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What Drives Euroskepticism?

Party–Public Cueing, Ideology and Strategic Opportunity

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On the surface, not much has changed in the European Union (EU). Its well-oiled institutional machinery continues to produce directives, regulations, and decisions. Business goes on as usual. But the rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in the heartland of Europe in the spring of 2005 was a watershed. The permissive consensus that shielded the machinery's operators from accountability is not just under strain; it is broken.

At stake here is not merely a particular outcome but the way in which decisions are made.¹ Since the 1990s, European integration has become measurably more contentious – in the media, in social movements, and, most prominently, among national political parties and public opinion (De Vreese, 2003; Franklin and Van der Eijk, 2004; Hooghe and Marks, 2006; Imig and Tarrow, 2001; Pennings, 2006; Ray, 2007; and Kriesi in this issue). At the same time, more democratic control over EU decision-making – stronger national parliamentary oversight, greater powers for the European Parliament, majority voting in the Council, and more EU referendums – has brought political parties and the public into EU decision-making. The era in which relatively insulated elites bargained grand treaties in the shadow of an uninterested and generally approving public has come to an end.

Public contestation therefore constrains the bargains that can be made, and this creates a limited zone of acquiescence for policy choice (Stimson, 1999). Propositions that fall outside this zone are likely to be shot down. When the public and parties take a stance, other actors are induced to respond. On issues that are salient for parties and public opinion, elites, in particular leaders in government, try to anticipate the effect of their decisions on the domestic mood. Hence public opinion about European integration is a field

of strategic interaction among party elites in their competition for political power (Hooghe and Marks, 2007).

Politicization, ideology, and strategy

This special issue puts two topics on the table. The first is concerned with the preferences of political parties as regards European integration. To what extent are parties driven by strategic incentives in the context of electoral competition; to what extent are they driven by durable ideological commitments? The second topic concerns the linkages between parties and public opinion: to what extent do voters and political parties cue each other? Whose preferences are driving European decisions – those of voters or those of political parties? Although these two sets of questions have been pursued independently in scholarly research, they are intimately connected – an answer to one question presupposes an answer to the other.

One compelling line of argument is a bottom-up view of preference formation in which voters' preferences provide a structure of incentives for party positioning in the context of electoral competition. This is the dominant view in analysis of party positioning, particularly from a rational choice perspective (Downs, 1957). The idea here is that at least a minority of voters have stable and transparent attitudes that affect their vote choice (Zaller, 1992). The bottom-up view can be extended to public opinion (Stimson, 1999). Political parties respond to the public mood on European integration, and this constrains decisions to a zone of acquiescence that cannot depart too far from the median voter (Carrubba, 2001).

A diametrically opposite, but equally plausible, line of argument is that political parties cue mass publics. From Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967) to Stefano Bartolini (2005), it has been argued, and empirically shown, that the structure of party competition is both resilient and powerful in shaping party positioning. In this view, political parties are organizations with historically rooted orientations that guide their response to new issues (Marks and Wilson, 2000). Elites, not masses, have coherent ideological maps with which they can make sense of highly technical and multifaceted issues, such as those arising from European integration (Druckman, 2001; Jennings, 1992). Citizens can rarely grasp the complexities of an issue and look to public actors, particularly political parties, for cues (Ray, 2003; Steenbergen and Jones, 2002).

The implication of the latter view is that it usually takes epochal change to redraw the battle-lines. We know that the structure of domestic competition powerfully constrains attitudes towards European integration

(Aspinwall 2002; Marks and Steenbergen, 2004; Marks et al., 2006). A party's orientation to European issues can be predicted fairly accurately if one knows where that party stands on an economic Left/Right dimension and a non-economic or new politics dimension. But how these dimensions relate to a party's views on European integration may change – though slowly – in response to changes in the EU, and how these intersect with the domestic structure of conflict. Hence, as the European Union has mutated from a trade regime to a federal-type polity, partisan and public attitudes have shifted (Eichenberg and Dalton, 2007; Marks and Wilson, 2000). In the early decades of European integration, Euroskepticism² was rooted in opposition to market integration (Gabel, 1998). Since the Maastricht Treaty, it has taken on an additional dimension: defense of the national community (Hooghe and Marks, 2007; Kriesi, in this issue). Change in the character of European integration may also affect domestic contexts differently. Extensive European authority in market regulation looks more attractive to market liberals in social democratic regimes than to their ideological allies in market liberal regimes (Brinegar et al., 2004; Marks, 2004). Likewise, strengthening supranationalism may be more compatible with some collective conceptions of national identity than with others (Diez Medrano, 2003). Hence this view argues that economic interest and identity shape the views of political parties, but that the causal weight and the direction of these factors vary across time and space.

This conception of slow-paced, ideologically filtered change in party positioning is radically different from one that conceives of party preferences primarily as adjustment to electoral-strategic incentives. The latter view opens up the possibility that parties may shift positions on Europe as they go in and out of government, scent electoral gain, and use Europe as a lever to exploit dissent in their opponents, or as a strategy to alter the political agenda.

Each of these views is nuanced. The bottom-up view focuses on voters as a source of party positioning. Parties can receive an intelligible signal from voters even if a majority of voters do not comprehend an issue. As long as a minority of voters have structured views, parties may be able to pick up a signal from a noisy background. But the issue must be salient enough for a minority of voters. Top-down theory views parties as sources of information for voters. If parties send weak or mixed signals, either because they wish to avoid competing on an issue or because they are internally divided, this should reduce their cueing capacity.

Analyses of party/voter cueing and party positioning are interdependent. One purpose of this special issue is to bring these two topics together and to spur both contributors and readers to rethink their conclusions about the dynamics of politicization in the European Union.

Overview of the special issue

To what extent does cueing on European integration take place, and, if it does, in what direction? What is the role of ideology and of electoral-strategic incentives in party positioning on European integration? Prior research has produced contradictory answers to both questions. The contributions in this special issue advance a variety of methods to probe these questions.

Marco Steenbergen, Erica Edwards, and Catherine de Vries develop a model that investigates the relative strength of top-down and bottom-up cueing. Their conceptual point of departure is that these types of cueing are complementary, and that their relative strength depends on characteristics of the electoral and party system, party elites, and party supporters. Contrary to popular perceptions, the authors find scant evidence that political elites are out of touch with citizens or with EU policies. That said, there are clear differences among parties: extremist parties appear the strongest cuers and mainstream parties the weakest. The reason, the authors claim, is that mainstream parties attract relatively few opinion leaders and, when opinion leadership is weak, so are bottom-up as well as top-down linkages. Modeling conditional reciprocal causation poses problems of endogeneity and estimation. The authors tackle these by means of an instrumental variable approach embedded in dynamic simultaneous equations models to estimate bottom-up and top-down effects over a time-span of almost two decades (1984–2002).

Matthew Gabel and Kenneth Scheve examine party cueing among mainstream parties. Since mainstream parties collect the lion's share of the vote, their linkage with voters is decisive in how politicization affects European integration. They argue that these parties send out multiple cues rather than a single cue. A major source of this divergent party cueing is internal party dissent. Internal bickering creates incentives for party supporters to filter cue-taking: it frees party supporters from adhering to a single party line, and invites them to use their own beliefs to select among diverse party cues. The argument builds on John Zaller's (1992) insight that, where elite cues diverge, citizens accept cues consistent with their interests, values, and political predispositions. Parties are not unitary actors, yet being divided does not necessarily deprive them of influence. This argument provides a neat explanation for the apparent disconnect between pro-EU parties and Euroskeptical followers in, say, constitutional referendums.

The Constitutional Treaty referendums of 2005 constitute a perfect occasion for observing how parties negotiate ideological credibility and electoral-strategic opportunity. As Ben Crum shows, the dilemma is severe for mainstream opposition parties whose ideology leads them to support

European integration, but whose opposition status induces them to fight the government. Crum finds that parties gave more weight to ideology than to strategic posturing, because pro-European mainstream opposition parties tended to side with government parties on the 'Yes' side. However, collusion with the government cost opposition parties dearly, in that it undermined their ability to cue party supporters. One reason for this is factionalism, an argument consistent with Gabel and Scheve. Factionalism alone, though, cannot explain the depth of the party-voter disconnect. Crum suggests that voters approach European integration primarily as a second-order issue, that is to say, as a strategic test ground for national government popularity. That makes it difficult for opposition parties to argue a 'Yes' vote for the Constitutional Treaty on ideological grounds, since it is a government project. Hence, where opposition parties do not play the standard opposition game, they may invite their supporters to turn to protest parties, which exploit the EU issue for their own strategic purposes.

Analyzing media reporting on national elections campaigns, Hanspeter Kriesi evaluates the strength of government/opposition dynamics versus ideology in influencing the salience and direction of party positioning on European integration in six West European countries – Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK. Kriesi finds considerably more support for ideology than for government/opposition dynamics. Euroskepticism, he argues, is part and parcel of a broader 'new cultural cleavage' that pits the losers from globalization against the winners. However, the extent to which parties blame this sense of loss on European integration varies across countries. The linkage is strongest in the UK and Switzerland, where Euroskepticism resonates with deep-seated national cultural anxieties, and where the European issue has consequently become central in restructuring the party system. It is too early to tell whether European integration will become the universal battleground for winners and losers of globalization.

Whereas the preceding authors are primarily interested in mainstream parties, Seth Jolly sets his sights on a peculiar subgroup of fringe parties, namely regionalist parties. Non-mainstream or fringe parties are often considered to be the kernel of Euroskepticism, and there are good ideological and electoral-strategic reasons for this. But regionalist parties do not appear to live by this law. As a group, they are consistently more pro-European than are other small party groups and nearly as pro-European as Christian democrats, socialists and liberals. This holds across time, space, and EU policy. Why is that so? Jolly demonstrates that regionalist parties favor European integration over and beyond ideological compatibility or electoral incentives because European integration makes smaller states more viable. A multi-level European Union is an unwitting ally against central governments.

The special issue ends with a reflective forum piece by Simon Hix, which sets out a rationalist institutionalist framework for understanding Euroskepticism. Echoing a basic assumption underlying most contributions here, Hix argues that Euroskepticism is best conceived as a rational response by citizens (and parties) for whom centralized EU power is a threat to their interests – not as deep-seated dissent from the political system. Support of and opposition to European integration are two sides of the same coin – both are contextual responses to changing interests. The upshot is that the Euroskeptics of today may become tomorrow's Euro-supporters if their fortunes were to improve in the EU's competitive multi-level polity. Although Hix probes the economic underpinnings of Euroskepticism, his framework provides a useful starting point for a dynamic comparative analysis of non-economic as well as economic sources of EU positioning among citizens and parties.

Notes

- 1 In that sense, the neo-functionalists were right in arguing that European integration is self-transforming (Haas, 1958; Schmitter, 1969). As European integration deepened, so the character of the process itself changed.
- 2 We have decided to leave the contributors to the special issue free to choose the spelling of the word 'Euros(k)(c)eppticism'. Both versions are correct, though one tends to find the 'c' spelling on the European side of the Atlantic and the 'k' spelling on the American side.

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