

Catherine E. de Vries: Euroscepticism and the Future of European Integration

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The first book by Catherine de Vries, *Euroscepticism and the Future of European Integration*, will unambiguously become a must-read for anyone interested in the increasingly more important issues of Euroscepticism and the relationship between public opinion and the future of European integration. Professor de Vries, currently based at Bocconi University, is well positioned to produce a quality contribution to the debate on Euroscepticism given her long-term publication track-record in comparative European politics and European Studies, including in the field of public opinion towards the EU. The main aim of the book is to provide a more advanced and far-reaching chapter in the conversation regarding the role of public opinion in the European integration process than those that were published previously.

At the beginning of Chapter 1, de Vries neatly and lucidly reviews the existing approaches to public opinion towards European integration, in particular the utilitarian and identity explanations (SEE ALSO HOBOLT – VRIES 2016). Nevertheless, she maintains that these approaches are insufficient to explain the multidimensional and multi-level nature of public opinion towards the EU. In other words, de Vries argues that there is a need for an approach that would correct (some of) the failures of the existing rich body of research. The following chapter, therefore, presents the main theoretical and conceptual contribution of the book: a benchmark theory of EU public opinion. The idea of the benchmark theory is simple, yet powerful at the same time. It claims that citizens' opinion towards the EU is inseparably linked to the national economic and political circumstances in which they find themselves. In other words, EU public opinion is not formed in a vacuum and, instead, represents a kind of *"kaleidoscope that closely reflects the national conditions in which people find themselves"* (P. 205).

In yardsticking public opinion towards the EU against the domestic conditions of individual EU inhabitants, de Vries builds on the now rather bearded contributions of Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca (2002) and Robert Rohrschneider (2002), who explicitly linked public opinion towards European integration with national political developments already decades ago. The benchmark theory argues that the way people see the EU is based on their conscious assessment of national political and economic conditions. If their national economic and political conditions are good, people who generally attribute the responsibility for those conditions to the national government may feel they have an alternative option to EU membership:

an exit from the EU. It is, therefore, in those contexts with good domestic conditions and people's related perceptions that they have an alternative to EU membership, where Euroscepticism is most likely to develop. At the same time, when people compare the benefits of the membership status quo and the alternative state of being outside the EU, they consider two types of benefits: regime and policy ones. While the term "regime benefits" refers to the evaluations of the rules and procedures of national and EU political systems, policy benefits are based on a comparison of public policies provided by the EU and the national level.

De Vries's benchmark theory of EU public opinion also overcomes aspects of the previously deep-seated understanding of Euroscepticism and support for the EU as a one-dimensional concept stretching from support to scepticism towards the EU. She shows how the concept is (a) relational and multi-level since it rests on the bi-directional comparison between EU and national levels, and (b) multidimensional for it relates to people's evaluations of both the rules and procedures of the system as well as to the policies it delivers. This alone is an important contribution to the existing literature, which so far focused more on studying the determinants of public opinion rather than on its conceptualisation. Based on this conceptual and theoretical lens, the following chapter presents a new typology of support for and scepticism towards the EU. De Vries suggests and empirically underlines that public opinion towards the EU can be categorised into four groups based on the individual's comparative assessment of the performance of the national and EU levels in both the policy and regime dimensions.

As ideal types, there are thus four types of people when it comes to opinions towards the EU: exit sceptics, regime sceptics, policy sceptics, and loyal supporters. Loyal supporters are those who favour the EU over their nation state based on both policies and the regime and hence can be understood as EU-enthusiasts. Exit sceptics, in contrast, favour their nation state over the EU in terms of both policies and the regime and hence can be seen as unified Eurosceptics who oppose all aspects of their country's EU membership. Policy and regime sceptics are in between these two poles. They favour their nation state over the EU either in terms of policies or the regime, respectively. In other words, they are not unified, but ambivalent Eurosceptics who dislike certain aspects of the EU, but do not reject the EU as a whole. In the rest of Chapter 4, de Vries empirically documents

how these four categories of people are distributed across as well as within member states in a predictable way using unemployment as a benchmark for the national economic situation, and political data from the Quality of Governance Institute of the University of Gothenburg as a benchmark for national political conditions.

The following several chapters provide a deeper empirical underpinning for the theoretical and conceptual framework of EU public opinion developed thus far. These chapters, for instance, show how within individual EU member states the four categories of people based on public opinion towards the EU differ in terms of issue priorities and socio-economic characteristics, in particular, age, gender, and education. In doing so, de Vries challenges the received wisdom that it is those economically left behind who are the most likely to be the exit sceptics. Based on her benchmark theory, an explanation of this phenomenon stems from the fact that people reward their national governments for their economic well-being and if they are well off they feel they can do without the EU. In Chapter 6, the link between different types of support and scepticism towards the EU and the likelihood of voting for a Eurosceptic party is examined. Indeed, exit sceptics were more likely to cast a vote for hard Eurosceptic parties in the 2014 EP elections compared to the other types.

De Vries then examines one of the defining points in time when it comes to the relationship between public opinion and the development of European integration, the voting choices in the Brexit referendum and, by extension, the voting intentions in a hypothetical EU membership referendum in a number of selected member states. Following the presented typology, support for remaining in the EU is the most pronounced among loyal supporters, while the opposite is true for exit sceptics. As predicted by the benchmark theory, national political and economic conditions matter for the preference to remain in or leave the EU. Exit sceptics residing in countries with good economic conditions and a stable political situation are less likely to support Remain compared to exit sceptics residing in countries with the opposite economic and political circumstances.

The final empirical chapter looks into how public opinion towards the EU may affect the future of European integration by investigating support for different proposals for EU reform across member states and types of sceptics/supporters. Once again, different types of sceptics and

supporters prefer different types of reforms. While exit sceptics want to see more national government- and referendum-based decision-making in the EU, policy sceptics favour European Parliament-based decision-making as much as referendums. Moreover, people from countries with a good economic and political situation are more likely to prefer “intergovernmental” reform proposals that strengthen the role of national governments in the EU. In contrast, respondents whose countries’ economic and political context is not so good do not support such reforms. In any case, de Vries compellingly shows how future reform of the EU, unlike the previous round of treaty reform, will have to map public opinion to be successful and not to stir fierce opposition among as well as within member states.

At times, one would like to see more persuasive argumentation or analytical strategies in the book. When de Vries gives examples of how the Brexit vote was not so much driven by the left-behind thesis, she argues that the rich areas in South England voted to leave while the poor regions in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain. What I miss is a reference to a potential partial alternative explanation based on the relationship between Euroscepticism and English nationalism, from which Northern Ireland and Scotland are exempted (SEE DADDOW – GIFFORD – WELLINGS 2019; WELLINGS 2020, 2012, 2010). Similarly, when refuting the thesis that high levels of scepticism towards the EU are related to the debtor-creditor cleavage that emerged after the Eurozone crisis, de Vries argues that Euroscepticism is particularly high in countries like Sweden and Denmark, which are not members of the Eurozone and, therefore, did not serve as creditors via the European Stability Mechanism, a rescue package adopted in response to the crisis. While they did not contribute to the package, people in these countries still could *perceive* themselves as belonging to the creditor camp, not least because these countries contributed to the IMF-based rescue mechanisms, and as such could become more sceptical towards the EU because the common currency that co-created the EU-wide problems was an EU invention. And in the remainder of the book, *perceptions* are as important as real-world developments for de Vries and her benchmark theory of EU public opinion.

While the chapter investigating the relationship between belonging to one of the four ideal types of support and scepticism and the likelihood of voting for a Eurosceptic party provides rich and rigorous evidence in favour of her theory, one wishes that she went beyond the 2014 EP elections

in the analysis. EP elections are chronically known as second-order national elections in which national political concerns play as strong a role as EU-level ones (KOVÁŘ 2016). While in the past, EU-level issues did not play any important role in national parliamentary elections, the author herself has shown that this is no longer the case to the extent it once was (DE VRIES 2010, 2007). In the light of this, one would be happy to see an investigation of how different kinds of supporters and sceptics voted for Eurosceptic parties in national parliamentary elections in several countries for which data would be available, though of course the author would have to control for other potential co-determinants. Lastly, the benchmark theory of EU public opinion stems from the impact of national political and economic conditions. In the book good or bad economic conditions are operationalised as unemployment that is higher or lower than the EU average, respectively. One sometimes wonders how robust these results are. Would anything significantly change if a different operationalisation of good and bad economic situations was used?

These shortfalls notwithstanding, the first book by Catherine de Vries provides not only a timely examination of the nature of public opinion towards the EU and its relevance for the future development of European integration. In presenting her benchmark theory of EU public opinion, she also manages to provide a breath of fresh air to the slightly static literature on public opinion towards the EU by persuasively linking it to a national political and economic context. The book thus makes an invaluable, insightful and creative theoretical as well as empirical contribution to the literature as it shows that there is indeed “*no such thing as Euroscepticism*” (P. 184). The findings and conclusions of the book are, in any case, relevant far beyond academia and expert circles. Politicians, policy-makers in EU institutions, journalists and pretty much anybody interested in how public opinion interacts with European integration are provided with food for thought by this excellent book. The book presents a benchmark theory of EU public opinion, but one may say it will become a benchmark in itself for the scholarly fields it speaks to.

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