European Integration and National Elections:
Examining the Impact of EU Issue Voting on National Electoral Politics

Summary

The process of European integration has undergone dramatic changes over the last decade. From the 1950s until the early 1990s, European integration was seen – by (neo-) functionalists and (liberal) intergovernmentalists alike – as an elite-driven project in which public opinion was largely irrelevant. Put in the words of Ernst Haas almost 50 years ago: ‘It is as impracticable as it is unnecessary to have recourse to general public opinion surveys, or even to surveys of specifically interested groups [...] It suffices to single out and define the political elites in the participating countries, to study their reactions to integration and to assess changes in attitude on their part’ (1958: 17). Such sentiments led to the notion coined by Lindberg and Scheingold (1970) that European integration was accompanied by a ‘permissive consensus’. The process secured peace, welfare and stability throughout Europe and was presumed to generate a diffuse feeling of approval on the part of the European citizenry.

Current developments cast a shadow on this image. Not only has public support for European integration become increasingly fickle, but recent events like the Dutch and French referenda on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 demonstrate the ability of European citizens to constrain integration efforts. Indeed, the latest studies show that European elites are paying close attention to the electorate, in particular to their constituents, in the context of European Union (EU) matters and as a result are quite responsive towards public opinion (Carrubba, 2001; Ray, 2003; Steenbergen, Edwards and De Vries, 2007). Today, we are witnessing the move away from a permissive consensus to a constraining dissensus in which European citizens and political parties actively monitor the course of integration and where necessary voice their fears and objections (Hooghe and Marks, 2007).

This dissertation ties into these developments in the European integration process by examining the ways in which rising salience and conflict regarding Europe influences national politics. Specifically, it studies the extent to which European integration affects national electoral politics by exploring how attitudes towards Europe influence vote choice in national elections – a phenomenon I refer to as EU issue voting. Whereas we know a lot about how national politics influences vote choice in elections to the European Parliament (EP) (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Van der Brug and Van der Eijk, 2007), our understanding of the way in which European integration intersects with national elections is much more
limited (Börzel and Risse, 2007). We hardly know anything about how EU issues influence processes of political contestation and interest aggregation at the national level (the work by Schmidt, 2005, 2007 constitutes a notable exception). Furthermore, the scant research regarding EU issue voting thus far is inconclusive. Some authors demonstrate that an ‘electoral connection’ between European and national politics exists (Carrubba, 2001; Evans, 1999, 2002; Gabel, 2000; Tillman 2004), while others contend that the impact of European integration on domestic interest formation and representation is minimal (Mair, 2000; Sitter, 2001; Krouwel, 2004; Van Holsteyn and Den Ridder, 2005). In addition, the current work fails to include a longitudinal and cross-national perspective, nor does it present a coherent theoretical understanding of the conditions under which EU issue voting is likely to occur. Hence, our understanding of EU issue voting, the causal mechanisms underlying it and its potential impact on national electoral and party politics remains incomplete. This dissertation takes on these issues by developing and empirically substantiating a model of EU issue voting that specifies the conditions under which issues regarding European integration affect vote choice in national elections across time and space.

This dissertation takes the form of a collection of five articles, which are motivated by two central research questions:

\begin{itemize}
  \item To what extent and under which conditions do attitudes towards European integration influence vote choice in national elections?
  \item What is the impact of EU issue voting on domestic party politics?
\end{itemize}

**Model of EU issue voting**

Under which conditions and to what extent do attitudes towards European integration influence national vote choice? And how does EU issue voting affect domestic party competition? Questions regarding the conditions under which issues come to affect vote choice and influence party politics have been at the heart of academic attention in political science ever since the 1960s (Lipset, 1960; Schattschneider, 1960; Campbell, et al., 1960; Riker, 1982; Sundquist, 1983; Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989; Franklin, Mackie and Valen, 1992; Dalton, 1996; Stimson, 2004). Complex societies produce diverse conflicts over public policy. Indeed, the number of potential policy issues is infinite. The essence of politics lies in the organisation of these diverse conflicts. The process in which one or several of the conflicts over public policy gain political dominance involves a mobilisation of bias (Schattschneider, 1960). That is to say, only some social divisions eventually find
political expression. Building on the work on issue evolution and realignment from the United States context (Schattschneider, 1960; Riker, 1982; Sundquist, 1983; Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989; Abramowitz, 1994; Adams, 1997; Layman and Carsey, 2002; Stimson, 2004) and the extensive research into electoral and party system change from Western Europe (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Franklin, Mackie and Valen, 1992; Mair, 1997), I develop a theoretical model explaining the conditions under which the EU issue is likely to influence voters’ decisions at the national ballot box. The figure below presents a graphical image of this model of EU issue voting. It also links the five different chapters of this dissertation.

Note that by drawing on general literature regarding the conditions under which issues are likely to gain prominence in electoral politics, I assume the EU issue behaves like any other policy issue. That is to say, the theoretical model developed in this dissertation is not necessarily confined to the particular case of EU issue voting. It may also prove useful in explaining the development of other issues, such as immigration, in national electoral politics.
European Integration and National Elections: Summary

Chapters 5 & 6

Party Politics

Chapters 3 & 4

EU Issue Voting

Issue Orthogonality

Partisan Conflict

Issue Salience

Issue Salience

Extent of EU Issue Voting

low medium high

low low high high

low low high high

low medium high

Mass-Elite Linkages

Chapter 2
The model begins with considering mass-elite linkages regarding Europe (see the bottom of the figure). All issue voting models start from the assumption that voters relate their issue position to that of a party when voting on the basis of a particular issue (Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Rabinowitz and MacDonald, 1989). Building on this insight, I start from the premise that there should be some sort of linkage between parties’ and voters’ stances on European integration for EU issue voting to occur. Hence, the first step in the EU issue voting process is to find out if congruence between parties’ and voters’ EU stances exists. Chapter 2 ‘Who’s Cueing Whom? Mass-elite linkages and the future of European integration’ focuses on the issue of mass-elite linkages in the context of European integration.

The second step in the model outlines the conditions under which EU issue voting is likely to occur in a given election (see the box entitled EU issue voting). The model outlines three conditions that mediate the extent of EU issue voting in a given election. The first condition is issue orthogonality, i.e. the extent to which an issue is unrelated to the dominant dimension of political conflict. The expectation is that in order for EU issue voting to occur, the EU issue should be related to the main dimension of political conflict (low issue orthogonality). The idea here is that parties and voters benefit when the number of conflicts over public policy are confined to one (or two) ideological dimension(s) (Downs, 1957; Schattschneider, 1960; Riker, 1982; North, 1990; Hinich and Munger, 1993; Stimson, 2004; McDonald and Budge, 2005). Reducing the number of conflicts reduces transaction costs for parties and voters. When parties relate emerging issues (here the EU issue) to the dominant ideological dimension (i.e. their left/right positioning), voting on the basis of these issues is more likely to occur as voters base their voting decision largely on ideological cues presented by parties (North, 1990; Hinich and Munger, 1993). Note that this argument implies that the issue is related but not necessarily incorporated or subsumed into the dominant left/right dimension. If latter is the case – that is to say, if the EU issue perfectly aligns with the left/right dimension – the EU issue would add no further information to voters to inform their vote choice. Thus, the expectation here is that issues are more likely to influence voters’ decisions when they are related to existing ideologies, i.e. when they can be allied with the ongoing political debate.

The second condition is that the contentious issue is (re-)phrased in partisan terms (Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989). Next to office-seeking and policy-seeking concerns, vote-seeking (i.e. the maximisation of votes) is among the chief objectives of political parties (see Downs, 1957; Strom, 1990). Consequently, political parties may have an incentive to introduce or promote an issue within electoral competition if they feel that this could result in an increase of votes or eventually upset an existing
majority (see Riker, 1982). Importantly, voters must be aware of the differences in the positions of the parties on the new issue at hand, i.e., perceived partisan conflict should be high. Hence, parties have to provide the ‘vehicles for contestation’ regarding Europe (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004: 39). If not, voters are forced to put their EU attitudes on ice at the time of election.

Finally, I argue that low issue orthogonality and partisan conflict alone are not enough for EU issue voting. The EU issue should also evoke an emotional response among voters. That is, voters must care about the issue (Carmines and Stimson, 1986: 902-903). As Schattschneider (1960: 2) notes: ‘The outcome of every [political] conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience [voters] becomes involved in it’. The extent of voter involvement in a political issue is labelled as issue salience.

To summarise EU issue voting depends on three conditions: 1) The EU issue should be (partly) related to the main dimension of political conflict (low orthogonality). 2) There should be conflict among parties, which is perceived by voters (high perceived partisan conflict). 3) Voters must feel that the issue is important (high issue salience). Consequently, EU issue voting is most likely in elections that fall into the bottom-right corner of the box in figure 1.1 and least likely in elections towards the bottom-left corner. Chapter 3 ‘Sleeping Giant: Fact or Fairytale? How European integration affects national elections’ and chapter 4 ‘How Do Issues Become Relevant to Voters? The role of issue orthogonality in EU issue voting’ develop and empirically substantiate this conditional model of EU issue voting.

The third and final step in the EU issue voting process is the impact of EU issue voting on party politics (see the top of the figure). Chapters 5 and 6 address this matter. Chapter 5 ‘EU Issue Voting: Asset or Liability? How European integration affects parties’ electoral fortunes in national elections’ focuses on the extent to which parties’ electoral fortunes in national elections are influenced by EU issue voting. It explores variation in EU issue voting across political parties by examining which parties are affected by EU issue voting and which party characteristics may explain this possible variation. Finally, considering that chapter 5 shows that the extent to which the EU issue is salient to a party is crucial in understanding variation in EU issue voting across parties, chapter 6 ‘The Salience of the European Integration Issue: Three data sources compared’ further explores the issue of EU salience among parties. It presents an explanation for varying degrees in issue salience regarding European integration among political parties.
Research design and main findings

This dissertation develops a model of EU issue voting that emphasises the role of issue salience among voters, partisan conflict and issue orthogonality. This model is tested empirically by examining EU issue voting in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom over the time period 1990-2005. Why study EU issue voting in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom? This case selection enables me to study EU issue voting in a quasi-experimental setting. While all four countries are longstanding EU members and have thus experienced a comparable impact of the integration process, their domestic configurations are very different. Hence, I examine a similar EU impact on electoral politics in different contexts. Moreover, the national election surveys for these four countries are very comparable. The surveys contain the relevant questions in order to operationalise EU issue voting. Also, the question wordings for the indicators used to study EU issue voting are similar across the different surveys.

Why use national election studies? The main drawback of using national election studies is that it restricts the time-period and the number of countries that I can examine as questions regarding self- and party placements on European integration are not often included in national election surveys. So why not use European Election Study data, which cover more countries over a longer time span? Several considerations guided my choice for national election surveys rather than European Election Study data. First, European Election Study data were collected for the purpose of studying European elections, not national ones (see Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). When one uses them for national elections, several problems emerge. For example, not all political parties that ran for national office are included, or only very few respondents indicated that they voted for smaller parties. Since I use discrete choice models – i.e. conditional and multinomial logit models – to the estimate vote choice, the latter issue is worrisome (see Alvarez and Nagler, 1998; Agresti, 2002). Secondly and even more importantly, using the European Election Study runs the risk of biasing one’s results in favour of finding EU issue voting since the prominence of EU-related questions in the survey may lead respondents to over-report on EU matters. Let me give two concrete examples. In the 1999 European Election Study, almost 2.0 percent of Dutch voters expressed that the EU issue was the most important problem facing their country, whereas according to the 1998 Dutch National Election Survey, fewer than 0.6 percent of Dutch voters held the same view. The difference in the case of Denmark is even more striking. While 4.2 percent of Danish voters in the 1998 Danish National Election Survey viewed EU issues as the
most important problem facing their country, this percentage is five times higher in the European Election Study data, namely 23.8. In order to circumvent a potential “EU bias” in the data, I rely on national election surveys.

Let me now turn to the main findings and conclusions of the five individual chapters. Chapter 2, which is co-authored with Marco Steenbergen and Erica Edwards, focuses on mass-elite linkages on European integration. Mass-elite linkages can take two forms. They can either be bottom-up, i.e. political elites adopt the electorate’s position on European integration, or top-down, i.e. through a process of information and persuasion the electorate adopts the positions of political elites. The breakdown of either process causes a disconnect between masses and elites, which would make EU issue voting almost impossible.

Past research on this topic has been indecisive. Some scholars contend that political elites respond to changing preferences of their electorates (Carrubba, 2001), whilst others suggest that party elites cue the mass public (Weßels, 1995; Steenbergen and Jones, 2002; Ray, 2003). This chapter shows that these conflicting results stem from the reciprocal nature of mass-elite linkages. A dual-process model of European integration, whereby elites simultaneously seek to influence and respond to the mass public, exists. Hence, the chapter shows that the prerequisite for EU issue voting – a linkage between voters’ and parties’ stances regarding European integration – is met.

The third chapter probes when these linkages translate into EU issue voting. In other words, do attitudes towards European integration influence vote choice in national elections, or not? As highlighted earlier, the European integration process is increasingly contested. Not all citizens appear to like the speed or direction in which the European endeavour is moving. As such, there exists a real potential for political mobilisation against the European project. Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) argue that there is a ‘sleeping giant’ of public opinion scepticism which can be woken up by political entrepreneurs. Initial evidence examining the extent to which EU attitudes influence national vote choice is inconclusive. Research consistent with the sleeping giant thesis demonstrates that attitudes towards European integration are indeed capable of influencing national vote choice (Evans, 1999; 2002; Gabel, 2000; Tillman, 2004), while other scholars note that Europeanisation effects on domestic electoral competition are weak (Mair, 2000; Sitter, 2001; Krouwel, 2004; Van Holsteyn and Den Ridder, 2005).

This chapter contends that a resolution emerges when we acknowledge the conditional nature of the EU issue voting process. EU issue voting is more likely to occur in elections in which both the extent of partisan conflict over European integration and the degree of EU issue salience among voters are high. So, the hurdle
for EU issue voting is quite formidable, but it can and has been met. The available evidence also suggests that both conditions are open to strategic manipulation by political parties, especially those on the fringes of the political spectrum.

The fourth chapter expands the explanation for the variation in EU issue voting across elections to include the role of issue orthogonality. Issue orthogonality is defined as the degree to which an issue is unrelated to existing ideological dimensions of political conflict – in this case the left/right dimension. Building on Schattschneider (1960) and Mair (1997), this chapter proposes that issues are more likely to influence voting behaviour to the extent that they are related (not fully orthogonal) to the dominant dimension of political competition. This general proposition is tested for EU issue voting. The empirical analyses show that EU issue voting is likely to occur when the EU issue is not orthogonal but rather related to the dominant left/right dimension. This finding is particularly noteworthy since previous research on this topic tends to argue that EU issues become relevant when they are perpendicular, i.e. orthogonal, to the left/right dimension (Evans, 1999, 2002; Gabel, 2000; Tillman, 2004; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). Thus, theories of EU issue voting should determine the relationship between axes of political competition, that is, the angle at which issues regarding European integration intersect with the dominant dimension of party competition.

The fifth chapter develops and tests arguments about how political parties’ electoral fortunes in national elections are influenced by voters’ preferences regarding the EU. Which parties are affected by EU issue voting? The empirical results reveal extensive variation in EU issue voting among political parties and that this variation in EU issue voting is largely a function of the degree to which the EU issue is salient to political parties, the level of extremism in terms of EU positioning as well as opposition status. These findings corroborate a growing body of work that demonstrates an ‘electoral connection’ between European and national politics (Carrubba, 2001). Moreover, they indicate that the EU issue constitutes a strategic opportunity for political parties to reap electoral gains. For example, opposition parties that actively play up their stance on Europe are likely to benefit from EU issue voting. Hence, the chapter shows the important implications of EU issue voting on domestic party competition and strengthens our understanding of how European integration affects national electoral politics.

The sixth and final chapter of this dissertation, which is co-authored with Harmen Binnema, examines the variation in EU issue salience among political parties. The previous chapter demonstrated that issue salience is the most important factor when explaining differences in EU issue voting across parties. Now, the question is
what determines the extent to which the EU is salient to a party’s leadership? Chapter 6 conceptualises and explains the salience of European integration to political parties by cross-validating three empirical salience measures used in the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge, et al., 2001), the European Election Study (Van der Eijk, et al., 2002) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Marks and Steenbergen, 1999). The chapter highlights two important findings. First, whilst one common dimension underlies the different salience measures, the explanation of salience differs greatly across the different operationalisations. Secondly, notwithstanding differences in operationalisations, one explanation is confirmed across the different data sources: The salience of the EU issue to a party is largely a factor of the extent to which other parties within the political system highlight or downplay the issue. So, although political parties may wish to strategically influence the salience of the European integration in order to differentiate themselves from governing parties, they are greatly constrained in this effort. If the EU is not salient in the party system as a whole, it appears difficult for a single party to turn the tide. Conversely, if the EU is salient across the party system, it is difficult for one party to avoid it.

Conclusions

Let us come back to the general questions guiding this study: Does EU issue voting exist? And if it does, how does it affect domestic party competition? The answer to the first question is yes. The second chapter shows that mass-elite linkages in the context of European integration exist, indicating that a potential for EU issue voting is given. Chapters 3 and 4 show that these linkages indeed translate into EU issue voting but only under certain conditions. EU issue voting is only likely to occur when partisan conflict regarding European integration is high, issue salience regarding Europe is high and the orthogonality of the EU issue is low. This latter result indicates that in elections in which EU issue voting exists, it is likely to revitalise the existing conflict in party competition, i.e. the left/right ideological divide, not introduce a new one. Hence, EU issue voting affects domestic party competition in that it tends to revive the dominant conflict dimension. In addition, chapter 5 highlights the impact of EU issue voting on domestic party competition by demonstrating that extensive variation in EU issue voting exists among political parties. Variation in EU issue voting is largely a function of the degree to which the EU issue is salient to political parties, the level of extremism in terms of EU positioning as well as opposition status. These results show that EU issue voting indeed affects domestic party politics and
when it exits, it is likely to invigorate existing conflict dimensions of party competition.