Opposing a different Europe

The nature and origins of Euroscepticism among left-wing and right-wing citizens in Western Europe

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Opposition to European integration does not fit left-right politics in an unequivocal way. Across Western Europe, Euroscepticism is found among both radical left and radical right parties and voters – a pattern commonly illustrated by the image of a horseshoe, emphasising the similarities between the extremes. But to what extent do attitudes towards ‘Europe’ actually provide common ground for the political left and right?

This dissertation studies the applicability of the ‘horseshoe model’ to public opinion in Western Europe. Its theoretical starting point is that Euroscepticism is a multidimensional attitude, the nature and origins of which are actually dependent on – rather than unrelated to – left-right ideology. In four empirical studies, based on survey data covering fifteen Western EU member states and four decades, it shows that the horseshoe only applies to Euroscepticism in its most general sense. However, systematic differences between the left and right are found when studying more specific EU attitudes. Left-wing and right-wing citizens are found to differ not only in their reasons for being Eurosceptic, but also in the type of EU opposition they hold. Thus, this dissertation concludes that rather than being unrelated, ideology is actually a crucial factor in structuring citizens’ Euroscepticism. This refines the common horseshoe understanding of Euroscepticism and the political space.

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Erika J. van Elsas
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Table of contents

List of tables 8
List of figures 9
Acknowledgements 10

CHAPTER 1 Introduction 13

Euroscepticism and left-right ideology: the ‘horseshoe model’ 13
The party level 16
The party-citizen link 16
Party positions towards European integration 17
The EU as a ‘moving target’ 20

The citizen level 21
This dissertation: refining the horseshoe 23
Two dimensions of Euroscepticism 23

Outline of the chapters 26
Case selection and data 29

PART I: THE STRUCTURE OF PUBLIC OPINION 33

CHAPTER 2 The changing relationship between left-right ideology and Euroscepticism, 1973-2010 35

Introduction 35
The changing nature of European integration 37
The changing meaning of left-right 39
Left-right ideology and Euroscepticism 39
Hypotheses 41
Data and Methods 44
Results 47
Conclusion 52
CHAPTER 5  A pro-EU mainstream versus anti-EU extremes? Exploring the
diverse nature of EU issue voting across the left-right spectrum  

Introduction  
Theory  
  Mainstream party positions: Ambivalence and differentiation  
  EU issue voting  
Data and method  
  Method  
  Variables  
Results  
  Descriptive results  
  Regression results  
Conclusion  

CHAPTER 6  Conclusion  

Introduction  
The pros and cons of the horseshoe model  
Contributions to the literature  
  European integration as a sleeping giant  
  Globalisation ‘losers’ and the salience of the cultural dimension  
  The sources of Euroscepticism  
Suggestions for future research  
Political and societal implications  

Appendices  
English summary  
Nederlandse samenvatting  
List of data sources  
List of non-scholarly resources  
References
List of tables

Table 1.1  Key variables, data sources and time coverage per chapter 30
Table 2.1  Overview of sample size and time frame per country 44
Table 2.2  Effect of left-right placement on relative fears related to eu 48
Table 2.3  Left-right and Euroscepticism in 12 EU member states (1973-2010) 49
Table 3.1  Items used in scales for support for redistribution and anti-immigrant sentiments 65
Table 3.2  Relation of two dimensions of Euroscepticism to left-right self-placement 67
Table 3.3  Interactions between left-right and support for redistribution and anti-immigrant sentiments 70
Table 4.1  Overview of sample size, number of countries and number of parties per EES wave 89
Table 4.2  Overview of attitudinal items used in analyses of 2009 and 2014 EES waves 92
Table 4.3a  Regression models explaining the probability to vote for Eurosceptic right-wing party 94
Table 4.3b  Regression models explaining the probability to vote for Eurosceptic left-wing party 95
Table 5.1  Summary of party positions on European integration 111
List of figures

Figure 1.1  Euroscepticism by left-right positions across Western European political parties 14
Figure 1.2  Schematic outline of dissertation 27
Figure 2.1  Relative fears with regard to EU by left-right self-placement 48
Figure 2.2  Predicted probability of Euroscepticism by left-right position in 12 EU member states (1973-2010) 50
Figure 3.1  Predicted values of two dimensions of Euroscepticism across left-right scale in 2009 68
Figure 3.2  Predicted values of two dimensions of Euroscepticism across left-right scale in 2014 68
Figure 3.3  Marginal effect of support for redistribution on two EU dimensions by left-right in 2008 72
Figure 3.4  Marginal effect of support for redistribution on two EU dimensions by left-right in 2012 72
Figure 3.5  Marginal effect of anti-immigrant sentiment on two EU dimensions by left-right in 2008 73
Figure 3.6  Marginal effect of anti-immigrant sentiment on two EU dimensions by left-right in 2012 73
Figure 4.1  Marginal effect of education on support for right-wing and left-wing Eurosceptic party, 1989-2014 97
Figure 4.2  Marginal effect of dissatisfaction with current EU on support for right-wing and left-wing Eurosceptic party, 1994-2009 98
Figure 4.3  Marginal effect of opposition to EU strengthening on support for right-wing and left-wing Eurosceptic party, 1989-2014 99
Figure 5.1  Average position on two EU dimensions by party voted for in last general election, 2009 115
Figure 5.2  Average position on two EU dimensions by party voted for in last general election, 2014 116
Figure 5.3  Average position on two EU dimensions by party voted for in last general election, 1994 117
Figure 5.4  Marginal effect of two EU dimensions on electoral support, 2009 118
Figure 5.5  Marginal effect of two EU dimensions on electoral support, 2014 119
Figure 5.6  Marginal effect of two EU dimensions on electoral support, 1994 120
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