

From Consensus to Competition? Ideological Alternatives on the EU Dimension

Mikko Mattila¹ & Tapio Raunio²

ABSTRACT

According to literature on EP elections, parties do not offer real choices to voters on European integration. Indeed, in most EU countries there has been broad consensus about integration between the main parties. Importantly, previous research shows that this elite convergence is not replicated among the voters. Using EES data from the 1999 and 2004 Euroelections, this paper analyses the ideological dispersion of parties on the EU dimension in the EU member states. The analysis contains two stages. First we describe longitudinally the development of inter-party competition on the EU dimension between the two elections. Moving to the empirical analysis, we then examine the impact of various factors – divided into public opinion, national party system, and EU hypotheses – on the breadth of party positions over integration.

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¹ Department of Political Science, PO Box 54, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland. Email: mikko.mattila@helsinki.fi.

² Department of Political Science, 20014 University of Turku, Finland. Email: tapio.raunio@utu.fi.

INTRODUCTION

According to the standard wisdom national parties want to stifle debate or contestation over European integration. As the overwhelming majority of political parties throughout the European Union (EU) were established on the basis of domestic cleavages, the EU dimension – often referred to as the independence/integration dimension – tends to produce difficulties for them. Hence parties have a strategic incentive to downplay European issues and to structure competition along the more familiar and thus safer domestic cleavages, primarily along the left-right dimension (Hix 1999; Marks & Steenbergen eds. 2002, 2004).

Indeed, research on elections to the European Parliament (EP) has confirmed that most national parties campaign on the basis of ‘national’ issues, with issues related to European integration very much in the background (e.g., van der Eijk & Franklin eds. 1996). Euroelections are therefore scarcely ‘European’, with national politics reproduced in EP election campaigns, with largely the same set of actors and also the same set of issues. However, this situation is arguably gradually changing. The rapid increase in the powers of the EU has resulted in higher levels of Euroscepticism, defined as opposition to further integration. While Eurosceptical parties and representatives remain very much in the minority in the Parliament, the 2004 saw various Eurosceptical parties or lists performing well in several member states, notably in Denmark, Great Britain, Poland, and Sweden (Lodge ed. 2005). The good performance of these Eurosceptical forces did not come as a surprise. Notwithstanding the second-order logic of EP elections, with smaller and opposition parties gaining votes at the expense of mainstream and government parties, public opinion surveys such as Eurobarometers had indicated that people were becoming less supportive of the European project.

These developments would indicate that the days of the famous ‘permissive consensus’ are increasingly behind us. This is good news for representative democracy. After all, in the

‘responsible party model’ parties should offer competing policy alternatives to the voters, with voters also being aware of these differences and choosing their party accordingly (Thomassen 1994). The more contestation there is over Europe, and the more salient integration is for both voters and parties, the higher the likelihood of this basic premise of party democracy being fulfilled.

This paper analyses the range of alternatives national parties offer to the European electorate in EP elections. Using European Elections Study (EES) data from the 1999 and 2004 Euroelections, we examine the ideological range of parties on the EU dimension in the EU member states. The next section introduces our research problem, and presents the hypotheses that guide the empirical analysis found in the following section. First we describe longitudinally the development of inter-party competition on the EU dimension between the two elections. Moving to the empirical analysis, we then examine the impact of various factors – divided into public opinion, national party system, and EU hypotheses -- on the level of alternatives over integration. The concluding section summarizes the main findings.

IDEOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVES AND THEIR SOURCES

Parties can present alternatives about two aspects of politics: policy and performance. The former means that parties present to the voters different policy programmes, while the latter refers to the ability of the parties to achieve certain goals. We can with certainty state that the latter function is of lesser importance. After all, people and parties do disagree about societal matters (such as how far European integration should go), and hence the alternatives parties offer to the citizens refer mainly to policies.

Our dependent variable is thus the level of ideological alternatives parties offer on the EU dimension. We use three operationalizations of the dependent variable. The first is range. We define range on a certain policy dimension as the distance between the two parties that

occupy the extreme positions at both ends of that dimension. The higher the range, the more alternatives citizens have. In their analysis of the left-right dimension in the Nordic party systems, Gilljam and Oscarsson (1996: 26) refer to range as ‘wing party distance’, meaning the difference between the most left-wing and the most right-wing party on that dimension. In order to avoid a situation where a truly minuscule party would impact on our findings, we include only parties that won at least 3 % of the votes in the respective EP elections or in the preceding national parliamentary elections in our analysis.

However, range or wing party distance is not an unproblematic concept. After all, the parties holding extreme positions can well be parties that most citizens would never consider voting for, such as extreme right or left parties, and hence one could argue that the one should focus instead on the differences between the ideologically moderate ‘mainstream’ parties. Hence we use also another measurement of alternatives offered to voters: following Mair and Castles (1997: 154) we measure the difference between the two largest parties on that same policy dimension³. As we focus in this study on the EU dimension, this clarification is arguably very important. Previous literature has shown that Euroscepticism is mainly the reserve of ideologically extremist or populist parties, i.e. more or less the same group of parties that are excluded from government in their member states (Taggart 1998, Hooghe et al. 2002). As most Europeans are not prepared to vote for such parties, it is necessary to also analyse the differences among the main political parties in each member state.

In addition, we employ a third operationalization that captures more effectively the nature of party competition over integration and the existence of choices on offer. This measurement is variance of party positions on the EU dimension, which we compute without taking into account the weight of parties. We feel that this non-weighted variance is more useful for our analysis, as we are primarily interested in the range of alternatives available to

³ Mair and Castles (1997: 154) refer to this measure as ‘degree of core divergence’.

the electorate and as our second operationalization already measures the differences between the two main parties in each country (see van der Eijk & Franklin 2004: 41).

But what produces ideological differences between political parties? And more specifically, when and why do parties adopt different positions over European integration? We put forward in this paper three rival explanations. According to the first perspective, ideological range on the EU dimension is a function of *public opinion*. The idea is simple: parties' positions on European integration should reflect those of their voters. However, we know from previous research that while parties are fairly representative of their voters on the left/right dimension, the picture is much bleaker in European matters. This strand of research has produced two main findings: regardless of the data used (voter perceptions of party locations or a combination of elite and survey data), there is a gap between the political parties and the voters, with the former more supportive of integration.⁴ Second, the diversity of opinion found among the electorate is not replicated at the elite level, with especially the Eurosceptical section of the citizens poorly represented by national parties. (See van der Eijk & Franklin 1991; Thomassen & Schmitt 1997, 1999; Schmitt & Thomassen 2000.)

Particularly interesting in this respect are two analyses that focus on the same elections that we do in this paper. Using data from the 1999 EES, van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) showed that the diversity of opinion among the electorate was not reflected at the level of the parties. There was thus, according to those authors, 'potential for contestation' on EU matters,

⁴ However, some of these studies paint a more positive picture. Comparing voters' perceptions of where parties stand and voters' own preferences from a survey carried out right after the 1989 EP elections, van der Eijk and Franklin (1991: 124) showed that most parties were representative of their voters in integration matters, with 'only a few parties' taking positions that were clearly out of line with the position of their voters. And, based on elite and citizen survey data from 1979 and 1994, Schmitt and Thomassen (2000) showed that while the policy preferences of the voters and the parties did diverge, issue agreement between voters and party elites about the general development of integration ('are you for or against efforts being made to unify Europe?') was as high as on the left-right dimension. Thus they argued that while policy representation may be failing in specific EU policy issues, it did seem to work fairly well as far as the overall development of integration is concerned.

with the EU issue being a 'sleeping giant' in European politics. The study also showed the parties to be far more supportive of integration than the voters. Finally, analysing issue agreement in the 2004 EP elections, Mattila and Raunio (2006) showed that parties were both closer to their voters on the left/right dimension than on the EU dimension and more supportive of European integration than their voters. That study also confirmed that political parties, at least in those member states that joined the Union before 2004, failed to offer enough competing alternatives to voters over European integration.

Research thus shows that there is a gap between the elite and the citizens, with political parties more supportive of integration than the voters. However, there is still good reason to believe that public opinion does impact on parties' locations on the EU dimension. Hence we first argue that the set of alternatives correlates with public support for the EU -- the higher the level of support in the country, the smaller the range. When a large majority of voters supports integration there is less need for the parties to compete on EU matters. Using the standard Eurobarometer / EES question ("Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership of the European Union is a good thing, bad thing or neither good nor bad?"), we measure support for the EU as the share of those citizens that hold positive views of their country's EU membership (H1).

Support for EU membership (or the lack of it) may or may not be shared to the same extent by the electorates. Hence, it is possible that it is the divisiveness of the membership issue that affects party competition. According to our second hypothesis, the more polarized public opinion is on Union membership, the greater the range on the EU dimension (H2). Polarization is measured as the standard deviation of the responses to the aforementioned membership question, with higher standard deviation indicating more variability in citizens' opinions.⁵

⁵ Measuring opinion consensus or the lack of it is not a simple matter and opinions of what

Our second set of hypotheses focuses on the properties of *national party systems*. The argument here is that the dispersion of party locations on the EU dimension is attributable to domestic party-political factors that have nothing or very little to do with European integration. We first put forward two hypotheses about the shape of the party system. According to H3 the more fragmented the party system, the greater the range of alternatives. Party system fragmentation is measured with the Laakso-Taagepera (1979) index of effective parties, calculated from the seat distribution in national parliaments at the time of the 1999 and 2004 EP elections. The rationale behind this hypothesis is simply that an increase in the number of parties should result in more ideological alternatives.

Next we hypothesize that the dispersion of parties on the left-right dimension is reflected or reproduced on the EU dimension -- that is, the higher the level of choices on the left-right dimension, the greater the dispersion of parties also on the EU dimension (H4). The location of parties on the left-right dimension is derived from the EES question, where the respondents were asked to place themselves and the parties on that dimension.⁶ Our final national party system variable focuses on government composition, with the expectation being that the higher the number of government parties (at the time of the 1999 and 2004 Euroelections), the smaller the breadth of alternatives (H5). The logic here is that participation in government, particularly the bargaining involved in multiparty coalitions, results in ideological moderation. Additionally, government parties represent their country at the EU

constitutes an appropriate measure diverge from each other. For example, in their review of different measures for consensus Conway & Schaller (1998) came to the conclusion that standard deviation is a measure that is intuitively easy to understand and simple to calculate and, hence, a good measure of consensus. On the other hand, according to van der Eijk (2001) standard deviation can be a misleading indicator of the degree of agreement.

⁶ 'In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". What is your position? Please indicate your views using any number on a 10-point-scale. On this scale, where 1 means "left" and 10 means "right", which number best describes your position?'. This question was followed by a set of questions in which respondents were asked to indicate the positions of the main parties in their country on the left/right scale according to their perception.

level in the Council and the European Council, and this may also facilitate consensus among government parties in EU matters (Mattila & Raunio 2006).

Finally, our last set of hypotheses examines whether specific *EU* factors impact on the choices parties offer over Europe. We expect that the timing of membership matters (measured as the number of years elapsed since a country joined the Union), with the level of alternatives greater in newer member countries (H6). The argument here is that in the older member countries, particularly in the six founding member states that joined the integration process already in the 1950s, EU membership is a fact of life that is no longer contested among the political parties. In contrast, in the countries that joined the EU more recently, European integration is a new issue that produces more divisions within and between the parties. In addition, the membership referenda that had taken place in those countries that joined the EU in 2004 (excluding Cyprus) prior to the June 2004 EP elections had forced parties to express their positions on European integration, or at least on membership, with citizens thus exposed to information about parties' European policies.

Our seventh and final hypothesis explores whether economic benefits derived from EU membership impact partisan contestation over integration. More specifically, we expect the level of alternatives to be greater in countries that are net contributors to the EU budget (H7). The example of Ireland illustrates the logic behind our hypothesis. While the Irish may not support deeper integration, there is broad consensus in Ireland – as shown by Eurobarometer studies – that EU membership has benefited the country, not least in economic terms. Hence there has traditionally been broad agreement among the Irish parties about European integration. But, if the (economic) benefits derived from membership are less visible, and if the country is a net contributor to the EU's budget, then presumably there is more contestation about integration. The three Nordic EU countries are good examples of the latter category of member states. We measure the countries' fiscal position as a net contributor or a net

beneficiary to the EU budget with figures released by the European Commission (2005). These figures measure the net budget balance of each member state as a share of the GDP. Negative values indicate that a member state contributes to the EU budget more than it receives EU subsidies and positive values indicate that a country is a net beneficiary from the budget.

The research hypotheses introduced in this section will be analysed in the following empirical section. But before that, the next section first presents our data and compares the set of alternatives on the EU dimension in the 1999 and the 2004 elections.

DATA AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Our data are taken from the European Election Study project, which consisted (for the most part) of identical surveys carried out in the EU countries just after the EP elections held in June 1999 and 2004. The enlargement that took place in 2004 obviously means that the data sets for the two elections are not identical. Unfortunately not all countries could be included in the 2004 data set. In addition to Malta that was left out of the survey altogether, in three countries -- Belgium, Lithuania, and Sweden -- the questionnaire did not include the EU scale question necessary for our analysis. This means that we have altogether 37 observations (16 from the 1999 and 21 from the 2004 EP elections⁷).

The main interest in this paper is the location of parties on the EU dimension. This was operationalized in the EES questionnaire as a 1-10 scale measuring respondents' attitudes towards European unification. The exact wording of the question was: 'Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a 10-point-scale. On this scale, 1 means unification

⁷ We treat the Belgian case as consisting of two different political systems with their own party systems (Flanders and Wallonia). Thus, we have 16 cases from the 1999 EP elections. Although Flanders and Wallonia are not EU member states, for the sake of simplicity, we will refer to our 37 cases as "member states" or as "member countries" in the text.

”has already gone too far” and 10 means it ”should be pushed further”. What number on this scale best describes your position?”. This question was followed by several questions where the respondents were asked to indicate, using the same scale, where the main parties of their respective countries were located. We measure party positions simply as a mean perception of the party location on both the EU and the left/right dimensions calculated from all respondents in a given member state.

It is of course possible that voter perceptions of party locations may not be accurate reflections of reality, with the majority of European citizens probably having quite limited information or knowledge of party policies, at least concerning European integration. However, it is important to emphasize that while voters may not be able to place parties accurately on political dimensions, they are likely to base their vote choices on their perceptions of party and/or candidate positions. Furthermore, a comparison of different measures of party positions (party manifesto data, expert evaluations and voter perceptions from the EES data) on the EU dimension showed basically that all measures correlate considerably with each other and, thus, measure the same thing (Marks et al. 2004).

Table 1 compares the dispersion of party locations on the EU dimension in the 1999 and 2004 EP elections, using the three operationalizations of the dependent variable introduced in the previous section: distance between the most pro-EU and anti-integrationist parties (range), variance of party positions and distance between the two largest parties (main parties). No clear pattern emerges from the comparison. Examining the distance between the extremist parties in those countries that joined the EU before 2004, we find that the range increased in six countries and decreased in seven member states. In 2004 there was basically no difference between the old and the new member states. This was not the case when looking at the positions of the two largest parties: these parties were further apart on the EU dimension in the new member countries. When examining the change between 1999 and 2004, we again

notice the lack of a clear trend, as the distance became greater in eight countries and smaller in five countries. The variance measure shows no real difference in 2004 between the old and new member countries. And, in terms of longitudinal comparison, the results are in line with our two other measurements for the level of alternatives: the variance increases in eight countries and decreases in five countries.

TABLE 1 HERE

Turning our attention to individual member states, we notice that there were quite large differences between them. The range between extreme parties and the variance of party positions were largest in Denmark, Sweden and Greece and smallest in Finland (1999), Spain (2004), Slovenia and Belgium (1999, both Flanders and Wallonia). The wide availability of choices in Denmark and Sweden is explained by the anti-EU parties and lists which have gained substantial support in the EP elections. The widest distances between the two main parties were found in Cyprus, Sweden and Slovakia while the distances were smallest in the Netherlands, Wallonia and Slovenia.

Our seven hypotheses are tested in Table 2. Given the small number of observations we do not perform multivariate regression analysis with our data but use simple bivariate regression analyses instead. We test the explanatory strength of the independent variables first with the whole data set and then for the 1999 and 2004 EP elections separately. We repeat this procedure for each of our three dependent variables (range between extreme parties, variance among party positions and distance between two main parties). The entries in the table are unstandardised bivariate regression coefficients.

TABLE 2 HERE

The results in Table 2 are rather modest: most of our independent variables fail to explain the degree of party competition on the EU dimension in a statistically significant way, even if we use the rather liberal $p < 0.10$ as a cut-off point for statistical significance. However, some conclusions can be made from the results. The number of government parties seems to be related to decreased party competition when we use range or variance as the dependent variable. This indicates that the ‘quality’ of party supply on the EU dimension is worse in countries with large multiparty coalition governments. Parties included in governments often have to revise their EU positions when entering negotiations with their coalition partners, governments of the other member states and the EU institutions. Moreover, parties that have reserved positions towards the EU may feel the need to revise their opinions if they desire to be respectable candidates in post-election government formation negotiations.

The length of EU membership is clearly not connected to the level of choices offered by the parties. Some of the member states have been EU members for almost fifty years while the ten new member states entered their first EP elections right after their accession in 2004. One might assume that fifty years of EU membership would affect party competition on integration matters but this seems not to be the case. However, there is a statistically significant relation between the length of EU membership and the distance between the two main parties: the longer a country has been an EU member, the less there is contestation between the main parties on the EU dimension.

It is also puzzling why the ‘quality’ of party competition on the left/right dimension is not reflected on the EU dimension. The range and variance of party positions on these two dimensions appear to be quite uncorrelated. The extent of public support for EU membership and the polarization of this issue are not related to the range or the variance of party positions. However, they seem to be related to the competition between the two main contestants of the

party system. When citizens are divided on the EU membership question, the two main parties are further apart from each other than when compared to the situation where the large majority of citizens agree on the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of their country’s EU membership. A large consensus on the benefits of EU membership affects the opposite way. When support for membership is considerably high, there is less need for the main parties to compete on the EU dimension. Finally, we can notice that the number of parties in the party system and the fiscal benefits from the EU budget have little impact on the variability of parties’ EU positions.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of our empirical analysis are quite interesting and even surprising. The strongest link was found to exist between government size and ideological alternatives, with large coalition governments hindering party competition on the EU dimension. Public opinion did have an effect on party positions, with the level of support for membership and polarization on this question impacting on competition between two main parties. The higher the polarization of support for membership, the bigger the differences between two main competitors. The level of support for membership operates the opposite way: when EU membership is very popular, there is less need for the two main parties to compete with each other on the EU dimension. But overall, our hypothesized factors explained only a small portion of between-country differences.

Perhaps more interesting are the findings of the longitudinal comparison between the 1999 and 2004 elections. The results show no clear trend, with the parties offering more alternatives to the citizens on EU issues in some member states and less choices in other countries. This is quite surprising, as one could have expected the breadth of positions to have increased. After all, European integration became arguably more ‘politicized’ than before

during this five-year period. The Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) held in 2000 produced the Treaty of Nice, which only entered into force in 2003 after the Irish had first voted against it in a referendum. Then the Convention and the following IGC resulted in the Draft Constitution for Europe, the fate of which remains unknown. Moreover, the enlargement that took place in 2004 brought to the fore questions about the EU's budget and borders, including the possibility of Turkey's membership. That these 'EU level' major constitutional events did not result in more divergence among national parties is quite worrying from the point of view of representative democracy and responsible model of party government. When these findings are analysed together with public opinion research on European integration, we note that parties still fail to offer alternatives to the citizens on the EU dimension.

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Table 1. Range, variance and the distance between the two biggest parties on the EU-dimension in 1999 and 2004.

Country	Range			Variance			Two main parties		
	1999	2004	Change	1999	2004	Change	1999	2004	Change
Austria	2,35	3,01	0,66	0,89	1,85	0,97	0,24	0,63	0,39
Britain	2,44	2,07	-0,37	0,88	0,90	0,01	1,47	0,99	-0,48
Denmark	5,39	4,17	-1,22	4,66	3,98	-0,68	0,91	0,25	-0,66
Finland	0,80	3,00	2,20	0,10	0,97	0,87	0,18	1,08	0,90
France	2,11	2,08	-0,03	0,52	1,55	1,02	0,31	0,20	-0,11
Germany	3,03	1,99	-1,04	1,43	0,54	-0,88	0,23	0,53	0,30
Greece	3,64	4,54	0,90	2,33	3,81	1,48	0,22	0,50	0,28
Ireland	2,71	2,01	-0,70	0,88	0,53	-0,35	0,37	0,24	-0,13
Italy	1,92	2,91	0,99	0,48	0,75	0,27	0,28	0,83	0,55
Luxembourg	2,44	2,53	0,09	1,05	1,12	0,08	0,24	0,83	0,59
Netherlands	1,87	2,40	0,53	0,53	0,63	0,10	0,08	0,58	0,50
Portugal	3,06	2,56	-0,50	2,29	1,77	-0,53	0,27	0,19	-0,08
Spain	2,28	1,07	-1,21	1,04	0,24	-0,80	0,39	1,01	0,62
Belgium / Flanders	1,26	-	-	0,19	-	-	0,32	-	-
Belgium / Wallonia	1,09	-	-	0,21	-	-	0,09	-	-
Sweden	4,96	-	-	3,13	-	-	2,14	-	-
Cyprus	-	2,63	-	-	1,27	-	-	2,63	-
Czech	-	2,44	-	-	1,32	-	-	0,95	-
Estonia	-	2,03	-	-	0,52	-	-	1,64	-
Hungary	-	3,24	-	-	1,79	-	-	0,28	-
Latvia	-	1,67	-	-	0,35	-	-	1,62	-
Poland	-	4,13	-	-	2,37	-	-	0,18	-
Slovakia	-	3,68	-	-	1,98	-	-	1,83	-
Slovenia	-	1,08	-	-	0,24	-	-	0,15	-
All countries	2,58	2,63		1,29	1,36		0,48	0,82	
EU15	2,58	2,64	0,02	1,29	1,43	0,12	0,48	0,60	0,21
New member states		2,61			1,23			1,16	

Table 2. Bivariate regressions between range, variance and the distance between two biggest parties and the hypothesized factors affecting them (the entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, *p<0.10, **p<0.05).

	All cases (N=37)	EP elections 1999 (N=16)	EP elections 2004 (N=21)
Range			
EU support (H1)	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01
EU polarization (H2)	0.60	0.69	1.18
Number of parties (H3)	-0.05	-0.16	0.00
Left/right range (H4)	0.15	0.19	0.12
Nr. of government parties (H5)	-0.22*	-0.30	-0.01
Length of membership (H6)	-0.01	-0.02	-0.00
Fiscal balance (H7)	0.14	0.21	0.04
Variance			
EU support (H1)	-0.01	-0.02	0.00
EU polarization (H2)	0.70	1.15	0.68
Number of parties (H3)	-0.07	-0.03	-0.09
Left/right variance (H4)	0.12	0.14	0.11
Nr. of government parties (H5)	-0.30**	-0.29	-0.33
Length of membership (H6)	-0.01	-0.03	-0.00
Fiscal balance (H7)	0.21	0.24	0.16
Two main parties			
EU support (H1)	-0.02**	-0.03**	-0.01
EU polarization (H2)	1.54**	1.77*	1.03
Number of parties (H3)	0.14	-0.01	0.23*
Left/right distance between main parties (H4)	0.18	0.14	0.17
Nr. of government parties (H5)	-0.02	-0.10	0.23
Length of membership (H6)	-0.01**	-0.01	-0.01
Fiscal balance (H7)	-0.01	-0.09	0.07