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Informing Europe

How news media shape political trust in the European Union

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Introduction

Mediated crises: How European citizens learn about politics

The European Union, over the past decade, faced a diverse range of obstacles and challenges. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2019) put it: "The whole world is being challenged by disruptive developments that have not passed Europe by." The economic and immigration crises undermined public support for the EU, and political actors in different member states began opposing the Union and questioning its legitimacy. Levels of distrust in the EU grew among citizens. This wave of 21st century Euroscepticism culminated in the British vote to leave the EU in June 2016, as well as in the electoral success of Eurosceptic parties in the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections. These developments suggest that the European Union may be falling out of its citizens' graces and could be facing an uncertain future.

When citizens learn about politics, economic developments, or immigration flows, they do so primarily through the media. In the EU, over 500 million citizens of 28 member states, speaking 24 official languages, find themselves in a complex political system with many layers of regional, national and European legislation. Information about this intricate political landscape is provided by an increasingly fragmented and diverse media environment. A Lithuanian may read about bailout packages for Ireland and Greece in a newspaper, watch refugees seeking asylum in Germany on TV, hear about an anti-European rally in France on social media, discuss national politics with friends, and then hear about a corruption scandal in the European Commission on the radio. Any of these pieces of information could impact the public's trust in the EU. When political institutions lose citizens' trust, they also lose their legitimacy. In a democracy, public opinion changes election results and thus political reality - and public opinion can be informed by the media. However, academic research has not often taken media content into account when explaining changes in attitudes towards the EU, and specifically political trust.

How do the media shape trust in the European Union? This dissertation addresses a core question about the formation - or dissolution - of democratic legitimacy. It takes into account media coverage of the EU, the economy, and immigration and studies how this content can impact political trust in the EU, using a combination of survey data, experiments, and both automated and manual content analysis. In addition, this dissertation considers how

media effects interact with pre-existing attitudes towards the EU, national politics, immigration, and economic evaluations. This work contributes to our understanding of how citizens form opinions about the EU in a constantly changing political landscape, in which European institutions and politicians become ever-more important actors.

The three pillars of support for the European Union

European citizens live in a multi-level governance structure, with regional and national authorities, as well as the overarching EU institutions. Hooghe and Marks (2009) argue that, until the 1990s, most viewed the EU as a far-removed institution and European integration as an elite issue with limited consequences for most citizens – a period dubbed as “permissive consensus”. The European Parliamentary Elections were viewed as “second order elections” (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). The 1992 Maastricht Treaty marks a turning point: It increased European integration in many areas and most notably paved the way to the creation of a common currency, the Euro. This development also had political consequences: With more and more decisions being made on the European level, a “constraining dissensus” has developed since the early 1990s (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Eurosceptic voices are now driving the discourse more than ever before (Kriesi, 2016) and growing politicization, polarization, and conflict surround European issues (Grande & Hutter, 2016; Hutter & Grande, 2014).

Aside from ongoing European integration, attitudes towards the EU were also shaped by specific crises. As a result of the European debt crisis, negative perceptions of the economy led to a decrease in satisfaction with democracy in the EU (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014), especially in countries that were more severely affected by the Euro crisis (Cordero & Simón, 2016). In these countries, economic and European issues increasingly merged due to the EU’s interference in economic policy (Otjes & Katsanidou, 2017). The European migrant crisis further contributed to negative changes in public opinion about the EU (Harteveld, Schaper, De Lange, & Van Der Brug, 2018). Finally, increased European integration has also made the deep and complex connection of national and European politics more salient. The emergence of Eurosceptic parties has fueled negative perceptions of the EU (De Vries & Edwards, 2009), culminating in calls for legislation or referendums aimed at ending EU membership altogether.

To an extent, the major challenges and crises that the EU has faced in recent years also reflect scholarship on the predictors of attitudes towards the EU. Hooghe and Marks (2005) divide antecedents of EU support into three categories: economic calculus, identity, and cues. For the present dissertation, this framework is a starting point for studying media effects on political trust in the EU. All three categories could be reflected in the news media, and media information about them could, in turn, result in changing attitudes towards the EU.

Economic calculus

The first category is the line of research with the longest tradition. Economic calculus, utilitarian in nature, encompasses evaluations of the EU's performance, most often in terms of economic considerations (Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993; Gabel & Palmer, 1995; Gabel & Whitten, 1997). This tradition speaks to the historical focus of the EU on economic and trading issues. EU membership and European integration were mostly challenged in terms of whether or not they benefit countries and their citizens economically. There is support for the assumption that citizens evaluate the EU in terms of its economic performance: Positive economic evaluations predict higher support for the EU (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005), whereas unemployment, inflation and economic downturn decrease trust in European institutions (Gomez, 2015; Wessels, 2009). Economic considerations were particularly important in countries (Otjes & Katsanidou, 2017) and for individuals (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016) that were more affected by the European debt crisis.

Identity-based considerations

The second category encompasses identity-based considerations. In principle, these relate to group loyalties, and specifically loyalties to one's nation (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). They have mostly been operationalized as an exclusive national identity or as anti-immigration attitudes to predict attitudes towards the EU. As a result of the EU's increasing involvement in various policy domains (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014), some citizens perceive a decline in national sovereignty. Furthermore, the EU's laws of free movement facilitate immigration within the EU and may also be perceived as facilitating immigration from outside of the EU. Both factors may induce a feeling of threat or loss of identity in those with strong national identities (e.g. Hooghe & Marks, 2005). Empirically, an exclusive national identity (Luedtke, 2005; McLaren, 2007) and anti-immigration attitudes (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; de Vreese, Boomgaarden, & Semetko, 2008; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2007; McLaren,

2002) are related to increased Euroscepticism. These concerns are stronger in Northern, net-immigration countries (Otjes & Katsanidou, 2017). Particularly the refugee crisis (Harteveld et al., 2018), but also general increases in immigration (Toshkov & Kortenska, 2015), have increased Euroscepticism.

Cues

The third category includes cues, which are not inherent to the EU itself. National and EU politics are intertwined in complex ways, and citizens do not always have distinct opinions or extensive knowledge about the EU. Therefore, it is not surprising that many rely on proxies and cues from, for example, political elites and parties to form their opinions (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). Particularly, support for the government and other national political institutions at the individual level are important predictors for support for the EU – a mechanisms typically referred to as “extrapolation” (Anderson, 1998; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Harteveld, van der Meer, & De Vries, 2013; Hobolt, 2012; McLaren, 2002). Even though cues and heuristics can be useful, a strong reliance on them can make political judgments less accurate (i.e. less in line with actual issue positions), especially for citizens with low political sophistication (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001).

In line with this framework, Harteveld, van der Meer, and De Vries (2013) use similar categories to systematize the driving factors behind political trust in the EU: the logic of rationality, the logic of identity, and the logic of extrapolation. Given that these three main antecedents are important for EU public opinion, and also specifically for trust in the EU, one can assume that new information about related issues could result in changing attitudes towards the EU.

The fourth estate: How the media influence attitudes towards the EU

To most citizens, the EU is more distant than national political institutions, which is why they typically have more knowledge about national politics than EU politics (Clark, 2014). However, the news media may be able to remedy this deficit to an extent: Exposure to news about the EU can increase citizens’ knowledge about it (Marquart, Goldberg, van Elsas, Brosius, & de Vreese, 2019). The media do not only impact citizens’ knowledge, but also their attitudes and behavior. If citizens are exposed to more positive media coverage of the EU, they are less likely to vote for Eurosceptic parties (van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014). When there is higher media attention, EU issue voting increases (De Vries, van der Brug, van Egmond, & van der Eijk, 2011);

however, a greater amount of EU news coverage does not necessarily increase turnout (Kleinnijenhuis & Van Atteveldt, 2016). Media content has effects especially in countries with a one-sided message flow (Desmet, van Spanje, & de Vreese, 2015; Peter, 2004); a two-sided media environment can increase polarization on EU issues (van Klingereren, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2017). Furthermore, changes in the media environment can influence support for EU enlargement (Azrout, van Spanje, & de Vreese, 2012), while conflict and benefit framing in EU media coverage are related to aggregate-level changes in EU support (Vliegenthart, Schuck, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2008). There is also experimental evidence that exposure to news stories impacts EU enlargement preferences (Maier & Rittberger, 2008). The effect of real-life events, such as increasing immigration rates, on EU support is in part mediated by media reporting (Harteveld et al., 2018). Overall, there is broad evidence that media information can change the public's knowledge and attitudes towards the EU. This effect occurs at two levels: Both changes in individual news media consumption (e.g. van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014) and changes in the general media environment (e.g. Azrout et al., 2012) can impact citizens' opinions about the EU.

Findings about the impact of media information on public opinion necessitate examining what kind of information about the EU citizens can receive from the media. In general, day-to-day EU politics is not covered extensively in the media, but the coverage does increase around important events and crises (de Ruiter & Vliegenthart, 2018; Peter & de Vreese, 2004; van Noije, 2010). However, Gattermann (2013) shows that the European Parliament is regularly covered and that the coverage remains steady even throughout national elections. Research also shows that there has been an increase of the EU's media visibility over time (Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, de Vreese, & Schuck, 2010; de Vreese & Azrout, 2019; Kleinnijenhuis & Van Atteveldt, 2016). When the coverage is evaluative, it tends to be negative (de Vreese & Azrout, 2019; de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006; Peter, Semetko, & de Vreese, 2003). Importantly, there is substantial variation of the amount and type of coverage that the EU receives in different countries (Boomgaarden et al., 2013; de Vreese & Azrout, 2019), resulting in European citizens having different access to information about the EU. In general, however, coverage is increasing, albeit remaining rather negative.

An important limitation of the current state of research on media effects on EU attitudes is that most studies have exclusively focused on coverage of the EU itself. However, research on the three pillars of EU support shows that EU attitudes are also related to economic evaluations, attitudes towards immigration, and opinions about national politics. It is therefore plausible to assume that media information about these issues could impact attitudes towards the EU, particularly given the EU's increasing responsibilities for policy areas such as the economy or immigration. Therefore, in addition to coverage of the EU itself, the present dissertation also considers media coverage of the economy and immigration and its impact on trust in the EU. Previous research shows that economic news coverage influences citizens' views of the economy (Damstra & Boukes, 2018) and can increase their economic knowledge (van Dalen, Svensson, Kalogeropoulos, Albæk, & de Vreese, 2018). Koehler et al. (2019) find that the framing of the EU in news pieces about the economic crisis influenced citizens' pro- or anti-European attitudes (Koehler et al., 2019). Similarly, news coverage of immigration influences attitudes towards immigration and support for anti-immigration parties (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Damstra, Jacobs, Boukes, & Vliegenthart, 2019; Schlueter & Davidov, 2013; van Klingeren et al., 2017; van Klingeren, Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2015), but also support for the EU (Harteveld et al., 2018).

There is, however, no previous research regarding media effects on political trust in the EU specifically. Evidence on the impact of the three pillars and their media coverage is scattered across a host of different dependent variables that vary in the degree of specificity of support for the EU. EU attitudes are multidimensional and can be, for example, utilitarian, affective, performance- and identity-related, or focused on EU strengthening (Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas, & de Vreese, 2011; de Vreese, Azrout, & Boomgaarden, 2019). Explanations of EU support can relate to these dimensions differently (see e.g. Boomgaarden et al., 2011; van Elsas & van der Brug, 2015). In light of the multidimensionality of EU attitudes, the present dissertation focuses on one of the most fundamental forms of political support: political trust, which encompasses elements of both diffuse and specific support, and is related to all three of the pillars of support for the EU (Harteveld et al., 2013). Having citizens' trust is of vital importance for the EU's legitimacy.

Political trust

Even though there is no universally agreed upon definition of trust, most include three elements: The person who trusts (the "truster"), the person or

institution who is trusted (the “trustee”), and an expected behavior (Baier, 1986). According to these definitions, person A subjectively evaluates the probability that person or institution B will act in a certain way C in the future (Coleman, 1990). In short: A trusts B to do C. In the context of political trust, the truster is often a citizen; the trustee is often a political institution. Thus, political trust is the belief of citizens that political institutions are likely to fulfill their expectations. Such a definition also implies that trust can change in response to new information about (non)compliance with specific expectations. Therefore, political trust is evaluative in nature.

Political trust is important for democratic societies, as citizens elect representatives that exercise their power for them. “A democratic political system cannot survive for long without the support of a majority of its citizens.” (Miller, 1974, p. 951) A certain level of distrust towards political institutions can be the result of citizens being well-informed about policy decisions that they are dissatisfied with, which is part of a healthy democracy. Yet, pervasive levels of distrust threaten a system’s legitimacy and existence. Consequently, concerns about declining levels of political and social trust have been frequent in the past decades (Abramson & Finifter, 1981; Citrin, 1974; Hetherington, 1998; Miller, 1974; Robinson et al., 1968)¹.

The debate around the implications of declining or fluctuating political trust is rooted in different assumptions about the nature of trust. Easton (1965) first introduced the distinction between diffuse and specific support. Specific support refers to performance evaluations of certain actors, such as the government, and their policies, whereas diffuse support refers to a more fundamental support for the political system. Miller (1974) views trust as a form of diffuse support. Consequently, lower levels of trust would be a concerning symptom of a general discontent with the political system among citizens. Citrin (1974) challenges this view. He argues that declining trust is a result of policy dissatisfaction, which is merely directed at incumbents. The question is thus whether declining levels of trust “reflect a basic withdrawal of support for the political system as a whole, or [...] merely reflect disaffection with the particular political leaders who currently hold power” (Abramson

1 Regarding political trust on the national level, newer research has pointed out that, in contrast to the more pessimistic views from the 1970s and 80s, there is little empirical evidence to support the notion of ever-declining levels of political trust. In many countries, trust has been fluctuating, rather than consistently declining (Marien, 2011; Van de Walle, Van Roosbroek, & Bouckaert, 2008).

& Finifter, 1981, pp. 291-298). The answer, most likely, lies somewhere in between: Hetherington (1998) argues that political trust is related to both diffuse and specific support. This middle-ground position makes political trust an important measure of general political support; it is based on evaluations, but, at the same time, acts as a “buffer against temporary output fluctuations” (Wessels, 2009, p. 165; but see De Vries, 2018, who conceptualizes trust in the EU as a reflection of regime evaluations, rather than policy evaluations).

Political trust can be linked to a number of factors. Research has focused mostly on government performance (Choi & Woo, 2016; Wong, Wan, & Hsiao, 2011), particularly corruption (Ares & Hernández, 2017; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Morris & Klesner, 2010; van der Meer, 2010; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017) and economic performance (Foster & Frieden, 2017; Torcal, 2014; van der Meer, 2010; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; Van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016), but scholars have also considered characteristics of politicians (Citrin & Green, 1986; Combs & Keller, 2010), context factors (Marien, 2011; Miller & Listhaug, 1990; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005; van der Meer, 2010), or sociodemographic and other individual-level variables (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005; Cole, 1973; Schyns & Koop, 2010; Zmerli & Newton, 2008).

The present dissertation follows the trust-as-evaluation approach, but also considers an often-neglected question: How are evaluations of political institutions, i.e. the basis of trust, formed in the first place? Citizens typically receive information about governmental and economic performance from the media (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), particularly when an institution is far removed from its citizens’ daily lives. One can assume that citizens react to new information about a political institution by adjusting their evaluations of it and consequently their trust in it. There is, however, no conclusive answer to the question of how news media information changes political trust. Previous research shows mixed results regarding the association between media use and political trust. General news use was found to be associated with higher (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2016), lower (Pietsch & Martin, 2011), or unchanged (Moy & Scheufele, 2000) levels of political trust. TV news exposure has been associated with higher (Gross, Aday, & Brewer, 2004) as well as lower (Avery, 2009) trust. Reading online news and newspapers has been associated with higher political trust (Ceron, 2015). This inconsistent pattern of results is likely due to correlational approaches, which can lead to different outcomes depending on context, respondents’

pre-existing attitudes (Avery, 2009; Ceron & Memoli, 2015) and the actual media content. More negative, personalized, or “horse-race” news, and uncivil discourse can decrease levels of trust in politics (Cappella, 2002; Kleinnijenhuis, Hoof, & Oegema, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). There are, however, very few studies that take specific media content into account when studying changes in political trust. This is particularly the case in the complex EU context, in which governance operates at different levels. This dissertation aims at narrowing this gap in our knowledge. It examines how citizens form their (dis)trust in the EU by studying the effects of cues from national politics, the effects of media coverage about the institution itself, and the effects of coverage of policy areas related to important predictors of EU attitudes, namely the economy and immigration.

Research Question

The research question of the present dissertation is how the news media shape political trust in the European Union. In four empirical chapters, I study different types of information that could have an impact on citizens’ trust. First, media coverage of the EU itself; second, media coverage of the economy; third, media coverage of immigration; and fourth cues about national politics. In the following, the chapters are briefly outlined.

Chapter 1 studies how trust in the EU changes when the news environment changes in ten countries between 2004 and 2015. Visibility of the EU in the news media and the tone of the coverage are analyzed using an automated content analysis. The changes in media content are connected to Eurobarometer survey data on trust in the EU. In particular, the chapter focuses on how a changing media environment could moderate cue-taking, i.e. the relationship between trust in national political institutions and trust in the EU. The direct effects of the media are limited, but the chapter shows that changes in the available information about the EU can dampen or amplify cue-taking.

Chapter 2 studies the impact of utilitarian considerations in the form of economic news coverage. Since the economy is one of the core criteria of EU performance evaluations, one can expect that new or changing information about the economy in connection to the EU should impact trust. Using a combination of an automated content analysis and nine-wave LISS panel data, collected between 2007 and 2016 in the Netherlands, this chapter shows that citizens who are exposed to a greater amount of economic news in the EU context lose confidence in the economy as well as trust in the EU. Yet, while

exposure to negative EU economic news has a negative effect on economic confidence, it has a positive effect on trust in the EU. This could mean that, specifically in times of crisis, some citizens see the EU as a trustworthy actor.

Chapter 3 focuses on identity-based considerations. In the EU context, such considerations most often include attitudes towards immigration. This chapter tests whether news coverage of immigration influences trust in the EU, and whether these effects are different for coverage of a specific type of immigration: refugees seeking asylum. Using a combination of content analysis data and survey data from three rounds of the European Social Survey between 2012 and 2017 in 18 countries, this chapter shows that changes in the media environment regarding immigration and refugees influence trust in the EU. However, the effects depend on citizens' ideological leaning and content characteristics. Furthermore, the findings show that the impact of immigration attitudes on trust in the EU becomes more important over the course of the refugee crisis.

Chapter 4 investigates the micro-mechanisms of cue-taking induced by survey context in five countries. By manipulating the order and proximity of survey items about trust in the EU and the national government in six experiments, this chapter provides novel micro-level evidence for the extrapolation mechanism according to which citizens rely on cues from national politics when they form their trust in the EU. In addition, the chapter shows that the survey design of commonly used datasets, such as the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, could produce consistency effects that may bias research on institutional trust.

In sum, this dissertation studies the effects of different types of media information and cues on political trust in the European Union. It ties together literature on antecedents of EU attitudes, the formation of political trust, and media effects. Its main contributions lie in offering insights into how new information can (or cannot) change political trust in the EU and its institutions.

