"Neoliberalism and Democratic Disaffection in France and the UK: A Series of Natural Experiments"

Vila-Henninger, Luis Antonio ; Van Ingelgom, Virginie ; Dupuy, Claire

ABSTRACT

Voters are growing increasingly disenchanted with politics—and democracy more generally. Scholars tend to explain this disaffection in terms of voter characteristics or attitudes—such as socioeconomic status or dissatisfaction with the political establishment. However, there is a gap in the literature concerning the effects of policy implementation on this key link between voters and their corresponding national political system. Welfare state retrenchment, largely in the form of neoliberal social and educational policies, has been a staple of European politics over the past forty years. Is there a causal relationship between the implementation of neoliberal social and educational policies and voter democratic disaffection? To answer this question we use data from the European Election Study from 1979, 1989, and 2004 to conduct a natural experiment. We investigate if—in analogous phases of policy implementation—democratic disaffection converges or diverges between France and the UK. This comparative analysis allows us to investigate arguments about how political institutional environments mediate the effects of neoliberal policy implementation (Fourcade and Babb 2002). Our study builds on and expands the comparative natural experimental design of Svallfors (2010) and helps to produce findings that meaningfully speak to the causal effects of neoliberal policy implementation on democratic disaffection within and between the UK and France.

CITE THIS VERSION


Le dépôt institutionnel DIAL est destiné au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques émanant des membres de l'UCLouvain. Toute utilisation de ce document à des fins lucratives ou commerciales est strictement interdite. L'utilisateur s'engage à respecter les droits d'auteur liés à ce document, principalement le droit à l'intégrité de l'œuvre et le droit à la paternité. La politique complète de copyright est disponible sur la page Copyright policy.

DIAL is an institutional repository for the deposit and dissemination of scientific documents from UCLouvain members. Usage of this document for profit or commercial purposes is strictly prohibited. User agrees to respect copyright about this document, mainly text integrity and source mention. Full content of copyright policy is available at Copyright policy.
“Neoliberalism and Democratic Disaffection in France and the UK: A Natural Experiment”


What is the impact of neoliberal policy reforms on collective democratic disaffection?

From attitudes: sachweh and koos, mau, svallfors,
Collective: nnle, taylor-gooby, sachweh qual,

Tentative “To Do” List:

1) Literature Review: Democratic Disaffection
2) Qualitative Analysis: National Level Neoliberal Policy Implementation in France 1979-2004
3) Qualitative Analysis: National Level Neoliberal Policy Implementation in the UK 1979-2004
5) Review Policy Table
6) Quantitative Analysis
7) Conclusion
8) Feedback for Completed Sections
9) Copy Edit and Submit to Journal

- Do we want to talk about the convergence of France and the UK (Hay/Svallfors)? In my opinion, that is beyond the scope of this preliminary analysis. I think it would be better to devote an entire paper to exploring the convergence of France and the UK, as the issue is complex and appears to me to involve a different analytical approach.

1 This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 716208).
For this draft, I eliminated the analysis of data from 1989 because I thought our argument would be more parsimonious if we did not include a treatment period for UK that did not match with France. By just using 1979 versus 2004, we can directly compare France and the UK for the same time period. During our meeting, we can discuss whether or not we should add the 1989 analysis back into the paper.

**Introduction**

Voters are growing increasingly disenchanted with politics—and democracy more generally. While many analyze such disaffection as linked to individual-level factors (for a summary see Hobolt and De Vries 2016; De Vries 2018), important work has been done on the influence of political (Mattes and Bratton 2007; Hobolt 2012; Magalhaes 2016) or economic performance (Polyakova and Fligstein 2015; Foster and Frieden 2017). However, the aforementioned work overlooks the role that public policy implementation plays in shaping citizens’ democratic disaffection (e.g. Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen 2014; Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2015; Larsen 2018). Furthermore, key research in public policy highlights the importance of neoliberal policy reform in shaping citizens’ political behavior (Gingrich and Watson 2016). Finally, scholars have established that the political effects of neoliberal policy implementation are mediated by the institutional characteristics of their political implementation. Fourcade and Babb (2002) find that highly politicized, ideological implementation of neoliberal policy results in political blowback (e.g. UK); while strategic and technocratic implementation of neoliberal policy through relative political consensus attenuates such negative effects (e.g. France).

Connecting these strands of research, we investigated the impact that national level neoliberal policy reforms had on voters’ democratic disaffection. We selected two key cases: France and the UK. To proceed with our investigation, we used data from the European Election Study (EES) from 1979 and 2004 to conduct a natural experiment (e.g. Svallfors 2010; Legewie 2013; Larsen 2018). We took advantage of the timing of data collection for the 1979 EES Voter Study, which occurred before the implementation of national level neoliberal policy in France or the UK. Thus, we used these 1979 data to establish control groups in France and the UK. Employing qualitative public policy analysis, we selected a treatment period: national level neoliberal policy implementation until 2004. This research design then allowed us to test whether national level neoliberal policy implementation in France and the UK was associated with democratic disaffection in each country.

We found that national level neoliberal public policy reforms were associated with citizens’ democratic disaffection in a way that corresponded with the institutional implementation of such policy (Fourcade and Babb 2002). As predicted, after the treatment period (1979 versus 2004), we found that British citizens’ pre-Great Recession attitudes about democracy in their country had statistically significantly higher odds of being more negative than those of voters before British neoliberal policy implementation began. Ideologically-driven partisan neoliberal reforms in the UK then appear to have produced political blowback in the form of intensified voter democratic disaffection. Furthermore, we found that French citizens’ pre-Great Recession attitudes about democracy in their country had statistically significantly higher odds of being more positive than those of voters before French neoliberal policy implementation began. This could then be interpreted as a positive political outcome of the strategic technocratic implementation of national level neoliberal policy by the French government.
These findings tie together the aforementioned literature on democratic disaffection, public policy, and the mediating role of state institutional characteristics on the political effects of neoliberal policy reform. The French case suggests a potential synthesis of work on the institutional characteristics of policy implementation (Fourcade and Babb 2002) with work on citizens’ perceptions of government efficacy (Mattes and Bratton 2007; Hobolt 2012; Magalhaes 2016). Thus, we argue that French citizens were more satisfied with democracy in their country in 2004 than in 1979 in part because of the perceived efficacy of the French government’s strategic and technocratic implementation of national level neoliberal policy. The next step in this analysis would then be to expand beyond our theoretically motivated case selection to investigate whether similar effects can be found in countries across Europe and across the globe. Future work can also investigate whether similar effects can be found for supranational neoliberal reforms.

Literature review:
Democratic Disaffection

Literature Review and Theory:
Neoliberal Policy Implementation in France 1979-2004

Literature Review and Theory:
Neoliberal Policy Implementation in the UK 1979-2004

(I constructed these two draft tables by using the neoliberal policy timeline that Claire sent for this paper)

Table 1. Timeline of National Level Neoliberal Policy Implementation until 2008 in the UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Policy Implementation</th>
<th>Key Policy Developments</th>
<th>Operationalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Until mid-1980s</td>
<td>Universal welfare state still in place even though limited level of generosity</td>
<td>1980: cancellation of the extended lump-sum benefit based on earnings</td>
<td>Pre-Treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| mid-1980s-mid 1990s | Retrenchment, benefits less generous, introduction of early forms of welfare markets—in particular in education | Unemployment:  
  • 1986: cancellation of statutory benefits indexation  
  • 1986-1992: taxation of unemployment benefit | Treatment |
Beginning in 1986: decline of the level of unemployment benefits relative to the average wage
- 1996: the maximum claim period for unemployment benefits was halved to 6 months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Policy Implementation</th>
<th>Key Policy Developments</th>
<th>Operationalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Until early 1990s</td>
<td>Keynesian welfare state, focus on the demand side, relatively high level</td>
<td>Pre-treatment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-2008</td>
<td>Conditionality</td>
<td>Introduction of welfare to work programs, Expansion of welfare markets in secondary education and higher education</td>
<td>Treatment; Dependent Variable: 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Austerity policies</td>
<td>Less generosity and more conditionality, Fiscal policy detrimental to poor, working class and middle-income households</td>
<td>Beyond Scope (Great Recession)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Timeline of National Level Neoliberal Policy Implementation until 2008 in France
of generosity, universalist, corporatist (despite crisis in the 1970s and policy failures in the 1980s)

| Early 1990s- early 2000s | Turn to the supply-side: reduced spending and therefore decreasing level of generosity, pension reforms | • Reduced replacement rate  
• Increased retirement age  
• No change in education policy relevant to scope of this paper | Treatment |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2001-2008 | • Introduction of activation policies for the unemployed  
• Beginning of the dualization process: insiders of the labour market are still well protected while a growing share of the population, the outsiders, fall into social assistance  
• Further pension reforms (same direction as earlier) | Treatment; Dependent Variable: 2004 |---|
Hypotheses

The first set of hypotheses is that there was no effect of neoliberal policy implementation on democratic satisfaction in France or the UK.

*Hypothesis 1a:* On average, there is no difference in democratic satisfaction between t0 and t1 in France.

*Hypothesis 1b:* On average, there is no difference in democratic satisfaction between t0 and t1 in the UK.

The second set of hypotheses is that neoliberal policy implementation increased democratic satisfaction in France and the UK. This could be interpreted as a tendency in these populations to agree with neoliberal policy. Alternatively, such an increase could be seen as generated by citizens’ perceived efficacy of their government due to its implementation of these neoliberal reforms (Mattes and Bratton 2007; Hobolt 2012).

*Hypothesis 2a:* On average, voters are more satisfied with democracy in t1 than in t0 in France.

*Hypothesis 2b:* On average, voters are more satisfied with democracy in t1 than in t0 in the UK.

The third set of hypotheses is that neoliberal policy implementation led to democratic disaffection in both France and the UK. This is based on the work on Hay (2005, 2007), as well as thinkers such as Marx and Polanyi.

*Hypothesis 3a:* On average, voters are less satisfied with democracy in t1 than in t0 in France.

*Hypothesis 3b:* On average, voters are less satisfied with democracy in t1 than in t0 in the UK.

Finally, the fourth set of hypotheses are generated from an institutional perspective (Fourcade and Babb 2002). Recall that this scholarship established that different state institutional contexts lead to different forms of neoliberal policy implementation—and subsequently to different political outcomes. One the one hand, France adopted a pragmatic and technocratic approach to national level neoliberal policy implementation that attenuated negative political consequences. On the other hand, the UK’s implementation of national level neoliberal policy was largely partisan and marketed to the public using ideological rhetoric—which ultimately intensified negative political outcomes. Together with the literature on citizens’ perceptions of governmental efficacy (e.g. Mattes and Bratton 2007; Hobolt 2012; Magalhaes 2016), we predict that the pragmatic and technocratic approach of the French government to the national level implementation of neoliberal policy led to increased voter satisfaction with French
democracy due to voters’ perceived government efficacy. Conversely, we predict that in the UK, the ideological and partisan national level implementation of neoliberal policy led to voters’ decreased democratic satisfaction. 

**Hypothesis 4a:** On average, voters are more satisfied with democracy in t1 than in t0 in France.  
**Hypothesis 4b:** On average, voters are less satisfied with democracy in t1 than in t0 in the UK.

DATA, VARIABLES, AND OPERATIONALIZATIONS

**Data**

This natural experiment required data that were collected on voter democratic satisfaction before French and UK national level neoliberal policy implementation, as well as analogous data from voters after a substantial period of such policy implementation. These data are available in the European Election Study. We used data from the 1979 Voter Study to measure pre-neoliberal levels of democratic satisfaction, and the 2004 Voter Study to measure democratic disaffection in the UK and France after a substantial period of neoliberal policy implementation.

The 1979 Voter Study was conducted as part of the Spring and Fall 1979 Eurobarometer Studies (EB 11 and 12). Eurobarometer 11 data were collected in May 1979 and Eurobarometer 12 data were collected in October 1979. Data for this study were collected in all nine of the members of the European Community. The 2004 Voter Study was conducted in the UK in June 2004. The 2004 EES data collection team for France did not report the details of their data collection. The 2004 Voter Study was conducted in 24 out of 25 EU member nations soon after the 2004 European Parliamentary elections.

**Dependent Variable:**

For our analysis, we selected a forced-choice self-reported survey item that measured democratic satisfaction. The wording of this survey item is almost identical in 1979 and 2004. In 1979, the survey item read “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy work in [country]?” In 2004, the wording was as follows: “On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?” The respondents were then presented with the same response categories as in 1979: “very satisfied,” “fairly satisfied,” “not very satisfied,” and “not at all satisfied.” The almost identical wording of the survey items, as well as the identical response categories, allowed us to pool these data and create a common indicator of democratic satisfaction in France and the UK from 1979 and 2004. We then created a dichotomous variable for democratic satisfaction using these pooled data: very dissatisfied and dissatisfied = 0, satisfied and very satisfied = 1.

**Treatment Variable and Natural Experiment Design**

We created the treatment variable for each country by creating a binary variable for each survey year for each country (e.g. UK 1979=0 and UK 2004=1). We then used this as an independent variable in our analysis. This approach builds on the work of American sociological natural experiments (Alon and Tienda 2007: 493; Legewie 2013: 1208, 1210). This approach is also very similar to Larsen’s (2018) analysis, but extends the natural experiment analysis from OLS to Logistic Regression.

**Control Variables**
We used all relevant control variables that appeared with comparable measures in the 1979 and 2004 EES Voter Studies. Almost all of the questions changed between these two surveys, so we were limited in the control variables we could use. Nonetheless, we were able to include key control variables in our analysis. These variables are “Support EU Membership,” “Partisanship,” “Year Stopped Education,” Gender, Age, and Left-Right Self-Placement.

The Left-Right Self-Placement, Year Stopped Education, and Age variables in our analyses were all standardized. Gender was a dichotomous variable with females coded as “1.” For Left-Right Self-Placement, the higher the positive value the more conservative the respondent rated him/herself. “Support EU Membership,” the question wording and response categories were the same in 1979 and 2004: “good thing,” “bad thing,” “neither good nor bad.” Responses were recoded as follows: “good thing =1,” “bad thing = -1,” “neither good nor bad =0.” Finally, the “Partisanship” variable asked respondents how close they felt to a party. In 1979 and 2004 respondents were given three possible response categories: “very close,” “fairly close,” and “merely a sympathizer.” Furthermore, while in 1979 respondents were given the additional response category of “Close to no particular party,” in 2004, those who did not feel close to “any particular party” indicated this in a previous question and did not respond to the survey item we used to measure partisanship. These respondents were then automatically included in the 2004 “Partisanship” survey item data as not feeling close to any particular party. We coded all non-responses, respondents who refused to answer, and those who did not feel close to any particular party (in 1979 indicated as a report of “Close to no particular party,” while in 2004 respondents indicated in a previous question whether or not they did not feel close to “any particular party”) as “0.” We then coded as follows: “very close =3,” “fairly close =2,” and “merely a sympathizer =1.” Thus, higher scores indicate more intense partisanship.

Analysis:
Table 3. Logistic Regression: Odds Ratios for UK Democratic Satisfaction in 1979 versus 2004 (EES Pooled Data 1979 and 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democratic Satisfaction 1979 versus 2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment Effect of National Level Neoliberal Policy Implementation Until 2004</td>
<td>0.519***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support EU Membership</td>
<td>1.075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>0.917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (leaving age)</td>
<td>0.998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Right Self-Placement</td>
<td>1.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic Satisfaction 1979 versus 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment Effect of National Level Neoliberal Policy Implementation Until 2004</td>
<td>2.039***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support EU Membership</td>
<td>2.374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>0.982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (leaving age)</td>
<td>1.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.792*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Right Self-Placement</td>
<td>1.692***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.103***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Conclusion