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Analysing how crises shape mass and elite preferences and behaviour in the European Union

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic proved the latest stress test for the European Union, after Brexit, the Eurozone crisis and the large influx of refugees. This highly relevant and well-timed special issue examines how past crises have left an imprint on the opinions and behaviour of ordinary citizens and political elites regarding the European Union. This Forum article reviews the special issue contributions by spelling out which lessons we can learn from each of them and which paths for future research they have opened up. In terms of a path forward, I argue that scholars ought to pay more attention to (a) the role of political elites, (b) political opportunity structures, and (c) heterogeneity both between and within member states.

Keywords: European Union attitudes, politicization, political parties, political opportunity structures

Introduction

‘Europe is forged in crises’ is a famous prediction about Europe’s future stemming from one of the European Union’s (EU) founding fathers, Monnet (1976). Although the EU arguably constitutes more than a sum of the decisions taken during episodes of crisis, there is some truth to Monnet’s prediction. Under the pressure of market reactions, geo-political developments or political disruptions, government leaders in the European Council seem to be more willing to undertake integrative steps (Börzel and Risse, 2018). The way in

which recent crises, like Brexit, the Eurozone crisis or sudden increase in migration flows in 2015, affected the behaviour of political parties and voters in the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections is the topic of this special issue. The contributions spell out important ways in which recent crises have fostered politicization over EU matters in both domestic and European politics, and how the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic may interact with these existing legacies. The special issue, developed and edited by Wouter Van der Brug, Katjana Gattermann and Claes H. De Vreese, entails a series of important articles detailing how past and ongoing crisis periods shape public and elite behaviour and position-taking when it comes to the EU. The findings provide crucial background for scholars wanting to understand the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic may affect European integration in the future especially in the upcoming EP elections in 2024. In this Forum piece, I will first briefly summarize the main findings of each of the contributions and outline the common threads of argument. Secondly, I will build upon these findings to define some important areas for future research.

Review of the special issue articles

The special issue is opened by the editors, Van der Brug et al. (2022), who highlight that three developments, (a) the introduction of the euro, (b) the increased salience of immigration, and (c) the democratic backsliding in some member states, have been major drivers of contestation over European integration. While other challenges exist, the editors suggest that these three are the most important, because they have the ability to split member states against each other. They created rifts between northern and southern Europe about how to share the economic burden and regain competitiveness, while western and eastern European member states disagree over democracy and human rights. These developments left a mark on public opinion and shape the strategic incentives of political elites. As such, they present an important backdrop against which to understand the increased politicization of EU matters in domestic and European politics according to the authors. One important observation should be made in this context. While these developments are clearly important, they may not really help to explain why and how EU-related development become politicized in the first place. Events need to be narrated and interpreted into grievances (or opportunities) by strategic political actors for the purpose of winning elections or swaying public opinion (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). This strategic mobilization might

lead us to define these developments as crucial a posteriori, but provide little guidance about how we can think of politicization processes a priori (e.g. Börzel and Risse, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

The second article by Kruschinski and Bene (2022) examines the role of social media in the context of the 2019 EP elections. The authors present the first comparative analysis of parties' digital political marketing on Facebook across 28 member states. The analysis shows that only few parties use sophisticated digital political marketing, and no clear patterns exist between different types of media systems. The authors conclude that the low level of activity reflects the overall pattern that due to the second-order nature of EP elections parties use fewer personnel, financial, material, and time resources for European campaigns (e.g. Reif and Schmitt, 1980). These novel insights about the digital political marketing during the 2019 EP elections raise interesting questions. Even though the overall use of digital political marketing was rather low and no clear differences exist between media systems, one could expect to find differences between political parties. For example, do challenger or Eurosceptic parties engage more in digital political marketing than others, or do established parties engage more? Answers to these and similar questions would be useful, for instance, to explain whether parties use social media as a way to mobilize or engage more with voters during the campaign.

The third article by Nai et al. (2022) provides insights into how parties differ in terms of their campaign messages during the 2019 EP elections. The authors use expert survey data to demonstrate that the campaign communication of Eurosceptic parties differs from other parties in terms of their harshness and negative campaigning. The authors also show that this negative campaigning strategy tends to be a successful vote-winning strategy for Eurosceptic parties because it allows them to increase their vote share. Based on these results, one cannot help but wonder how EP elections, which are characterized by high proportionality, have become an important breeding ground for the electoral success of Eurosceptic parties domestically. Work by Dinas and Riera (2018) suggests that voting patterns in EP elections indeed spill over onto national elections, especially among voters not yet socialized into patterns of habitual voting. Whether this is also the case of parties' campaigning strategies remains to be seen.

The fourth article by Katsanidou et al. (2022) directly takes on the issue of how crises affect people's views about European integration. It

examines people's willingness to express solidarity towards fellow member states within a survey setting. By comparing people's willingness to express solidarity based on three crises scenarios associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece and Germany, the authors examine how a previous crisis experience affects people's preferences towards solidarity. The results suggest that Greek respondents display higher levels of stated solidarity in surveys than German ones. The authors associate this with the recent crisis experience in Greece. These results provide interesting insights into how crises shape public opinion. In fact, they suggest that the severity of the crisis experienced in itself might actually not increase contestation over European integration, but could increase solidarity preferences. This raises important questions about the systemic consequences of crises for the European project. An additional avenue of interest could be to examine the role of the source of the information. The informational vignettes in the survey were generally formulated, yet in real life, they are often communicated by partisan actors. Exploring source cues is important for fully understanding the consequences of crises for contestation over European integration.

The fifth article by Pellegata and Visconti (2022) delves deeper into the expressed solidarity across 10 EU member states using novel survey data. The article examines how expressions of European solidarity are associated with vote choices in the 2019 EP elections. The findings suggest that green and radical-left parties profited from expressed European solidarity in many countries, while it reduced the likelihood to vote for moderate and radical-right parties in all countries under investigation. These results seem to reflect the overall ideological stances of left and right parties when it comes to redistribution at the national level, with the exception of radical-right parties that often combine pro-national redistribution with anti-European solidarity stances. This raises the question of the extent to which political elites shape voters' preferences over European solidarity through the process of information provision and persuasion or the reverse. Recent evidence by Baccaro et al. (2020, 2021) for example suggests considerable effects on information provision on public opinion towards the Euro or debt mutualisation within the EU.

The sixth article by Braun and Schäfer (2022) examines the extent to which major transnational policy issues can have a mobilizing effect in EP elections. The authors suggest that participation in EP elections increases when citizens attach greater personal or national importance

to four transnational policy areas, 'climate change and environment', 'economy and growth', 'immigration' and 'European integration'. The authors examine this expectation using the Eurobarometer post-election survey 2019 and the RECONNECT 2019 EP election panel survey. These results suggest that turnout in EP elections might increase when transnational policy areas are more strongly mobilized in election campaigns. These results contribute to the debate about the degree to which EP elections are second-order in nature or not. Future research should examine the drivers of the mobilization of transnational policy issues. Based on the results of Nai et al. (2022), we could expect that Eurosceptic parties that strongly mobilize against further European integration play a crucial role in increasing turnout. Yet, this also raises the question about what causes what: do political entrepreneurs fuel citizens mobilization, or does the demand for more Eurosceptic party positions among the public drive the actions of political entrepreneurs (Steenbergen et al., 2007)?

The seventh article by Gattermann and De Vreese (2022) examines how leader evaluations affect voting behaviour in the 2019 EP elections in 10 EU member states. The results suggest that leader evaluations are generally unidimensional, mainly driven by EU trust and performance evaluations, and they are associated with vote choice. Although the results are conditional upon individual leaders and party affiliation. For future research, it seems important to examine how the rejection of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure by the European Council will affect leadership evaluations in the upcoming 2024 EP elections. The article highlights how European leaders are overall not very known, and highly dependent on national name recognition. These patterns might exacerbate without the presence of a Spitzenkandidaten procedure. Overall, the findings presented here paint a rather pessimistic picture of the role of leadership as a mobilizing factor in EP election campaigns.

The eighth and final article by Hobolt et al. (2022) examines the effect of Brexit on people's views of their own country's EU membership in the 27 remaining EU member states. Based on the theory of benchmarking (De Vries, 2017, 2018), the authors designed a survey experiment in which respondents were randomly assigned to informational vignettes about the consequences of Brexit for the UK to see if this influenced their views of their own country's EU membership (Walter, 2021). The results suggest that vignettes containing information about the negative economic consequences of

Brexit had no significant effect, whereas positive information about Britain's enhanced sovereignty did have effects. While supporting the notion that Brexit acts as a benchmark for EU public opinion, the differential findings based on positive and negative information could be largely due to the fact that respondents' views had already been saturated by negative economic information. Indeed, the way in which crises, like Brexit, are spun by political actors and in the media might have important consequences for public opinion. In order to make these types of interventions even more realistic, it seems important to conduct survey experiments pitting different concerns against each other (economic, sovereignty, identity, solidarity etc.), while at the same time exploring the importance of source cues, political parties.

Avenues for future research

Collectively, the articles in this special issue provide important new insights into the ways in which recent crises- Brexit, the Eurozone crisis and the conflict over a large influx of refugees in 2015- shape the ways in which European matters affect elections, party behaviour and public opinion. The value of this special issue lies more on the results and conclusions presented in the individual articles than the formulation of a coherent set of expectations about how crises forge elite and mass behaviour. Building on the findings presented in these articles, future research should examine the ways in which crises indeed shape the European integration process more carefully. Do crises accelerate further integrative steps like Jean Monnet suggested in his famous memoirs? Or do they, by putting a spotlight on European affairs that are usually less salient in the minds of many voters, limit the room to manoeuvre for national and European political leaders to move forward?

When answering these questions scholars should think through the systemic consequences of crises for the European project. In doing so, they should pay closer attention to three sets of factors: (a) the role of political elites, (b) of political opportunity structures and (c) the preference heterogeneity within member states. Scepticism about the merits of European integration, or international cooperation more generally, is not new. Yet, what seems to have changed in recent decades is the extent to which public opinion is more involved and EU related matters are part-and-parcel of European and national election campaigns. The question is why.

While the overall framework of this special issue focuses on the role of crises, the results of the individual contributions highlight considerable heterogeneity in the extent to which European integration has become politicized across member states. In order to develop a more general understanding of why certain real-world events might fuel contestation over European integration a priori, time- and context-specific sources of variation should be considered more carefully and linked to systemic outcomes at the European level, for instance, legislation or Council negotiations. First, it is important to acknowledge that public opinion might at least in part be a product of the activities of political entrepreneurs (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). While political entrepreneurs might not be able to move public preferences per se, they might make transnational policy issues more important in the eyes of voters. One would expect political parties to mobilize aspects of pre-existing discontent when it is most advantageous to do so. In the case of European integration, it is the prerogative of the extreme left and right parties that aim to exploit the divisions within government parties and have ideological reasons to be sceptical about the EU. The EU issue constitutes a classic wedge issue in European politics, as it is an issue that is not easily integrated into the dominant dimension of left–right politics (Hooghe et al., 2002). The process of European integration has provoked deep tensions within major parties on both the left and right. These tensions can be exploited by political entrepreneurs and their role should be considered more in-depth in the future. The existing focus is too often on the demand side, less on the supply side of politics, and hardly addresses the interaction between the two.

Second, the role that political entrepreneurs play is highly dependent on the existing political opportunity structures (De Vries et al., 2021). Such structures include electoral rules, media and party system characteristics, and they help us understand how public opinion and party activity matters for contestation and ultimately feeds back into the EU institutions. Proportional electoral rules and multiparty systems make it easier for political entrepreneurs to generate public contestation over European integration. This is because these contexts make it not only easier for new parties to break through, but also to campaign on a more specialized issue offering. While more disproportional systems present high barriers for channelling conflict, when EU contestation reaches centre stage the consequences might be more severe as it spreads into government parties (e.g. Brexit in the UK). Understanding how contestation over

European integration takes on a very different form as a product of political entrepreneurs and institutional rules is an important area for future research.

A third and final avenue for future research is not only to explore heterogeneity across member states, but also within. This special issue focused mostly on how crisis experiences fuelled different reactions across member states. Yet, some secondary results highlight the importance of within member state differences. It is not only relevant that a crisis raises the stakes of European integration, but also that political entrepreneurs provide voters with a narrative that connects events to the activities of EU institutions or the integration project itself. In addition, it is equally crucial to understand which kind of citizens go along with these narratives and get activated by them. Moreover, some of the results presented in this special issue suggest that the activation of citizens by crises is not only a matter of fuelling Euroscepticism but may also increase feelings of European solidarity. Again, the background characteristics of citizens, such as education, skills, migration experiences, or identifications, could be important factors explaining these differences. In sum, the contributions in this special issue put a spotlight on how crises shape public opinion and elite behaviour within the EU. This renewed focus is extremely important and the presented findings are thought-provoking. The contributions also raise key avenues for future research, namely trying to understand the heterogeneity both between and within member states when it comes to the contestation over European matters during and in the wake of crises. This research agenda, which was a key theme of the special issue contributions, provides an important frame for scholars wanting to understand how EU member states will recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and how heterogeneity in recovery might affect the 2024 EP elections.

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