

## The study of national preference formation in times of the euro crisis and beyond

### 1. Introduction

Both the financial and economic, and the migration, crises show how important it is that the European Union (EU) is able to aggregate different views of the appropriate policy solution. These views emerge at all levels of the multi-level EU polity. They are expressed or harboured by citizens, mainstream pro-EU parties and their Eurosceptic challengers. Views on what should or should not be done at the EU level circulate in the local, regional, national and, indeed, transnational and supranational domains of politics. Not all of these expressions coincide or ultimately feature in what is decided at the EU-level, but the importance of understanding what different political actors want from Europe matters for explaining how the EU arrives at its decisions is difficult to contest. For these reasons, scholars of the EU have long been interested in what matters for political actors and how they arrive at what in the field is thought of as their 'preferences' in EU decision-making. Assigned a central role in the liberal intergovernmentalist framework elaborated by Andrew Moravcsik in the early 1990s, 'preferences' and 'preference formation' have become an important part of the conceptual toolkit for investigating EU decision-making. Despite the criticisms that liberal intergovernmentalism has attracted since its emergence, these two concepts have retained their attraction as they link EU decisions to the range of positions taken by member governments.

At the same time, even scholars who are critical of how liberal intergovernmentalism theorises the process of preference formation and how it conceptualises preferences,

and especially of how liberal intergovernmentalism distinguishes the notion of preferences from positions, use the very same terminology in their accounts (cf. Schirm 2018). In other words, although the value of ‘preferences’ and ‘preference formation’ as concepts is widely recognised, there is often hesitation and sometimes deep anxiety, about how they are defined and deployed within the liberal intergovernmentalist framework. Both the attraction of the terminology, as well as dissatisfaction with its application by liberal intergovernmentalism, are strongly represented in accounts of responses to the financial and economic crisis and attempts to explain the reform of the euro zone. As Csehi and Puetter (2017) have shown in their examination of accounts of the euro zone crisis, scholars may utilise ‘preferences’ and ‘preference formation’ as organizing concepts, but depart from liberal intergovernmentalism. Moreover, even some of the latter’s most stalwart proponents find it hard to adhere strictly to the understandings and framework as originally outlined by Moravcsik.

This dissonance is the starting point for this special issue. The purpose of this introduction and the articles that follow is to reflect critically on the usefulness of ‘preferences’ and ‘preference formation’ for understanding how views are aggregated by actors in EU decision-making. Rather than using the definitions offered by liberal intergovernmentalism as a starting point, this introduction undertakes a broader review of how preference formation has been conceptualised and theorised in EU studies and neighbouring sub-disciplines of political science. Taking this wider view makes it possible to address themes or pose questions that often go unaddressed when discussion is limited to an evaluation of the liberal intergovernmentalist framework. Indeed, we argue that problematizing preference formation is essential for new research on the euro crisis, and beyond.

Although often equated with governmental or even state preference formation, preference formation is arguably a wider political process in which many social actors potentially engage often in different ways. In this spirit, Hall defines preference formation as a political process 'by which social actors decide what they want and what to pursue' (Hall 2005, 129). Preferences of individual actors may be considered at an aggregate level but this requires us to conceptualize processes of aggregation.

Governmental preference formation is of key interest to students of EU politics who study decision-making between member state governments but the concept as such does not reveal itself in terms of how such preferences are formed or whether they can be identified in expressions of governmental action and communication.

Liberating 'preferences' and 'preference formation' from its moorings in (or appropriation by) liberal intergovernmentalism makes it possible to address a broader series of questions when analysing state preference formation in the EU: At which level does preference formation take place? Does it include local, regional, national, transnational, supranational and even global constituencies? If so, to what extent, and to what degree are these levels intertwined? Does preference formation also occur through policy transfer? Learning? International constraints? Does framing influence political preference formation? And, finally, how do feedback loops and the empowering (and disempowering) of certain actor groups influence preference formation in the EU?

The contributions in this special issue address these issues through empirical studies of how specific member state governments formed and defended preferences on the reform of economic governance mechanisms during the euro crisis. This introduction

provides contextualisation and points of reference for the discussions that follow. The next section provides a brief review of key theoretical approaches to preference formation, focusing in particular on 'old' and 'new' institutionalism, as well as liberal and the new intergovernmentalism. The following section introduces the contributions to this special issue and relates some of their key findings to these conceptual insights. Finally, we offer some brief conclusions on what can be learned from these in-depth case studies for research and conceptualisations of preferences and preference formation of economic governance and more generally.

## **2. Theoretical approaches to preference formation**

The notions of 'preference' and 'preference formation' are central aspects of politics. How and why actors establish what they want and how they pursue these preferences in relation to others is crucial in understanding how political and social systems function. Sub-disciplines of political science, including international relations, political economy and public policy, address the issue from different and diverse epistemological perspectives.

### *Preference formation in rational choice approaches*

Rationalist approaches in international relations and foreign policy-making tend to label state preferences 'interests' and consider them fixed. In this view, political outcomes result from the material interests of the relevant actors defined more or less directly in terms of the economic benefits that will ensue from cooperation (Frieden and Rogowski 1998; Rogowski 1989). The main value of this approach is that it highlights the material interests that underpin many political outcomes. As with other conceptual frameworks,

rational choice approaches are not uniform. In the literature on foreign economic policy-making, while some scholars within the tradition argue that national preferences reflect the country's major economic interests (Rogowski 1989 ; Frieden 1991; Moravcsik 1993, 1998, 2011; Aspinwall 2007), others emphasise the policy preferences of central decision-makers (cf. e.g. Krasner 1978; Gilpin 1981). Realism goes further and claims that state preferences may not reflect domestic preferences at all. It sees the state as an autonomous actor, which often pursues an independent goal of promoting the general well-being of the society as a whole.

Situated in EU studies, but with the explicit aspiration for recognition as a paradigmatic alternative to realism and institutionalism, *liberal intergovernmentalism* contests this view and argues that state preferences are not fixed. In this approach, state preferences are derived from domestic social pressures. They are rooted fundamentally in state-society relations (Moravcsik 1993, 1998, 2011, 2018; Schirm 2018). National preferences, according to Moravcsik (1998: 24) are an 'ordered and weighted set of values placed on future substantive outcomes', which are driven by geopolitical and economic interests in relation to European integration. Preferences are 'not simply a particular set of policy goals but a set of underlying national objectives *independent of any particular international negotiation*' (Moravcsik 1998: 20).

This definition is important in at least two ways. First, it asserts that preference formation is a domestic process that is independent of, and precedes interaction at the EU level, and thus implies a temporal sequencing. Second, the definition allows for an analytical differentiation between 'preference formation' and what is labelled as 'position-taking' (see also Degner and Leuffen 2017: 3). The latter occurs during

intergovernmental exchanges and may be the result of compromises, side-payments, or the formation of alternative coalitions (Moravcsik 1998: 64-66). It is assumed by liberal intergovernmentalism that preferences tend to be enduring. This allows for cases where preferences and government positions differ. The analytical distinction is rooted in the conviction that domestic preference formation is more fundamental than, and prior to, position-taking (Kim 2016, also Schimmelfennig 2014, 2015).

Political economy motivations influence the process of preference formation over geopolitical interest or ideology. According to liberal intergovernmentalism, national decision-makers, elites and economic interest groups are central to national preference formation. Simply put, Moravcsik (1993) argues that international cooperation creates domestic winners and losers amongst societal groups. In situations where costs are diffuse but gains concentrated, the beneficiaries of integration face fewer obstacles than integration losers. This makes it harder for political actors to ignore their demands. If costs are concentrated, but benefits diffuse, the opposite is the case and the losers from integration will be heard. The ambiguity of public opinion, however, in particular at times when policy issues become linked to questions of identity, makes it more difficult for liberal intergovernmentalism to explain how citizens and societal interests influence national preferences (Kleine and Pollack, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; cf. for response Moravcsik 2018: 1660).

While approaches, such as post-functionalism, functionalism, multilevel governance or constructivism address different aspects of these questions, including identity issues among the population and its influence on European negotiations, or the influence of domestic values and ideas, institutionalist approaches combine multiple elements.

According to one well-known definition, institutions are 'formal rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals in various units of the polity and the economy' (Hall 1986: 19). From another perspective within the institutionalist camp, by contrast, 'taken-for-granted scripts, rules, and classifications are the stuff of which institutions are made' (DiMaggio and Powell 1991: 15).

While intergovernmentalism in its broadest sense understands actors defining state preferences in particular as political elites, experts, economic interest groups and even parties, *institutionalists* define these domestic variables in a much broader sense. In an older tradition, the institutions in question refer to the formal legal structure of political systems, particularly the 'public laws that concern formal governmental organizations' (Eckstein 1979: 2), as well 'the ideas embedded in them' (see Rhodes 2011: 142, 145). In this approach, practised by among others Duverger, Finer, and Eckstein, 'legal rules and procedures are the basic independent variable and the functioning and fate of democracies the dependent variable' (Rhodes 2011: 145). Moreover, these 'rules are prescriptions; that is, behavior occurs because of a particular rule. For example, local authorities limit local spending and taxes because they know the central government . . . can impose a legal ceiling or even directly run the local authority' (Rhodes 2011:145). The old institutionalism, furthermore, is comparative, historical and inductive (Rhodes 2011: 146).

While the old institutionalism focuses on formal institutions and their interaction in political systems, the new institutionalism adopts a different understanding of 'institutions' and features an alternative research agenda. Whether or not the new institutionalism in its main variants is interpreted as a reaction to behaviouralism

(March and Olsen 1984; Hall and Taylor 1996; Adcock et al 2006), its exponents criticise 'old institutionalism' as 'atheoretical' (Thelen and Steinmo 1992: 2). Though the different new institutionalisms adopt quite different methodological approaches, they share what Rhodes (2011: 144) describes as a 'modernist-empiricist epistemology', where 'institutions such as legislatures, constitutions, and civil services are treated as discrete objects that can be compared, measured, and classified'.

The differences between old and new institutionalisms matter for the understanding of preferences and preference formation. For the older tradition, an examination of the respective powers and responsibilities of political institutions would be the starting point for understanding national preferences or positions. Variants of the new institutionalism, however, would take a quite different approach. Whereas rational choice institutionalism assumes as given individual preferences for optimising material advantage and holds that self-interest can explain the selection, persistence and decline of particular institutions, historical, sociological, as well as discursive, institutionalisms, believe that preferences are socially constructed and assume that preferences are suggestible or open to change (Hall 1993, Berman 1998, Blyth 2002; Schmidt 2013; Carstensen and Schmidt 2015). Preferences are based not only on expected or feared consequences, but also on what actors perceive as appropriate (March and Olsen 1989, Finnemore 1993). Actor-centred constructivism as a variant of institutionalism attempts to reconcile the foregoing, arguing that, while actors are indeed economically-oriented rational beings, they are embedded in institutions that indicate appropriate behaviour and hence establish boundaries in which individuals or groups act. Crossing these boundaries is possible, but it incurs a cost (Jabko 2006; Saurugger 2013). The implications for preference formation in the context of the EU as a multi-level system



are significant. It follows that the preferences, which are presented and defended by member governments at the EU level, are shaped in some part by EU institutional norms. This notion is essentially an insight from the new institutionalism.

*New intergovernmentalism* (Bickerton et al. 2015; Puetter 2014) is embedded in the broader institutionalist literature, and anchors this idea within an intergovernmentalist setting of EU decision-making. As a more recent theoretical framework, it addresses the notion of preference formation in two important ways. While new intergovernmentalism is compatible with the institutionalist notion of preference formation as an embedded process, it highlights a particular pattern of EU-level decision-making, which has been consolidated throughout the post-Maastricht period. Member states remain reluctant to empower supranational institutions, notably the Commission, along the lines of the classic community method. Instead, they prefer to pursue further integration by putting themselves in the driving seat. Rather than empowering traditional supranational actors, member governments use collective forums, or institutions, such as the European Council and the Eurogroup, to take important executive decisions themselves, including bailouts or prescriptions to correct domestic economic policy. The absence of legislative decision-making leaves unanimity among member governments as the only viable decision-making rule. In this context consensus-seeking has become the guiding norm in EU intergovernmental politics. This is detectable through highly institutionalized forms of policy deliberation among executive actors, which have a monopoly in exercising all key policy functions simultaneously: policy formulation, adoption and implementation. It is the institutional environment of the European Council and the Council that aligns member state administrations including senior bureaucrats and political decision-makers in a

transnational policy-making environment (Puetter 2014). For the new intergovernmentalism preference formation becomes an inherently transnational process that involves governmental elites. The administrative underpinnings of this deliberative intergovernmentalism (Puetter 2012) contradict the assertion that preferences are forged in a domestic setting before they are advanced at the EU level and implies an amalgamation of both. Moreover, the new intergovernmentalism assumes that frictions in representative democracy and changes to the role of specific societal actors, such as trade union and organized business, are key sources of the relative autonomy of member state governments in determining their own preferences on EU integration. Although this autonomy comes with the caveat that governments constantly worry about their legitimation, governments are able to make standalone inputs in EU politics (Bickerton et al. 2015: 714).

However, new institutionalist thinking might also open up further understandings of the domestic sphere, notably of the wide range of domestic factors that potentially influence preference formation. Although front and centre in discussion of the national coordination of EU policy (Kassim et al 2000, 2001), domestic institutions rarely feature in explanations of preference formation in their own right. The respective roles played by governments and legislatures, by national and sub-national authorities, and by central banks, are not only likely to be relevant to how a state positions itself in EU discussions, but are a key variable in accounting for cross-national differences. In this context, also the old institutionalism, for example, may in the absence of a convincing account of interest mobilisation, interest aggregation, or a theory of the state on part of liberal intergovernmentalism (Dimitrakopoulos and Kassim 2004), provide insights into how governmental institutions within the domestic setting arrive at a decision on what

position should be presented and defended at the EU level.

More broadly, conceiving the EU is as a multi-level system rather than a forum for hard bargaining between governments opens up the possibility that pressure for what counts as 'appropriate behaviour' may derive from a wide range of sources. They include domestic groups, veto players or public opinion at home, and transnational institutions, interest groups such as European associations, and European think tanks, and other governments, or even public opinion in other member states as horizontal factors within the EU setting. Expertise, ideology, and technical knowledge may also be important. In this context, Kathleen McNamara's research has shown that fundamental developments in economic theory played a key role in shifting the preferences of EU member states towards EMU (McNamara 1998). Paradigms or appropriate behaviour can be understood as beliefs about cause-and-effect relationships, which are central in establishing fundamental preferences over specific courses of action: 'Causal beliefs are rooted in theories about how the world works, but the credibility of those theories turns on our experience of using them. As experience shifts, so do our causal beliefs' (Hall 2005, 152; Hall 2012).

### **3. Studying preference formation in the context of the euro crisis**

Separating preferences and preference formation from liberal intergovernmentalism allows a far greater range of actors, influences and pressures to be taken into account when considering how and why member governments adopted their respective positions during the Euro crisis. In the above discussion we developed three important notions of preferences and preference formation, which we consider crucial in order to enrich the use and understanding of these concepts. First, we understand preference

formation as a transnational process, as argued by new intergovernmentalism. Second, we consider preference formation as influenced by the domestic institutional context, considering both new and old institutionalism. Third and finally, we investigate in how far preference formation is based on appropriate behaviour understood in the broadest possible way according to new institutionalist thinking.

This special issue features four empirical studies. Fontan and Saurugger (2019) examine preference formation during the euro crisis in France, Kassim *et al* (2019) look at how preferences were formed in the United Kingdom, the largest non-euro zone EU member state, and Degner and Leuffen (2019) provide an in-depth analysis of preference formation in Germany, the largest euro zone member state. Taking a transnational approach, Bojovic *et al* (2019) study the role of socio-economic interest groups and other non-executive actors in preference formation in nine euro zone countries in relation to the creation of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). The contributions critically examine with varying emphasis whether or not national governments were insulated from or exposed to domestic politics, transnational processes, and behavioural norms as they formed their preferences on crisis-induced EMU reform.

The two case studies on the United Kingdom and France show that preference formation with regard to the adoption of new EMU governance instruments was indeed a transnational process, as much as one which was based on domestic institutional factors. In the UK's case, in three of the four instances under scrutiny - the initial bailout of Greece, the capitalisation of the ESM, the legal nature of the debt brake enshrined in the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) and the introduction of so-called reverse qualified majority voting – government preferences were determined by a

small circle of top politicians in the absence of significant mobilisation, or even interest on the part of relevant societal groups.

The main constraints on HMG were imposed by Parliament and intra-party opposition (Kassim et al 2019). These variables, which are at the core of the 'old institutionalism', are absent from liberal intergovernmentalism. In the latter's pared-down conception of the domestic arena, which reflects the flawed premises of classic pluralism, the only actors are societal interests and the state executive. Such a limited conceptualisation of the domestic setting does not capture the factors that in particular the case of the United Kingdom has shown to be important, nor does it provide a basis for explaining cross-national differences.

Similarly, the French case study shows that economic governance was dominated by a small number of civil servants and representatives from the banking industry who formed a strong and tight policy network. The authors show that the convergence of preferences between the French government and French banks fostered the emergence of "economic patriotism" within a "post-dirigiste" state (Clift and Woll 2012). However, contrary to the UK case, the formation of French preferences was also influenced by the euro zone's institutional structure and power considerations even before member states started the intergovernmental bargaining process (Fontan and Saurugger 2019). On the one hand, Germany's economic power and legal organisation nudged French negotiators to internalise German's red lines when developing their own policy preferences. On the other hand, the iterative nested games that characterise euro zone macroeconomic policies were a window of opportunity for French negotiators to further their interests and protect their own red lines. Contrary to the case study on Germany, however,

domestic politics and electoral outcomes did not affect the formation of French preferences.

With regard to the German case, and drawing on the responsiveness literature, Degner and Leuffen (2019) challenge the claim that well-organised business interests determine governmental preferences in times of crisis. They argue, rather, that vote-seeking governments accounted for citizens' policy demands, given particularly high levels of saliency and public attention prevalent during crises. Based on original data from the 'EMU Choices' project, public opinion polls as well as newspaper articles, the authors trace the development of the German government's positioning on reforms, such as the creation of the ESM or the tightening of fiscal governance rules. They show that the German government, despite intensive lobbying efforts by banks and industry associations, were more responsive to the demands of the public. This leads the authors to conclude that input legitimacy in EU decision-making is stronger than often assumed, at least at the level of governmental preference formation in times of crises.

The fourth contribution investigates the influence of important socio-economic actors, including representatives of organised business and labour, as well as parliamentarians, in determining governmental preferences on the creation of the ESM during the euro crisis in nine euro zone countries. The country sample includes three debtor countries, (Spain, Portugal, and Ireland), four creditor countries, (Austria, the Netherlands, Finland, and Estonia), one small economy with a vulnerable banking sector (Slovenia), and Slovakia, a member state which had seen its government collapse on the issue of the ESM's predecessor, the European Financial Stability Facility. Bojovic *et al* (2019) suggest that in all these countries governments had significant leeway in forming their

preferences on the ESM and were driven predominantly by internal technocratic advice and their integration into EU-level structures of bureaucratic cooperation -- findings that match the case studies on France and the United Kingdom. Moreover, Bojovic *et al* (2019) show that initial governmental preferences were not challenged by important interest groups and that in those instances where parliamentary actors asserted themselves, the concessions they received did not affect the original principles of ESM design.

Collectively, these articles show that research on preference formation requires attention to what we refer to as the *horizontal* or even *circular dimension* of preference formation. Instead of conceiving preference formation as a process which centres only on the domestic sphere and particular actor groups, research must take seriously the formation of preferences on EU policy by different political actors interacting in different ways at different levels of the EU's multi-level polity. As Marks, Hooghe and Blank (1996) reminded us more than two decades ago, member state governments represent only one category of political actors among many others, even if they are the most powerful.

Moreover, researchers need to recognise the problems in preference formation. While research on EU governance distinguishes between input, output and throughput legitimacy (Schmidt 2013), it has not yet explored or defined a category for instances in which political actors form no particular preference. Moreover, broader scepticism towards or approval of EU integration in itself does not amount to a clearly articulated preference for a particular policy option. However, such beliefs may feature in the formation of preferences on the part of some actors, as the new intergovernmentalism proposes (Hodson and Puetter 2019).

The importance of process-tracing and the avoidance of broad generalizations about patterns of preference aggregation, in particular in relation to societal processes, emerge as strong messages from the contributions to this special issue in regard to the future research agenda on preference formation. Policy approaches that highlight feedback loops hold particular promise in this regard. In order to make decisions, humans and organizations rely on information from often complex environments (Simon 1997, 1985; Jones 2001). In order to define a policy preference, or, in policy language, a solution to a problem, political actors must identify the important attributes of a problem and match these attributes to the available solutions.

Although an issue of a public policy is often multidimensional, attention to the subject is usually unidirectional (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Hence, it is complicated for an actor to pay simultaneously attention to multiple dimensions of a problem. However, focusing events, or windows of opportunity, can serve as a trigger for policy change (Birkland 1997, Kingdon 1984). The euro crisis provided such a window of opportunity (cf. amongst others Degner 2018). Focusing events or windows of opportunity make a new dimension of an issue more salient, leading an increasing number of actors to be willing to change course. In framing the issue, the media, public perception and political symbols are crucial factors to influence actors' preferences, and this beyond the simple economic interests that prevail (Stone 1989, Hall 1993).

Rocheftort and Cobb (1994) argue in this respect that 'cultural values, interest group advocacy, scientific information and professional advice all help to shape the content of problem definition', and from there, we would argue, preference formation. The EU's



multilevel character adds further, but necessary, complexity to this understanding of preference formation. First, if national preference formation is not only the result of the influence of major economic interest groups and political elites at the domestic level but also of media and public perceptions, these perceptions and media are not domestically embedded but go beyond borders. Second, preference formation, as depicted by public policy approaches, is more complex than a series of linear push factors. It is a circular process through which political elites and experts, interest groups and social movements, as well as the media, contribute to the framing of a problem and influence state actors in shaping national preferences. Decisions taken on the basis of preferences at the EU level then once again influence domestic actors who adjust and adapt their positions, and ultimately transform national preferences.

Contributions to this special issue thus engage in tracing domestic as well as EU-level processes of preference formation and consider the interlinkages between different societal actors. A key element of research will be a focus on structuring elements of preference formation. The degree of formal or informal institutionalization of, for example, relations between transnational elites can be a key indicator for interlinked processes of preference formation. In a similar vein, societal processes such as the decline of the model of tripartite macroeconomic governance, which accompanies the evolution of EMU's institutional framework despite (failed) attempts of its institutionalization (Smismans 2008), are important aspects to consider.

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