

Backlash politics against European integration

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Abstract

The answer to the question whether opposition to the European integration process is an example of backlash politics is an ambiguous one. While the Euroscepticism from the radical right qualifies for backlash politics, the Euroscepticism from the radical left does not at first sight, although it also shows some traces of this kind of politics. Both the radical left and the radical right mobilise political discontent and are part of a 'populist backlash', but it is only the 'nationalistic backlash' against European integration of the radical right which qualifies as a politics with a retrograde objective. The argument is illustrated by the case of Brexit, the British version of the 'nationalistic backlash'.

Keywords

Brexit, Euroscepticism, nationalist backlash, politicisation of European integration, populism, populist backlash

What kind of backlash politics?

Alter and Zürn (this volume) conceive of 'backlash politics' as a politics with a retrograde objective, opposed to 'progressive politics', aiming to revert to a prior condition and involving extraordinary goals and tactics. The question is whether the opposition to the European integration process is a case in point. Opposition to European integration has been driven by new challenger parties from the radical left and the radical right, while established parties have resorted to a vast array of strategies to depoliticise European integration in national politics (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012; Green-Pedersen, 2012; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Schimmelfennig, 2018). To be sure, mainstream parties have not always succeeded in their attempts to depoliticise the issue (Dolezal and Hellström, 2016; Hellström and Blomgren, 2015), as is vividly illustrated by the British Conservatives, but they have generally attempted to keep it off the agenda. Given that opposition to European integration has come both from the radical left and the radical right suggests that the answer to the question is not an unambiguous one: while the Euroscepticism from the radical right qualifies for 'backlash politics', the Euroscepticism from the radical left does not at first sight, although it also shows some traces of this kind of politics.

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Hobolt and De Vries (2016), in their analysis of the 2014 European Parliament elections, find that the surge in support for Eurosceptic parties is related to the voters' negative perceptions of the European Union's (EU) management of the Eurozone crisis and to the degree to which they were themselves adversely affected. These effects apply for parties from both the radical left and the radical right, even if the effect of negative perceptions of the EU's crisis management is twice as strong for parties from the radical right. The key difference between the Eurosceptic vote for the radical left and the radical right is, however, that the radical right was benefitting from the Eurozone crisis in north-western Europe, while the radical left did so in southern Europe. In the northwestern European 'creditor' countries, the voters backed radical right parties that wanted to repatriate powers and disapproved of economic solidarity. By contrast, in the hard hit 'debtor' countries (mainly, but not exclusively in the European South), the Eurosceptic parties from the radical left like Syriza (Greece) and Podemos (Spain) or Sinn Fein (Ireland) were vocal opponents of the austerity policies imposed by the troika (the EU Commission, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB)) and demanded more solidarity between richer and poorer member states as well as a renewal of democracy. Importantly, in these countries, the radical left turned against both, the EU and the domestic elites. Thus, Alexis Tsipras, Syriza's leader, used the phrase of 'external troika – internal troika' effectively equating the three-party coalition government (New Democracy (ND), Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and Dimokratiki Aristera (DIMAR)) with the country's international emergency lenders.

Subsequently, the refugee crisis not only enhanced the Euroscepticism of the radical right in northwestern Europe, but also of the more established conservative right in central-eastern Europe. In the latter part of Europe, xenophobia runs high among the electorate in spite of the almost complete absence of foreign residents (Zaun, 2018: 54), and the parties on the conservative-nationalist right seized the opportunity to mobilise the 'defensive nationalism' which has been asserting itself against internal enemies (such as ethnic minorities: Russians, Roma and Jews) and external ones (such as the EU and foreign corporations colonising the national economy) already before these crises. This defensive nationalism is embraced by the transition losers (e.g. 'Poland B'), and has been fueled by the existence of contested national borders (e.g. national diasporas in neighbouring countries), by the unassimilated legacy of the Second World War and the Communist regimes, by 'more deep-seated vulnerabilities' (Haughton, 2014: 80), and by the strategic mobilisation of parties from the right (Enyedi, 2005). The refugee crisis and the attempts of European decision-makers to impose a resettlement scheme for refugees on all EU member states fueled the nationalist opposition in the Visegrad countries in particular (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) and led to increasing conflicts between the eastern European bystander states and the west European front-line and destination states (Börzel and Risse, 2018).

In other words, the Eurosceptic backlash of the radical left on the one hand, and the radical right (in northwestern Europe) and the nationalist-conservative right (in central-eastern Europe) on the other hand, has a very different meaning. In southern Europe, where opposition to European integration has been mainly driven by the radical left and where it has been most intense (see Hutter and Kriesi, 2019), it arguably did not have a retrograde objective. Thus, the Greeks (with the exception of their short-term finance minister Varoufakis) never intended to leave the EU. What they claimed was more solidarity from the EU and the other member states with their predicament. In the final analysis, the radical left asked for a different, more solidary Europe than the one that the

southern European countries had to deal with in the Eurozone crisis. By contrast, the Eurosceptic backlash of the radical and nationalist-conservative right in northwestern and central-eastern Europe clearly has a retrograde quality. This kind of Euroscepticism wants to return to a prior condition, where nation-states were reserved to the native population, and in full command of their sovereignty. It is this kind of Euroscepticism, which desires to restore the sovereignty of the nation-states ('take back control') and to preserve the homogeneity of the national population, that is more closely associated with 'backlash politics'.

The difference with regard to the Euroscepticism of the two types of radical parties is embedded in their radically different political orientations. The parties on the radical left do not tend to be nationalist, but to support immigration, cultural liberalism and economic integration. Thus, Syriza has been one of the most consistent advocates of equal rights for immigrants and of their full inclusion in Greek society. Syriza also supports culturally liberal claims such as gender equality and LGBT rights (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014: 132). More generally, in addition to being Eurosceptic, the voters of the radical left are strongly in favour of economic equality, rather supportive of immigration, and culturally more liberal than voters of mainstream parties (Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos, 2020). By contrast, what characterises the voters of the radical right, in addition to their Euroscepticism, is above all their opposition to immigration. But note that they are not more or less culturally liberal or supportive of redistribution than voters of mainstream parties.

It is important to add that parties from the radical left and the radical right not only express substantive demands of voters, but also political discontent with the way the political system works in their own country. While their 'host' ideologies connects them to different fundamental structural conflicts in society – to the class conflict (radical left) and to a new conflict focused on the national community (radical right, see below), to some extent they share the 'thin' populist ideology, which links them to the political sphere and to the political discontent of their constituencies. More specifically, the populist 'ideology' refers to the tension between 'the elites' and 'the people'. This 'ideology' puts the emphasis on the fundamental role of 'the people' in politics, claims that 'the people' have been betrayed by 'the elites' in charge who are abusing their position of power, and demands that the sovereignty of the people be restored (Mény and Surel, 2002: 11f.; Mudde, 2004). In line with their populist ideology, populist leaders favour a 'cultural backlash' that is tailored to the fundamental opposition between the people and the elites. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018: 12):

Populists favor the authentic (pure) 'low culture' of the people over the unauthentic (corrupt) 'high culture' of the elite (Ostiguy, 2017). Hence, its leaders portray themselves as 'men of the people', and, occasionally, 'women of the people', who like to drink beer in the pub (Nigel Farage), eat fast food (Donald Trump), love football (Silvio Berlusconi), or use vulgar language (Hugo Chávez). It is this backlash against the unauthentic, global culture of 'the elite', or in the populist terms of David Goodhart 'the Anywheres', that all populists share.

This kind of backlash involves a 'rejection of parts of the dominant social script', as suggested by Alter and Zürn in their introduction to this special issue, and an intentionally disruptive taboo breaking too. But note that this populist element of the radical parties depends on political dynamics related to the quality of political representation in a given country – dynamics which are developing independently of the structural conflicts that determine their

substantive demands. In other words, support for these parties is driven by both stable, structural conflicts of society (reflected in their substantive demands) and by more variable political discontent (reflected in their populism; Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos, 2020).

Radical right opposition against European integration

Although the backlash against European integration from the radical right has increased in the context of the recent crises that shook the EU (e.g. Bremer and Schulte-Cloos, 2019), it is not a recent phenomenon. Eurosceptic forces from the radical right have mobilised against the EU at least since the 1970s (Kriesi, 2007). Moreover, the radical right backlash against European integration is not an isolated phenomenon, but is related to a broader conflict that has been structuring party competition above all in northwestern Europe for some decades. Thus, this backlash against European integration is part and parcel of a set of processes all of which put the national political community under strain, raise fundamental issues of rule and belonging and tap into various sources of conflicts about national identity, sovereignty and solidarity. The emerging divide is mainly expressed in conflicts about the influx of migrants, competing supranational sources of authority and international economic competition. Scholars have used different labels to refer to the new structuring conflict – from ‘GAL-TAN’ (Hooghe et al., 2002), ‘integration-demarcation’ (Kriesi et al., 2008), ‘universalism-communitarianism’ (Bornschieer, 2010), ‘cosmopolitanism-communitarianism’ (Zürn and De Wilde, 2016), ‘cosmopolitanism-parochialism’ (De Vries, 2017) to the ‘transnational cleavage’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2018).

Some authors have interpreted the rise of the radical right in terms of a broader ‘cultural backlash’. Thus, in line with Ignazi (1992, 2003) and Bornschieer (2010), Inglehart and Norris (2016: 29) identify a ‘cultural backlash’ against the cultural shift that has taken place since the late 1960s and that ‘has fostered greater approval of social tolerance of diverse lifestyles, religions, and cultures, multiculturalism, international cooperation, democratic governance, and protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights’. It is this spread of progressive values that has, in their view, stimulated a cultural backlash among people who feel threatened by this development. They interpret the rise of the radical right as ‘a reaction against a wide range of rapid cultural changes that seem to be eroding the basic values and customs of Western societies’ (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 30). Although compatible with the notion of ‘backlash politics’ as retrograde politics opposed to progressive politics, this interpretation of the rise of the radical right in northwestern Europe is not specifically focused on the conflict about national identity and sovereignty, but is broader in scope and refers to a more general conflict between cultural liberalism and traditional authoritarianism.

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018: 10) also invoke a ‘cultural backlash’ thesis with respect to the radical right, but they define it more narrowly, exclusively based on immigration: ‘Simply stated, it holds that the rise of populist radical right parties is linked to mass immigration and multiculturalism, and support for these parties is mostly an expression of nativism’. Nativism claims that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the ‘nation’). It is a radical form of nationalism. This narrower version of the ‘cultural backlash’ thesis is more in line with the core idea of the structural conflict about integration versus demarcation and with the claims the radical right stands for. As opposed to the broader ‘cultural backlash’ thesis as defined by Inglehart and Norris, this narrower ‘nationalistic backlash’ thesis seems more adequate for the analysis of backlash politics in relation to European integration.

Among the radical right, the populist backlash of the ‘pure people’ against the unauthentic elites is closely related to the nationalistic backlash against the cosmopolitan culture. The reason is that the mainstream political elites have generally followed the cultural shift, have typically adopted a rather tolerant, multicultural and cosmopolitan attitude and have shaped key policies accordingly. In particular, it is the cosmopolitan elites who have promoted the project of European integration, under the cover of a ‘permissive consensus’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). It is only once this ‘permissive consensus’ broke down, once the public found out that the process of European integration had been ‘going too far too fast’ that the backlash politics of the radical right set in. All radical right parties are to some extent populist, and all of them combine the two types of ‘cultural backlash’ in one way or another. By contrast, among the radical left, the populist ‘cultural backlash’ is unrelated to the nationalistic ‘cultural backlash’, since, as I have argued, the radical left is not nationalistic in the same sense. Moreover, only some parties of the European radical left are populist parties (March, 2011). With respect to the radical left, the populist kind of ‘cultural backlash’ is compatible with the notion of ‘progressive politics’, as is illustrated not only by southern European radical left parties, but also by some Latin-American populists.

Brexit: A case of nationalistic backlash against European integration

The case of Brexit allows us to illustrate the particular qualities of the nationalistic backlash against European integration. Brexit turns out to be the British version of the nationalistic backlash that is expressed by the rise of the radical populist right in other northwestern European countries more generally. Given its crucial importance for the future of Europe, it is worth closer examination. There are two questions involved in accounting for the Brexit crisis which are relevant for the present purposes: the question of why the Leave vote was able to win and the question of who voted for leaving the EU. The first question addresses the size of the ‘backlash’, while the second question addresses its meaning. With respect to the first question, Evans et al. (2017) and Carl et al. (2018) argue that an appeal to British politics and British exceptionalism is needed to explain the Brexit vote. It is British domestic politics which explain why the British were given a choice to leave in the first place (with notable roles for Tony Blair’s and David Cameron’s brinkmanship). To call a referendum on the question was particularly hazardous, since the British have consistently given a far more negative appraisal of the effect of EU membership and they always had a weaker sense of European identity than the average European. The British never were warm supporters of the EU. Carl et al. (2018: 16) explain this with the country’s history (strong links with its former Empire, and the single European allied power that has resisted occupation by Germany), its culture (common law legal system and a national church) and geography (an island, which fostered the perception that ‘the continent’ is remote). However, the salience of EU membership was exceptionally low up to 2014. By contrast, immigration had for some time been a major concern of British voters, fueled in part by immigration from eastern European countries that had joined the EU in 2004. While attitudes about immigration had been largely independent of attitudes about EU membership, the two increasingly became associated with each other in the minds of the British public. This was the result of the renegotiation over the terms of UK’s membership (one of the key aims of which was to reduce the flows of EU citizens moving to the United Kingdom and the outcome of which was dismissed as worthless by the

Eurosceptic elites) and of the pro-Leave campaigns, which explicitly used anti-immigration rhetoric (Dennison and Geddes, 2018: 1146–1147). Ultimately, this association was reflected in the determinants of the vote: attitudes towards immigration were the major attitudinal predictor of vote choice after attitudes to the EU itself (Clarke et al., 2017), and immigration and sovereignty were the two issues cited most by Leave voters as motivations of their vote choice (Fieldhouse et al., 2017). Thus, in answer to the first question, the Britons' weak sense of European identity, their long-standing Euroscepticism was decisive for Brexit to become possible. But it took the activation of this long-standing Euroscepticism by the politicisation of large-scale immigration to make it happen. Thus, the Leave campaigns mobilised Brexit supporters in exceptional numbers (Hay, 2019). Evans et al. (2018: 392) note the disproportionate increases in participation in the Brexit referendum among the working class, poor- and less-educated, which still make up an important part of the British population and were all inclined to vote Leave.

In answer to the second question, the analysis of the individual motives for the vote uncovers both economic and cultural reasons (Clarke et al., 2017; Curtis, 2017; Fisher and Renwick, 2018; Hobolt, 2016). Thus, Curtis (2017: 32) suggests that, in addition to expectations about immigration and about British identity, voters' evaluations of the economic consequences of leaving the EU played an important role in shaping their vote too, but they did not have sufficient weight to deliver the victory to the remain side. This is largely due to the fact that only roughly one-third of the voters thought that Britain's economic situation would be worse after leaving. While Curtis (2017: 31) vaguely concludes that the 'outcome of the referendum is best understood as the product of the interplay between both instrumental (economic) considerations and identity-based considerations', Evans et al. (2017: 390) suggest that voters largely acted on their long-standing own convictions which they then rationalised after the fact. Accordingly, beliefs about the consequences of Brexit were highly one-dimensional: those who thought Brexit would have a positive impact in economic terms also thought it would have a positive impact in cultural terms, and vice versa.

The analysis of the vote at the aggregate level (Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Lee et al., 2018) puts the accent more on the economic origin of the cultural motives for the Brexit vote. It argues that the Brexit vote was anchored – predominantly, although not exclusively – in areas of the country that are filled with pensioners, low-skilled and less-well educated blue-collar workers and citizens that have been pushed to the margins not only by the socio-economic transformations, but also by the values that have come to dominate a more socially liberal media and political class. From this analysis, it emerges that the vote for Brexit was delivered by the 'left behind' – social groups that are united by a general sense of insecurity, pessimism and marginalisation 'who do not feel as though elites, whether in Brussels or Westminster, share their values, represent their interests and generally empathize with their intense Angst about rapid social, economic and cultural change' (Goodwin and Heath, 2016: 331).

A more recent study by Carreras et al. (2019) succeeds in linking the aggregate and individual level analyses and in clarifying the relationship between the economic and cultural origins of the vote. This study provides convincing evidence that regional economic inequalities are critical to explain the cultural grievances that eventually led to the Brexit vote. It shows that people who live in districts that have suffered long-term economic decline are more likely to adopt anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic attitudes. In other words, the 'cultural backlash' that ultimately motivated the Brexit vote is rooted in long-term structural inequalities in economic performance between regions benefitting from

economic change linked to globalisation and technological advances, and regions experiencing long-term economic decline.

In addition, the Brexit vote also expressed a 'populist backlash'. Thus, Evans et al. (2017: 391) report that 63% of the working class voted for Leave, compared to only 44% of the middle class. They also point to the fact that working class participation in the vote was higher than in recent general elections and they suggest that the referendum gave the voters from the working class and less-educated backgrounds a chance 'to "bite back" and for the first time in many years shape an important political outcome' (Evans et al., 2017: 394). Hay (2019: 13) adds that 'taking back control' was not just about taking back control from Brussels, but taking back control of politics from experts, too. In his view, Brexit succeeded, among other things, as a result of a 'combination of political disaffection and socio-economic dislocation' (Hay, 2019: 9).

The idea that the nationalistic backlash against European integration is rooted in the social groups of those 'left behind' is related to the idea that 'backlash politics' are closely related to the fear of individual and collective status loss, which has been claimed to be decisive for the radical right vote ever since Lipset's (1959) classic account (see Rydgren, 2007: 248). It is the sense of relative deprivation (or 'status loss') that is expected to drive the resentment felt by people who vote for the populist radical right and possibly also for the populist radical left. Thus, in their attempt to come to terms with the economic and cultural bases of the increasing vote for the radical right, Gidron and Hall (2017) have shown that, controlling for the 'objective' structural position, the voters' subjective social status is, indeed, significantly related to the choice of the radical right. Rooduijn and Burgoon (2017) confirm this effect for both the radical left and the radical right. They also show that it is conditional on the national context: individual hardship spurs radical left and right voting mainly when aggregate conditions are favourable – a result that is not necessarily at odds with the findings of Carreras et al. (2019), because the people in 'left behind' regions may feel the relative deprivation above all when the rest of the country is flourishing. Most importantly, Mayer et al. (2015) have shown that it is above all the subjective *trajectory*, that is, the difference between the voters' current subjective position and the one 5 years ago, which accounts for the choice of the radical right and, to a lesser extent, of the radical left.

Conclusion

What can we conclude from this discussion? The politicisation of European integration has increased across Europe. In southern Europe, where it has increased most, it is doubtful whether the increased Eurosceptic vote for the radical left is an expression of a backlash against Europe. It should rather be interpreted as the expression of an alternative vision of Europe, which clashes with the vision that prevails in some northwestern European countries. By contrast, in northwestern Europe, where the politicisation of European integration has mainly been driven by the radical right, and in central-eastern Europe, where it has mainly been the result of the mobilisation by the conservative-nationalistic right, it is clearly an expression of a nationalistic backlash. This type of cultural backlash is different in focus from the more general cultural backlash that Inglehart and Norris had in mind. It does not express a general traditional set of values, but a more specific adherence to the national community, which may or may not be associated with other types of traditional values. In addition, opposition to European integration, whether from the left or the right, expresses a populist backlash against the

cosmopolitan domestic and supranational elites, who are felt to be remote from the pre-occupations of the common man and who are targeted by movements from the radical left and the radical right. As the discussion of the Brexit vote suggests, both the nationalistic and the populist backlash are ultimately rooted in more structural conditions of economic insecurity and a general feeling of having been 'left behind'.

If this analysis is correct, the way forward to overcome 'backlash politics' against European integration points in the following two directions: a reinforcement of democratic procedures at the European level and an enhancement of individual economic security at the domestic level. What is needed to overcome the twin 'nationalist' and 'populist' backlash is the provision of opportunities for European citizens to have a greater say in the key decisions that are taken at the supranational level and that affect their lives wherever they live in Europe, and the provision of a basic social safety net that allows them to escape poverty and to live a decent life independently of the economic clout of their own country.

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