ISSUE LINKAGE: HOW HARD POLICY ISSUES AFFECT VOTERS’ ELECTORAL CHOICES

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April 7, 2012

Abstract

Why do some policy issues influence voters’ choices while others do not? Whereas symbolic issues, such as race or abortion, are easy to grasp for voters because they evoke a ‘gut response’, most policy issues are rather technical and complex in nature. This study examines issue voting on the basis of hard policy issues. It argues that the degree to which political parties relate hard issues to their existing ideological profiles, a concept referred to as issue linkage, lowers the costs of issue voting. Issue linkage provides voters with chief cognitive short-cuts which increase the likelihood of voting due to complex issues. What is more, this study suggests that the relationship is largely curvilinear in nature, that is voting based on hard policy issues is most extensive at intermediate levels of issue linkage. When a hard policy issue is either largely orthogonal or fully linked to parties’ main ideological stances, issue voting tends to be low. These propositions are empirically substantiated by examining the impact of European integration on voters’ choices in British, Danish, Dutch and German elections between 1992-2002. The findings have important implications for the study of electoral behavior and enrich our understanding of issue voting when complex policy issues are involved. Finally, although this study applies the notion of issue linkage to explore dynamics in issue voting based on the European integration issue, its main theoretical argument is not confined to this particular case, but should also hold for other relatively complex policy issues, like the environment or health care for example.

Key Words: European Integration, Issue Linkage, Issue Voting, Political Parties & Two-Stage Multilevel Models.

* The author would to thank Mark Franklin, Jane Green, Sara Hobolt, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Sergi Pardos-Prados and Marco Steenbergen for their insightful comments on previous versions of this paper and acknowledges the financial support of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research [NWO VENI Grant 451-08-001]. Usual disclaimers apply.
1 Introduction

[V]oters are not fools. [T]he electorate behaves as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of alternatives presented to it and character of the information available to it. – V.O. Key, 1966, pp. 7.

Prior to every election politicians, political strategists, campaign advisers and journalists ponder about which policy issues will come to define the election campaign and inform voters’ ballot choices. Ever since the pioneering work of Downs (1957) and Key (1966), it has become an established fact for students of electoral behavior that policy issues matter for voters’ decisions at the ballot box. Topics like issue voting or issue evolution have gained a strong foothold within the discipline (see for example Campbell et al. 1960; Carmines and Stimson 1980, 1986, 1989, 1993; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989). Complex societies produce a multitude of conflicts over public policy. The number of potential policy issues that voters can consider when casting their ballot is almost infinite. Yet, it is clearly impossible for voters to weigh parties’ stances on every policy issue when deciding which party to support. The pertinent question thus becomes: Why do some policy issues influence voters’ decision-making processes while others do not?

Over the years, scholarship has suggested that both voter characteristics and contextual factors are crucial pieces of this puzzle. Indeed, a voluminous and established line of research demonstrates the impact of voter heterogeneity based on political knowledge, political information or issue ambivalence on electoral behavior (see for example Campbell et al. 1960; Nie, Verba and Petrocik 1976; Palfrey and Poole 1987; Alvarez 1997; Basinger and Lavine 2005). What is more, students of economic voting have revealed the conditional impact of institutional factors on electoral behavior. One of the most influential findings of the past two decades in this line of research was the realization that the degree of clarity of the domestic institutional context affects the relationship between economic perceptions and incumbent vote (Powell and Whitten 1993; Whitten and Palmer 1999; Nadeau, Niemi and Yoshinaka 2002).

Notwithstanding the importance of these findings, much of current research fails to provide a clear and comprehensive account concerning the core element of issue voting: namely the policy issue itself. A thorough understanding of the nature and breadth of issue voting hinges
an understanding of the policy issues that set the contours of the political debate and ultimately define the electoral fate of parties or candidates. In their seminal article from 1980, Edward Carmines and James Stimson highlight the importance of understanding the characteristics of the “issue” for the study of issue voting. The authors suggest that issue voting encompasses two specific types: easy versus hard. Issue voting of the latter kind has its intellectual roots in the Downsian tradition and assumes a sophisticated decision calculus on the side of voters. Hard policy issues are sufficiently complex and technical in nature that utilizing them in deciding which party to vote for is an effortful undertaking. Issue voting on the basis of easy policy issues, by contrast, requires lesser effort. This is largely due to the fact that easy policy issues are highly symbolic in nature and can be understood by voters at a “gut level”, think of race or abortion in American politics for example (Carmines and Stimson 1980, 80). By consequence, issue voting due to easy policy issues is expected to be more widespread within the electorate and carry more significant implications in terms of electoral outcomes (Carmines and Stimson 1980). However, Carmines and Stimson (1980: 80) point out that easy issues are likely the outliers in political space. Most issues fall into the hard category.

Can parties make hard policy issues more straightforward for voters, and thus increase the overall likelihood that voters will use these policy considerations to inform their ballot choices? This study suggests the answer is yes. It argues that the world of issue voting is by no means limited to easy policy issues, hard ones may enlighten voters’ decision making processes as well. When aiming to grasp the dynamics in issue voting due to hard issues, the policy offerings of parties play a particularly crucial role. The argument developed here is that issue voting based on hard policy issues requires a degree of issue linkage between parties’ positions on the issue and their overall stances on the main dimension of political competition. Issue linkage refers to the process in which parties translate complex and technical policy issues into the dominant language in political conflict, in most countries the left/right ideological dimension (Mair 2007). In doing so, parties lower the informational costs for voters allowing them to inform their decision calculus by hard policy concerns (for a related argument in the case of opinion formation regarding immigration, see Pardos-Prado 2011). Perceived in this way, issue linkage serves an easily accessible cognitive short-cut for voters (Feldman and Conover 1983; Popkin 1991; Zaller 1992).
The applicability of the issue linkage argument is empirically demonstrated by examining the impact of a technical and complex policy issue, namely European integration, on vote choice in British, Danish, Dutch and German national elections between 1992 and 2002. European integration constitutes an excellent object of study for our endeavor as every European Union (EU) member state is confronted with issues arising from further unification in Europe. In addition, the process of European integration and the EU institutional structure is multi-faceted, complex and distant from voters’ everyday lives especially within the time-frame of investigation (Anderson 1998; Karp, Banducci and Bowler 2003; de Vries et al. 2011). Furthermore, all four countries included in this study are longstanding members of the Union and have experienced a comparable impact of the EU integration process. Yet, recent research suggests that the impact of the EU issue on voters’ choices in national elections, a phenomenon referred as EU issue voting, varies substantially across parties and countries (see for example de Vries 2007, 2010). These cases thus provide an unique testing ground for an exploration of the extent to which varying degrees of issue linkage can account for the dynamics in EU issue voting.

By employing a two-stage multilevel model, this study provides considerable evidence for the issue linkage argument. The empirical analysis reveals that the degree of EU issue voting is more extensive when parties link their EU position to their stance on the main dimension of political competition, that is the left/right dimension. The results also suggest that this relationship is largely curvilinear in nature implying that EU issue voting is most extensive at intermediate levels of issue linkage. When the EU issue is largely orthogonal or fully linked to parties’ left/right positioning, EU issue voting tends to be low.

These findings highlight the importance of considering the degree of issue linkage when studying variation in issue voting on the basis of hard policy issues. Hence, this study has important implications for the study of voting behavior. Moreover, it enriches our understanding of issue voting based on complex policy issues. Finally, although this study explains issue linkage in the context of EU issue voting, its main theoretical implication is not confined to the particular case of European integration. It should also hold for other relatively rather complex policy issues, such as environmental protection or health care reform for example.

The study proceeds in four parts. The first section introduces the concept of issue linkage. Next, the application of the issue linkage perspective to issue voting on the basis of a hard pol-
icy issue, European integration, is discussed. Subsequently, in a third and fourth step, the data, methods and operationalizations are outlined, and the results of the empirical analysis are presented. Finally, the study concludes by highlighting the implications of the empirical findings for the study of issue voting generally and research concerning the impact of the European integration issue in domestic electoral politics in particular.

2 The Concept of Issue Linkage

Within the study of electoral behavior issue voting has gained much prominence over the years. The most widely used conceptualization is the proximity model as developed by Enelow and Hinich (1984) in their seminal work *The Spatial Theory of Voting*. This model assumes voters to act rationally, and vote for policy proposals which form the basis of future government. The rationale here is that each voter's utility of a party (or candidate) on a particular policy issue is a negative function of the issue distance between a voter and that party. In the case of redistributive attitudes for example, one would expect voters to cast their ballot for a party which issue position on redistribution is most proximate to their own (Enelow and Hinich 1984). Perceived in this way, public policy preferences are largely prospective in nature and portray differences over what the government should do (see also Downs 1957). The nature of the policy concern itself on which voters base their self and party placements has received much less attention within the issue voting literature. In their seminal piece on the two faces of issue voting, Edward Carmines and James Stimson (1980:78) point out that without a clear theory of the nature of policy issues involved we cannot properly account for the dynamics in issue voting. The authors provide a rather simple, yet convincing, account of the double-barreled nature of issue voting. Issue voting comes in two specific flavors: *easy* and *hard*. The degree to which a policy issue falls in either category is based on three criteria (Carmines and Stimson 1980, 80):

1. *The easy issue would be symbolic rather than technical.*
2. *It would more likely deal with policy ends than means.*
3. *It would be an issue long on the political agenda.*

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1An alternative conceptualization of issue voting also exists, namely the *directional model* developed by Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989). This model includes both a directional and intensity component when conceptualizing the distance between voters and parties. Its use within the literature on issue voting is however more limited.
While symbolic conflicts are readily communicated, technical issues require much more factual knowledge and discussion. By consequence, the authors suggest that although easy issues are rare, issue voting on the basis of them is more widespread. The cognitive demands posed on voters by complex and technical issues make issue voting rather effortful, overall less likely and mainly restricted to the realm of sophisticated voters. The notion of easy versus hard policy issues has been applied not only to the issue of race in American politics (Carmines and Stimson 1980), but also to the study of public opinion on foreign policy (Maggiotto and Wittkopf 1981) or social security (Joselyn and Haider-Markel 2002) for example. The original theory does, however, leave some questions unaddressed. For example, which criteria should be used to infer if issues are easy or hard in the minds of voters? Joselyn and Haider-Markel (2002) suggest that issues are easy when they relate to emotive beliefs, while hard issues require technical know-how and specific details to form an opinion. This study follows this contribution. Yet, it takes a rather direct approach by inferring the degree to which an issue can be classified as hard by inspecting voters’ opinions directly. Specifically, it argues that if respondents in a survey have difficulties placing parties on a policy dimension by relying more often on the answer category “don’t know” compared to other issues, this provides a good indication of the ‘hardness’ of a policy issue. This approach also allows for a direct test of the degree to which an issue is hard in the mind of an average voter. Dividing issues based on the extent to which they are easily accessible to voters is important as it is a well-documented fact within the study of public opinion that ordinary voters dedicate only limited pockets of their time to politics and are by-and-large rather ill-informed (Converse 1964; Carpini and Keeter 1996; Luskin 1987; Zaller 1992). Issue voting on the basis of hard policy issues is clearly cognitively demanding for voters. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily preclude its existence which Carmines and Stimson (1980) and others also demonstrate empirically. The question becomes which factors may account for the varying degrees of issue voting due to hard policy issues? This study suggests that the way in which parties link these issues to their overall ideological profiles is crucial.

Scholarship suggests that broad-based ideological profiles of parties may help reduce complexity in the minds of voters and structure their opinions about specific policy issues (Feldman and Conover 1983; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Popkin 1991; Hinich and Munger 1993; van der Eijk, Binder and Schmitt 2005). Voters rely on these ideological labels to make sense of the po-
itical world around them. Political ideologies make the preferences and actions of political parties understandable and predictable for voters. In order to cut informational costs, voters as bounded rational citizens (Simon 1985) are also likely to rely on parties’ ideological profiles as fairly cheap and straightforward cognitive short-cuts when casting their ballots (Feldman and Conover 1983; Popkin 1991; Hinich and Munger 1993). In keeping with this work, we expect issue voting on the basis of hard policy issues to increase when parties link their positions on these issues to their overall stance on the main dimension of political conflict with which most voters are familiar. In order for hard policy issues to resonate with voters and affect their behavior, they need to be translated into the dominant language of politics. That is, parties need to partially connect their issue positions on hard issues to their overall ideological stances. This allows voters to compensate for their limited information about politics and navigate through campaigns filled with references to specific policy issues.

In most advanced industrial democracies the dominant dimension of political conflict is the left/right dimension (Mair 2007). Although scholars have come to associate broad streams of ideas with the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’, its poles generally pit a more progressive and redistributive view of the state against a more conservative and market-oriented view. The left/right dimension constitutes the focal point for parties as well as for voters and is often viewed as “the ideological super-issue” bundling a large array of specific policy issues (Pierce 1999, 30, see also Downs, 1957; van der Eijk, Binder, Schmitt 2005; Mair 2007). By linking their stances on hard policy issues to their overall ideological profiles, parties substantially reduce the informational costs for voters. Research demonstrates that even voters with low levels of political interest or knowledge are able to deduce specific policy stands of parties on the basis of their familiarity with parties’ general ideological positioning (van der Brug 1997). Voters in turn use the availability of these ideological labels as information substitutes for detailed policy-specific information. Consequently, for hard policy issues the informational costs of issue voting are lowered dramatically when parties link their issue stance to their more broadly construed left/right ideological positions. This expectation can be formalized in the following way:

**Issue Linkage Hypothesis:** The degree of issue voting for a party on the basis of a hard
policy issue increases when voters perceive a linkage between that party's position on the hard policy issue and its stance on the dominant left/right dimension, all else being equal.

It is important to highlight that the issue linkage argument implies that a hard policy issue is related to, but not entirely subsumed into the dominant left/right dimension. If the latter would be the case, that is if a policy issue perfectly aligns with the left/right dimension, it would add no additional information to voters’ electoral choices. This suggests that the relationship between issue linkage and issue voting might be curvilinear in nature. The extent of issue voting based on hard policy issues likely diminishes when parties do not link this issue to the dominant dimension, that is when orthogonality is high. Equally, issue voting likely decreases when parties fully subsume the hard policy issue into the main dimension. In either case, no rational incentive exists for voters to get informed about partisan stances on the hard policy issue. If, on the one hand, the hard policy issue is subsumed, new information would direct voters to an identical party choice as before, without knowing parties’ stances on the hard issue, since parties’ positions on both dimensions are almost perfectly correlated. If, on the other hand, parties’ positions are fully orthogonal, voters are unlikely to acquire new information due to the high informational costs involved. In either instance, it is unlikely that voters will base their ballot choices on information concerning hard policy issues. Consequently, complex policy issues are expected to influence voting behavior more strongly when parties partly relate their stances to the dominant left/right dimension. This expectation regarding the curvilinear nature of the relationship between issue linkage and issue voting on the basis of hard policy issues is summarized in the following hypothesis:

**Curvilinear Issue Linkage Hypothesis:** The degree of issue voting for a party on the basis of a hard policy issue is likely to be low when voters perceive no linkage between that party's position on the hard policy issue and its stance on the dominant left/right dimension, but it is expected to be equally low when voters perceive a perfect linkage, all else being equal.
3 Applying the Issue Linkage to EU Issue Voting

The issue linkage argument outlined above underlines the conditions under which complex policy issues may affect voters’ decisions at the ballot box. We expect the degree to which parties associate a hard policy issue to the main dimension of political competition to facilitate issue voting. At the same time, we also anticipate the relationship between issue linkage and issue voting to be curvilinear in nature. These propositions are general in nature and thus could be applied to the dynamics of issue voting on a large range of hard policy issues. In this study, we test these theoretical conjectures by examining the dynamics in EU issue voting.

The EU issue constitutes an excellent object of study for our endeavor as it is a distant and multifaceted issue which is difficult to grasp for voters (Anderson 1998; Karp, Banducci and Bowler 2003; Steenbergen and Jones 2002; Steenbergen, Edwards and de Vries 2007; de Vries et al. 2011). The European integration process is characterized by a complex division of power between various European institutions and between these institutions and national governments. Citizens may have particular difficulties understanding in which instances the EU is responsible for policy outcomes (see for example Anderson 1998; de Vries et al. 2011). Adding to this complexity comes the fact that, for much of its history, European integration was conceived as a matter restricted to the realm of foreign policy about which citizens throughout the democratic world tend to have limited knowledge (Holsti 1992). Not surprisingly perhaps, evidence indeed suggests that on average citizens are not well-informed about EU politics and the consequences of European unification are often intangible, uncertain and ill-understood by the general public (Anderson 1998; Karp, Banducci and Bowler 2003).

Since every EU member state is confronted with policy issues arising from European unification, we can test the issue linkage propositions in a wide variety of political contexts. While countries in Western Europe by the early 2000s are all longstanding members of the Union and have experienced a comparable impact of the EU integration process, research demonstrates that the impact of the EU issue on party and electoral competition varies substantially throughout the region (de Vries 2007; de Vries et al. 2011; Hobolt 2009; Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008). The degree of issue linkage may account for these differences. That said, unfortunately, not many national election studies include EU related questions in their surveys, so we have to limit our
analyses to eleven elections in four countries.\footnote{Our focus is on differences in the strength of EU issue voting across political parties and the degree to which issue linkage can account for these differences. An alternative data source to examine these effects would be the European Election Survey (EES). The issue with the EES is that the focus and timing of these surveys may lead to overstated EU issue voting. We cannot be sure that the presumed priming effects in the EES surveys are constant across national contexts since the degree of politicization of EU related issues differences substantially between countries, so these possible priming effects could pose a serious threat to inference for our study. Finally, we are interested in voting in national elections and not in European elections, so national election surveys seem to the logical choice here.}

The empirical analysis employs national election survey data from eleven elections between 1992 and 2002 from four countries: Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In these countries, questions concerning support or opposition regarding European integration are available in two or more consecutive rounds of national election surveys allowing an examination of EU issue voting over time. A temporal perspective is important for our endeavor as issue linkage likely requires time to develop as the EU encroaches on national political life. Previous work (de Vries et al. 2011) suggests that EU issue voting is a rather difficult enterprise for ordinary voters. Casting a ballot on the basis of preferences about Europe “is not self-evident in view of the distant, often technical and complex aspects of all matters relating to European integration. Moreover, voters need information about where political parties stand on these issues, the presence of which is, again, not obvious in the view of the paucity of media attention to European affairs.” (de Vries et al. 2011, 17) Although European integration may have become an easier issue for voters in recent years given the Euro and Greek debt crisis, within the timeframe under investigation this politicization process was merely at its infancy (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004; de Vries 2007). This can also be observed in the data employed in the study. Recall, that in order for an issue to be classified as hard this study employs an empirical criterion, namely to what extent are voters able to place parties on the respective policy issue? We explore this empirically by inspecting the patterns in “don't know” responses of voters placing parties on the left/right versus EU dimension. Unfortunately, we cannot verify the uncertainty about party placements among Dutch and Danish respondents as the respective surveys do not provide “don't know” as an answer category. The results for the German and British cases reveal a clear pattern. Respondents in the 1998 and 2002 German election studies were 50 percent more likely to report “don't know” when they were asked to place political parties on a pro- versus anti-EU scale compared to a left/right scale, while the British respondents in 1992 and 1997 were a third more likely to answer “don't know” when instructed to place parties on a EU scale com-
pared to the left/right. These higher levels of uncertainty about parties’ EU positions compared to left/right stances indicate the ‘hardness’ of European integration as a policy issue in the eyes of voters.

Finally, the application of the issue linkage perspective to variation in EU issue voting is also interesting as it is partly at odds with the dominant view held within EU studies. The conventional view postulated in the literature is that EU issue voting is more extensive when the EU issue is unrelated to the left/right dimension (see for example Evans 1998; van der Eijk and Franklin 2004). For example, Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004, 33, italics added) argue that "the pro-/anti-EU orientation [...] constitutes something of a ‘sleeping giant’ that has the potential, if awakened, to impel voters to political behavior (because of its degree of orthogonality with left/right orientations) that undercut[s] 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 political conflict dimensions and shake up existing patterns of electoral politics by bringing about new voter alignments. In light of the issue linkage perspective highlighted in the previous section this orthogonality scenario seems not very likely. European integration is a rather hard policy issue for voters, at least in the time-frame under investigation, as it comprises an immensely vast web of institutions and policy making spanning areas, such as monetary, agricultural or educational policy, but also foreign affairs or regional development. As a result, European unification is sufficiently complex that citizens have to resort to cognitive shortcuts in the form of attitudinal cues to form opinions (Anderson 1998). Some of these cues may take the form of personal predispositions, but most research shows that they are usually offered by the political environment, especially by political parties (Ray 2003; Steenbergen, Edwards and de Vries 2007; de Vries and Edwards 2009). In this light, we expect a complex policy issue like European integration to inform voters’ electoral decisions more strongly when parties present their EU positions through the lens of their overall left/right ideological profile.

4 Data, Methods & Operationalizations

In order to test our two main hypotheses, the analysis draws on national election survey data from eleven elections between 1992 and 2002 from Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and
The goal of the empirical analysis is to determine the variation in EU issue voting across parties and to establish if it can be accounted for by the degree to which voters perceive parties' EU positions to be linked their stances on the left/right dimension. In order to estimate the effect of EU attitudes on party choice and the impact of issue linkage, we employ a two-stage multi-level multinomial logit model. The choice for a multinomial logit (MNL) regression framework allows us, as we explain below, to examine the extent of EU issue voting per party individually. We opt for a two-stage multi-level model (MLM) as the large number of choice options (i.e. parties) introduces a whole variety of computational difficulties if we were to estimate a one-step MNL model in a hierarchical setting. These issues have not yet been adequately solved in the literature (for a discussion on one-stage versus two-stage MLM models, see Gelman 2005). As an alternative, we use a two-step hierarchical estimation procedure (Achen 2005; Duch and Stevenson 2005, 2008; Franzese 2005; Lewis and Linzer 2005). This is a special case of MLM in which we obtain first-level results for each party using a MNL model and then explore the variation across parties in a separate second-level model whilst accounting for the uncertainty of the computed first-level estimates and for possible clustering across countries and elections (see Franzese 2005; Lewis and Linzer 2005). This two-stage procedure constitutes a reasonable alternative to a one-stage MLM model as several studies cross-validating both approaches have shown that two-stage MLM models yield essentially the same results as long as the number of respondents per country in the dataset is sufficiently large (see Jusko and Shiv- eley 2005; Duch and Stevenson 2005). This condition is satisfied in our case, as the samples range from about 1500 respondents in the 1998 Danish to over 3000 respondents in 2001 British election survey.

The first stage of the procedure estimates an individual-level MNL regression analysis. In these MNL analyses the dependent variable is vote choice for a particular party in a given election. Table 2 in the appendix provides a list of the parties included in every election. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis is inappropriate for the individual-level analysis because the dependent variable is a categorical variable with multiple values, i.e. vote choice for different parties, and the probability of voting for a party can only vary between 0 and 1 (see Alvarez and

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A MNL model allows for the estimation of the effect of a voter’s EU attitudes on the likelihood that the voter will choose one alternative, i.e. a particular party, over the baseline category. MNL regression does not allow for the inclusion of alternative-specific, i.e. party-specific, independent variables (Alvarez and Nagler 1998, 58-9). This property has some implications for the operationalization of EU issue voting. Rather than operationalizing EU issue voting as the distance between respondents’ self-placement and their placement of a party’s position on an EU scale (which would be in line with the proximity model of issue voting), EU issue voting has to constitute an individual-specific characteristic operationalized as a respondent’s self-placement on an EU scale. This latter measure is gleaned from several surveys in which voters were asked to place themselves on an EU scale with low scores indicating low EU support and high scores indicating high EU support.

In order to circumvent under-specification at the individual level and to assess the importance of the EU issue for vote choice in relation to other concerns, three non-EU related policy variables are included: left/right and two new politics policies, namely immigration and environmental policy. Although the new politics dimension may include diverse issues, such as political participation, gender, abortion or lifestyle issues, immigration and environmental policy are usually considered key elements of new politics (Dalton 2006). The self-placement of voters on these policy scales are used to determine the effects of these policy variables. Finally, all analyses also include several socio-demographic control variables, e.g. gender, religiosity, income and education. These socio-demographic controls tap into the impact of cleavage structures on voting behavior.

After the first stage MNL regressions are estimated, the second stage of the analysis proceeds

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4One potential problem with MNL models is the independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA) assumption. IIA means that the ratio of the choice probabilities for two alternatives, A and B, is independent from all other alternatives in the choice set (see Agresti 2002). A Hausman test statistic computed for the respective elections demonstrates that the IIA assumption seems reasonable.

5In this case the reference category is the largest right-wing centrist party in the respective party system: the Danish Liberals (Venstre-V), the German Christian Democrats (Christlich Demokratische Union/Christlich-Soziale Union-CDU/CSU), the Dutch Christian Democrats (Christen-Democratisch Appel-CDA) and the British Conservatives (CON).

6Voters’ and parties’ placements on nuclear energy in German and Dutch surveys are used to tap into the environment issue. The original coding of voter and party placements on the EU, immigration and environment issue in the Dutch and German election studies were based on a seven-point scale. In order to guarantee comparability across the different countries, these items were recoded to a 5-point scale. The original 10-point scales of left-right voter and party placements for the British, Danish, Dutch and German studies were collapsed into a five-point scale. Different permutations of rescaling do not affect the results.
by employing the first stage estimates to model inter-party variation in EU issue voting. MNL coefficients are the log odds of voting for the party in relation to the reference category, i.e. the factor by which we multiply the odds of voting for the party rather than for the reference category for each one-unit increase in the independent variable (Agresti 2002). To ensure substantively meaningful comparability across cases, the first stage MNL coefficients are transformed into predicted values (see also Duch and Stevenson 2005, 2008). In this case, the predicted change in vote probability for a particular party due to a change in the distribution of EU preferences across voters is used. These changes are calculated using CLARIFY, which employs Monte Carlo simulations to convert raw statistical results into more intuitive quantities without changing the statistical assumptions (King, Tomz and Wittenberg 2000). These changes in vote probabilities, i.e. the EU issue voting measure for a particular party, make up the estimated dependent variable in the second stage. We calculated the change in predicted vote probability for each individual party as a result of a voter becoming more pro-EU, i.e. the level of EU support moves from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean. Overall, the extent of EU issue voting for British, Danish, Dutch and German parties between 1992 and 2002 varies between 0 and 34.6 percent.

Since the dependent variable in the second stage of the analysis is based on estimates, the analysis should account for the uncertainty of these estimates. Lewis and Linzer (2005) put forward a weighting procedure that produces appropriate standard errors for the second stage but also show that using White’s heteroskedastic consistent standard errors is almost always as good. The latter strategy is used here. Additionally, since the extent of EU issue voting is determined using several election surveys from the same country, one might expect the level of EU issue voting for the same party to be correlated across different elections. To control for this, the standard errors are clustered on parties to account for possible correlations between parties. Consequently, the resulting standard errors allow for unspecified forms of heteroskedasticity for the same party across the different surveys. Finally, in order to account for possible cross-country or cross-time effects country and time-point dummies are included (see Franzese 2005).

The main independent variable in the second stage is the degree of issue linkage across parties. Issue linkage is measured by means of the correlation between voters’ placements of a party on an EU and a left/right scale using the respective national election surveys. Recall that the the-
oretical section outlined the possibility that the relationship between issue linkage and EU issue voting could be curvilinear. In order to explore this possibility, we included a squared term of issue linkage after standardizing the issue linkage variable. Next to the two issue linkage measures, we include controls. First, we control for issue salience of European integration measured as a party’s EU issue salience on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (no importance) to 5 (high importance) obtained from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data on party positioning regarding European integration (for detailed information regarding the CHES data, see Hooghe et al. 2010). We expect EU issue voting for a party to increase as a function of the extent to which a party mobilizes on the basis of this issue. This expectation is in line with the saliency theory of party competition as well as the theory of issue ownership (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). As a second control, we include a variable capturing the extremity of of a party’s EU position compared to that of the median in the party system, both based on the mean of voters' party placements on an EU scale. The intuition here is that issue voting on the basis of a hard policy issue like European integration may be expected to increase as a result of clear positional cues presented by parties (Zaller 1992; de Vries 2007; Steenbergen, Edwards and de Vries 2007).

5 Empirical Analysis

Does the varying degree of issue linkage among parties account for inter-party variation in EU issue voting? The empirical analysis presented in this section puts the issue linkage argument to the test by exploring variation in EU issue voting across parties in British, Danish, Dutch and German elections between 1992 and 2002. In order to determine the extent to which issue linkage may explain EU issue voting for each party, a measure of EU issue voting at the party level is needed. As this cannot be observed directly, we must rely on a measure estimated from the data for the two variables that make up the relationship: a voter’s party choice and a voter’s EU preference. We conducted election-specific individual-level MNL regression analyses to model the impact of voters’ EU preferences on vote choice, while also controlling for other factors. Recall that these analyses produce MNL coefficients which are the log odds of voting for the party in relation to the reference category (Agresti 2002). These are not really informative nor substantively meaningful to compare across parties. Therefore, the first stage MNL coefficients are
transformed into predicted values by means of Monte Carlo simulations (see King, Tomz and Wittenberg 2000).

Figures 1 through 4 below provide these results. The estimates of the extent of EU issue voting for the British, Danish, Dutch and German parties in the respective elections between 1992 and 2002 are based on the simulations. The values reflect the change in vote probability for each party when a voter moves from one standard deviation below the mean on the EU support scale to one standard deviation above the mean, while holding all other control variables at their respective means and dummy variables at their respective modes. The figures allow for a straightforward comparison of the extent to which a party’s predicted vote probability is influenced by EU issue voting across parties. The black bars around the point estimates (indicated by the black triangles) in figures 1 through 4 signify the upper and lower bounds of the 95% confidence intervals. Positive values indicate an increase in the predicted vote probability of a party as a result of an increasingly pro-EU voter, while negative values indicate a decrease in the predicted vote probability. Readers interested in the full MNL results are referred to tables A.1 through A.11 in the supplemental appendix. Table 2 in the appendix provides an overview of the acronyms for each party.

Comparing figures 1 through 4 reveals that the Danish Liberals (Venstre-V) and the Danish Social Democrats (Socialdemokratiet-SD) in the 1994 election experienced the highest change in vote probability due to EU issue voting: a more pro-EU voter decreases the vote probability for the Socialdemokratiet by 34.6 percent, while it increases the vote probability for Venstre by 27.3. In the United Kingdom, the Labour Party (LAB) and the Conservatives (CON) in the 1997 election were most strongly affected by EU issue voting. While Labour profited from a more pro-EU voter, the vote probability for the Conservative Party decreased by roughly 25 percent. On average, for British and Danish parties voters’ EU attitudes are a more important factor in determining the likelihood that a voter will vote for a particular party than is the case for Dutch and German parties. Nonetheless, the change in vote probability due to EU issue voting exceeded the 5 percent mark for the Dutch Social Democrats (Partij van de Arbeid-PvdA) in 1994 and 2002 and for the Liberal Democrats (Democraten 66-D66) and the Christian Democrats (Christen-
Democratisch Appel-CDA) in 2002. In Germany, the change in vote probability due to EU issue voting was most extensive for the Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands-SPD) and the Christian Democrats (Christlich Demokratische Union/ Christlich-Soziale Union-CDU/CSU) during the 1998 German election. On the whole, however, the EU issue voting effects for Dutch and German parties are rather small which is in line with previous work (de Vries 2007).

The second step of the empirical analysis determines if the degree of issue linkage accounts for the variation in EU issue voting across parties. The applicability of the issue linkage perspective for understanding inter-party variation in EU issue voting is tested by means of an OLS regression analysis using the absolute changes in predicted vote probabilities as the dependent variable. Table 1 below presents the OLS results. The predicted changes in vote probabilities were regressed on issue linkage and issue linkage squared while including control variables.\(^7\)

Table 1 presents the results of two models: Model (1) includes only the two issue linkage variables, and Model (2) adds issue salience and issue extremity of parties concerning European integration as controls. Note that the variables were standardized in order to make the coefficients comparable as a result one-unit increase in the independent variables reflects one standard deviation.\(^8\)

\(\text{Table 1 about here}\)

The results of the first model lend substantial support for our theoretical conjectures. The findings show that variation in the degree of EU issue voting across parties is largely a function of issue linkage and issue linkage squared tapping into the curvilinearity of the relationship. In addition, the results presented in Model 2 indicate that the impact of issue linkage holds even when the extremity of a party's EU position or the importance a party attaches to the EU is taken into account. Taken together the issue linkage variables plus controls explain over half of the variance in EU issue voting across parties. Referring to the results presented in Model (2), a one standard deviation increase in issue linkage leads to a 2.56-point increase in EU issue voting on a 0 to 34.6-point scale, which is roughly a seven percent increase in EU issue voting. The squared

\(^7\)Four party observations (Dutch Socialistische Partij-SP in 1994, the Danish Enhedslisten-E in 1998 and 2001 and Kristeligt Folkeparti-KrF in 2001) were excluded from the analysis. Since they were not included in the respective rounds of the CHES surveys, so have no observations on the control variables.

\(^8\)Both models also include the country and time dummies which have been suppressed in the table due to space limitations.
term of issue linkage, which taps in to the curvilinear relationship of issue linkage and EU issue voting, raises the degree of EU issue voting for a party by 1.18-points which amounts about five percent. Note that both EU issue extremity and EU issue salience are also strong predictors of inter-party variation in EU issue voting which is not surprising given the prominence of these factors in the literature. In line with the issue ownership model, the EU issue salience finding indicates that voters indeed seem to respond when a party raises the importance of an issue and, in this case, are likely to let their vote choice be informed by that issue (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). Moreover, in line with the cueing and priming literature, we find that parties providing clear pro- or anti-EU position experience higher levels of EU issue voting (see for example Zaller 1992; Steenbergen, Edwards and de Vries 2007). Both the effects for issue linkage and the controls are in line with our theoretical expectations and previous work.

6 Discussion & Conclusion

This study proposes and empirically substantiates the importance of issue linkage, i.e. the degree to which parties link their positions on a policy issue to their stances on the main dimension of political competition, for our understanding of issue voting based on hard policy issues. The findings suggest that issue voting on the basis of policy issues which are technical in nature and characterized by a high level of complexity is conditional upon the degree of issue linkage parties offer to voters. When parties translate these complex policy issues into the dominant language of politics, namely the left/right dimension, this lowers informational costs for voters and makes issue voting less effortful. By consequence, issue voting based on hard policy issues increases. The empirical applicability of the issue linkage perspective is substantiated by an examination of the extent to which a rather complex policy issue, European integration, influences electoral behavior in four Western European countries and eleven elections between 1992 and 2002. The empirical analysis reveals greater levels of EU issue voting for parties that link their EU position to their left/right stance even when controlling for important alternative explanations.

The results also provide evidence for the curvilinearity of the relationship between issue linkage and EU issue voting. The analysis suggests that EU issue voting is substantially reduced when parties’ positions on the EU and left/right dimension are orthogonal, but also when they
are almost perfectly correlated. Orthogonality likely reduces EU issue voting as the issue becomes too complex for voters when parties fail to provide cues about how the issue relates to existing party ideology. In addition, EU issue voting is likely dampened when voters view party stances on both the EU and left/right dimension as nearly identical. If this is the case, parties' EU stances add no new information to voters' decision calculus; whichever of the two issue dimensions they would consider, voters would arrive at the same ballot choice. These findings add to a growing body of work demonstrating that party behavior is central for understanding and explaining dynamics in issue voting (see Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008; Lachat 2008). Consequently, the findings presented here have important implications for the study of elections and issue voting as well as enrich our understanding of why certain policy issues influence voters' choices at the ballot box.

The results also inform our understanding of the way in which European integration affects national elections (see Evans 1998; Tillman 2004; de Vries 2007). The analysis shows that EU issue voting is more extensive when parties link their positions on the EU issue to the main dimension of political conflict, i.e. the left/right dimension. This finding refines previous work on EU issue voting (see Evans 1998; van der Eijk and Franklin 2004) by demonstrating that when EU issue voting is present, it is likely to revitalize the existing left/right ideological divide in party competition rather than introduce a new dimension. The Danish case illustrates this finding. In Denmark, opposition to European integration has been a powerful source of EU issue voting precisely because leftist parties 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 research have suggested. This study thus highlights the 'domestication' of EU related issues in order for them to influence national politics. This process of domestication reduces the informational costs for voters. By analyzing the effect of issue linkage on the extent of EU issue voting, this study has taken an important step toward understanding the conditions under which complex policy issues come to influence voting behavior. The main theoretical contribution is not necessarily confined to the particular case of the European integration issue, but should also hold for other relatively complex policy issues, such as the environment or health care (for a similar argumentation for opinion formation on the immigration issue, see Pardos-Prado 2011).
Naturally, this study also has limitations. First, although the analysis provides a longitudinal perspective data availability has limited the set of countries included. In a next step, the number of countries included in the analysis could be expanded by attempting to exploit additional data sources on issue voting for other policy issues. This would also enable us to consider the strategic context in which parties operate. For example, do party system characteristics condition the way in which issue linkage affects issue voting on hard policy issues? 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; Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002; Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008). Although different labels are used within the literature to capture the second dimension of political contestation, most scholars contend that a second cultural dimension exists next to the economic left/right dimension. This second dimension 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 2006). The focus of the present study is on the left/right dimension of political conflict as this is the dominant conflict dimension throughout EU member states and is widely included in election surveys. If data permits, it may be interesting to also explore issue linkage with the cultural dimension as research by Kriesi et al. (2006) regarding party competition seems to suggest that hard transnational policy issues like European integration or globalization are starting to realign with this cultural dimension. That said, this finding has been contested recently in the work of van der Brug and van Spanje (2009). Notwithstanding these avenues for further research, the conceptualization and examination of the impact of issue linkage on issue voting on the basis of a hard policy issue constitutes an important theoretical and empirical contribution to our understanding of the role policy issues play in electoral decision making.
References


7 Appendix

Table 2 about here
### Table 1: Issue Linkage & Variation in EU Issue Voting across Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 OLS Estimates</th>
<th>Model 2 OLS Estimates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>7.92** (1.67)</td>
<td>7.89** (1.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Linkage</td>
<td>2.60** (1.28)</td>
<td>2.56** (0.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Linkage Squared</td>
<td>1.29* (0.70)</td>
<td>1.18* (0.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Extremity</td>
<td>4.20* (2.37)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Salience</td>
<td>2.20* (1.17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** \( R^2 \) ** = .35 \quad .45

\( F - Statistic \) = 2.12** \quad 3.40**

\( N \) = 61 \quad 61

**Notes**: Cell entries are OLS estimates with robust standard errors clustered on party in parentheses. The model includes country and time-point dummies which have been suppressed in the table.


**significant at \( p \leq 0.01 \); * significant at \( p \leq 0.05 \) (one-tailed).
Table 2: List of Parties Included in the Analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Original Name</th>
<th>English Name</th>
<th>Acronym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Flemskridspartiet</td>
<td>Progress Party</td>
<td>FP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dansk Folkeparti</td>
<td>Danish People's Party</td>
<td>DF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Venstre</td>
<td>Liberals</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Konservative Folkeparti</td>
<td>Conservative People's Party</td>
<td>KF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kristeligt Folkeparti</td>
<td>Christian People's Party</td>
<td>KrF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Radikale Venstre</td>
<td>Danish Social Liberal Party</td>
<td>RV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socialdemokratiest</td>
<td>Social Democratic Party</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Centrum-Demokraterne</td>
<td>Center Democrats</td>
<td>CD</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socialistisk Folkeparti</td>
<td>Socialist People's Party</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enhedslisten</td>
<td>Unity List</td>
<td>E</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
<td>Christlich Demokratische Union/</td>
<td>Christian Democratic Union/</td>
<td>CDU/</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christlich-Soziale Union</td>
<td>Christian Social Union</td>
<td>CSU</td>
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<td>Free Democratic Party</td>
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<td>Alliance '90/Greens</td>
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<td>Party of German Socialism</td>
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<td>List Pim Fortuyn</td>
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<td>Reformed Political Alliance/</td>
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<td>Partij van de Arbeid</td>
<td>Labour Party</td>
<td>PvdA</td>
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<td>Groen Links</td>
<td>Green Left</td>
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<td>Socialists Party</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Liberal Democrats</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labour Party</td>
<td>Labour Party</td>
<td>LAB</td>
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</table>
Figure 1: EU Issue Voting across Political Parties, Denmark 1994-2001

**Notes:** The values on the y-axis denote the change in the predicted vote probability $P(v)$ for a party as a function of an increasing pro-EU voter, i.e. when a voter’s EU preference moves from one standard deviation below to one standard deviation above the mean of the EU scale. Positive values indicate an increase in the predicted vote probability of a party as a result of an increasing pro-EU electorate, while negative values indicate a decrease in the predicted vote probability. The individual parties are labeled by an acronym. For details on the Danish parties included, the reader is referred to table 2 in the appendix. Full results are presented in tables A.1 though A.3 in the supplemental appendix.

**Source:** Danish National Election Studies, 1994-2001.
Figure 2: EU Issue Voting across Political Parties, Germany 1998-2002

Notes: The values on the y-axis denote the change in the predicted vote probability P(v) for a party as a function of an increasing pro-EU voter, i.e. when a voter’s EU preference moves from one standard deviation below to one standard deviation above the mean of the EU scale. Positive values indicate an increase in the predicted vote probability of a party as a result of an increasing pro-EU electorate, while negative values indicate a decrease in the predicted vote probability. The individual parties are labeled by an acronym. For details on the German parties included, the reader is referred to table 2 in the appendix. Full results are presented in tables A.4 though A.5 in the supplemental appendix.

Notes: The values on the y-axis denote the change in the predicted vote probability P(v) for a party as a function of an increasing pro-EU voter, i.e. when a voter’s EU preference moves from one standard deviation below to one standard deviation above the mean of the EU scale. Positive values indicate an increase in the predicted vote probability of a party as a result of an increasing pro-EU electorate, while negative values indicate a decrease in the predicted vote probability. The individual parties are labeled by an acronym. For details on the Dutch parties included, the reader is referred to table 2 in the appendix. Full results are presented in tables A.6 through A.8 in the supplemental appendix.
Figure 4: EU Issue Voting across Political Parties, United Kingdom 1992-2001

Notes: The values on the y-axis denote the change in the predicted vote probability P(v) for a party as a function of an increasing pro-EU voter, i.e. when a voter’s EU preference moves from one standard deviation below to one standard deviation above the mean of the EU scale. Positive values indicate an increase in the predicted vote probability of a party as a result of an increasing pro-EU electorate, while negative values indicate a decrease in the predicted vote probability. The individual parties are labeled by an acronym. For details on the British parties included, the reader is referred to table 2 in the appendix. Full results are presented in tables A.9 though A.11 in the supplemental appendix.