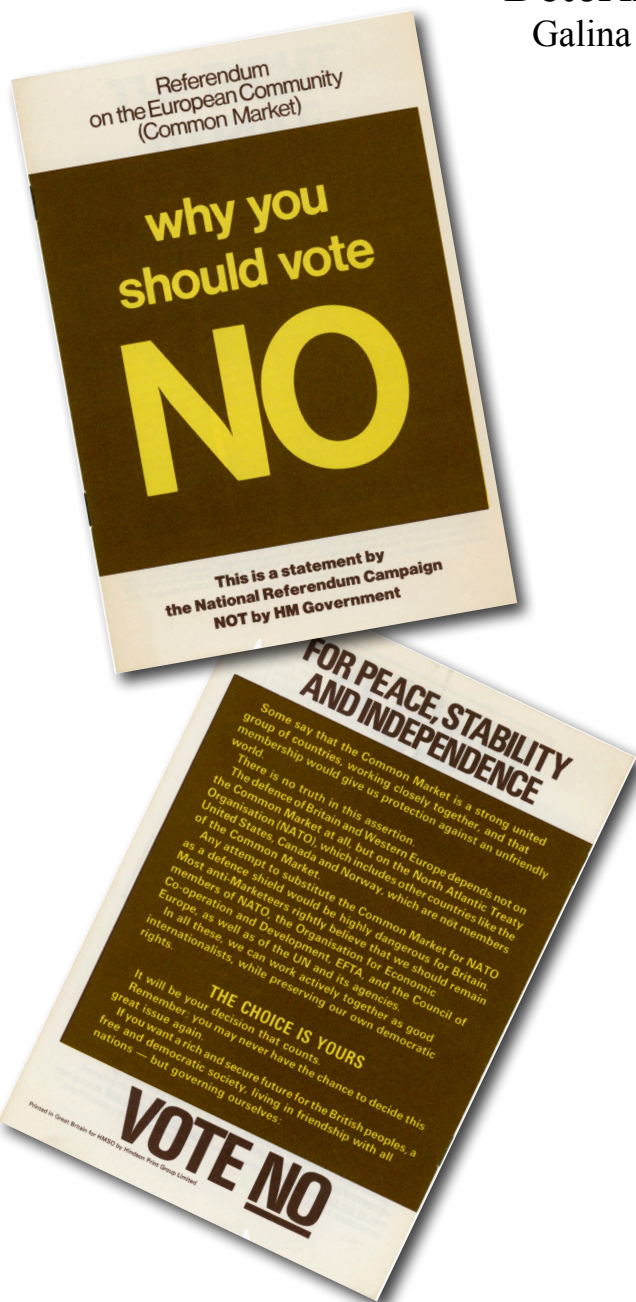


Insincere Voters and the Individual-Level Determinants of Euroscepticism

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Receiving the CES Pre-dissertation Fellowship allowed me to conduct fieldwork that was vital to the successful completion of my dissertation. In my dissertation I ask: What accounts for the emergence and electoral performance of Eurosceptic and populist political parties in the domestic party systems of Central and East Europe (CEE)? Related to this question, I explore how the determinants of electoral Euroscepticism differ from those of genuine, value-based Euroscepticism in the CEE. Value-based Euroscepticism refers to Euroscepticism as an attitude, as compared with Euroscepticism as a vote choice. It is measured by direct survey questions about views on the European Union, while electoral Euroscepticism is manifested in one's vote for a Eurosceptic party.

I argue that parties adopt a Eurosceptic agenda in an attempt to strategically challenge mainstream political elites on the core issue – EU accession – that has grown to define mainstream policies. Opposition to the EU thus serves only as a signal to voters and is instrumental in capturing the segments of the population that have become dissatisfied with mainstream governments. Citizens who choose Eurosceptic parties do so largely as a form of protest against what they see as the hollow mainstream party competition and the lack of choice on substantive issues. When mainstream political parties – united in the overarching goal of EU membership and rushed to comply with membership conditionality – grow closer in the political issue-space over time, voters are likely to be left with little substantive choice. Citizens across the region may feel forced to pick between competing political groups that are often viewed as 'all the same'.

Yet, a perception of 'sameness' of the mainstream political parties does not automatically need to result in a protest vote. If citizens felt

that the core political parties are performing satisfactorily, their convergence on a variety of issues might not have resulted in disenchantment with the political process. In Central and East Europe, however, mainstream political elites have continuously been charged with engaging in corrupt and dishonest behavior with disastrous consequences for the political system. Perceptions of widespread political corruption can thus serve as a trigger that, coupled with viewing mainstream parties as ‘all the same’, intensifies the likelihood that voters would choose a Eurosceptic party as a form of electoral protest.

For the sake of capturing this larger sense of disenchantment with the mainstream elite, Eurosceptic parties often have heavy populist undertones in their rhetoric and utilize the corruption issue to their benefit. Thus, I analyze Eurosceptic parties as a subset of the larger category of protest parties, and attempt to disentangle the link between populism and Euroscepticism. According to my argument, the domestic electoral success of protest parties that mix Euroscepticism with populism is largely due to the populist anti-elite and anti-corruption element in them rather than their anti-EU positions.

I used my fellowship funds toward conducting an original random representative survey in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic to test this project’s individual level hypotheses. These two countries were chosen for a variety of reasons. One of them entered the European Union in 2004 as one of the front-runners; the other one was delayed until 2007 due to deficiencies in terms of curbing corruption and organized crime and reforming the judicial system. Thus, the survey ensures that results will not be biased on the basis of the timing of EU accession and, by extension, the degree of progress in fulfilling the accession criteria. Secondly, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic provide the necessary range of types of protest parties. Bulgaria has experienced the rise of populist parties in the last few elections and a lower degree of Euroscepticism. The Czech Republic, on the

other hand, has encountered less populism but one of its two major parties has an explicit Eurosceptic bent in its ideology. Therefore, by combining the surveys from these two countries, one can acquire a comprehensive range of Euroscepticism and populism.

The surveys consisted of a random sample of 700 individuals of voting age per country for a total of 1400 respondents. Prior to having the actual surveys carried out, I conducted a dozen cognitive interviews in each country. Cognitive interviews are becoming a widespread pre-survey tactic for improving the validity of the proposed questions. Beatty and Willis (2007) define them as “the administration of draft survey questions while collecting additional verbal information about the survey responses, which is used to evaluate the quality of the response or to help determine whether the question is generating the information that its author intends”. Respondents were, in essence, asked to share their thoughts at each step of the cognitive process from reading the assigned question to selecting an answer. Also known as the “think aloud method”, these one-on-one interviews become particularly necessary in the context of translating survey questions into a different language as there always exists the possibility of translated concepts being understood differently in the local political culture. Cognitive interviews can eliminate or reduce this potential bias, as well as help correct for general survey threats to validity – such as too complex or misleading questions and social desirability bias. Information collected from all pre-survey respondents was then carefully examined for common trends and the final survey questions were modified to take into account potential confounding factors.

The collected data were crucial in helping me explain what drives the protest vote in the new member states – attitudes toward the EU or attitudes toward domestic governments. Results indicate that there are indeed different underlying motivations driving electoral and value-based Euroscepticism. Citizens who perceive a higher

degree of corruption among public officials in their countries are much more likely to vote for mixed (Eurosceptic/populist) and purely populist parties. Citizens who see a higher degree of mainstream party convergence are also more likely to pick these parties, although the effect appears much stronger when corruption perceptions are simultaneously high. People's attitudes toward the EU and European integration, on the other hand, were not found to be systematically related to vote choice when it comes to these political parties. My findings indicate that protest voting is indeed taking place in the region and that electoral Euroscepticism is, to a large extent, driven by domestic considerations.

The East European protest voters can be conceived as 'insincere' voters sending a message to their political elites.

Insincere voting has been found to occur in three cases – when citizens want to avoid wasting their vote on small parties (Cox 1997; Duch and Palmer 2002), when they want to moderate policy outputs through split-ticket voting (Fiorina 1992; Alesina and Rosenthal 1995) and when they want to send a message to candidates by voting insincerely in low-profile elections (Meiowitz and Tucker 2007). The type of insincere Eurosceptic voters presented here, however, does not fall neatly into these categories. In fact, they are more likely to vote for initially small parties with fringe agendas and their votes are likely to polarize rather than simply moderate policy. This behavior is exhibited in high-profile as well as low-profile elections and serves as punishment aimed at the whole class of mainstream parties rather than simply a message to the current office-holders.

The Eurosceptic voters examined here are not actively seeking to undermine the European project and often have favorable views of European integration. They pick protest parties because of their populist anti-mainstream appeal rather than

the European dimension. Some CEE citizens who do not trust domestic institutions in their countries are actually more likely to approve of the EU, possibly as an alternative to perceived domestic inefficiencies. On the other hand, by placing a lower priority on their views regarding the EU, voters are exhibiting signs of the same detachment that often plagues European Parliament elections. Willingness to put Eurosceptic parties in office thus indicates that voters are still unaware of the scope of impact that EU-level decisions have on their lives and may regard their Eurosceptic voting choice as a necessary evil given the greater salience of domestic issues.

My findings raise some concerns about the effects of Europeanization. While the mainstream elite consensus on the issue of EU membership undoubtedly facilitated

economic and political reforms in post-communist Europe, the lack of debate unintentionally created the preconditions for fringe parties to utilize the European issue to their advantage. Referendums on membership itself were held in some countries but individual policies or sets of policies were rarely debated – instead they were presented as the next set of conditions to be satisfied. The findings suggest that future enlargements would benefit from a more politicized approach to accession, as moderate Euroscepticism among mainstream formations would diminish public perceptions that parties have grown too similar in their race to membership.

In some cases, protest-based parties are said to act as correctives to inefficient or unresponsive mainstream political parties, and the surge of Euroscepticism and populism is followed by a regrouping of the mainstream actors in order to regain electoral ground (Casullo 2009). However, while this certainly seems to be happening in some European political systems, it comes at a price. Incorporating populists into political life

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has resulted in tentative adoption of populist or Eurosceptic rhetoric by mainstream parties in the hope of capturing some of the cherished protest votes. Thus, otherwise mainstream parties can subscribe to a more nationalistic, Eurosceptic or exclusionary agenda even if only for strategic vote-seeking purposes.

Citizens, however, are the ones affected the most by these developments. The populist resurgence creates a vicious cycle in which initial disenchantment with the political process causes voters to put protest parties in parliament. If mainstream parties adapt to the new strategic situation and ‘borrow’ some of the populist or Eurosceptic language, citizens are exposed to a political discourse that moves even farther away from the liberal democratic ideal type. Populism did not disappear in Central and East Europe after accession – instead, it is now growing in the party systems of West European countries as well. The traditional left-right ideological division is being challenged by more extreme populist parties,

which often have Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant positions. This pushes the party system toward a new dynamic where one large mainstream party is forced to compete with another equally strong protest-based party for people’s votes. Such reconfiguration can be seen in Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Sweden, the Netherlands and Norway. One effect of this development is that the political mainstream is beginning to move closer to their populist opponents – what constitutes ‘reasonable’ policy becomes reasonable through comparison with the right-wing populists.

In sum, my CES Fellowship research contributed toward the completion of my dissertation project by allowing me to test key individual-level hypotheses concerning citizens’ voting behavior in the new EU member states. Examining the determinants of protest-based voting in the region enhances our understanding of the link between citizens, domestic governments and the EU.

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