

The Issue Voting Triangle:

The Role of Voter Salience, Party Conflict and Issue Linkage in Issue Voting

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Abstract

Why do some issues influence voting behaviour while others do not? This study proposes a model – the *issue voting triangle* – that accounts for the variation in issue voting. It argues that issues are more likely to influence party choice when three conditions are fulfilled: 1) voters must render the issue important; 2) voters should perceive party positions on the issue to be different; 3) and the issue should in the eyes of voters be related to the main dimension of political conflict, i.e. the left/right dimension. These general propositions are tested by an examination of the impact of the European integration issue on party choice in 20 West and East-Central European countries. The analysis shows that that EU issue voting is indeed more prominent when the three conditions are fulfilled. This finding has important implications for the study of elections and issue voting and enriches our understanding of why issues become relevant to voters.

Key Words: Elections, Issue Voting, Party Choice, Political Parties, Voting Behavior

‘To speak of politics is to speak of political issues, almost invariably.
We speak of them as if we knew of them. But we truly do not.
We do not know why they arise, *why one question rather than another
comes to seem important, why it happens at a particular time, rather than another,
why some last, why some do not.*’

Carmines and Stimson (1989: 3, italics added):

Introduction

Ever since the late 1960s we are witnessing a decline in cleavage politics throughout Western Europe (Franklin, et al., 1992). Traditional models of vote choice painted pictures of stable electorates strongly tied to specific parties through deeply rooted social divisions (Lazersfeld, et al. 1944; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). This relatively tranquil electoral landscape was stirred up dramatically during the last three decades of the last century. As a result of processes of social and political modernization traditional linkages between parties and voters began to weaken, resulting in a steady rise of electoral volatility throughout most countries of Western Europe (Franklin, et al., 1992; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). This process of electoral change also instigated an influx in issue- and candidate-based voting (Dalton, 1996). Owing to these intertwined processes of waning cleavage-based and increasing issue-based voting, electoral researchers face new challenges. For example, which issues are important to voters and why do some reach the centre stage of electoral competition, while others remain on the political periphery? In other words, why do issues become relevant to voters?

The latter question lies at the heart of this endeavor. This study proposes a model – the *issue voting triangle* – that accounts for the extent to which issues influence voters’ decisions at the ballot box. It draws our attention to three conditions – *voter salience*, *party conflict* and *issue linkage*– that explain the way in which political issues impact voters’ decisions at the ballot box. The first condition *voter salience* refers to the extent to which voters care enough about an issue to let it influence their choices in the voting booth. The second condition *party conflict* signifies that issue voting increases when the contentious issue is (re-) phrased in partisan terms and when voters are

aware of these differences. The final condition relates to *issue linkage*, that is to say the extent to which voters view an issue as related to the dominant dimension of political conflict, i.e. the left/right ideological dimension. The argument here is that issue linkage reduces the transaction costs of issue voting for individual voters. These three conditions make up the *issue voting triangle*. The extent to which issues meet the issue voting triangle conditions mediates the degree of issue voting.

The usefulness of the issue voting triangle model is demonstrated by examining the impact of relatively new policy issue –i.e. European integration– on party choice in 20 countries in Western and East-Central Europe. The European integration issue constitutes an excellent object of study for our endeavor as every European Union (EU) member state has to deal with issues arising from European integration. While at the same time, the impact of the EU issue can be expected to vary substantially within countries due the different domestic configurations. Subsequently, the EU issue provides a fruitful testing ground to determine how sharply contrasting contexts (i.e. voter salience, party conflict and issue linkage) impact the extent of EU issue voting –i.e. the impact of the EU issue on party choice (De Vries, 2007). Relying on observations from European Election Survey (EES) 2004¹, this study provides strong evidence for the issue voting triangle. By studying EU issue voting, this contribution has taken an important step toward understanding the conditions which instigate issue voting. Its main theoretical contribution is not necessarily confined to the particular case of issues relating to European integration, but should also hold for other important issues, such as immigration or globalization.

This study proceeds in five parts. The first section introduces the issue voting triangle. Next, the data and methods are elaborated. In a third step, the results of the empirical analysis are presented. The fourth section provides several robustness checks, and finally, the paper concludes by highlighting the implications of the findings.

¹ The data needed for the analyses presented in this paper are not available for all countries in the EES 2004. Belgium, Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta and Sweden were excluded from the analysis.

The Issue Voting Triangle: The Importance of Voter Salience, Party Conflict and Issue Linkage

Complex societies produce diverse conflicts over public policy. Indeed, the number of potential policy issues is infinite. The essence of politics lies in the organization of these diverse conflicts, a point succinctly made by Schattschneider when he remarked: ‘What happens in politics *depends on the way in which people are divided* into factions, parties, groups, classes, etc. The outcome of the game of politics depends on which of the multitude of possible conflicts gains the dominant position’ (Schattschneider, 1960: 62, *italics in original*). The process in which one or several of these conflicts gain political dominance involves a *mobilization of bias* (Schattschneider, 1960). That is to say, only some social divisions eventually find political expression. The question arises under which conditions can policy issues, like European integration, be expected to become politically relevant and influence voting behavior?

This issue has been addressed by several prominent scholars within political science (Campbell, et al., 1960; Schattschneider, 1960; Riker, 1982; Sundquist, 1983; Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989; Franklin, et al., 1992; Stimson, 2004). A large array of factors, such as critical events or new party entry, are viewed as important pieces of the puzzle concerning why some issues influence voters’ voting decisions while others do not. By bridging the work on issue evolution from the United States context (Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989; Abramowitz, 1994; Adams, 1997; Layman and Carsey, 2002; Stimson, 2004) and the extensive research into electoral change from Western Europe (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Franklin, et al., 1992; Mair, 1997), this study outlines three conditions that are crucial in this respect: *voter salience*, *party conflict* and *issue linkage*. On the basis of these three factors, a theoretical model, i.e. the *issue voting triangle*, is developed that explains the conditions under which “new” policy issues are more likely to influence party choice. The idea of the issue voting triangle is outlined in figure 1.

--- Figure 1 about here ---

The Concept of Issue Voting

The concept of issue voting lies at the heart of the issue voting triangle. Consequently, it is important to provide a clear conceptualization of issue voting. The most widely used conceptualization is based on the proximity model as developed in by Enelow and Hinich (1984) in their seminal work *The Spatial Theory of Voting*.² This model assumes that voters act rationally and vote on the basis of policy outcomes that they associate with the future government. The model outlines that each voter's utility of a party on particular policy issue is a positive function of the issue proximity from a voter to a party or candidate:

$$U_{ijp} = (P_{jp} - P_{ji})^2 \quad (1)$$

Where voter *i*'s evaluation of party *p*'s utility on policy issue *j* (U_{ijp}) is dependent on the squared proximity between party *p*'s policy position on this issue (P_{jp}) and voter *i*'s own position on this policy issue (P_{ji}). In other words, the utility of a party increases as the closeness between a party and a voter on an issue augments. In the case of EU issue voting one expects that voters are more likely to vote for parties which EU issue position is proximate to their own EU stance.

The issue voting triangle model presented in figure 1 outlines that the degree of issue voting –i.e. the degree to which issue proximity affects voter *i*'s utility of a party *p* on a particular policy issue– is mediated by three factors: *Voter Salience*, *Party Conflict* and *Issue Linkage*.

Voter salience mediates issue voting as it is more likely for voters to weigh a new policy issue into their party choice when they view the issue as important. ‘The outcome of every [political] conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience [voters] becomes involved in it’

² An alternative conceptualization of issue voting also exists, namely the *directional voting model* by Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989) who include direction and intensity in conceptualizing the distance between voters and parties. Its use within the literature on issue voting is however much more limited.

(Schattschneider, 1960: 2). The extent of voter involvement in a political issue is labeled voter salience (see also Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989). A recent study by Bélanger and Meguid (2008) demonstrates the importance of voter salience for understanding variation in issue voting. These authors, however, model this voter salience effect indirectly via the degree to which a party ‘owns’ a particular policy issue. Their analysis demonstrates that issue ownership affects voting decisions only for those individuals who think that the issue is important (Bélanger and Meguid, 2008: 485-6).

In this case, we expect a direct effect of voter salience. Voters that care about an issue are more likely to let this policy concern influence their party choice. In order to model this effect, one can extend the proximity model to include a non-policy orientation. Previous work has argued that the inclusion of non-policy factors –such as a party’s competence on an issue or the likelihood of policy delivery– is indeed crucial as “these factors can give one party an advantage with important implications for party differentiation” (Green and Hobolt, 2008: 463; see also Hinich and Munger, 1993; Heath, et al. 2001). Here, non-policy factors are expected to increase or decrease the impact of issue proximity on the utility of a party for individual voters. Specifically for EU issue voting, we expect the effect of EU issue proximity on a party’s utility for a voter on the EU issue to increase when voter salience regarding European integration is high. Consequently, when modeling the overall utility of party p on a policy issue j for voter i (U_{ijp}), we need not only include the issue proximity between a voter and a party ($P_{jp} - P_{ji}$), but also the degree the issue j is salient to voter i (S_{ji}):

$$U_{ijp} = (P_{jp} - P_{ji})^2 \cdot S_{ji} \tag{2}$$

The second issue voting triangle condition is *party conflict*. It is defined as the degree to which voters perceive party positions to diverge on a particular policy issue. Party conflict matters for issue voting as a variation in issue positions offers voters with “real” choices on the issue at hand. It

provides voters with a useful yardstick to relate their own position on a policy issue to the position of a party on the same issue. If voters do not perceive positional difference across parties, they are forced to put their policy attitudes “on ice” at the time of an election. To put it differently, when examining a voter i ’s overall utility of party p on a policy issue j (U_{ijp}), the effect of issue proximity ($P_{jp} - P_{ji}$) is mediated by the degree of party conflict perceived by voter i on issue j (C_{ji}):

$$U_{ijp} = (P_{jp} - P_{ji})^2 \cdot C_{ji} \quad (3)$$

In the case of EU issue voting, we expect the effect of EU issue proximity on a party’s utility for a voter to increase when parties provide diverging issue positions regarding the EU (see also Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004: 39). This raises the following question: in which instances can we expect to find party conflict on a policy issue? It may be triggered by strategic calculation –a situation whereby challenger parties identify a previously non-salient issue in the anticipation that it may help them upset an existing majority. Vote-seeking, that is the maximization of votes, is among the chief objectives of political parties (see Downs, 1957; Strøm, 1990). As a result, political parties may have an incentive to introduce or promote an issue within electoral competition if they feel that this could result in an increase of votes or eventually upset an existing majority (Riker, 1982). When it comes to the EU issue, parties on the far right or left may have an interest in restructuring contestation by taking clear stances regarding European integration in order to broaden their voter base. Contestation on the EU issue could provide a strategic opportunity for these parties in two respects (Taggart, 1998; Hooghe, 2003; De Vries, 2007). First, Euroskepticism is ideologically consistent with these parties’ more general criticism of the political-economic and socio-cultural status quo. Second, public opinion is, on average, much more Euroskeptical than mainstream elites. Thus, the Euroskeptic stance of many far left and right parties brings them closer to the median voter, possibly bringing about new voters.

The final factor included in the issue voting triangle is *issue linkage*. It refers to the extent to which voters perceive a policy issue to be related to existing dimensions of political conflict. The expectation here is that issue voting increases when voters can relate new policy issues to existing ideologies, i.e. when an issue can be allied with the main dimension of ongoing political debate. In most advanced industrial democracies the dominant dimension of political conflict is the left/right dimension. The left/right dimension constitutes the focal point for both parties as well as voters and is often viewed as ‘the ideological super-issue’, which bundles a large array of specific policy issues (Pierce, 1999: 30; see also Downs, 1957; Pierce, 1999; Gabel and Huber, 2000; McDonald and Budge, 2005). Thus, we can expect issue voting to increase when voters can align a specific policy issue to the left/right dimension. In this view, the overall utility of party p on policy issue j for voter i (U_{ijp}) is thus a function of both the issue proximity between voter i and party p on issue j as well as the degree of linkage (L_{ij}) between issue j and the left/right conflict dimension as perceived by voter i :

$$U_{ijp} = (P_{jp} - P_{ji})^2 \cdot L_{ij} \quad (4)$$

It is important to highlight that the linkage argument implies that an issue is *related* but not entirely subsumed into the dominant left/right dimension. If the latter would be the case – that is to say, if a new policy issue perfectly aligns with the left/right dimension in the eyes of voters– the new issue adds no further information to inform voters’ party choices.

The issue linkage perspective outlined here is at odds with the conventional view within EU studies that expects EU issue voting to be more extensive when the EU issue is largely orthogonal – i.e. unrelated– to the left/right dimension (see Evans, 1998, 1999, 2002; Gabel, 2000; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004: 33, *italics added*), for example, argue that “the pro-/anti-EU orientation [...] constitutes something of a “sleeping giant” that has the potential, if awakened, to impel voters to political behaviour (*because of its degree of orthogonality with left/right*

orientations) that undercuts the bases for contemporary party mobilization in many, if not most, European polities.” From this perspective, EU issue voting has the potential to cut across existing cleavages and will likely shake up existing patterns of electoral politics by bringing about new voter alignments.

In light of the issue voting triangle this orthogonality scenario is not very likely.³ Rather it seems more likely for “new” policy issue like the EU issue to enter the voting booth when it is translated in common language of politics. Within the issue linkage scenario EU issue voting is expected to be more prominent when the EU issue (at least partly) related to the left/right dimension as relating new issues to existing political ideologies reduces informational cost of voting (see Downs, 1957, but also Feldman and Conover, 1983; Popkin, 1991). Clearly, it is impossible for voters to weigh parties’ stances on every policy issue when deciding which party to vote for. Most voters are relatively ill-informed about the actual policy stances of parties. Moreover, they are aware of the fact that while in office the actions of political elites are hard to predict –mainly due to unforeseen events and/or coalition bargaining. As a result, voters rely on party’s ideological profiles as cognitive cues when casting their ballot (Feldman and Conover, 1983; Popkin, 1991). Political ideologies make the preferences and actions of political parties more understandable and predictable for voters. Research shows that even voters with low levels of political interest or knowledge are able to deduce specific policy stands of parties on the bases of their familiarity of parties’ general ideological profiles (Van der Brug, 1997). Rationally acting voters thus use the availability of these general ideological profiles as broadly construed information substitutes for detailed policy-specific information. Parties’ ideological profiles serve as information short-cuts in voters’ party choice as they lowers the (transaction) costs of voting (Downs, 1957: chapter 7, see also North, 1990). Hence,

³ Note also that this orthogonality scenario is not very likely given our current knowledge regarding party positioning towards the EU. Recent literature argues that issue positions of political parties regarding European integration are *linked to* (Marks and Wilson, 2000; Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002; Noury and Roland, 2002; Hix, Noury and Roland, 2006) the dominant dimension of political conflict rather than being orthogonal to it.

by relating new issues to existing political ideologies – or to the existing “political language” if you will (Mair, 1997)– voters reduce the costs of casting a ballot. Against this backdrop, EU issue voting is more likely when voters view the EU issue as related to the left/right dimension rather than not.

So far, voter salience, party conflict and issue linkage are presented as separate effects. It follows from the issue voting triangle model as presented in figure 1 that these three different factors taken together make issue voting even more likely. The final equation 5 thus includes all three issue voting triangle conditions:

$$U_{ip} = (P_{jp} - P_{ji})^2 \cdot (S_{ji} \cdot C_{ji} \cdot L_{ji}) \quad (5)$$

Where the overall utility of party p on policy issue j for voter i (U_{ip}) is a function of the issue proximity between a voter and a party ($P_{jp} - P_{ji}$), the degree the issue j is salient to voter i (S_{ji}), the extent to which voter i perceives conflict between parties over issue j (C_{ji}) as well as the to which voter i perceives that a linkage between issue j and the left/right conflict dimension exists (L_{ji}). On the basis of this model, we expect EU issue voting to be most prominent when the three issue voting triangle conditions are met. That is to say, when 1) voters render the EU issue important, 2) parties are perceived to be divided over the EU issue, 3) and the EU issue is seen to be linked to the left/right dimension.

Data, Operationalizations and Methods

The goal of the empirical analysis is to explore the applicability of the issue voting triangle by examining the conditions under which EU issue voting is most prominent. In order to do so the analysis draws on survey data from the EES 2004. This survey allows for the testing of the extent to which a new policy issue like European integration influences vote choice in a large number of countries simultaneously by employing identical measures. Although the survey entails all EU

member states in 2004 excluding Malta, not every country survey entails all relevant data needed for the analysis. The analysis is thus based on 20 countries, excluding Belgium, Cyprus, Lithuania and Sweden.

How to measure the effect of EU preferences on a voter's utility for a party? The most widespread strategy is to use actual vote choice as the dependent variable and to estimate the effect of EU issue proximity between a party and voter on party choices by means of discrete-choice models, such as conditional or multinomial logit regression (see Alvarez and Nagler, 1998). A recent study by Van der Eijk et al. (2006, see also Van der Brug et. al., 2007) convincingly highlights the difficulties related to these kinds of estimations. The authors point to the fact that discrete-choice models do not measure electoral utility directly and require the deduction of these utilities. As a result parties receiving only a small portion of the vote have to be eliminated from the analysis; if not, the utilities for these parties would be too unstable. These limitations are especially worrisome when studying EU issue voting and the role of party conflict in this respect as opposition to the EU is often vocalized by extremist parties which usually do not receive a large portion of the vote. Excluding these parties would likely bias the results.

The alternative is analyzing electoral utilities directly measured with survey data using vote propensity questions rather than relying on actual vote choice. These vote propensity measures have been used successfully in other studies of voting behavior, and they have been found to correlate strongly with reported voting behavior (Oppenhuis 1995, Tillie 1995, Van der Brug et al 2007). While discrete-choice models as conditional logit are mostly applied separately for each country providing no real yardstick for comparison, the use of vote propensities allows for the estimation of identical models for large number of countries simultaneously by pooling of data. Moreover, vote propensities allow for the usage of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis, which eases both the estimation as well as the interpretation of the results.

The dependent variable employed in the analysis is voters' electoral preferences based on vote propensities which are operationalized by the following question from the EES 2004 survey:

We have a number of parties in [COUNTRY], each of which would like to get your vote. Please tell me for each of the following how probable it is that you would ever vote for this party? 1= not at all probable; 10 = very probable.

Note that vote propensities yield a large number of variables, namely one for each party in the dataset. In order to derive at one single generic variable measuring the vote propensity for each respondent*party combination, a stacked data matrix is constructed (see Stimson, 1985; Van der Eijk, et al, 2006). In such a dataset the unit of analysis is the respondent*party combination (e.g. i*j). The independent variables also need to take on the form of a respondent*party combination. In the case of a measure of EU issue voting this is fairly straightforward. An EU issue proximity variable is constructed that measures the squared proximity between the mean position of each party as perceived by all voters and a respondent's self placement on EU scale which is in line with the proximity model of issue voting (Enelow and Hinich, 1984). This a ten-point EU scale ranges from European integration 1 'has already gone too far' to 10 'should be pushed further'. Left/right proximity is constructed in an identical fashion and is included to assess the importance of the EU issue in relation to other central concerns facing voters.

In theory, similar deductively transformed measures could be constructed for any variable for which party characteristics can be related to voter characteristics. However, in reality, we often lack theoretical grounds where a party stands in terms of particular independent variables (Van der Eijk, et al., 2006). In this case, the link between voters and parties is constructed inductively. This is done in a set of separate regression analyses (i.e. one for each party in each country) in which party preference is predicted from the respective respondent characteristics. The resulting predicted values are saved, standardized and used as the independent variables. This procedure is performed for all independent variables, except EU issue and left/right proximity. After this procedure a stacked data matrix is constructed.

In this way additional control variables (next to left/right proximity) were added to the analysis. First, two variables measuring the respondent's retrospective and prospective evaluations of the national economy (recoded 0 'worse' to 1 'better') are included to control for the influence of economic voting (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). Second, a measure of a respondents' approval of the record of the current government is added (0 'low approval' to 1 'high approval'). Third, a variable measuring the respondent's level of interest in politics is included (0 'low' to 1 'high'). Fourth, a variable party size is included which measures the share of parliamentary seats held by a particular party. The rationale for including this control is that party size matters for voters when holding parties more or less responsible for policy output. Finally, an extensive set of socio-demographic controls is included, such as gender (recoded 0 'male'; 1 'female'), subjective class status (recoded 0 'low'; 1 'high'), union membership (recoded 0 'no'; 1 'yes'), religiosity (measured as church attendance, recoded 0 'low'; 1 'high') and education (recoded 0 'low'; 1 'high'). These socio-demographic controls tap into the impact of cleavage structures on voting behavior.

In order to examine the issue voting triangle, we also need measures of the three issue voting triangle conditions, i.e. voter salience, party conflict and issue linkage. Voter salience is measured using the question asking respondents to name the most important problems facing their countries. Although the usage of this question as an operationalization of voter salience has been recently criticized because it potentially conflates the importance of an issue with the problematic nature of the same issue (Wlezien, 2005), the analysis relies on this indicator as its availability allows for a comparison of varying levels of voter salience across space. The extent of party conflict is usually measured using manifesto data or expert survey party placement. In order to develop a measure that is sensitive to the extent to which voters perceive party conflict, this analysis uses voters' perceptions of parties' EU rather than relying on expert party placements or positioning based on content-analysis or official party documents. Party conflict over the EU is thus operationalized as the standard deviations between parties' EU positions as perceived by the mean voter within a particular country. Finally, the degree of issue linkage of the EU issue to the left/right ideological dimension is

measured by the correlation coefficient between voters' EU and left/right preferences for each country included in the analysis.⁴

Empirical Findings

Before the empirical applicability of the issue voting triangle model is determined, let us first examine the extent to which the countries included in the analysis fulfill the three different conditions. Table 1 provides an overview of the different conditions in each of the 20 countries under investigation. The level of voter salience regarding the EU shows substantial variation across countries. The second column in table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who viewed issues regarding European integration and/or the Euro as the most important problems facing their countries. In order not to bias the results issues relating to the European Parliamentary election of 2004 were excluded. The "most important problem" question requires voters to weigh the relative importance of the EU with other pressing issues. Hence, one would not expect many voters to see the EU as one of the most important issues. In most countries this expectation holds. In 14 out of 20 countries EU issue salience is well below the 1.85 percent mark, which is the mean level over voter salience across all countries. On average EU issue salience is slightly more extensive in the West European countries, i.e. 2.03 percent on average, compared to the member states in East-Central Europe where voter salience on average amounts to 1.51 percent. The British case is the outlier when it comes to voter salience regarding the EU. In this country 13 percent of voters

⁴ Note that although many authors argue that political space in Western Europe consists of "one-plus" or two dimensions (Inglehart, 1997; Flanagan, 1987; Kitschelt, 1989; Inglehart, Rabier and Reif, 1991; Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002; Kriesi, et al, 2006). Here an one-dimensional space is used, measuring the linkage of the EU issue to the left/right dimension. This is done for several reasons. The first is a practical one: the EES data does not include an indicator of voter or party placements on a second cultural dimension. Secondly, research has shown that the left/right dimension is the dominant conflict dimension of political competition throughout the EU for both parties and voters (Downs, 1957; Budge, et al., 1987; Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Miller, et al., 1999; Gabel and Huber, 2000; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Marks, et al., 2006; Tucker, 2006).

viewed issues relating to the EU and the process of European integration as important. This finding does not really come as a surprise since EU issues have been an integral part of British politics and elections (see Evans, 1998, 2002).

--- Table 1 about here ---

The third column provides an indication of party conflict regarding the EU. In half the countries do we find party conflict exceeding the overall mean of 1.16. Party conflict over the EU issue is most extensive in Denmark. Like the British finding for voter salience, the Danish finding does not come as a surprise since Danish politics has witnessed extensive debate over European integration ever since the 1970s. The EU issue has also caused major disagreement in the Danish party system leading to tensions in major political parties, such as the Danish Social Democrats (Worre, 1996). Moreover, Denmark has recently experienced contentious referenda on European issues. Six popular referenda have been held on European integration (Buch and Hansen, 2002). Each time, a large minority has voted in opposition to further integration within Europe and in two out of six referenda on European integration the “no-vote” gained the upper hand. So, EU conflict seems part and parcel of Danish politics.

Finally, the last column in table 1 provides the degree of issue linkage between voters’ self-placements on an EU and a left/right scale for each country. The results show that in 8 out of 20 countries, the EU issue is not linked to left/right ideology in the eyes of voters. Nonetheless in a majority of countries one finds some degree of issue linkage. The size of the correlation coefficients varies greatly, however, from a maximum level of from Pearson’s $R=.31$ in Slovakia to a minimum of 0 in Poland. The way in which the EU issue is related to left/right ideology also differs across countries. A clear distinction between East-Central and Western Europe exists. While in the East rightwing parties are on average more supportive of European integration, the pattern for the West

is not uniform. In some Western EU countries, like Denmark, Finland and Ireland, rightwing parties are also more supportive, but in countries, like Austria and Britain, the opposite pattern is found.

Do these differences in voter salience, party conflict and issue linkage matter for the extent of EU issue voting? The conditional impact of different issue voting triangle conditions on EU issue voting is evaluated by means of a pooled multivariate OLS regression analysis on the constructed stacked dataset (see Stimson, 1985; Van der Eijk, et al, 2006). Table 2 reports the results for five different models. First, the baseline model in which all three conditions are absent. Next, in the three subsequent models interaction effects for the three different issue voting triangle conditions are introduced. Finally, the last model includes all the different interaction terms. The equation used for estimating the full model can be written as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
 VotePropensity = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 EUIssueProximity + \beta_2 VoterSalience \\
 & + \beta_3 EUIssueProximity * VoterSalience \\
 & + \beta_4 PartyConflict + \beta_5 EUIssueProximity * PartyConflict \\
 & + \beta_6 IssueLinkage + \beta_7 EUIssueProximity * IssueLinkage \\
 & + \beta_{8-19} Controls + \epsilon
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{6}$$

All the four interaction models include the elements that constitute the interaction term, i.e. the constitutive terms, in order to guarantee correct estimation (see Brambor, et al., 2006: 66-70). Moreover, since the stacked dataset procedure produces multiple observations per respondent (i.e. one observation for each party) which are mutually dependent, the analysis is clustered on the number of respondents. Country effects are accounted for by the inclusion of country dummies (due to space limitations these results are not included in table 2).

--- Table 2 about here ---

The results for the baseline model –i.e. excluding the issue voting triangle conditions– show that EU issue voting indeed influences the vote propensity of parties. EU issue proximity has a significant positive effect on vote propensity, even when controlling for other important factors influencing voters’ electoral preference, such as left/right ideology and economic voting. The effect of the EU issue proximity is much smaller, however, than for example the effect of left/right proximity. This is not surprising as previous research tells us that the left/right dimension is the main predictor of vote choice (Van der Eijk and Niemöller, 1983; Van der Eijk, Franklin and Van der Brug, 1999).

In the four interaction models the value of the coefficient for EU issue proximity –i.e. β_1 – gives an indication of the effect of EU issue voting on vote propensity when the value of issue voting triangle condition is zero. The fact that the respective coefficient for the interactions term, i.e. *EUIssueProximity*VoterSalience*, *EUIssueProximity*PartyConflict* and *EUIssueProximity*IssueLinkage*, are all positive indicates that an increase in the effect of EU issue proximity for higher levels of these different conditions. This is in line with our expectations outlined in equations 2 through 4. Yet, there is no way of knowing from the information presented in table 2 what the impact of these conditions is when its value are greater than zero.

Table 2, thus, only provides limited insight into the mediating effect of the issue voting triangle conditions on EU issue voting. In order to get a sense of the conditional nature and interpret the interaction effects, graphs are presented that provide an overview of the marginal effect and the accompanying significance levels for each of the interaction terms included in the full model, see figures 2 through 4. These graphs are produced on the basis of a procedure developed by Brambor et al. 2006.⁵ The solid sloping lines in the figures indicate how the marginal effect of EU issue proximity –i.e. EU issue voting– on vote propensity changes as the values of the issue voting triangle conditions change. In the case of figure 2 the solid line indicates the marginal effect of EU issue voting on vote propensity for different levels of voter salience. Any particular point on this line

⁵ For further information including STATA do-files see Matt Golder’s website: <http://homepages.nyu.edu/~mrg217/>.

is calculated using the following formula: $\frac{\partial \text{Vote Propensity}}{\partial \text{EU Issue Proximity}} = \beta_1 + \beta_3 \text{VoterSalience}$. The dotted lines plot the 95 percent confidence intervals around the line. These dotted lines allow us to determine when the mediating effect of voter salience on EU issue voting is statistically significant. The effect is statistically significant whenever the upper and lower bounds of the confidence interval are both above or both below the zero line. So, figure 2 tells us that as voter salience increases, the effect of EU issue proximity on vote propensity increases significantly as a result.

--- Figures 2 through 4 about here---

Figures 3 and 4 also show a significant positive effect of party conflict and issue linkage on the degree of EU issue voting, but these effects are slightly weaker than for voter salience. What is the overall size of these effects? For example, when voter salience changes from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean the expected value vote propensity increases by 1.2-points on a 10-point scale. The size of the conditional party conflict effect is of much smaller magnitude: when party conflict moves one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean vote propensity changes by a quarter of a point (.25). In the case of issue linkage we find a conditional effect of similar size: a .27-point increase in vote propensity when issue linkage moves one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean. These findings are in line with the expectations presented in the theoretical section: voter salience, party conflict and issue linkage all increase the likelihood of EU issue voting (see equations 2 through 4). The empirical evidence also shows that of the conditional effects of the different conditions vary in size and that voter salience has the largest impact on EU issue voting.

Thus far, we have examined the conditional effects of the issue triangle voting conditions separately. It follows from the issue voting triangle model as presented in figure 1 and equation 5 that the three different factors taken together should make EU issue voting even more likely. In

order to empirically estimate the issue voting triangle, we have to add a quadruple interaction term, i.e. $EU_{IssueProximity} * VoterSalience * PartyConflict * IssueLinkage$. Including this interaction term also requires the inclusion of several other terms in order to ensure correct estimation, see the appendix for the equation used for this analysis. Table 3 below presents the results.

--- Table 3 about here ---

In order to judge if EU issue voting is indeed more extensive when all three issue voting triangle conditions are given, we need to calculate the effect of EU issue voting proximity for different values of the three conditions as the effects of the interacted variables cannot be directly inferred from the reported regression coefficients and standard errors (see Brambor, et al, 2006).⁶ Table 4 presents an overview of the conditional effect of EU issue proximity on the expected value of vote propensity for four different scenarios, see numbers I through IV in table 4. These simulations are performed using *CLARIFY*, which employs Monte Carlo simulations to convert raw statistical results into more intuitive quantities without changing the statistical assumptions (King, et al., 2000).⁷

--- Table 4 about here ---

The first scenario provides an estimate for the change in the expected value of vote propensity when EU issue proximity moves from one standard deviation below to one standard

⁶ Consequently the significance level of the interaction effect can also not directly be inferred from table 3. Brambor, et al, 2006 as well as this analysis shows that the conditional effect of (a particular value of) each variable may be statistically significant even if the overall interaction term is not.

⁷ *CLARIFY* 2.1 is a STATA application that can be downloaded from Gary King's website: <http://gking.harvard.edu/clarify/>.

deviation above its mean and when voter salience, party conflict and issue linkage are low – that is one standard deviation below their respective means– whilst keeping all other variables at their respective means. This calculation shows that the expected value of vote propensity increases by .82-point on a ten-point scale. The comparison of changes in the expected value of vote propensity for the different scenarios clearly indicates that the effect of EU issue proximity increases substantially when the issue voting triangle conditions increase, i.e. move from 1 standard deviation below to one standard deviation above the mean. The largest effect is found when voter salience, party conflict as well as issue linkage are at one standard deviation above their respective means. In this case, the change in the expected value of vote propensity increases with 1.85-points. This is over twice as large as when the different issue voting triangle conditions are one standard deviation above their respective means. In all these findings support the ideas outlined in the issue voting triangle model and equations 2 through 5. EU issue voting is indeed more prominent when voters feel that the EU issue is salient, when they perceive parties to be divided on the issue and when they view that the EU issue is related to the left/right dimension.

Robustness Checks

In order to guarantee the robustness of the findings presented above several robustness checks are performed. First, the issue linkage operationalization is cross-validated by estimating issue linkage as a curvi-linear rather than a linear relationship. An extensive literature on party positioning regarding European integration suggests that the relationship between left/right ideology and the EU issue is best described as an “inverted-U curve” (Hooghe, et al., 2002), rather than a linear relationship. The shape of the linkage between voters’ left/right and EU preferences, however, did not change the results (these results are available on request). Thus, highlighting the robustness of these findings reported here.

As a second robustness check the analyses reported here were performed for East-Central European and Western European countries separately (available on request). The results of these

analyses indicate that the mediating effects on EU issue voting of the different issue voting triangle conditions are similar both in size and direction across the different contexts. This indicates that no causal heterogeneity seems to exist across these regions. This finding corroborates recent work by Van der Brug and his colleagues (2008) showing that voters in East-Central Europe make their political choices in ways that are very similar to the decision processes found in Western European democracies.

Finally, it is important to check if the results change when particular countries are excluded from the sample. Especially since party conflict and issue linkage are measured by aggregated voter judgments. These analyses indicated that the findings presented here hold regardless of which country is dropped (available on request). In sum, these robustness checks increase our confidence regarding the empirical applicability of the issue voting triangle in explaining variations in the extent of EU issue voting.

Conclusion

So, what can one take away from this contribution? This study proposes and empirically substantiates a conditional model of issue voting, namely the issue voting triangle. This triangular understanding of issue voting argues that the extent of issue voting is conditional upon three factors: voter salience, party conflict and issue linkage. The empirical applicability of the issue voting triangle is substantiated by an examination of the extent to which a relatively new policy issue – European integration – influences elections in 20 West and East-Central European countries. The results show that the EU issue voting is more extensive when voters care about Europe, parties are perceived to be divided over the issue of European integration and, last but not least, when the EU issue is linked, i.e. related to, the dominant left/right dimension in the eyes of voters. This latter finding is especially interesting as it refines previous work on EU issue voting (see Evans, 1998; Gabel, 2000 ; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). It demonstrates that when EU issue voting exists, it is likely to revitalize the existing conflict in party competition, i.e. the left/right ideological divide, rather than to introduce a new dimension. One can think of this finding in the following way. Take the case of

Denmark for example, opposition to European integration has been a powerful source of EU issue voting precisely because leftist voters have conceived of European integration as a market-liberal project that threatens to undermine leftist domestic policy – not because European integration is orthogonal to the left/right dimension as previous studies seemed to suggest.

This study highlights the significance of the ‘domestication’ of EU related issues in order for them to influence national politics. Moreover, by studying the extent of EU issue voting, this study has taken an important step toward understanding the conditions under which issues come to influence voting behavior. Its main theoretical contribution is necessarily not confined to the particular case of issues relating to European integration but should also hold for other important policy issues, such as immigration or globalization.

Naturally, this study has limitations. First of all, although this analysis incorporates a large number of countries, it does so at one particular point in time. In a next step, it would be interesting to expand the time-frame of the analysis. Secondly, this study demonstrates the importance of issue linkage in understanding variation in issue voting and does so by focusing on the left/right dimension. In a next step, it may prove worthwhile to study the relationship between issue voting and the cultural dimension of political conflict. Many authors argue that political space in Western Europe consists of “one-plus” or two dimensions (Inglehart, 1977; Flanagan, 1987; Kitschelt, 1989; Inglehart, Rabier and Reif, 1991; Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002; Kriesi, et al, 2006). Different labels are used within the literature to capture the second dimension of political contestation, but what these authors have in common is their contention that a second cultural dimension exists next to the economic left/right dimension. This second dimension of political contestation involves the divide between values, such as public order, national security and traditional life styles, and values, such as individual choice, political participation and environmental protection (Dalton, 1996: 81-2). In this study, the focus is on the left/right dimension of political conflict as this is the dominant conflict dimension throughout EU member states. Notwithstanding, it is important in future efforts to explore if new policy issues – like European integration or immigration – may start to realign with

this cultural dimension. A recent study by Kriesi, et al. (2006) regarding party competition seems to suggest as such.

Notwithstanding these avenues for further research, the conceptualization and examination of the issue voting triangle model constitutes an important theoretical and empirical contribution to our understanding of issue voting. The study demonstrates that voter salience, party conflict and issue linkage are crucial factors in helping us understand variation in the extent to which issues become relevant to voters. By studying EU issue voting, this analysis has taken an important step toward understanding the conditions under which issues come to influence voting behavior. The finding that an issue becomes politically relevant and influences party choice, only if voters care about it, perceive differences across parties and when they view the issue to be (at least partially) related to the dominant left/right dimension, should also hold for other issues. The question if the issue voting triangle model holds across different issue-areas should be addressed in future research.

Appendix

The equation used for estimating the issue voting triangle model can be written as follows.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{VotePropensity} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{EU Issue Proximity} + \beta_2 \text{Voter Salience} \\ & + \beta_3 \text{EU Issue Proximity} * \text{Voter Salience} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{Party Conflict} + \beta_5 \text{EU Issue Proximity} * \text{Party Conflict} \\ & + \beta_6 \text{Issue Linkage} + \beta_7 \text{EU Issue Proximity} * \text{Issue Linkage} \\ & + \beta_8 \text{Voter Salience} * \text{Party Conflict} + \beta_9 \text{Voter Salience} * \text{Issue Linkage} \quad (7) \\ & + \beta_{10} \text{Party Conflict} * \text{Issue Linkage} + \beta_{11} \text{EU Issue Proximity} * \text{Voter Salience} * \\ & \text{Party Conflict} + \beta_{12} \text{EU Issue Proximity} * \text{Voter Salience} * \text{Issue Linkage} + \\ & \beta_{13} \text{EU Issue Proximity} * \text{Party Conflict} * \text{Issue Linkage} + \beta_{14} \text{Voter Salience} * \\ & \text{Party Conflict} * \text{Issue Linkage} + \beta_{15} \text{EU Issue Proximity} * \text{Voter Salience} * \\ & \text{Party Conflict} * \text{Issue Linkage} + \beta_{16-27} + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

--- Table A.1 about here ---

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Tables and Figures

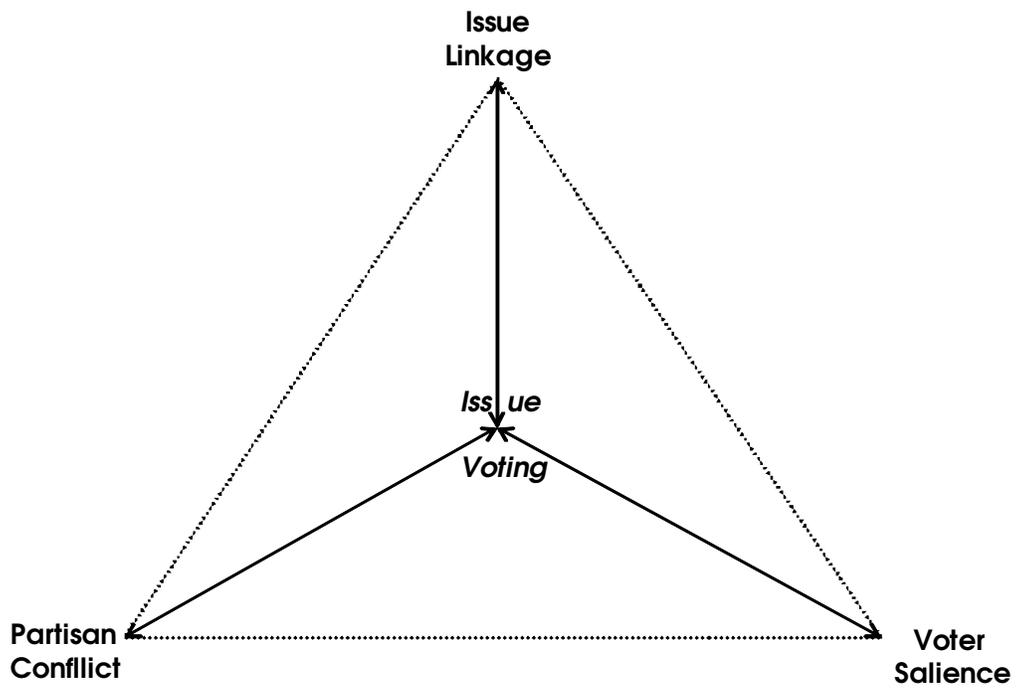


Figure 1: Issue Voting Triangle

Table 1: Overview of the Three Issue Voting Triangle Conditions by Country

Country	Voter Saliency	Party Conflict	Issue Linkage
<i>East:</i>			
Czech Republic	.10	1.24	.30**
Estonia	2.09	.87	.14**
Hungary	.78	1.32	.02
Latvia	1.43	.88	.15**
Poland	3.35	1.52	-.00
Slovakia	.10	1.74	.31**
Slovenia	1.21	.89	.04
<i>West:</i>			
Austria	4.80	1.36	-.14**
Britain	13.00	.74	-.17**
Denmark	1.89	1.99	.10*
Finland	3.54	1.17	.15**
France	1.15	1.19	-.02
Germany	.78	1.32	-.09*
Greece	0	1.95	.08
Ireland	.18	.73	.06*
Italy	1.40	.75	-.20**
Luxembourg	.01	1.10	-.09*
Netherlands	0	.88	-.02
Portugal	.42	1.26	.06
Spain	1.27	.38	-.05
<i>Mean</i>	<i>1.85</i>	<i>1.16</i>	<i>.03</i>

Notes: *Voter saliency* is measured as the share of respondents in each country that view issues regarding European integration as one of the most important problems facing their countries. *Party conflict* is measured by the standard deviations between parties' EU positions as perceived by the mean voter within each country. *Issue linkage* is measured the correlation coefficient between voters' EU and left/right preferences for each country.

** significant at the $p \leq .001$ level * $p \leq .05$ level (two-tailed).

Source: European Election Study 2004.

Table 2: Conditional Effect of Voter Salience, Party Conflict and Issue Linkage on EU Issue Voting

	Baseline Model	Voter Salience	Party Conflict	Issue Linkage	Full Model
EU Issue Proximity	.13** (.01)	.14** (.01)	.12** (.01)	.14** (.01)	.13** (.01)
EU Issue Proximity* Issue Linkage	-	-	-	.09** (.01)	.08** (.01)
EU Issue Proximity* Party Conflict	-	-	.07** (.01)	-	.06** (.01)
EU Issue Proximity* Voter Salience	-	.89** (.26)	-	-	.89** (.26)
Issue Linkage	-	-	-	.02° (.01)	.01 (.01)
Party Conflict	-	-	.06** (.01)	-	.05** (.01)
Voter Salience	-	.94** (.24)	-	-	.93** (.24)
Left-Right Proximity	.73** (.01)	.73** (.01)	.73** (.01)	.72** (.01)	.72** (.01)
Retrospective Economic Evaluations	.21** (.05)	.21** (.05)	.19** (.05)	.21** (.05)	.20** (.05)
Prospective Economic Evaluations	.47** (.06)	.47** (.06)	.47** (.06)	.47** (.06)	.47** (.05)
Government Approval	.60** (.04)	.60** (.04)	.61** (.04)	.60** (.04)	.60** (.04)
Political Interest	.73** (.07)	.74** (.07)	.71** (.07)	.72** (.07)	.70** (.07)
Party Size	.67** (.01)	.67** (.01)	.67** (.01)	.67** (.01)	.67** (.01)
Gender	1.00** (.17)	.97** (.17)	.97** (.17)	.97** (.17)	.96** (.17)
Education	.34** (.09)	.33** (.09)	.28** (.09)	.32** (.09)	.28** (.09)
Age	.71** (.08)	.71** (.08)	.70** (.08)	.70** (.08)	.69** (.08)
Social Class	.51** (.07)	.51** (.07)	.53** (.07)	.51** (.07)	.52** (.07)
Religiosity	.53** (.07)	.53** (.07)	.53** (.07)	.53** (.07)	.53** (.07)
Union Membership	.46** (.05)	.46** (.05)	.43** (.05)	.45** (.05)	.43** (.05)
Constant	3.73** (.01)	3.73** (.01)	3.73** (.01)	3.73** (.01)	3.73** (.01)
R²	.14	.15	.15	.15	.16
Clusters (respondents)	12.324	12.324	12.324	12.324	12.324
Units of analysis	82.164	82.164	82.164	82.164	82.164

Notes: Table entries are OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses clustered on respondents. The models also include country dummies which have been suppressed in the table (these are available upon request). ** significant at the $p \leq .001$ level * $p \leq .05$ level; ° $p \leq .10$ level (two-tailed). **Source:** European Election Survey 2004

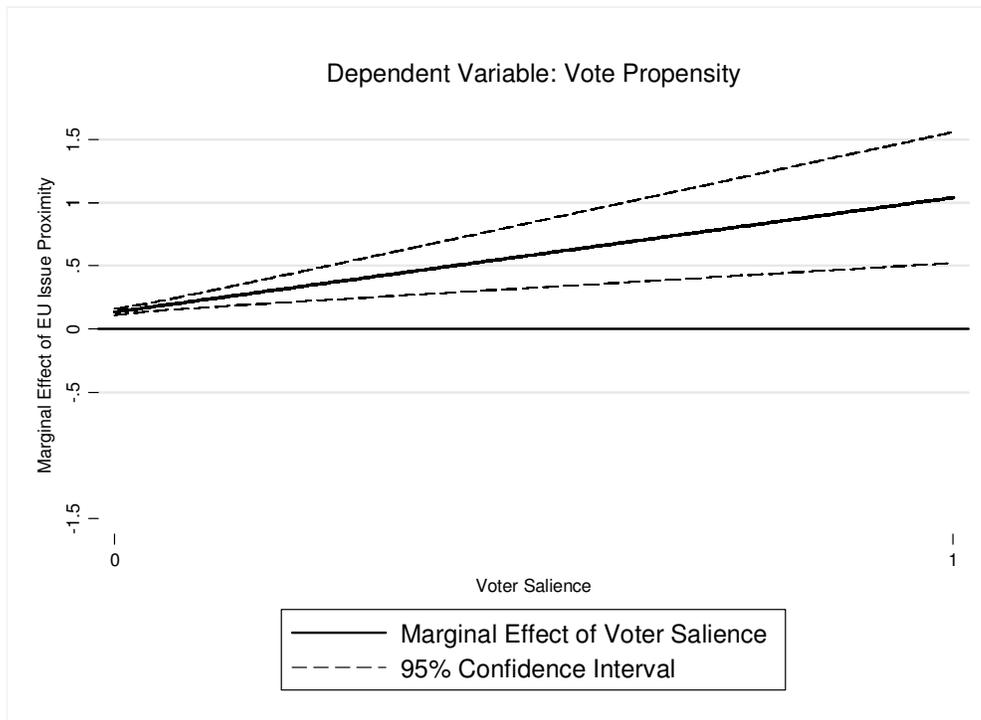


Figure 2: Change of the Marginal Effect of EU Issue Proximity on Vote Propensity as Voter Salience Changes

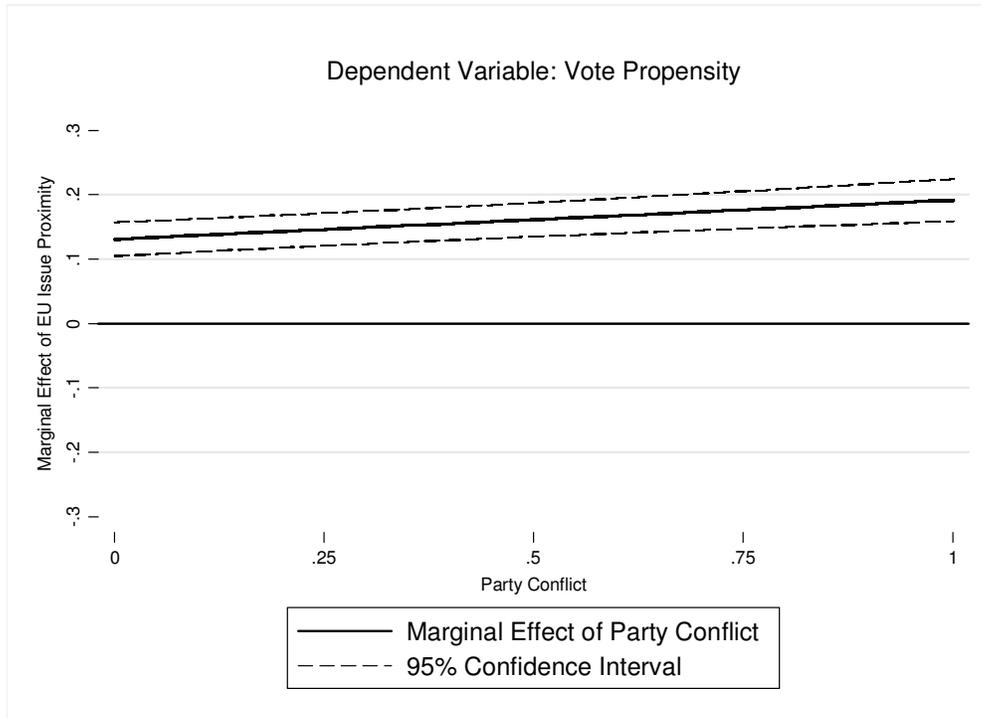


Figure 3: Change of the Marginal Effect of EU Issue Proximity on Vote Propensity as Party Conflict Changes

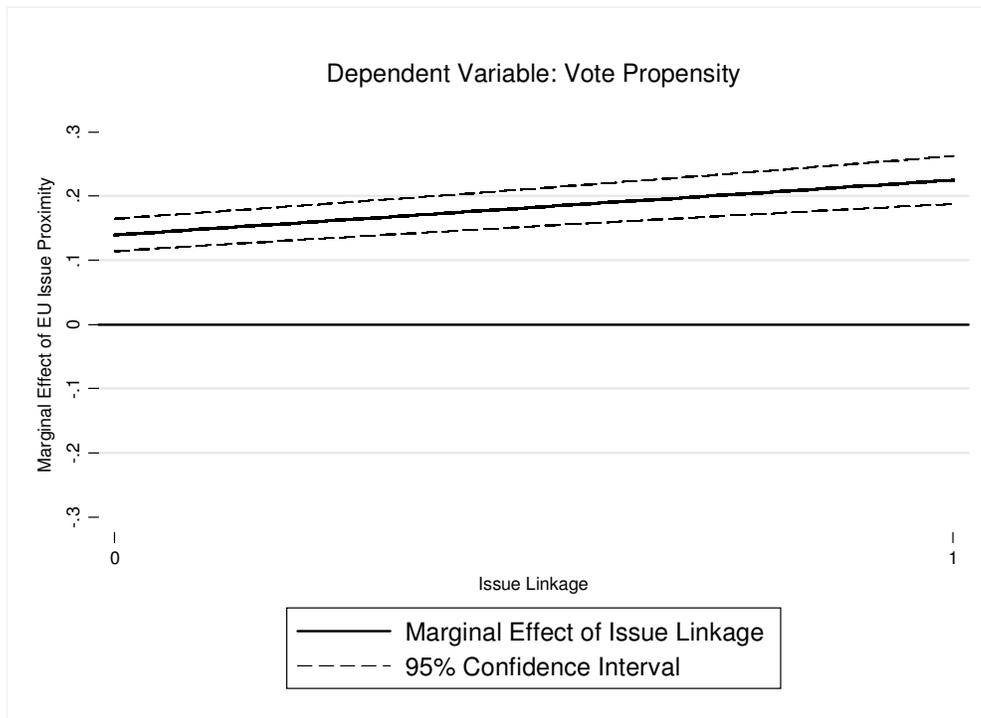


Figure 4: Change of the Marginal Effect of EU Issue Proximity on Vote Propensity as Issue Linkage Changes

Table 3: Conditional Effect of the Issue Voting Triangle on EU Issue Voting

	Issue Voting Triangle Model
EU Issue Proximity	.13** (.01)
EU Issue Proximity*Voter Salience	1.67** (.61)
EU Issue Proximity*Party Conflict	.01° (.00)
EU Issue Proximity*Issue Linkage	.01 (.04)
EU Issue Proximity*Voter Salience* Party Conflict * Issue Linkage	.29° (.15)
EU Issue Proximity* Voter Salience* Party Conflict	.18 (.15)
EU Issue Proximity* Voter Salience* Issue Linkage	1.36 (.96)
EU Issue Proximity* Party Conflict* Issue Linkage	.02 (.01)
Voter Salience * Party Conflict* Issue Linkage	-.69** (.21)
Voter Salience * Party Conflict	.50** (.14)
Voter Salience * Issue Linkage	2.03** (.75)
Party Conflict* Issue Linkage	.02 (.01)
Voter Salience	-.94° (.55)
Party Conflict	.01 (.01)
Issue Linkage	-.05 (.04)
Left-Right Proximity	.72** (.01)
Retrospective Economic Evaluations	.23** (.05)
Prospective Economic Evaluations	.50** (.06)
Government Approval	.56** (.04)
Political Interest	.74** (.07)
Party Size	.66** (.01)
Gender	.98** (.17)

Table 3 continued

Education	.33** (.09)
Age	.72** (.09)
Social Class	.50** (.07)
Religiosity	.59** (.07)
Union Membership	.40** (.06)
Constant	3.73** (.01)
R²	.16
Clusters (respondents)	12.324
Units of analysis	82.164

Notes: Table entries are OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses clustered on respondents. The model also includes country dummies which have been suppressed in the table (these are available upon request). ** significant at the $p \leq .001$ level * $p \leq .05$ level; ° $p \leq .10$ level (two-tailed).

Source: European Election Survey 2004

Table 4: Conditional Effect of EU Issue Proximity on Vote Propensity as Voter Salience, Party Conflict and Issue Linkage Change

Δ E (Vote Propensity)			
EU Issue Proximity	1 sd below	1 sd above	Δ 1 sd below- 1 sd above
<i>I Voter Salience, Party Conflict and Issue Linkage 1 sd below</i>			
	2.35** (.69)	4.17** (.59)	.82
<i>II Voter Salience 1 sd above; Party Conflict and Issue Linkage 1 sd below</i>			
	2.30** (.65)	3.86** (.79)	1.56
<i>III Voter Salience and Party Conflict 1 sd above; Issue Linkage 1 sd below</i>			
	2.53** (.85)	4.23** (.89)	1.70
<i>IV Voter Salience, Party Conflict and Issue Linkage 1 sd above</i>			
	2.55** (.92)	4.40** (.75)	1.85

Notes: Table entries are (changes in) expected values of vote propensity when the three different issue voting triangle conditions change. Vote propensity is measured on a scale from 1 to 10, where a voter was asked to indicate if she was likely to vote for a particular party 1 indicates “not very probable” and 10 indicates “very probable”. ** significant at the $p \leq .001$ level (two-tailed).

Source: European Election Survey 2004

Table A.1: Correlation between the Three Issue Voting Triangle Conditions

	Issue Linkage	Party Conflict	Voter Salience
Issue Linkage	<i>1.000</i>	-	-
Party Conflict	.159**	<i>1.000</i>	-
Voter Salience	.002	-.001	<i>1.000</i>

Notes: Conflict is measured by dividing the standard deviation on the pro/anti EU dimension by the standard deviation on the left-right. EU issue salience is measured. Higher values indicate higher levels of partisan conflict on the pro-/anti-EU dimension. EU issue salience is measured as the share of respondents that view issues regarding European integration as one of the most important problems facing their countries. Issue linkage is measured by a dummy variable in which a value of 1 indicates those countries in which voters' EU issue and left/right preferences are correlated and a value of 0 indicates those countries in which these preferences are not correlated. ** significant at the $p \leq .01$ level * $p \leq .05$ level (two-tailed)

Source: European Election Survey 2004.