

## **Beyond the Left-Right Dimension? The Impact of European Integration on West European Party Politics**

**Keywords:** Mainstream parties; Protest parties; EU Issue Entrepreneurship; EU issue voting; Politicization.

### **ABSTRACT**

According to many overviews, European integration has historically had a weak impact on party strategies and the patterns of inter-party competition. Some scholars referred to a phenomenon of people's *permissive consensus*, which characterized the public opinion trends regarding European integration. Indeed, the vast majority of the European public did not fully perceive the political outcomes of the integration, leaving a wide room for action for national governments to expand the EU project. Consequently, the Anti-/Pro-Europe conflict did not constitute a new dimension of party competition, while the Left-Right divide dominated the partisan alignments in Europe, significantly predicting electoral behaviour.

However, a contingent, but powerful, factor appears to have hastened the establishment of a new political conflict related to European integration and its subsequent translation into a set of party alternatives - The *Great Recession* or *Euro crisis* (2008-2014). Indeed, the European Union took centre stage in the management of the Euro Crisis, handling several economic and political challenges. Hence, the Euro crisis has probably ushered in a new era of economic governance in the Euro-zone countries, further boosting the role of EU institutions (mainly the inter-governmental ones) and increasingly reducing the room for manoeuvre of the national governments. The convergence on the austerity measures may have weakened the ability of Pro-European parties to link voter preferences on the Left-Right conflict dimension. Indeed, the economic content ensuing the Left-Right dimension of political contestation has appeared to be dampened in political agendas by the European Union economic governance. The Left-Right ideological dimension seems to have been undercut by the effects of the Euro crisis, potentially depriving the voters of this political information device and, perhaps, restructuring the electoral preferences at the national level. Meanwhile, despite the complexity of the EU building, which set up a multi-level polity, the citizens were able to assign responsibility to the European institutions. The propensity of citizens to blame the EU for the policy outcomes substantially increased during the crisis, changing public opinion towards the overall European building. These trends in public opinion and the institutional developments have apparently rendered the public debate over European integration more salient at the domestic level, potentially laying the foundations for the emergence of *EU issue voting*.

We hypothesize that the *Protest* parties, located at the extreme of the Left-Right continuum and outside of the *cartel* of governing parties, have found new incentives for politicizing EU issues in the wake of the Euro crisis. These parties are expected to be the main political entrepreneurs of European integration issues, by emphasizing their Eurosceptic stances. Indeed, Protest parties are weak in vying along the Left-Right dimension and to maximize votes they could attempt to overturn the party competition patterns. On the contrary, the Mainstream parties, positioned closer to the centre of the Left-Right continuum and belonging to the established European party families, are more likely to minimize EU issue saliency to maintain the traditional partisan conflicts. In fact, this cluster of parties does not seem to have any incentives to introduce a new conflict dimension as a source of electoral competition.

As a result, a research question emerges:

*Since the outbreak of the Euro crisis, how much has the European integration conflict reshaped the electoral supply and party preferences in the national party systems?*

This work aims at developing arguments about how European integration has affected the electoral supply of the Protest and Mainstream parties at the national level. This analysis focuses on the party

supply in 4 European countries - Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom – to formulate some comparative propositions. We seek to observe the trends in the four larger European democracies – to understand to what extent the national culture is a mediating factor in shaping electoral supply and voting preferences. We seek to examine the party positions and emphasis on European integration by means of employing the so-called EU Issue Entrepreneurship's index, relying on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey dataset (2006-2010-2014).

Specifically, by means of these findings, the objective is to test if the so-called *Protest Entrepreneurship Hypothesis (H1)*, which implies the Increasing Issue Entrepreneurship of the *Protest parties*, is empirically grounded. As well, this section of the work aims at ascertaining which parties have sought to dampen the European integration conflict, maintaining the Left-Right dimension as an asset in electoral competition. The expectation is that the Mainstream parties have substantially deflected their levels of EU Issue Entrepreneurship, trying to lock up their electoral fortunes. This alleged strategy of the well-established European parties is defined here as the *Mainstream Entrepreneurship Hypothesis (H2)*.

The third step involves providing explanations for the contemporary trends in European voter preferences. European Election Studies' (EES) data allows for creating linear regression models to identify the relations between the European integration conflict and the voting preferences for national parties between 2004 and until 2014. Our model adopts the Downsian "*smallest distance*" theory (Downs 1957), which is suitable for examining the voter-party proximity on the issue dimensions. The hypothesis is that the crisis has strengthened the establishment of the Anti-/Pro-European dimension of contestation and the *EU issue voting* has increasingly determined the electoral preferences at the domestic level. Thus, we contend that the Protest parties have been more likely to maximize their electoral preferences on a scale ranging from Anti-European to Pro-European. The current hypothesis is outlined as the *Protest-voting Hypothesis (H3)*, which holds that, since the outbreak of the Great Recession, the voter-party proximity to the European dimension of conflict has significantly increased its explanatory power in conditioning Protest party support.

Meanwhile, Mainstream parties have appeared to exploit the resiliency of the Left-Right division, which is still one of the most noteworthy electoral predictors in Europe. Thus, we argue that these parties have deflected the saliency of EU related issues by maintaining more conformist positions on this dimension of contestation. In fact, Mainstream parties have aimed at securing their winning electoral positions by depoliticizing the EU issues. Furthermore, they have tried to escape from the threats of the potential intra-party conflict unleashed by the EU conflict. Thus, in the aftermath of the Crisis, the Mainstream parties have probably reaped electoral gains by exploiting the Left-Right dimension of contestation, overlooking the Anti-/Pro-European dimension. This latter hypothesis is dubbed as the *Mainstream-voting Hypothesis (Hypothesis 4)* and it maintains that voter-party proximity of the Mainstream parties on the Left-Right issue dimension has remained the chief determinant of their electoral preferences, which are more influenced by issues resulting from traditional partisan alignments.

