



HAL
open science

Euroscepticism as Anti-Centralization

Simon Hix

► **To cite this version:**

Simon Hix. Euroscepticism as Anti-Centralization. *European Union Politics*, 2007, 8 (1), pp.131-150.
10.1177/1465116507073291 . hal-00571740

HAL Id: hal-00571740

<https://hal.science/hal-00571740>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



European Union Politics

DOI: 10.1177/1465116507073291

Volume 8 (1): 131–150

Copyright© 2007

SAGE Publications

Los Angeles, London, New Delhi
and Singapore

Forum Section

Euroscepticism as Anti-Centralization

A Rational Choice Institutional Perspective

◆ **Simon Hix**

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

ABSTRACT

From a rational choice institutionalist perspective, Euroscepticism is little more than a set of preferences by citizens, parties and interest groups about institutional design in Europe. If actors' expect policy outcomes to move closer to their ideal positions as a result of European integration, they will be Euro-enthusiastic (as many centrists are). But, if they feel that policies will move further away from their ideal positions, they will be Eurosceptic (as many extremists are). This simple idea has broad historical and geographical relevance, relating to how actors view the design of multi-level polities, and how these institutional preferences change in response to policy outcomes of the central institutions.

KEY WORDS

- Euroscepticism
- institutionalism
- public opinion
- rational choice

Harold Laski was a prominent academic, politician and public intellectual in American and British political life in the middle of the 20th century. Laski taught at Harvard during the First World War, when he started a close friendship with US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, was a Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics from the mid-1920s, and was a prominent intellectual figure in the British Labour Party in the 1930s and 1940s, including being its Chairman in 1945–6 during the Attlee Labour government. Throughout his life he was a staunch socialist and proponent of using government to promote the economic and social transformation of capitalist society in Britain and the United States (see Kramnick and Sheerman, 1993).

Why is Harold Laski interesting for the topic of Euroscepticism? Laski was a vocal opponent of the US federal government and a defender of states' rights. The reason, he contended, was that socialism was impossible to build in the USA from Washington, DC (e.g. Laski, 1948). This is a striking conclusion for a scholar of the USA in the 1930s and 1940s, given the transformation of US policies and politics with the New Deal. However, this observation is similar to more recent analysis of how the institutional design of the US federal government has prevented the development of a welfare state, mainly because multiple veto-players and malapportionment in the Senate produce policy outcomes that are strongly biased towards the status quo (see Lipset and Marks, 2000; Alesina and Glaeser, 2004). The conclusion reached by Laski, and by some recent thinkers, is that the only way to achieve progressive policies in the USA is via a decentralization of powers to the states.

But the story does not stop there. A debate raged in the UK in the 1930s and 1940s about whether the UK should become a federal state, with devolved parliaments and powers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In contrast to the anti-centralization position he held for the USA, in this context Laski was vehemently opposed to any decentralization of powers from Westminster and Whitehall. His logic: that socialism could not be built in Britain unless it was dictated from the centre. This time, he was in favour of a centralization of policy powers because this was the best way to achieve universal health care, pensions and education.

At face value one might accuse Laski of inconsistency: in one context he opposed centralization while in another context he supported it. However, looking deeper there is no inconsistency whatsoever. Laski, like any rational policy-seeking actor, was primarily motivated by his basic policy preferences: greater redistribution of wealth from rich to poor, the provision of universal public goods, the regulation of free markets, and various other policies typical of socialist parties, voters and thinkers in the mid-twentieth century. Where

centralization would undermine these policy outcomes, as in the USA in the 1920s (or so he believed), he was in favour of decentralization. Yet, where centralization would promote these policy outcomes, as in the UK in the 1940s, he was opposed to decentralization. Hence, given his primary socio-economic preferences and his assumptions about which design of government was most likely to achieve these outcomes, he was consistent in his preferences about the design of policy competences between the higher and lower levels of government in the United States and the UK.

Put this way, Laski was a precursor of many recent political scientists, such as Ken Shepsle, Douglass North, Barry Weingast and George Tsebelis, who argue that, if institutions determine policy outcomes, then actors' preferences about the design of institutions should follow from their preferences over policies. Laski was perhaps an early rational choice institutionalist!

This puts Euroscepticism in a more general theoretical and historical context. Citizens and party leaders may simply have attitudes towards the European Union (EU) and European integration that are derived from their primary preferences over policies and the assumptions they make about the likelihood of achieving these policies at the domestic and European levels. If citizens are unhappy with the domestic policy regime and believe that further European integration or action at the European level would produce policies that they favour, then they are likely to be pro-European (e.g. Ray, 2004; Brinegar and Jolly, 2005). Conversely, if citizens either believe that European integration or EU policies have led to policy outcomes that are less desirable than the previous domestic policy status quo, or believe that the EU reduces the likelihood that domestic policies will move in their preferred direction, then they are likely to be Eurosceptic. This seems like a relatively simple set of ideas, yet may go quite some way towards explaining why some citizens and political parties are opposed to the EU whereas others are in favour, and why citizens and parties have changed their attitudes towards European integration as the EU and/or their domestic governments have changed.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section I set out a rational choice institutionalist theory of Euroscepticism in more detail. I then discuss how far this approach explains Euroscepticism towards the EU Constitution, and compare this approach to the approaches adopted by the papers in this special issue. Finally, section four concludes.

A rational choice institutionalist approach to Euroscepticism

A rational choice institutionalist approach to Euroscepticism has several intellectual roots. In the political economy literature, Bolton and Roland (1997)

propose a formal model of the break-up and unification of states (see Wittman, 1991). Their model starts with some assumptions about the economic policy preferences of citizens and the likelihood of conflicts over redistributive policies at different levels of government. Citizens with incomes that are considerably closer to a local median than to a higher system-wide median would oppose economic redistribution at the central level, because this would be likely to make them worse off than would deciding how wealth is redistributed by a local majority. In the European integration context, the EU may not have much of a direct impact on economic redistribution in the member states (given that the size of the EU budget is approximately 1% of EU gross domestic product), but the indirect impact of the EU policy regime on the ability of states to redistribute wealth is potentially large, as a result of the single market and economic and monetary union. From Bolton and Roland, this would suggest that poorer citizens in highly redistributive states (such as Sweden) and richer citizens in states with low levels of income distribution (such as the United Kingdom) are both likely to be more Eurosceptic than citizens at the other ends of the income scale in these states.

Similarly, Alesina and Spolaore (2003) built a general model of 'the optimal size of states' based on a cost-benefit trade-off between the benefits of size and the costs of heterogeneity. Their model is primarily normative – relating to what should be the appropriate design of government given a particular structure of preferences across a variety of policy areas. However, it is also positive – relating to the conditions under which states should break up or unify. In this regard, states where the median citizens' preferences are highly divergent from those of the likely system-wide median citizen should prefer to exit a polity. Alesina and Spolaore focus on citizens' preferences for economic openness, which may or may not correlate with general left-right preferences. However, the same logic should hold for general socioeconomic preferences, as expressed in the left-right dimension of politics. For example, citizens in states where the median voter is considerably to the left of the European average and citizens in states where the median voter is considerably to the right of the European average should expect that a European-wide median voter would prefer considerably different policies from their own preferences and so should be opposed to endowing this voter with policy-making power by passing competences up to the European level.

Some of the existing theories of citizens' general attitudes towards the EU and European integration also fit a rational choice institutionalist framework. Gabel's (1998) work on the relationship between economic interests and support for European integration is particularly apt. Gabel points out that European integration forces member states to liberalize their markets and

open up to capital mobility, which increases the value of the assets possessed by those with higher incomes and higher levels of education. As a result, citizens who possess high levels of 'human capital' (in terms of economic assets and education) are less likely to be anti-European than citizens with lower levels of human capital.

Anderson's (1998) argument about the role of domestic institutions in channelling attitudes towards the EU also fits a rational choice institutionalist perspective. In this influential paper, Anderson argues that citizens' attitudes towards the EU are shaped by their attitudes towards their domestic political system, their domestic government and the established political parties in their state. If citizens perceive that they are gaining their preferred policies in their domestic system, either because they like their political system, or because they voted for the incumbent government, or because they feel their preferences are well represented by the main political parties, then they are less likely to feel that transferring policies to the European level will produce better policy outcomes than the ones they already have domestically. Similarly, Sanchez-Cuenca (2000) finds that citizens are more likely to be Eurosceptic if they have a low opinion of the European-level institutions and a high opinion of their domestic institutions, including the party in government at the time and the performance of the domestic system in the provision of public goods. Nevertheless, Rohrschneider (2002) has an alternative perspective: if citizens 'trust' their domestic institutions, they are also likely to trust the EU institutions – presumably because they trust what their leaders are doing at the EU level.

Finally, the extensive work on the relationship between the institutional design of government and policy outcomes is also relevant. The design of representation and decision-making influences the likelihood of policy change, in absolute terms, as well as the particular direction of policy change. For example, where a system has multiple veto-players and these veto-players have highly divergent preferences, then policies are difficult to change once they have been adopted (e.g. Tsebelis, 2002). In contrast, where a system allows for a particular majority to come to power, control agenda-setting and pass legislation, then policies can be changed quickly in one direction or another. However, the likely direction of policy change also depends on the structure of representation in the system of government. If one particular set of interests is overrepresented relative to its numerical weight in the population, policy is more likely to move in the direction of the preferences of these interests than in the opposite direction.

Consider the example of economic redistribution in the United States. Those opposed to redistribution are well represented in the US Senate because the small conservative Southern and Western states are overrepresented in

this chamber relative to the large liberal North Eastern and West Coast states. When this malapportionment is combined with the myriad of checks and balances in the US federal government, it is not surprising that the federal government does not engage in significant direct economic redistribution. Hence, conservative voters in the USA are more likely than are liberal voters to see their preferences secured at the federal level – as Laski pointed out.

Building from this basis we can set out the following basic assumptions of a rational choice institutionalist theory of Euroscepticism:

First, an actor (a citizen, political party or interest group) is primarily driven by policy outcomes, and will form an opinion about the EU on the basis of whether action at the EU level will produce policies that are closer to his or her preferred policies than existing policy outcomes at the domestic level.

Second, when deciding whether to support or oppose the EU, an actor will weigh up the following factors:

- (1) whether the existing EU policy regime is closer to or further away from his or her preferred set of policies than the domestic policy regime;
- (2) the likely direction of policy change at the domestic level, given the prevailing political climate in the domestic arena and the design of domestic institutions (the number of veto-players and how well/badly he or she is represented at the domestic level); and
- (3) the likely direction of policy change at the European level, given the prevailing political climate at the European level and the design of the EU institutions (the number of veto-players and how well/badly he or she is represented at the European level).

Third, party leaders and interest groups are likely to be much better informed than citizens about the policy consequences of action at the EU level. As a result, citizens are likely to rely on ‘cues’ from parties and interest groups about how EU actions relate to their own preferences (in terms of the likely direction of domestic policy change as a result of EU action) – as Steenbergen et al. as well as Gabel and Scheve assume in their articles in this issue.

Given the structure of preferences and institutions at the domestic and European levels, a series of inferences about actors’ attitudes towards the EU logically follow from these assumptions. For example, two propositions should hold across country and across time:

1. Voters and parties on the extreme left and extreme right are more likely to be Eurosceptic than are centrist voters and parties.

If policies at the European level are likely to be close to some notional European-wide median voter, then voters and parties that are a long way from this median are likely to be the most Eurosceptic, all other things being equal. This is also consistent with an interpretation of attitudes of extreme parties and voters towards the EU as a form of anti-establishment populism (Taggart, 1998). If the (moderate) establishment is pro-EU, then those groups that are likely to gain from undermining the position of the centrist parties and the elites are likely to oppose the EU. It would not even be necessary to work out whether EU policy is good or bad, but simply sufficient to take one's cues from the fact that those who support European integration tend to support moderate and centrist policies; hence, if one opposes these policies, then one should oppose the EU.

2. Citizens and interest groups who support governing parties are less likely to be Eurosceptic.

Parties in government not only control the domestic policy agenda but also are the central actors at the European level: setting the long-term agenda in the European Council, passing legislation in the Council, and picking the Commissioners. As a result, governing parties are more likely than opposition parties to be able to shape policy outcomes at the European level in their preferred direction. Hence, voters for governing parties, and interest groups who are close to parties in government, are less likely to be Eurosceptic than are voters for opposition parties and interest groups who are close to opposition parties, all other things being equal (see Sitter, 2001).

Two further propositions should explain variations in Euroscepticism across a country:

3. Where a member state's domestic policy regime is to the left(right) of the European average, voters and parties on the left(right) are more likely than voters on the right(left) to be Eurosceptic, and vice versa.

If the EU is likely to produce policies close to a notional European-wide voter, this would mean a move rightwards for member states with domestic policy regimes that are on the left, and a move leftwards for member states with domestic policy regimes that are on the right. As a result, and following the logic of the political economy literature discussed above, European integration is likely to mean that policies will move further away from actors on the left in the first set of states and from actors on the right in the second set of states. For example, voters and parties on the left in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Germany and France are likely to be more Eurosceptic than voters and parties on the right, and the reverse is likely to be true in the United Kingdom, Southern Europe, and some parties of Central and Eastern Europe.

4. Voters and parties in domestic systems that have majoritarian systems of government are more likely to be Eurosceptic than voters and parties in domestic systems with consensus systems of government.

This inference might be observationally equivalent to some of the propositions in the Europeanization literature about how the match or mismatch between domestic and EU-level regimes affects policy-makers' attitudes towards Europe (e.g. Cowles et al., 2000). However, the logic here is different. In consensus systems, with proportional representation and traditions of coalition government, most policies are close to the domestic median voter and policy change is difficult (Powell, 2000; Tsebelis, 1999). In majoritarian systems, in contrast, with plurality elections and traditions of single-party government, policy change (in one direction or another) is more likely. Regardless of the system, most parties and voters are not at the position of the median voter and so prefer some policy change. In consensus systems, allowing policies to be made at the European level might 'unblock' the domestic checks and balances and so increase the chances of policy change. In majoritarian systems, in contrast, allowing policies to be made at the European level might prevent likely policy change at the domestic level.

A higher fragmentation in the party system in proportional systems, as a result of strategic voting behaviour and lower entry thresholds, would suggest that there is more room for Eurosceptic parties in these systems than in majoritarian systems. However, what I am suggesting here is that mainstream parties, which have a reasonable chance of forming a government, are more likely to be Eurosceptic in majoritarian systems than in consensus systems. This is because, in majoritarian systems, the main centre-left and centre-right parties have a reasonable chance of governing as a single party at some point in the not too distant future, and so have an incentive not to constrain the hands of the domestic government by passing policy competences up to the European level. In consensus systems, in contrast, the main parties on the centre-left and centre-right are unlikely to be able to govern unencumbered at the domestic level, and so may rationally prefer to delegate powers up to the European level to overcome domestic blockages. Hence, mainstream parties and their supporters in states where 'grand coalitions' or multiple checks and balances tend to block policy change, such as Italy, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Luxembourg, Finland or the Netherlands, are less likely to be Eurosceptic than are mainstream parties and their supporters in states where single-party or 'single bloc' government is the norm, such as the United Kingdom, France, Greece, Hungary, Poland or Malta.

Finally, the EU has changed dramatically in the past three decades and these changes should lead to changes over time in terms of which groups are Eurosceptic. There are three relevant changes in this regard:

- (1) change in the policy agenda – from initial liberalization in the common market and single market from the 1950s to the 1980s, to social and environmental re-regulation in the 1990s, to the current liberalization drive in the Lisbon Agenda in the 2000s;
- (2) change in the political make-up of the EU institutions – from a dominant position for centre-right politicians in the Council and Commission in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to a dominant position for the centre-left in the Council, Commission and European Parliament in the mid to late 1990s, to a dominant position for the centre-right in all three EU institutions since 2004; and
- (3) change in the design of the EU institutions and the structure of representation at the European level – where treaty reforms (such as increasing the power of the European Parliament in the legislative process) and EU enlargement have reduced the power of the larger member states and decreased the likelihood of policy change at the European level, as a result of the increase in the number and heterogeneity of preferences of the veto-players.

These changes lead to two further inferences about variations in actors' attitudes towards the EU over time:

5. Voters and parties on the left were more Eurosceptic in the 1970s, 1980s and 2000s, whereas voters and parties on the right were more Eurosceptic in the 1990s.

This inference logically follows from the first and second sets of changes – the shifting policy agenda of the EU, and the related shift in the political make-up of the EU institutions. In the 1970s and 1980s and again in the 2000s, parties and voters on the left are likely to have viewed the EU as undermining domestic welfare policies and redistributive mechanisms. In this period, voters for left-wing parties are likely to perceive the EU as promoting privatization of public utilities and fostering service sector and labour market liberalization, and so acting against the interests of less-skilled workers, organized labour and public sector workers, regardless of who is in power at the domestic level. On the opposite side, in the 1990s, parties and voters on the right are likely to have viewed the EU as undermining domestic efforts to liberalize and deregulate markets. In this period, voters for right-wing parties were likely to perceive the EU as promoting the interests of environmentalists, trade unions and producer groups against the interests of small and medium-sized enterprises, which are faced with growing 'Brussels red tape'.

6. Voters, parties and interest groups in large member states have become more Eurosceptic.

This inference logically follows from the third set of changes, relating to the treaty reforms and EU enlargement. The dominance of the larger member states in decision-making in the EU has gradually eroded as a result of the addition of the European Parliament in the legislative process, the removal of a second Commissioner from each of the larger member states, and the addition of 10 new states, most of which are small states. As a result, actors in the larger member states are less likely than before to be able to secure their preferred policy outcomes from the EU, and so are less likely to be supportive of actions at the European level. This does not mean that actors in the smaller member states will have become more pro-European. Although the power of the larger states has declined, the power of the smaller states has not necessarily increased. Rather, what has happened is a levelling of the states' power at the European level, where the traditional 'big three' of France, Germany and the United Kingdom are no longer able to dominate the policy agenda, whether individually, bilaterally or collectively.

In addition to these six inferences, there are many other potential inferences from the basic assumptions of a rational choice institutionalist framework. Nevertheless, the aim here is simply to illustrate that a rational choice institutionalist framework can generate a rich set of propositions about how and why the attitudes of citizens, parties and interest groups towards the EU might vary across time and space.

An application: Euroscepticism and the EU Constitution

One simple test of the basic framework is to look at public attitudes in each of the member states towards the EU Constitution. The Eurobarometer 62.1 survey was conducted in October and November 2004 in all 25 EU member states and included a batch of questions on the Constitution.¹ One question was:

'According to what you know, would you say that you are in favour of or opposed to the draft European Constitution? Answer options: Totally in favour, Rather in favour, Rather opposed, Totally opposed, Don't Know.'

To look at the relationship between an individual's basic policy preferences and his or her attitude towards the Constitution we can also look at the question that asked citizens about their basic ideological orientation:

'In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right"' How would you place your views on this scale? (Left) 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10 (Right).'

One way of calculating the average attitude of each citizen at each point on this left-right scale in each member state is to take the percentage who were

in favour of the Constitution (those who were ‘totally in favour’ plus those who were ‘rather in favour’) minus the percentage who were opposed to the Constitution (those who were ‘rather opposed’ plus those who were ‘totally opposed’). The relationship between the underlying policy preferences and attitudes towards the Constitution can then be estimated by fitting a quadratic regression model to the data for each member state. One should be careful when interpreting the results, because there are only a small number of respondents at some of the extreme points for some of the smaller member states (1, 2, 9 or 10). Nevertheless, if one focuses on the relative attitudes of the centre-left, centre and centre-right, there were four distinct patterns of Euroscepticism towards the Constitution in the autumn of 2004.

First, Figure 1 shows the seven member states where the left was more Eurosceptic about the Constitution than the right. Most of these member states have domestic policy regimes that are clearly to the left of the EU average. For example, the level of public expenditure as a percentage of GDP in 2004 in five of these states was well above the EU average (of 45%): Sweden had 57% of GDP in the public sector, Denmark had 56%, Finland had 51%, Greece had 50%, and Malta had 49%.² Voters on the right in these states presumably felt that EU-level policies as a result of the Constitution would move these domestic policy outcomes closer to their preferences, whereas voters on the left in these states felt the opposite. This also explains why the

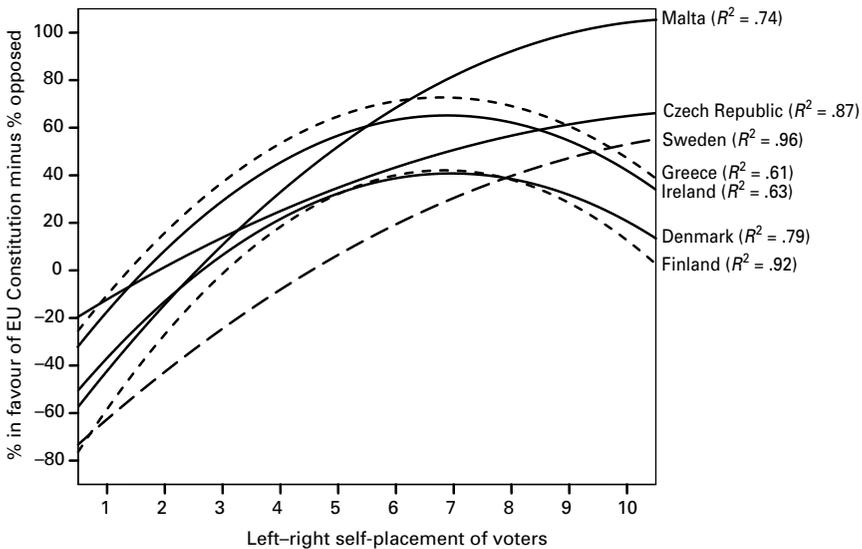


Figure 1 Left Euroscepticism.

anti-European parties that fight European Parliament elections in Denmark and Sweden are on the left, and why the radical left parties in Greece and the mainstream left-wing party in Malta are both anti-European. However, Ireland and the Czech Republic do not fit this model, as these two states have domestic policy regimes considerably to the right of the EU average, with relatively deregulated labour markets and service sectors and levels of public expenditure below the European average.

Second, Figure 2 shows the four member states where the right was more Eurosceptic than the left. The United Kingdom fits the simple rational choice institutionalist framework best in this regard, in that the domestic policy regime in the UK, with a liberal labour market and service sector, is considerably to the right of the EU average. As a result, voters on the left might reasonably have assumed that the EU Constitution would enable new labour rights and social standards to be introduced into the UK. Against this, the UK Independence Party and the Conservative Party are strongly opposed to Brussels imposing 'socialism through the back door', as Margaret Thatcher once put it. Poland also fits this model, where the left feels that the EU Constitution would introduce new social rights that are currently lacking in Poland, such as gender equality and gay rights. However, Germany and Austria are a puzzle. As 'coordinated economies', one would expect voters on the right in these states to be more favourable towards the EU's efforts to liberalize

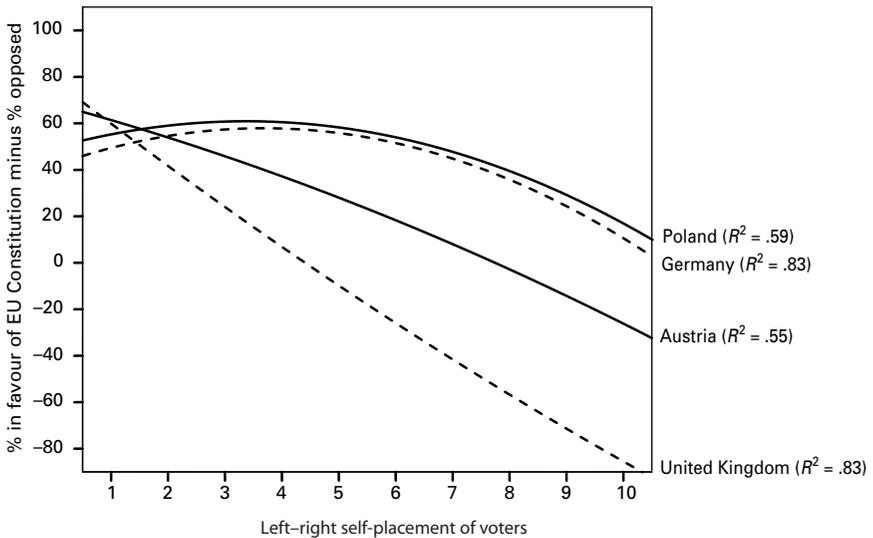


Figure 2 Right Euroscepticism.

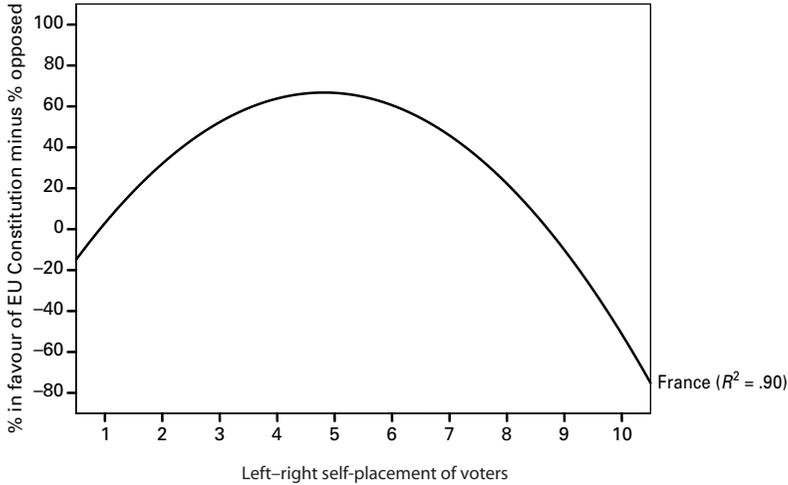


Figure 3 Extremist Euroscepticism.

domestic labour markets and the service sector, and voters on the left to defend the domestic status quo.

Third, Figure 3 shows the only member state, France, where both extremes were Eurosceptic while the centre was strongly pro-Europe. This 'inverted U' shape is the classic model of attitudes towards the EU, where Euroscepticism was the preserve of the anti-system and populist extremes (Taggart, 1998; Aspinwall, 2002). It is perhaps surprising, then, that only 1 of the 25 member states fitted this pattern in 2004. Moreover, even France did not fit this pattern for long: by the time of the French referendum in May 2005, the opposition to the Constitution was mainly on the centre-left and extreme left, within the French Socialist Party and from the various communist and Trotskyist groups. This suggests that, by the time of the referendum, voters had more precise estimates of the likely direction of the EU policy agenda as a result of the Constitution. If it is unclear what the EU represents, both the centre-left and the centre-right can be pro-European. However, once it becomes clear that the EU will produce policy outcomes in a particular direction, then it is more difficult for both the centre-left and the centre-right to be equally pro-European, because one or other of these two groups is likely to be better off as a result of the likely new EU policies.

Finally, Figures 4 and 5 show that a large number of member states amongst the 'old 15' and the 'new 10' had no clear pattern of Euroscepticism. In all these states, voters on the left were almost as pro-European as voters on the right. Presumably for these states there are no clear domestic redistributive effects of European integration. As a result, no social group strongly

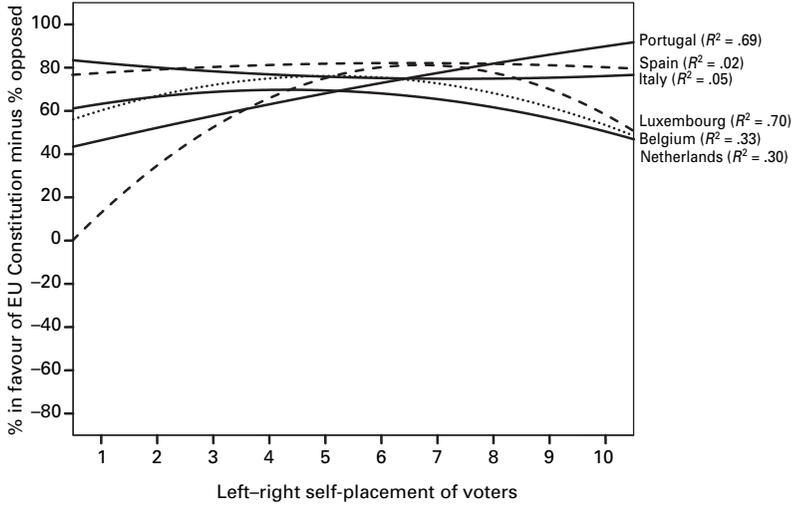


Figure 4 No Euroscepticism: old member states.

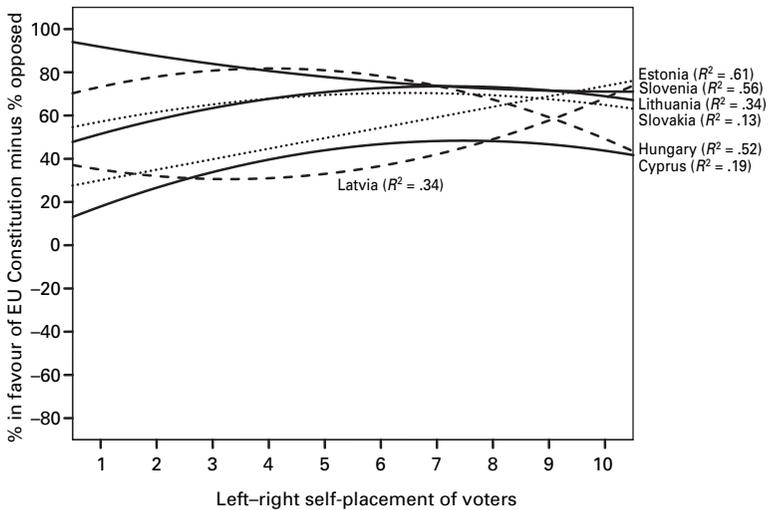


Figure 5 No Euroscepticism: new member states.

defended a domestic policy regime against possible change brought about by the EU Constitution.

What is perhaps most striking, however, is the location of the Netherlands in this group of non-Eurosceptic states. In June 2005, almost two-thirds of Dutch citizens voted against the EU Constitution in the Dutch referendum.

Also, opposition to the Constitution in the referendum came from across the Dutch political spectrum. One reason for this was the growing realization that the Dutch would be the largest net contributors per capita in the 2007–14 EU budget. Since these costs would fall more or less equally across Dutch society, what happened was a wholesale collapse in the level of support at all points on the left–right dimension. From a perception in the Netherlands for many years that ‘everyone gains from Europe’, the perception by the time of the 2005 referendum was that ‘everyone loses from Europe’.

The articles in this issue of *EUP*

As Liesbet Hooghe points out in the introduction to this issue, the papers in this issue focus on two key issues: first, whether parties are driven by strategic or ideological considerations when taking positions on Europe; and, second, whether parties lead voters or voters lead parties. Both these concerns relate to the theoretical approach I have developed here.

On the issue of party motivations, the rational choice institutionalist theory suggests that the ideological and strategic considerations of parties should interact. On the ideological side, parties are primarily policy-seekers, which suggests that their positions on the EU should be determined by their positions on the key socioeconomic questions in domestic politics, as captured by the left–right dimension. On the strategic side, however, parties are more likely to be able to secure their policy positions at the European level if they are in government than if they are in opposition.

This perspective is consistent with Ben Crum’s findings about the behaviour of parties in the referendums on the EU Constitution. The strategic dilemma was greatest for opposition parties that supported the Constitution: should they back the Constitution and miss an opportunity to inflict a damaging defeat on the parties in government? In general, the leaderships of these parties stuck with their underlying policy preferences, to endorse the Constitution, while the voters for these parties were split. Furthermore, in left-wing opposition parties these internal party splits were driven less by strategic considerations than by different policy evaluations. Whereas the moderate left (and the elites in most centre–left parties) felt that they could still achieve their policy goals at the European level and that the EU Constitution was not necessarily a constraint on their domestic policy goals, the more radical left (and many of the rank-and-file of moderate left parties) perceived that the EU was increasingly promoting market liberalization and constraining domestic redistributive and regulatory policies. As a result, the French Socialist Party, the Dutch Labour Party and Luxembourg Socialist Workers’

Party were split down the middle in the referendums, because both policy preference and strategic considerations split the moderate party leaderships from the more radical party activists and from many party voters.

The rational choice institutionalist arguments also partly fit the evidence presented in Hanspeter Kriesi's analysis of the role of Europe in national election campaigns. Looking at six countries, Kriesi finds that opposition to the EU is not the preserve only of opposition parties and that parties' positions on European integration are generally consistent with their basic socioeconomic policy profiles. For example, extremist parties in all cases are strongly anti-European. This is partly a function of protest politics, but it is more decidedly a function of the realization that European integration generally locks in moderate policy outcomes that are hard to change. The explanation also fits the anti-European positions of the British, Swiss and Austrian conservatives. The British conservatives opposed European integration in the 1990s because they saw it as promoting interventionist and regulatory economic policies. For economic policy reasons, one might assume that the Swiss and Austrian conservatives should be pro-European, on the grounds that European integration would liberalize their domestic policy regimes. However, Kriesi points out that these parties are primarily concerned with sociocultural issues, and hence see European integration as promoting more liberal social policies, such as immigration, which undermines their traditional domestic stances on these issues (which is similar to the position of the Polish conservatives).

Seth Jolly's analysis of regionalist parties also fits well. The primary policy goal of regionalist parties is decentralization, and in some cases independence. Most regionalist parties are also policy outliers, on the left or right of the political spectrum, because they are unsatisfied with policies emanating from their national capitals. These two policy perspectives fit together well in the case of the Scottish National Party, which favours independence and is to the left of the Labour Party. Promoting European integration is a means to achieve both these goals – undermining the sovereignty of Westminster and promoting market re-regulation in Brussels against generally more free market and deregulatory policies from London. However, for some regionalist parties the decentralization and socioeconomic policy goals conflict when it comes to Europe, as with the Italian Northern League (Lega Nord), which used to be strongly pro-European but is now opposed to what it sees as left-wing interference from Brussels in collusion with Rome.

Turning to the issue of the relationship between parties and voters, the rational choice institutionalist framework I have outlined is relatively ambiguous. The theory expects that parties and voters will be aligned in their preferences on Europe. Party leaders and voters are both primarily motivated

by policy. Hence, if a group of voters and the party they support share the same basic socioeconomic policy preferences, then they should have similar preferences about how the EU should be designed (in terms of powers at the European level and the national level) to achieve these socioeconomic policy goals.

However, voters are usually less well informed about institutional design questions (such as electoral reform, constitutional reform or EU integration) than they are about the main policy issues in domestic politics (such as education or health care), and so are likely to be more responsive to the views of party leaders on institutional issues than on the bread-and-butter policy issues. Nevertheless, the longer the issue of Europe is on the political agenda, the harder it should be for party leaders to influence their voters' opinions, because citizens' positions should start to harden as they begin to understand the domestic policy consequences of European integration (see Hooghe and Marks, 2006).

The evidence presented by Marco Steenbergen, Erica Edwards and Catherine de Vries is broadly consistent with this approach. They find that party elites and their supporters are closely aligned on the issue of Europe, and this situation is maintained by a two-way interaction – party leaders responding to voters and voters responding to leaders. Interestingly, though, this connection has declined over time. They contend that this is a result of declining 'opinion leadership' by mainstream political parties, which could be fixed if parties had more able leaders or took clearer policy positions. However, it might also be a result of the fact that citizens have increasingly stable positions on Europe as they have gradually observed the policy consequences of European integration. This would make citizens less responsive to cues from party leaders.

Here's where Gabel and Scheve fit in. They find that dissent within parties reduces party voters' support for Europe. One way of interpreting this is that dissent reveals that party leaders have uncertain assessments of the policy consequences of European integration or a particular set of institutional reforms, such as the EU Constitution. Hence, if party leaders are split over the likely policy direction of further integration, then so are party supporters. Gabel and Scheve also argue that this means that party supporters have a choice about whom they are going to be cued by. And uncertainty breeds contempt: 'If you don't know, vote no', as the 'No' campaign put it in the first Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty in June 2001. Linking back to Crum's paper, this also suggests a particular interpretation of the result of the 2005 referendum in France, where the French Socialist Party leadership and its supporters were split on the question of Europe. On the one hand, this split reflected a left–right split within the party, with the more centrist wing of the

leadership supporting the EU Constitution and the more left-wing section of the leadership and the bulk of the party supporters opposing the Constitution. On the other hand, the split also reflected mixed expectations about the consequences of the Constitution. The French Socialist Party members originally voted in favour of the Constitution in an internal ballot. Once a wider public debate took place, however, a large proportion of the socialist electorate became concerned that the EU Constitution would lock-in a liberal free market agenda. Against this, there were few concrete 'social Europe' policies that the pro-Constitution forces on the left could hold up as evidence against this claim. So, as policy expectations hardened, the majority of the voters for the Socialist Party began to side with the minority position in the Socialist Party leadership.

Conclusion

Political science research in the past decade has come a long way in understanding what determines citizens' and political parties' attitudes towards European integration, why some citizens and parties are Eurosceptic whereas others are Europhile, and how citizens respond to parties and how parties react to citizens when determining positions on the EU. The papers in this special issue add to the richness of the existing research, clarify certain existing suppositions, and add new findings about the strategic interaction between parties and voters on the issue of Europe.

Nevertheless, as yet we do not have a unifying theoretical framework within which to place the various propositions and against which to compare the mounting empirical findings. What I have done here is sketch the basis of a rational choice institutionalist framework for understanding actors' attitudes towards the EU. On one level, this seems a much too simplified model for explaining the myriad of relationships that exist and shape citizens' and parties' views about Europe. On another level, however, this framework allows thinking about attitudes towards European integration to be connected to general theoretical and historical concerns about which actors should prefer centralized or decentralized government and under what conditions. Put this way, the question facing us about Europe in the early 21st century is identical to the question Harold Laski grappled with about the UK and the USA in the mid-20th century: am I more likely to get the policies I want from greater policy centralization or from greater policy decentralization?

Notes

- 1 Eurobarometer 62.1: *The Constitutional Treaty, Economic Challenges, Vocational Training, Information Technology at Work, Environmental Issues, October–November 2004*. Principal Investigator: Renaud Soufflot de Magny, European Commission. Directorate-General Press and Communication. Opinion Polls Sector. ICPSR Study No. 4341.
- 2 Data from Eurostat.

References

- Alesina, Alberto and Edward L. Glaeser (2004) *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe: A World of Difference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Alesina, Alberto and Enrico Spolaore (2003) *The Size of Nations*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Anderson, Christopher J. (1998) 'When in Doubt, Use Proxies: Attitudes towards Domestic Politics and Support for European Integration', *Comparative Political Studies* 31(5): 569–601.
- Aspinwall, Mark (2002) 'The Dimensionality of the EU Policy Space', *European Union Politics* 3(1): 81–111.
- Bolton, Patrick and Gerard Roland (1997) 'The Political Break-up of Nations: A Political Economy Analysis', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112(4): 1057–90.
- Brinegar, Adam P. and Seth K. Jolly (2005) 'Location, Location, Location: National Contextual Factors and Public Support for European Integration', *European Union Politics* 6(2): 155–80.
- Cowles, Maria Green, James Caporaso and Thomas Risse (eds) (2000) *Transforming Europe: Europeanization and Domestic Change*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gabel, Matthew J. (1998) *Interests and Integration: Market Liberalization, Public Opinion, and European Union*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hooghe, Liesbet and Gary Marks (2006) 'Europe's Blues: Theoretical Soul-Searching after the Rejection of a European Constitution', *PS: Politics and Political Science*, forthcoming.
- Kramnick, Isaac and Barry Sheerman (1993) *Harold Laski: A Life on the Left*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Laski, Harold J. (1948) *The American Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin and Gary Marks (2000) *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. London: Norton.
- Powell, G. Bingham (2000) *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian or Proportional Visions*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ray, Leonard (2004) 'Don't Rock the Boat: Expectations, Fears, and Opposition to EU Level Policymaking', in Gary Marks and Marco Steenbergen (eds) *European Integration and Political Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rohrschneider, Robert (2002) 'The Democratic Deficit and Mass Support for an EU-Wide Government', *American Journal of Political Science* 46(2): 463–75.

- Sanchez-Cuenca, Ignacio (2000) 'The Political Basis of Support for European Integration', *European Union Politics* 1(2): 147–71.
- Sitter, Nick (2001) 'The Politics of Opposition and European Integration in Scandinavia: Is Euro-Scepticism a Government–Opposition Dynamic?', *West European Politics* 24(4): 22–39.
- Taggart, Paul (1998) 'A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems', *European Journal of Political Research* 33(3): 363–88.
- Tsebelis, Gorge (1999) 'Veto Players and Law Production in Parliamentary Democracies: An Empirical Analysis', *American Political Science Review* 93(3): 591–608.
- Tsebelis, George (2002) *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wittman, Donald (1991) 'Nations and States: Mergers and Acquisitions; Dissolutions and Divorce', *American Economic Review* 81(2): 126–9.

About the author

Simon Hix is Professor of European and Comparative Politics, Department of Government, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK.
Fax: +44 20 7955 6352
E-mail: s.hix@lse.ac.uk
