

European Elections and Political Conflict Structuring: A Comparative Analysis

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1. The research problem

The project analyses the relationship between the electoral connection of citizens and parties and the structuring of political conflict in European elections. European elections are the most important *institutional* mechanism to establish a *direct* link between EU citizens and the European institutions. Since the first direct election in 1979, the competences of the European Parliament (EP) have steadily expanded, thereby increasing the importance of European elections (Maurer 2002; Rittberger 2005). Yet election turnout has consistently declined, and Euro-scepticism has grown among citizens at the same time. Evidently, European elections have so far failed to mobilize the necessary degree of political support that would ensure legitimacy for the EU and its far-reaching responsibilities and activities. The nomination of lead candidates (“Spitzenkandidaten”) in the 2014 elections did nothing to change this situation (Hobolt 2014; Braun/ Popa 2018; Braun/ Schwarzbözl 2018). The low turnout in European elections cannot be explained by institutional and structural conditions in the national context alone (as argued by Franklin 2001). Rather, we assume that the “electoral disconnect” (Hobolt 2014: 1529) in the EU is caused by *structural factors* in the EU’s multi-layered political system as well.

The *main assumption* of our project is that European elections can only mobilize the electorate and provide political legitimacy if they are able to *structure political conflicts in an independent manner*. This is the political precondition for establishing a close electoral connection between citizens and supranational institutions. This not only presupposes the existence of a competitive party system. It also requires that the issue preferences articulated by political parties in their European election manifestos become publicly visible during election campaigns and that these manifestos actually represent voter preferences. This is especially the case if party competition leads to a permanent structuring of political conflict, that is, a stable polarization of political actors (both parties and voters!) regarding the salient political issues. The standard model of democratic representation and responsibility (cf. Dalton 2013: Ch. 11; van der Eijk/ Franklin 2009: Ch. 8) assumes that these three elements—party preferences, public visibility of issues, and voter preferences—are closely interconnected.

This assumption has been challenged from two sides in recent years. On the one hand, the theory of “post democracy” (Crouch 2004) argues that parties and voters have been structurally disconnected in contemporary Western democracies. On the other hand, critics of the model of parliamentary democracy in the EU (e.g., Grande 2000; Beck/ Grande 2004) argue that it is impossible to establish such a connection in a multi-level system with competing political agendas, actors, and decision-making centres.

Nevertheless, the constitutional framework of the EU’s political system is based on the premise that such a close connection can, in principle, be established in European elections and that the EU’s democratic legitimacy of the EU’s political system can be ensured in this manner. The introduction of direct elections to the EP and the systematic expansion of that parliament’s competences were supposed to strengthen this connection. The aim of our project is to empirically test this assumption. Our research question is:

Do elections to the European Parliament have an independent structuring effect with regard to political conflicts, and does this conflict structuring create closer electoral connections between citizens and parties?

This question has not been investigated systematically in research on the EU thus far. Empirical studies of political conflict structuring have focused primarily on the European Parliament (Hix et al. 2007) and the European Commission (Hooghe 2001). Despite the EP’s central position within the EU’s political system, we know surprisingly little about the political mechanisms through which political conflicts are structured on European issues and channelled into the political system of the EU.

2. State of the art

Research on European elections thus far has mainly been interested in explaining voter behaviour. Our knowledge on the political prerequisites for European elections to provide legitimacy to the EU’s political system is still insufficient. This holds in particular for the structures of political conflict on which these elections are based, their evolution over time, and their importance for the relationship between citizens and the system of supranational institutions. This project aims to close this research gap. We bring together four research strands that have addressed aspects relevant to our research question, namely research on (a) European elections, (b) public opinion on European integration, (c) the politicization of European integration, and (d) the transformation of political conflict structures in West European countries. In the following, we briefly summarize the state of the art in each of the four research areas.

(a) European elections: Still second order elections?

European elections have so far been “in the shadow of attention” (Mittag 2011a: 11), at least when compared to national elections. Relevant studies have focused on the nomination of candidates, on voter behaviour, and on election campaigns.¹ This research was strongly influenced by the “second order election” model, developed by Reif and Schmitt (1980) to explain the outcome of the first direct election to the EP in 1979. According to this model, European elections are second order national elections, dominated by national policy issues and characterized by a specific pattern of voter behaviour. In second order elections, voters cast their votes less strategically (“voting by heart”). For this reason, the major parties in general and the parties in government in particular lose an above-average share of votes compared to first order national elections, whereas smaller, especially extreme parties gain a corresponding share of the vote. Although these analyses did not address structures of political conflict, the model—and the results of the empirical studies based on it (especially van der Eijk/ Franklin 1996)—is instructive for our project. Most importantly, the model implies that European elections do not structure political conflict in any *independent* manner. If these elections are dominated by national issues and if voters act less strategically, we should expect that the structures of *national* political conflict emerge more clearly in European elections than they do in the main national elections. If, alternatively, European elections are used by voters to express political protest, the conflicts would not have any *permanent* structuring effect. In both cases, the outcome would be significant incongruity between the conflict dimensions of national party competition and the political conflicts existing in supranational institutions (Franklin et al. 1996: 381). With respect to the standard model of representative democracy, this implies that the policies proposed in the European election manifestos are largely disconnected from voter preferences and public election debates, in which European issues—as in the 2004 European election campaign in Germany, for example—typically play “only a marginal role” (Niedermayer 2005).

Despite the EU’s expanding responsibilities and activities, the EP’s increasing legislative authority, and the EU’s territorial expansion, the second order election model has proven remarkably robust.² However, a number of empirical findings suggest paying more attention to the structuring of political conflicts in European elections. When reviewing the model for the

¹ On the state of research in general, see Mittag (2001b); on the 2005 European election see Niedermayer/ Schmitt (2005), and on the 2009 European election see the volumes edited by Lodge (2010) and Harmsen/ Schild (2011).

² See Reif (1984) for the 1979 and 1984 elections; Marsh (1998) for the 1979–1994 elections; Schmitt (2005) for the 2004 election; Hix/ Marsh (2011) for the 1979–2009 elections. For an overview see Marsh/ Mikhaylov (2010).

2004 European elections, Schmitt (2005) himself found that while the model was still valid for Western Europe, it did not apply to East European countries, which participated in European elections for the first time. Most important, there is evidence of a growing “Europeanization” of European elections for Western Europe: (a) Hix and Marsh (2011) found that the basic pattern of voter behaviour in European elections is influenced not only by national effects but also by Europe-wide voting trends (e.g., the electoral success of Green Parties in the 1989 election); (b) European issues play a substantial role in European elections: This has been shown by Dolezal (2012), in his analysis of the 1994 and 2004 European election campaigns as well as in the case of party manifestos issued ahead of EP elections (Spoon 2012). This is so in particular when considering not only constitutional but also European level policy issues (Braun et al., 2016); and (c) Manow (2006) showed that voter decisions are increasingly influenced by European policy issues. Scholars argue that this trend (d) has intensified in the 2009 European elections, which is considered as playing a “catalytic role” (Hrbek 2009) in that regard (cf. de Wilde et al. 2013). However, the analyses also indicate that (e) there is a “clear disconnect between parties and citizens” especially when it comes to European policy issues (Tiemann et al. 2011: 240). Even though European issues and conflicts played a larger role in the 2014 European elections because of the Euro crisis and a more personalized election campaign, first studies argue that European elections are still “second order in some ways, but not in others” (Corbett 2014: 1196). Taken together, these analyses suggest that European elections—the ongoing validity of the second order election model notwithstanding—have become more relevant to the structuring of political conflict and that European issues are playing an increasing role in this process.

b) Public opinion on Europe: The end of “permissive consensus”?

A second area relevant to our project, albeit not directly concerned with European elections, is research on public opinion regarding European integration. This research is based on the assumption that citizens’ attitudes towards Europe are an important, and increasingly more important, factor in the process of European integration (e.g. Gabel 1998; Tiemann et al. 2011: Ch. 2). Based on survey data, numerous studies found evidence of a fundamental shift in citizens’ attitudes towards the EU (Eichenberg/ Dalton 2007). Whereas the initial phase of integration was marked by a “permissive consensus” (Lindberg/ Scheingold 1970)—that is, a sympathetic but indifferent attitude towards Europe among the majority of citizens—this sentiment changed in the early 1990s during the process of negotiating and ratifying the Maastricht Treaty. Citizens’ approval of the EU declined rapidly during this period and then stabi-

lized again at a much lower level. In this context, the growing Euroscepticism among citizens became the subject of intense scholarly research (cf. Leconte 2010).

One focus of this research is on the determinants of citizens' attitudes. This includes, on the one hand, the relationship between the attitudes of political elites and those of the general public, i.e. the "elite-mass linkages" (de Vries/ Edwards 2009) and issue of mass and elite opinion cueing (Hooghe/ Marks 2005; de Vries/ Edwards 2009; Sanders/ Toka 2013). Even if findings are ambiguous, it is reasonable to assume on the basis of this literature that public opinions are independent of the positions of political elites and hence must be treated as an independent causal factor in analyses of politicization and conflict structuring in the EU. On the other hand, researchers have been interested in the motivations and explanatory patterns on which public opinion is based. They show that the first phase of integration was dominated by economic motivations (Dalton/ Eichenberg 1993; Gabel et al. 1995). As the integration process advanced, purely economic arguments were supplemented with additional factors. In particular, the strength of national identity was identified as being an important reason for the lack of support for European integration (McLaren 2006).

In sum, the most relevant findings from this research for our project are (a) that public opinion can be independent of the positions of political elites; (b) that citizen's attitudes towards Europe have become more critical, making it impossible to assume a permissive consensus with respect to the European project any longer; and (c) that the reasons for supporting or criticizing Europe have changed, with cultural and identity-related motives and factors playing an increasingly larger role.

c) The politicization of Europe: Is the giant still sleep asleep?

For a long time, the low importance assigned to European elections corresponded to the low salience of European issues and the low intensity of political conflict over these issues in the member states. With regard to political conflict, Europe seemed to be a "sleeping giant" (van der Eijk/ Franklin 2007). Empirical research on the politicization of Europe has revealed a substantially more nuanced picture in recent years (see especially Hutter et al. 2016). Numerous empirical studies show that Europe has become not only a more salient but also an increasingly polarizing issue in national elections and public debates (Hooghe/ Marks 2009; Statham/ Trez 2013; Hutter/ Grande 2014; Hoeglinger 2015; de Wilde et al 2016; for a summary of this literature see Kriesi 2016). Various reasons have been suggested to explain the increasing politicization of Europe: authority transfers from the member states to the EU with the Single European Act, the Maastricht Treaty and subsequent treaty changes in the past

twenty years (de Wilde/ Zürn 2012); the growing intensity of membership conflicts resulting from the EU's Eastern enlargement and the beginning of accession negotiations with Turkey (Helbling et al. 2010); and solidarity- and distribution-related conflicts that reached a new quality during the Euro crisis (Statham/ Trezz 2013). Hooghe and Marks argue that, as a consequence of this politicization, the political logic of integration has shifted fundamentally, and the permissive consensus has given way to a "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe/ Marks 2009).

In studies on the politicization of Europe, European elections have so far played only a marginal role.³ And yet, this research is illuminating for three reasons. First, it shows that European issues have become significantly more important in national political contexts. This implies that European issues may shape political conflicts in European elections even if these elections keep their character as second order national elections. Second, this research has identified a number of factors that are responsible for the politicization of Europe. Among them are right-wing and left-wing populist and Eurosceptical parties, the importance of constitutional issues, and the cultural-identitarian framing of these issues (Hooghe/ Marks 2009; Hutter/ Grande 2014). Third, the existing studies have revealed considerable variation between the EU member states (Kriesi 2016). This holds both for the intensity of politicization and the factors influencing this development (cf. Hutter et al. 2016).

d) Globalization and the restructuring of political conflict

The fourth strand of research of relevance for our project builds on cleavage theory (Lipset/ Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 2000) and analyses the (re)structuring of political conflict in the process of European integration and globalization. Except for Dolezal (2012), European elections are only a minor topic in this research context. But these studies nevertheless allow formulating important hypotheses on the emergence of political conflict structures over the course of European integration. Based on election data, Caramani (2006) argues that the conflicts that characterized the process of nation-state building in Europe also structure the new European party system. This results in isomorphic structures of political conflict at the national and European levels, which are both dominated by socio-economic conflicts. Flora (2000a, b), in contrast, assumes in his model of the European social space that Europe-wide centre-periphery structures emerge and solidify in the process of European integration (Flora 2000b: 158-160). He argues that the EU's growing importance is accompanied by a "Europeanization of divisions" (Flora 2000a: 119) through which territorial and cultural conflicts gain promi-

³ A rare exception is the study by de Wilde et al. (2013), who analysed public debates in online media during the 2009 European election campaign and found growing Euroscepticism in all countries under investigation.

nence over socio-economic conflicts which dominate politics in the nation-state. Bartolini (2005) provides a similar analysis of how European integration (re)structures political conflicts in Europe. He identifies several prerequisites that are necessary for a “European mass politics”, with its own conflict structures, to emerge at the European level.

Kriesi et al. (2008, 2012) have shown empirically that the denationalization of West European societies has in fact led to the emergence of a new cleavage which is cultural and territorial in nature. This “demarcation-integration cleavage” is first and foremost constituted by two issues: immigration (and attitudes towards foreigners more generally) and European integration. Furthermore, Dolezal (2012) shows in this research context that conflicts over Europe in European elections are particularly marked by constitutive issues. He explicitly rejects the argument made in the second order election literature, namely that national structures of conflict also dominate European elections. His results provide no evidence of a new “pro” versus “anti-Europe” cleavage in Western Europe, as expected by Flora (2000a, 2000b), Bartolini (2005), and, most recently Hooghe and Marks (2017). Nevertheless, these empirical findings suggest that European issues do have a structuring effect on political conflict by contributing to the transformation of the cultural line of conflict in West European societies.

e) Summary

To summarize this overview of the current state of research, the first thing to note is that a study which systematically links the three key variables for analysing the electoral connection in European elections—namely relations between party manifestos, election campaigns, and voter preferences—and analyses them over a longer period of time is still missing. Second, there are no analyses on the relationship between the electoral connection in European elections and the structuring of political conflict. Third, previous research on conflict structuring in European elections is characterized by contradictory expectations and findings. The following findings seem to be most important for our project: (a) Recent studies observe an increasing Europeanization of issues in European elections, although the second order nature of European elections is not contested. (b) Citizens’ attitudes towards Europe have become more sceptical and more marked by cultural and identity-related motives. (c) The process of European integration is becoming more and more politicized, especially in the electoral arena. (d) This politicization of European issues has been a key factor in the restructuring of political conflict in Western Europe. (e) These trends, however, strongly depend on the (domestic) political context and vary between countries. Against this background, we may *assume that political conflict structuring is now taking place in European elections as well—and this may*

have significant effects on the function of these elections in the EU's political system. The objective of our project is to test this basic hypothesis in a comparative empirical study on the basis of new data, especially with regard to the strategic positioning of political parties in election campaigns.

3. Conceptual framework

The project analyses empirically the structuring of political conflict, and the impact of these conflict structures on the electoral connection between citizens and parties in European elections. The key concept is the concept of *political conflict structuring*, which refers to the long-term polarization between political actors (parties *and* voters) on salient political issues. An *independent* effect of European elections in terms of political conflict structuring exists if the issues, actors, and relationships between actors in European elections differ significantly from those in national elections. This would be the case if other issues (especially European issues), other actors (e.g. Eurosceptical parties), or other structures of polarization (e.g. between mainstream parties and new, Eurosceptical challengers) were to emerge. A *long-term* effect would exist if this conflict structure were to be observed not only in a single election but over the course of a larger number of elections.

Conceptualizing electoral connection

Based on the model of democratic representation and accountability, three factors are at the centre of our analysis of *electoral connection* in European elections: a) the *programmatic supply* of political parties in their European election manifestos; b) *public debate* on European issues in European election campaigns; and c) *voter preferences* as expressed in opinion polls. In this context, two dimensions of electoral connection will be distinguished:

- first, *issue congruence*, i.e. the degree to which issues listed in the parties' election manifestos match those actually put forth in public election debates;
- second, *elite-mass linkage*, i.e. the degree to which voter preferences match the parties' programmatic supply and the issues emphasized by parties in election campaigns).

A strong match in both dimensions would signify a close electoral connection between citizens and the EU's parliamentary system. The project presumes that political conflicts become particularly visible in public *election debates*. For this reason, these campaigns play a key role in our analysis of European elections. However, we expect that systemic effects may play an important role in party competition. Consequently, election campaigns can follow a logic of

their own, which may cause parties to deviate from positions formulated in their manifestos. This may result in significant deviation from the preferences of their voters.

Concept of conflict structuring

Our main objective is to *explain* the strength (or weakness) of this connection and its transformation in European elections. To do so, we use a *dynamic-strategic concept of political conflict structuring*, as developed by Kriesi and Grande (cf. Kriesi et al. 2008, 2012). This concept generally builds on the cleavage concept by Rokkan (2000; cf. Lipset/ Rokkan 1967), which was already used productively by Flora (2000a, b) and Bartolini (2005) to analyse political conflict structuring in the EU. More specifically, it builds on Rokkan's assumption that the multitude of political conflicts in modern democracies are aggregated into a small number of cleavages and that stable "system(s) of cleavage and oppositions" (Lipset/ Rokkan 1967: 1) emerge on that basis. Following Bartolini and Mair (1990), such cleavages are defined by three characteristics: (a) the formation of stable *social groups*; (b) the long-term *political organization* of these conflicting groups; and (c) a specific *normative foundation* of such conflict. This means that potential structural conflicts only can have a lasting political effect once they are articulated and mobilized by political organizations. Political conflicts can be mobilized by various organizations and through several "channels". In European democracies, political parties have been the dominant organizations and the electoral arena their main channel for mobilizing conflicts thus far. The democratization of the EU's political system through introducing direct elections to a European parliament follows this dominant model.

Although Lipset and Rokkan (1967) assume that only a very few major social and political revolutions have the power to produce permanent cleavages in societies which shape their party systems, the ideological "content" of the conflict structures is empirically contingent to some extent; and the strength and the stability of these cleavages may vary as well. Both aspects have to be examined empirically, and such an empirical analysis of political conflict structuring must include both the preferences of citizens (demand side) and the issues and programmatic platforms promoted by political parties (supply side).

Yet our strategic-dynamic concept of political conflict structuring goes beyond a Rokkanian cleavage concept in two important regards. (a) First, unlike "structuralist" cleavage concepts, which assume that political conflict structures are determined by social structures, we assume the existence of *dynamic interaction* between social groups and their mobilization through political parties, movements, and the like. The social groups that are constitutive for a cleavage are thus not structurally predetermined but may be constituted politically—on a smaller or

larger scale—by “political entrepreneurs” (Enyedi 2005). The structuring of political conflict thus becomes an active, dynamic process between the political “supply side” (parties in particular) and the “demand side” (i.e. voters). (b) Second, we assume the political actors in this dynamic process of cleavage formation have substantial *room for strategic action*. They may use this room for action to emphasize or de-emphasize the salience of issues, to frame issues, to organize political conflicts in the form of political parties, interest groups and political movements, to form political coalitions, and so forth. *Cleavages thus emerge as the outcome of strategic political action*. In short: The cleavage concept on which the project is based conceives politics as a “strategic concept” (Schattschneider 1957: 933) and conceptualizes the relationship between the political supply and demand sides as strategic interaction between parties and voters. In the case of European elections, the strategic reactions to new, Eurosceptical challengers are especially important. As Meguid (2010) has shown, mainstream parties generally have three strategic options to respond to new challengers: they can ignore them, confront them, or adapt to their positions. Which strategy a party chooses in a given election campaign, and how successful this strategy turns out to be, is again an open empirical question.

Causal factors

Hence, the question of which factors determine the strategies of political parties is of crucial importance in our concept of political conflict structuring. The empirical analysis of these factors is another analytical focus of the project. Based on previous research, we assume that the mobilization strategies of political parties in European elections are influenced by four main factors: (a) the intensity of *intra-party conflicts* within mainstream parties; (b) the salience of European issues in *public opinion*; (c) the strength of *Eurosceptical parties*; and (d) a number of political and institutional *context factors*.

(a) The existence and intensity of *intra-party conflict* within the mainstream parties play a key role in the formulation of the parties’ programmatic supply and the way these positions are debated in public. Franklin et al. (1996) explain the dominance of national issues and the absence of political controversy over Europe in European elections by intense internal conflicts in mainstream parties on European issues. As a strategic response to such conflicts, mainstream parties try to avoid emphasizing such issues in election campaigns. However, such a strategy of *de-emphasizing* European issues creates a window of opportunity for new parties, especially Eurosceptical ones (so-called *challenger parties*). (b) The size of this window of opportunity also depends on the salience of European issues in *public opinion* and their de-

gree of polarization. The more salient such issues are, and the larger the share of Eurosceptical positions in public opinion—in short: the larger the “sleeping giant” is in a given election—the larger is the window of opportunity for new challengers. (c) The strategic reactions of mainstream parties are also influenced by the *strength of Eurosceptical challengers*. The existence of strong Eurosceptical parties increases the risk of waking up the “sleeping giant” and of mobilizing potential voters not reached by the mainstream parties because of their internal conflicts. Against this background, the 2014 European election, which was marked by a strong increase in the vote shares of Eurosceptical parties in several EU member states (France, UK, Denmark, Austria) is of special importance (cf. Treib 2014). (d) Finally, there are a number of *context factors* that may influence the parties’ strategic choices (cf. Kriesi et al. 2008). These include the timing of European “second order” and national “first order” elections, the existence of national referendums on European issues, national electoral law, the structure of the national party system, and the like.

4. Research questions and hypotheses

Based on these theoretical and conceptual considerations, our project aims to address three main *research questions*:

1. Has the electoral connection between European election manifestos, election campaign debates, and voter preferences become closer? To what extent do political parties in European elections represent the political preferences of national electorates?
2. Have conflicts in European elections become more structured? Is there a link between the strength of electoral connection and the structuring of political conflict?
3. Which factors have pushed or impeded these developments? What is the role of intra-party conflicts, new Eurosceptical parties, and public opinion when it comes to political conflict structuring in European elections?

On the basis of our conceptual framework and the literature reviewed above, several research hypotheses—some of them competing, some of them complementary—can be formulated in response to these questions. These hypotheses refer to a) the strength of the electoral connection, b) the evolution of political conflict structures over time, and c) the causal and context factors that influence both.

The project’s main hypothesis claims a positive relationship between the structuring of political conflict and electoral connection:

H1: The stronger political conflict structuring is in the EU, the closer is the electoral connection of the parties' programmatic supply, the main issues discussed in election campaign debates, and voter preferences (structuring hypothesis).

Regarding the structuring of political conflict in European elections, the second order election model and the empirical research building on it suggests a zero hypothesis that says:

H2: Because of their second order nature and the dominance of national actors and issues, European elections do not have an independent structuring effect on political conflicts in the EU (second order election hypothesis).

Regarding the electoral connection—that is, the relationship between the parties' programmatic supply, the main issues discussed in election campaign debates, and voter preferences—we formulate two competing hypotheses: an electoral connection hypothesis and a representation-gap hypothesis:

H3: Over the course of European integration, the electoral connection between the parties' programmatic supply, the main issues discussed in election campaign debates, and voter preferences becomes stronger (electoral connection hypothesis).

H4: As European elections are dominated by national party competition, there is a representational gap between the parties' programmatic supply and election campaign strategies on the one hand and voter preferences on the other hand (representation-gap hypothesis).

In addition, the literature on political conflict structuring in European integration allows formulating two competing hypotheses on the nature of political conflict structures in the EU:

H5: Over the course of integration, conflict structures in national and European elections become more alike, with socio-economic conflicts dominating at both levels (isomorphism hypothesis).

H6: As more and more competences are transferred to the EU, European elections are increasingly characterized by distinct conflict structures marked by cultural and territorial conflicts (cultural structuring hypothesis).

Regarding the causal factors that influence processes of political conflict structuring, three main hypotheses can be formulated on the basis of the relevant literature:

H7: The more strongly mainstream parties experience internal conflicts on European policy issues, the less willing these parties will be to discuss European issues in European election campaigns (intra-party conflict hypothesis).

H8: If Eurosceptical parties emerge and win major shares of the vote, political conflict structuring will intensify in European elections (new challengers hypothesis).

H9: If “Europe” figures as an important and controversial issue in public opinion, political conflict structuring will intensify in European elections (public opinion hypothesis).

Testing these hypotheses requires an extensive, quantitative empirical research programme to analyse the electoral connection and political conflict structuring in European elections in a longitudinal perspective. In the following we describe (a) the analytical steps of this research program, (b) the research design of the project, and (c) our methodological approach.

5. Work Programme

The project’s work programme consists of *three independent analytical steps*. In *step 1 of the analysis*, we examine the strength of the electoral connection in European elections along both dimensions: the connection between political parties and voters (“elite-mass linkage”) and the relationship between the parties’ programmatic supply and the main issues discussed in public election debates (“issue congruence”). This step is largely descriptive. The aim is to collect information on our “independent variable”—namely how it has evolved over time and how it varies between countries. This part of the analysis draws on opinion polls, data on European election manifestos, and media analyses of European election campaign debates.

In *step 2 of the analysis*, we study political conflict structuring in European elections. This step focuses on four aspects: (a) the parties’ programmatic supply in election campaigns, (b) the formation of voter groups in relation to this supply, (c) the comparison of conflict structures in European and national election campaigns, and (d) party strategies in European election campaigns. The aim of this part of the analysis is to identify the relationship between the type and intensity of political conflict structuring in European elections and the strength of the electoral connection in these elections. Aside from drawing on survey data, this part of the study is based on media analyses of national and European election campaign debates.

In *step 3 of the analysis*, we aim to explain the strength (or weakness) of the relationship between political conflict structuring and the electoral connection. On the basis of our conceptual framework, party strategies in European election campaigns will play a key role. The analysis will focus on those three factors that have been identified in the relevant literature as be-

ing particularly useful for explaining party strategies: (a) the intensity of intra-party conflicts, (b) public opinion on Europe, and (c) the strength of new challengers in party competition. Furthermore, we aim to test the explanatory power of several context factors. The analysis aims to explain the strategic choices that parties make when deciding which issues to put on their campaign agenda and how to position themselves towards these issues. Aside from survey data and official statistics, the analysis will be based primarily on media analyses of election campaigns and integration debates.

Table 1 gives an overview of these steps, the respective analytical dimensions, and the respective database.

Table 1: Work programme of the project

<i>Analytical step</i>	<i>Analytical dimensions / variables</i>	<i>Database</i>
Electoral connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Elite-mass linkage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Voter preferences – Main issues in election campaign debates b) Issue congruence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Programmatic supply – Main issues in election campaign debates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Survey data – <i>Content analysis EU election campaign debates</i> – Content analysis of EU election manifestos – <i>Content analysis EU election campaign debates</i>
Conflict structuring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Supply side <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Main issues in election campaign debates b) Demand side <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Formation of voter groups c) Comparison of conflict structures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – European election campaigns – National election campaigns d) Party strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Content analysis EU election campaign debates – Survey data – <i>Content analysis EU election campaign debates</i> – <i>Content analysis national election campaign debates</i> – <i>Content analysis EU election campaign debates</i>
Explanation of party strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Intra-party conflicts b) Public opinion c) Strength of new challengers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Content analysis integration debates – Survey data – Official statistics

d) Context factors

– Official Statistics

Note: Data to be newly generated (**bold**), own data from previous projects (*italics*)

6. Research design

The project combines two comparative perspectives: an inter-temporal one and a cross-national one. It assumes that processes of political conflict structuring extend over a longer period of time. As a consequence, an empirical analysis of such processes must cover a larger number of elections as institutionalized “windows of observation”. It also takes into account the findings of studies on European elections, the politicization of Europe, and political conflict structuring in Western Europe which have identified major differences between countries. For this reason, our project includes a larger number of West European countries.

Period of investigation

The period of investigation period ranges from 1994 through 2014 and covers five European elections, namely in 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014.⁴ The reason for not including elections prior to 1994 is that the early 1990s with the Maastricht Treaty in many ways represent a critical threshold in the European integration process: The scope of the EU’s competences and responsibility was expanded considerably, the authority of the EP was increased, citizens’ attitudes towards Europe became more sceptical, and European issues became more salient in national political contexts. Moreover, van der Eijk and Franklin (1996), in their study of the 1989 and 1994 European elections, found clear evidence that European issues played only a minor role in these elections. The proposed project can build on these empirical findings and will use the 1994 European elections as a starting point for the systematic analysis of political conflict structuring in subsequent European elections.

Country selection

Five EU member states are included in our empirical analysis: Austria, France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. These countries were chosen on the bases of a most-similar-systems design, which is used to study a limited number of countries with similar starting conditions. For this reason, our study only includes EU member states that can be classified as consolidated democracies over the entire period of investigation. Central and Eastern European countries are not considered for this reason.

The countries selected vary with regard to EU-specific criteria such as the duration of EU membership, the degree of integration, citizens’ attitudes towards the EU, and with regard to several political and socio-economic context factors (e.g. the national party system). The country sample includes two founding members of the EU, Germany and France; whereas the

⁴ We also plan to include the next European election in 2019.

UK joined the EU as part of the first enlargement in 1973, and Austria and Sweden became members with the third enlargement in 1995. The five countries also differ with regard to their degree of integration (cf. Leuffen et al. 2013). Whereas Germany, France, and Austria are very strongly integrated, the UK and Sweden are less integrated. Both countries are not members of the Eurozone. The UK is not part of the Schengen Area either. Finally, new right-wing or Eurosceptical parties have enjoyed very different degrees of success in national and European elections in these countries (cf. Kriesi 2007; Treib 2014).

This country selection has already proven its value in previous analyses of political conflict structuring and on the politicization of Europe. The project “The Politicization of Europe” (“Die Politisierung Europas”, PoIEU) focused on these five countries, and four of the five countries (except Sweden) were also part of the country sample for the projects on “National Political Change” (NPW) (cf. Kriesi et al. 2008, 2012; Hutter et al. 2016). These projects have shown that the five countries represent significant variations in the transformation of political conflict structures in Western Europe and in the politicization of European integration—variations that are also important in our project proposed here. However, we are aware of the fact that these countries represent only one of the three European “macro regions”, namely “North West European” countries, and allow no generalizations beyond this region (for the distinction of these regions see Kriesi 2016).

Moreover, this country sample allows us to draw data generated in these projects. This is especially the case with data on national debates on major European integration steps and data on national election campaigns. With the use of these data, it is possible to systematically compare the development of national conflict structures in European elections with first-order national elections.

7. Research methods and data collection

The project is based on four sets of data: (a) our new data collected on European election campaign debates (and a few national election campaign and integration debates); (b) data collected in earlier projects on national election campaign and European integration debates (NPW and PoIEU projects); (c) Euromanifesto project data on European election manifestos; and (d) survey data on voter preferences and public opinion. Table 2 provides an overview of the data used in the project.

Table 2: Overview of the proposed data collection

Country	Collection	European election campaigns	National election campaigns	National integration debates
Austria		<i>1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014</i>	1994-2005: NPW 2009-2013: POLCON	Up to March 2012: PoIEU <i>Euro crisis starting 2013</i>
France		<i>1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014</i>	1995-2007: NPW 2012: POLCON	Up to March 2012: PoIEU <i>Euro crisis starting 2013</i>
Germany		<i>1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014</i>	1992-2005: NPW 2010-2015: POLCON	Up to March 2012: PoIEU <i>Euro crisis starting 2013</i>
Sweden		<i>1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014</i>	1994-2006: NPW 2009-2013: POLCON	Up to March 2012: PoIEU <i>Euro crisis starting 2013</i>
United Kingdom		<i>1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014</i>	<i>1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014</i>	Up to March 2012: PoIEU <i>Euro crisis starting 2013</i>

Bold: New data collected in our project

In the following, we first describe the methodological approach for collecting our own data and then go on to describe how we use the other datasets for each of the analytical steps.

Methods

Collection of new data focuses on election debates in European elections and (on a small scale) on national election debates and European integration debates. The same method will be used was used in cases, namely a core sentence-based media content analysis. Core sentences represent the smallest unit that gives meaning to a grammatical sentence. They are composed of a subject (actor) and an object (actor or issue), connected by a (positive or negative) predicate. These relational data are particularly well suited for quantitative analyses of political conflict structures because they—unlike the method used in the manifesto projects or

in expert interviews—contain information on both the salience of an issue and on an actor’s position.⁵

Articles in the *national quality press* serve as the source for the core sentence-based content analysis. Our choice of the data source was guided by two criteria: (a) its availability over a longer period of time and (b) its comparability between countries. With regard to these criteria, national quality newspapers are still the most reliable data source compared to electronic mass media (TV news) and internet-based communication media. Coverage in electronic mass media, owing to differences in media systems and programming formats, creates major problems in terms of comparability; internet-based data sources are only available for the more recent past.

The two most important daily newspapers for each country, published over the course of the entire investigation period, were chosen to serve as data sources. Building on other research projects based on national print media, the project used the following daily newspapers as data sources: (a) Austria: Die Presse, Der Standard; (b) France: Le Monde, Le Figaro; (c) Germany: Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung; (d) Sweden: Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet; (e) United Kingdom: The Times, The Guardian.

The coding of articles was done manually by student assistants. Automated methods of content analysis are not applicable for our purposes because the structure of the texts to be analysed, especially election campaign debates in print media, is too complex. Such automated methods generally assume that each textual unit can be assigned to a clearly identifiable author and that the unit deals exclusively with one topic (Grimmer/ Stewart 2013). For the data sources to be used in this project, neither of the two criteria applies.

Categorization of issues

The project treats Europe as a “compound issue”. It assumes that a differentiated collection of data on European issues is necessary for a meaningful analysis of party positions in European elections and the strength of the electoral connection. The majority of earlier studies treated Europe as a simple variable and asked for its (relative) significance (compared to national issues) or for citizens’ attitudes towards “Europe”. Such an approach obviously fails to capture the multi-layered and multi-dimensional character of the European polity and of the European integration process. As studies on party manifestos (Hooghe et al. 2002), on voting behaviour in the EP (Hix et al. 2007) and on integration debates (Kriesi et al. 2012;

⁵ For a detailed description of the application of this method in our earlier projects see Dolezal et al. (2012).

Hoeglinger 2015) have shown, “Europe” is a multi-dimensional issue marked by both socio-economic issues and by constitutive conflict on European integration. Accordingly, Dolezal (2012) and Hoeglinger (2015) distinguish between transfers of authority to the EU (“deepening”) and enlargement issues (“enlargement”) when analysing constitutive issues; and between “neoliberal” policies (markets-making policies) and market-correcting policies when analysing policy-related issues. With regard to policy issues, we also distinguish between economic and non-economic issues (see Grande/ Hutter 2016); and between national and European issues, as in the Euromanifesto project. This conceptualization of European issues allows capturing the full range of issues and conflicts related to European integration.

Data collection

(i) European election debates

We analyse five European election campaigns for each of the five countries under investigation. For each election campaign, we collected data over a period of four weeks. This reflects the fact that European election campaigns are shorter than national campaigns, for which a data collection period of six weeks has proven to be appropriate. Data collection took place in two steps. In the *first step*, we applied a semi-automated method to identify newspaper articles on all relevant political issues during the data collection period. By doing so, we determined the salience of European issues in relation to national policy issues in each election campaign. In a *second step*, we then selected and coded all articles that refer to the EU.⁶ Because of the high importance of (national and European) executive actors in European debates, we not only coded statements by national party actors but also by a wide range of other national, foreign, and European actors. This approach enables us to analyse actor constellations related to conflicts in European elections in full detail and to avoid “methodological nationalism” when analysing these debates. The election campaign debates were coded with the same coding scheme used for election manifestos to ensure compatibility between the two datasets.

(ii) National election campaign debates

To be able to make statements about the independence of political conflict structures, European election campaign debates must be compared to national election campaign debates that took place shortly before or after. For four of the five countries under investigation, the required data can be taken from other projects directed by Kriesi and Grande and in the ongoing ERC project POLCON by Hanspeter Kriesi, for which the NPW data were updated. Because

⁶ Including only newspaper articles that make explicit reference to European elections would be too restrictive as such references are often made indirectly in national coverage of European issues.

Sweden was not among the countries studied in the NPW project, data was collected for the 1994–2014 national elections (except for the 2010 election) in this country.

(iii) National integration debates

We use national debates on the most important European integration steps as windows for observing intra-party conflicts. When it comes to studying intra-party conflicts on European issues, election manifestos and election campaign debates usually do not offer much information. For this reason, intra-party conflict must be studied in a context of public political activity, in which (a) European issues play a key role; and (b) in which it is possible to articulate divergent positions within political parties. Public debates on key issues of European integration (e.g. the Constitutional Treaty or the Euro crisis) satisfy both requirements and hence, from our point of view, provide ideal windows for observing intra-party conflicts on European issues.⁷

Major integration debates (including the accession debates for Austria, Sweden and the UK) were coded for all five countries in the PoIEU project by means of core sentence-based media content analysis. Of these debates, we use especially the data since the enactment of the Maastricht Treaty. Since the PoIEU project only collected data on the first stage of the Euro crisis (October 2010 to March 2012), and given the crucial role of the Euro crisis in the 2014 European elections, we expanded this dataset to include data on subsequent stages of the Euro crisis up until May 2014.

In our analysis of intra-party conflict we will use an indicator that captures the distribution of statements on a given issue within a party. For this purpose, we calculate the variance in the positions of party actors with regard to individual European policy issues. Furthermore, by considering actor- and issue-specific salience, it is possible to integrate the relevance of single sub-issues and positions into the calculation of the overall indicator. This means that frequently discussed issues and actor positions that are very visible in a given debate have more weight in the indicator than others. We believe this indicator is an innovative contribution to the analysis of intra-party conflicts, presenting a methodological and conceptual alternative to the dissent indicator used in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (cf. Bakker et al. 2015).

⁷ Alternatively, one could examine parliamentary debates and party conventions. In both cases, however, new data would have to be collected for all countries, which is why we decided against these alternatives, as we also believe that the explanatory power of such data is not superior to the data used by us.

(iv) European election manifestos

For our analysis of European election manifestos, we use data collected by the Euromanifesto project. This involves two restrictions, however. First, the Euromanifesto project uses a different issue categorization, which gives more weight to nationally relevant issues. Yet this way of categorizing issues can be transformed into the issue categorization used in our project (admittedly at the cost of losing some information). The Euromanifesto data are only suitable for measuring the salience of issues in election manifestos, however. For our purposes, this is sufficient, as European election manifestos are used especially in the first analytical step to analyse issue congruence, i.e. the degree of congruence between the parties' programmatic preferences and the main issues debated in election campaigns.

(v) Public opinion and voter preferences

Public opinion data is taken from various internationally comparative surveys. We draw especially on data from the European Election Study (EES), which has been collected since the first direct European elections in 1979 and mainly contains questions about voter preferences. In addition, we use data from three other cross-national surveys: (a) the Eurobarometer surveys (EB), because they have collected data on citizens' attitudes towards political actors, institutions, and policies on a regular basis since 1973; (b) the European Values Study (EVS), conducted since 1981 with the main goal of studying the basic human values of citizens all over Europe; and (c) the European Social Survey (ESS), which started in 2002 and also contains a small number of questions concerning the EU.

8 References

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