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Party Attitudes Towards the EU in the Member States

Parties for Europe, parties against Europe

Edited by
Nicolò Conti

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Party Attitudes Towards the EU in the Member States

In a moment when the EU is facing an important number of challenges, there is growing interest in understanding how parties influence the way Europe evolves as a political issue, notably how parties structure domestic competition over European issues and how they mobilise sentiments in referenda over European integration.

This book examines the views of national parties towards the European Union and the different facets of a supranational citizenship. It provides an in-depth investigation into the variations to the cross-national patterns in ten countries, including old and new member states and different EU regions. Using original and innovative concepts, data and research techniques the authors:

- explore whether parties formulate specific positions and preferences on the most particular aspects of the EU process;
- investigate whether the party's stance could be inserted into more pro-European, or more Eurosceptical attitudes;
- illustrate patterns of party contestation of EU issues in the member states and explain these patterns in the light of the main theoretical arguments.

Making an important contribution to party attitudes towards the EU and the Europeanisation of party politics, this book will be of interest to students and scholars of European politics, sociology, comparative politics, government and party politics.

Nicolò Conti is Assistant Professor at the Unitelma Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.

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Catherine Guisan

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Nicole Alecu de Flers

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Gemma Loomes

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Hubert Heinelt and Xavier Bertrana Horta

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Contents

List of figures xiii
List of tables xiv
List of contributors xv

1 **Introduction** 1
NICOLÒ CONTI

2 **France** 19
NICOLAS HUBÉ

3 **Germany** 43
CLAUDIUS WAGEMANN

4 **Great Britain** 59
GIACOMO BENEDETTO AND DIEGO VARELA

5 **Italy** 79
NICOLÒ CONTI AND VINCENZO MEMOLI

6 **Spain** 99
RAFAEL VÁZQUEZ-GARCÍA, SANTIAGO DELGADO FERNÁNDEZ AND ALEKSANDRA SOJKA

7 **Portugal** 115
JOSÉ SANTANA PEREIRA AND EDALINA RODRIGUES SANCHES

8 **Greece** 133
SUSANNAH VERNEY WITH SOFIA MICHALAKI

9 **Czech Republic** 158
VÍT HLOUŠEK AND PETR KANIOK

Figures

2.1	General attitude and party type	27
2.2	General attitude and institutional position	28
2.3	General position in time	30
2.4	General attitude and party type in time	31
2.5	Parties and parties' positions on axes 1 and 2	35
5.1	The content structure of Euromanifestos	81
5.2	Italian parties in a bi-dimensional space (2004)	86
5.3	Italian parties in a bi-dimensional space (2009)	91
7.1	Party positions on representation and scope of governance, 1987/1989	121
7.2	Party positions on representation and scope of governance, 1994/1999	124
7.3	Party positions on representation and scope of governance, 2004/2009	127
8.1	The salience of Europe in Greek electoral competition, 1994–2009	141
8.2	The salience of identity in Greek Euro-election manifestos, 1994–2009	146
8.3	Attitudes towards the current functioning of EU democracy in Greek Euro-election manifestos, 1994–2009	148
8.4	Preferences on EU decision-making as expressed in Greek Euro-election manifestos, 1994–2009	149
8.5	Decision-making preferences by policy area in Greek Euro-election manifestos, 1994–2009	152

Tables

2.1	Parties, party family, governmental positions and European positioning	24
2.a.1	Weights of each variable's modality in the definition of the three first factorial axes	38
4.1	List of most common words in the 2009 Euromanifestos	75

1 Introduction

Nicolò Conti

The context of the volume

In the last decade, there has been a growing interest in understanding how parties influence the way Europe evolves as a political issue or even as an emerging cleavage (Kriesi 2007; Down and Wilson 2010), notably how parties structure domestic competition over European issues and how they mobilise sentiments in referenda over European integration (Marks and Steenbergen 2004). This interest has become even more salient after the failure of the referenda on the EU held in countries such as France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Ireland where not only the public, but also parties had often shown clear signs of disaffection for the EU. European issues have also become more salient after the outbreak of radical Eurosceptical parties in many member states. In the attempt to understand how parties structure patterns of contestation of the EU, the large-scale comparative literature has documented a cross-national tendency to structure party positions in a similar way (Marks and Steenbergen 2004). At the same time, however, other studies have shown some important differences across countries and geographic areas. Patterns of contestation of the EU are different in the old and in the new member states (Conti 2012). In the Nordic countries partisan Euroscepticism has always been persistent (Raunio 2008) and a mounting Euroscepticism has been documented in the new member states as well (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2002; Neumayer 2008). On the other hand, the South European member states have often been defined as a region where pro-European attitudes are exceptionally widespread and the symbiosis between integration, democratisation and modernisation was very effective in the eyes of domestic politicians and decision-makers (Conti *et al.* 2010), at least until the eruption of the economic crisis. It seems that the EU should produce a similar broad impact upon parties – consisting of a negative influence on parties' relevance 'in popular terms' (Mair 1995: 46–7) since their capacity to process key issues and be leading agents of interest aggregation and political representation was undermined consequent to the process of European integration (Gaffney 1996; Bartolini 1998, 2005; Hix and Goetz 2000) – in reality parties respond differently across the member states. In the attempt to advance in our knowledge of a phenomenon – i.e. party attitudes to the EU – that is relevant not only for

democratic competition but also for the future of Europe, our research investigates in-depth the national parties in ten countries: a sample meant as representative of the wider EU since it covers old and new member states and different EU regions.[1]

At a moment when the EU is facing an important number of challenges, and given that its legitimacy and democratic capacities are increasingly questioned (Eriksen and Fossum 2004; Leconte 2010), it seems particularly important to address questions of *if*, *how* and *where* parties want the EU to grow. Moving from these broad research questions, this volume intends to make a contribution in comparative terms to the ever-growing literature on party attitudes towards the EU (Marks and Steenbergen 2004; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008). Furthermore, it intends to contribute to the development of the recent literature on Europeanisation of party politics (Kuhlaci 2012; Ladrech 2002; Mair 2006; Poguntke *et al.* 2007). The interest of our study is, in fact, twofold. First, we describe the attitudes of parties towards the EU in-depth for a sizeable group of member states. Second, we relate the explanatory factors of party attitudes in the analysed countries to the main theoretical arguments available in the literature. We refine the theoretical framework that has originated from the comparative literature with some original speculations, in light of some new evidence that we were able to produce with our enquiry. Third, we analyse features of Europeanisation of the party system by considering to what extent the issue of Europe has been internalised by the system and absorbed into the main patterns of party competition. In particular, the empirical analyses will attempt to answer the following questions. *How is the EU depicted in the member states by parties? Can the EU rely on wide party consensus for its institutional performance and involvement in policy-making? Do projects of deeper integration find party support in the member states? Is there any identity issue that parties raise when they politicise the EU? Are these issues politically contested in the member states and, if so, what is the pattern of contestation they reflect?*

To achieve our research goals, we analyse an original set of data that was collected within the broader large-scale undertaking of the INTUNE project.[2] The main purpose of the project was to study the attitudes of several actors – elites, parties, masses, experts, media – towards the EU across several dimensions of the EU process. The theoretical foundations of this attempt originate from some recent reflections on the theme of citizenship and the EU. It is quite evident that over the last two decades the process of European integration has become more closely interwoven with the theme of citizenship. The fact that in the European treaties the concept of a European citizenship has received, starting with Maastricht, then with Amsterdam and Lisbon, an explicit mention and a precise legal definition is only the most visible and symbolic aspect of this trend. The fact that when citizens vote in EU referenda and in national and European elections they often express fears about the negative consequences of the EU process on their rights, duties, opportunities and constraints certainly is a more material aspect.

Citizenship developed within the national forms of political organisation with a multidimensional connotation, precisely under a *horizontal* and a *vertical*

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