

Why some parties respond to Eurosceptic public opinion while others don't

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Several countries have experienced a rise in Eurosceptic public opinion since the start of the financial crisis, but what effect does this change in attitudes have on the platforms of political parties? [Christopher Williams](#) presents findings from a study of party positions in European Parliament elections. He writes that while some parties do respond to Eurosceptic public opinion by adopting a more critical stance toward the integration process, this effect is not uniform across all parties.



Public attitudes towards the process of European integration have become more salient in recent years. Moreover, there is little doubt that Euroscepticism in European Union member states is on the rise. This begs the question of what effect these increasing Eurosceptic attitudes have on party politics? In a [recent study](#), I (alongside my co-author Jae-Jae Spoon) attempt to understand party responsiveness to this aforementioned rising Euroscepticism in the context of European Parliament elections. We find that political parties are responsive to Euroscepticism, but this effect is not uniform across all parties. Rather some parties change their positions in response to public Euroscepticism, while other parties do not respond to public Euroscepticism at all.

Party responses to Eurosceptic public opinion

Theoretically, a party's desire to win elections is expected to lead to responsiveness to public attitudes. At the most basic theoretical level, voters tend to support the party that is closest to their own positions. Thus, if a party's positions mirror the positions of the public (often understood as the positions of the median voter), that party will receive more votes. With this understanding, if parties wish to win elections they will seek more votes, and thus will change their positions, shifting towards the positions of the public. Therefore, one would expect that political parties competing in European Parliament (EP) elections would be more Eurosceptic in their positions when a larger percentage of the public in their member states are Eurosceptic prior to an EP election.

Although this basic theoretical construct seems quite intuitive, the relationship between aggregate public Euroscepticism and party Euroscepticism is bit more complicated. Political parties vary in a number of regards that can be expected to condition their level of responsiveness to public attitudes, including public Euroscepticism. Party characteristics can be expected to affect the goals of political parties. Thus, varying party characteristics may lead to differentiated party responsiveness to public attitudes.

Two such party characteristics that may affect party goals and, in turn, party behavior, are the size of a party, and a party's status as a member of government. Larger parties tend to be less ideologically driven than smaller parties, and more concerned with vote maximisation. This results in larger parties being willing to adjust their positions to attract a larger number of voters.

Take for example the British Conservative party. In recent years, the Tories have become increasingly Eurosceptic in an attempt to draw in voters that espouse negative opinions towards Britain's membership in the EU, even moving for a referendum on the UK's continued membership. Conversely, smaller parties tend to be ideologically pure, with many being centred around one or a small number of issues – for example any number of Green parties throughout Europe, or the Pirate parties that have arisen over the last ten years. With this ideological purity comes an unwillingness to shift positions simply to maximise votes.

Therefore, it is expected that larger parties would be more responsive to public opinion than would be smaller

parties. This expectation of greater responsiveness among larger parties can be applied to the issue of Euroscepticism in European Parliament elections. Specifically, one would expect that larger parties will be more Eurosceptic than smaller parties at EP elections when more of the public is Eurosceptic prior to the election.

The status of a party as a member of the government or of the opposition may also influence responsiveness to public Euroscepticism. Government parties and opposition parties have different incentive structures at election time. Parties in government were elected on a slate of policy positions. Changing positions during an EP election opens a party up to public fears of insincerity and claims of “flip flopping”. This makes it less likely that governing parties will change their positions. Additionally, governing parties face pressures from Brussels to toe the line on issues of integration, thus making it particularly unlikely that governing parties will respond to public Euroscepticism. Therefore, it is likely that opposition parties are more responsive to public attitudes, and particularly Eurosceptic attitudes than are government parties.



Testing the theory

These expectations are borne out in part by our analysis. Using Euromanifestos Project data from 1989 through 2009 combined with European Election Study data from the same time period, we show that political parties were not uniformly responsive to public Euroscepticism. When a larger percentage of the population in an EU member state was Eurosceptic prior to an EP election, political parties in that state were neither more nor less Eurosceptic in their European Parliament election manifestos. This finding is not wholly unexpected, as there are theoretical reasons to believe that party responsiveness to Euroscepticism is conditioned by party characteristics.

Regarding the conditioning effect of party characteristics, we find that while the governing status of a party does not appear to condition the relationship between Euroscepticism prior to EP elections and party positions during EP elections, larger parties are more responsive than smaller parties to Eurosceptic attitudes. Specifically, parties that received a larger vote share in a previous national election tend to be more Eurosceptic during an EP election when the public is more Eurosceptic prior to that election.

So, what does this mean? First, these findings have important implications for our understanding of political responsiveness and democratic legitimacy in the EU. It appears that political parties are, at least somewhat, responsive to public opinion. This indicates that one of the basic tenets of democracy, namely party responsiveness, does exist in European Parliament elections. This may assuage some fears that the EU lacks democratic legitimacy.

Second, these findings inform our understanding of party responsiveness more generally. It is found that party responsiveness is not uniform across all political parties, but rather that certain party characteristics influence party responsiveness. It is important to keep this in mind when further examining party responsiveness in all contexts, not only EP elections.

Third, the finding of party responsiveness in European Parliament elections contributes to our understanding of EP elections as second-order contests. The finding that political parties are adjusting their EP election manifestos in response to public opinion indicates that parties are taking these elections more seriously. This further implies that EP elections may be shifting away from their second-order status.

Finally, the finding that (larger) parties espouse more Eurosceptic positions when the public is more Eurosceptic may have profound implications for the future of European integration. Taken together with the growing level of Euroscepticism in the EU and its member states, one could easily interpret these findings as an indication that in the future we will see a greater degree of Euroscepticism in the European Parliament. This certainly will influence European policy-making and future integration efforts. Further, if these findings are generalisable beyond EP elections, and hold true in national elections as well, it is not unreasonable to expect increased opposition to the process of integration among parties in EU member states, and thus, within the governments of EU member states.

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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.

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