### Euroscepticism as a lever: Contesting European integration with ulterior motives

Simon Usherwood

Department of Politics
University of Surrey
Guildford GU2 7XH
UK

s.usherwood@surrey.ac.uk

**Abstract:**

Euroscepticism has always been a nebulous concept, expanding and stretching to accommodate a wide range of actors and actions. The ‘European crisis’ of recent years has offered new opportunities for such actors and actions to gain an ever more prominent profile in national and European public debates, effectively embedding themselves into the political system. At the same time, the notion of a ‘euroscepticism’ has become ever harder to hold. This paper argues that a central reason for this is the way in which political actors of various kinds have co-opted the language of scepticism to serve other purposes. Using examples from the UK, the paper suggests that very few actors oppose European integration in of itself, but instead they use it as a manifestation of some other issue. In so doing, there is an attempt to move beyond Taggart’s (1998) classic model, by conceptualising scepticism not simply as a tactical device employed by marginal political parties as a means of differentiation, but as an increasingly pervasive means of strengthening the frame for other policies. Since the primary focus of such actions is typically national, rather than European, the longer-term consequence is a potential hollowing-out of popular engagement and legitimacy with the EU, which poses a serious challenge for the future development of the organisation.

*This paper represents a first set of thoughts on the subject, so please do not cite without permission*
Europe has changed very profoundly since the late 1980s: the collapse of Communist regimes in the east of the continent and, with it, the end of the bipolar system of the Cold War, created an opportunity for the creation of a wider and deeper European Union (EU). This Union, with its high rhetoric of the Maastricht Treaty, has almost trebled its membership, expanded into at least a supporting role in every area of public policy and created a single currency zone that has weathered the worst economic conditions for nearly a century. The EU remains a regional organisation without peer, be it in its legal order, degree of citizen participation and scope of activity.

But there is a second side to this period. In the same time, we have seen the emergence of critical voices throughout the Union. From political parties to public opinion, civil society groups to the media, there has never been a similarly comprehensive array of challenge to the principles and practice of European integration. Usually pulled together under the title of ‘euroscepticism’, these actors and actions can be found in every member state (and even in some states that are not members) and, even when not dominant, appear to be increasingly consequential in shaping or nudging those making decisions.

This tension – between the substantial advances of the EU and the growth of euroscepticism – forms the basis of this paper. The Union of today finds itself required to question whether and how it will engage with Eurosceptics, even as it discovers that the latter term is largely meaningless. What began in a very specific and limited context has been taken out into a huge range of different contexts and settings, to the point that ‘euroscepticism’ means little – if anything – in of itself. That ephemerality is not only an academic problem, but also a political one, for it obscures as much as it reveals, making the process of engagement all the more difficult.

The paper starts by considering the conceptual stretching and hollowing-out that ‘euroscepticism’ has undergone in the 30 years of its existence, before providing a brief review of the current situation in the UK, the country of its birth. This leads into a consideration of wider theoretical and political implications.
The Concept-Stretching of Euroscepticism

The word ‘euroscepticism’ first appeared in the UK in the late 1980s. It was used to describe an emergent group of Conservative MPs (mainly backbenchers) who were increasingly concerned about the development of plans for further European integration in the wake of the Single European Act (George 2000). The Act itself had been seen as a very positive development for British agendas in the then European Community (EC), promoting as it did the completion of the single market at a time of increased international competition. However, the plans for monetary and financial integration that were being floated by various actors – notably the Commission president, Jacques Delors – were seen to be going far beyond this.

Very quickly, the language of ‘euroscepticism’ took hold in the British media, especially in the wake of Margaret Thatcher’s Bruges speech in 1988, where she publicly challenged the presumed intentions of Delors (and others) and opened the final phase of her time in office (see Usherwood 2003 for a discussion). However, it was to be the Maastricht treaty itself that marked the flowering of euroscepticism as the dominant frame for understanding critical actions and actors.

Maastricht marked a step-change in public awareness due to the nature of the proposals (see Flood, 2002; Startin, 2005; Mudde, 2011; Verney, 2011; Usherwood & Startin, 2013; Vasilopoulou, 2013) and is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, Maastricht signalled a new politicisation of European integration, with the name change from Community to Union and the creation of a new political order. Secondly, it marks the moment when divisions between European and domestic policy begin to become increasingly blurred in the areas of political, economic, social, legal, environmental and foreign affairs. Post-Maastricht, opposition to ‘Europe’ changed from being a straightforward question concerning the pros and cons of EU membership to one that was couched much more in terms of the rationale of the route that the European project is taking. Thirdly, Maastricht acts as a watershed, a key turning point in the debate surrounding the development of the EU as it marks the moment when referenda become a regular occurrence in certain countries to ratify changes to EU treaties, serving to galvanise Eurosceptics in their bid to derail the process of European
integration. In June 1992 the Danes rejected the Maastricht Treaty and in September the French narrowly voted in favour – a far from ringing endorsement given that current, previous and future Presidents (representing France’s three major parties) all campaigned for a ‘yes’ vote. Finally, Maastricht acted as a pivotal point as the raised profile and salience of the EU allowed opportunistic politicians and leaders willing to mobilize public opposition to obtain national draw from the European issue. Pan-European cooperation begins between nationally-organised sceptical interest groups, springing from shared adversity and common threats, drawing in groups where opposition might have previously been only latent and/or inopportune. In short, Maastricht acted as a catalyst as Euroscepticism spread across the EU, both in terms of political parties and in terms of public opinion.

The upshot of this has been both a proliferation of critical actors across the EU and a proliferation in their identification as ‘eurosceptic’: the label is applied to French communists, Hungarian fascists, British conservatives, Irish pro-life groups, German liberals and Twitter-users from all over the place with equal facility. To scope this breadth of use is beyond this paper (although some attempt is made below for the UK), but even this brief array of examples points us towards the conceptual-stretching (Sartori 1970) and hollowing-up of the term that has taken place.

Very clearly, euroscepticism does not contain an a priori ideological underpinning: its –ism does not exist. Put differently, euroscepticism is negatively constructed: it is about what is disliked, rather than what is liked or desired. However we construct the term, euroscepticism reflects a dislike or opposition to some aspect of Europe (even if we can usually limit that last term to the EU more specifically): the reasons for that dislike/opposition are not intrinsic to the definition of the word. Indeed, this is recognised in the most developed models of euroscepticism, namely party politics. As Mudde (2011) has usefully noted, the two main schools of thought on party-based euroscepticism differentiate themselves by their stress on either party competition models (the ‘Sussex’ school, as typified by Szczerbiak & Taggart (2003) or ideological predispositions (the ‘North Carolina’ school of Hooghe et al 2002). The key claim of the latter group is that it is less centrist ideologies that have adopted Eurosceptical positions, as seen on a left-right spectrum, which are also associated with traditional/authoritarian/nationalist positions. Hooghe et al would claim that this is an ideological explanation, even though this grouping covers a wide range of ideologies and
their peripherality remains a key marker. As in the party competition approaches, ideology matters only in as far as it is relational to other ideologies.

The argument behind this is that the European Union itself is an extended package deal between many different actors. As such, it contains extensive pay-offs to accommodate those involved, to secure their participation and support. Consequently, it is easy for any ideologue to identify an element that they dislike within the whole and to express that. Indeed, this highlights another key aspect of the concept-stretching process, namely that there is no clear boundary between where euroscepticism ends and something else starts. To make the somewhat trite point, there is probably no one within the EU’s institutions or member states who is completely content with the EU as it is now: everybody wishes some change. Does this make everyone a eurosceptic? Obviously not, but where to draw the line? As a recent term, can we use the word to describe Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s, or PASOK in the 1980s? How do we capture the heated debate about Eurozone governance reform since 2008, where all parties are accused of betraying some key principle of the Union?

In part, this is a problem of how we use the term. Very few people willingly describe themselves as Eurosceptics; instead they are, if they use any such label, Eurorealists or building an alternative Europe – scepticism or doubt does not really figure for them. But in the face of so little self-identification, why is the term so popular? To a considerable degree, it is because it is used in a pejorative way, to mark out opponents and to stigmatise. As Neunreither (1998) pointed out, the Union is not designed to accommodate dissent, because it is a consensus-building machine: while much effort is put into bringing in as many as possible into that consensus, it is not complete, and those who fall outside tend to be either ignored or disdained. And this has indeed been the hallmark of the EU’s response over the past two decades: an almost complete inability (or willingness) to accept that some people dislike what is happening, a de haut en bas attitude that merely exacerbates the situation.

To pull all of this together, we might useful start by talking of Euroscepticisms – recognising that there is no one overarching idea (or ideology), but rather many different reasons and manifestations at work simultaneously. To illustrate this point, we might usefully consider the current situation in the home of the word, the UK.
**Euroscepticism in the UK today**

At one level, euroscepticism seems as rampant as it has ever been in the UK. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) came first in the European Parliament elections in May, have secured their first elected MP, and might be on track to secure a second one next month, and currently poll at 15%. The other political parties talk about cutting back on European obligations: from human rights under the European Convention (which is not the EU per se, but which does have implications thereon) to David Cameron’s comments on limiting free movement of people. Public opinion is negatively disposed, with the lowest levels of support in the EU (Eurobarometer 2014). Add to this a broadly sceptical print media (Daddow 2012) and it would appear that all of the tropes of the ‘awkward partner’ (George 1998) still hold true.

However, this is a very reductive reading of the situation and one which bears further investigation.

Let us start by considering UKIP, seeming standard-bearer of the Eurosceptic movement in the UK, and beyond. Douglas Carswell’s victory in the Clacton by-election has undoubtedly provided a very positive boost to his new party’s position as it runs into the general election. But it also brings a number of tensions. Carswell’s politics – libertarian in the true sense of the word – do not sit very easily with many party supporters: consider his acceptance speech, with its calls for tolerance of immigrants. Couple that to Nigel Farage’s history of pushing out challengers to his authority (which will be much more likely if Mark Reckless wins his by-election in November) and we can see that the party remains as contingent as ever. Even in the European Parliament, the recent difficulties in maintaining the threshold requirements for the Europe of Freedom & Direct Democracy (EFDD) group have underlined that progress is not without difficulties.

But aside from such organisational/structural issues, there is also the question of how much UKIP is ‘about’ the EU. The party has had a long history of moving away from its pure focus on withdrawal: founder Alan Sked’s original plan contained literally nothing else but this. Since then, there has been the softening of positions on MEPs taking up their seats (and EU funding) and the expansion into other areas of policy, most obviously immigration (see Daniel 2005 and Gardener 2006). Farage has been a key driver of that shift: during his first
stint as party leader, it was he who wanted to rename it as the Independence Party, to draw in all aspects of dissatisfaction and protest: he failed in that re-labelling, but he secured in practical terms. As has been seen, UKIP’s success has been built on speaking to the ‘left-behinds’: people who feel threatened by economic change, immigration and the changing welfare system: the EU is not much more than a symbol of those underlying issues (Ford & Goodwin 2014).

This has created a situation where ‘Europe’ is a necessary, but not sufficient factor in motivating UKIP voters, who also are anti-immigration, discontented with the state of politics and economically pessimistic (Ford & Goodwin 2014). Indeed, recent polling (Ipsos-MORI 2014) has shown that 11% of UKIP voters support EU membership, with another 10% ‘not sure’ on the matter. If UKIP was once just about the EU, it certainly is not so any more.

Something similar is observable in the other political parties: the slowness in recognising the shift in UKIP’s challenge has meant that both Conservatives and Labour have talked up their critical stance towards the European Union, to close the political space.

The problem is more acute for the Tories, who have felt more of an existential threat from UKIP, both in policy and personnel terms. David Cameron continues to try to hold the ring with his backbenchers, leading to the even more contorted positions that have culminated with the recent announcements on the ECHR and on free movement. It is these backbenchers who have been the key drivers of policy change since Cameron’s arrival as party leader in 2006, especially following the 2010 general election, where they were numerous enough to hold the party in a position that could undermine its parliamentary majority. The combination of fear, profound ignorance of the existing legal order and a party that doesn’t entirely trust its leader results in policy that satisfies no-one and creates the preconditions for its (the policy’s, if not the party’s) own collapse.

But again, the European issue is reflexive, rather than considered: the backbench group take their political cues from a stylised understanding of Thatcherite politics that ignores the contributions she made towards European integration (see Usherwood 2013) and instead is a neoliberal worldview. As a result, euroscepticism is totemic and needs no explanation, nor a constructive alternative plan. Indeed, it is telling that the most considered of this group, Douglas Carswell, is the one who has left to join UKIP.
On Labour’s side, while Ed Miliband has resisted the pressure to move any more formally towards any referendum commitment, this has not stopped the party from more strident language, to contain any obvious outflanking during campaigning for the general election. The old critique from the hard left of the party – that the European Union undermines the country’s ability to provide a social-equitable public policy – remains, but bound up in a bigger critique of the nature of the contemporary state of politics, economics and society. In this they mirror the Tory backbench, where ‘Europe’ is symbolically important, but also merely indicative of a wider issue.

As for public opinion, while levels of support for the Union remain low in the UK, but absolutely and in the relative context of other member states, it is also striking that the EU as an issue has not regaining the position it had in the late 1990s-early 2000s: the long-term polling has placed in at around 10%, just where it has been for many years now, even since the collapse of the Constitutional Treaty (Ipsos-Mori n/d). Just as its importance as a matter of public debate appears to have receded, so too have attitudes become more variable: Ipsos-Mori (2014) produced a recent poll that showed the largest majority in favour of membership for over 20 years, even as it gave UKIP one of their highest polling figures.

The rejoinder to this is that the rise of immigration as an issue of public concern – now considered the most important issue confronting the UK today – is actually about the EU, since membership precludes limiting free movement from other member states, but that would suggest a level of public knowledge that is not supported by the evidence: consider the recent ComRes (2014) poll where 52% of people thought British nationals should have unlimited freedom of movement in the EU (26% opposed), while only 36% thought that other EU nationals should have the same rights in the UK (46% opposed. Also see Eurobarometer 2014). While UKIP have worked hard to make the connection between the two issues, it is also apparent that immigration also taps into wider issues about national identity, multiculturalism and even racism (e.g. Dancygier & Donnelly 2013).

Even the critical media environment could be argued to be more functional than fundamental, given both the shifts that have occurred over time and the economic interests that might predispose media owners to dislike the EU. The figure of Rupert Murdoch has been emblematic in this and his willingness to adapt his newspapers’ editorial lines to suit his personal preferences is undoubted (Anderson 2004). However, over time the progressive
fragmentation of the media landscape has also called into question how much of an impact any of it has on public attitudes (or politicians’, for that matter): the constraints on broadcast news in the UK might be offset by the echo-chamber of the internet, but in any case the scope for any one news source to set agendas has become limited.

In this quick overview, a number of commonalities might be noted. The first is the lack of self-identification as Eurosceptic by most of those involved, a point that matches the pattern found elsewhere. A common refrain here is that a given group is not anti-Europe, but anti-EU, and that the group’s agendas are positive visions of how the UK could be. Euro-critics and Eurorealists abound, while those who are more supportive of the EU freely use Eurosceptic as a term of othering and denigration. This latter strategy has become less and less effective over time, through a combination of over-use and of popularisation, whereby the shock value of the term is effectively zero.

The second key commonality is the lack of a clear or consistent ideology to British euroscepticism. UKIP represents the classic case of this, with its pick-and-mix approach to policy-making, drawing in populism, libertarianism and much else, an approach that has been made possible by the mix of interests within the party and by the assuming windfalls of money and flexibility that would accrue from leaving the Union. The party thus acts as a microcosm of the wider picture in the UK, with critiques from trade unions and business federations, progressives and conservatives, greens and industrialists, all mixing together, sometimes overlapping – as with the question of Eurozone membership – and sometimes in direct opposition to one another. What plans that do exist are largely appeals to the potential opportunities of closer cooperation with other English-speaking countries (Wellings 2014) or to an enhanced post-membership deal with an EU that would be grateful to retain access to British markets. There is not space here to consider more fully the paradox that such plans contain, but it will suffice to observe that a common theme is that the UK is currently very weak and unable to defend its interests within the EU, but would become strong once it left, even as it distanced itself from its immediate neighbourhood.

The final observation here is that euroscepticism in the UK is primarily a vehicle for achieving other objectives. One way to explore this is to unpack how euroscepticism has developed, which allows us to see two distinct elements. On the one hand, there are those individuals and groups that have been in action seemingly forever: individuals such as Bill
Cash or the Campaign for an Independent Britain, formed in the aftermath of the 1975 referendum. More recently, you have those who kept active in their opposition in the early 2000s, after the single currency membership debates and before the Constitutional Treaty. On the other, there is the more diffuse and unorganised wave of opposition that has emerged in recent years: all the groups and parties that have started tacking on expressions of dissatisfaction with European integration to their programmes; the rise in negative public opinion and protest voting in elections; the critical media coverage.

The former group are characterised by their righteousness, a belief that they are fighting for fundamental principles that cannot be left to chance. For them, the EU is not only a problem, but the problem. Their opposition thus is an end in itself and it might be expected that they are likely to stay active and fighting even in a reformed Union. To take the British case, these are the sort of people who would keep up their opposition even after losing a referendum on membership.

The latter group is something more like grit in the system. They are dissatisfied, rather than deeply opposed, their concerns are driven as much by the economic cycle and dissatisfaction with all expressions of authority as by the actions of the Union itself. Thus, the EU is a problem – like the first group – but an expression of another problem. In this case, we might see that as it becomes evident that a Union (changed or not) is not the root cause of the difficulty, so these people will move on to some other thing: their opposition is a means to an end and as such they are more likely to accept a narrative that a reforming Union is meeting their concerns.

**Theoretical Implications**

Theorising euroscepticism has always been difficult. As alluded to above, outside of party politics there has been little progress in creating over-arching models of the phenomenon. Indeed, there is often the distinct sense that scholars’ main response to this has been to avoid the question, by focusing down on their particular speciality.
This paper does not offer a solution to this problematic situation, but does try to ways in which it can be addressed. The starting point in this has to be a recognition of a set of fundamental principles that have already been alluded to. The first has to an acceptance that euroscepticism is not an ideology in of itself. The only glue that holds together the various groups to which the label is applied is some negative view of some aspect of European integration. This fundamentally negative construction of euroscepticism is both a source of strength and weakness to the label: a strength for the endless flexibility it offers, but a weakness for the lack of positive and constructive alternative it offers alongside its varied critiques.

This runs into the second key idea, namely that there is no one Euroscepticism, only Euroscepticisms. Aside from their shared dislike of the EU (itself already a very fractured collection of views) there need not be – and there often is not – much that holds them together. Instead, the label of euroscepticism masks more than it reveals, through its suggestion that this is about ideology rather than actions. In part, this also explains why what limited attempts have been made to response to Eurosceptics have failed, since in attempting to satisfy one group, another group becomes less satisfied: such is the nature of both EU and Eurosceptics.

This in turn leads into a third idea, that of euroscepticism as an incidental process, rather than a fundamental one. Of the two groups identified above in the UK, the opportunists by far outweigh the righteous: consider the very large fluctuations in the memberships of all of the major groups over the past 20 years: the Referendum party, the Democracy Movement, UKIP (Usherwood 2004). With that in mind, we might usefully consider that euroscepticism is usually a by-product of trying to achieve something else, rather than a purpose in of itself: if the EU didn’t exist, most of these actors would still be trying to change things. Even in the case of single-issue pressure groups, such as Business for Sterling in the1990s, it was apparent that there were different motivations for individuals to join, even if they shared the same ostensible goal.

To be clear, this are not solely features of Eurosceptics: ‘pro-EU’ actors face similar problems. Hence all of the main pro-EU groups that have sprung up over the decades have suffered from basic differences of opinion about why the EU is good for the UK and all have broken up very quickly once the relevant critical juncture – the 1975 referendum,
membership of the Euro, preparation for a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty – has passed, just as the equivalent umbrella groups of the Eurosceptic side have similarly suffered.

That such issues are pervasive helpfully leads to the final key idea. To date, models of euroscepticism have been built on ideas of marginality. To take the best-known and most widely used model, Taggart’s hard/soft division of political parties, the holding of Eurosceptic positions is understood essentially as a means of differentiating parties on the political peripheries from their mainstream rivals. This made sense in a time where that mainstream held almost without exception to the consensual-derived benefits of EU membership and when the successes of integration in the 1980s and 1990s seemed to place Europe on a clear trajectory to the progressive reinforcement of that system.

The proposition here is that these conditions do not hold any more. The extended democratic failure of the constitutionalisation process begun at Laeken in 2001 has coupled with the policy failures of the great recession since 2008 to produce a situation where euroscepticism has become mainstreamed. The UK might be the most extreme example of this - with the main party in government about to fight a general election on a platform of renegotiating the basic principles of the EU, before submitting them to a popular vote – but it can also be found elsewhere, from Hungary to Greece, Finland to France. The manifestations of this vary from country to country, but to describe positions that are critical of the EU as marginal misses the way in which many mainstream parties have taken on at least the rhetoric, if not fully the substance.

One way to view this is a triumph of Euroscepticism, a sea-change in political and public attitudes that has been fought against the odds and won. But again this would be to see euroscepticism as a monolith, consistent and coherent. The very fact that the mainstreaming has taken such different forms points to the fallacy of this view: The discourse of withdrawal has not really spread beyond British shores, just as the rise of radical-right groups has been very uneven from case to case. Once again, this suggests that Euroscepticism is not ideological in construct, but strategic or operational.

Where this differs from Szczerbiak & Taggart’s (2003) conception is in the pervasiveness of euroscepticism as a tool in the political toolbox, produced and used to meet contingent and local objectives. In this sense, the early adopters have been successful in changing the
political landscape, but only to the extent that the language and (occasional) actions of euroscepticism have become a way of providing cover. Thus, the old language of Community values has given way to ‘talking tough’ and defending national interests (e.g. Le Cacheux 2005), certainly at the level of the European Council, but also below. It is perhaps telling that one of the consequences of the Spitzenkandidaten process in the Parliament has been to politicise the Commission, one of the main bastions of the ‘Community interest’, a development that might potential strengthen this dynamic.

Concluding Remarks

Sadly, we are not in a position to get everyone to stop using the term ‘euroscepticism’ and switch to something less problematic and more precise instead. As such, the best that can be aimed for is a re-appropriation of the word, grounded in a coherent framework of understanding and analysis.

At the academic level, that requires a shift in thinking, from ideologically-grounded or strategic approaches, to a pervasive tactical model, where Eurosceptic frames and actions become a part of the standard pattern of political life, used in a tactical and very localised way to achieve other objectives. Such an approach is grounded in the mainstreaming of euroscepticism and in apparent inability (or at least unwillingness) of political actors to actively articulate a more positive conception of European integration. Such an imbalance is likely to remain for the foreseeable future, because the bargained nature of the EU system means that there will always be (localised) loses, which will always seem more consequential than the (global) gains.

At the same time, there needs to be an awareness of the corrosive effects of this mainstreaming, whereby what democratic legitimacy that does exist is progressively undermined. Just as the extension of the Parliament’s powers has not created a ‘citizen’s Europe’ and might even have increased public cynicism (Wilde et al 2014), so the increasing willingness of political actors across the spectrum to challenge the value of the Union is very unlikely to create an improving situation. This is already widely understood on the ground, as seen in the retreat from the use of referendums after the votes in France and the Netherlands.
in 2005, but it also calls into question the logics of socialisation that have underpinned much of integration theory (e.g. Checkel 2005; Shore 2013).

Despite all of this, the final message is a more hopeful one. If most euroscepticism is not particularly about the EU, then that opens up new courses of action. Central in this is the nebulous notion of ‘reform’, which everyone wants, even if they disagree about what it might actually contain. Reform is, in of itself, valuable for the way in which it creates a new discursive frame of change and renewal, logically drawing on popular concerns and so rebuilding support. It is in the trying, as much as the succeeding, that the Union can create a path out of its current situation and make euroscepticism a more benign and constructive part of the system.
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