

RECON Workshop on Euroscepticism

Draft chapter: The UK- A case of extraordinary Euroscepticism?

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Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) is arguably a case of Euroscepticism *par excellence*. Branded Europe's 'awkward partner' (George 1990), the UK has been a reluctant European Union (EU) member from the outset both in terms of its political choices and in terms of public opinion, as this is voiced through and by media actors, as well as through opinion polls. During the '50s the UK attempted to antagonise the then new-founded EEC, with Whitehall developing an alternative 'Plan G' for a Free Trade area across Europe; a move that not only demonstrated British scepticism towards the Franco-German driven effort for European integration, but also fuelled suspicion and mistrust towards the UK from its continental neighbours (see, for example, Young 2000). After the UK's EU accession in 1973, scepticism has continued to characterise not only the country's stance towards the Union, but also the way Britain's role is viewed by its continental counterparts, not least because of key events, such as the 1975 UK referendum on EU membership and the British rebate, which Margaret Thatcher 'forcefully and successfully' negotiated in the 80s (which remains a recurring topic of heated domestic public debate and intergovernmental negotiations ever since).¹

What characterises British Euroscepticism is controversy: UK governments, at the early stages of their coming to power, have appeared to support the EU project and the country's role in it, only to retract on their pro-European rhetoric and acts later on. Moreover, Euroscepticism is not exclusive to party formations that sit at the extremes of the political spectrum: it features in the policy agendas and rhetoric of all political parties, with a tendency for parties to adopt a stronger Eurosceptic position when they are in opposition than when they are in government. At the same time, British public opinion consistently comes up in opinion polls as strongly Eurosceptic and largely ill informed and/or indifferent towards EU matters. As for the British media, it is telling of their attitude towards the EU that the European Commission EU Representation in the UK has a special service dedicated to rebuffing myths and inaccuracies about the EU circulated in the British press.

Is Britain really so unique in its Euroscepticism among all member states? Does it deserve the title of 'the awkward partner' of the EU? What sets the content of Eurosceptic expressions in the UK apart from their continental counterparts? In order to address these questions, we need to look beyond party politics and opinion polls and examine the 'making of' Euroscepticism through the process of public political debates. The online UK public sphere offers a unique glimpse at the way political actors and professional journalists, as well as citizens, shape their arguments about the EU polity.

By focusing, in particular, on the online debates in relation to the 2009 EP election campaign, it is possible to capture a higher volume of views on this otherwise little-debated topic. Before presenting the findings, I discuss the concept of 'uniqueness' of British Euroscepticism, as this emerges from analyses of party politics and opinion polls. This serves as the frame within which the making of online Eurosceptic views is then discussed. In the final part of this chapter I revisit the notion of 'unique British Euroscepticism' and discuss

¹ For a thorough historical analysis of Britain's roadmap to European integration since 1945 see Daddow 2004).

whether this is backed by the findings. To do this, I compare the data from the British case with those from other countries included in this study.

Profiling British Euroscepticism

Scholarly approaches of Euroscepticism in the UK vary widely, both in terms of the conceptual framework and the method(s) deployed to measure Euroscepticism. However, largely, most researchers agree on two points: Firstly, that the term 'Euroscepticism' is multifaceted, meaning that there is no one single expression or source of Euroscepticism in Britain; and secondly, that expressions of Euroscepticism carry, to varying degrees, an evaluative opinion of the EU as an idea and/or of the EU as an integration project (Alexandre-Collier 2002, Daddow 2006, Forster 2002, Vasilopoulou 2009). This approach of British Euroscepticism, as a wide-ranging set of attitudes towards the EU based on and driven by the worthiness of the polity as a whole and/or the process of integration coincides with more general definitions of the term outlined by scholars in order to describe the phenomenon of scepticism towards the EU across Europe (Boltanski, Thévenot 2006, Kopecky, Mudde 2002, Lubbers, Scheepers 2007, Taggart, Szczesniak 2004).

In the case of British Euroscepticism, identity is attributed a significant causal role. Gifford (2006: 851) defines Euroscepticism as a distinct and powerful national movement asserting conceptions of Britain's exceptional national identity. He argues that a strong national identity does not lead to a strong European identity, regardless of the level of discontent. Rather, he applies the concept of identity as the opposite of 'other':

'In a context of imperial decline, the nation has had to be persistently regenerated and there has been a need for an 'other' against which a 'new' Britain can be redefined. Since the 1970s, 'Europe' and more specifically the project of European integration, has played such a role. [...] Euroscepticism emerged as the guardian of powerful national myths and drew on assumptions about British political identity that appeared to further the process of post-imperial decline.' (ibid.: 856-857).

Party politics

Euroscepticism within the British party system has been thoroughly documented and analysed by a host of scholars (Aspinwall 2000, Baker et al. 2008, George 1990, Wallace 1995). The term tends to be associated with those politicians within the Conservative party who increasingly contested the project of European integration in the 1980s and 1990s, and eventually succeeded in establishing a Eurosceptic policy line for the Conservative party (Forster 2002, Gifford 2008). Nevertheless, Forster traces the history of Euroscepticism in Britain back to the end of the Second World War and Britain's first application for membership to the European community (Forster 2002), pointing out that Euroscepticism is not exclusive to the Conservative party. Moving along similar lines, Baker et al (2008: 94) identify four distinct periods of British Euroscepticism, defined by the actions of the British political elite towards the project of Europe, namely:

-The Euroscepticism-as-'conventional wisdom' phase (certainly in the earlier days of this period), dating from the end of the Second World War and up until Britain's entry into the

European Economic Community (EEC) in 1972. Being Eurosceptic during this period was the norm among the British political elite, even after the 'pragmatic economic rationale for membership' became apparent;

-The Euroscepticism-in-the-offence phase; a brief period between Britain's accession in 1972 and the 1975 referendum on Labour's renegotiated terms of precisely this membership. During this period, Eurosceptics 'fought a rearguard action to secure Britain's exit from the EEC' without success;

-The 'dormant' Euroscepticism phase, spanning from the year of the referendum until 1988, when according to Baker et al Euroscepticism was not at the fore of political actions and debates in Britain; and finally

-The current phase (late 1980s onwards), when Euroscepticism has become 'fundamental to the contemporary configuration of British politics and general elections'.

Baker et al (2008) locate the 'catalytic' role of Euroscepticism in current British politics in the acceleration of European political integration, which has fuelled Eurosceptic concerns on issues of sovereignty and national identity (see also Evans, Butt 2007).² This, in turn, has accelerated the growth of Euroscepticism within one of the three main British parties, the Conservatives, and has given rise to new Eurosceptic parties, such as UKIP and the BNP, which have gathered significant electoral momentum in recent European Parliament elections (Lubbers, Scheepers 2007).

At the same time, a new type of Eurosceptic politicians has come to the fore, those that Baker et al call a 'new breed of Soft Eurosceptics', who present themselves as pro-Europeans but strongly oppose the euro (Baker et al. 2008). Similarly, Sherrington notes that in the period of 2000-2005, the 'British agenda' for a 'Europe of states' was consistently promoted by all three main parties. In the aftermath of the Constitutional process (or 'post-Constitutional stalling of the European project', as she calls it), the European issue has become electorally 'damaging' or at least 'unrewarding' for British parties. So much so, that her research uncovered 'almost deafening political silence on the European issue' during the 2005 UK general election 'underwritten by a silent pact between all the major parties' (ibid.: 69 and 76). It, therefore, appears that the main UK parties want to have their cake and eat it. They cannot talk directly about European integration because the political cost would be too high, but they cannot adopt a hard Eurosceptic stance either, as this would not be pragmatic; hence, they deploy a softer type of rhetoric in favour of the European ideal but against integration/specific policies in practice.

A key trait of the British political parties' European policies, at least those of the three main party 'players', is that UK parties have been consistently inconsistent in their attitudes towards European integration. In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Wallace (1995: 50) argues that while '*in many member states cross-party positions are constructed, [...] over the development of the European policy agenda*' resulting in what we could identify as '*a "national" approach oriented towards shared "national interests" vis a vis the EU*', this process has not taken place in the UK since its accession in 1973. Instead, '*Britain's European*

² See also Gifford 2006 for an analysis of the role that the Maastricht Treaty in particular has had on accelerating British right-wing Euroscepticism, when 'the freedom of the people was posited against a centralising European state' (Gifford 2006: 862).

policy positions have been adopted by the government of the day in the light of its own prevalent preferences.' (ibid.).

At the same time Euroscepticism is deeply embedded in UK party politics and by no means does it constitute an 'exclusive' policy card for a specific ideological group or political party. A possible explanation for this is what Aspinwall (2000) and Usherwood (2002) have identified as the 'factional' nature of Euroscepticism within British political parties. According to Aspinwall, for example, the so-called 'Euro-sceptic social voice' found in member states with power-sharing governments does not make it into mainstream politics, as it gets 'filtered out' through a range of institutional mechanisms (Aspinwall 2000: 433). By contrast, British governments operating in a system of one-party rule have to give greater consideration to backbench Eurosceptic opinion (ibid.: 434-436; see also Hix 2007: 138). Yet other research contradicts this conclusion. Baker et al, for example, have shown that in the case of the Conservative party, Euroscepticism does not come from the back benches but is a key feature of the party's 'hyperglobalist ideology' (Baker et al. 2008, Baker et al. 2002).

Gifford argues that the UK is not a representative but a populist democracy, where political parties 'claim legitimacy on the basis that they represent the mass of the people' (Gifford 2006: 855). In this context, Euroscepticism has emerged as part of populist discourse, used by all political parties in their attempt to gain legitimacy by transcending party politics and appealing to the nation's collective identity. UK party Euroscepticism is, therefore, just one of the many expressions of the 'degenerating' populist approach to international affairs, characterised by 'the centrality of the Westminster parliament' and 'the myth of exceptionalism- a free country confronting an unfree European continent' (Wallace 1991: 29 in Gifford 2006).

The argument, thus, is that Euroscepticism in British party politics is unique because the populist nature of UK political discourse and/or the power structure of the political system (one-party rule) have allowed Euroscepticism to gain a prominent position in the mainstream political debate. While this was certainly the case in the 1970s and 1980s, Euroscepticism is no longer an 'exclusive' trait of British mainstream politics (de Vries, Edwards 2009, Crum 2007, de Vries, van Kersbergen 2007, Hooghe, Marks 2007).

Rather, what constitutes British party Euroscepticism 'a source of fascination, perplexity, and sometimes frustration' (Baker et al. 2008) is the combination of the following: Euroscepticism is, indeed, found in the political discourse of all UK parties. At the same time, with the exception of some minor left-wing parties that play no role in national politics, its basis is on the collective-identity populist argument, i.e. the 'defence of national sovereignty from Europe' cue. This means that even parties such Labour and the Conservatives, who position themselves in the centre of the political spectrum, display the type of Euroscepticism usually attributed to right-wing extremist parties across Europe (see de Vries, Edwards 2009 for a definition of extreme right- and left-wing Euroscepticism).

Public opinion

Public opinion polls consistently place the UK at the bottom of the list among EU member states when it comes to trust towards the Union and its institutions. At first glance, the UK's EU membership also gathers little support from the public, both in terms of absolute

numbers and in comparison to the public opinion in other member states. Specifically, in the latest Eurobarometer public opinion poll (Eurobarometer 2008) the country's EU membership received a positive evaluation from only 32% of the respondents, when the European average is at 53% and with only two other member states where public opinion ranks lower (Hungary and Latvia, with a positive evaluation of membership at 31% and 27% respectively). The British public is also the least trusting of the EU as a polity, with only 25% of respondents declaring their tendency to trust the EU overall (ibid.: 27). Indicative of the British public's level of distrust towards the EU polity is the amount of percentage points that has consistently separated it from the EU average in the last five years (a difference of 20.5 percentage points on average, based on Eurobarometer figures from spring 2004 until autumn 2008); as well the distance from the second most distrusting member state, which on the last poll was Italy, with 41% of respondents there declaring their tendency to trust the EU on the whole (ibid.).

Sceptical as they may be towards EU institutions and the benefits of an EU membership, the British support intergovernmental cooperation at EU level on matters such as the fight against terrorism (67%; cf. 79% EU average); protection of the environment (57%; cf. 67% EU average); defence and foreign affairs and immigration (both at 43% of support, with EU averages at 64% and 60% respectively); and crime, which is also the second major concern for the British public (34% in support of joint EU decisions, with EU average at 38%) (ibid.).

These statistics are consistent with research findings on Euroscepticism in Britain and across Europe. Wessels, for example, found that although adamant Eurosceptics (no European identity and negative evaluation of the EU's performance) make up 14.2% of all Eurosceptics in the 25 countries (32% of all European citizens are classified as Eurosceptics of one type or the other), in the UK they constitute the majority of Eurosceptics at 29%. This brings the country first in Eurosceptic ranking (the total amount of Eurosceptic population in the UK is 46%, significantly higher than the total European figure) (Wessels 2007: 301- 302).

However, upon closer inspection, the above figures reveal not so much a Eurosceptic public in the UK, as a politics-sceptic one. The British appear distrustful not only of EU institutions but of their national counterparts too (Eurobarometer 2008; also Figures 1 and 2 below). Moreover, the public's trust towards institutions increases, the more specifically defined the latter are, i.e. the British are more trustful of the European Parliament, than the EU as a whole (ibid.). In addition, although the UK public appears less trustful of the EU than the publics in most other member states, its support for the EU polity and institutions follows the same trend as the EU average (ibid.). It is also important to note that insofar as the evaluation of EU membership is concerned, the positive response was lower than the EU average (53%) in 13 out of 27 member states, which reflects a more general shift towards Euroscepticism across Europe, in terms of EU polity worth (ibid.: 31).

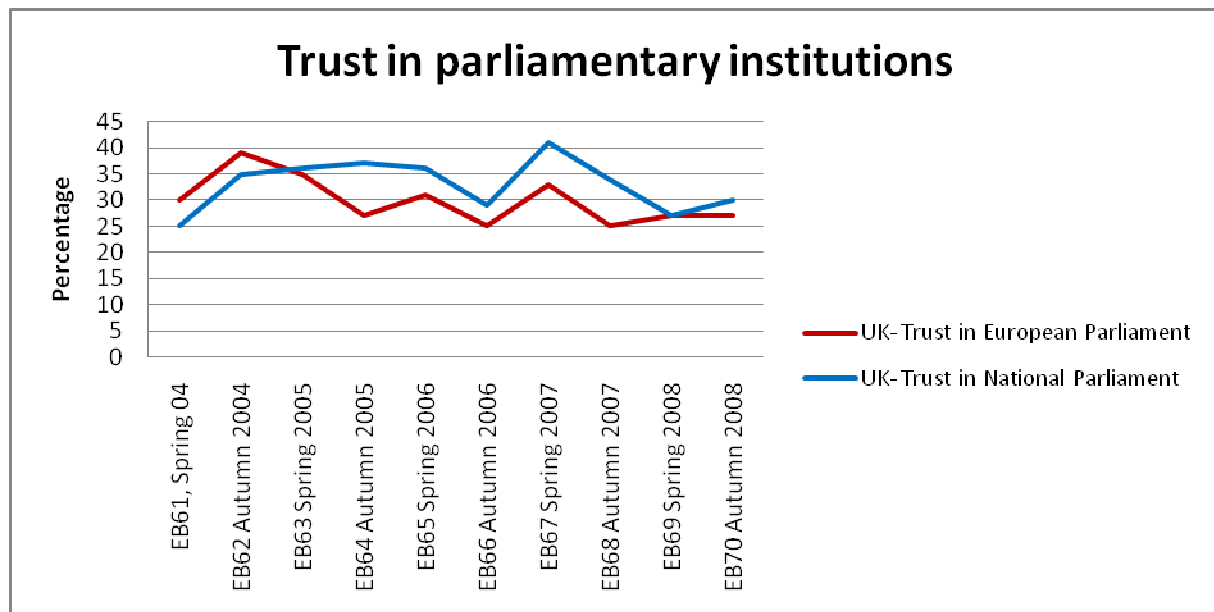


Figure 1: Trust of UK citizens to the national and European parliament (Source Eurobarometer).

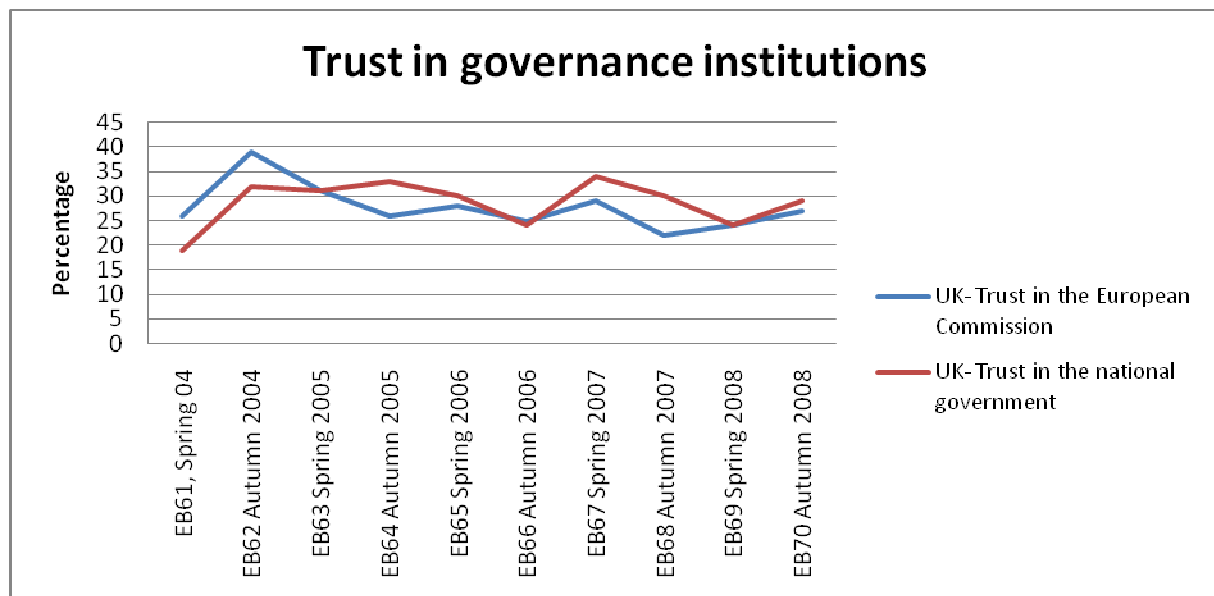


Figure 2: Trust of UK citizens to national and European governance institutions (Source Eurobarometer).

The above confirm Rohrschneider's argument that citizens' trust towards EU institutions is proportional to their trust towards their domestic institutions and political system, i.e. the higher the trust to domestic institutions, the higher the trust to the EU, as citizens feel their interests are being adequately safeguarded by their national representatives in the EU (Rohrschneider 2002).³ If British citizens are distrustful of their domestic political system, it follows that they will show low levels of trust for the EU too.

³ Conversely, Anderson argues that citizens' attitudes towards the EU is inversely proportional to their attitudes towards the domestic political system (Anderson 1998). The more citizens find that their interests and needs are met by their national government/political system, the less they will agree with a transfer of powers to the European level (see also Sanchez-Cuenca 2000).

Approaching the issue from a rational choice institutionalist theory, Hix (2007) offers a different explanation for British public opinion Euroscepticism. He argues that

‘where a member state’s domestic policy regime is to the left(right) of the European average, voters and parties on the left(right) are more likely than voters on the right(left) to be Eurosceptic, and vice versa.’ (ibid.: 137).

Following on from this axiom, his research findings show that the UK fits this rational choice institutionalist framework best of all member states examined, as with a liberal labour market and service sector, Britain’s domestic policy regime is to the right of the EU average (ibid.: 142). If we combine this with the fact that all mainstream parties regardless of their ideological positioning on the political spectrum follow a right-wing Euroscepticism discourse, as we have seen earlier, it is no surprise that UK public opinion appears Eurosceptic in its majority. This combination of ‘utilitarianism’ and national identity discourse are factors that determine public support of European integration and EU institutions across Europe, as McLaren’s research has shown (McLaren 2007).

Another possible explanation, at least partially, for the high levels of Eurosceptic public opinion in the UK could be the low levels of knowledge about the EU among the British people. Specifically, in the most recent Eurobarometer poll, 58% of UK citizens said they do not understand how the EU works, while overall levels of knowledge on specific European matters was also low, with 26% of respondents giving wrong answers and 40% opting for the ‘I don’t know’ response (Eurobarometer, ERC-UK 2008, Eurobarometer 2008). Although British citizens are by no means alone in their lack of knowledge on EU issues (66% of Hungarians and 59% of Italians and Portuguese responded ‘I don’t know’ too), research suggests that lack of knowledge fuels Euroscepticism (Hix 2007, Lubbers, Scheepers 2007, Wessels 2007), which also fits with the relevant Eurobarometer results on the UK (support for the EU and the UK’s membership increased manifold in the categories of educated to the age of 20 and beyond and those still studying, as compared to those who had finished education aged 15 or less (Eurobarometer 2008).

Media

Research across Europe confirms that media reporting has a direct impact on the levels of public Euroscepticism (Hooghe, Teepe 2007, Szczerbiak, Taggart 2008, Trenz 2008,). In one of the most recent studies of this issue, de Vreese found that ‘news media coverage of EU-issues and events, such as Council meetings, can cause changes in the level of cynicism about European integration.’ (de Vreese 2007: 280). Rather than suggest a ‘hypodermic needle’ model, whereby the media dictate the tone and quality of public debate on EU issues, de Vreese’s research shows that the extent to which the media may feed into Eurosceptic attitudes depends on two factors: ‘the pervasiveness of strategically framed news reporting’ and individual level characteristics, such as the level of ‘political sophistication’ (ibid). This means that when EU news coverage is not worded/framed in a suggestive manner, pointing at winners and losers, using ‘war and games’ language, focusing on opinion polls and/or specific candidates, then cynicism about EU affairs decreases. Conversely, individuals may have a high level of political sophistication (to be interested and knowledgeable about EU matters) and still be dismissive of politicians and their performance (ibid.).

This is an intriguing finding when considering the high levels of a) lack of knowledge of EU issues and b) (hard) Eurosceptic attitudes towards the EU measured among British citizens: One assumption widely made is that an increase in information about the EU will drive Euroscepticism levels down. For example, this is certainly what has been driving the EU's public communication strategy in the new millennium (Michailidou 2008a, Michailidou 2008b) while the EU's Representation in London has a special section on its website dedicated on dispelling 'Euromyths' invariably circulated on British press (ERC-UK 2009). Yet, as de Vreese (2007) argues, it is not knowledge about the EU that generates greater public trust, but rather the way media present EU issues.

Specifically in relation to the British media, although Euroscepticism is not an exclusive trait of specific UK newspapers, it is generally understood that the 'Eurosceptic tag' applies to the following:⁴

- Tabloids: The Sun, the Mail, the Express
- Broadsheets: The Times, the Daily Telegraph (Anderson 2004, Spiering 2004)

With regard to strategic framing of EU issues, the British press often makes references to national identity. Daddow has shown that Eurosceptic press material is directly linked with Britain's history before 1945, i.e. with the times of UK imperial/military glory:

'The images and rhetorical strategies we see deployed in articles by Eurosceptical writers in the press can therefore be seen as yet more evidence that there exists an implicit public national consensus interpretation of Britain and Europe born out of literature coming from people quite literally brought up on a diet of modernist national history.' (Daddow 2006: 81).

At the same time, Anderson suggests that while the British Eurosceptic press indeed frames EU issues in a national-identity context, this discourse is largely a 'façade masking the commercial interests of the newspapers' proprietors' (Anderson 2004: 151). He consequently highlights the utilitarian aspect of Euroscepticism in the press (see also (Inthorn 2006). The press is also closely linked with Euroscepticism in party politics: Gifford, for example, draws attention to the fact that the Eurosceptics within the Conservative party, who eventually superseded during the Maastricht Treaty crisis, enjoyed 'substantial backing' from 'significant sections of the press' (Gifford 2006: 861).

European Parliament elections 2009

It is in light of the aspects of British Euroscepticism discussed above that the UK findings concerning online debates on the 2009 EP elections are examined in more detail here. Are online debates in UK websites Eurosceptic? If so, do we find the same type of 'uniquely British' Euroscepticism observed in party politics, public opinion polls and media coverage?

⁴ As the number of studies into the role of audiovisual and electronic media in Eurosceptic public discourse is limited (e.g. Gavin 2001), here I focus on Euroscepticism in the British press.

General Nature of the June 2009 EP election debate

One key theme dominated the EP election campaign in the UK, virtually eliminating debate on any other issues: UK national parliamentarians' expenses. The revelations on MPs excessive, and at times unlawful, expense claims caused what many have come to consider as the greatest political scandal in Britain's recent history. Although the issue of MPs expense claims has been under public scrutiny for two years, it was not until January 2009 when developments rapidly unravelled, when the UK government dropped a motion to exempt Parliament from key parts of the Freedom of Information Act, which could prevent details of MPs' expenses from being revealed. A month later, the Telegraph published the first in a long series of detailed expense claims submitted by MPs and furore ensued (The Telegraph.co.uk 2009). Such was the public outcry on the revelations that MPs had been using taxpayers' money to pay for anything from lavish refurbishments in their main homes to movies, toilet seats and outlandish dry-cleaning bills, that the House of Commons Speaker, Michael Martin, announced his resignation on 19 May, an unprecedented move in modern British history.⁵

The implications of this scandal for the EP elections campaign were grave: As Richard Whitaker observed on the day the elections were held in the UK,

'Such is the domination of the campaign by the issue of MPs' allowances that most of the main parties' European Election Broadcasts – a place where they have the opportunity to talk specifically about European issues - made little or no mention of Europe.' (Whitaker 2009).

In this context, the UK debate on the 2009 EU elections undoubtedly reaffirms the status of EU elections as a 'second order' event (Reif and Inglehart 1991). This is certainly not a uniquely British phenomenon, as in most of the EU Member States these elections have so far generally been about domestic policy issues, with domestic politicians dominating the campaigns. Such a campaign may be labeled 'ignorant' as the European dimension and policy questions at European level – which the elections are actually about – are hardly discussed (de Wilde 2009).

What little space was devoted to EU issues focused primarily on the Lisbon Treaty and in particular the extent to which the treaty is democratic, as well as the potential impact it may have on the UK's sovereignty. From this perspective, UK online debates analysed in relation to the 2009 EP elections contained seeds of an 'existential' type of discourse, whereby discussions prominently feature contestation about European integration (Trenz and De Wilde 2009). That is, many questions central in the campaign would be about more or less integration, increasing or decreasing the powers and reach of supranational institutions and/or about membership in the EU or Eurozone of one's own member state, other member states, or applicant countries. Such a debate is understood here as 'existential' because it concerns the existence of the EU as polity and its possible form and shape.

⁵ The last time a House of Commons Speaker was forced to resign was in 1695, when Sir John Trevor was expelled from the Commons after being found guilty of accepting a bribe.

The Lisbon Treaty was one of the central issues for the Conservative Party, not only in their EP election campaign but also in their national election campaign strategy. The Conservatives' foreign affairs spokesman William Hague was reported to have described Gordon Brown's refusal to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty as 'a betrayal of voter trust which "debases the coinage of politics"' (Euractiv.com 2009). The Conservatives' leader, David Cameron, has on several occasions made the commitment to hold a referendum on the already ratified by the UK Treaty as soon as his party becomes government, provided that the Treaty would not have been ratified by then. According to the party's EP elections manifesto, the Conservatives pledge that

'if the Lisbon Treaty is not in force in the event of the election of a Conservative Government this year or next, we will hold a referendum on it, urge its rejection, and – if successful – reverse Britain's ratification. And if the Constitution is already in force by then, we have made clear that in our view political integration in the EU would have gone too far, the Treaty would lack democratic legitimacy, and we would not let matters rest there.' (Conservatives 2009: 2).

During the EP election campaign, Cameron also declared his party's intention to withdraw from the European People's Party (EPP) coalition, where Conservatives MEPs have traditionally been sitting, and form a new anti-federalist group with allies drawn from other independent (and Eurosceptic) parties around Europe.

Amidst the MPs' expenses scandal and the Conservatives calls for a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, the BNP (British National Party) made a dynamic come-back, following a rhetoric similar to the Conservatives on the Lisbon Treaty issue. However, the BNP's overall electoral campaign was far more extreme in the policies it proposed than the Conservatives, in line with its overall right-wing, xenophobic ideology.⁶ Despite its extreme rhetoric, it became quickly apparent that the BNP was gaining in popularity and speculation about it gaining its first seat in the EP was rife in the days before the elections were held.

As far as strategic media reporting is concerned, both press and online media focused on 'performers' and 'critics', 'candidate style and performance' and opinion polls (components of strategic reporting as per (Jamieson 1992), although online media offered extensive factual resources on the European Parliament, EU issues and policies and political parties across Europe (Guardian.co.uk 2009, BBC.co.uk 2009). This is where we can locate traces of a third type of debates, namely 'substantial' discourse, which focuses on policy issues decided at EU level in which the European Parliament has a say (Trenz and de Wilde 2009). In such a debate, the nature and design of the EU polity would not be at the heart of contestation, with controversy targeting the policies conducted at EU level instead. Arguably, only the third type of debate would be normatively defensible as a substantial campaign would inform voters about the issues at stake in the elections and allow them a meaningful choice where their votes have direct impact (De Wilde 2009). At the same time, UK media was largely negatively predisposed towards the BNP, despite its Eurosceptic positions. Rather, its openly racist ideology led even other Eurosceptic politicians to condemn the party's

⁶ It is indicative of the party's ideology that even the meta-description it uses for its website (i.e. the description by which all search engines list the website) declares that *'The British National Party is the only party which opposes mass immigration and surrender to the European Union. Unlike the other parties, we mean it when we say it.'*

positions, both during and after the elections, in what the BNP itself evaluated as a ‘media onslaught’ against it.

However, in order to determine the general nature of the UK online debate and address the questions posed earlier in this chapter as regards the extent to which Euroscepticism is present in online debates and in a similar ‘uniquely British’ format, it is necessary to also look at the data concerning the content of the websites. First, the topics of the threads are analyzed. Secondly, I compare the amount of messages with those made in other Member States. Lastly, messages are qualitatively analysed, in order to map the target of the EU evaluations as well as the context within which these evaluations are justified.

Sources and Data

Five UK websites were selected for monitoring and further coding and analysis in the period 18 May-10 June 2009, which includes the two weeks before the EP elections and on week after. Using Alexa rankings (Alexa 2010), I identified the most popular websites for political news making and debate in the UK, as follows:⁷

Table 1: The top 10 most popular websites for political news making/debate in the UK

Rank	Name	Link	Alexa ranking (UK)
1	Yahoo!	http://www.yahoo.com/	5
2	The BBC	http://www.bbc.co.uk/	7
3	Microsoft Network (MSN)	http://www.msn.com/	10
4	The Guardian	http://www.guardian.co.uk	21
5	The Mail Online	http://www.dailymail.co.uk	27
6	The Telegraph	http://www.telegraph.co.uk/	29
7	The Sun	http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/	31
8	Times Online	http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/	46
9	Channel 4	http://www.channel4.com/	57
10	The Mirror	http://www.mirror.co.uk/	128

From the above websites the following three were selected:

a. The BBC.

This is the UK’s public broadcasting service and as such it is expected to retain its political impartiality, which it does more or less successfully and consistently (The BBC 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). The organisation is generally respected for the quality of its broadcasting both domestically and abroad.

b. The Guardian.

⁷ Rankings as of 17 August 2009. Although rankings may have shifted slightly since May 2009, when the selection of websites took place, the overall order of political websites has not changed. This means that the BBC is still more popular than the Guardian, the Guardian than the Telegraph and so on.

Classified as 'broadsheet' or quality newspaper, the Guardian prides itself to be independent, and is situated on the centre-left of the political ideology spectrum (Guardian News and Media Ltd 2009).

c. The Daily Mail.

In contrast to the previous two, this is a tabloid newspaper, focusing more on social, entertainment and sport issues. The language used is also more sensationalist as are the photos that accompany several of the featuring articles. There is no subcategory of political news, but the Mail Online has four permanent political blogs featuring at the top of its relevant blogs' webpage. The Mail expresses conservative views on most issues. It has an anti-EU, anti-abortion stance and is pro-capitalism and pro-monarchy, as well as in favour of stricter punishments for certain crimes, version endorsed by the Mail (The Mail Online 2009). The paper is also one of BBC's main critics, accusing the latter of left-wing bias (ibid.).

Yahoo! and MSN were not considered as, although they offer news and political commentary, they are not professional journalism websites. Rather, they are platforms, offering a variety of services, including email and e-shopping, and political news constitutes only a small part of their content.

Because there were no political blogs in the UK Top 100 websites listed on Alexa, Wikio rankings were used to identify the top 10 most popular blogs (Wikio.com 2009). The ratings were then cross-referenced with Alexa and the following two blogs were eventually selected, as they were top on the Wikio list at the time and the most popular by Alexa measurements.

a. Iain Dale's Diary, <http://iaindale.blogspot.com/>.

This is a leading UK political blog, written by a professional political analyst, party activist and former lobbyist. The author/blogger is an active member of the Conservative party and stood as a Conservative candidate at the last UK national election (Dale 2008). He is co-director of the Campaign for Fixed Term Parliaments and a vocal proponent of an English Parliament. The quality of the commentary is quite high for blog standards and is arguably close to the genre of narrative journalism. Despite his clear ideological stance, Dale's blog is balanced, as it provides links to blogs of similar and opposite ideology.

b. Guido Fawke's blog of plots, rumours and conspiracy, <http://www.order-order.com/>

'Right-wing libertarian' (Wikipedia.org 2009), the author aims to uncover 'political sleaze and hypocrisy' but 'doesn't believe in impartiality nor pretend to it' (Guido Fawkes' blog 2009). The UK's most popular and influential political blog (Guardian.co.uk 2008), Guido Fawkes has won several awards and distinctions (The Economist 2008), while his numerous revelations of political scandals have prompted the Telegraph to describe him recently as the 'blogger who strikes fear into Westminster' (Rayner 2009).

The above two blogs have consistently been at the top on Wikio's list of most popular political blogs, since ratings were first checked in April 2009.

The 'clipping' of articles from the above five websites resulted in 305 clippings for the period 18 May-10 June 2009, of which 50 were randomly selected for coding (stratified coding according to time period and website). Of the selected threads only half (25) contained evaluations of the EU, which is slightly above the cross-country average (47%). In total, 259 evaluations were identified and coded within these 25 threads, making the UK the leading country in our sample in terms of evaluations generated, as the figure below illustrates. The majority of evaluations were located in the professional journalism websites (249 evaluations), with the BBC containing 47% of all evaluations (122), while the Guardian and the Mail Online ranked second and third in terms of density of EU evaluations containing 31% (80 evaluations) and 16% respectively (41). Most messages were located in the 'Comments' area of the websites (82%, 211 evaluations), with the largest proportion of these generated as a direct response to the content of the main article/topic of the thread (156 evaluations).

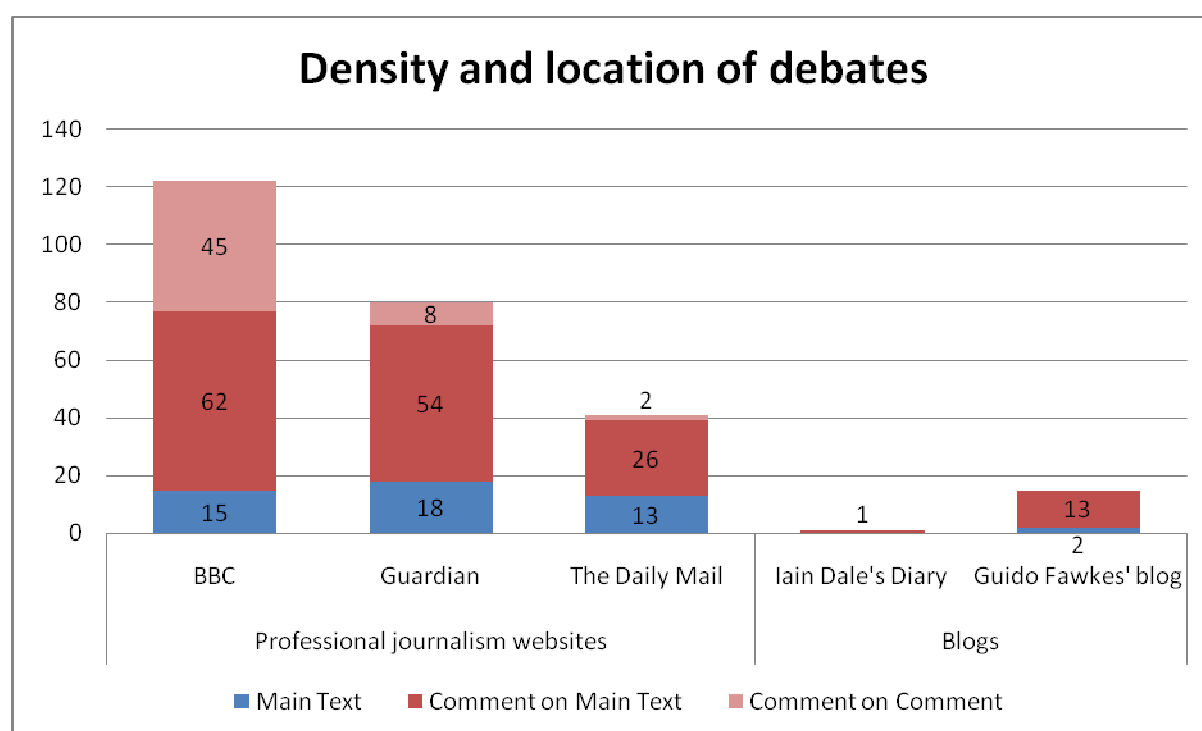


Figure 3: Distribution of data across selected websites

Findings

To begin with, the data confirms the 'ignorant' nature of the debates, as the majority of threads had a topic that covered domestic politics. Specifically, 56% of all UK threads examined were classified under the Domestic Party Politics category (28 threads), with the topics of Democracy and European Party Politics coming distant second with eight threads each. What is more interesting to observe here, however, is the distribution of topics across the different website. As the figure below illustrates, the range of topics covered in relation to the 2009 EP elections coincides with the impartiality indicator of each website and their overall stance towards the EU, as this has been recorded in previous studies. In this respect, the BBC, as the UK's national broadcasting service and among the most popular news

websites across the globe, offers a plural coverage, with its selected threads covering all topics identified in our Codebook. It also appears to be the most 'European' of all five websites, as the majority of the threads concerned European Party politics. In this sense, the BBC provided the most substantial coverage. At the other end of the spectrum is Iain Dale's Diary, where all threads were found to cover domestic party politics. Overall, the professional journalism websites provided a more plural coverage than the two political blogs, with coverage of European party politics steadily diminishing as we move from the national broadcasting corporation, the BBC, to newspapers and then to political blogs.

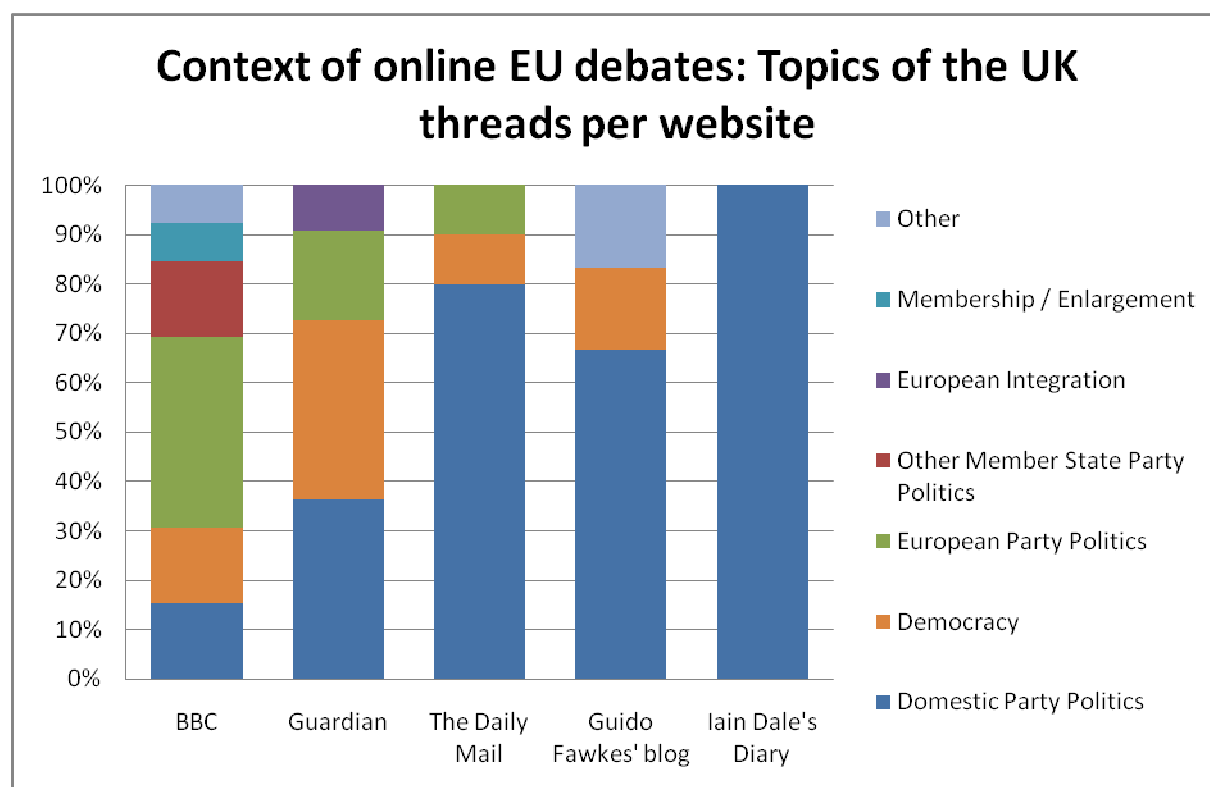


Figure 4: Topics of the coded UK threads, per website

Moreover, in line with the cross-country findings, citizens dominated the EU election online debates in the UK. Moreover, citizens' contributions in the UK debates were 10% higher than the cross-country average, with 73% of all EU evaluations in UK debates generated by citizens compared to 63% across all countries in our sample.

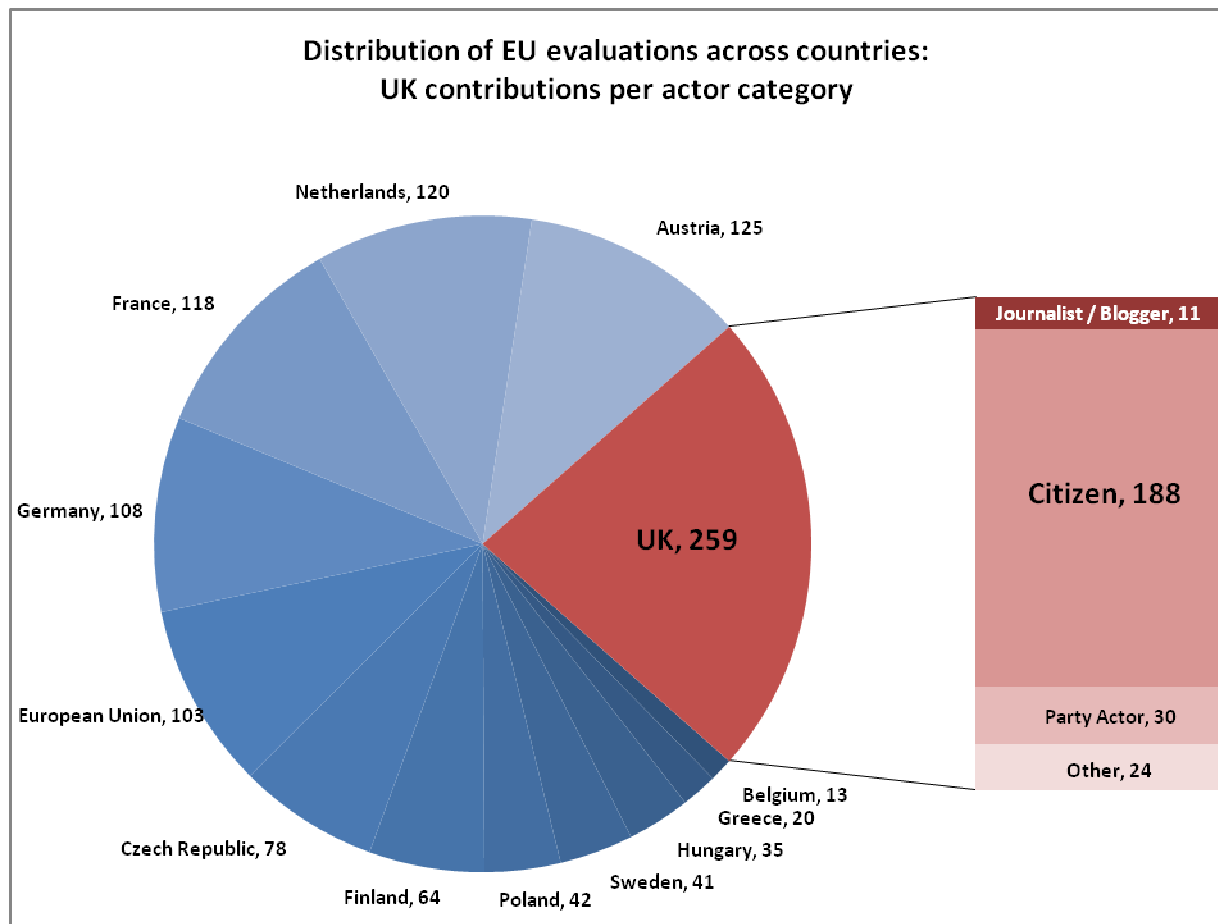


Figure 5: Actors expressing EU polity evaluations, UK debates on June 2009 EP elections.

Dimensions of Euroscepticism

Taking a closer look at how the debate on the EU unfolded in the selected UK threads, we can identify a clear trend of negative evaluations of the EU, which focus on the current political set-up and power distribution between EU and national institutions, as well as among the different EU institutions. More specifically, few participants expressed evaluations concerning the principle of integration, which is the general idea and/or act of cooperation among European member states in any form (de Wilde et al. 2010). Moreover, all 47 evaluations recorded under this category (18% of all evaluations) were positive, i.e. no participants expressed opposition to the idea of collaboration among EU countries. As user 'kaybraes' put it ([Thread 1206](#), [bbc.co.uk](#)) '[...] the EU [...] was intended to be, a group of free trading , cooperating nations living in peace'. Similarly, 'joseph1832' stated on the Mail Online that 'Of course, European countries should work together' ([Thread 1221](#)).

The future of the EU (project of integration) also generated a limited amount of evaluations (76 out of 259 evaluations). However, unlike the principle of integration, the prospects of the EU polity were evaluated in a mostly negative way. Of the 76 evaluations recorded under this category, 57 were negative, with the vast majority focusing on the level of future integration, i.e. the future distribution of power within the EU polity (52 evaluations, 68% of evaluations on the Project of Integration). This is encapsulated in the comment left on the

BBC website by user 'Freeborn John', according to whom *'The real objective of EU supporters is to find some excuse, no matter how weak, to justify the creation of EU law in new fields, because it is the replacement of national law by EU law that is the principle means by which the federal super state is constructed. [...] The remedy now is to permanently break European federalism as a political movement and to restore democracy by taking back powers from Brussels'* (Thread 1210).

This trend of negative evaluations of the level of EU polity reflects exactly the pattern of opinions concerning the most contested of the three EU polity dimensions, i.e. the current EU political set-up. With 222 evaluations (86% of all evaluations), the way the EU is currently governed was at the epicentre of the UK online debates. The vast majority of participants expressed negative opinions about the way decision-making power is distributed between EU institutions and national governments, as well as among the different EU institutions (127 evaluations, 49%). The EP is frequently described as a 'gravy train', drawing comparisons with the UK parliamentary body and its expenses scandal (for example, 'littleredtomahawk' on Thread 1217, guardian.co.uk), while the EU is likened to a 'superstate' with power-hungry officials. For example, responding to a previous user, 'GMel' expressed the view that the Tories are right to move away from groups (in the EP) that want even more integration than now, because 'We were tricked by the EU from the very beginning. We were told it would be for greater co-operation and trade, not to become part of some super state like the Soviet Union (look what happened to that!)' (Thread 1229, the Mail Online).

Qualifying Euroscepticism: Justifications

The primary concern driving online evaluations of the EU in the UK is without doubt democracy. Of the 259 evaluations recorded in total, 126 (49%) were justified on the basis of democratic values and governance (de Wilde et al. 2010). This is also in line with the cross-national trend, where the majority of evaluations were justified on this basis (422; 37% of all evaluative statements). In distant second place, we find justifications pertaining to necessity (40 evaluations), i.e. an assessment of the EU polity is made on the basis of efficiency, effectiveness, governability and/or obligations of member-states and/or EU institutions deriving from the Treaties. In fact, the overall pattern of justifications in the UK is exactly the same as at cross-national level, as Figure 6 below illustrates.

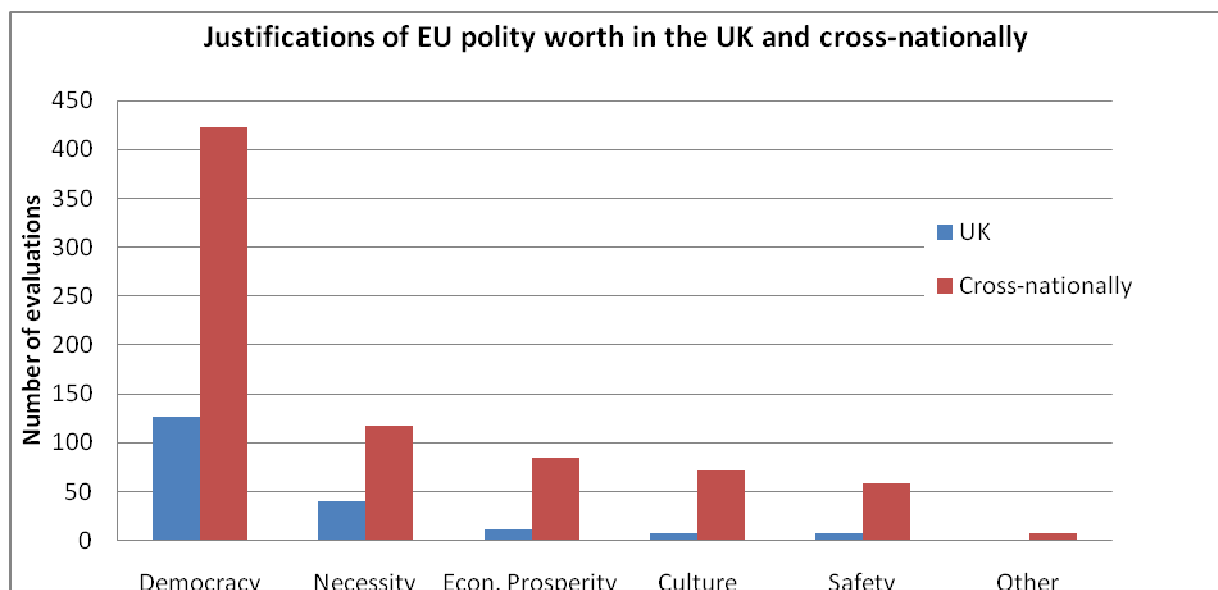


Figure 6: Pattern of justifications in online EU debates in the UK and cross-nationally

Furthermore, justifications are not affected by actors' stance on the EU, i.e. by whether an actor makes a positive or negative assessment of one or more of the EU polity dimensions. In addition, it was not possible to statistically confirm a link between the online source and the type of justifications. Nevertheless, as the majority of evaluations concern the current EU polity set-up and are negative, so most justifications appear in relation to this type of evaluation. What concerns political actors and citizens alike, as this transpires from the analysis of online debates, is the lack of democratic mandate that EU institutions present. The EU polity is perceived as a near-authoritarian, corrupt regime (the 'EU gravy train'), in which the peoples of Europe were lured by their political elites. The latter are accused of having 'missold' the EU membership case to citizens, portraying it as primarily an economic union that would enhance prosperity and market stability, only to increasingly delegate political powers to EU institutions. Once appointed or elected in EU positions, national politicians get their 'snouts' even deeper in the 'trough', i.e. continue squandering public money.

Comments in the selected UK e-debates invariably point to the gap between citizens and politicians at national and EU level, which is caused by the 'refusal' of the latter to 'listen to the people', thus introducing policies which are unpopular. At the same time, the democratic process at EU level is regularly deemed 'a joke' and 'an insult' since citizens feel their vote is wasted: Firstly, the EP is perceived as an institution with no real powers. Secondly, citizens' votes are ignored when they do not fit with the plans of the political elites, with the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties most quoted as examples. The following comment, posted by 'Johannestannes' on the BBC website, exemplifies the justificatory logic most EU polity evaluations followed in the UK:

'The lamentable rise of the right is sadly a reaction to millions of europeans being deprived a say in the new EU post-democratic age. This is still a muted response however. Imagine American citizens being TOLD that their laws would all originate from an un-elected "commission" of 17 people,...there would be an armed revolt against their masters ! [...] The notion of any EU country's (I refuse to use the EU jargon of "state") laws being made by it's own commissioner and 26 others who perhaps know little of that country's language, heritage and mentality...is ridiculous at best. The Dutch, French and Irish made their opinions clear on the Constitution/Lisbon. Germans, Austrians and Brits also demand that the EU be given less rather than more power. Sadly,..the un-elected commission refuses to listen and has the audacity to encourage us to vote in a "democratic" EU election where one German vote has only 1/16th the democratic clout of a voter from Luxembourg. Welcome to post-democratic Europe. !' (Thread 1205).

The election results

On the surface, the June electoral results confirmed the BNP's rise as well as the UK's leading position as Eurosceptic country. The results also reflected the public's discontent with Labour, who lost even in what were considered to be core areas, such as the North West and Wales. In total, the UK elected 72 MEPs, of whom 25 are Conservatives, 13 Labour, 13 UKIP, 11 Liberal Democrats, 2 Greens and 2 of the BNP, the first in the party's history. It is worth noting that UKIP received more votes than Labour. Voter turnout was at just 34.5%, but although this is not a high outcome, it is not the worst to be ever recorded in the UK and also, it does not deviate much from previous years' turnouts (European Parliament 2009, Mellows-Facer, Cracknell & Lightbown 2009). Moreover, it is not much lower than the European average, which hit a record low this year at 43% (European Parliament 2009).

True to their pre-election pledge and despite predictions for the contrary, the Conservatives have formed a new Eurosceptic EP group, the European Conservatives and Reformists group

(ECR), after succeeding in gathering the required number of MEPs from across the EU.⁸ The majority of the group's MEPs come from the UK (25), while the rest are mostly MEPs who formerly grouped either under the centre-right European People's Party/European Democrats (EPP-ED) or the (former) Union for Europe of the Nations group (UEN). In total, seven countries apart from the UK are represented through 55 MEPs in the ECR, namely Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Belgium.

UKIP has also formed a new Eurosceptic EP group, although more out of necessity, as the previous EP formation to which it belonged (Independence/Democracy, IND/DEM) failed to meet the numbers required to qualify for EU funding and recognition as a formal EP group. Similarly, UEN faced a similar problem so the two groups merged to create what is now called the Europe of Freedom and Democracy group (EFD). In total, 30 MEPs from nine countries belong to this group, with the majority representing UKIP.⁹ Ideologically, the new EP group is far more to the right than UEN, to which UKIP previously belonged, as there are no left-wing Eurosceptics in this formation and all other national parties represented here sit on the extreme-right end of the political spectrum. Like the Conservatives, UKIP will head the new EP group, with UKIP's Nigel Farage sharing leadership with Italian Enrico Speroni of Lega Nord.

Across Europe, electoral results confirm the rise of Eurosceptic parties, as well as an overall turn of Europeans to the right (European Parliament 2009). While no longer an exclusive characteristic of British politics, Euroscepticism in the UK constitutes a core feature of the public political discourse, both media- and party-driven, as well as a key trait of public opinion, as this emerges through opinion polls and electoral results. What can rather be said about UK Euroscepticism is that it is unique in the extent that it has become embedded in party politics and in its expression through (what is generally considered) right-wing rhetoric, regardless of the political background of its advocates.

At the same time, the key theme that monopolised the EP electoral campaign, namely MPs expense claims, confirms those scholarly propositions that Euroscepticism is an expression of discontent, directly proportional to the discontent citizens feel about national governments, as discussed in Section A.1. This could also go some way towards explaining the presence of that other 'elephant in the room': the impressive 57% of Europeans on average (65.5% of Britons) who did not vote.

On the other hand, with European citizens 'turning right' at these EP elections, UK party Euroscepticism moves to a new phase: No longer the 'awkward partners' in the EP, UK Eurosceptic parties take the lead and organise their continental counterparts in formal EP groups. Moreover, the EP electoral results of June 2009 clearly show a wider Eurosceptic trend across Europe, thus confirming Hooghe and Marks's assessment that

'Rather than a 'permissive consensus' on the benefits of continuous integration, the political climate in Europe has more and more turned towards a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 4).

⁸ In order to form a new European Parliament party coalition, it is necessary to have at least 25 MEPs (the Conservatives meet this number with their own MEPs) but from members also need to be from at least seven member states.

⁹ The other countries are Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Slovakia.

This 'dissensus' can also be interpreted as a measurement of a growing divide between Europe's elites and citizens (de Wilde 2007: 14). In this context, it is clear that the political issue of European integration is *no longer* a '*sleeping giant*' in most member states, as the evidence, which enabled van der Eijk and Franklin to make this assessment just five years ago (van der Eijk, Franklin 2004: 8), has now been overturned.

Conclusion

Britain has long been considered an exceptionally Eurosceptic member state. However, when reviewing the historical trajectories of Euroscepticism within British political parties, it becomes evident that these have been anything but consistent in their policies towards European integration. Rather, the two constants that define UK Euroscepticism are the unwaveringly Euro-distrustful British public opinion and the consistent rhetorical link between (loss of) national identity and EU membership. This is also where the uniqueness of UK Euroscepticism lies: While in most other member-states identity-based Euroscepticism is linked with extreme right-wing party politics, in the UK it is found in the rhetoric of otherwise moderate/centre parties, such as the Conservatives.

The analysis of online debates on the 2009 EP elections adds new layers on the argument of 'unique British Euroscepticism'. Firstly, and in line with previous research and opinion polls, the EU is a second-order media issue. Throughout the EP election period, the focus of online media coverage and of the debates linked to it was on national politics. Secondly, British public opinion is not simply Euro-distrustful but rather politics-sceptic. It thus appears that the distrust towards the EU polity is directly linked to the distrust (and disgust) people expressed online for the corrupt ways of national politicians. In any case, these two findings confirm the Eurosceptic disposition of the British public. Nevertheless, the analysis presented in this chapter deconstructs the image of British public opinion as 'uniquely Eurosceptic'. When compared with our cross-country findings, it transpires that citizens in the UK are concerned about the same aspects of the EU polity's legitimacy as are the citizens in all the other countries of our sample. This finding remained constraint even after the UK was excluded from the statistical analysis of the data, in order to control for sample bias. In this context, the UK can be used not as an example of extraordinary Euroscepticism but as a typical case of the 'constraining dissensus' which is taking roots across the EU.

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