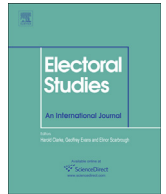




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The risks and opportunities of Europe: How *issue yield* explains (non-) reactions to the financial crisis

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ABSTRACT

The financial crisis subjected the EU to its first truly serious stress test. A majority of citizens is now opposed to further integration. But party systems have barely adjusted, instead perpetuating traditional patterns of an evasive mainstream with Euroskeptic fringes. To explain this unexpected outcome we draw on *issue yield* (De Sio and Weber, 2014), a general model of political competition that unites public opinion, party unity and electoral support. Issue yield highlights how the crisis affected risks and opportunities differently for pro- and anti-integration parties. For such an asymmetric constellation, the model predicts the muffled choices supplied by most parties on EU matters. We use the European Election Studies 2009/2014 and the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys 2010/2014 to document these patterns.

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1. Introduction¹

Since the 1990s scholars have noticed the way in which European integration has become contested in the electorate and divisive within parties (e.g. Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Hix and Lord, 1997; Aylott, 2002; Parsons and Weber, 2011). The issue became the “sleeping giant” of the European political space (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004).

The Euro crisis that began in 2009 has given unprecedented attention to the topic. Public opinion, long generally supportive of the European Project, moved decisively in a negative direction, becoming skeptical of further integration. A growing body of literature has attempted to determine whether the giant has finally awakened (e.g. Van Egmond, 2007; Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009; Hobolt et al., 2009; Weber, 2009; De Vries, 2010; Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011; Dinas and Pardos-Prado, 2012; Green-Pedersen, 2012), but without reaching definitive conclusions. In this paper

we ask whether the financial crisis that started in 2010 has at last tipped the scales.

Issue yield theory (De Sio and Weber, 2014) lends itself to the analysis of this question. Building on Downsian *proximity* theory (Downs, 1957), Stokes' *valence* critique (Stokes, 1963) as well as *saliency* theory (Budge and Farlie, 1983) and the notion of *heres-thetics* (Riker, 1986), it argues that, among all available issues in a given campaign, a party will concentrate on issues with the highest *yield*. High-yield issues are those where the party is not internally divided on the issue while its position is widely shared outside the party. Such issues present a favorable risk/opportunity constellation, with minimal risk and ample opportunity. Conversely, parties are expected to avoid *low-yield* issues, which would not win over new voters and perhaps even split existing supporters.

The two dimensions of issue yield – support for a policy in public opinion, and the degree of within-party unity on the issue (the “partisanship” of the issue)² – are precisely those that typify the situation in regard to EU integration: decreasing support in the electorate at large, and increasing divisions within most parties, as

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² The issue yield model sees *within-party unity* as applying to voters for a particular party. Note that this is different from the concept of within-party unity prevalent in previous literature about EU integration, which mostly refers to party *members*. Given our focus on electoral strategies, we will follow the issue yield usage.

will be set out. On the basis of this dynamic we will show that, on the EU integration issue, parties that enjoyed a favorable risk/opportunity constellation at the beginning of the crisis indeed received an electoral boost. They increased their electoral support on the basis of the EU issue, and their continuing high issue yield shows that they still have potential for further gains. For most parties, however, the situation was reversed, with losses in issue yield for the more pro-EU parties whose supporters became increasingly divided on the issue.

This view of developments gives us reason to be cautious regarding the often-evoked politicization of European integration, perhaps even leading to party system realignments. Though scholars have been guarded about specifying the circumstances in which the giant would awaken (e.g. Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004), at least some of them would have been astonished to know that, over the 2009–2014 period of our study, party systems were apparently surviving largely intact even in the face of a crisis such as the one we have now seen. Overall, there has been no change in the way party systems or voter preferences are structured by the EU issue – something that, in the absence of issue yield theory, would constitute an empirical puzzle that is described in the following section. We will then show that yield-based strategizing has succeeded in keeping the “giant” largely asleep.

Our analysis thus demonstrates the capacity of the issue yield model to shed light on “difficult” cases such as European integration that would otherwise need to be treated as *sui generis*.

2. Public opinion changes, but without clear ramifications

To explore the impact of the financial crisis on public opinion and voting behavior, we rely on the European Election Studies (EES) of 2009 and 2014. The EES regularly fields representative voter surveys in all EU member states on the occasion of elections to the European Parliament (EP). While we are not interested in the EP elections in particular, these data support a rigorous test of our expectations in that they provide opportune pre- and post-crisis measurements of national party positions and evaluations in a comprehensive and highly comparable form across EU member countries.

First of all, note that despite the outbreak of the financial crisis in September 2008, the time frame of 2009–2014 provides a valid comparison. This is mainly because the crisis did not really appear to affect electoral results in EU countries in 2009 (see e.g. De Sio and Legnante, 2010), as it had not yet translated into actual austerity measures with a direct impact on voters’ everyday life. By 2014, however, we expect the full effect of a decrease of support for EU integration to be evident.³

Table App1 in the Appendix shows responses to a survey question asking whether European integration “should be pushed further.” Country-level aggregates in 2014 are compared with 2009. While public support for more European integration among the EU population was not overwhelming before the crisis, after the crisis the majority had moved decisively against further integration. On average support for more integration dropped by 11.6 points, from 56.5% to 44.9%. Support only increased in Bulgaria and Latvia (by 7 percent each). By contrast, the largest decreases came in Ireland (–28), Denmark (–26), the Czech Republic (–25), Slovakia (–23) and Finland (–21).

Given this mandate from the general public and the high

financial risks involved in the maintenance of the Eurozone, one would have expected political actors to follow public opinion by proposing more careful policy platforms – if not reactionary measures. This is at least the standard expectation that spatial modeling in the Downsian tradition and two decades of research into “dynamic representation” gives us: If public opinion changes, public policy should follow (e.g. Stimson et al., 1995; Erikson et al., 2002; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008; Hakhverdian, 2010; Soroka and Wlezién, 2010). In the context of European integration, such a reaction would have told us that the “sleeping giant” had heard the alarm bell ringing. But reality took a different course. Despite all incentives to the contrary, European mainstream parties held on to their moderate pro-integration stances.⁴ That dynamic representation in the case of European integration is shaky at best has been noted repeatedly as of late (Toshkov, 2011; Miklin, 2014; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2016; Dalton, this issue). Recent “highlights” of the integration process showcase the problem: Just as the defeat of the constitutional treaty in 2005 was interpreted as a mandate to impose the largely identical Treaty of Lisbon, the Euro crisis was interpreted as a mandate for deeper (rather than less) financial integration. Conflicts mostly arise over how integration should be pushed further, not over whether more integration is needed at all. More Euroskeptic positions remain largely reserved to parties on the edges of the political spectrum. This even applies to the UK, traditionally one of the most Euroskeptic EU member states, where the Tories’ commitment to a referendum over British membership seems to have been more driven by UKIP’s “blackmail potential” (Sartori, 1976) than by support for this move within the party.

Even if mainstream parties do not cater to the new anti-integration majority, however, the impact of the issue on voting behavior could still increase if voters focussed more centrally on EU matters, even given the limited choices that are available to them. To test whether this was the case, we model the effect of integration attitudes on party preferences. Our dependent variable is a measure known as “propensity to vote” (PTV). PTV questions ask respondents to indicate on an 11-point scale the likelihood that they will “ever vote for” each of a set of national political parties. The measure has been used extensively in comparative electoral research since Van der Eijk and Franklin (1996). Because PTVs are asked about each party separately, the dataset was reshaped to yield an observation for each respondent-party combination (cf. Van der Eijk et al., 2006).

Our main independent variable is a voter-party proximity score derived from the question about support for European integration presented in Table App1. Respondents located themselves and a set of parties on an 11-point scale with the endpoints indicating that European integration “has already gone too far” or “should be pushed further.” To avoid endogeneity from possible rationalization of perceptions, we use the mean perception of the electorate to measure party positions.

Similar proximity scores were calculated for the general left-right dimension as well as for four individual issues: same-sex marriage, market regulation, redistribution, and immigration.⁵ The choice of these issues was motivated both by their general importance in electoral politics and by the availability of

⁴ Mean net change shown by the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys 2010 and 2014 is indistinguishable from zero (0.02), and mean absolute change is a mere 0.46 on the 7-point position scale.

⁵ For the four individual issues, no perceptions of party positions are available from the EES. Instead we calculated party positions as the mean location of the respondents intending to vote for a party in the next national election (hypothetically held the following day). This is less than ideal, but – since we do so for both years – justifiable for mere control variables.

³ Of course the crisis is not the only event in European politics between 2009 and 2014. For our dynamic analysis, however, it is sufficient to assume that other events did not systematically affect EU attitudes and party support, and can thus be treated as random noise.

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