

European integration constrains party competition in the member states

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10/05/2013

Kyriaki Nanou and **Han Dorussen** describe their research into the effects of European integration on electoral competition in the EU's member states. Their analysis considers how parties have changed their positions over time in nine distinct policy domains with varying degrees of regulation at the European level. They find that the distance between party policy positions has decreased in those areas where the involvement of the EU has increased. The effect is unique for member states of the European Union, but not equally pronounced for all parties. The EU has had the most impact on limiting the policies of larger, mainstream and pro-EU parties.



It is undisputed that the political importance of the EU has expanded substantially over time. The EU has both 'broadened' and 'deepened' its authority. EU legislation now affects all policy areas and most of them more intensely. In some areas EU involvement has become predominant or even exclusive; for example, **Liesbet Hooghe** and **Gary Marks** have observed that in 1951 monetary policy was the exclusive responsibility of the member states; in 1979, with the formation of the European Monetary System, there was power-sharing; and in 2000, with the implementation of the European Monetary Union, decisions were taken almost exclusively at the EU level. In other policy areas, such as national defence, the authority of the EU has remained more limited. What, if any, has been the impact of these developments on party competition across Europe?



We argue that transferring authority to the EU institutions matters for domestic politics since EU decisions once adopted attain supremacy over existing and future national legislation in the member states and function as *constraints* on policy change. The EU decision-making process tends to 'lock in' legislative outputs, because it is difficult to renegotiate original agreements. We argue that EU legislation limits the range of policy choices that parties in member states can pursue once in office. Ultimately, this also limits the alternatives political parties offer to electorates.

Our findings suggest that political parties neither simply ignore what is decided in 'Brussels', nor concentrate exclusively on those policy domains which are still largely decided domestically. Instead, they tend to accept the political reality that power in Europe is shared between the national and supra-national level. As a consequence, over time and in a number of crucial policy areas, such as socio-economic policies, party programmes across Europe have become more alike. Voters have less choice, and political parties not only look, but actually are more similar.

For our research we have evaluated the policy platforms of parties in 18 European countries (the 15 EU member states prior to the 2004 enlargement and three countries, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland, which are affiliated with the EU but are not members). The main data are derived from the [Comparative Manifestos Project](#) and cover



Protest at Assemblée nationale, Paris (Credit: Hughes Eglise, CC BY 2.0)

elections from 1968 to 2005. We examine whether increasing EU involvement in decision-making has different effects in member and non-member states. EU constraints should not have a similar impact on party competition in non-member states, since the full range of policy decisions at the EU level are binding for member states. For the same reason, we include information on parties' policy proposals in the 15 EU member states both *before* and *after* they joined the EU. The observations for non-members include the three countries that do not have membership status and nine members before they joined.

To measure the expansion of EU policy-making competencies over time and across policy areas, we use expert data collected by Hooghe and Marks. These data provide information on the extent of EU involvement in a number of policy areas based upon existing treaties – 'foundation period' (1950–1956), the EEC (1957–1968), the EC (1968–1992), the EU/Maastricht treaty (1992–2000), and the Amsterdam treaty (2000 onwards). By combining the Comparative Manifesto Project data with the EU Competency data, we are able to identify party positions on nine policy areas exposed to varying degrees of EU regulation over time.

The idea that parties and party systems have evolved over time and increasingly provide less distinctive policies is well-established. Our research complements dominant explanations, such as the [Richard Katz and Peter Mair](#) cartel-party model, and also explanations of the effects of globalisation on economic regulation, by emphasising the EU effect. Our research distinguishes expectations of policy convergence across policy sectors with varying degrees of transfer of authority to the EU, and evaluates the effect of the timing of transfer on party competition in each sector.

The main finding of our research is that in policy domains with increased EU involvement, the distance between parties' positions tends to decrease. As the commitments deriving from EU membership increase, governments become more constrained in terms of the policies they can implement. National executives can use the EU to commit successor governments to policies that are favourable to their party and the social interests they represent. Incoming governments can compensate domestic interests affected by EU legislation or use collective action within the EU to agree on common policies mitigating 'damage' over the longer term. However, once EU legislation is in place for a certain policy, it becomes impervious to change. A party that defies EU constraints faces a loss of credibility and could incur electoral penalties. As parties adjust their policy platforms to adopt positions in line with EU legislation, they offer less choice to voters. Notably, EU constraints impact differently on policy convergence in member and non-member states. In those areas where EU policy competence has increased over time, the policy options that parties offer in the member states have narrowed, but this is not the case for countries outside the EU.

Arguably, the convergence of policy positions should be stronger for parties that are most likely to be held to account for election promises. Larger and mainstream parties are more likely to form governments and to have the opportunity to implement their policy manifestos. In contrast, small parties, parties without governing aspirations, or Eurosceptic parties are expected to be less responsive to EU constraints. In effect, they may well try to benefit from agitating against EU policies. They can appeal to voters by channeling discontent with mainstream parties and 'elitist' EU politics. Parts of the electorate can cast a protest vote and express disagreement with EU policies, even while accepting that the policies of these parties are unfeasible. We find that as EU constraints increase, large, mainstream and pro-EU parties moderate their positions and adopt positions closer to those of their rivals.

In essence, the more decisions derive from the EU as currently designed, the less distinct are the policy choices on which parties compete and citizens can vote. These findings have important implications for democratic politics in the member states and should inform debate regarding the EU's future direction. One implication is that there will be less open debate on policies already decided at the EU level. Although the period covered by our study offers little evidence of a possible backlash, it is tempting to speculate whether the convergence of policy agendas we observed has contributed to the growing realisation by EU citizens, marked during the period of the economic crisis, that they can no longer influence public policy through voting in national elections.

This is in line with [Peter Mair's](#) observation, in a paper discussing the impact of the current crisis on political representation in Ireland, that 'this signals the onset of failure of representation and democracy without choices'. Our

observation that the EU has become a constraint on domestic political debate could also possibly explain increased Euroscepticism as a salient feature of electoral competition in some member states. Political parties, such as UKIP in Britain, or the PVV in the Netherlands, and even parties such as Golden Dawn in Greece, may have succeeded in exploiting a vacuum in the political space.

You can read a full version of the paper: Nanou, K. and H. Dorussen (2013), '[European Integration and Electoral Democracy: How the EU Constrains Party Competition in the Member States](#)', *European Journal of Political Research*, 25 (1): 71-93

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Kyriaki Nanou – *University of Oxford*

Dr Kyriaki Nanou is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Oxford. Her research focus is on issues relating to European integration, comparative European politics, public and party based Euroscepticism, party competition and Europeanisation. She is working on a book project that examines how the process of European integration affects different aspects of party competition at national elections (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).



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Han Dorussen – *University of Essex*

Dr Han Dorussen is Professor of Government at the University of Essex. His research focus is on international relations, international and comparative political economy and applied game theory. Current research interests include the relationship between trade and conflict, the use of economic policies in international politics, peacekeeping operations and the governance of post-conflict societies, and policy convergence in the European Union.



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