehbiel and Cheruvu, 2021; Magistro *et al.*, 2021). However, the study of how the representativeness heuristic (especially as applied to administrative structures) could influence perceptions of multi-level systems is mostly absent from this literature, making a more in-depth examination of the broader topic desirable.

The second relevant literature is on the important issue of Euroscepticism. There has been an extensive debate regarding its origins and consequences with respect to both political parties (De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Kopecký and Mudde, 2002; Massetti and Schakel, 2021; Nai *et al.*, 2022; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008a; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008b) and citizens (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2011; Hooghe and Marks, 2007; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2010).¹⁰ Research has shown that “institutional distrust in the EU” is a key driver of eurosceptic attitudes (Abts *et al.*, 2009). This is not surprising because, as indicated above, the (“unelected”) bureaucracy of the EU is seen by many as the worst aspect of EU integration (The Economist, 2017). Accordingly, it is frequently singled out and targeted by eurosceptics (Hanley, 2004, 693, 704; Startin and Krouwel, 2013, 68; Teubert, 2017) who consider the EU administration “technocratic governance” in perfection (De Wilde and Trenez, 2012, 538). Given these circumstances, it is surprising that there are no studies of citizens' perceptions of the European Union bureaucracy specifically. My study aims to fill this essential gap in the literature.

Importantly, my claims may be perceived as contradictory to some existing knowledge within the literature on attitudes toward the EU. Specifically, Sánchez-Cuenca (2000) suggests that poorly functioning national institutions

¹⁰Moreover, studies have investigated Euroscepticism in a variety of settings, including Britain (Daddow, 2013; Forster, 2003; Gifford, 2017), France (Benoit, 1997; Goodliffe, 2015; Milner, 2000), Germany (Bogado *et al.*, 2023; Yordanova *et al.*, 2020), the Netherlands (Lubbers and Jaspers, 2011; Vollaard, 2006), Denmark (Schraff and Schimmelfennig, 2020), Norway (Skinner, 2012), the new member states (Neumayer, 2008), and the Nordic countries (Archer, 2000; Raunio, 2007; Sitter, 2001). Further studies have analyzed the phenomenon's comparative characteristics (Benedetto and Quaglia, 2007; Kuhn, 2012), its relationship with attitudes toward “differentiated integration” (De Blok and De Vries, 2023; Schuessler *et al.*, 2023; Vergioglou and Hegewald, 2023), its connection to financial crises (Serricchio *et al.*, 2013), EU budget allocations (Sadeh *et al.*, 2022), as well as immigration (Yeung, 2021), and its prevalence in newspapers (Rowinski, 2016) as well as the public discourse (De Wilde and Trenez, 2012).

will *increase* general support for EU integration. In his framework, from the perspective of citizens, the EU generally represents a possible *substitute* that compensates for failing institutions at the national level. However, it is extremely important to make a nuanced comparison: Sánchez-Cuenca focuses on EU integration as a *broad concept*, which is not limited to membership in the EU's political-administrative institutions but also includes access to the common market and the freedom of movement, among others. From a different perspective, I investigate citizen attitudes toward a *highly specific* EU institution, namely the EU's central bureaucratic apparatus. Even if citizens broadly support EU integration, they may still hold skeptical or hostile views toward the EU bureaucracy—views that, following my theory, could be partially derived from a variation of the representativeness heuristic.¹¹

Theory

Here, I first discuss (1) institutional distrust in public administration and (2) Euroscepticism. Subsequently, I develop a theory based on the *representativeness heuristic*. Then, I also elaborate on the theory's scope conditions, my case selection strategy, and possible challenges to my theoretical argument.

The Impact and Relevance of Euroscepticism and Institutional Distrust in Public Administration

The EU has long suffered from negative attitudes among a subset of its citizens: Euroscepticism is a persistent phenomenon that is unlikely to evaporate anytime soon (Usherwood and Startin, 2013). As an institution above all affiliated national governments—and with some uncertainty about who exactly its primary constituents are—far away from the daily life of most people, it is sometimes difficult for citizens to identify with the EU (Harteveld *et al.*, 2013; Peitz *et al.*, 2018). Even though it may be challenging for many people to develop trust in an institution that is supposedly so far away from their lived realities, a minimum of positive attitudes towards the EU could be necessary to preserve its political stability. The British exit from the EU (“Brexit”) shows how wide-ranging the effects of distrust in the EU and its fundamental institutions can be (Henderson *et al.*, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; Peitz *et al.*, 2018; Vasilopoulou, 2016). As this event demonstrates, if a majority of citizens

¹¹Also, as indicated above, minimal concrete knowledge about political institutions at both levels makes it easier for citizens to effectively view them as either complementary or substitutable. The absence of concrete knowledge about the EU bureaucracy makes such an evaluation much more difficult, if not impossible.

do not have trust in the EU or perceive it as corrupt, this could lead to the organization's disintegration.¹²

There are many reasons why distrust in EU institutions is of relevance to Euroscepticism. One reason is that a large number of people do not know leading EU personnel by name, giving relatively greater weight to the reputation of *institutions* over *persons*. At the same time, EU institutions likely receive less attention than domestic institutions in national educational systems. Thus, while citizens typically gain at least basic familiarity with their domestic political-administrative institutions in school—which could subsequently form the basis for a minimum of trust in the domestic political system—in many cases they likely cannot develop a similarly strong foundation with respect to trust in the EU, which could have severe negative consequences (cf. Abts *et al.*, 2009).

The problem of institutional distrust in public administration is an issue that is not limited to a single country or society. For instance, in the United States, conservative media has recently promoted a theory of the “deep state” as a source of misbehavior and corruption (Chaffetz, 2018; Lofgren, 2016). The exact meaning of the term is somewhat ambiguous but it broadly refers to “unelected” bureaucrats who are accused of following a partisan political agenda and/or undermining the democratically elected government. In general, public bureaucracies in America are often portrayed (and viewed) in a negative light (Cook and Vogler, 2023), which may create self-fulfilling prophecies of poor reputations and poor performance (Lerman, 2019). Thus, the results obtained here could be of much broader political relevance across countries.

In short, Euroscepticism is a potentially “explosive” phenomenon. If skepticism towards the EU grows even stronger in the future, it could ultimately lead to the disintegration of the EU as a political entity. Moreover, the underlying issue of institutional distrust in the public administration is a transnational phenomenon that can be observed in other contexts as well—most prominently in current American politics.

The Application of Heuristics to Form Judgments about the EU Bureaucracy

Most employees of the relatively small EU public administration are located in Brussels. Only approximately 43,000 people work for it (32,000 for the European Commission, 7,500 for the European Parliament, and 3,500 for the European Council) (European Union, 2020). Relative to other political units of comparable size, this is a tiny number. For instance, the small size of

¹²In line with this prospect, despite the severe negative economic consequences that Brexit had for Britain (Vogler, 2020, pp. 164–167), there may *not* be a significant deterrence effect on public opinion in other countries with respect to leaving the EU (Hobolt *et al.*, 2022).

the EU's central bureaucracy becomes apparent when compared to the circa 3 million employees in the American federal public administration. Due to the EU bureaucracy's small numerical size, few citizens have ever had direct contact with it.¹³

Therefore, when asked about the extent to which they trust or distrust the EU bureaucracy, almost no European citizen can make a judgment based on direct interactions with EU bureaucrats. Considering this marginal level of real exposure, how do people make judgments under conditions of uncertainty? Which reference points do they use?

It could be assumed that people are able to obtain concrete, substantive information about the EU bureaucracy from others, including newspapers, TV, friends, or family. However, comprehensive news coverage of the EU—in which wide-ranging and systematic information on institutions and policies is provided—is typically limited to major events, such as the introduction of the Euro as a new currency or Brexit. Media coverage of other EU-related issues used to be marginal (De Vreese, 2001; Peter *et al.*, 2003) and has somewhat increased with recent Europe-wide events (Bijmans, 2017; De Wilde, 2011; Van Spanje and De Vreese, 2014), but remains at low levels compared to most top issues in domestic politics. This is especially true for the EU bureaucracy. While it is often simplistically portrayed as a group of “unelected bureaucrats” in tabloids¹⁴—which gives citizens the notion that it is a key, distinct aspect of the EU—these portrayals do not provide substantive or systematic information on its institutional framework and characteristics.

Considering minimal real exposure to the European bureaucracy and the limited substantive coverage of the EU public administration in most news media outlets, it is likely that people use some form of heuristics to make judgments about the EU bureaucracy. The investigation of such mental shortcuts has been particularly prominent in the disciplines of psychology and behavioral economics. For example, in their seminal study, Tversky and Kahneman (1974) describe a number of key heuristics that are frequently used by humans to make inferences about phenomena they do not have complete information on.

Given the context I study, the heuristic that is most relevant to me is the so-called “representativeness heuristic”¹⁵ (Kahneman and Tversky, 1972; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). A key insight related to this heuristic is

¹³It is important to note that one of the key reasons for the small size of the EU bureaucracy is that national governments bear more responsibility for implementing EU policies. Even though national governments play a major role in this process and prevent the direct exposure of citizens to the EU's public administration, people often have a very strong opinion of the EU bureaucracy itself, which is the object of inquiry here.

¹⁴Please note that, while these portrayals could have an effect on the variables of interest, I control for a large number of socioeconomic and demographic factors, including education levels, that jointly cover media preferences (e.g., preferences for tabloids).

¹⁵As elaborated in footnote 6, the word “representativeness” in this context has a very different meaning than the word “representation” in the context of political representation.

that humans often judge unfamiliar objects or situations based on superficial commonalities with known (prototypical) objects or situations. Accordingly, when people are asked to assess the qualities of a specific new and unfamiliar phenomenon, which they believe to belong to a broader overall population of phenomena that they have more concrete beliefs about, they potentially use their beliefs about the reference population to form quick judgments about the newly introduced manifestation. Such a process may take place even if there is just a tenuous (superficial) link to the assumed population. These dynamics represent extremely common mental shortcuts that have a great risk of leading to cognitive biases and the incorrect judgment of specific situations.

The representativeness heuristic is used in a broad variety of contexts, including in scenarios in which we would typically expect rational decision making (based only on the truly relevant information) to absolutely dominate, such as entrepreneurial decisions (Wickham, 2003). Furthermore, it is even applied to situations that may determine life or death, such as diagnoses by medical professionals. For instance, Brannon and Carson (2003) show that nurses judged the sources of patient symptoms in part based on (situational) patient characteristics that were unrelated to the concrete symptoms of the case at hand.¹⁶

With respect to perceptions of the EU administration, we can apply key insights from the representativeness heuristic to make some straightforward predictions. Many people have concrete views of their domestic bureaucracy because they are exposed to it on a more regular basis, for instance through local public service delivery or local reporting (James, 2007; Poister and Henry, 1994; Van Ryzin, 2004). Specifically, in Romania—the site of my empirical test—a number of public services are provided by the local public administration, ranging from the simple procedure of applying for an ID card to requesting financial assistance or a business permit from the government. Given (1) this relatively high frequency of exposure (compared to exposure to the EU bureaucracy) and (2) more reliable local media information, people are likely to form concrete views of their local public administration.

Furthermore, citizens can also be expected to be exposed to reports about the experiences of family members and friends who directly interact with the domestic public administration.¹⁷ Thus, more concrete and comprehensive direct and indirect exposure to the domestic public administration allows citizens to form a more concrete and comprehensive picture of those bureaucratic institutions, including on issues such as corruption levels.¹⁸

¹⁶For an overview of the use of heuristics in clinical decision-making, see also Cioffi (1997).

¹⁷This will be reflected in the question wording at the local level.

¹⁸It is important to note that Lerman (2019) reveals the existence of self-reinforcing dynamics with respect to the actual quality of public services and public perceptions thereof. A similar perspective is provided by Vogler (2019a) and Vogler (2019b). While the existence of such dynamics is remarkable, it is not at odds with this study's theoretical framework. This is so because even self-reinforcing views of public service quality and bureaucratic performance represent a strong foundation for the use of the representativeness heuristic.

It is important to note that, in comparison with local-level bureaucrats, citizens will likely have less exposure to bureaucrats at the central (domestic) level. For example, this includes those bureaucrats who work for the national executive or the national parliament. Nonetheless, although there is less exposure to and interaction with the central public administration, it is still significantly more likely that either citizens themselves or their friends and relatives have some form of concrete exposure to this bureaucracy, too. Additionally, a significantly higher frequency of systematic media reporting about the quality of domestic public goods and services—even those organized at the central level—indicates that *indirectly* acquired knowledge (through relatively concrete second-hand information) is likely to be more comprehensive as well.¹⁹ Thus, even if exposure to domestic central institutions occurs more rarely, people are likely to have significantly greater first-hand and second-hand experience with the national bureaucracy than with the EU's public administration.

Considering greater exposure to and likelihood of interaction with domestic local and central bureaucracies, administrative institutions at those two levels are likely to shape the views of most people about public administrations' general functioning and fundamental characteristics. In other words, these experiences will lead to the creation of a *prototypical image* of bureaucracy. This more concrete knowledge about/image of the quality and conditions of local and national public administrations can then be used as a basis to make inferences about superficially comparable phenomena with related outer characteristics, specifically the EU public administration.

Thus, without much knowledge regarding the true underlying levels of corruption or other properties of the EU administration, citizens can be expected to (partly) use their knowledge of domestic bureaucracies to form an opinion of the EU bureaucracy via the representativeness heuristic. This process is expected to take place even if there are meaningful substantive differences between those bureaucracies (such as, for instance, levels of professionalization). Specifically, any such differences cannot be expected to play a major role precisely because of the lack of concrete substantive knowledge about the EU bureaucracy that leads to the application of heuristics in the first place.

The theoretical framework developed here is summarized in Figure 1.

With respect to perceptions of corruption and trust/distrust in the EU bureaucracy, I derive four hypotheses from the discussion above:

Hypothesis 1. *Individuals who perceive their domestic local public administration to be more corrupt will perceive the EU public administration to be more corrupt as well.*

¹⁹For comprehensive empirical evidence that citizens deeply care about the quality of public services as well as their mode of delivery, see Vogler (2023b) and Woodhouse *et al.* (2022).

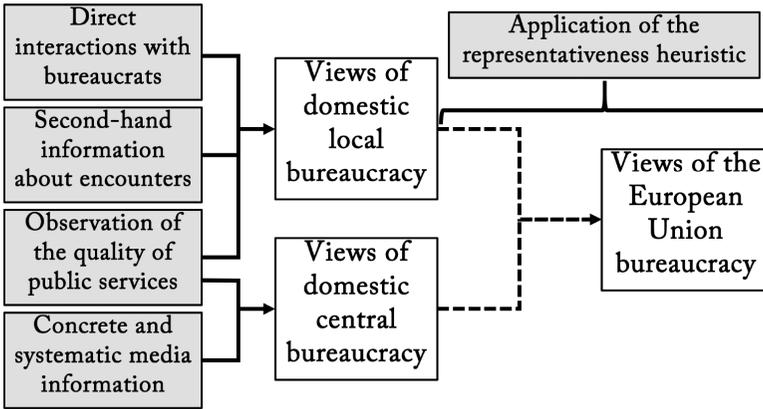


Figure 1: Illustration of the theory: Application of the representativeness heuristic.

Hypothesis 2. *Individuals who perceive their domestic central public administration to be more corrupt will perceive the EU public administration to be more corrupt as well.*

Hypothesis 3. *Individuals who have more trust in their domestic local public administration will have more trust in the EU public administration as well.*

Hypothesis 4. *Individuals who have more trust in their domestic central public administration will have more trust in the EU public administration as well.*

Theoretical Scope Conditions

What are my theory’s scope conditions? In this section, I discuss possible scope conditions at the individual and societal levels. At the individual level, we can establish three important scope conditions. The first one is that citizens must not have direct exposure to the EU bureaucracy. Direct exposure to the EU bureaucracy would allow citizens to form more accurate perceptions of European administrative employees, which would give them an alternative foundation for evaluating the related institutions (other than the use of heuristics). For this reason, it would be difficult to conduct this study in Brussels or Luxembourg, for instance, which are home to a significant proportion of EU bureaucrats. Fortunately, as touched upon above, the vast majority of European citizens are never directly exposed to the EU bureaucracy.

The second scope condition is that respondents must have some minimal degree of knowledge about or experience with their local and central domestic bureaucracy. The concept of heuristics is only applicable if respondents have concrete knowledge of a phenomenon of interest A and can transfer their

beliefs about A to a superficially related phenomenon B. Fortunately, we can expect that most European citizens have some minimal exposure to domestic bureaucracies through various channels, including direct interaction and “indirect” exposure to the quality of local public goods and public services. While the degree of exposure is likely greater with respect to *local* administrative institutions, some degree of either exposure to bureaucratic agents or indirect exposure to public goods and services provided by (or media reporting about concrete developments in) central bureaucracies is also likely.

Finally, a third scope condition at the individual level is that citizens must not be experts on the European Union. Experts on the EU likely have a (much more) sophisticated understanding and comprehensive knowledge of the quality of European governmental institutions, including the administrative bodies subordinated to them. Fortunately, while a proportion of EU citizens are (somewhat) well informed about the EU—in that they are familiar with its basic institutions—we cannot categorize them as full experts on these matters.

Beyond those three scope conditions, it is possible to argue that some other factors at the individual level may influence the applicability of the representativeness heuristic’s logic, including individuals’ levels of education or socioeconomic status. However, even highly educated individuals and those of high socioeconomic status can be expected to use heuristics when they have little substantive knowledge of a specific unfamiliar phenomenon, such as the EU bureaucracy. This is plausible because, as indicated previously, even domain-specific experts who are trained professionals do not abstain from using heuristics, including in the fields of medicine (Brannon and Carson, 2003) and business (Wickham, 2003).²⁰ Thus, in the concrete context of this study, even individuals who are highly educated or have high socioeconomic status can be anticipated to apply heuristics in a similar fashion to those who have low education or low socioeconomic status.²¹

At the societal level, too, there are a number of potential candidates for scope conditions. Most importantly, this theory primarily applies to societies that are members of the European Union. Additionally, (in line with the first scope condition at the individual level) a second scope condition at the societal level is that the vast majority of a country’s citizens cannot be directly exposed to the EU bureaucracy. For this reason, one would not be able to conduct this study in Luxembourg, for instance, because it is home to several major EU institutions.

Beyond those two basic country-level characteristics, it is important to discuss whether either (1) a country’s level of economic integration or (2) the quality of its domestic institutions represent possible scope conditions. Importantly, however, below I conclude that neither of these factors has the

²⁰Brannon and Carson (2003) even find that nurses’ level of training does not matter when it comes to the application of heuristics.

²¹Empirical evidence in favor of these statements is provided in the Online Appendix.

potential to preclude the use of heuristics by citizens, which means that they do not directly influence the theory's applicability.

The degree of economic integration certainly can be expected to have a macroeconomic effect on living conditions within EU member countries. But, as indicated above, there are no reasons to believe that higher levels of material wealth prevent individuals from using heuristics in their daily lives. (In this respect, in the Online Appendix I show that different levels of household income have no significant influence on individuals' use of heuristics.) Thus, even if there was a broader societal effect of economic integration, it would not contradict the core theoretical argument made here. Additionally, my framework is solely focused on a specific aspect of the EU's institutional framework (its bureaucracy), which is substantively distinct from a change in economic conditions brought by European integration.

Moreover, variation in the quality of domestic administrative institutions (high/low quality) cannot be a scope condition because it is part of the underlying theoretical logic. Specifically, the quality of bureaucratic institutions (that citizens are exposed to) forms the basis of knowledge that is then transferred to EU institutions via the representativeness heuristic. Accordingly, such distinctions in institutional quality (low/high) is a fundamental aspect of the theory's logic and forms the whole range of possible experiences with bureaucracies.

Also, as elaborated upon earlier, variation in the quality of genuinely *political* institutions (executives, parliaments) has to be considered a separate phenomenon. Nonetheless, a related societal condition that has the potential to moderate the *magnitude* of the effect of heuristics is perceived institutional separation/conflict between the EU and domestic actors in general. Specifically, if the EU is perceived to be closely aligned with domestic institutions, then we would expect a greater effect of the representativeness heuristic. Vice versa, if the EU is perceived to be in conflict with domestic institutions, then we would expect to see a more tenuous/weak link between perceptions at different levels. As I explain below, Romania may be considered a hard test case because it falls into the latter category.

Case Selection

In light of the above discussion, I have chosen Romania as an appropriate testing ground for multiple reasons. First, Romania meets all of the aforementioned scope conditions. In particular its geographic distance to the EU's core administrative institutions (in Brussels, Frankfurt, Luxembourg, and Strasbourg) means that the vast majority of its citizens cannot be expected to have any form of direct interaction with or exposure to the EU bureaucracy. Moreover, we can assume that an overwhelming majority of Romanian citizens have at least minimal concrete knowledge of their own (domestic) administrative institutions. Finally, as discussed in more detail below, in Romania there

is significant variation in the quality of domestic administrative institutions, which allows for a wide range of citizen perceptions.

Second, from a substantive perspective, citizen attitudes toward the EU—an organization with significant emphasis on free markets and the rule of law—are especially interesting in the young democracies of Eastern Europe, many of which do not have a long history of civic political participation as they only transitioned to democracy three decades ago (von Beyme, 1996). In those countries, in which democracy is often not fully consolidated yet (Coman and Tomini, 2014; Dimitrova, 2018; Gingerich and Vogler, 2023; Sadurski, 2019), the EU's legitimacy is of significantly greater relevance to long-term political development.

Third, while in Eastern Europe there has been widespread criticism and skepticism of the EU and the integration process (Neumayer, 2008; Torrelblanca and Leonard, 2013), Romania is a case with a population that is split when it comes to supporting the European project. Although the country features a Eurosceptic party—the *Greater Romania Party* (Szczurbiak and Taggart, 2008a, p. 12)—this party is not of high electoral relevance and a slight population majority (52%) holds pro-European attitudes (European Commission, 2019, Topaloff, 2012, 198). Furthermore, the country represents a good mix of people who consider themselves well informed (42%) and not well informed (57%) about European matters (European Commission, 2019).²² Importantly, though, the underlying questions are at relatively basic level. (Thus, even respondents who answer them correctly may not yet be qualified as “EU experts,” which is important in light of the theory's scope conditions.) Moreover, attitudes toward European integration in Romania, such as the EU's general image or trust in the EU, are relatively stable over time (European Commission, 2017a), indicating that my 2017 survey does not come from a year with significant movements in attitudes.

Additionally, the ruling parties of many Eastern European countries have signaled that they are dissatisfied with the EU or have been in open conflict with it (The Economist, 2018; The Guardian, 2018). The Romanian parliamentary majority and the EU have experienced similar disputes over planned judicial reforms (Reuters, 2018). Given the discussion of scope conditions above, it is possible that these clashes have strengthened the *perceived distinction* between national institutions and EU institutions. If this holds, it means that Romania presents a hard test case for my theory based on perceived similarities.²³

Furthermore, Romania is an ideal case given this article's focus because its domestic bureaucracy is considered to have a long history of involvement in

²²De facto knowledge about the EU reflected these patterns, with an average (by question) of 57% of respondents being able to answer factual knowledge questions on European integration correctly in 2017 (the year when I conducted the survey) (European Commission, 2017b).

²³Since I obtain positive results despite these conditions, I count this in favor of the theory.

corruption (Gallagher, 2005). The country consistently ranks among the most corrupt European countries in databases such as the one by Transparency International (2019), with 17% of all public service users reporting the payment of bribes (and possibly a much higher number of undetected cases). Similarly, a detailed report by GAN Integrity (2017) confirms that Romania has a “serious problem” with corruption. Under such circumstances, we can expect that corruption is a salient issue and that there are sufficiently many people who have been exposed to corrupt practices, which could then influence their perceptions of other bureaucracies via the representativeness heuristic. Moreover, if we strictly follow the framework of Sánchez-Cuenca (2000), under circumstances such as those found in Romania, we would expect that not only a slight, but a *vast* majority of citizens hold positive views of the EU. Yet a substantial proportion of Romanians are eurosceptic, which requires an alternative explanation. Accordingly, because of both (1) the frequency of corruption and (2) a key empirical puzzle that cannot be explained by existing theories, Romania is an appropriate testing ground.

Finally, by focusing on a single country, one can hold certain factors constant that may impact attitudes towards the EU, such as the size of the domestic welfare state (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000) and national political structures. As this is the first empirical test of the theory at hand, one may start with a single country case and—if successful—expand the empirical evaluation to other country cases in future studies.

The Possibilities of Reverse Causality, Reciprocal Causation, and Omitted Variable Bias

Is it possible that experiences with the EU bureaucracy drive perceptions of domestic bureaucracies? Alternatively, could there be reciprocal causation/interdependence of attitudes? With respect to major political institutions of the EU, such as the Parliament or the Commission—as represented by the Commissioners, but not the administrative body working for them—one could certainly make a strong case for such an argument of reciprocal causation or the interdependence of attitudes (see, for instance, De Vries, 2018; Dominioni *et al.*, 2020). The reason is that citizens that consume daily news are regularly exposed to concrete information about these major political institutions. Nevertheless, very different dynamics arguably apply to the *EU bureaucracy* subordinated to these political bodies.

With respect to the EU public administration, the possibility of reverse causality or reciprocal causation only credibly exists for a very marginal number of EU citizens, that is, those that directly and frequently interact with the EU’s bureaucracy. As indicated earlier, this important circumstance also differentiates my study with its focus on heuristics from previous studies that deal with “proxies” (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000) or “cues” (Hooghe and Marks,

2005) regarding more general EU matters, such as overall support for European integration.²⁴ Considering both the social and geographical distance between the EU administration and most citizens (with the exception of the inhabitants of Brussels, Frankfurt, Luxembourg, and Strasbourg²⁵), not only the level of exposure, but also the level of accuracy of information is likely to be substantially higher with respect to domestic bureaucracies. Thus, considering the marginal number of EU civil servants and the extremely limited exposure of citizens to the EU administration, the possibility of reverse causality is equally marginal.

In addition to reverse causality and reciprocal causation, I must also acknowledge potential problems associated with the empirical phenomenon of *omitted variables* (see Jargowsky, 2005). Specifically, there could be personality traits that simultaneously influence general perceptions of public administration and perceptions of the EU bureaucracy. To address these and related concerns, as a first (imperfect) step, I control for education, gender, and household income, which are key variables that may correlate with certain aspects of personality. As a second step, I also control for trust in other forms of public institutions, which likely captures at least some of the variation in the underlying psychology of participants related to trust in public bureaucracies.²⁶ While these are initial responses to concerns about omitted variables, future studies could go beyond them by more directly measuring other aspects of respondents' personalities that may affect trust in public bureaucratic institutions. A more detailed discussion of this matter can also be found in the Online Appendix.

All in all, the above discussion indicates that one has to carefully differentiate between (1) the EU in general and overall support for integration, (2) perceptions of *political* institutions and prominent EU representatives, and (3) perceptions of the *bureaucratic-administrative* bodies subordinated to these political institutions. Only the latter is my focus here. Moreover, important concerns about omitted variable bias are partly addressed by some of the control variables detailed below, but future studies can clearly expand upon my strategy through more comprehensive analyses of individual personality traits in particular.

²⁴Because these studies focus on more general views—which are likely based on a larger number of constituent factors—their arguments cannot be applied in the same way to the highly specific area I study.

²⁵These are the European cities in which the main EU governmental bodies are located.

²⁶The relevant literature on how personality traits affect views of public bureaucratic institutions is still in its infancy (e.g., Cook and Vogler, 2023).

A First Challenge to the Argument: General Trust into Public Institutions

My theory suggests that experiences with *very specific* institutions—that is, local and central domestic public administrations—create a prototypical image of bureaucracies and thereby influence perceptions of *superficially comparable* institutions of the same kind at another level, namely the EU bureaucracy. In this context, the apparent comparability of institutions at different levels of the administrative hierarchy allows for the use of the representativeness heuristic. To the contrary, citizens likely perceive other types of institutions, such as the police or courts, as distinct organizations that are not (superficially) comparable to bureaucracies. Thus, the representativeness heuristic would not apply in such cases.

Nonetheless, in light of the previous discussion of the theory's scope conditions, one still needs to take respondents' trust in other types of public institutions seriously. Specifically, in the discussion of the scope conditions, I have highlighted that we can expect citizens to have sufficient experience to gather minimal concrete knowledge of domestic public administration. If this argument holds, it would imply that citizens likely also have minimal concrete knowledge of other types of domestic institutions. Given that other public institutions are also part of the "state" as a broad conceptual entity, this knowledge could play a role in forming their views of public bureaucracies, too (although this would not happen via the representativeness heuristic).²⁷ The key question is then if views of other public institutions represent as strong an explanation as heuristics to explain variation in respondents' perceptions of the EU bureaucracy.

In this respect, we may find that perceptions of bureaucracies are explained by an *overall* trust in public institutions. For example, some people may simply have greater levels of trust in *all* state institutions. In this case, it is not a heuristic based on comparable institutions, but more part of an individual's "global perception of public institutions."

In order to account for this alternative explanation, I consider trust in two additional public institutions, namely courts and the police. If we consistently observe a substantial and statistically robust relationship to those two institutions (even when measures of bureaucratic perceptions are included), it would mean that the observed patterns are in part explained by general institutional trust instead of the representativeness heuristic specifically.

Thus, an alternative explanation is that individuals who have more trust in several types of public institutions also have higher levels of trust in the EU bureaucracy. I account for this alternative explanation in the empirical test and again (in more detail) in the Online Appendix.

²⁷In this respect, results obtained by Yackee and Lowery (2005) suggest that attitudes toward other government institutions have the potential to affect trust in public bureaucracies.

A Second Challenge to the Argument: Deep Historical Roots of Perceptions of Public Institutions

Existing studies in the political institutions and political economy literature show that there are historical legacies with respect to trust in some public institutions. These insights also directly apply to the case of Romania (Becker *et al.*, 2016; Vogler, 2022).²⁸ Specifically, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Romania was partially ruled by the Habsburg Empire, which means that one should account for the possible impact of historical imperial rule on perceptions of the EU administration.²⁹ Doing so is important because the Habsburg Empire also was a form of “supranational organization” and the historical experience with this institution could simultaneously shape both present-day perceptions of domestic public administration (Becker *et al.*, 2016; Vogler, 2022) and perceptions of the EU administration. Thus, I need to examine if there are any historical legacies that might explain differential trust into public institutions.

Thus, a second alternative explanation for variation in the perceptions of the EU bureaucracy is that they differ across the historical imperial borders of the Austrian Empire. I account for this second alternative explanation in the empirical test.

Empirical Test

In this section, I introduce the dataset and discuss all relevant variables. The data represent a sample of Romanian adults from both urban and rural areas, and the data collection was commissioned by the author for two academic studies on perceptions of bureaucracy in Romania. Trained specialists of the Romanian survey firm INSCOP conducted the interviews face-to-face.

A total of 1,001 adults were surveyed in April and May 2017. The sample was chosen at random. Specifically, based on a random sampling methodology—following a combination of address-based and systematic random sampling—trained specialists (with a majority having 5–10 years of experience in this field) chose the street, house number, and person to be interviewed. The interviewer received a route (with the streets of potential respondents) and applied the “skip interval” method in order to select house numbers, blocks,

²⁸For recent general overviews of the historical persistence/legacies literature, see Abad and Maurer (2021), Acharya *et al.* (2023), Cirone and Pepinsky (2022), and Guardado (2023).

²⁹Also, until 1878 the Ottoman Empire *formally* ruled over the regions that would later become the Kingdom of Romania (Popescu and Popa, 2022). However, for a variety of reasons, the Ottoman legacy in the specific area of *bureaucratic* institutions can be seen as negligible (see Vogler, 2022).

and apartments. To ensure that no subset of the population was systematically excluded, interviews were conducted on both weekdays and weekends, often in the afternoon. Because of this sophisticated random choice procedure and the extensive coverage of days and times throughout the week, the sample is representative of Romania's overall population. Participants were not financially compensated.³⁰

Key Dependent Variables

In order to test my theory, I use two different key dependent variables: (1) *Trust in the EU Bureaucracy* and (2) *Perceived Corruption in the EU Bureaucracy*.

Trust in the EU Bureaucracy: The first key dependent variable is the level of trust/distrust in the EU's central bureaucracy. It is based on the following question: "How much do you trust or distrust the central bureaucracy of the European Union?" Respondents were able to give their reply on a 7-point scale, ranging from high levels of trust to high levels of distrust.

Perceived Corruption in the EU Bureaucracy: The second key dependent variable is the perceived level of corruption in the EU's central bureaucracy. It is based on the following question: "Do you agree or disagree with the statement that corruption is a problem of the European Union's central bureaucracy?" Respondents were able to give their reply on a 7-point scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Further details on the coding of both key dependent variables can be found in the Online Appendix. In addition, summary statistics can be found in Table 2.

Why do I use two different indicators instead of creating a composite measurement? In this respect, it is important to note that trust in the EU bureaucracy and perceived levels of corruption in the EU bureaucracy are two distinct phenomena, which only have a weak statistical relationship. Neither is a significant predictor of the other one in a linear regression framework and their correlation is weak ($|cor| < 0.1$). For further details, see Table 1. The absence of a strong relationship between these indicators, which may seem counter-intuitive, actually supports the notion that judgments of the EU bureaucracy are not based on concrete information.³¹

³⁰While I do not have concrete information on the specific response rates to my survey, the survey firm has provided me with general/overall response rates for their face-to-face surveys. Specifically, their average response rate is about 60–62%, with slightly higher response rates in rural areas and slightly lower ones in urban areas. This response rate statistic is based on years of experience by the survey firm with conducting such kinds of surveys. Therefore, it can be seen as highly reliable.

³¹Importantly, this weak relationship between trust and perceptions of corruption does *not* exist for national local and central bureaucratic institutions (here, the correlation between these measures is significant), which indicates that this is *not* a matter of question wording.

Table 1: Relationship of Trust and Perceptions of Corruption in the EU Bureaucracy.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i> Trust in EU Bureaucracy
Perc. Corruption of EU Bur.	-0.056 (0.037)
Constant	0.649*** (0.060)
Observations	853
R ²	0.003
Adjusted R ²	0.002

Note: OLS * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Key Explanatory Variables

Based on my theory, the key explanatory variables all reflect levels of trust and perceived levels of corruption in domestic (local and central) bureaucracies. The detailed questions and answer scales on which those variables are based can be found in the Online Appendix. Additionally, summary statistics can be found in Table 2.

1. **Trust in the Domestic Central Public Administration:** I expect that this variable is a significant predictor of trust in the EU bureaucracy.
2. **Trust in the Domestic Local Public Administration:** I expect that this variable is a significant predictor of trust in the EU bureaucracy.
3. **Perceived Levels of Corruption in the Domestic Central Public Administration:** I expect that this variable is a significant predictor of perceived levels of corruption in the EU bureaucracy.
4. **Perceived Levels of Corruption in the Domestic Local Public Administration:** I expect that this variable is a significant predictor of perceived levels of corruption in the EU bureaucracy.³²

³²An important difference between the questions related to corruption at the central level and the local level is that, at the local level, the survey explicitly asked about views regarding corruption formed in part on direct experiences and the reported experiences of people in the social environment. The question was formulated in this way because at this level, citizens are likely to have more immediate exposure. Importantly, such subtle differences in question wording between the local, the central, and the supranational could lead to slightly weaker statistical associations, which biases the test against the researcher.

Alternative Explanatory Variables

Based on the Euroscepticism literature and the possible challenges to my theory discussed above, I present several alternative explanatory variables below. The detailed questions and answer scales on which those variables are based can again be found in the Online Appendix. Additionally, summary statistics can again be found in Table 2.

1. ***The Direction of the Domestic Economy:*** Perceptions of a country's economic fortunes could influence evaluations of bureaucratic performance at different levels of government. Similarly, the argument that macroeconomic conditions affect views of the EC/EU is made in several existing studies (Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993; Garry and Tilley, 2009; Jurado, 2022). Thus, I include satisfaction with the general direction of the economy.
2. ***The Economic Effect of EU Membership on the Domestic Economy:*** Perceptions of the *specific* effect that the EU has on the national economy could be even more decisive when it comes to explaining evaluations of EU institutions (cf. Anderson and Reichert, 1995).³³ Studies show that membership in the EU has multifaceted and sometimes diverging effects on economies, depending on preexisting structures and characteristics (e.g., Hall, 2014; Peritz *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, I include a variable capturing this perceived effect.
3. ***Trust in Local Police:*** As a first control variable for general trust in public institutions (an alternative theory discussed in the previous section), I include trust into the local police.
4. ***Trust in Courts:*** As a second control variable for general trust in public institutions (an alternative theory discussed in the previous section), I include trust into courts.
5. ***Previous Habsburg Rule:*** Even though the EU did not yet exist at the time of historical imperial rule through the Habsburgs, there could be cultural legacies of the perception of state institutions which may lead to differential perceptions of EU institutions (Bădescu and Sum, 2005; Vogler, 2022). Thus, I include a dummy variable reflecting this possibility.³⁴

³³A similar argument, namely that the financial costs/benefits of EU membership in terms of financial contributions are of importance is also made by Eichenberg and Dalton (1993).

³⁴The empirical information on Romania's historical geographic division was taken from Vogler (2022).

Additional Covariates

In addition to all of the above variables, I introduce a number of additional covariates. All these covariates could partially explain perceptions of EU institutions. As with previous measures, the detailed questions and answer scales can be found in the Online Appendix. Additionally, summary statistics can again be found in Table 2.

1. ***Location Type:*** Urbanized areas often have different social structures and economic conditions, which could affect views of supranational organizations (Surwillo *et al.*, 2010; Thompson, 2003). Therefore, I differentiate between three types of locations: (1) Municipalities (most urbanized), (2) cities (mix of urban and rural), and (3) communes (most rural). Specifically, the empirical baseline category is “city” and I introduce dummies for municipalities and communes.
2. ***Respondent Age:*** In previous studies, age has been an inconsistent predictor of attitudes toward the EU (Anderson and Reichert, 1995; Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2011; Curtis and Nielsen, 2018; Rohrschneider, 2002). But in the case of Romania, age might matter more. Specifically, younger people grew up in a Romania that already was a part of the EU. Yet older people experienced Romania under communist/socialist rule. These different experiences may be an important factor influencing views of the EU. Furthermore, given different capabilities to deal with electronic government services, age could also increasingly influence general views of bureaucracies (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006).
3. ***Public Administration Work Experience:*** People who have worked in public administration previously may perceive bureaucracies differently than people who have only experienced them “from the outside.”
4. ***Education Level:*** Previous studies on Euroscepticism have shown that education is an important factor that partly explains individuals’ attitudes toward the EU (Gabel, 1998; Hakhverdian *et al.*, 2013; Lubbers and Jaspers, 2011). Moreover, education levels appear to matter most in less wealthy member states of the EU (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2010), meaning that they should be of significant influence in Romania (which has a relatively low GDP per capita).³⁵ A study by Lee and Van Ryzin (2020) also suggests that education levels influence general views of public bureaucracy.
5. ***Income Level:*** In addition to perceptions regarding the current national level of economic growth, personal economic fortunes could have an

³⁵However, Kunst *et al.* (2020) provide a more critical perspective on the importance of education for forming attitudes toward the EU.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics: Empirical analysis.

Variable	n	Min	q_1	\bar{x}	\tilde{x}	q_3	Max	IQR
Trust in EU Bureaucracy	961	-3	0	0.62	1	2	3	2
Perc. Corruption in EU Bur.	865	-2	0	0.82	1	2	3	2
Direction of the Economy	995	-3	-2	-0.26	0	1	3	3
EU Economic Effect on Econ.	980	-3	0	0.56	1	2	3	2
Trust in Central PA	996	-3	-1	0.12	1	1	3	2
Corruption in Central PA	969	-2	1	1.73	2	3	3	2
Trust in Local PA	997	-3	0	0.93	1	2	3	2
Corruption in Local PA	805	-3	-1	0.26	1	1	3	2
Trust in Police	881	-3	1	0.93	2	2	3	1
Trust in Courts	797	-3	-1	0.71	1	2	3	3
Historical Habsburg Rule	1001	0	0	0.41	0	1	1	1
Age	997	18	35	48.67	49	62	89	27
Work Experience in PA	970	0	0	0.04	0	0	1	0
Education	991	0	0	1.46	2	2	4	2
Income	893	0	2	2.61	3	3	7	1
Female	1001	0	0	0.51	1	1	1	1
Capital	1001	0	0	0.04	0	0	1	0

impact on attitudes toward the EU and its bureaucracy (Foster and Frieden, 2021; Gabel, 1998; Gabel and Palmer, 1995). Income levels may also influence general views of public bureaucracy (Lee and Van Ryzin, 2020). Thus, I include a control for income.

6. **Female:** Although gender has been shown to not be a significant predictor of support for European integration, it is regularly included as a control variable in studies of Euroscepticism (e.g., Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2011; McLaren, 2007). Gender also likely influences general views of public bureaucracy (Lee and Van Ryzin, 2020). Accordingly, I include a variable differentiating between men and women.
7. **Capital:** Although public administrative organization is relatively similar across the national territory of Romania, the capital of Bucharest has a slightly different organization than the other areas of the country, which could have an impact on perceptions of public bureaucracy. In addition, it is the country's most densely populated area and attracts a large number of young people and foreigners. Due to its very different social structure, I include a dummy for the capital.

Descriptive Summary Statistics

Table 2 shows descriptive summary statistics for the variables that are used in the empirical test (except for interaction terms and the factor variable that reflects different types of location).

Results

In this section, I present the results of my statistical analysis. I show that perceptions of domestic institutions are a significant predictor of perceptions of EU institutions. This is true for both *levels of trust/distrust* and *perceived levels of corruption in the EU administration*.

Trust in the EU Bureaucracy

I begin the presentation of the empirical results with an analysis of possible determinants of *trust in the EU bureaucracy*. In Table 3, I show the results of a large number of different regression analyses.³⁶ Models 1 and 2 consider trust in domestic central and local bureaucracies, respectively. Regression 3 considers both factors simultaneously. In the first three models, both *trust in the central public administration* and *trust in the local public administration* are significant predictors of *trust in the EU bureaucracy* (when not controlling for additional variables). The coefficient of *trust in the central public administration* is of particularly high magnitude and generally ranges from a .364 to .506 increase in *trust in the EU bureaucracy*.

Figures 2 and 3 graphically demonstrate the effect that trust in domestic institutions has on trust in the EU administration. They are based on regression 3 and regressions 3 and 6, respectively. Like all subsequent illustrations, they include 90%-confidence intervals. As the first graph reveals, the relationship between perceptions of central institutions and the EU bureaucracy is particularly strong. In regressions 2 and 3, perceptions of local institutions also have a statistically significant effect, but this effect is generally less substantively influential. More importantly, once a set of control variables is included, the effect of perceptions of *local* bureaucratic institutions is no longer significant.

In regression models 4 to 7, (in line with the previous discussion) I add a number of covariates to check if the results hold when controlling for potentially confounding factors. I find that perceptions of central bureaucratic institutions continue to exhibit a statistically significant effect. However, perceptions of local public administrations are no longer statistically significant. I discuss possible reasons for this pattern in the summary below and in the conclusion.

Perceptions of Corruption in the EU Bureaucracy

I continue with an analysis of *perceptions of corruption in the EU bureaucracy* as the second key outcome variable. Table 4 shows the results of a multitude of different regression analyses. Models 1 and 2 consider perceptions of

³⁶In the main results section of the article, all results are estimated using OLS regression without further adjustment of standard errors. Additionally, in the Online Appendix, I show that the results do not substantively change when using robust standard errors.

Table 3: Trust in the EU bureaucracy.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	Trust in EU Bureaucracy						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Trust in Central PA	0.506*** (0.024)		0.482*** (0.027)	0.391*** (0.028)	0.367*** (0.033)	0.367*** (0.033)	0.364*** (0.037)
Trust in Local PA		0.301*** (0.032)	0.062** (0.031)	0.047 (0.029)	-0.004 (0.040)	-0.003 (0.040)	-0.026 (0.043)
Direction of Econ.				-0.032 (0.026)	-0.001 (0.030)	-0.001 (0.030)	0.001 (0.033)
EU Effect on Econ.				0.368*** (0.027)	0.347*** (0.032)	0.346*** (0.032)	0.311*** (0.036)
Trust in Police					0.030 (0.037)	0.030 (0.037)	0.026 (0.040)
Trust in Courts					0.053* (0.032)	0.053 (0.032)	0.059* (0.035)
Habsburg Part						0.021 (0.090)	0.002 (0.105)
Commune							-0.216 (0.136)
Municipality							-0.153 (0.147)
Age							0.003 (0.003)
Work in PA							0.302 (0.253)
Education							-0.005 (0.049)
Income							-0.009 (0.051)
Female							0.066 (0.099)
Capital							-0.175 (0.322)
Constant	0.549*** (0.042)	0.331*** (0.056)	0.494*** (0.050)	0.297*** (0.050)	0.348*** (0.060)	0.340*** (0.070)	0.438 (0.288)
Observations	959	959	957	937	711	711	611
R ²	0.308	0.087	0.311	0.427	0.433	0.433	0.409
Adjusted R ²	0.308	0.086	0.309	0.425	0.429	0.428	0.394

Note: OLS * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

corruption in domestic central and local bureaucracies, respectively. Regression 3 considers both factors simultaneously. In models 1 through 3 (and in all subsequent regressions), perceptions of corruption at both bureaucratic levels are significant predictors of *perceptions of corruption in the EU bureaucracy*.

Figures 4 and 5 graphically demonstrate the effect that perceptions of corruption in domestic institutions have on the same concept with respect to the EU administration. Both figures are based on regression model 3; and the second one also includes results from model 6 (with control variables).

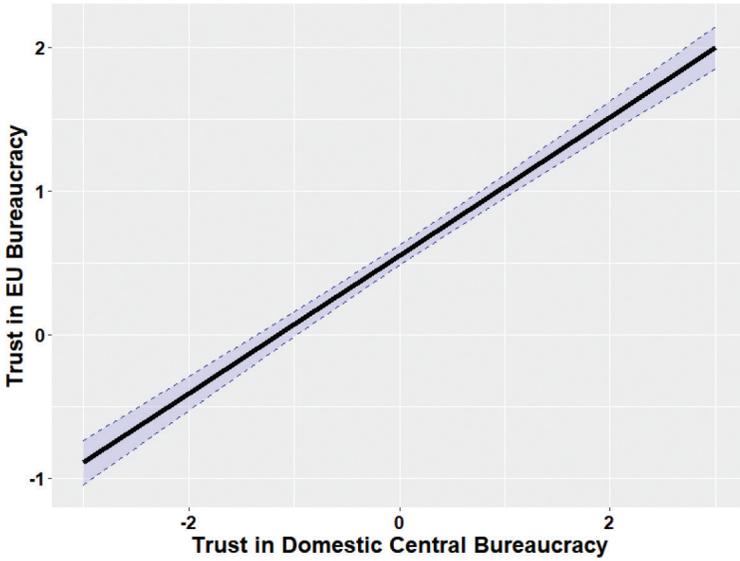


Figure 2: Trust in the EU bureaucracy and in the domestic central bureaucracy.

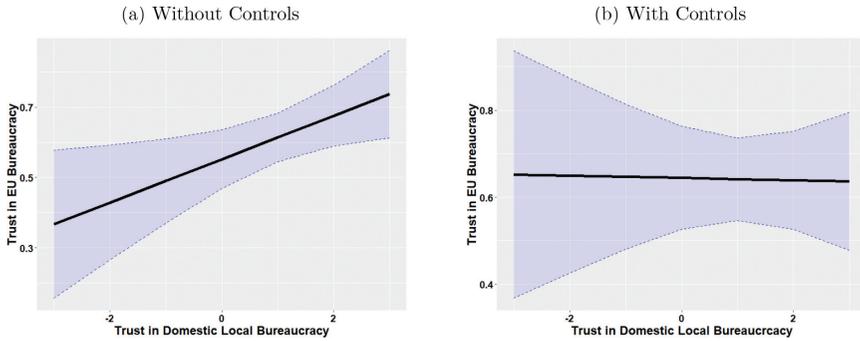


Figure 3: Trust in the EU bureaucracy and in the domestic local bureaucracy.

Similar to previously obtained results with respect to levels of trust, the relationship between perceptions of *central* institutions and the EU bureaucracy is particularly strong. As indicated above, another similarity is that, although perceptions of local institutions have a statistically significant effect on perceptions of the EU bureaucracy (in contrast to measures of trust), the effect is also generally less substantively influential.

In regressions 4 to 7, I again add a number of covariates to check if the results hold when controlling for potentially confounding factors. I find that perceptions of central bureaucratic institutions continue to persistently show a

Table 4: Perceptions of corruption in the EU bureaucracy.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>						
	Perceived Corruption in EU Bureaucracy						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Perc. Corr. in Central PA	0.533*** (0.031)		0.499*** (0.035)	0.524*** (0.036)	0.539*** (0.041)	0.537*** (0.041)	0.522*** (0.047)
Perc. Corr. in Local PA		0.182*** (0.030)	0.089*** (0.027)	0.100*** (0.027)	0.104*** (0.033)	0.103*** (0.033)	0.105*** (0.036)
Direction of Econ.				0.078*** (0.029)	0.074** (0.034)	0.075** (0.034)	0.086** (0.037)
EU Effect on Econ.				-0.029 (0.033)	-0.080** (0.040)	-0.083** (0.040)	-0.102** (0.043)
Trust in Police					0.016 (0.041)	0.014 (0.041)	0.028 (0.043)
Trust in Courts					0.026 (0.038)	0.025 (0.038)	0.011 (0.040)
Habsburg Part						0.055 (0.109)	0.162 (0.125)
Commune							-0.135 (0.156)
Municipality							0.131 (0.169)
Age							-0.001 (0.004)
Work in PA							-0.124 (0.329)
Education							0.119** (0.056)
Income							-0.050 (0.061)
Female							-0.004 (0.116)
Capital							-1.222*** (0.424)
Constant	-0.095 (0.068)	0.782*** (0.052)	-0.039 (0.074)	-0.047 (0.077)	-0.096 (0.096)	-0.111 (0.101)	-0.071 (0.346)
Observations	859	705	700	687	533	533	458
R ²	0.258	0.050	0.271	0.283	0.293	0.293	0.304
Adjusted R ²	0.257	0.049	0.269	0.279	0.285	0.284	0.280

Note: OLS * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

statistically significant effect. Additionally, other than with respect to levels of trust discussed above, perceptions of corruption in *local* public administrations remain a significant predictor as well. In short, the effects of both *perceptions of corruption in the central public administration* and *perceptions of corruption in the local public administration* are consistently significant and show a substantive influence. Specifically, when it comes to predicting *perceptions of corruption in the EU administration*, a 1-point increase in local corruption perceptions is associated with a change of between 0.089 and 0.182, and a 1-point increase in central corruption perceptions leads to a change of between 0.499 and 0.539.

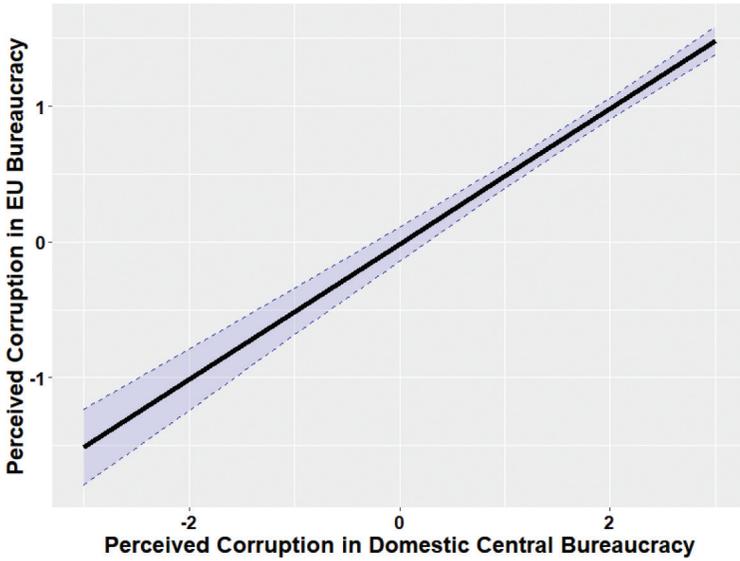


Figure 4: Perceived corruption in the EU bureaucracy and in the domestic central bureaucracy.

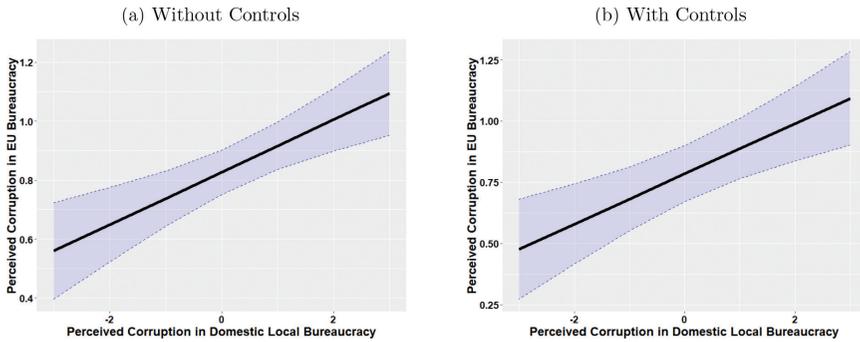


Figure 5: Perceived corruption in the EU bureaucracy and in the domestic local bureaucracy.

Summary and Discussion

The empirical analysis has demonstrated that trust/distrust and perceptions of corruption in local and—in particular—in central bureaucracies represent crucial and consistent empirical predictors of perceptions of the EU bureaucracy. Since the vast majority of citizens have very little real exposure to the EU administration and EU bureaucrats—in line with the theory developed here—it is likely that their views of domestic institutions inform their views of EU

institutions based on the representativeness heuristic (and not the other way around).

The argument that insights from the representativeness heuristic are crucial to explaining the observed patterns is strengthened by two specific results. First, views of the central public administration are both substantively and statistically more decisive in terms of influencing a respondent's view of the EU administration than views of the local public administration. This is in line with the representativeness heuristic's underlying logic because the domestic central bureaucracy can generally be considered more (superficially) comparable to the EU administration than local bureaucracies (e.g., in the area of professionalization).

Furthermore, the most important rival hypothesis—that we merely observe an individual's general level of trust in public institutions—does not find strong empirical support. When perceptions of bureaucracies and a set of essential control variables are included, neither *trust in police* nor *trust in the courts* are substantively or statistically important predictors of either trust or perceptions of corruption in the EU administration.³⁷ This further strengthens the argument that a form of the representativeness heuristic—which is limited in its claims to superficially comparable kinds of institutions—is at work here, not a form of general trust in public institutions.

Conclusion and Implications

Within the steadily growing literature on multi-level administrative systems (Agranoff, 2018; Hong, 2017; Hooghe and Marks, 2003), the European Union certainly is one of the most complex and internally heterogeneous cases, persistently generating intense scholarly interest (Benz, 2015; Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Marks *et al.*, 1996; Scharpf, 1988; Vogler, 2020). Despite these high levels of interest, there still is a scarcity of studies on *perceptions* of the European Union's central bureaucracy. This circumstance is surprising because the EU's administrative institutions are an essential part of its multi-level administrative system. They are also frequently singled out in public discourses and the media.

My article seeks to fill these and other important gaps by speaking to three different literatures. First, I advance the study of multi-level governance through a contribution that focuses primarily on dependence in perceptions of bureaucratic institutions at various administrative levels. Second, I add the crucial analytical tool of the representativeness heuristic to the broader

³⁷ Additionally, a more detailed empirical analysis of this issue can be found in the Online Appendix.

literatures on institutional distrust and Euroscepticism.³⁸ Third, I present one of the first studies that focuses on citizen perceptions of the EU bureaucracy, an organization that influences the lives of more than 400 million European citizens, making it an institution of enormous real-world significance.

The analysis of distrust in the EU bureaucracy is of particular importance because it likely partly drives Euroscepticism (Abts *et al.*, 2009)—a widespread and persistent phenomenon among a substantial subset of EU citizens. Eurosceptic attitudes have contributed to decisions of great political-economic relevance, such as Brexit (Gastinger, 2021; Henderson *et al.*, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; Peitz *et al.*, 2018; Vasilopoulou, 2016). Thus, this study has both wide-ranging academic and practical-political implications.

The approach presented here goes beyond existing research in multiple important ways. Most importantly, it goes beyond previous and more abstract notions of “proxies” (Anderson, 1998) and “cues” (Hooghe and Marks, 2005)—which have often been applied to more general subjects, such as broad support for European integration—by systematically developing a clear theoretical concept of heuristics and deriving empirical expectations for a highly specific dimension of the EU’s institutional framework (its bureaucracy).

In the empirical analysis, which is focused on the case of Romania, I find that perceptions of domestic local and central bureaucracies are significantly correlated with perceptions of the EU bureaucracy. I show that the strength of the relationship to perceptions of domestic *central* institutions is substantively greater and statistically more significant than to local institutions. This may be due to higher levels of perceived similarity between central and EU institutions. Furthermore, there is no consistent statistical association with trust in other types of public institutions, meaning that the results are unlikely to be driven by general institutional (dis)trust. Instead, the clear implication of these results is that the representativeness heuristic is a key mechanism through which citizens form attitudes toward more distant centralized bureaucracies (especially those at the supranational level).

To what extent can we generalize the results above? Romania certainly is distinct from some other EU countries due to its very high level of corruption and wide-ranging variation in the quality of administrative institutions, which made it an ideal case for my study. At the same time, there are several EU countries that also suffer from non-negligible levels of domestic corruption, including Hungary, Bulgaria, Malta, and Poland. The study at hand was conducted in a single country because it allowed me to hold certain domestic factors, such as the size of the welfare state, constant. However, in the future, it would be desirable to extend the analysis to other countries and verify if we can observe the same patterns there. There could be intervening variables, such

³⁸As elaborated throughout the article, even though “proxies” (Anderson, 1998) or “cues” (Hooghe and Marks, 2005) share some similarities with heuristics, there are also crucial differences.

as different national cultures, that mediate the relationship of institutional distrust and Euroscepticism (see Angino *et al.*, 2022). For instance, Italy is often thought of as a case in which some citizens have relatively low trust in their own government and comparatively more trust in the European project.

This study shows that academics who investigate specific institutional aspects of Euroscepticism should always take domestic experiences and perceptions of *comparable* domestic institutions into account. They may be crucial for explaining variations in their outcomes. Moreover, certain political inferences may be drawn as well. In order to reduce skepticism of EU institutions, European citizens may need more direct exposure to or concrete information about the EU bureaucracy, so that they can form opinions on them separately from other (domestic) administrative institutions. This echoes previous arguments about a more general “communication deficit” of the EU (see, for instance, De Vreese *et al.*, 2006; Meyer, 1999).

It is important to note at this point that, although Euroscepticism as a subject can be *partly* explained by the representativeness heuristic, this heuristic certainly is not the only factor that is responsible for eurosceptic attitudes. Numerous studies have shown that a wide range of other political, social, and economic dynamics are also constitutive of eurosceptic views.³⁹ In light of the alternative explanations offered, I mostly see this study as a *complement* to existing knowledge, able to explain an important *part*, but certainly *not all* of the variation in eurosceptic attitudes. This specific part is highly important from a policy perspective, however, because merely providing additional quality information about EU institutions to citizens could disrupt the application of heuristics when it comes to institutional perceptions.

Given the large literature on the determinants of Euroscepticism, how do my results compare to existing work? As touched upon earlier, at first glance my results *appear* to be inconsistent with Sánchez-Cuenca (2000) because he finds that poorly functioning national institutions (as indicated by high corruption and low social expenditures) increase support for European integration in a broad sense. However, a crucial difference to Sánchez-Cuenca is that I focus only on a single, highly specific factor of Euroscepticism, namely *trust in European public administrative institutions*. Sánchez-Cuenca, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the much broader concept of general support for European integration that may be built on a much larger number of diverse subcomponents (for details on this issue, see Goldberg *et al.*, 2021; Scotto di Vettimo, 2022; Toshkov and Krouwel, 2022). Specifically, there may be

³⁹For details, see this article’s literature review section. Additionally, there may even be some self-reinforcing media dynamics when it comes to eurosceptic reporting (Galpin and Trenz, 2017).

other, alternative mechanisms, through which poorly functioning national institutions could *increase* support for European integration.⁴⁰

For instance, people who view their domestic government as corrupt (which is generally known to inhibit economic growth) may be primarily interested in the *economic* benefits of European integration, which could form the basis of their support for the EU. Alternatively, these people may be less inclined to be nationalistic, which may also have a positive impact on attitudes towards the EU. Therefore, future studies could consider a variety of causal mechanisms through which perceptions of domestic institutions ultimately affect skepticism of EU integration more broadly—beyond the very specific type of distrust analyzed here.⁴¹

In sum, this discussion indicates that future research should take into account how different causal mechanisms affect support for EU integration in possibly divergent ways. Therefore, it would also be desirable to simultaneously collect empirical data on a number of additional dependent variables and directly compare a range of key independent variables in terms of their predictive power (potentially through machine learning applications).⁴²

Moreover, the results obtained here also speak to a contribution by De Vries (2018). Like De Vries, my study highlights that Euroscepticism is a multifaceted phenomenon that can potentially be broken up into many different dimensions, including skeptical views of the EU public administration as a subcomponent.⁴³ Furthermore, despite some differences in the line of argument, my findings confirm the results by De Vries that (national) benchmarks and mental shortcuts—resembling aspects of the heuristics discussed here—are

⁴⁰In this respect, it is also worth emphasizing again that individual citizens can exhibit high support for the EU or European integration in general while they may still be distrustful of its bureaucratic institutions.

⁴¹When analyzing levels of support for EU integration in a broad sense, it is also important to note that—in comparison with bureaucratic institutions of the EU—people can be assumed to be more familiar with and more exposed to (media) information about major political institutions and processes, such as the European Parliament or the European Commission. More exposure to concrete information could be a strong factor in their judgments of EU integration in general. As indicated previously, an effective distinction between the EU and national *political* institutions, for instance, can allow citizens to view them as substitutes or complements. With respect to the EU bureaucracy, it is unlikely, though, that citizens are viewing it along a complementary-substitutable continuum as they generally have too little concrete substantive knowledge on EU administrative institutions to make such a kind of judgment.

⁴²Additionally, it would be desirable to investigate if the application of heuristics remains unchanged after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic represented a major shock in which the EU played an important political role (Haverland *et al.*, 2022; Papageorgiou and Immonen, 2023), some existing research has found only negligible/minor effects on citizens' political attitudes (e.g., Blumenau *et al.*, 2022; Dennison *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, the observed dynamics in terms of the application of heuristics to evaluations of supranational bureaucracy might have survived the pandemic mostly unaltered.

⁴³Regarding different types of eurosceptics as a related phenomenon, see also Wefels (2007).

crucial to how people think about the EU.⁴⁴ Similarly, results by Brosius *et al.* (2020) about the general extrapolation of attitudes from the national to the supranational level are also confirmed by me.⁴⁵

Given the earlier discussion of external validity, to which other settings could my theoretical framework be applied in the future? First of all, as indicated, an application to Belgium or Luxembourg would be problematic as (a substantial proportion of) respondents are more likely to be directly exposed to the EU bureaucracy, which violates the scope conditions that were previously outlined. Instead, from a theoretical perspective, it would be desirable to also test the framework in countries whose domestic bureaucracies enjoy good reputations and where corruption is less pervasive. In this respect, the Scandinavian EU members would represent appropriate testing grounds that meet all the scope conditions. Moreover, from a substantive perspective, it would be most desirable to examine countries that (1) have generally high levels of domestic (bureaucratic) corruption and (2) where the population exhibits above-average levels of eurosceptic attitudes. Thus, an ideal candidate would be Hungary, where both conditions are present and the scope conditions are met as well. In general, there are many avenues to expand upon the study at hand.

Although my findings may be perceived to be at odds with Sánchez-Cuenca (2000) (a notion that—as discussed above—is not necessarily accurate), they corroborate the results of several previous studies, which have found that citizens often make positive/negative judgments regarding the EU based on the perceived positive/negative performance of national governments or the domestic political-economic situation (e.g., Baute *et al.*, 2019; De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005; De Vries, 2018; Dominiononi *et al.*, 2020; Franklin *et al.*, 1994; Garry *et al.*, 2005). Future contributions can build upon the insights gained here by exploring panel data and extending this research to other EU member states. Most importantly, future research could also examine if these insights about the European Union's administrative system can be transferred to multi-level governance systems in other world regions and in different cultural/institutional contexts—possible studies that would be of critical interest to researchers of political institutions and political economy.

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⁴⁴See also Harteveld *et al.* (2013).

⁴⁵However, in this study I did not randomize the order of questions, so I cannot assess the impact of question ordering as Brosius *et al.* do.

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