

Hard choices and few soft options: The implications of Brexit for Euroscepticism across Europe

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While much of the discussion surrounding Brexit has focused on the potential impact on the UK, the result of the EU referendum also has clear implications for Eurosceptic movements elsewhere in Europe. [Aleks Szczerbiak](#) and [Paul Taggart](#) argue that Brexit has made 'Hard Euroscepticism' a more viable political project for Eurosceptic parties, necessitating a rethink of how we conceptualise Euroscepticism on the continent.



The dramatic vote for Brexit has the potential to transform the terrain for Euroscepticism in the coming years. The referendum result appears to have led to both a slight, short-term drop in support for public Euroscepticism across Europe and a 'softening' of its expression in party politics. In the longer term, however, it could transform the perception of rejectionist Hard Euroscepticism from a marginal political stance into a viable political project. Britain's departure from the EU – and earlier failure to secure significant concessions in pre-referendum negotiations, in spite of threatening withdrawal – could also deal a severe blow to more qualified and contingent anti-federalist Soft Euroscepticism across Europe.



Redefining Hard and Soft Euroscepticism

When we first started to try and define the phenomena of party-based Euroscepticism more than fifteen years ago, we felt that there was a need to break down this concept and distinguish between principled, outright opposition to European integration through the EU on the one hand and more contingent and qualified opposition on the other. As a consequence, we developed the concepts of 'Hard' and 'Soft' Euroscepticism and, after much discussion and debate with (and responding to criticisms from) a number of colleagues working in this sub-field, [we refined and reformulated our initial working definitions](#).

Hard Euroscepticism was, therefore, defined as: principled opposition to the project of European integration based on the ceding or transfer of powers to supranational institutions such as the EU. Soft Euroscepticism, on the other hand, was when there was not a principled objection to EU European integration, but there was opposition to the Union's current or future planned trajectory based on the further extension of competencies that it was planning to make.

The main driver for our decision to modify and refine our original conceptualism was criticism from scholars such as [Petr Kopecky](#) and [Cas Mudde](#) that our [original definition of Soft Euroscepticism](#) ('where concerns on one [or a number] of policy areas led to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there was a sense that 'national interest' was currently at odds with the EU trajectory') was felt to be too broad and all-encompassing. However, significantly we also modified our [original conceptualisation](#) of Hard Euroscepticism which was defined as: 'a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in *parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership*, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived' (emphasis added).

We came to the conclusion that support for or opposition to a country's membership of the EU was a poor litmus test of whether a party should be classified as Hard or Soft Eurosceptic because, in practice, it was so rare to find examples of such parties that openly articulated withdrawal or opposed entry (even if the reason for this may have been a pragmatic one that such a demand was felt to be politically unrealistic).

Rather, accepting the weakness of using attitudes towards EU membership at any given time as the key definitional variable, our response was to re-focus our definitions so that they referred (somewhat more amorphously) to a *party's attitude towards the principle of European integration* in the case of Hard Eurosceptic parties or the EU's current and future trajectory in terms of extending its competencies in the case of Soft Euroscepticism.

Hard Euroscepticism as a viable political project

On 23 June, Euroscepticism recorded its greatest political victory to date when Britain voted by 51.9% to 48.1% on a 72.2% turnout to leave the EU, potentially changing the course of contemporary British and European history. How is this vote, the realisation of our original Hard Eurosceptic conceptualisation of opposition to a country's continued EU membership, likely to impact on the development of Euroscepticism – and its academic study – in the rest of the EU?

Initially, and paradoxically, the Brexit referendum vote actually appears to have led to a [slight fall](#) in support for both popular Euroscepticism and a muting of its expression in party politics. This is, perhaps, not so surprising given that – whatever one thinks the medium-to-long-term social, economic and political consequences will be for Britain and the rest of Europe – such a momentous change was always likely to lead to at least a degree of instability and uncertainty in the short-term. The short-term reaction of European publics is, therefore, likely to be to back-off from supporting more radical Eurosceptic solutions and for parties that are opposed to, or strongly critical of EU integration, to tone down their rhetoric as a response.

It will be interesting to see how this plays out in European elections over the next few months. Already, in the re-run Spanish parliamentary election held three days after the Brexit vote, there was [a small increase in support for the mainstream parties](#) and decline in support for the radical left 'Podemos' party which many commentators expected to overtake its social democratic Spanish Socialist Party rival and emerge as the second largest force in the Spanish parliament. An interesting early indicator here is likely to be the [re-run Austrian presidential election](#) between the previously victorious Green Party candidate (supported by all the mainstream parties) and his narrowly defeated rival from the Eurosceptic Freedom Party, scheduled for October.

However, regardless of any short-term knocks that the Eurosceptic cause may suffer as a result of the uncertainty created by the need to re-negotiate Britain's relationship with what remains of the EU, there is no doubt that the longer term impact of the Brexit referendum will to be transform rejectionist Hard Euroscepticism from a marginal political current (to the extent that, as noted above, we even had to re-define it to exclude withdrawal from the EU as a key element) into a viable political project. In our view, the key breakthrough here was the ability of Hard Euroscepticism to move beyond the fringes of the party system and attract the support of several figures associated with the political mainstream, notably leading members of the British Conservative party, such as cabinet member Michael Gove and former Mayor of London Boris Johnson.

In addition to showing that it is a feasible and realistic objective, the long-term attractiveness and exportability of the Hard Eurosceptic political project depends on how 'successful' (however defined) Brexit is judged to be. If it is viewed as successful, then we could see other mainstream Soft Eurosceptic political actors starting to consider their country's withdrawal from the EU as a serious option, either because this accords with their true ideological instincts



Marine Le Pen during a debate on Brexit in the European Parliament, Credit: © European Union 2016 – European Parliament (CC-BY-ND-SA-4.0)

on the European integration issue or for more electoral-strategic reasons to prevent themselves being outflanked by Hard Eurosceptic challengers on the fringes of their party systems. The one thing that is clear from the British vote is that domestic party politics, and particularly the unusual nature of the Conservative Party, played a massive role in facilitating a referendum decision on this international issue.

Is Soft Euroscepticism still a viable project?

The Brexit referendum, and earlier re-negotiation of the British terms of membership between British Conservative prime minister David Cameron and the EU institutions that preceded it, also raise serious questions about the future viability of Soft Euroscepticism as a political project. For sure, [the reaction](#) of some European political leaders, notably Poland's right-wing Law and Justice government, was to blame the Brexit referendum result on over-reach by EU political elites.

Brexit may, therefore, prompt some broader re-thinking about the trajectory of the European project – and, indeed, force some EU leaders who are privately less enthusiastic about deeper political integration but have up until now hidden behind the British government's anti-federalism, to break cover and articulate their views more openly. A major challenge to the EU's current trajectory from a non-rejectionist perspective could also emerge on the heels of the European migration crisis following October's [Hungarian referendum](#) on whether or not to reject the EU relocation scheme.

On the other hand, the instinctive reaction of many of the EU political elite to Brexit, particularly in the Commission, appears to be the same as it has been to every one of the countless crises that the EU has encountered in recent years. Indeed, it is clear that for some in European capitals and in Brussels, Brexit is the premise to call for 'more Europe' meaning faster and deeper political European integration, particularly around a vanguard hard core of Eurozone members. But the responses are diverse and some within both Brussels and national capitals have also seen Brexit as a [call for reform](#) and a less top-down process.

Moreover, whatever the initial instinctive response, Brexit has important institutional implications. In the [European Parliament](#) it means the departure of the most significant Soft Eurosceptic political force from the EU, exemplified by the fact that, without the British Conservatives, the anti-federalist Soft Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists European Parliament group is almost certain to cease to function. This raises serious question marks over the viability of Soft Euroscepticism as a long-term political project and whether it could end up being squeezed by Euro-enthusiastic federalist and the 'harder' rejectionist options.

Indeed, the failure of the British government – representing one of the largest, wealthiest and most powerful of the member states – to secure more than absolutely minimal concessions from the rest of the EU in its membership re-negotiations that preceded the referendum, even when invoking the threat of the 'nuclear option' of withdrawal, dramatically illustrates the limitations of attempts to reform the EU in a more inter-governmentalist Soft Eurosceptic direction. In the longer-term, this could push some Soft Eurosceptics, (perhaps reluctantly) into a more Hard Eurosceptic stance.

The future is Hard?

At this stage, much of this is, of course, speculation. By placing membership of the EU for existing (as opposed to prospective) member states firmly on the political agenda, the Brexit referendum has made withdrawal – previously seemingly unthinkable for mainstream political actors – into a viable political option. As a consequence, it is forcing us as scholars of Euroscepticism to re-examine our (re-)conceptualisation of Hard Euroscepticism so that it now includes withdrawal from the EU as a serious political option and (once again) possible litmus test for such rejectionist parties.

This, together with the questioning of Soft Euroscepticism as a viable political project, means that while, by creating uncertainty, in the short-term Brexit may, paradoxically, have dampened down support for Euroscepticism, in the

longer-term it may lead to the strengthening of the Hard version of it. Like so much in British politics, it remains to be seen if the exceptional becomes the new normal across Europe.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. The authors are Co-Convenors of the [European Parties Elections and Referendums Network \(EPERN\)](#), where this article originally appeared, and co-editors of [Opposing Europe: The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism](#) (Oxford University Press, 2008).

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