

Blaming Brussels: When and How Does It Work?

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Puzzle and Research Questions

Populist Eurosceptic political parties have been on the rise in many European countries. These parties often seem to have thrived on the resonance of their own scaremongering, anti-Brussels political campaigns created among voters. The decision of a majority of the British electorate to leave the European Union was fueled by the campaign of the right-wing populist UK Independence Party and the British tabloid press against the cost of EU membership and the allegedly ‘uncontrolled’ immigration of cheap labor from Eastern Europe. Similarly, the campaign of the left-wing populist Syriza against austerity measures allegedly imposed upon Greece by Brussels helped the party to gain enough electoral support to take over governing power. And the right-wing populist governments in Hungary and Poland have stabilized their domestic electoral support by turning the criticism voiced by EU actors against the authoritarian transformation of their respective legal and political systems into a blame game in which they attacked Brussels for illegitimately interfering into domestic affairs.

Does this mean that populist blaming strategies against Brussels always pay off? Are populist elites able to threaten citizens into supporting them? Or might mainstream political actors defending Brussels and upholding non-populist principles of democratic exchange be able to fend off the attacks of populist challengers and garner public support for their moderate positions?

This project sets out to shed new light on these issues. We address the following research questions:

- 1) *Under what conditions does populist anti-EU communication lead to an increase in Eurosceptic and populist attitudes among citizens and to what extent does this lead to more support for populist Eurosceptic political parties?*
- 2) *Might the success of populist anti-EU be countered by mainstream political actors developing pro-EU counter-narratives?*

We will answer these questions using an innovative methodology embedded in a comparative empirical design. This will allow us to connect different strands in the literature on populism, the political psychology of threats and fear, Euroskepticism and political communication, and it will enable us to identify the conditions of successful populist political communication against Brussels, providing the knowledge to counteract the populist Eurosceptic challenge. In essence, we therefore not only identify and analyze challenges for Europe but also attempt to sketch out potential solutions to them.

Theoretical Framework

Populism is a thin ideology marked by (the communication of)

- (1) a distinction between ‘us’ (the people, the man on the street) and ‘them’ (mostly: the ruling elites, but also other groups such as ‘big business’, immigrants or other minorities) and
- (2) a need to defend the former against the exploitation of the latter.

As a consequence of such an understanding, researchers on populism have distinguished between actors using populism as a mode of political communication and the actual positions these actors take. While all populist actors are against mainstream elites, they offer right-wing (like PiS or Fidesz), left-wing (like Syriza or Podemos) or even centrist (like the Five Star Movement) political alternatives to voters.

Despite this ideological variance, populist parties have been fairly unanimous in their negative position toward the European Union – although based on diverging arguments. Three reasons may account for this. First, Euroscepticism – to be understood as the degree of support for the European Union, its institutions and/or European integration – can be easily integrated into populist political rhetoric. The distinction between the corrupt elites in Brussels and the man on the street at home comes in quite handy. Second, Euroscepticism has been demonstrated to separate mainstream parties from parties and voters at the extreme poles of the political spectrum. Third, blaming external actors such as the EU and presenting oneself as the preventer of further intervention by that actor is a strategy that also works for populist parties in office. When gaining office, populist actors become part of the domestic establishment they used to attack. Under these conditions, blaming external actors such as the EU can be used as an alternative strategy.

Hence, it comes as no surprise that communication strategies of populist actors frequently seem to make use of Eurosceptic rhetoric in order to evoke populist and Eurosceptic attitudes among citizens, which in turn may boost popular support for populist parties. The proposed project puts the apparent synergies between Euroscepticism and populism center stage. It seeks to establish how the specific mixture of populist and anti-EU elite rhetoric affects the political attitudes of citizens. In the remainder, we outline our theoretical expectations about the conditions under which such a Eurosceptic rhetoric by populist actors might, or might not, be effective. After sketching two mechanisms of communication effects, we turn to the two main bundles of factors potentially constraining the effect of populist Eurosceptic rhetoric: individual predispositions of citizens and Europhile communication of mainstream, non-populist actors.¹

Communication scholars often find media effects based on the mechanisms of framing and cueing.² Cueing means that citizens simply take over positions communicated by elites they feel close to and trust. Citizens thus take the elite position toward an actor or topic as a cue or heuristic to make up their minds about that actor or topic. Framing, in contrast, means that elites make citizens think about an actor or topic in a certain way by the way they portray this actor or topic in their public communication. European integration, for example, might be framed as a threat to national identity or as an opportunity to gain economic advantages.

Populist actors may use both mechanisms in their Eurosceptic rhetoric by providing clear-cut anti-EU positions that citizens may take as cues; and by framing actions and policies of the EU in a way that make citizens think more negatively about the EU. However, both cueing and framing effects depend on the *content* and the *source* of the cue or frame as well as on the existence of *counter-framing*.

We expect that all three factors may limit the influence of populist Eurosceptic rhetoric.

¹ We should point out here that the differentiation between (1) populist actors using Eurosceptic rhetoric and (2) non-populist actors using Europhile rhetoric could be turned into a 2 x 2 matrix, which would also contain (3) populist actors using Europhile rhetoric and (4) non-populist actors using Eurosceptic rhetoric. Some may ascribe Emmanuel Macron to cell (3), for example. However, theoretically and empirically we should expect the dichotomy between populist Eurosceptics and non-populist Europhiles to mostly grasp the empirical variance out there.

² There are of course other mechanisms of communication effects, such as priming or agenda setting effects, but framing and cueing should matter most in the case of populist actors.

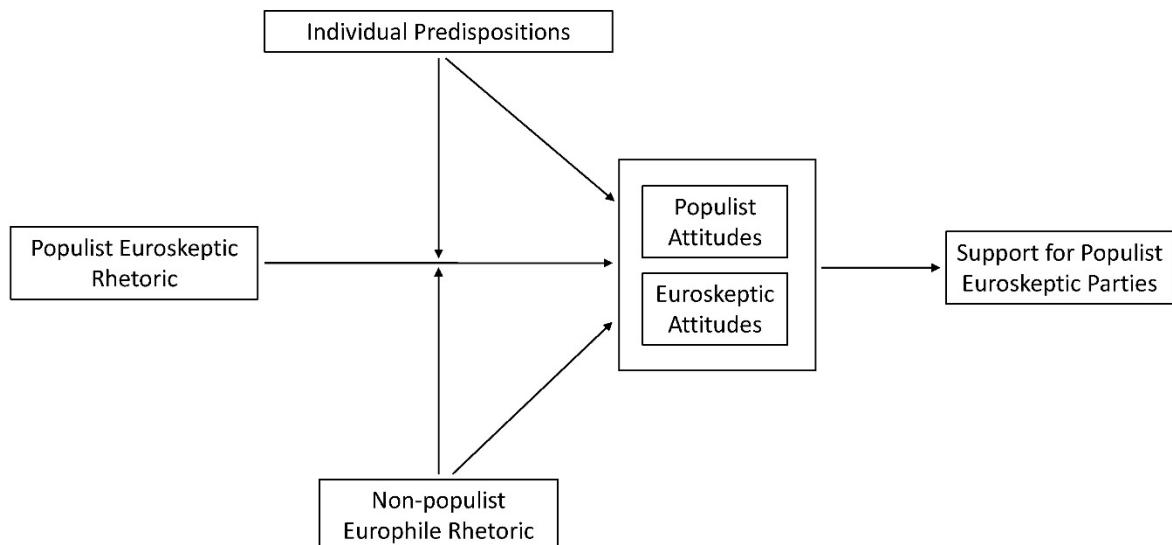
First, the *content of the frame or cue* might matter as not every citizen has the same preferences or reacts to the same frames in similar ways. Research on public Euroscepticism has demonstrated that attitudes towards the EU are influenced by utilitarian cost-benefit rationales, cultural and identity-related motivations, variances in psychological predispositions and emotions. Hence, certain types of Eurosceptic rhetoric are likely to resonate differently with citizens holding different individual predispositions.

Second, the *source of the cue or frame* matters. Research on Euroscepticism indicates that citizens take cues from elites they trust, whereas they will not take cues from elites they do not trust. Hence, populist Eurosceptic rhetoric should have less effects on citizens who do not trust populist actors.

Third, the *communication context* plays a role as well. What effects do non-populist Europhile counter-messages have on the effectiveness of populist Eurosceptic political communication? In the light of growing efforts of political parties and civil-society actors to defend the European Union, at least in some countries, we expect to observe processes of *counter-framing*. This counter-framing could restrain or even trump the effects of populist rhetoric.

Figure 1 sketches our theoretical expectations on the impact of populist anti-EU political communication on three dependent variables: populist attitudes, Euroscepticism, and support for populist Eurosceptic political parties. We expect that anti-European populist rhetoric should have a positive effect on citizens' levels of populism, Euroscepticism, and – as a consequence – on support for populist Eurosceptic parties. This effect alone would suggest a self-reinforcing dynamic whereby political campaigns by populist Eurosceptic parties change people's attitudes and make them more likely to support these political actors. However, we expect that this effect is moderated by the counter-framing of pro-European non-populist rhetoric and the individual predispositions of citizens. Populist Eurosceptic communication will thus not work on everyone, and its effect could also be weakened or superseded by suitable counter-framing from non-populist pro-EU actors.

Figure 1. Theoretical Expectations

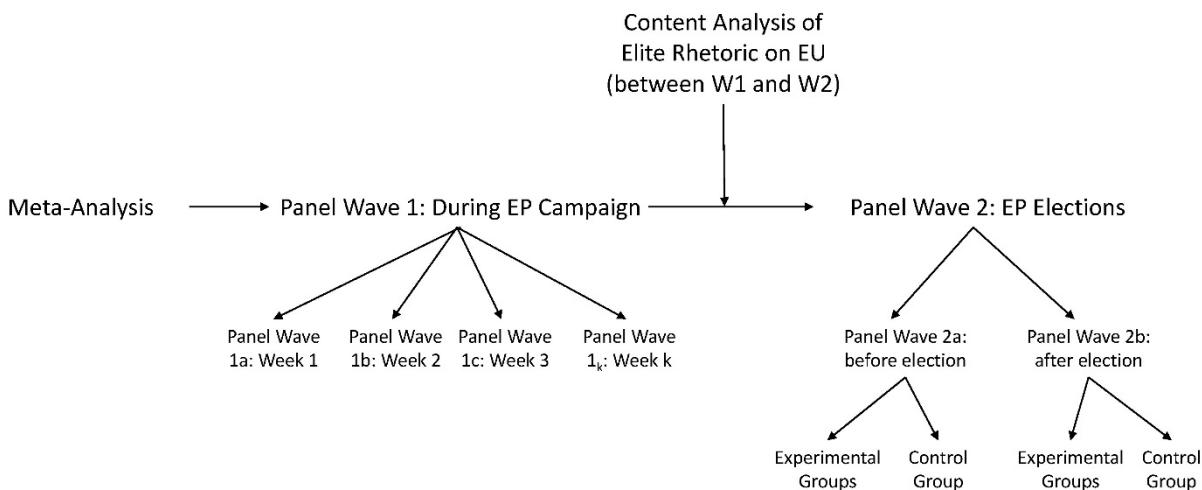


Research Design

Demonstrating the empirical relevance of our theoretical expectations, especially in a comparative setting, requires an elaborate research design. The key challenge is the establishment of a convincing causal link between a context-level variable, a certain type of political communication, and individual attitudes such as Euroscepticism, populism, and the support for certain parties. We employ an innovative methodological setting to accomplish this task.

We start with three meta-analyses. One will analyze the effects of individual-level factors that have been identified in the literature to influence Eurosceptic attitudes of citizens. The second will investigate the effects of individual factors on populist attitudes found in the literature. Finally, the third will turn to the effect of (populist) political communication on public opinion and the conditions under which these proved to be significant or not.

Figure 2. Methodological Design



Building on the findings of these meta-analyses, we will then proceed to collecting our own primary data. We will combine two designs that are best suited for establishing causal links between political communication and individual attitudes: a panel design and an experimental design. In a panel design, the same respondents are surveyed at different points in time. This allows us to check whether certain developments at the level of political communication over time have an impact on respondents. In an experimental design, groups of individuals are confronted with different types of stimuli. Differences between treatment and control groups are an indication of the effect of treatment variables. We will use a field experiment and a survey experiment.

In the *field experiment*, we test the effect of the electoral campaigns in the run-up to the European Parliament elections or, more precisely, the impact of populist Eurosceptic or non-populist Europhile elite rhetoric on citizens' attitudes and voting propensities. The setting of the EP elections seems especially well suited for our endeavor as we can expect relatively intense EU-related political campaigns by political parties in all EU member states and, at the same time, good real-world conditions for measuring EU-related attitudes as well as voting intentions. We will measure the EU-related rhetoric of political parties in the run-up to the EP elections

by content analysis of media coverage. This will allow us to control for the frames and cues that all of our respondents (potentially) encountered during the electoral campaigns.

Additionally, we will use these frames and cues in our *survey experiment*, in which we can systematically vary the frames and cues with which we confront individual respondents. To further control for potential exogenous events during the electoral campaigns, we run the first wave of our panel as a rolling cross-sectional wave – that is, we survey a subsample of wave 1 every week during the campaign – and field the second wave in two subsamples, one closely before and one closely after the election.

We are aware that even such a design will not allow us to perfectly isolate individual causal effects of elite communication on individuals' political attitudes, but it comes closer to this aim than any other study has done as yet. Figure 2 presents our methodological design. We decided to collect data in seven countries which are marked by varying levels of importance and different types of populist Eurosceptic actors, represent different geographical families of nations within the EU and have, therefore, different economic and cultural backgrounds: Germany, Hungary, Poland, Greece, Italy, France, and Austria.

Expected Output and Impact

This project will break new ground in terms of both academic insights and lessons to be learned for political practitioners. To our knowledge, it is the first comparative study to look at the effects of populist *and* Eurosceptic political communication on individual political attitudes *and* on voting in EP elections. It advances a novel theoretical argument that builds on a variety of literatures from research on Euroscepticism, populism, political communication and political psychology that have hitherto not been brought together. And it tests this theoretical argument on the basis of an innovative methodological design that combines several strategies to identify effects of political communication on individual attitudes. Finally, our findings are highly relevant for journalists, politicians and other political actors when trying to devise viable pro-European communication strategies to effectively counter the attacks by populist anti-EU parties.

The project will produce a range of joint publications in international peer-reviewed journals. The datasets emerging from our data collection exercise will also be made available to the public. In addition, we will use our already existing contacts to journalists, civil-society groups and political practitioners to disseminate our findings also to the general public.

Research Team and Structure

The Principal Investigators (PIs) of this project have an established track record of research on Euroscepticism and populism, on European Parliament elections and on the effect of political communication. The PIs also bring outstanding methodological skills to the project, guaranteeing that the empirical design can be implemented successfully.

Levente Littvay (LL) is Associate Professor of Political Science at Central European University in Budapest and one of the Academic Convenors of the ECPR Methods Schools. His research on survey and quantitative methodology, twin and family studies, and the psychology of radicalism and populism has been published in outlets such as the Journal of Politics, Political Psychology and the Swiss Political Science Review. In addition, Littvay is head of Team Survey within Team Populism, a scholarly network that brings together renowned scholars from Europe and the Americas to study the causes and consequences of populism.

Bernd Schlipphak (BS) is Professor of Empirical Research Methods at the University of Münster and member-elect of the steering committee of the ECPR Standing Group on Political Methodology. He has worked extensively on political communication and attitudes toward the European Union. His work has been published in outlets such as Review of International Organizations, European Union Politics, and Journal of Common Market Studies. Together with Oliver Treib, he has recently published an article on the backlash effects of EU interventions against populist governments.

Oliver Treib (OT) is Professor of Comparative Policy Analysis and Research Methods at the University of Münster and one of the Convenors of the German Political Science Association's "Arbeitskreis Integrationsforschung". His research has focused on EU policy-making, political conflicts in EU politics, and Eurosceptic political parties. His work has been published in journals such as the European Journal of Political Research, European Union Politics and the Journal of Common Market Studies.

Sofia Vasilopoulou (SV) is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of York and Convenor of the ECPR Standing Group on Political Parties. She has worked extensively on Euroscepticism and currently leads a three-year project on "Euroscepticism: dimensions, causes and consequences in times of crisis", funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. She has published a monograph with ECPR Press on the topic as well as articles in outlets such as the European Journal of Political Research, European Union Politics and Government & Opposition.

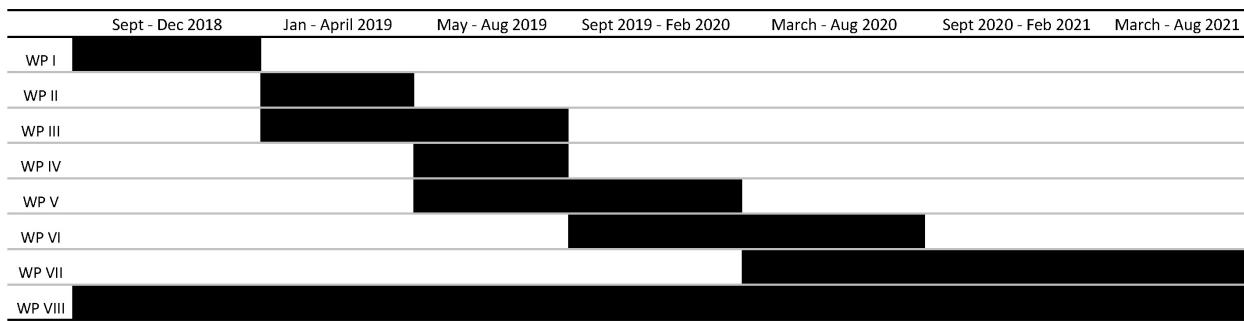
The project will be coordinated by BS and OT in Münster, but LL (Budapest) and SV (York) are also Principal Investigators with the same status as the two coordinators. Each of the four PIs is an expert on one of the countries in the sample (LL: Hungary, BS: Germany, OT: Austria, SV: Greece). The four PIs are involved in all work packages, and each of them is additionally responsible for conducting the media content analysis in their respective country. Media content analysis in France will be done by BS and OT. This task will be facilitated by the extensive contacts their department has with Science Po in Lille. Both institutions have been conducting a joint study program for many years. Hiring coders with French language skills and knowledge about French politics will thus be easy in Münster.

To cover the media content analysis in the two remaining countries, Poland and Italy, the project includes two associate partners. For Poland, this will be **Ben Stanley**, who is a Lecturer at SWPS University in Warsaw. Stanley has published widely on Polish populist parties. For Italy, the associate partner will be **Manuela Caiani**, an Associate Professor at Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence. Caiani is an expert on right-wing extremism and populism and has recently published a volume on Euroscepticism, democracy, and the media as well as an article on populism in Italy.

Schedule of Work Packages

We differentiate between eight work packages (WPs). All four PIs contribute to all eight WPs equally. WP I encompasses the three meta-analyses. WPs II, III and IV concern the data collection. WP II involves the development of the questionnaire for the first panel wave and the organization of the fielding of the survey. WP III includes the media content analysis of elite rhetoric in the electoral campaigns prior to the European Parliament elections 2018. Next to the four PIs, the two associate members will also contribute to this work package. WP IV consists of developing the questionnaire for the second panel wave and the organization of the fielding of the survey, including also the survey experiments. WP V covers data administration and, most importantly, the analysis of the data. WP VII includes academic publications and impact activities of the PIs, while WP VIII consists of managing the project (communication with Volkswagen Foundation, managing the finances, etc.). The project is scheduled to run for 36 months, starting in September 2018.

Figure 3. Schedule of WPs³



³ Please note that for reasons of clarity, months 1 to 12 are subdivided into four months-portions while months 13-36 are divided into six-month portions.