

The EU Political Behavior: Concept Contextualization for Post-Economic Recession Sustainability

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Please cite this paper as:

Frățiloiu, B., Bichel, A., Vasiliu, C. and Maftei, M., 2022. The EU Political Behavior: Concept Contextualization for Post-Economic Recession Sustainability. In: R. Pamfilie, V. Dinu, C. Vasiliu, D. Pleșea, L. Tăchiciu eds. 2022. *8th BASIQ International Conference on New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption*. Graz, Austria, 25-27 May 2022. Bucharest: ASE, pp. 506-513.

DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2022/08/067

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the politicization of the European issue in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis, with a focus on the impact on individual opinions and voting at the national and supranational levels. We begin by reviewing the current state of knowledge on the significance of the Eurozone crisis for EU politicization, before summarizing each paper and its contribution. While our contributors may focus on different dependent variables at times, they all address the subject of whether the Great Recession had a long-term impact and whether EU politicization is important. Most of the papers are longitudinal in nature, looking for changes as a result of the crisis. However, papers reviewing the political lessons learned from the Great Recession, as well as those examining whether EU effects can be discovered throughout the post-crisis years, are preoccupied with the Great Recession. Despite the disparities in methodologies and findings, each piece contributes to a major topic in the literature, particularly three key issues that have emerged: the influence of the crisis on European party systems, economic voting, and the degree of legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Keywords

democratic institutions; economic voting; sustainability; crisis; politicization; European Union.

DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2022/08/067

Introduction

The paper's main purpose is to examine the politicization of the European issue in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis, as well as its impact on individual opinions and voting at the national and supranational levels. The papers in this collection look at whether and how information about the EU and EU issues influences citizens' political attitudes and electoral choices. We explore the implications of EU politicization for national and supranational politics in this way.

This essential topic was first raised by Hooghe and Marks (2009) in their seminal work on European integration dynamics. These authors claimed that voters' attitudes about Europe have moved from a permissive consensus to a restrictive dissension. The passage of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 was the primary cause, resulting in an increase in European Union politicization.

The Treaty's incremental transfers of authority to the supranational level brought Europe into political debates, making European concerns more important and improving citizen awareness of the implications of supranational decisions. This thesis has created a significant literature that has mainly agreed that EU politicization is occurring in Europe using various approaches (Kriesi, 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014).

Until recently, the majority of studies on EU politicization focused on its effects on the European integration process. There was relatively little research on how EU politicization might influence national behavior, with the major argument being that the EU was a "sleeping giant" (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004), with little impact on national (or even EU) political behavior. De Vries, on the other hand, warned in 2007 that

high EU issue salience could emerge in specific circumstances, influencing voting behavior. As a result, the politicization of the EU appeared to have implications for voters' political attitudes and behavior at both the national and supranational levels. Despite this cautionary note, scholars have mostly focused on the description and explanation of EU politicization to this point, with less attention paid to the research of its micro-level impacts, which is a primary emphasis of this paper.

1. The roots of the EU crisis and politicization

The onset of the Eurozone crisis, which was seen as a further moment for EU politicization at the domestic level (Grande and Hutter 2016; Hoeglinger 2016; De Vries, 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Hutter and Kriesi 2019a, 2019b; Gross and Schafer, 2020), prompted a flurry of new research on the effects of "Europe" on political behavior.

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, there are various academic debates on the EU and EU contestation. On the one hand, the question of whether and how it influenced economic voting in general. On the other hand, it's unclear whether it played a role in the evolution of European political parties. And then there's the issue of political systems' legitimacy.

The authors will give a quick overview of these debates before returning to them in our conclusion.

For starters, incumbent parties suffered electoral costs as a result of the Eurozone crisis (Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck 2014; Hernandez and Kriesi, 2016, Giuliani and Massari, 2019; Lobo and Pannico, 2020). This can be interpreted as a classic "punishment of the incumbent" effect, in which negative economic trends take center stage in public discourse. During the crisis, however, supra nationalization of monetary and (increasingly) fiscal policy to the EU level may have become particularly visible to the common person, casting doubt on national political institutions' responsibilities (Gabel, 2020).

Indeed, the European Monetary Union's supra nationalization of economic policy has been viewed as a form of "blurring of responsibility" (Gabel, 2020, p.41). Using data from the 2009 European Election Studies (EES), Lobo and Lewis-Beck (2012) discovered that heightened perceptions of European Union economic responsibility reduce the amount of the national economic vote coefficient. Lobo and Pannico (2020) also discovered that during the crisis, people who read publications with a higher level of EU coverage used economic voting less.

Using comparative EES longitudinal data, Talving (2017) discovered that governments' lower capacity to direct national economic policy has little effect on electoral sanctioning or rewarding. Furthermore, Kosmidis (2014) found no indication of "little room for maneuver" lowering the economic vote during the bailout period using experimental data collected in Greece. One of the key consequences is the role of supranationalization of economic policy in the vote calculus.

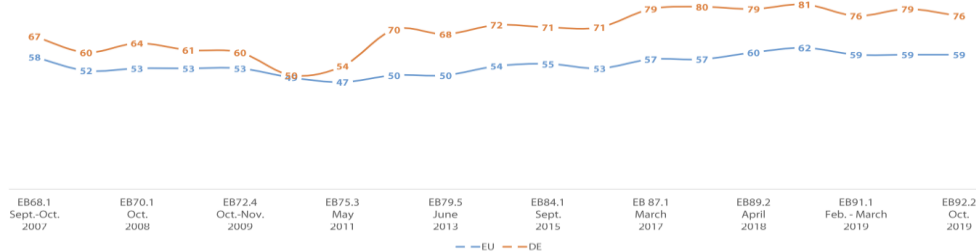
Preferences on three problems arising directly from the euro crisis affect the choice of specific challenger parties: EU integration, austerity, and immigration. Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso (2017) proposed a framework to explain why people are dissatisfied with major parties. In bailout countries that have implemented austerity programs, there was a learning curve for citizens who realized there was very little room for government maneuvering. Indeed, they lacked autonomy, and as a result, the role of elections in holding governments responsible was weakened, leading to a decline in democratic satisfaction and turnout in bailout nations, particularly in Southern Europe. To summarize, the economic crisis became something deeper — a legitimacy crisis of national democracy — due to the way the Eurozone was set up and the Eurozone issue was handled.

Furthermore, Armingeon and co-authors discover that where the EU and the IMF engaged during the Great Recession, there was a decrease in trust in national and European institutions, as well as satisfaction with democracy (SWD) (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014; Armingeon, Guthmann and Weisstanner, 2016). Schraff and Schimmelfennig (2019), on the other hand, find that "the empirical data indicates to a temporary, performance-based unhappiness with democracy in the bailout countries rather than a persistent, legitimacy-based detachment in the bailout countries." Indeed, despite a continuous and increasingly negative—albeit substantively small—effect of the bailouts on democratic quality (as judged by V-dem indicators of democracy quality), they find a resurgence in democratic satisfaction and turnout.

Our paper has as main purpose to contribute to the progress of these discussions. The current works are the outcome of multiple interactions between the organizers and authors at various European conferences over the last few years. Consequently, in general, address the question of whether the Great Recession had a long-term impact and whether EU politicization is relevant.

Differences between the EU and Germany

European Union Membership



Differences between the EU and Greece

European Union Membership

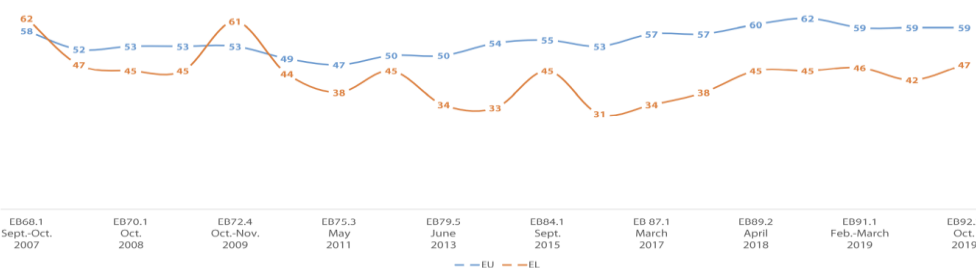


Figure no. 1. Evolution of the level of trust in the EU institution in Germany vs. Greece
Source: European Parliament, 2019

Above, we selected two graphic charts which show the level of trust in the European institutions at the level of the EU versus the level of trust registered in Germany and Greece. We selected the two countries because one of them is the main contributor to the Union budget while the other is one of the main recipient of the European funds. The analysis covers the period between 2007 and 2019 and has few interesting landmarks to be observed. The first one is the year 2007 when the EU extended, admitting few new members and consequently, increasing the budget spent with these countries. For the old members of the Union like Germany, the main contributor to the consolidated budget, the level of trust in the European institutions situated constantly above the average registered in the Union. It was a notable decrease in 2009 and 2010, most probably generated by the global financial crisis but increased substantially after 2011 and kept constantly with a median of 20 points above the average of the Union. That shows a correlation between the degree of integration between the national institutions and the European agencies responsible for investing and spending the European money.

The case of Greece is somehow different, showing a high level of trust in the European institutions in 2007, with few points above the average level. Surprisingly, after a little decrease in the next two years, it was a significant increase during 2009, most probably generated by the financial crisis and the higher level of trust in the European institutions in comparison with the local ones. The figures registered in the next year's show a constant decrease of the level of trust, the lowest level being registered between 2015 and 2017 when the country entered in financial default. It is worth to observe that the trust is built based a number of expectations from European institutions and mechanisms which if are not met, the tendency is to go lower and lower. On the other side, the level of correlation between the deliverables of the local institutions versus the European ones and their degree of integration and capacity to deliver according to the expectations is essential in keeping the level of trust high.

Summing up, a main beneficiary of European funds and management assistance like Greece, is not necessary a champion in having the trust in the European institutions at a high level. On the contrary, the main contributor to the budget keeps the indicators high mainly because of the high level of the integration between the local and Union institutions and the capacity to deliver according to the public expectations.

2. The impact of the Great Recession

Ruth Dassonneville, Michael Lewis-Beck and Alexandra Jabbour focus on whether Europe contributes to a deterioration in democratic satisfaction. The question is important for a variety of reasons. European integration has progressed, but there might be a "democratic deficit" in EU institutions. As the EU has become more politicized across Europe, countries such as France and Greece have seen Europe become a major voting issue in national elections. Is it possible that this process will have an impact on citizens' contentment with national democracy? The authors use Eurobarometer data for aggregate analysis (1970–2017, 15 member states) and EES data for individual analysis (1979–2009, 28 member states) to evaluate this link in a longitudinal study. There are several expectations that are established in the article:

- The number of European directives should be correlated with democratic satisfaction in EU countries.
- The less satisfied individuals are with democracy, the more interconnected European economies become, which means less opportunity for maneuvering (SWD).
- The lower the satisfaction with democracy, the greater the influx of immigrants into the country as a result of EU integration.
- The greater the number of countries in the EU, the lower the level of democratic satisfaction. However, the greater the number of countries in the EU, the lower the level of democratic satisfaction.
- The bigger a country's net contribution to the EU budget is, the less satisfied it is with democracy, according to Lobo and Lewis-Beck. Each of these assumptions is based on particular features of EU integration during the last few decades.

The study is aggregated, and it examines the importance of the independent factors on democratic satisfaction at the country level through time. The authors conclude that none of the models provide substantial evidence in support of the hypothesis that greater "Europe" leads to democratic unhappiness.

First, happiness with democracy is unaffected by the amount of EU legislation, the degree of economic interconnectedness, or the European Union size. Second, immigration appears to have a beneficial relationship with SWD. The authors do discover that net contributors had lower levels of democratic satisfaction, although this is a minor effect. To supplement this research, the authors look at individual-level data from the European Election Study from 1979 to 2009, which used an identical measure of democratic satisfaction and included data from all 28 EU member states. They first duplicate the aggregate study, finding that none of the macro-level variables account for national satisfaction with democracy. The writers then investigate whether political sophisticates are more informed of Europe than the general public. They use education as a proxy and interact education level with macro-level variables of interest. The findings imply that persons with a higher level of education are more satisfied with democracy. Indeed, there are substantial and positive interactions for two of our five indicators of "Europe"—labor market integration and EU size—indicating that as European markets integrate and the EU expands, persons with a post-secondary degree are more satisfied with democracy than citizens without one. Ruben Ruiz Rufino proposes and examines a theory regarding financial bailouts and their consequences on establishment politics in the second piece in this collection (Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso, 2017). According to the author, the establishment parties' electoral fall is due to their exposure to financial bailouts. Establishment parties had a 60 percent vote share in adopting countries between 1991 and 2009, but that support dropped to 48 percent between 2010 and 2019. Electoral support for establishment parties in bailout countries was 77 percent before the bailouts, but 55 percent from 2010 to 2019. The following is the mechanism: Citizens who were exposed to the macroeconomic conditions of financial bailouts not only saw the effects of extreme fiscal adjustment packages, but they may also have learned something about politics. Specifically, major parties were influenced by supranational influences and were unable to respond, preferring instead to be responsible. This shows citizens that voting for these parties does not always imply policy change. As a result of their political education, several citizens abandoned these parties in later elections. These theoretical claims are tested in two ways: first, using individual data from the sixth round of the European Social Survey (ESS) to suggest one way to approximate the learning update process experienced by citizens affected by a financial bailout; and second, using data from the European Social Survey (ESS) to suggest one way to approximate the learning update process experienced by citizens affected by a financial bailout. The empirical study's second section makes use of aggregated data from European and parliamentary elections held in eleven Eurozone nations between 1991 and 2019. Costa Lobo and Pannico tested the impact of EMU views for economic voting in two nations, Germany and Greece (Lobo and Lewis-Beck, 2012). During the Eurozone crisis, European monetary integration necessitates the pooling of economic sovereignty and, indeed, increased citizen awareness of supranational institutions for national economic

policies, particularly in bailout countries. This process of supra nationalization of policies is viewed as a blurring of accountability that may limit voters' ability to hold governments accountable for economic policy. It's crucial to put this argument to the test outside of the Eurozone crisis, when public awareness of the EU's involvement in economic policymaking is at an all-time high. As a result, the writers come up with the following hypothesis. First, in both countries, positive economic evaluations predict voting intentions. Second, economic judgments will be less important in the vote for those who believe the EU is primarily responsible for economic policies. Third, this will be especially true for people who have more political knowledge.

In both nations, the authors corroborate the baseline model of economic voting. However, in Germany and Greece, the connection between perceptions of EU responsibility and economic performance has opposing significant consequences, with the former being good and the latter being negative. Indeed, when we move from negative to positive evaluations of economic performance in Germany, those who believe the EU is extremely or very responsible for the national economy are more likely to vote for incumbents. The "blurring of responsibility" proposes the exact opposite. Greek voters, on the other hand, are following the article's predictions. These effects are particularly prominent among each country's political sophisticates.

Two further hypotheses follow from this one. First, because the Eurozone crisis was felt more acutely in bailout nations, these consequences of national government trust on EU trust should be felt more acutely in bailout countries. Second, given the severity of the crisis and its widespread impact on the population, it is no longer possible to rely on citizens' political sophistication in extraordinary times. The authors support the first hypothesis, demonstrating that support for home political institutions is far more important than national economic judgments in determining trust in the EU. They also discover a lot of evidence to support the second idea. For practically every year in their sample between 2007 and 2015, political effects are much greater than in 2004, implying that opinions toward domestic political institutions matter significantly more during extraordinary times for understanding sentiments toward the EU. The authors also indicate that the link between domestic political opinions and EU attitudes grew stronger as the crisis progressed, particularly in countries that suffered the most from the Eurozone crisis. Finally, during or shortly after the European debt crisis, the influence of political trust in national institutions on trust in the EU for low and high sophisticates tends to converge, implying that group disparities are moderated during extraordinary circumstances. When the crisis is gone, sophisticate group distinctions appear to resurface. This shows that the learning that takes place is only transitory and does not constitute a long-term change.

3. Research methodology

The authors started the article with a critical analysis of the existing worldwide relevant literature in the field. Having in mind the relatively few empirical data, together with the descriptive character of the paper, the authors focus on a qualitative analysis. However, the main research tool focus on drawing upon recent literature in order to highlight the influence of the economic recession on the EU political behavior. The keywords used were "democratic institutions" or "economic voting" "crisis" and "politization"; "European Union" or "leader ethic", the abstracts were read and we focused on those papers that were directly showing characteristics or impacts of the economic recession within the EU political behavior resulting in a total of 28 articles. Furthermore, the authors categorized the information gathered in the 28 articles explained in a research method chosen for its usefulness for seeking to develop a hypothesis. By addressing the concept of Europe and the institutional legitimacy, the articles highlight the impact of over 40 years of contentment with democracy in EU countries that suffered little, if at all, from EU political and economic policy initiatives. Therefore the 'democratic deficit' has gone unnoticed over a lengthy time and that will allow building future case studies relevant to the EU political behavior and its' impact on a sustainable economy. This hypothesis, along with the others highlighted, points to the need to look at other important and evolving links between the European Union and political behavior. Finally, the authors will present their own observations and conclusions regarding the contextualization of political behavior for post economic recession sustainability.

4. Results and discussions

Through our research, we analyzed the correlation between the evolution of the political behavior and the performance of the European institutions. It has been observed that external factors, like economic crisis, financial crashes or any other major disruptions are not necessary the generators of a low level of trust between people and institutions. Therefore, the below table summarize a couple of articles which demonstrate that economic performance associated with a good communication and proper alignment of

the deliverables create a high level of trust, a good integration between the local and global institutions and in the end economic development and performance.

Table no. 1. Link between level of trust in the European institutions based on built expectations

The root cause	The level of trust	Relation type (Mediator, if case)	Author
Organizational & Economical	“the level of trust if directly proportional with the performance of the local institutions”	First degree relation	Armingeon and Ceka, 2014
Economical	“the correlation between the public discourse and the economical deliverables is essential”	First degree relation	Armingeon, Guthmann and Weisstanner, 2016.
Economical	“the level of trust is associated with a strong economic performance”	First degree relation	Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2014.
Organizational & Economical	“the level of trust increase during a crisis is the institutions are strong and the communication is efficient”	Second degree relation (fosters healthy work environment, that allows economic development)	De Vries, 2007.
Organizational	“the degree of integration between the local institutions and the European ones”	First degree relation	Devine, 2019.
Organizational & Economical	“economic crises are perceived as opportunities if the institutions are aligned in delivering what is expected from them”	Second degree relation (fosters healthy work environment, that leads to economical development)	Gabel, 2020.
Organizational & Economical	“the role of the leaders is building the trust is essential”	Second degree relation (fosters healthy work environment, that leads to economical development)	Giuliani and Massari, 2019.
Organizational & Economical	“the contribution to the EU budget is not necessary associated with a high level of trust”	Second degree relation (fosters knowledge that leads to economical development)	Grande and Hutter, 2016.
Organizational & Economical	“the main recipients of the funds are not necessary the ones with a high level of trust”	Second degree relation (fosters knowledge that leads to economical development)	Hernandez and Kriesi, 2016.
Environmental	“correlation between economic performance and general expectations”	First degree relation	Hobolt and Tilley, 2016.
Organizational & Economical	“communication and setting up tangible targets is essential”	Second degree relation	Hooghe and Marks, 2009.
Economical	“the global economic crises influence the level of trust”	First degree relation	Kosmidis, 2014.
Economical	“local and global institutions are responsible to set up clear expectations and solutions“	First degree relation	Lobo and Lewis-Beck, 2021
Organizational & Economical	“reliability on the European institutions is higher if they are perceived as providing an increase of the efficiency on the local level”	Second degree relation (fosters healthy work environment, that leads to economical development)	Schafer and Gross, 2020

Source: Developed by authors

On the contrary, when the degree of the local and global institutions is low, the efficiency and the level of integration of the economic mechanisms is not set up properly, the gaps occur, and the level of trust decrease dramatically. It is the case of Greece, noticeably during the financial default registered during 2015-2017 when the public perception of the locals was that European institutions are somehow responsible for producing this big crisis. However, the cited articles show that the inefficient communication between the global EU institutions and the local institutions as well as not properly set mechanisms to follow up key economic performance indicators generated a vicious circle where nobody is accountable, but everybody has explanations.

Conclusions

Despite the diversity of methodologies and some discrepancies in findings, each piece contributes to a major discussion that is now raging in the literature. In this respect, we may take into consideration how were highlighted three important academic debates about EU contestation and political behavior in the aftermath of the Great Recession. First, we need to look at if and how it influenced economic voting. Second, whether it may have influenced the evolution of European political parties. And, last, whether it altered the legitimacy of political systems. Finally, we need to return to these debates and see what light the papers have cast on them. We used a central finding from each as an organizing mechanism.

We start with some important new studies on economic voting. To begin, the Costa Lobo and Pannico study shows a baseline model that claims economic perceptions determine vote intention in two different countries (Lobo and Lewis-Beck, 2012). The direction of that impact, however, is determined by public perceptions of EU economic responsibility. In Germany, a more optimistic picture of the economy boosts the incumbent vote, since Germans perceive the EU to be more accountable. However, in Greece, a more optimistic view of the economy reduces the incumbent vote because residents perceive the EU to be more responsible. The evident inference is that public are ready to 'forgive' EU domination (and thus lose some democratic control) provided it benefits national economies.

The Jurado and Navarrete (2021) report goes on to say that voting on EU issues is more important for countries that have a higher economic investment in the EU budget, implying that sensible voters are concerned about the financial costs and benefits of EU membership on a national level.

Two publications are particularly relevant when it comes to the impact of the EU on changing party structures. The Ruiz-Rufino article shows that financial bailouts contribute to establishment party electoral declines; for example, in countries receiving a bailout, support decreased to 55% (from 77 percent before the bailout) (Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso, 2017).

Finally, we addressed the concept of "Europe" as well as institutional legitimacy, specifically the institution of democratic government. The article of Dassonneville, Lewis Beck (2014), and Jabbour shows that, over a lengthy time (1970–2017), contentment with democracy in EU countries has suffered little, if at all, from EU political and economic policy initiatives, implying that a 'democratic deficit' has gone unnoticed.

Based on their analysis of 32 Eurobarometers across all member states (2004–2018), the Talving and Vasilipoulou study indicates that the link between local political attitudes and EU political attitudes is higher in countries where the Eurozone crisis was more acute. This contradicts Dassonneville, Lewis-Beck and Jabbour's findings, implying that a domestic political attitude such as "content with democracy" should respond differently to EU policies and politics. What is the most effective means of resolving this conflict? One option is to look at the individual level of analysis, as both papers do. In this regard, both discover attitudes disparities between high and low sophisticates.

However, according to Talving (2017), these disparities tend to converge after a crisis, showing that the shift in trust sentiments may not be permanent. Given this, an overall result of "no democratic deficit" may be reconciled with individual changes in "pleasure with democracy" in the short term, both before and after the crisis.

Of course, the final sentences are merely a guess. However, it does pave the way for more exciting research into the micro- and macro-links between attitudes about democracy and changing EU politics and policy. This hypothesis, along with the others highlighted in this Special Issue, points to the need to look at other important and evolving links between the European Union and political behavior.

Acknowledgement

This paper was co-financed by The Bucharest University of Economic Studies during the PhD program.

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