How should mainstream parties react to increasing Euroscepticism among voters? Robert Rohrschneider and Stephen Whitefield argue that the failure of mainstream parties to alter their positions on European integration in light of these shifts in public opinion has left a significant representational gap for extreme anti-integration parties to fill. They notice a difference between Western European and eastern European countries, remarking that the latter have better managed to integrate growing scepticism about the EU, although the examples of Hungary and Poland demonstrate that the adoption of Eurosceptic stances is by no means a firewall against extreme politics.

European parties are currently facing a significant strain as they seek to represent increasingly diverse voters. Our previous conclusions on the topic were largely positive: until 2007, parties in Western Europe and Eastern Europe did a pretty good job of articulating the preferences of citizens. The growth of public Euroscepticism since the financial (and other) crisis in 2007, however, has raised a new representational challenge for Europe’s parties and it is one that mainstream parties, particularly in Western Europe, are largely failing to address.

Essentially, mainstream parties have chosen not to shift their positions on European integration to take account of shifts in public opinion. They have thereby left a substantial representational opening for extreme anti-integration parties to take up. Figure 1 shows that mainstream parties stayed largely positive about integration between 2007 and 2013, whereas extreme parties (i.e., those at either the left or right ideological extremes) even more clearly oppose the EU by 2013. Note that even though extremist parties, especially in Western Europe, were already very sceptical in 2007, they have become significantly more critical of the EU by 2013. In contrast, mainstream parties sustained their support for Europe during this time. We observe a comparable development in central and eastern Europe, though in more muted form.

Figure 1: Party support for European integration
The chart shows mean scores on an additive three-item scale. A score of 21 indicates ‘strong support’ for European integration, while a score of 1 indicates ‘strong opposition’. The western European parties have figures for 2008 and 2013, while the eastern European parties’ figures refer to 2007 and 2013. For more information on how parties are categorised, see the authors’ recent article in *European Union Politics*.
European project, the rising salience of integration in the public mind has meant that their strategy has largely failed. David Cameron’s hope of ‘shooting UKIP’s fox’ by offering a referendum on EU membership strikes us as an exception to the mainstream strategy that proves the rule: by shifting in a sceptical direction, the Conservative Party did little to dampen the rise of UKIP. Only the huge disproportionality of the UK electoral system prevented major UKIP gains in the last general election. And of course, the concession by Cameron to sceptical opinion means that we have a very uncertain referendum on EU membership to look forward to.

Extreme parties, however, display a different but entirely intelligible logic of competition. As our findings show, faced by rising public scepticism, anti-integration parties have become even more anti-integration than they already were at the outset of the crisis. Those that have survived over the last few years are much more sceptical than they were previously. And new sceptical entrants are the most sceptical of all. This makes sense in light of expectations of party competition: as the issue becomes more salient, and mainstream parties only offer a pro-European choice, new parties competing on the issue appeal to voters by offering a clear stance against the EU.

Parties in post-communist EU countries, however, have better integrated growing scepticism about the EU into their platforms. European integration issues in post-communist democracies have been a much stronger presence in party competition since the emergence of democratic politics in the 1990s, in large part because a return to democracy and the market also meant a return to Europe. This has meant that mainstream eastern European parties have always ‘integrated integration’ into their appeals and so the issue has not been left purely to a niche of extreme anti-integration parties.

This has meant that mainstream eastern European parties have been more willing than their western European counterparts to take up Euroscepticism after the crisis. But, the fact that eastern European party competition operates within a different dynamic may not be much of a firewall against extreme politics, as the cases of Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland amply demonstrate.

We find this worrying for a number of reasons. First, because we believe that European integration in some form is of great importance and finding common solutions to Europe’s problems will be made much more difficult if only extreme anti-integration parties represent voters’ concerns. Second, because we note that extreme anti-integration parties tend to be extreme on many other issues as well, particularly on connected questions of cultural and migration politics. Their entry into the electoral arena through their representation of scepticism about integration brings much more troublesome baggage to politics.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. To read more about the research underpinning this post, read the authors’ recent article in European Union Politics.

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About the authors

Robert Rohrschneider – University of Kansas
Robert Rohrschneider, Sir Robert Worcester Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the Department of Political Science, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Kansas.

Stephen Whitefield – University of Oxford
Stephen Whitefield, Tutor in Politics, Rhodes Pelczynski Fellow in Politics, and Professor of Comparative Russian and East European Politics and Societies at the Pembroke College Oxford.