



*Opposing a Different Europe. The Nature and Origins of Euroscepticism Among
Left-Wing and Right-Wing Citizens*

E.J. van Elsas

English summary

As illustrated by the several EU referenda that have been held over the past decades, contestation over European integration tends to produce uncommon political alliances – with the anti-EU camp formed by radical right and radical left political actors campaigning for the same outcome. This pattern has repeatedly been verified by systematic analyses of party positions, which have shown that the relationship between left-right ideology and Euroscepticism has the shape of a horseshoe, with Euroscepticism concentrated at the political extremes. In contrast to other ‘new’ issues – such as the environment or immigration policy – opposition to ‘Europe’ is thus not the exclusive domain of either the political left or the right. The EU issue appears not to fit familiar left-right politics, and its cross-cutting nature has been put forward as a reason for both its low politicisation and its (sleeping) potential to fundamentally restructure voter alignments or to contribute to a structural cleavage between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalisation.

This dissertation studies the applicability of this ‘horseshoe model’ at the level of public opinion by testing the assumption that citizens at the left and right ends of the political spectrum are similar in their Euroscepticism. The reasons to study this are twofold. First, we know from previous research that not only left-right ideology has multiple interpretations, but that Euroscepticism itself is a multidimensional attitude. This raises the question how profound the similarities between Euroscepticism at the left and the right actually are. Second, much of what we know about the relationship of Euroscepticism to the political space follows from party level research. Most public opinion studies to date have studied the relationship rather superficially by analysing correlations between unidimensional measures of Euroscepticism and left-right positions, yielding seemingly contradictory results: Public Euroscepticism has been found to be higher at the left, at the right or at both extremes, while others find no relationship at all. This dissertation provides a more refined view of the relationship between Euroscepticism, left-right ideology and electoral preferences by studying public opinion across fifteen Western European EU member states. Its theoretical starting point is that the horseshoe model masks more intricate patterns of association between Euroscepticism and left-right ideology.

This summary provides an overview of the findings of the four empirical chapters that constitute the core of this dissertation. A more elaborate discussion of the implications of these results for the horseshoe model, as well as their broader scientific and societal implications, is presented in the concluding chapter (Chapter 6).

The four empirical chapters can be divided into two parts. *Part I* of this dissertation focuses on the relationship between Euroscepticism and left-right ideology in public opinion. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a complementary assessment of the horseshoe model. First, the relationship is mapped with consistent

measures over a large time span (Chapter 2). Second, the main concepts that constitute the relationship are disentangled by distinguishing between two dimensions of Euroscepticism and between different (economic and cultural) motivations for Euroscepticism among left-wing and right-wing citizens (Chapter 3). In *Part II*, the applicability of the horseshoe is tested for Euroscepticism and electoral support, by analysing the effect of two dimensions of Euroscepticism on supporting left-wing and right-wing Eurosceptic parties (Chapter 4) and on supporting mainstream versus Eurosceptic parties more generally (Chapter 5).

Chapter 2 starts out with an extensive study of the relationship between general measures of left-right ideology and Euroscepticism over four decades (1973-2010) and twelve EU member states, in order to assess the applicability of the horseshoe model to public opinion across time and space. The theoretical starting point of this analysis is that both left-right ideology and 'Europe' have changed in meaning over time – the latter particularly due to the changing character of the EU around Maastricht. Where initially left-wing citizens had most reason to oppose Europe on the basis of economic, anti-neoliberal arguments, from the 1990s onwards a cultural, nationalist critique stimulated Euroscepticism among right-wing citizens. By modelling the relationship as a quadratic function across the whole period, the analysis shows that, in line with theoretical expectations, the relationship changes from linear (with left-wing citizens being most Eurosceptic) to U-shaped (with citizens at both the left and right extremes most Eurosceptic). There is thus a long-term development towards a horseshoe shaped relationship, and the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) constitutes a crucial turning point in this development.

Chapter 3 analyses to what extent the Euroscepticism found among left-wing and right-wing citizens is actually a similar or a different attitude – both in terms of its nature and origins. It employs more detailed attitudinal data over the 2004-2014 period in fifteen Western EU member states to disentangle Eurosceptic attitudes and their motivations. The findings show that two dimensions of Euroscepticism can be distinguished, and that these dimensions have different attitudinal antecedents. The first dimension entails specific evaluations of the EU as it currently exists, and is referred to as *dissatisfaction with the current functioning of the EU*. Such dissatisfaction is found to be particularly high among left-wing citizens, and can be explained by both economic (i.e. related to income equality and redistribution) and cultural (i.e. related to immigration) concerns. The second dimension, *opposition to further EU strengthening*, in turn, refers to more diffuse attitudes towards the European project, and the fundamental tension between supranational integration and preserving national sovereignty. This type of Euroscepticism is much higher among right-wing citizens than among left-wing citizens, which can be explained by the finding that it is motivated by cultural concerns for all citizens. The nationalism and monoculturalism of citizens at the far right explains why they are strongly opposed to the furthering of the European project, while left-wing citizens' more favourable attitudes can be understood from their more

multicultural, universal outlook. Thus, the associations between left-right and Euroscepticism are more complex than the horseshoe model reflects. Instead of being unrelated, left-right ideology is an important determinant of the nature and origins of Euroscepticism, which are fundamentally different among left-wing and right-wing citizens.

This raises the question to what extent similar nuances should be made for Eurosceptic voting behaviour. *Chapter 4* questions to what extent Eurosceptic parties with a left-wing and right-wing ideology actually draw similar or different supporters. I theorise that while both party families are likely to appeal to similar *interests* – those of the lower educated ‘losers of globalisation’ – they crucially differ in the terms of the *values* they represent on a nationalism-cosmopolitanism dimension. Given the accumulating evidence in the literature that such values are dominant in attitudes towards European integration and globalisation, I expect the differences between the Eurosceptic left and right to prevail. My analyses of electoral support over the 1989-2014 period support this intuition. While supporters of both left-wing and right-wing Eurosceptic parties on average are dissatisfied with the current EU, they differ in their opposition to further EU strengthening. Such opposition strongly contributes to support for right-wing Eurosceptic parties, while its relationship to left-wing Eurosceptic support is inconsistent. A likely explanation for this is that opposition to EU strengthening is strongly rooted in monocultural, nationalist attitudes (as shown in Chapter 3) and therefore causes ambiguity among those with a radical left ideology, who generally hold more multicultural, cosmopolitan attitudes. This ambiguity is also reflected in other characteristics of supporters of the Eurosceptic left. In contrast to the Eurosceptic right, which consistently draws supporters who stand negatively towards immigrants and who have low levels of education, the Eurosceptic left attracts supporters with a mixed educational profile, and with positive views on immigration. Thus, only the Eurosceptic right mobilises typical ‘globalisation losers’, whereas the Euroscepticism of Eurosceptic left supporters is more nuanced and is not part of a broader anti-globalisation package. These findings again serve to nuance the horseshoe model, as they show that Eurosceptic mobilisation at the left and right extremes is based on fundamentally different premises.

Chapter 5 further tests the applicability of the horseshoe model to electoral support by including mainstream parties in the comparison. The horseshoe model portrays the political mainstream as an undifferentiated pro-EU block. This chapter, taking a more explorative approach than the previous chapters, investigates to what extent this image holds when studying the effect of the two dimensions of Euroscepticism on electoral support for seven principal (mainstream and radical) party families (radical left, green, social democratic, Christian democratic, liberal, conservative and radical right). In line with the findings for Eurosceptic parties in Chapter 4, the effect of dissatisfaction with the current EU is similar for all mainstream parties, left and right – all draw supporters who are relatively satisfied on this dimension. Again, however, differences are found for opposition to the furthering of the European

project. In 2009 and 2014, only social democratic, green and liberal parties are on average more popular among supporters of EU strengthening, while this attitude has no effect on support for conservative and Christian democratic parties. Rather than dividing radicals from the mainstream, this EU dimension distinguishes a left-liberal versus a right-conservative political camp. This indicates that electoral support does not follow the familiar horseshoe pattern when it comes to more fundamental forms of EU opposition.

Overall, these results show that there are both pros and cons to using the horseshoe model to describe public opinion towards Europe. On a general level, we are indeed more likely to find public Euroscepticism among far left-wing and far right-wing citizens than in the political centre, and electoral support for both left-wing and right-wing Eurosceptic parties is indeed driven by negative attitudes towards Europe. Yet, the similarities between left-wing and right-wing Eurosceptics are superficial, as not only their reasons for Euroscepticism but also the objects at which their opposition is directed are fundamentally different. This means, first, that rather than being united against a common foe, citizens at the left and right are Eurosceptic in ways that fit their broader ideological profiles. Second, as Euroscepticism is a response to different concerns for left-wing and right-wing citizens, Euroscepticism may be strongest at the far left, the far right, or at both extremes, depending on the societal, historical and political context. There is no inherent horseshoe-shaped relationship between left-right and Euroscepticism. Rather, the horseshoe comes about in contexts where both the political left and right find reasons to oppose European integration.

What do these findings imply for political contestation over Europe in the years to come? First, the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis and the continuing refugee crisis are likely to strengthen the horseshoe, as these crises fuel both left-wing and right-wing objections to the EU. If the sense of crisis persists, we might even find that Euroscepticism at the extremes takes on a more similar character, as far left-wing citizens' dissatisfaction with the current EU might eventually spill over to a more fundamental opposition. Second, as cultural concerns have come to dominate the political debate in many Western European countries, radical right parties currently appear to be in the best position to mobilise Eurosceptic voters – as even economic issues such as the Eurozone crisis have proven to be easily incorporated into their nationalist discourse. Yet, Eurosceptic left parties are more successful in countries under strict EU austerity regimes, suggesting that the Eurozone crisis may also increase ideological divisions about the EU along national lines. Finally and more generally, the findings imply that Euroscepticism, due to its diverse and ideological character, is unlikely to create new lasting political alliances between the radical left and the radical right. Coalitions on the sole basis of shared Euroscepticism – such as the 2015 Greek government – rely on a feeble electoral basis. In addition, the diverse nature of public Euroscepticism means that those aiming to reduce the lack of representation with regard to Europe face no easy task.

Offering European citizens the choice of being either in favour or against the EU does not do justice to their opinions; rather, the nature of public Euroscepticism calls for a more comprehensive form of policy contestation than the EU has hitherto seen.