Internet Effects in Times of Political Crisis: Online News-gathering and Attitudes Towards the European Union

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The issue

• We evaluate the influence of online news consumption on attitudes towards the European Union in a context of protracted economic crisis

• The mass adoption of the Internet changed the way people access, consume, and exchange information

• No evaluation of its impact on public opinion exists → gap in the literature

• Observational data to mimic the dynamics of a laboratory experiment → Quasi-experimental research design
The context: Ireland

- Extraordinary economic growth → mid-1990s to late 2008
- Bursting of Ireland's property bubble and government bailout of the banks
- EU/ECB/IMF bailout

All these led to government low popularity rate and eventually its collapse. Election called for February 2011

8% decline in positive attitudes towards the EU

Ireland is the only EU country where a EU policy to tackle the crisis was voted in a direct consultation

- Fiscal Compact Referendum 31 May 2012
- Behavioral complement to our attitudinal analysis
Theory: Media effects and the EU

- Widespread low level of knowledge of EU politics and policies "very few citizens have first- or even second-hand contact with Community affairs in Brussels" (Dalton and Duval, 1986)
- Evidence of traditional media consumption affecting knowledge and turnout
- Differences between traditional and new media
- Selective exposure leading to preference reinforcement
Hypotheses

- $H_1$: Those who gather news online display significantly different attitudes towards the EU's role in the economic crisis than those who do not, *ceteris paribus*.
- $H_{2a}$: Individuals who are positively disposed towards further EU integration and also gather news from the Internet will be less likely to blame the EU for the economic crisis.
- $H_{2b}$: Individuals who are negatively disposed towards further EU integration and also gather news from the Internet will be more likely to blame the EU for the economic crisis.
Empirical Analysis: Surveys

• Irish National Election Study 2011

• Fiscal Compact Referendum Survey ➔ Specific questions on patterns of online newsgathering
  – Blogs
  – Referendum Commission

• Geo-location data
Measures: I

• Dependent variable
  – `In the past few years the economy has been in recession. How responsible, if at all, is the European Union for the poor economic conditions of the past two years? Extremely responsible (4), Very responsible (3), Moderately responsible (2), A little responsible (1), Not at all responsible (0), Don't know (5)`

• Treatment
  – Online that takes a value of 1 for respondents who browse the Internet for politically-relevant news at least once per week and 0 for respondents who never do so
Measures: II

• Instrument
  – Search for broadband coverage in each location of INES and Fiscal Compact Survey by consulting information supplied by major broadband providers additionally, by using online services providing detailed information on broadband coverage by location

• Covariates
  Socio-economic characteristics; use of traditional media; political attitudes; rural urban divide

• Conditional mechanisms
  Split sample around attitudes towards the EU
Effects of online newsgathering: INES 2011

• Online newsgathering \(\rightarrow\) Blaming the EU more

• Effects conditional on attitudes towards the EU
  – The anti-EU effect is most pronounced among those who are opposed to further EU integration
  – No effect among those who are in favour of further EU integration

• Partial support for reinforcement effects
Effects conditional on content browsed: FCR 2012

• Only suggestive evidence

• Respondents who only visit the Referendum Commission website are less likely to vote `No’

• Respondents who only visit Blogs/Fora are more likely to vote `No’

• Content matters
The take away message

• Media use is causally linked to citizens' political opinions
• Partial confirmation for reinforcement effects
• Content matters

• Why negativity is amplified?
  – The crisis is obscure in its origin; complex interplay of actors and levels of government
  – Negative messages exert a stronger impact than positive ones