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.

Erika van Elsas is a postdoctoral researcher at the Amsterdam School for Communication Research (ASCoR) at the University of Amsterdam. She carried out this research as a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science of the same university.