



# Turning against the Union? The impact of the crisis on the Eurosceptic vote in the 2014 European Parliament elections



Sara B. Hobolt <sup>a,\*</sup>, Catherine de Vries <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> London School of Economic and Political Science, European Institute, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

<sup>b</sup> University of Oxford, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 28 September 2015

Accepted 28 May 2016

Available online 2 June 2016

### Keywords:

Elections

European Parliament

Crisis

Economic voting

Euroscepticism

## ABSTRACT

The 2014 European Parliament elections were held against the backdrop of the worst economic crisis in post-war Europe. The elections saw an unprecedented surge in support for Eurosceptic parties. This raises the question of whether the crisis, and the EU's response to it, can explain the rise of Eurosceptic parties. Our analysis of the 2014 European Election Study demonstrates that the degree to which individuals were adversely affected by the crisis and their discontent with the EU's handling of the crisis are major factors in explaining defection from mainstream pro-European to Eurosceptic parties in these elections. This suggests that far from being second-order national elections concerned only with domestic politics, European issues had a significant impact on vote choices.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

The global financial crisis that erupted in September 2008 vividly demonstrated the interconnectedness of financial markets and national governments' limited room to manoeuvre. As the financial turmoil travelled from the United States of America to Europe, it evolved into a sovereign debtcrisis. By 2012, eight out of 28 European Union (EU) member states had received some form of financial bailout (Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Portugal, Romania and Spain). In return for these credit arrangements by the EU, jointly with International Monetary Fund (IMF), the debtor countries had to engage in significant fiscal retrenchment and structural reforms. The economic and social consequences of the crisis within the EU have been far-reaching.

At the time of the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections, unemployment rates had reached a post-war high and citizens were increasingly blaming the EU for their woes (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014; Cramme and Hobolt, 2014). The situation was worst in Spain and Greece, where more than 25 per cent of the workforce were excluded from the labour market (Eurostat, 2014). In 15 EU member states the unemployment rate was higher than 10 per cent, with youth unemployment a particularly serious problem in Southern

Europe. The consequences were not only economic and social. The political backlash against austerity in many crisis-struck countries was pronounced. In Ireland for example, support for the centre-right party, Fianna Fail, that had dominated the political scene for decades plummeted, dramatically after problems in the country's banking sector became apparent. In Greece and Spain, we have witnessed the rise of challenger parties, Syriza and Podemos, who campaign against the austerity associated with the bailout programmes.

In this article we delve deeper into the political consequences of the crisis by examining electoral behaviour in the 2014 EP elections. The most notable aspect of these elections was the surge in support for parties that either campaigned for their countries to exit the EU or called for radical reform of the EU. This raises the question of whether the crisis, and the EU's response to it, contributed to the success of these Eurosceptic parties. Scholars have traditionally conceived of EP elections as second-order national elections where vote choices are primarily based on domestic political considerations (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). However, recent evidence suggests that concerns about European integration and the euro do affect vote choices (Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009; Hobolt et al., 2009; De Vries et al., 2011a,b; Hobolt and Spoon, 2012; Tillman, 2012). The growing involvement of EU institutions in national economic policy during the crisis has further eroded citizens' perceptions that their own government is responsible for economic outcomes, and blame has partly been shifted to the EU (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014).

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [s.b.hobolt@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.b.hobolt@lse.ac.uk) (S.B. Hobolt), [catherine.devries@politics.ox.ac.uk](mailto:catherine.devries@politics.ox.ac.uk) (C. de Vries).

Consequently, we argue that the direct effects of the crisis as well as perceptions of EU's involvement in the crisis have shaped vote choices in the 2014 EP elections.

Specifically, we examine two questions: First, to what extent did the impact of the crisis on people's personal circumstances influence vote choices? Were those individuals negatively affected by the crisis more likely to vote for Eurosceptic parties? Second, how did evaluations of the EU's performance during the crisis and the experience of EU-led bailout programmes influence the type of Euroscepticism expressed in these elections (hard versus soft and left-wing versus right-wing Eurosceptic support)? We examine these questions by employing cross-national survey data from the 2014 European Election Study (EES). In line with our argument, the findings suggest that the degree to which individuals were adversely affected by the crisis, and their discontent with the EU's role in the crisis, are important factors in explaining defection from mainstream pro-European parties in the 2014 EP elections, but that the choice of Eurosceptic party was shaped by citizens' attitudes towards EU financial transfers and immigration as well as the national economic context.

## 2. The crisis and the Eurosceptic vote

The 2014 EP elections were held in the midst of the worst economic crisis in post-war Europe. The effects of the crisis on public perceptions about the EU were stark. According to a Eurobarometer survey in September 2010, for the first time ever, more citizens tended to mistrust the EU institutions than those who tended to trust them. This gap had widened to 56 per cent (mistrust) versus 31 per cent (trust) by the time of the EP elections. Similarly, the overall "image" of the EU suffered considerably in the wake of the crisis. Whereas in the past a large majority of Europeans had a "positive" image of the EU, in the spring of 2014 only 34 per cent still held this view, as opposed to 25 per cent who had a negative image (Eurobarometer, 2014). How were citizens able to express this discontent in political terms?

The most manifest expression of discontent in the EP elections was the surge in support for parties that either rejected the EU or sought wholesale reform of the Union. Eurosceptic parties won EP seats in 23 out of 28 member states, and in a number of countries – such as Britain, France and Denmark – a Eurosceptic party even topped the polls. We argue that vote choices were shaped by voters' experiences with the crisis and their evaluations of the EU's handling of the crisis. This argument goes against much of the existing literature on EP elections, based on the so-called "second-order national election" model pioneered by Reif and Schmitt (1980). Most scholarship on EP election thus far has conceived of EP elections largely as midterm elections in which vote choices are primarily guided by citizens' national political concerns (see Reif and Schmitt, 1980: 9; see also Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Marsh, 1998; Hix and Marsh, 2007; Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010). Given that less is at stake in second-order elections, it is argued that voters use them as an opportunity for signalling discontent with national governments. Yet, recent scholarship has shown that EU-specific motivations matter to vote choices in EP elections (Hobolt et al., 2009; De Vries et al., 2011a,b; Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011; Hobolt and Spoon, 2012). For example, Hobolt et al. (2009) have demonstrated that voters are more likely to defect from a governing party if they have more Eurosceptic preferences than the party (see also Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009). Similarly, De Vries et al. (2011a,b) have shown that attitudes towards Europe are an important factor deciding individual-level vote choice in the 2009 EP elections (see also Hobolt and Spoon, 2012). In a systematic comparison of the "second-order" and the "Europe matters" theses, Hix and Marsh (2007), using aggregate-level data from six EP

elections, show that large parties tend to lose votes in EP elections regardless of their position on European integration. However, they also find some electoral gains for anti-EU parties and parties that emphasise the European issue.

While this recent evidence suggests that people's generic EU evaluations have an effect on vote choices in EP elections, it provides limited insight into which specific aspects of European integration affect people's decisions at the ballot box. In this article, we aim to shed light on this by examining how people's specific experiences with the economic crisis, and their evaluations of the EU's involvement in the crisis, shape their electoral behaviour. Moreover, we examine how people's attitudes towards fiscal transfers and immigration in Europe affect their party support. Given that the 2014 EP elections were held during a severe economic crisis, and the EU itself became an object of blame in popular discourse, we expect citizens to express their discontent by casting a ballot for a Eurosceptic party.

To understand the ways in which the Eurozone crisis may have shaped vote choices in the 2014 EP election, we build on the vast literature on economic voting. Specifically, we focus on two drivers of Eurosceptic voting: first, the impact of changes to personal economic circumstances due to the crisis on vote choices, and second the impact of evaluations of the EU's role in the crisis. When it comes to the effect of changes to personal finances, there is considerable disagreement in the literature about the extent to which citizens actually respond to changes in their own economic circumstances at the ballot box. Traditionally, scholars have argued that citizens are not really able to relate changes in their own welfare to macroeconomic outcomes or incumbent performance. Personal experiences, or so-called pocketbook considerations, matter very little for voting decisions whereas sociotropic economic evaluations matter a lot (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000, 2007). Yet, recently there has been somewhat of a revival of pocketbook approaches to electoral behaviour. A series of studies suggest that personal economic circumstances have a significant effect on electoral behaviour. Voters respond to specific policies with direct consequences for their own welfare, such as disaster relief or cuts in social expenditure, by adjusting their political preferences and vote choices (Bechtel and Hainmueller, 2011; Healy and Malhotra, 2010, 2013; Margalit, 2012; Zucco, 2013). Likewise, economic self-interest is found to be a key determinant of welfare preferences, with income, employment risk and social protection being strong predictors of attitudes towards redistribution (Rehm, 2011; Hacker et al., 2013).

Building on this recent work, we expect that the degree to which citizens are adversely affected by the crisis should affect their behaviour in the subsequent EP elections. The crisis could have influenced citizens in many different ways, but most significant was a loss of employment in the household and/or a significant reduction in household income. In national first-order elections, the expectation is that voters who are financially worse off will punish the incumbent. As Fiorina (1981:5) noted in his seminal book on US elections: "In order to ascertain whether the incumbents have performed poorly or well, citizens need only calculate the changes in their own welfare." However, in EP elections voters are not voting to sanction and select the incumbent, since the link between these elections and the EU executive is tenuous at best. In the EU there is no easily identifiable partisan "government" or "incumbent" that would allow dissatisfied voters to simply "throw the rascals out" (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). Hence, if voters want to punish someone for the effects of crisis, they can either punish their national government (the parties that make up the government), or the EU as a whole. Given the central role played by the EU during the crisis, both in terms of its origins and possible solutions, our expectation is that many adversely affected

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7463503>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7463503>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)