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PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Review
Article

Keywords

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Abstract

The European Union appears, in the context of a conceptual and transformational change, in the shape of a fluid structure that is continuously shaped by a wide variety of factors. Under the current redefining process, the present article pursues the amplitude of the social force in the Union's configuration. The EU can be currently viewed as a reality found at crossroads, due to a growing fragility of public support for integration and the increasing contestation of the EU through the amplification of Eurosceptic attitudes and the rising popularity of the populist-nationalist parties. In the conditions of a populism-terrorism-migration triad that is threatening the European integration project, this article represents an attempt to provide a preliminary insight on the forces that shape the configuration of this supranational structure, with regard to the factors that are accountable for the growing scepticism among the European citizens and have shifted the citizens' approach on the EU from a permissive consensus to a constraining dissensus.

INTRODUCTION

The European Union has recently become the focal point of an ongoing debate, as numerous divergent opinions and ideas collided as a result of a multi-directional crisis that affected the European citizens in different ways and to a different extent. A superficial observer of the EU could claim that nothing significant has changed at the core of this hybrid construction, as it continues to function as a “well-oiled institutional machinery” and “continues to produce directives, regulations, and decisions” (Hooghe, 2007). Undoubtedly, this fact can be confirmed, but then this would also mean overlooking the structural change that is transforming or, more exactly, is pressuring the EU to transform. At the heart of this constitutive process that is currently at crossroads, as it still seeks a unanimously accepted direction and a final destination, it can be argued that the public opinion or, in other words, the European citizens are the main voice that is advocating for change.

The democratisation process of EU matters can be perceived as a rather recent mutation, as the European affairs were until recently driven by elitist forces. As it has been noticed, “more democratic control over EU decision-making – stronger national parliamentary oversight, greater powers for the European Parliament, majority voting in the Council, and more EU referendums – has brought political parties and the public into EU decision-making. The era in which relatively insulated elites bargained grand treaties in the shadow of an uninterested and generally approving public has come to an end” (Hooghe, 2007).

For the scientific literature in the field this meant a transition with regard to the European citizens’ approach on the EU from a “permissive consensus” to a “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe, Marks, 2009), meaning that the growing role attributed to the mass public has become a force that can function as a constraint to all decisions that are being taken at the supranational level. This structural shift has been illustrated during the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone, which caused a pronounced decline in trust in both national and EU institutions (Hobolt, de Vries, 2016). Also, this critical moment resulted in an increase in support for Euro-critical parties (Cramme, Hobolt, 2014). These new actors on the political scene seized the opportunity to attract support from the categories that have been touched by the crisis and, in this way, this unprecedented development led to the existential crisis of the EU. In this way, the European Union contained within itself an antinomy: the control exerted by its citizens was needed in order to preserve the legitimacy of its decisions, while the same democratic control that the EU relies on has also produced a growing public contestation of its policies.

The democratic control over these institutions, coming from a divided and heterogeneous public

that generally lacks a common identity that could gather them around a common cause, along with a series of unpopular decisions that inflicted undesirable effects on some categories of public, have determined the appearance of Eurosceptic attitudes towards the European project. In this context, the literature on the subject of public attitudes has grown exponentially and, what is more, there has been observed a translation from the studies focused on support for the EU integration (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000) to the subject of contestation of integration, or the so-called Euroscepticism (Hooghe, 2007; Leconte, 2010).

The aim of the present article is to provide a preliminary insight on the forces that shape the configuration of this supranational structure, with regard to the factors that are accountable for the growing scepticism among the European citizens. While the main focus of the paper is to offer a comprehensive outlook on the existing scientific literature, it also comprises the main development directions intended for further research.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF TERMS AND EXPLANATORY APPROACHES

During the last decades, and more specifically beginning with the 1990s, the subject of European integration acquired more coverage, while becoming, at the same time, more contentious. The European Union became measurably more visible among the mass publics, the national parties and in the media (De Vreese, 2003; Hooghe, Marks, 2006; Imig, Tarrow, 2001). Following the same trend, most literature on public opinion has emerged beginning with the early 90s, focusing on EU regime support or policy-specific support. (McLaren, 2006; Hobolt, 2014).

When discussing the concept of public support for the European Union it is compulsory to discern between two levels of support: diffuse and specific. While diffuse support refers to the evaluation of the regime, engulfing a more fixed and durable attitude that tends to persist over time, specific support is taking into account the attitude attributed to citizens regarding policies, defined as “binding collective decisions taken by political actors” (Hobolt, de Vries, 2016). While diffuse support matters because it measures citizens’ support for the EU as a constitutional arrangement, giving it legitimacy and recognising its authority, the second type of support is central because it can articulate a more sequential image of the support, based on insular decisions or policies.

With regard to European citizens, it can be argued that the process of democratisation of the European polity represented a milestone for the integration project. For a considerable period of time, the European Union was imagined as a distant, elite-driven structure, as its citizens were viewed as

irrelevant. This situation tended to alter with time, as the European citizens were given growing decision power and, with that, more credibility. With the rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, it became clear that the public opinion was becoming an incontestable voice and, with it, the core idea of European integration has become increasingly disputed and debated by a new category of actors. This shift in the decision-making mechanisms has soon sparked the interest of the academic community, and, as a result, a wide range of scientific literature has been dedicated to the issues related to the role of public opinion for the European integration process (Franklin et al., 1994; Worre, 1995). Although the approach on public opinion has suffered various changes, its focal point remained mainly the same, focusing on the determinants of public opinion and also the consequences that this factor produces with regard to the process of European integration.

So, the core question examined among the scientific literature remains the same, focusing on what factors can explain the variation in public attitudes towards European integration. The general means for addressing this subject places public support in the category of dependent variables. Although public support can be divided into two dimensions, that is favourable or unfavourable to European integration, the positioning towards the European finality is conditioned by a plurality of factors. As research tends to become gradually more complex, by reaching new challenges and new conclusions theoretically and empirically, the subject tended to elude unilateral explanations and to embrace different viewpoints and multi-faceted approaches. Broadly speaking, there can be identified three main explanatory approaches for considering and understanding variation in support for European integration (Hobolt, de Vries, 2016; Hooghe, Marks, 2005). The most common approach is represented by the utilitarian one, which refers to the advantages that the European citizens receive as a consequence to adhering to the EU goals. The second approach takes into consideration the identity factor, arguing the capacity of the European Union to develop a community sense or feeling based on a common heritage for its citizens. Finally, the third approach refers to proxies or cue-taking and benchmarking approaches, meaning that the EU citizens' opinion on the European Union has as a starting point the attitudes from the political landscape at the national level, by taking into account the spill over effect.

UTILITARIAN APPROACH

The utilitarian perspective argues that the public attitude towards European integration comes as a result of an individual and rational calculus that evaluates the advantages and disadvantages contained by the integration process. In other words, the citizens will favour the integration process if the

advantages, whether they have an economic, security or social nature, prevail. This approach is deeply rooted into the economic stance of the European project, as the EU was focused, for decades, on economic cooperation and market integration for its member states. As a consequence, in the 90s, the scientific field was dominated by utilitarian explanations for public support (Anderson, Reichert, 1995; Gabel, 1998; Gabel, Palmer, 1995).

The idea around which the utilitarian approach revolves argues that the process of European integration holds a strong redistributive role, as it produces, because of its economic policies and regulations, a series of winners and losers. In other words, trade liberalisation and other economic reforms will favour citizens with higher levels of income, education and human capital, this category of people becoming more inclined to support European integration (Hobolt, de Vries, 2016). At the same time, the same process will create, for the category of low-skilled workers, a wide range of insecurities related to their jobs and their well-being.

IDENTITY APPROACH

As the competences of the European Union have expanded, by slowly becoming more than an inter-governmental organisation serving a mainly economic purpose, and while it gave more power to its citizens, the focus of the scientific literature also shifted, by trying to find a solid argumentation for public support in more symbolic terms. A central direction of this approach was constituted by the assumption that the EU can erode the national sovereignty by undertaking numerous capacities that were traditionally pursued by states (Carey, 2002; Hooghe, Marks, 2005, 2009). In this way, the EU was seen as a polity capable to blur the traditional boundaries between states and, what is more, it was seen as capable of creating the infrastructure of a new type of solidarity, based on a European identity. For example, a series of studies demonstrated that people with strong or exclusive national identities were more likely to oppose European integration (Carey, 2002). In this context, Euroscepticism or the incapacity of the EU to create a cohesive community around its scope can be understood through the absence of a common heritage or cultural and historic traits among the distinct populations it contains (Hooghe, Marks, 2005). This approach could also offer a hint to the immigration crisis inside the Union, as the exclusivity of some national identities would mean a natural reticence towards the others.

CUE-TAKING AND PROXY APPROACH

The third approach focuses on the intermediaries used by the European citizens to position themselves when it comes to the process of integration. Given

that the European Union appeared for a long period of time as a remote structure that did not interact directly with its citizens, so that they did not possess a sufficient amount of information in order to make a rational decision, it was assumed that the individuals used so-called shortcuts in order to overcome their information shortfall (Anderson, 1998). The cues or proxies generally used are the domestic ones, given the fact that actors such as national media, national elites or national parties are the closest related to the European politics.

A number of studies have succeeded to demonstrate the capability of national political elites to influence or shape the public attitudes towards European integration. The more pro-European a national party is, the more inclined its supporters are to welcome and pursue European integration (Hobolt 2007; Anderson, 1998). However, there has also been found some contradictory evidence regarding the relationship between political elites, European integration and public support. Whereas there are studies that claim that the influence of national political actors is a symmetric one, meaning that the more the citizens favour the national government, the more they will support European integration (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000), there is also evidence for the contrary. In other words, it has been demonstrated that when the citizens are disappointed with the performance of the national government and their trust level is low, they will be inclined to be more supportive of the supranational level of governance, as this situation will be more advantageous for their well-being. Countries suffering from severe problems such as corruption, poor performance of the state, low responsiveness of political parties, high structural unemployment etc. may find the solution in the European Union (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000).

These mixed results reached within the same academic sphere denote the complexity of the phenomenon of public support. However, the debate on Europe is complex, but “recent research has shown it has structure. It is coherent, not chaotic. It is connected to domestic political conflict, not *sui generis*” (Hooghe, Marks, 2009).

CHALLENGES AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The European Union is an extraordinarily incomplete contract (Hooghe, Marks, 2009). As its complexity increases and its range of competence expands, the EU is becoming more contentious. At the moment of speaking, this supranational structure appears as an open-ended process, without an established finality or defined scope. Moreover, due to its incumbent crises and its sometimes flawed answers and policies, the European Union seems to be found at crossroads, with an urging need for reform. In the conditions of mounting levels of scepticism towards European integration and deepening cleavages that divide the European

populations on a multi-layer structure, the future of European Union remains uncertain. The main political events, such as the economic and monetary crisis, the refugee crisis, the new wave of populist and nationalist enthusiasm, terrorism or Brexit, brought a sense of novelty within the society through their unprecedented character and opened new directions for further research.

Hence, in the conditions of a populism-terrorism-migration triad that is aggregated in the shape of a menace to the European integration project, the fundamental question that remains in the context of a fragmented scientific discourse is which are the variables that can explain the variation in public support for European integration. When re-evaluating the issue of public attitudes towards the European integration project it would be interesting to study the effects of the social implications of the EU. The European Union, through its policy and direction of development has maintained a strong redistributive role at an international level. As European integration has created new forms of competition, it also produced new redistributive flows and, at the same time, new forms of inequality (Hooghe, Marks, 2005). Following this logic, the process of European integration has divided its citizens into winners and losers of integration.

It can be argued that the redistributive role of the EU creates a so-called economic discrimination among its citizens, as it deepens the existing cleavages and produces new ones on an economic basis. Whereas inequality remains a reality at a national level, the EU tends to accentuate a new type of transnational inequality. That is, the poorer social categories living in the more developed member-states will be discriminated by favouring the underdeveloped populations living inside poorer member states. A question that can reside from this situation is if the EU is capable of managing its contrasting members in order to bring them on equal footing or if it will only manage to perpetuate the present state of affairs, mainly seen as a two-speed Europe.

Within this quest for offering a scientific perspective on the social role and capacities of the EU and the connection with the issue of public support in the context of the winners and losers of integration, the future research on this topic intends to include the Selectorate Theory belonging to Bueno de Mesquita and Alistair Smith (de Mesquita, 2012). According to this theory, any system of governance, no matter the regime, is dependent of the configuration of two elements: the nominal and real selectorate (including here the proportion of citizens that have a role in choosing their leader) and the minimum winning coalition (representing the proportion from the selectorate whose support is essential for ensuring a political leader's success in elections). This approach can prove useful through its explanatory value in trying to find an answer regarding the issue of public support for the European Union.

CONCLUSIONS

Beyond its economic component, which is utilised in numerous scientific studies, it can be argued that the European Union's space of incidence is a much more inclusive one, as it contains a wide range of implications in dimensions such as the social, security or political one. The European Union has the complexity of a genuine political system, although it appears as an incomprehensible structure or an incomplete social contract. In the same way in which the popularity of a ruling political group cannot be measured by only taking into account its performances on a certain level, public support for the European Union has gained the reputation of a driving force with direct effects on policy making and the welfare of its citizens, while the EU is considered accountable for all decisions affecting individuals. The full range of crises that can be somehow linked to EU decisions and poor administration of its areas of competence, such as the economic crisis or the refugee crisis, have led to a response or a self-preservation reaction that was materialised in a mounting level of distrust in the European institutions and decision-making mechanisms. In this way, it can be said that the European citizens, through their growing levels of contestation and Euroscepticism regarding the European project, have expressed their motion of no confidence.

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