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DIIS Brief

New Political Contestation in the European Union

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Executive summary

The recent and widespread sense of crisis in the European Union (EU), with competing demands for a more social Europe, limiting further enlargement, greater protection of the environment, and less immigration, for example, suggest that new lines of political contestation are challenging conventional ways of thinking about EU politics. The EU Internal Dynamics (EU ID) unit at the Danish Institute for International Studies is launching a project, subject to external research funding, to analyse the extent and ways in which new political issues such as climate change, immigration, security and enlargement, are leading to new lines of political contestation in the EU. The objective is to understand if and why the two conventional lines of contestation over more or less integration and left or right politics in the EU need to accommodate emerging lines of political contestation over a more cosmopolitan versus a more communitarian EU. The project is intended to assess in a systematic manner the relevance of three existing models of the relationship between ‘integrationist’ (more/less EU), ‘horizontal’ (left/right politics), and ‘new politics’ (cosmopolitan/communitarian) in the 21st century European Union.

Increasing relevance of new political contestation in the EU

The last five years have seen the European Union and its member states enter a period of political uncertainty regarding the future of the Union and its relationship to its citizens. The impact of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements of the Union, together with the constitutional referenda rejections in 2005, have left many with a new kind of feeling of unease about European integration. At the same time, accelerating patterns of globalisation ranging from the outsourcing of production to the activities of global terrorists, have led to calls for the EU to do more to protect the lives and livelihood of its citizens. Greater pressure is being put on the EU to be more active in protecting the environment, ensuring energy supplies, and defending human rights, while at the same time facing opposition from groups seeking to limit the powers of the EU in the name of ‘identity, tradition, sovereignty’ (the title of the newest political group in the European Parliament).

In this era of uncertainty the question arises of how can we better understand the EU’s relations with its member states and citizens? The apparent gap between the political agenda of the EU and the political concerns of EU citizens, and the failure of political analysis to make sense of this disparity, suggest that existing ways of understanding and explaining EU dynamics need revision. Conventional accounts of contestation in the EU tend to see its politics either in terms of more or less EU (as Andrew Moravcsik argues), or in terms of left-right party-political alignment (as Simon Hix and Christopher Lord have argued). But the politicisation of issues such as climate change, immigration, security, and enlargement at the EU level appear to render such conventional explanations inadequate. It seems it is now time to expand our understanding of EU politics beyond conventional explanations to incorporate the politicisation of these issues through a thorough study of new political contestation in the European Union.

New political contestation involves the construction of new lines of political disagreement which cut across the classic axes of ‘integrationist’ (more or less EU) or ‘horizontal’ (left-right) alignment. In the EU, new political contestation is increasingly thought to occur over what are termed ‘new politics’ issues that pit those with more cosmopolitan attitudes against those who hold more communitarian beliefs. Cosmopolitan attitudes include greater openness towards those of different nationality, sex, ethnicity, language, or sexuality. These attitudes include a concern with global issues such as the environment, poverty, or human rights. In contrast, communitarian beliefs include a concern for protecting existing ways of life such as national community, ethnic homogeneity or religious beliefs. In their innovative work examining party positions on European integration, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks and Carole Wilson argue that ‘the new politics dimension of party competition powerfully structures variation.... We find that this dimension is the most general and powerful predictor of party positioning on the issues that arise from European integration’.

Are there emerging lines of new political contestation in the EU?

Conventional approaches to political contestation have tended to be institutional or sectoral in approach focusing on, for example, the European Parliament, or protest groups. A rare exception to these approaches is the edited book by Gary Marks and Marco Steenbergen looking at citizens, parties and groups, although it lacks a common focus or method. Understanding new political contestation demands a sustained and systematic attempt to judge the extent to which the ‘new politics’ issues, as observed in views and attitudes of different citizens, shape EU politics.

The changing political climate of the EU and its member states make this a particularly difficult task to achieve in a meaningful way, hence most scholars tend to prefer rich empirical description of institutions or policies, or are attracted to the data-rich environments of opinion polls and voting records. The challenge for the project is to compare and contrast the way different political issues are viewed by asking a series of common questions in different arenas. By asking such common questions, the project team intend to judge the extent to which ‘integrationist’, ‘horizontal’ or ‘new politics’ are important lines of contestation, while allowing analytical space for emerging issues such as future enlargement. At the same time, asking these common questions in different arenas of political contestation allows the project team to judge the extent to which different viewpoints are shaped by different settings. The selection of different arenas allows for differences over public versus elite perceptions of new politics issues to be examined, as well as differing patterns of socialisation between national and Brussels-based policymakers. The project team aim to compare and contrast different arenas in order to better understand the emergence of gaps between public and elite contestation. At the same time, the project team will look for evidence of context-based socialisation, for example within different political or lobbying organisations, or between different social settings.

The main research question of this project is:

To what extent and why are there emerging lines of new political contestation in the European Union?

This question consists of **four specific research questions**:

1. To what extent is there evidence of new political contestation that is different to existing ‘integrationist’ and ‘horizontal’ alignments?
2. What explains the relative importance of new political contestation and its relationship to these existing alignments?
3. To what extent and why is there a difference between different arenas of contestation?
4. Are there any new political issues that do not fit within either existing or new alignments of political contestation? Why not??

Explaining political contestation in the EU

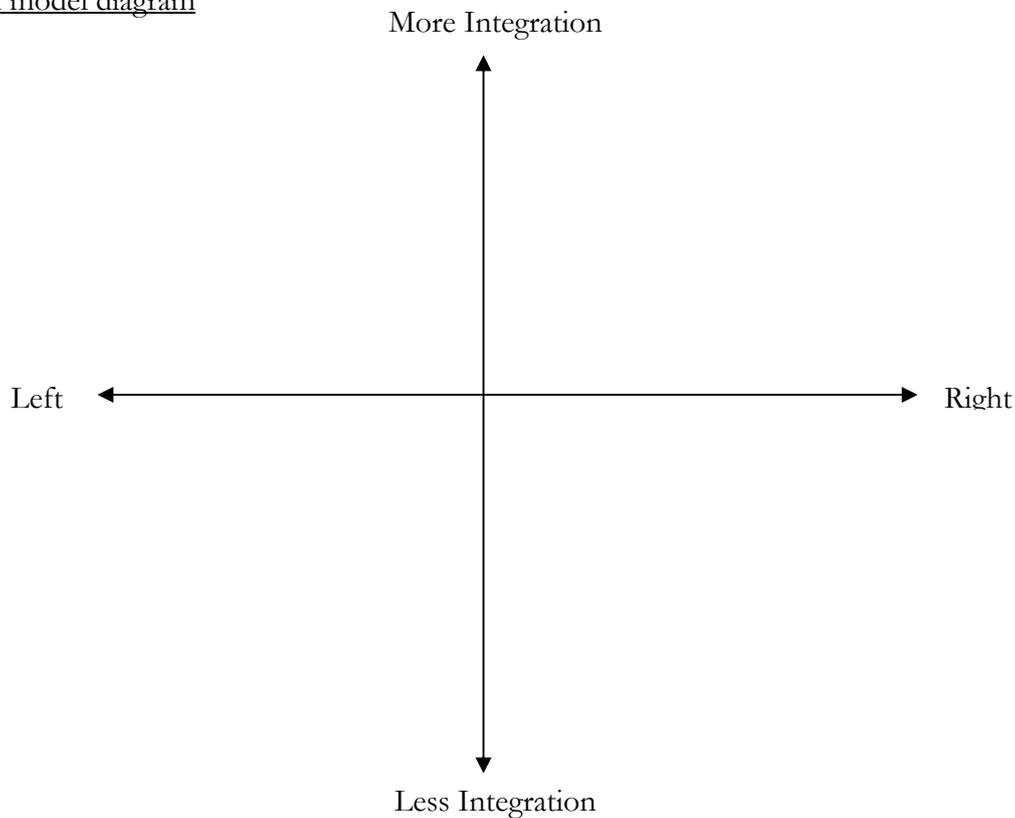
A rich variety of theoretical explanations for political contestation in the EU have emerged over the past fifty years, ranging from the role of political parties, through national differences, the consequences of social group conflict, materialist or post-materialist orientations, and the importance of levels of governance. Since the 1970s, theoretical debates have focused on the relative importance of social cleavages, social movements and the political alignments which they lead to. Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks and Carole Wilson argue that three patterns of socio-political cleavage and contestation are currently considered to be important in the study of EU politics:

- **integrationist** – the degree of disagreement over the extent to which more or less integration (pro- or anti-Europe) is desirable;
- **horizontal** – the degree of left-right disagreement over socio-economic issues such as class-based politics;
- **new politics** – the degree of disagreement over the merits of openness to difference, ranging from more cosmopolitan attitudes (including green, alternative or libertarian politics) to more communitarian beliefs (including traditional, authoritarian or nationalist politics);

Three differing sets of explanations have been put forwards to explain the relationships between these patterns of political contestation:

Orthogonal model – a number of scholars of party politics in the European Parliament, in particular Simon Hix and Christopher Lord, have advocated that EU political contestation is two dimensional, involving only integrationist and horizontal dimensions perpendicular to each other and thus unrelated. Marco Steenbergen and Gary Marks have represented this model diagrammatically:

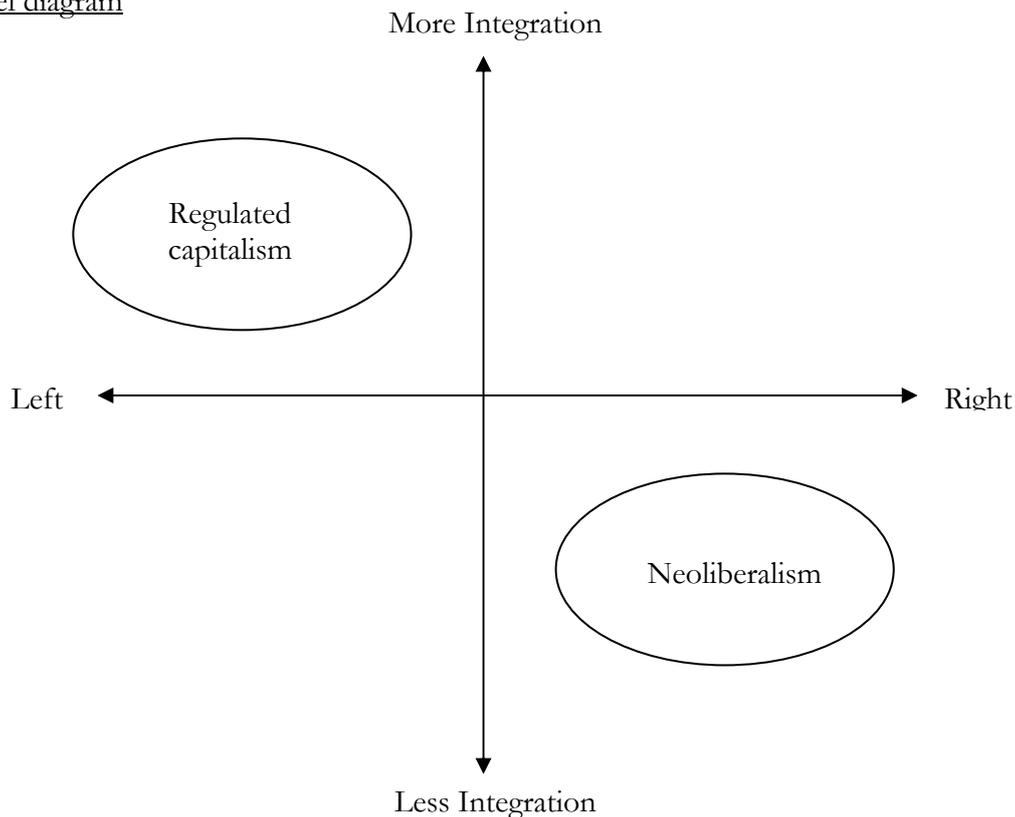
Orthogonal model diagram



The orthogonal model argues that the horizontal and integrationist dimensions are independent of each other because they ‘mobilise cross-cutting coalitions’. The model claims that the integrationist dimension is structured by contestation between territorial groups, while the horizontal dimension is structured by contestation between functional groups. The orthogonal model predicts that new political issues are incorporated into the existing horizontal lines of contestation because it is in the interest of existing political parties to do so. Under this model it is unlikely that new lines of contestation will occur that are independent of the two existing dimensions.

Social model – scholars of the EU as a multilevel polity, in particular Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, have identified the recent evolution of a two-sided debate over issues of market regulation and the idea of a European social model. This two-sided struggle has been popularised in the post-Nice era by the idea of a distinction between the neo-liberal EU of the unregulated free market and the social democratic EU of regulated capitalism. Marco Steenbergen and Gary Marks have also represented this model diagrammatically:

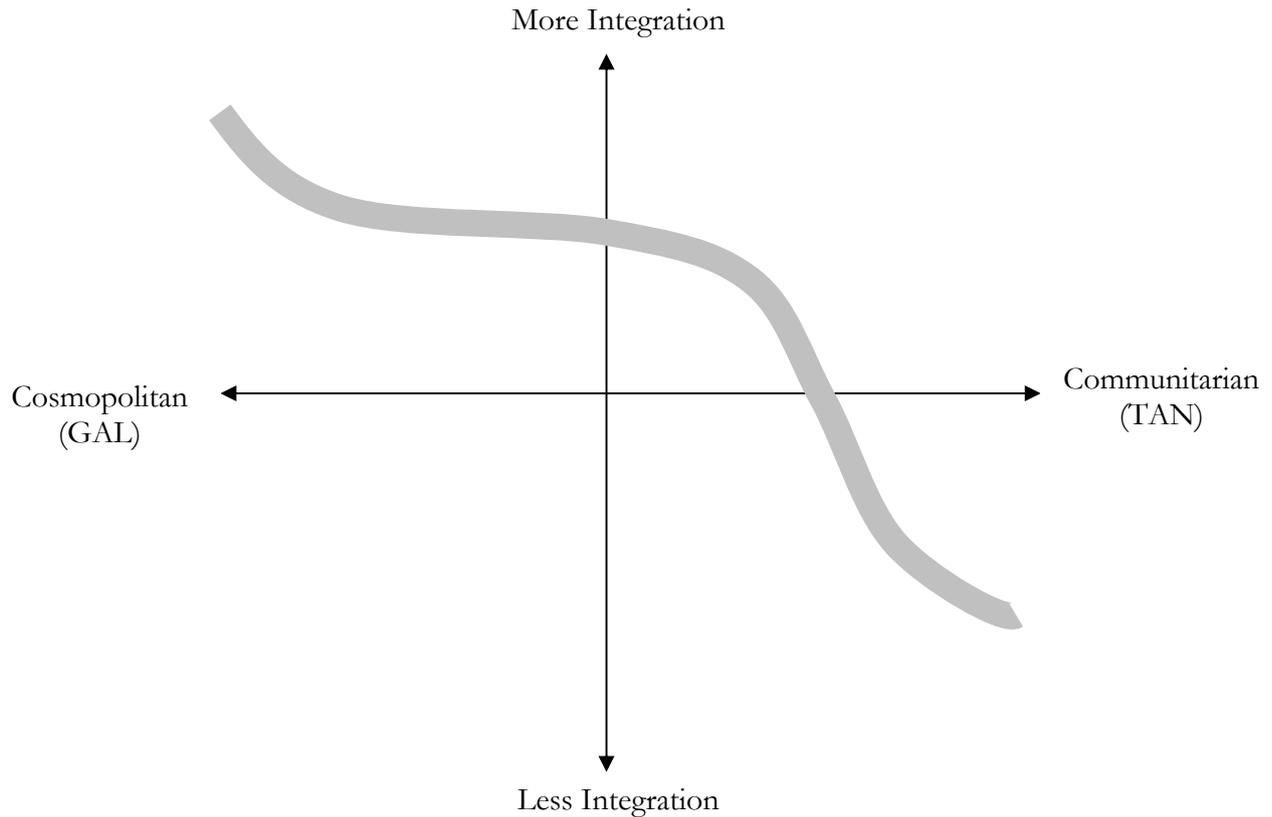
Social model diagram



The social model argues that the horizontal and integrationist dimensions are related only on issues that involve redistribution and regulating capitalism. The model claims that on redistributive and market issues individuals and groups of the left express support for more integration to protect the European social model and to regulate capitalism. In contrast, the model argues that individuals and groups of the right want less integration on these issues to encourage free markets and minimise the role of government. The social model allows space for new political issues to arise that may not be incorporated into the existing horizontal dimension of contestation, but may create new alignments of politics.

New politics model – a very recent argument developed by Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks and Carole Wilson on the basis of expert survey data of political parties suggests that new political issues represent an important dimension of contestation that has a structuring effect on EU politics. They suggest that issues such as support for European integration, the power of the European Parliament, EU environment policy and EU asylum policy are strongly shaped by differences between more cosmopolitan attitudes found in Green/Alternative/Libertarian (GAL) politics and more communitarian beliefs found in Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist (TAN) politics. Marco Steenbergen and Gary Marks have represented this third model diagrammatically:

New politics model diagram



The new politics model argues the importance of a new dimension of political contestation involving the politicisation of issues such as the environment, human rights and other global concerns, together with the rise of reactionary politics on issues such as national sovereignty, immigration, and personal freedom. The model claims that the new politics dimension influences the interrelationships between positions of major political parties and support for European integration, in particular environmental and asylum policies. The new politics model thus argues that new political issues will create new alignments of politics that will strongly shape EU political contestation.

Conclusion: new political contestation in the EU

The approach taken in the EU ID unit's new research project is to analyse the relative strengths of these three theoretical models. The project will also need to be sensitive to the possibility that none of these models captures the emerging lines of new political contestation, or that differing models are appropriate in the different arena. The common questions asked in the different arenas of contestation will therefore facilitate the comparison of the relative strengths of the three models. The four potential outcomes are thus:

1. New political contestation is **not important** in understanding any area of EU politics, as these issues are incorporated into existing lines of political contention, as the **orthogonal model** predicts.
2. New political contestation is **important** for understanding some peripheral areas of EU politics, such as the environment and energy, human rights and personal freedoms, or asylum and immigration. But new political contestation is **not important** for understanding the core areas of EU politics such as redistribution and the market, as the **social model** suggests.
3. New political contestation is **important** for understanding all areas of EU politics, as these issues influence both the positions of major parties and overall support for European integration, as the **new politics model** suggests.
4. New political contestation **does not** fit into the three models considered in the project.

Further reading

Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks and Carole Wilson, 'Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration?', in Gary Marks and Marco Steenbergen (eds.) *European Integration and Political Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 120-40.

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Andreas Maurer, 'Latent but Non-activated Contestation, an Increasing Problem for the EU: a Comment', paper given to Europolity Conference (03/2004), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Ulrich Sedelmeier and Alasdair Young, 'Editorial: Crisis, What Crisis? Continuity and Normality in the European Union in 2005', in Ulrich Sedelmeier and Alasdair Young (eds.) *The JCMS Annual Review of the European Union in 2005* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2006), pp. 1-5.

Marco Steenbergen and Gary Marks, 'Introduction: Models of Political Conflict in the European Union', in Gary Marks and Marco Steenbergen (eds.) *European Integration and Political Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1-10.

Imogen Sudbery and Brigid Laffan, 'Politicisation – an Emerging Dynamic in EU integration Research', 2006 Annual State of the Art Paper of Work Package II/III, EU-Consent Research Programme.