



Sources of Euroscepticism

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What leads citizens and political parties to oppose the principles, institutions, or policies of the European Union? This double special issue brings together specialists on public opinion, political parties, and media to answer this question. We examine economic interest and identity as sources of Euroscepticism among Europe's citizens and we analyse how public opinion is cued by media and political parties. *Acta Politica* (2007) 42, 119–127. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500192

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Introduction

The scope and intensity of Euroscepticism came as a surprise. Neofunctionalists expected politicization to increase support, not opposition, to Europe as the benefits of integration spread from specialized interests to the society at large. Intergovernmentalists ignored public opinion on the ground that governments, not voters, determine European integration. Yet, Euroscepticism is a potent feature of the political landscape across the European Union (EU). It surfaces in conflict within, as well as among, political parties and in high-profile referenda, several of which have ended in government defeat (Hooghe and Marks, 2006; Crum, 2007). Euroscepticism has not only shaken confidence in further European integration, but has provoked several attempts to re-theorize the process of European integration (Bartolini, 2005; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006; Hooghe and Marks, forthcoming).

The question posed in this special issue is (deceptively) simple: What leads citizens and political parties to oppose the principles, institutions, or policies of European integration?¹ Our starting point is the shared realization that European integration is no longer determined by insulated elites. Public opinion, party competition, and the mass media are vital ingredients.

Understanding Euroscepticism

The meaning of the word *scepticism* has diffused from its reference to the classical sceptics to mean 'an attitude of doubt or a disposition of disbelief.'



Euroscepticism refers to scepticism about Europe or European integration. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term first surfaced in print in *The Economist* on 26 December 1992 to describe the souring of German public opinion on European integration after Germany was told to adjust its purity rules on beer to conform to the internal market.² The timing — the year following the Maastricht Accord — is revealing, as is the fact that Euroscepticism has gained wide currency in political discourse.

The term expresses doubt or disbelief in Europe and European integration in general. So we concur with Paul Taggart, Aleks Szczerbiak, and others in conceiving Euroscepticism as encompassing a range of critical positions on European integration, as well as outright opposition (Taggart, 1998; Kopecký and Mudde, 2002; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2005). Accordingly, the contributors to this special issue use the term to describe one side of a continuum that ranges from very positive to very negative dispositions towards European integration, its policies, its institutions, or its principles.

We wish to explore and explain variation in Euroscepticism, and to do so we disaggregate. First, we distinguish among *actors*. The articles that follow examine variation in the preferences of public opinion, political parties, or both, across time, as well as in a variety of countries.

Second, we examine *varieties* of Euroscepticism. Bernhard Wessels builds on Eastonian systems theory to theorize how specific opposition may spill over into diffuse opposition. Several articles in this special issue are concerned with attitudes towards the regime and the community.³ Lauren McLaren's contribution analyses policy attitudes, while André Krouwel and Koen Abts locate Euroscepticism in a two-dimensional frame that distinguishes the degree of criticism from the targets for public evaluation (Europe's authorities, regime, or community). Claes de Vreese focuses on the conditions for popular cynicism towards European leaders and institutions.

In the past, most public opinion research built on trade theory to theorize a calculus of economic costs and benefits, the presumption being that citizens and parties evaluate European integration in terms of its economic effects (e.g. Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993; Gabel, 1998; Marks and Steenbergen, 2004). This is a plausible approach, but we wish to go beyond it (McLaren, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2006; Kriesi, 2007).⁴

One line of inquiry draws on the psychology of group membership to examine how identities including, above all, national identities, constrain support for European integration. What matters most for attitudes towards Europe is how an individual *conceives* her identity, for example, in ethnic *vs* civic or exclusive *vs* inclusive terms (Diez Medrano, 2003; Hooghe and Marks, 2005).



A second line of inquiry suggests that generalized political discontent or institutional distrust feeds Euroscepticism. There is ample evidence of an association between institutional (dis)trust and attitudes towards European integration, but the direction of the effect and the causal process are debated (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000; Rohrschneider, 2002). In an effort to unravel this conundrum, we reflect on how Euroscepticism is related to broader changes in democratic practice, including an erosion of trust, a decline in voter turnout and political participation, and intensified economic and cultural insecurity (Rodrik 1997; Norris, 2003; Dalton, 2004; Franklin, 2005). Is Euroscepticism a response to perceived shortcomings of political integration or is it an expression of a more general malaise?

Finally, we explore how Euroscepticism is cued by elites (de Vries and Edwards, 2005; Gabel and Scheve, 2007; Steenbergen *et al.*, 2007). The premise of cueing theory is that external influences may be decisive in priming or framing attitudes towards a particular object (Zaller, 2002; Semetko and de Vreese, 2004). To what extent do the media and political parties affect citizen attitudes on the EU?

Overviewing the Double Issue

The editors began this project believing that it would be useful to move beyond economic explanations of preferences, and so we asked the contributors to take alternative lines of analysis seriously. We also invited them to investigate Euroscepticism in the context most familiar to them.

The incidence and character of Euroscepticism varies across Europe, yet its causality appears to be patterned. We find that Euroscepticism has changed in tandem with the policies pursued by the EU. In the early decades of European integration, Euroscepticism was rooted in opposition to market integration. Since the Maastricht Treaty, Euroscepticism has taken on an additional dimension: defence of national community.

Euroscepticism across time

The first two articles in this special issue review how the preferences of the public and of political parties on Europe have changed in recent years.

Richard Eichenberg and *Russell Dalton* survey changing public opinion since 1973 for eight core EU countries, the old five (minus Luxembourg) and the three of the first enlargement. While overall net support has not decreased much since the 1970s, public opinion in these countries has converged. More strikingly, the causal underpinnings of public opinion have changed. Until the early 1990s, Euroscepticism was tied to macroeconomic performance, rising



with inflation and unemployment and falling with economic growth. However, these associations have eroded as European integration shifted from market-making to polity-building. Eichenberg and Dalton suggest two lines of inquiry. One emphasizes national identity in response to the erosion of national sovereignty after the Maastricht Treaty. Another highlights individual economic concerns as a response to heightened job insecurity arising from market integration. Either way, macroeconomic performance no longer frames public opinion on Europe.

Leonard Ray's contribution reviews change and continuity in Eurosupport and scepticism among national political parties since 1984. As with public opinion, there is no significant rise in Euroscepticism since 1984, although its centre of gravity has shifted to the populist right. Ray confirms that Euroscepticism is primarily a phenomenon of the political fringes. Ideological extremity provides the key: radical left parties oppose European integration because they view it as a capitalist project; radical right parties do so as part of their defence of national sovereignty. A handful of (mainly Scandinavian and British) mainstream parties are Eurosceptic, and as Ray notes, these parties are distinguished by their assertive defence of national interests.

Euroscepticism across Europe

Geoffrey Evans and *Sarah Butt* probe the changing face of Euroscepticism in Britain, a country where both national-cultural and economic objections to European integration are salient. Public support for European integration in Britain has always been lukewarm at best, but how this plays into the positioning of political parties has changed. Contrary to much of continental Europe, Euroscepticism has found a home in mainstream parties. In the early 1970s it constituted a powerful strand within the Labour party, and since the 1980s it has surfaced strongly in a divided Conservative party. Using national election panel data, Evans and Butt demonstrate that public opinion increasingly cues political parties rather than the reverse. They also show that Euroscepticism in Britain has become less driven by economic insecurity and more so by concerns about British (or English) identity.

Two articles examine Euroscepticism in its most and least Eurosceptical contexts: the Scandinavian North and the Mediterranean South. The puzzle that motivates *Tapio Raunio's* article is the contrast between entrenched Euroscepticism among Danish and Swedish political parties and weak Euroscepticism among Finnish parties. There is little difference in the levels of public support for Europe across these countries. The explanation, Raunio argues, lies in party preferences and government formation. Danish and Swedish parties compete in mutually exclusive ideological blocs and consequently must build electoral majorities to realize their policy goals.



Government formation in Finland is far less ideologically riven, and political parties of various stripes are induced to compete for office, rather than votes, to achieve their policy goals — but this demands that they soften their rough edges to make themselves coalitionable. As a result, Finnish parties are swayed to downplay Euroscepticism. However, this stark contrast may wane in the future. Across Scandinavia, public opinion has recently begun to warm to European integration, and this should weaken Eurosceptic pressures in Sweden and Denmark. For Finnish parties predisposed to Euroscepticism, this should blunt the trade-off between vote-seeking and policy-seeking.

In their analysis of public opinion in Spain, Portugal and Greece, *Ivan Llamazares* and *Wladimir Gramacho* set out to explain variation in Euroscepticism in the EU's most pro-European region. Weighing the relative role of economic, identity, and cueing factors, they trace Euroscepticism to preferences over cultural exclusivism and economic redistribution. This, as we will see below, is consistent with broader crossnational analyses. Hence, what makes the South distinctive is not the causality underlying Euroscepticism, but rather its low level of Euroscepticism. The preferences of Mediterranean citizens are relatively consistent with those of political elites, and reflect the view that EU membership bestows prosperity, democracy, and influence in the world. Radical right parties — and mobilization of nationalist and anti-foreigner sentiments — are notably weak in southern Europe.

Sources of Euroscepticism

What are the sources of Euroscepticism? To what extent is Euroscepticism generated by economic concerns, identity, or distrust? To what extent is it cued by the media, political entrepreneurs or particular parties? The contributions in this section engage these questions from a crossnational perspective.

Examining public support for EU policies in the early 2000s *Lauren McLaren* distinguishes economic, cultural and institutional factors. Her analysis confirms that exclusive national identities motivate Euroscepticism. But she also finds that respondents who feel personally disadvantaged by European integration are more likely to be Eurosceptic, as are people who distrust EU institutions. How do these three factors relate to one another? Are exclusive nationalists, economic losers, and distrusting citizens one and the same? The short answer is — not quite. To begin with, McLaren finds little evidence that exclusive national identity affects perceptions of economic loss or vice-versa. So there may be two distinct paths to Euroscepticism: one rooted in cultural threat, and one in perceived economic loss. Further, McLaren notes that institutional distrust motivates Euroscepticism. While the direct effect of institutional trust runs through EU institutions, distrust of EU and national institutions tend to go together. Given the choice of two evils —



national government and European government — distrustful respondents are likely to prefer the one they know, that is, national government.

Andre Krouwel and *Koen Abts* also emphasize that opposition to European integration is rooted in broader political discontent, and they highlight the role of populists in linking domestic to European discontent. Since most citizens do not have strong views on Europe, populists can project discontent about domestic elites or institutions onto Europe. Moreover, populist rhetoric can feed a downward spiral of discontent, framing specific criticisms in terms of a general system breakdown thereby disarming citizens' capacity to differentiate and reflect critically.

Claes de Vreese examines how Dutch and Danish newspaper reporting on EU summits cues public opinion on European integration. De Vreese's article illuminates both the potential and limits of media framing. He debunks the notion that media always intensify political cynicism. This depends on the news stories themselves and on whether the public is itself predisposed to political cynicism. Cynicism is most likely when the media downplay the substantive content of policy and focus instead on candidate style and simplistic public opinion polls. In this mode, politics is represented as a kind of war game to be won or lost.

While most contributions in this special issue focus on what feeds Euroscepticism, *Bernhard Wessels* investigates what limits Euroscepticism. Building on Eastonian systems theory, Wessels argues that a political system can weather opposition if citizens identify with the political community. Euroscepticism is most corrosive when it is reinforced by a lack of European identity. The hard-core of Euroscepticism is therefore made up of individuals who are critical of EU performance and who attest an exclusively national identity. Wessels finds that 41 per cent of citizens across the EU-25 are neutral or negative with respect to European identity, of whom a third can be described as hard-core Eurosceptics. He concludes that Euroscepticism has the potential to become system-threatening.

The article by *Catherine de Vries* and *Kees van Kersbergen* conceives Euroscepticism as a reaction on the part of citizens to national government failure. Citizens support their governments in exchange for cultural security and economic well-being. As long as EU membership is consistent with the capacity of national governments to deliver, citizens extend allegiance from their national state to the EU. But citizens reject this double allegiance when governments are unable to protect them against insecurity. Euroscepticism is therefore the price the EU pays when governments fail to fulfil their side of the bargain.

Finally, Liesbet Hooghe, JingJing Huo, and Gary Marks inquire into the effects of occupational location and civic vs ethnic identity for Euroscepticism. They find that occupation and identity exert independent effects that are



roughly similar in size. Identity tends to be prominent in countries with strong radical right parties. They conclude that the limited reliability of available survey data impede efforts to evaluate plausible rival hypotheses.

Instead of assuming that public opinion on European integration reflects economic concerns, the articles in this special issue probe how Euroscepticism emerges from the interplay between identity and economic interest. On the political right, Euroscepticism is expressed in the criticism that the EU undermines national identity and national independence. On the political left, it is expressed in concerns about the effect of European integration on social protection and the European social model. There are, then, two distinct sources of Euroscepticism. The common thread is that the EU is conceived as a threat to the *status quo* (Hooghe and Marks, forthcoming; Kriesi, 2007).

Our effort to broaden the theoretical terrain of explanation leads us to reject the notion that preferences over Europe are rationally immediate, or self-evident, to citizens. Neither identity nor economic interest speak for themselves, but are cued and framed by political actors. Euroscepticism results from efforts by political actors to relate European integration to latent public feelings of cultural threat and economic loss. To understand variation in opinions on Europe, one must endeavour to explain how Europe is *constructed* in political debate. This leads us to pay detailed attention to the efforts of radical right political parties, populist entrepreneurs, and media in cueing Euroscepticism.

In order to make progress with this research programme, we need reliable comparative data that allow us to probe identity and the construction of public opinion. The contributors to this special issue bring diverse sources of data to bear on Euroscepticism, including national public opinion surveys, panel data of public opinion, European election surveys, expert data on party positioning, international social science program survey data, and media content data. Eurobarometer surveys, funded by the European Commission, remain a vital resource, but they reiterate a simplistic left/right conception of ideological space that is inadequate to investigate public opinion in western Europe and inappropriate for central and eastern Europe. Our efforts to theorize European politics and society, as tentative as they are, far outstrip our ability to systematically test our guesses.

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Notes

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- 2 The first public use of 'Euro-sceptic' was recorded in 1986, to describe British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. *The Times* noted that Mrs Thatcher was 'seen in most of the EEC as a Euro-sceptic at best' (*The Times*, 30 June 1986, 9/1). The prefix 'Euro' now graces around one hundred words according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED online, accessed on 18 May 2006).
- 3 That is, the contributions by Richard Eichenberg and Russell Dalton, Leonard Ray, Geoffrey Evans and Sarah Butt, Tapio Raunio, Ivan Llamazares and Wladimir Gramacho, Bernhard Wessels, Catherine de Vries and Kees van Kersbergen, and Liesbet Hooghe, JingJing Huo, and Gary Marks.
- 4 Other factors, such as identity and political construction, are at least as powerful as economic factors in shaping public and party preferences on European integration. Recently, the economic model of public opinion has come under serious attack from within its own ranks, that is to say, from leading scholars of public opinion and electoral behaviour. They argue that it is simply inappropriate to extend the assumptions of the economic voting model to the analysis of public opinion. Yet this is what has happened over the past decade. Critics call this a case of severe theory drift (Duch and Palmer, 2006).