The European Union and political behaviour: The shadow of the Great Recession☆

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ABSTRACT

The symposium aims to analyse the politicisation of the European issue following the onset of the Eurozone crisis, in particular its impact on individual attitudes and voting both at the national and supranational level. By way of an introduction, we address the state of the art on the importance of the Eurozone crisis for EU politicisation, as well as outlining each article and its contribution. While our authors may sometimes focus on different dependent variables, they all speak to the question of whether the Great Recession made a lasting difference, and whether EU politicisation matters. Most articles are longitudinal, and test for changes due to the crisis (Dassonneville, Lewis-Beck and Jabbour; Ruiz-Rufino; Talving and Vasilopoulou; Jurado and Navarrete). But preoccupation with the Great Recession is also present in the articles assessing the political learning that unfolded from it (Ruiz-Rufino), or the ones which investigate whether EU effects can be detected during the post-crisis years (Talving and Vasilopoulou; Lobo and Pannico; Heyne and Lobo). Despite the diversity of approaches, and certain differences in findings, each article contributes to a major debate ongoing in the literature, especially three key debates which have arisen: the crisis’ impact on European party systems, economic voting, and the degree of legitimacy of democratic systems.

1. Special issue/symposium- introduction

The central goal of this symposium is to analyse the politicisation of the European issue following the onset of the Eurozone crisis, and its impact on individual attitudes and voting both at the national and supranational level. The articles gathered here focus on analysing whether, and under which circumstances, information about the EU and EU issues shape citizens’ political attitudes and electoral choices. In this way, we address the consequences of EU politicisation for national and supranational politics.

2. Relevant background

This crucial topic was initially launched by Hooghe and Marks (2009) in their pivotal contribution on the dynamics of European integration. These authors argued that the relationship of citizens to “Europe” has increasingly shifted from a “permissive consensus to a constraining dissensus”. The main driver was the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, which lead to an increase in European Union (EU) politicisation. The gradual transfers of authority to the supranational level, which the Treaty enabled, increasingly pushed Europe into political discussions, making European issues more salient and raising awareness amongst citizens about the implications of decisions taken at the supranational level. This argument has spawned quite a large literature which, using different methods, has mostly concurred that EU politicisation is occurring in Europe (Kriesi et al., 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014).

Until recently, the bulk of research on EU politicisation was dedicated to its impact on the process of European integration itself. There was relatively less research on the way in which EU politicisation could have an impact on behaviour at the national level, with the main argument being that the EU was a “sleeping giant” (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004), with not much effect on national (or even EU) political behaviour. Yet, already at the micro-level, de Vries, in 2007, alerted that in certain contexts high EU issue salience could occur and impact voting behaviour. Thus, the process of EU politicisation appeared likely to have consequences for voters’ political attitudes and behaviour at the national as well as the supranational level. Despite this warning, however,
scholars have until now mainly focused on the description and explanation of EU politicisation, with less concern for the investigation of its effects at the micro-level, a central focus of this Symposium.

The onset of the Eurozone crisis, seen as a further moment for EU politicisation at the domestic level (Hutter and Kriesi 2019a, 2019b; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Hoelgliener 2016; Grande and Hutter 2016; De Vries, 2018, Gross and Schäfer, 2020), gave rise to a lot more research on the consequences of “Europe” for political behaviour. The Eurozone crisis brought home to citizens the implications of the EMU (Economic and Monetary Union), both in terms of the locus of economic decision-making, but also in terms of the obligations of both debtor and creditor countries within it. Governments in debtor countries had to agree to austerity packages, in exchange for funds lent by creditor countries, who themselves had little option but to contribute to that funding. Thus, the Eurozone crisis can be seen in the context of ongoing politicisation of the EU, at least since the Maastricht Treaty.

There are several topics of academic debate concerning the EU and EU contestation in the shadow of the Great Recession. On the one hand, whether and how it impacted economic voting per se. On the other, whether it may have contributed to changing the European party system. And, on yet another, the degree of legitimacy of political systems. We shall present these debates briefly and return to them in our conclusion.

Firstly, the Eurozone crisis had negative electoral consequences for incumbent parties (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016, Giuliani and Massari, 2019; Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck 2014; Lewis-Beck and Lobo, 2017; Lobo and Pannico, 2020). This can be explained as a classic “punishment of the incumbent” effect, as the negative economic trends assume high salience in public debates. Yet, simultaneously, during the crisis, supranationalisation of monetary and (increasingly) fiscal policy to the EU level may have become particularly evident to the average citizen, putting into question the responsibility of national political institutions (Gabel, 2020). Indeed, the supranationalisation of economic policy in the EU due to European Monetary Union has also been considered a type of “blurring of responsibility” (Gabel, 2020:41). Lobo and Lewis-Beck (2012) found, using 2009 European Election Studies (EES) data, that heightened perception of European Union economic responsibility reduces the magnitude of the national economic vote coefficient. Lobo and Pannico (2020) also found that during the crisis, those who read newspapers with greater EU salience used economic voting to a lesser extent. Yet, Talving (2017) using comparative EES longitudinal data found that the reduced capacity of governments to steer national economic policies does not affect electoral sanctioning or rewarding. Also, using experimental data fielded in Greece, Kosmidis (2014) did not find evidence of “limited room for manoeuvre” reducing the economic vote during the bailout period. Indeed, the importance of supranationalisation of economic policy for the vote calculus is one of the topics of the symposium.

The functioning of the economic vote during the Great Recession is itself connected to a wider debate on whether the Eurozone crisis has left longlasting changes to political behaviour in European democracies. Some authors contend that the Great Recession is a “critical juncture” (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016). These authors posit that electoral behaviour during the Great Recession needs to be seen in the context of economic voting and party system change, where the crisis eroded not only support of incumbent parties, but of all the mainstream parties (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016). Hobolt and Tilley (2016) present challenger parties as visible faces of post-crisis politics. During the crisis, voters who were economically adversely affected by the crisis punished mainstream parties both in government and in opposition by voting for challenger parties.

The choice of specific challenger party is shaped by preferences on three issues that directly flow from the euro crisis: EU integration, austerity and immigration. Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso (2017) put forward a mechanism which they believed underlay the disenchantment with mainstream parties. In the bailout countries with austerity policies, there was a learning curve for citizens, who understood that little room existed for government manoeuvre. Indeed, they lacked autonomy, and as a result, the function of elections to hold governments accountable was undermined, which lead to a systematic decrease in satisfaction with democracy as well as turnout in bailout countries, especially in Southern Europe. In sum, because of how the Eurozone is set up and the Eurozone crisis has been handled, economic crisis turned into something deeper—a legitimacy crisis of national democracy. Also, Armingeon and co-authors find that there was a reduction in trust in national and European institutions and satisfaction with democracy (SWD) where the EU and the IMF intervened during the Great Recession (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014: 94; Armingeon et al., 2016: 11).

More recently, however, Schraff and Schimmelfennig (2019:364), on their part, find that “the empirical evidence points to a temporary, performance-based dissatisfaction with democracy in the bailout countries rather than a durable, legitimacy-based detachment”. Indeed, they find that there is a rebound in satisfaction with democracy as well as turnout in spite of a persistent and increasingly negative—albeit substantially small—effect of the bailouts on democratic quality (measured by V-dem indicators of quality of democracy). In similar fashion, Devine (2019) tests two models of political trust and finds that it is much more dependent on economic perceptions than relative perceptions of responsibility between the EU and national government.

Our symposium hopefully contributes to the development of these debates. The works at hand are the result of several encounters in different European conferences in the past few years among the organizers and the authors. Our articles, write large, address the issue of whether the Great Recession made a lasting difference, and whether EU politicisation matters. Most are longitudinal, and test for changes due to the onset of the crisis (Dassonneville, Lewis-Beck and Jubbour; Ruiz-Rufino; Talving and Vasilopoulou; Jurado and Navarrete). But the preoccupation with the importance the Great Recession is also present in articles which deal with political learning that followed from it (Ruiz-Rufino), or the ones which investigate whether EU effects can be detected during the post-crisis years (Talving and Vasilopoulou; Lobo and Pannico; Heyne and Lobo).

While looking for EU’s impact, the articles focus on different dependent variables. Namely, whether the EU affects satisfaction with democracy (Dassonneville, Lewis-Beck and Jubbour), the likelihood of voting for different parties (Ruiz-Rufino, Heyne and Lobo, Jurado and Navarrete), economic perceptions (Lobo and Pannico), and support for EU (Talving and Vasilopoulou). In what follows, we will summarise leading results in each of them.

3. The articles: a first view

In the first article of this symposium, Ruth Dassonneville, Michael Lewis-Beck and Alexandra Jubbour focus on whether more Europe leads to a decline in satisfaction with democracy. The question is relevant, for several reasons. European integration has been progressing, and EU institutions appear to suffer from a “democratic deficit”. As EU politicisation has occurred across Europe, it has been seen that in countries such as France or Greece “Europe” became an important voting issue in national elections. Could this process have consequences for satisfaction with national democracy? The authors investigate this link through a longitudinal analysis using Eurobarometer data for aggregate analysis (19702017, 15 member-states) and EES data for individual analysis (19792009, 28 member-states). The article sets up a number of expectations. First, that the number of European directives should correlate negatively with satisfaction with democracy in EU countries. Second, the more integrated European economies are, which imply a reduction of room for manoeuvre, the lower the satisfaction with democracy (SWD). Third, the larger the influx of immigrants in the country, an indirect consequence of EU integration, the lower the satisfaction with democracy. Fourth, the larger the number of countries in the EU, the lower the satisfaction with democracy. Fifth, the larger a
country’s absolute net contribution to the EU budget, the less satisfaction with democracy. Each of these expectations is derived from specific aspects of EU integration in the last decades. The analysis is aggregate and tests the importance of the independent variables for satisfaction with democracy at the country level, longitudinally. The authors find that none of the models show strong evidence consistent with the expectation that more “Europe” leads to dissatisfaction with democracy. First, neither the amount of EU legislation, nor the degree of economic interdependence, or the size of the EU have any impact on satisfaction with democracy. Second, levels of immigration seem to have a positive association with SWD. The authors do find that net contributors tend to have lower levels of democratic satisfaction; that effect is not large, however.

To complement this analysis, the authors consider an individual-level analysis from the European Election Study between 1979 and 2009, using an identical measure of satisfaction with democracy, including data for the 28 EU member-states. They first replicate the aggregate analysis, and none of the macro-level variables explain satisfaction with democracy at the national level. The authors then consider whether awareness about Europe may be especially prevalent among political sophisticates. They take education as a proxy for it and interact level of education with the macro-level variables of interest. The results suggest that those with more education tend to be more satisfied with democracy. Indeed, there are significant and positive interactions for two of the five indicators of “Europe”—labor market integration and the size of the EU—indicating that as European markets integrate, and as the EU enlarges, the higher educated gain more satisfaction with democracy than citizens without a post-secondary degree.

In the second article in this collection, Ruben Ruiz Rufino develops and tests a theory about financial bailouts and their effects on establishment politics. According to the author, exposure to financial bailouts accounts for the electoral decline of establishment parties. As the author mentions, between 1991 and 2009, the mean vote-share of establishment parties in implementing countries was 60%; that level of support decreased to 48% in the period 2010–2019. For countries receiving a bailout, electoral support for establishment parties was 77% before the bailouts but 55% in the period 2010–2019. The mechanism is the following: Citizens who were exposed to the macroeconomic conditions of financial bailouts not only observed the consequences of drastic fiscal adjustment packages but, possibly, also underwent a process of political learning. Namely, that mainstream parties were conditioned by supranational forces, and were not able to be responsive, opting instead for being responsible. This indicates to citizens that voting for these parties did not necessarily lead to policy change. Such political learning led some citizens to abandon these parties in subsequent elections. These theoretical claims are tested in two different ways: first using individual data from the sixth round of the European Social Survey (ESS), in order to suggest one way to approximate the learning update process experienced by citizens affected by a financial bailout. The second part of the empirical analysis uses aggregated data from European and parliamentary elections observed between 1991 and 2019 in eleven countries of the Eurozone. This aggregated analysis tests whether a connection exists between the behavioural patterns observed at the individual level with the overall electoral performance of establishment parties before, during, and after the implementation of bailouts. This paper thus, is novel in that it establishes a link between aggregate and individual tiers of analysis to account for how bailouts impact current attitudinal as well as electoral changes. The author’s two main conclusions from bailout countries assess items of democracy differently than citizens from implementing countries. More specifically, citizens learn that levels of party responsiveness decrease as parties have little room to address citizens’ demands.

In the third article in this special issue, Marina Costa Lobo and Roberto Pannico test the importance of perceptions about the EMU for economic voting in two Eurozone members, Germany and Greece. The article makes use of identical survey data collected in 2019, which combines measures of voting intention, European attitudes and political sophistication in both countries. Its goal is to understand whether citizens in both Eurozone member states, who are aware of supranationalisation of EU economic policy, hold the government less accountable for economic performance in their vote calculus. European monetary integration presupposes the pooling of economic sovereignty and, indeed, of increasing citizens awareness, especially in bailout countries, of supranational institutions for national economic policies during the Eurozone crisis. This process of supranationalisation of policies is understood as a blurring of responsibility which may hinder the ability of citizens to hold their governments accountable for economic policy. It is important to test this argument in normal times, rather than during the Eurozone crisis when awareness of the EU’s role in economic policy-making is heightened. Thus, the authors formulate the following hypotheses. First, that positive economic perceptions are predictive of vote intention in both countries. Second, that, for those who believe that the EU is mostly responsible for economic policy, economic perceptions will matter less for the vote. Third, that this will be especially the case for individuals with more political information. The authors confirm the baseline model of economic voting in both countries. However, the interaction between perceptions of EU responsibility and economic performance, has opposite significant effects in Germany and Greece, being positive in the former and negative the latter. Indeed, in Germany, as we move from negative to positive perceptions of the economic performance, the likelihood of voting for incumbent increases more for those who believe that the EU is extremely or very responsible for the national economy. This is the opposite of what the “blurring of responsibility” posits. On the contrary, Greek electors are in line with the article’s expectations. These effects are especially strong among political sophisticates in each country. Our research sheds light on the consequences of EMU for economic voting in national legislative elections, and ultimately for democratic accountability in member states.

In the fourth paper of this Symposium, Ignacio Jurado and Rosa Navarrete assess the extent to which parties’ EU orientations in their manifestos and their congruence with citizens’ views on Europe determine voting in national elections. In particular, the article aims to understand the contextual variation in EU issue voting. They formulate three hypotheses to test EU issue voting: first, that it will be stronger in countries which have greater input in European decision-making; second, that EU issue voting will be higher in countries that have had intervened economies; third, EU issue voting should be higher in those countries that contribute more to the European budget. The authors use data from the EES 2014 and 2019, and their main independent variable measures the congruence between voters’ position on the EU and the party in question, measured exogenously with Comparative Manifesto Project data. By using a stacked dataset that combines individual-level data, data from the Comparative Manifestos Project and country-level data, they show first that EU positions matter for voters in national elections, both for pro-EU and anti-EU voting. Voters are congruent with their EU positions and more likely to vote in national elections for parties that are aligned with their EU views, even when controlling for ideological distance. They confirm that EU issue voting matters more in countries with larger numbers of MEPs, and in countries that contribute more to the EU budget. Contrary to their expectations, they do not find that EU issue voting matters in intervened economies.

In the fifth article of this symposium, Lea Heyne and Marina Costa Lobo address the relationship between European citizens and technocracy in Europe. This crisis raised important questions about how citizens assess the role of technocracy in Europe. This occurred in places where government by experts were formed, such as in Italy or Greece as a result of political and economic instability. Also, it occurred in bailout countries where the "troika" consisting of non-elected expert officials negotiated or imposed economic policies during the Eurozone crisis. There is however, little research on attitudes towards technocracy and voting behaviour. Thus, this article starts with several hypotheses from the extant literature on the nature of technocracy. First, that technocracy supporters should tend
to abstain more, vote for challenger parties and be less supportive of mainstream parties. In addition, the article examines the idea that technocratic attitudes may be considered a “thin ideology” by exploring diverging patterns of political support amongst technocracy supporters. The article makes use of panel data collected in a two-wave panel before and after the 2019 European Parliament elections in the following countries: Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain. The authors find that indeed, with the exception of Spain, those respondents who support technocracy tend to abstain or vote blank. Also, supporting technocracy also increases the likelihood of choosing a radical or populist right party over a mainstream party and, in the case of Belgium and Germany, significantly increases the likelihood to vote for the radical or populist left as well. In the second part of the paper, technocracy supporters are split according to whether they have a mainstream party identification, no party identification, or a non-mainstream party identification. These sub-samples are shown to differ in their satisfaction with democracy, and satisfaction with EU policies. Whereas technocracy supporters with a mainstream party identification are supportive of the EU policies and satisfied with democracy, the other two subgroups exhibit lower levels of support and satisfaction. Thus, whereas for those with a mainstream party identification, support for technocracy can be understood as a nod towards elitism and non-majoritarian decision-making as occurs in the EU, among those with no party identification, or with non-mainstream party identification, support for technocracy is mainly an expression of political disaffection, and a rejection of the status quo - not only national, but also European, political institutions.

In the final article of this collection, Liisa Talving and Sofia Vasilipouli investigate the relationship between EU support in ordinary and extraordinary times, making use of 32 Eurobarometer survey waves for all EU member states between 2004 and 2018, and using multilevel modelling to take into consideration variation across time, country and individuals. The authors examine how and under what circumstances trust in the national government affects trust in the EU, and systematically compare it to the effects of economic perceptions on trust in EU. They first test a basic hypothesis which posits that the positive relationship between trust in domestic political institutions and trust in the EU is present over time. The second hypothesis is that this relationship intensified during the Eurozone crisis, i.e., the effects of trust in the national government on trust in the EU become stronger. From this hypothesis two more follow. First, that given that the Eurozone crisis was more strongly felt in bailout countries, then these effects of trust in national government on trust in the EU should be more strongly felt among bailout countries. Second, that given the severity of the crisis and the broad effect it has on the electorate, in extraordinary times it ceases to depend on citizens’ level of political sophistication. The authors confirm the first hypothesis and show that trust in EU is much more dependent on support for domestic political institutions than national economic perceptions. They also find strong support for the second hypothesis. Namely, political effects are significantly larger than in 2004 for almost all years between 2007 and 2015 in their sample, which suggests that attitudes towards domestic political institutions matter considerably more during extraordinary times for explaining attitudes towards the EU. The authors also confirm that the association between domestic political attitudes and EU attitudes intensified with the crisis primarily in countries that suffered more during the Eurozone crisis. Finally, the impact of political trust in national institutions on trust in EU for low and high sophisticates tend to converge during or right after the European debt crisis, suggesting that group differences are mitigated during extraordinary times. Once the crisis is over, the group differences between sophisticates seem to re-emerge. This suggests that the learning process which takes place may be temporary and does not represent a long-lasting change.

4. Conclusion

Despite the diversity of approaches, and certain differences in findings, each article makes a contribution to a major debate ongoing in the literature. Recall that earlier we listed three serious topics of academic debate concerning EU contestation and political behaviour in the shadow of the Great Recession. First, whether and how it impacted economic voting. Second, whether it may have contributed to changing European party systems. And, third, whether it changed the degree of legitimacy of political systems. By way of conclusion, we now return to these debates and assess what light has been shed on them by the papers at hand. As an organizing device, we put forward a central finding from each.

We begin with key new findings on economic voting. The Costa Lobo and Pannico paper, as a start, displays a baseline model arguing economic perceptions predict vote intention in two contrasting countries. However, the direction of that impact depends on perceptions of European economic responsibility. For Germany, a more positive view of the economy increases the incumbent vote, to the extent citizens see the EU as more responsible. But, for Greece, a more positive view of the economy decreases the incumbent vote, to the extent citizens see the EU as more responsible. The clear implication is that citizens are willing to ‘forgive’ EU dominance (so relinquishing some democratic control) if it fosters national economic benefits. In the Jurado and Navarrete paper, they go on to confirm that voting on EU issues has more importance for countries that have a greater economic investment in the EU budget, clearly suggesting rational voters paying attention to the domestic financial costs and benefits of EU membership.

Turning to the question of the EU impact leading to changing party systems, two papers have special relevance. The Ruiz-Rufino paper demonstrates that financial bailouts help account for the electoral decline of establishment parties, e.g., for countries getting a bailout their support fell to 55 percent (from 77 percent before the bailout). In other words, these mainstream parties were, in fact, victims of negative voting. The Heyne and Lobo paper contributes further to explaining the disestablishment of mainstream parties with their finding that, generally, citizens who support technocratic governments are also less likely to actually vote. However, if they do vote, they are more likely to vote for a non-mainstream party, such as populist right or populist left.

Finally, we take up the question of “Europe” and institutional legitimacy, in particular the institution of democratic governance. The Dassonneville, Lewis-Beck and Jabbour article indicates, perhaps surprisingly, that satisfaction with democracy in EU countries, over a long period (1970–2017), has suffered little, if at all, from EU political and economic policy interventions, i.e., a ‘democratic deficit’ remains undetected. Offering a certain contrast, the Talving and Vasilipouli paper, in their examination of 32 Eurobarometers over all members states (2004–2018) indicates that the link between domestic political attitudes and EU political attitudes has more strength in countries where the Eurozone crisis was more painful. This suggests that a domestic political attitude, such as ‘satisfaction with democracy’ should be differentially responsive to EU policies and politics, which goes against the foregoing result from Dassonneville, Lewis-Beck and Jabbour. How to resolve this disagreement? One possibility is to look at the individual-level of analysis, which both papers pursue. In that regard, both find attitude differences between high and low sophisticates. However, Talving and Vasilipouli note that these differences tend to converge post-crisis, implying the change in attitudes may not be long-lasting. Given that is the case, then an aggregate finding of ‘no democratic deficit’ would be compatible with individual fluctuations in ‘satisfaction with democracy’ in the short-term, pre- and post-crisis.

Of course, the last sentences only offer a speculation. But it does open the way to further fascinating studies of the micro- and macro-links between attitudes toward democracy in the face of shifting EU politics and policy. This possibility, and the other possibilities raised in this Special Issue, point the way to the investigation of other vital and
changing connections between the European Union and political behaviour.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

References


