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Book Review

National Political Elites, European Integration and the Eurozone Crisis

Edited by Nicolò Conti, Borbála Göncz, José Real-Dato

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Abstract

The book draws on surveys of national legislators to analyse whether and how the economic crisis has changed the elites' levels of identification with the European Union, their perceptions of the functioning of the EU and their preferences for further integration and the future of the EU.

Keywords

European integration; Political elites; Economic crisis; Public opinion

The volume targets an audience of scholars interested in the European integration process and the role that political elites play in it. It is also a useful source for students of legislative representation and responsiveness, as well as for political economists trying to understand how economic circumstances influence the short and long-term institutional and policy preferences of policymakers.

The book is based on the project 'European national elites and the crisis' in which members of parliament (MPs) from 11 national legislatures were surveyed, prior to the refugee crisis and British referendum on EU membership, in Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain. In order to compare meaningfully the legislators' pre- and post-crisis preferences, this data was complemented with survey data collected largely by the same research team in 2007-2009, the 'Integrated and united? a quest for citizenship in an 'ever closer Europe' (INTUNE) surveys.

The first chapter, by Best and Vogel, analyses whether the economic crisis has changed the elites' levels of Europeanness (defined as attachment to Europe), support for further integration and support for a single EU foreign policy. According to their findings, since the crisis, elites have become more sceptical regarding further integration and the prospect of a single EU foreign policy, and thus more responsive to public opinion. However, the gap in emotional attachment to the EU between elites and citizens has increased. Real-Dato, Cotta and Rodríguez-Teruel investigate the respondents' post-crisis perceptions of EU institutions and their preferences regarding the future of them. Their analysis reveals that most MPs appear critical of how the Council and the Commission handled the crisis, but they are also favourable to further empowerment of the European Parliament, the European Commission and democratisation of the EU. MPs in countries that suffered the most from the crisis tend to think that the EU institutional structure does not take into account their countries' interests and places too much weight on some member states' preferences. The crisis led to a mostly indirect decline in legislators' trust in the EU: through their perception of citizens losing trust in the EU, whereas preferences regarding further supranationalisation seem to be even stronger in countries more affected by the crisis.

Lengyel, Lengyel and Conti study the crisis-induced changes in preferences regarding the Europeanisation of policymaking, distinguishing between policy fields, short and long-term preferences and most-preferred options regarding taxation at local, national and EU levels. An

important finding is that the crisis strengthened support for delegation of decision-making to the EU for all policies for the short term, whereas for the long-term perspective (although there remains remarkable support for Europeanisation of all policy domains), the intensity of this support has decreased compared to 2007. A general conclusion is that after the crisis, legislators became more supportive of EU governance irrespective of the state of their national economies. This finding is explored further in the next chapter, by Vogel and Göncz. They analyse the gap between citizen and elite views on European integration, the evolution of those views during the crisis and their determinants. Their analysis illustrates that this gap has indeed become larger: even if legislators' enthusiasm for further integration decreased, there was a much sharper decline in citizens' support. Nevertheless, according to Vogel and Göncz, increased polarisation of elite opinions on the EU has contributed to more congruence with public preferences.

Kucek, Kocijan and Verzichelli analyse the factors behind the disagreement between MPs and their parties regarding EU integration. According to their findings, this disagreement seems largely unaffected by parties' ideological and organisational characteristics, the salience of EU integration or government-opposition status. The same is true for MPs' seniority levels or their experience in local government. Instead, MPs with more frequent EU contacts tend to be more congruent with their parties as do MPs from Social-Democratic parties, as opposed to Conservative legislators.

Makarovič and Tomšič test how the crisis has influenced the pro-EU consensus among national legislators, focusing on the divide between old and new member states. It appears that the crisis has not loosened the pro-EU consensus of the elites. However, the authors show that the old versus new member states cleavage is still salient: elites from the latter are more attached to Europe. That said, the effects of certain independent variables - moderate political ideology, frequency of contact with the EU and perception of the EU's role in managing the crisis - play out differently for MPs from new member states with respect to support for further integration and average trust in EU institutions.

Finally, Marangoni and Russo investigate legislators' preferences for the EU's future, distinguishing between three models: federalist, intergovernmental and a compound model combining the two. A plurality of MPs supports the compound model, while only a minority opt for the federal model, although there is overwhelming support in the sample for strengthening the powers of the European Parliament, deepening integration and transforming the Commission into a true government of the EU. The authors illustrate that supporters of intergovernmentalism are driven by instrumental rationality, they doubt EU membership benefits their country and are more sceptical of future EU economic and geopolitical success; while federalist supporters are more leftist and, unsurprisingly, more attached to the EU.

There are many aspects to commend about the volume. Readers will certainly appreciate the up-to-date reviews of the literature on European integration, elite-citizen congruence or Euroscepticism that inform the research. The research designs used to analyse the data are appropriate and some of the operationalisations of the main variables are innovative. Above all, the book is convincing in illustrating that the national political elites' preferences regarding the EU are driven first and foremost by emotional attachment and ideological considerations, while the role of economic calculation is rather limited.

Nevertheless, some decisions of the contributors could also be questioned. First, while the choice of countries reflects various important cleavages (new versus old member states, countries hit hard by the crises versus some more resilient) and the sample includes four of the five largest countries in the Union, one wonders whether the main findings would hold if the sample had included countries where Eurosceptic parties have enjoyed stronger support for a longer period. Second, the link between the

theories being tested and the empirical analyses could have been made clearer: of the volume's seven substantive chapters, only four formulate explicit hypotheses. The reader's understanding of the magnitude of the empirical findings is also constrained by the fact that only three chapters include illustrations of the main effects of the regression analyses. Third, some chapters take seriously the extent to which parties' ideological and organisational characteristics structure and shape the MPs' attitudes and preferences regarding all the aspects of EU integration considered, but this is not consistent throughout the volume.

Fourth, a relevant question that is not fully addressed is to what extent the legislators' views and preferences are actually consequential. The book does not consider a series of contextual factors that could indicate the likely impact of the legislators' preferences on the actual EU integration process. One aspect is how active these national parliaments are with respect to the EU and how involved they are in scrutiny of the European legislative process. Another one is the variation in legislative career patterns: how often it is the case that politicians from the national parliament move to the European Parliament and other European institutions or vice versa? In some of the countries included in the study (for instance, France, Italy) there are numerous career switches between the two levels, whereas in others (such as Germany) European and national legislator careers are kept separate.

Another potential criticism refers to the nature of the data used in the volume. More specifically, the validity of the various analyses would have been augmented by supplementing the self-reported data with objective information on the MPs' behaviour or their positions. For instance, the legislators' frequency of EU contact or interest in the EU could have been measured with respect to membership in parliamentary committees dealing with European affairs.

Finally, a salient question is whether the reader can be persuaded by the overall optimistic outlook projected by the authors regarding the European elites' continuous support for further integration and the non-advancement of a 'constraining dissensus'. It could be argued instead that this is a snapshot that expired much sooner than expected. While the authors try to explain away their two deviant cases (Hungary and Greece) by referring to elite circulation processes specific to these countries, the validity of the overall assessment seems diminished most visibly by the current developments in Italy, but also more generally, by the decline of mainstream Social Democratic parties and the gains of parties propagating anti-EU rhetoric in both Western and Eastern European countries.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the volume makes a significant contribution to the literature on European integration, helping us to make sense of the ways in which the national elites perceive the current state of the process and foresee its future, amid increasing citizen disenchantment. Hopefully, it will be soon followed by similar studies.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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