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RECEIVED 19 April 2024

ACCEPTED 18 July 2024

PUBLISHED 11 October 2024

CITATION

Carpenter MJ, Brunet-Jailly E and Hallgrímsson HK (2024) Editorial: Crisis, contention, and Euroscepticism. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 6:1420335. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2024.1420335

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Editorial: Crisis, contention, and Euroscepticism

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KEYWORDS

crisis, integration, identity, narrative, Euroscepticism, euro-skepticism, contentious politics, populism

Editorial on the Research Topic Crisis, contention, and Euroscepticism

This Research Topic examines the prospects of deepening European integration in the context of crisis-driven contentious politics. The Research Topic brings together contributors from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and combines insights from the fields of social movements and political economy. Our objective is to promote better understandings of the interplay between *crisis narratives* and *Euroscepticism*. In this context, we also aim to contribute to scholarly and policy discussions around *better governance strategies and enhancing public trust in political institutions and governance processes*.

The papers in this Research Topic form part of a larger research agenda that starting with thinking through the impact of the 2008 financial crisis impact on narratives of integration/disintegration in the European Union. In an earlier Research Topic of *Frontiers in Sociology* (Hodge et al., 2020), we focused on causal conjectures of narrative participation and governance regimes, with a specific interest in networked connections between activists and political actors at a time when fiscal austerity led to opportunities for Eurosceptic claims. Initially, our work centers on attempts to understand contentious politics, i.e. the “politics in which people make concerted claims bearing on each other’s interests” (Tilly, 2004, p. 6), and how and why contentious politics produces a specific outcome, which indeed, is exceptionally challenging to address (Amenta and Young, 1999; Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Bernstein, 2013); hence, our theoretical approach focused on (1) frames that render the strategic activities of collective actors actionable to potential supporters (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986; Van Stekelenburg et al., 2009) and (2) political process theories that examine the relationship between the activities and strategies of collective actors and the structural features of the political context (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Kitschelt, 1986; Tarrow, 2011).

While the scholarships on contentious politics and governance are rarely combined, our studies linked these concepts by looking at how the networks underlying contentious politics shape governance capacities and regimes; in other words, our work core contribution is linking the relatively new scholarship on contentious politics (Leconte, 2010) to governance. A key question in this literature is concerned with the relative influence of functionalist/utilitarian arguments for integration against the primordial or identity-based argument in Eurosceptic politics (markets/politics/Brexit). However, the question of *how* these identity-based contentious politics play out in the shadow of austerity

politics and against the backdrop of the European “democratic deficit” has yet to be addressed. Findings from our earlier Research Topic (Hodge et al., 2020) focused on understanding the complex intersections between crisis and memory politics during the global financial crisis and the migration crisis. All in all, our work suggested (1) that crises are narrative devices of our time that denote urgency and provide totalizing narratives, providing binary understandings of citizens, the deserving, the rule of law, which serves Eurosceptic Politics platforms effectively. (2) Our work also pointed to narrative that underscore a binary ethno-centric sense of identity and emotional energy, exploiting a loss of control and lack of preparedness.

The current Research Topic of *Frontiers in Politics* emerged from a workshop held at the annual conference of the Nordic Political Science Association in August 2021, where our work further addressed those issues focusing on crisis as narrative devices that denote urgency and provide totalizing narratives: hence, we focus on (1) the political discourse, in particular in terms of populist and normative framing of citizenship, and (2) national belonging and pan-Europeanism and euro-skepticism. Our interest is specifically on the ways in which (a) a discourse is taken up by political actors in anti-European claims making, and (b) under what specific governance conditions such framing led to politically important outcomes for Eurosceptic actors.

Contrary to the relative optimism regarding European integration in the latter half of the 20th century, Euroscepticism has expanded from a minority disposition to an influential and sometimes decisive factor in European politics (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2020; Leconte, 2010; Shore, 2021; Stockemer et al., 2020; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2018). These shifts are associated with a series of compounding crises in the last decade and a half. The first major shock was the 2008 global financial meltdown and subsequent economic downturn dubbed the ‘Great Recession’, the worst since the 1930s (Crotty, 2009; Rose and Spiegel, 2011; Stiglitz, 2016; Stockhammer, 2015). During this period, the core powers of Europe, acting through the European Union (EU) and other international institutions, bailed out poorer member states who were facing default on their national debts. The aid packages, however, were strictly conditioned on deeply unpopular austerity measures. Pan-European wealth inequalities suddenly became fodder for contentious and populist politics, fueling Euroscepticism and straining the bonds of the union (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2020; Hobolt and De Vries, 2016; Melzer and Serafin, 2013; Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, 2015). Popular movements for social justice proliferated in the streets while far-right political parties, as well as some on the populist left, surged from the margins and into national parliaments (Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos, 2020).

Into this simmering discontent, since 2014, asylum seekers from North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia have been arriving at Europe’s borders and shores in unprecedented numbers, fleeing conflict and destitution, risking perilous journeys in the hopes of reaching safety and better lives (Asaf, 2017; Coen, 2015; Ghadbian, 2021). While the receptiveness of European countries varied dramatically, the result was a net arrival of several million asylum seekers precisely at a time when most destination states were least equipped to accommodate, and when most electorates were already on edge, eager to scapegoat or see menace in

the ‘other’. Discourse and politics during this period reveal a surge in xenophobic, antiimmigrant, and Islamophobic sentiments, going beyond economic concerns and extending into cultural and civilizational narratives, which continue to affect politics in most EU member states (Brubaker, 2017; Dinas et al., 2019; Stockemer et al., 2020).

For many in the European public, the source of both sets of concerns—economic and immigration—is one and the same: EU policy. The EU was seen as imposing a neoliberal version of global governance on sovereign states in the absence of democratic accountability. Across the continent, populist movements, especially nationalist and far-right, have expanded their constituencies, buoyed by the two distinct yet inextricably linked crises (Bohemen et al., 2019; Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016; Conrad, 2020; Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2020; Lees, 2018; Schmidtke, 2020; Hurrelmann, 2023, 2021). To punctuate these developments, the British electorate shocked the world (including the British) by voting to leave the EU in a national referendum held in June of 2016 (Shore, 2021; Virdee and McGeever, 2018; Wincott et al., 2021). Of course, these events, including the financial and refugee crises and Brexit, are complex and multicausal, and each paper of this Research Topic provides more detail and analysis; the point here is that crises are associated with economic stress on segments of the European population, which in turn leads to a polarization and radicalization of politics.

Less understood, the urgent governance challenges posed by the economic and migratory crises have been further complicated by the COVID pandemic and resulted in polarized political discourses and identities, and further questioning of European integration. An apparently unforeseen consequence of the compound crises is a weakening of public confidence in established authorities, a degrading of the ground that democracy has seemed to rest on. Partly attributable to the rise of social media, a relatively shared foundation of truth, or a widely shared set of presuppositions about political life, could no longer be taken for granted (Conrad, 2021; Harsin, 2018; Newman, 2020). In diverse contexts across Europe, each article of this special issue points to governance challenges that go beyond the surface-level of the perceived emergency: conventional political assumptions and identities have become less stable, sometimes shifting into unexpected and contradictory alignments. Our contributors show that, for example: political identities in Europe can be national separatist and pro-Europe at the same time; populism, now nearly ubiquitous in politics and discourse, arises from ideologically opposed constituencies, sometimes combining them, and can apparently take the form of an aspirational opposition movement or a centralized authoritarian government; as evidenced by disagreements over the meaning and limits of social movements and civil disobedience even basic categories of political action are breaking down or are blurring (each article is summarized below).

The disorienting and often counterintuitive politics captured in this Research Topic casts light on the utilization of crisis as a narrative device that triggers unstable binary or totalizing political agendas. The Research Topic of five articles brings together contributors from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and combines insights from the fields of social movements and political

economy.¹ The Research Topic is not meant to be comprehensive of topics or regions but rather a small survey drawing on diverse contexts, each facing very different challenges and responding in very different ways. Yet, across the seemingly dissimilar case examinations, continuities and similar lessons emerge, including suggestions about more sustainable and democratic pathways forward:

In “*Performing crisis to create your enemy: Europe vs. the EU in Hungarian populist discourse*”, Sata shows that nationalist identity can be simultaneously anti-EU and pro-Europe, even explicitly pitting one against the other. When Victor Orban, the populist leader of Hungary, denounces the EU, he appeals not only to ‘the nation’ but also to ‘Europe’; to save Europe, the EU must be resisted. Leaving aside Orban’s imagined notion of Europe, this raises an important point: Euroscepticism is not necessarily opposed to European integration in principle but rather contests the particulars of the EU as it has come to be.

The sometimes ambiguous and dual nature of crisis as a dis/integrative factor in Europeanization is explored in “*Cultural narrative, crisis, and contention in Iceland’s bid to join the European Union, 2009–2015*” by Hallgrímsdóttir et al.. The authors argue that national identity constructions proved decisive over economic rationale for the aborted accession process, highlighting the importance of framing in social construction. The financial crisis at first seemed to serve the integrative impulse but ultimately failed to overcome and even bolstered the isolationist camp. Stories about culture and national independence proved more powerful than stories about technocratic governance and consumer benefits.

In Orlando and Conrad’s comparative “*Reinforcing or moderating? The impact of Brexit on Italian and German Euroscepticism*”, the authors weigh Britain’s watershed 2016 vote to exit the union as a differential factor in the Eurosceptic politics of Italy and Germany. For both countries, Brexit was regarded “as a sign of the decline of the EU, as an example of democracy in action, and as proof that there is an alternative” (8). Yet, in the case of Italy, and in distinction to German experience, Brexit did not prove a contagion and even played a moderating role.

On the streets, French protest movements challenged national authorities for imposing unpopular supranational neoliberalism, as Carpenter and Perrier (a, b) show in “*Yellow Vests: Anti-austerity, pro-democracy, and popular (not populist)*”. The authors document the coherence of the movement’s grievances and demands as well as its appeal across social divides, indicating again the potential for alternative approaches to European governance. The Yellow Vests do not present yet another right-wing opposition to the EU; rather they present a more grassroots and democratic approach, popular for its inclusive principles and, the authors argue, not populist due to its eschewal of hierarchy and institutional politics.

Along these lines, in “*Trade contestation and regional politics: The case of Belgium and Germany*”, Egan and Guimarães

argue that trade agreements could be more conducive to European integration through “framing of trade narratives, addressing asymmetries of influence, enhancing subnational engagement, and mitigating the distributive costs of liberalization” (1). In short, they argue for more responsive and inclusive approaches to structuring the transnational economy.

From a governance perspective, authorities are confronted with two possible approaches to resolving the crisis of Euroscepticism. One approach is ‘more of the same’, that is, pushing ahead with top-down neoliberalism and assuming that opposition can be worn down or won over in the long term. This course would necessitate more diligent and effective public messaging as well as a good deal more coercion. Alternatively, authorities could strive for more adaptable and inclusive governance, even at the cost of slowing, narrowing, or fundamentally redefining the integration process. This could mean opening up the very constitutions and basic laws of the EU to transformation by the demos. Deepening European integration through democratic reform may not be as far-fetched as it might seem, recalling that opposition often attaches to the particulars of the EU rather than the principle of integration itself, and that more transparent and participatory alternatives have broad appeal. In other words, surgent Euroscepticism need not spell the end or the failure of European integration but could indicate a more sustainable approach to continental governance. From this perspective, more democracy, not less, may be key to ensuring the longevity of a united Europe.

Author contributions

MC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. HH: Writing – review & editing. EB-J: Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), including Insight Grant 435-2016-0642 awarded to Helga Kristín Hallgrímsdóttir (2016-2021), Insight Grant 430-2012-0082 awarded to Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly (2012-2014), and Insight Grant 611-2021-0015 awarded to Michael J. Carpenter (2021-2023).

Conflict of interest

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¹ The five articles of this Research Topic evolved from a collaborative workshop exploring new research on the connections between crisis and Euroscepticism (Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2021) with support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight Grants 435-2016-0642, 430-2012-0082, and 611-2021-0015.

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