

EU Today Podcast 3 Transcript

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[Intro music in theme of piano playing Ode to Joy]

Katie Lindner: Hello, and welcome to EU Today, a podcast from the Center for European studies, a Jean Monnet Center of Excellence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Thank you to the Erasmus+ program of the European Commission, the EU Delegation to the U.S., and the U.S. Department of Education for supporting our center and its programs. On this podcast, we sit down with scholars and policy leaders to discuss pressing issues facing the EU. We hope you enjoy it.

On this podcast, we will be interviewing Dr. Jonathan Polk, one of the core participants at the May 2019 "Partisan Divides" conference at UNC. The conference was organized by UNC Political Science Professors Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, as well as their PhD students, in partnership with the Center for European Studies. At the conference, over 20 professors and graduate students from UNC and universities worldwide presented and discussed their ongoing research on divisions among and within parties and voters in the EU. Jonathan Polk is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and the Center for European Research at the University of Gothenburg. Dr. Polk's teaching and research interests include political parties, European politics, representation, and political participation in economically advanced democracies. He is currently a member of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, or CHES, research group, which administers web-based surveys to estimate the positions of political party leadership in Europe. He is also the co-principle investigator of the Swedish Party Membership Survey. This project collects and analyzes information on the political attitudes and behavior of over 10,000 members from 7 different Swedish political parties. Interviewing Dr. Polk is Simon Fredholm, a student in the Transatlantic Master's program.

[Ode to Joy fades back in and plays for appx. 4 measures]

Simon Fredholm: Today I'll be talking to Dr. Jonathan Polk, one of the core participants in the partisan divides conference happening this week at UNC. The Partisan Divides Conference is organized by UNC Political Science Professor Dr.

Liesbet Hooghe and Dr. Gary Marks and their PhD students, in partnership with the Center for European Studies. At the conference, over 20 professors and graduate students from UNC and universities worldwide will present and discuss their ongoing research on divisions among and within parties and voters in Europe. You're at UNC this week to take part in the conference on partisan divides—could you tell us what this conference will focus on and about the research you will present?

Dr. Jonathan Polk: Sure thing. The conference's focus is largely driven by Gary and Liesbet's research interest in the nature of cleavage politics in Contemporary European societies. As you probably know yourself, European party systems have been undergoing substantial change in recent years and there are a number of new challenger parties that have arisen to compete against more traditional mainstream parties, and there's a lot of discussion of whether we're finding dealignment within the electorate so that voters are no longer stably connected to political parties over lasting, long standing divisions, as opposed to the idea of realignment, which would suggest that there's a kind of restructuring of the party competition and new divides are emerging that are increasingly responsible for the way voters and parties are connected to one another.

The research I'm presenting at the conference is coauthored with my colleague at the University of Bergen Raimondas Ibenskas, and what we're looking at in particular is responsiveness of political parties to shifts in public opinion. The classic research on this topic suggests that there is a distinction to be made between the way mainstream parties respond to changes in public opinion and the way that niche or challenger parties respond to changes in public opinion. Where the mainstream parties by and large respond primarily to shifts in central tendency of the overall electorate, so all voters. So, when the central tendency the mean position of the average voter shifts to the left or the right on the left/right scale, mainstream parties tend to follow that shift. Meanwhile, niche parties are more likely to focus on the central tendency of their specific electorate, so the people who have voted for them in the past.

What we find in a new analysis that looks at more updated data, from 1999-2014 using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, as well as many different national and European surveys of the public, is that now mainstream parties increasingly behaving the way niche parties used to, in that they are overwhelmingly more responsive to incongruence that exists between themselves and their partisan supporters. So, they're more responsive to this whereas the niche parties are not responding to changes in left/right politics at all because they are focused on fundamentally different issues than those that relate to the left/right division for the most part. So that's what I'm going to be presenting on.

Simon Fredholm: It's clear that there are several types of divides between political parties, but you've also done some work on division within parties, which is a newer

area of research in contemporary political science. What do we know so far about the nature of internal party division, and where is this research headed next?

Dr. Polk: My research on internal divisions within parties was largely driven by my experience running the Swedish Party membership survey, which I'm currently administering with a colleague at the University of Aarhus, Ann-Kristin Kölln. It's in its second wave, so we had one survey that went out in 2015, and another that were receiving the data now in 2019, and this allows us to probe ideological divisions and various other types of divisions that exist within political parties. As far as what we know, we know that there is in fact quite a diversity within political parties in terms of their overall cohesiveness and the divisions that exist within them. A lot of the work she and I are doing at the very moment now are trying to understand more about the nature of these divisions, whether they are primarily about different kinds of ideological factions within a political party or are they largely a reflection of different kinds of organizational structures within the party. So that the party leadership or the party elite are fundamentally different than the rank and file membership, not only as it relates to their ideological positions but just because of the nature of the relationship they have to the party itself. So, I think the contemporary work that is being done on internal party divisions is very much focused on understanding the most salient divisions that exist within these political parties, and of course how that ends up affecting both the personnel of the parties and as well as the policy stances that these parties ultimately take.

Simon Fredholm: You're also a part of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey research group. Could you share a bit with our listeners about what this group does and how the surveys are used in political science research?

Dr. Polk: Absolutely. I've been really proud to be part of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey since the 2010 wave. The Chapel Hill Expert Survey is the longest running survey of party positions in European democracies. It runs in a continuous time series from 1999 up to a most recent wave that we are just about to collect now in 2019. So, once we have collected this 2019 data, we'll have 20 years and several different data points of time of the positions that political parties take in the European Union as well as in the candidate states for European Union membership. The idea behind it is to understand where different parties stand on different political dimensions—left/right, economic politics/cultural politics, which we use this GALTAN terminology to understand and measure, and then primarily, how these different ideological positionings of parties relate to the way they interact with and position themselves on the European Union and European integration. For the most part that is what the was originally designed to deal with and that is largely what scholars in the community use it for now.

Simon Fredholm: UNC and your home institution, the University of Gothenburg, have been partners in European research and study. Could you tell me more about the main goals of this partnership? How has this partnership made students, researchers, and the universities stronger, and how has it benefitted your own work?

Dr. Polk: I'm extremely proud of the relationship that the University of Gothenburg and the University of North Carolina have developed and continue to develop. The main goals from my perspective is to enhance the quality of the education and the teaching and the research that's being done by the students themselves as well as the faculty by exchanging ideas and different approaches to studies of European politics and society, and I think we've been very successful on all of those fronts. For me personally, it's been very good to be able to combine my research life, which as we've previously mentioned in the question before, is very much woven into the Chapel Hill University of North Carolina political science community, with my teaching and research life at the University of Gothenburg. And to bring colleagues together in education and research there has been extremely useful for me and edifying, as well.

Simon Fredholm: One interesting article you recently published in the party politics journal with Jan Rovny is called "New Wine in Old Bottles: Explaining the Dimensional Structure of European Party Systems." Tell me about the core findings of this research—what's the "new wine" in European politics?

Dr. Polk: We actually just recently received some attention about that paper because of the Spanish election results that just took place where Vox, the new far-right party, anti-immigration party in Spain, did not do quite as well as some commentators expected. In particular they had a difficult time picking up potentially working-class voters because of their fairly right-standing economic positions. The fundamental argument of "new wine in old bottles" with Jan Rovny is that the relationship between economic, left/right, and cultural politics, or GALTAN, differs across countries in Europe based on, to a large extent, the experience they had with religious struggles in the late 19th century, particularly as it relates to questions of education. And in a lot of the countries of southern Europe, where the Catholic church had a strong role in society, there is a way in which the cultural and the economic have fused together in a more unidimensional structure that creates an extremity cross left/right and GALTAN positioning that ends up being fundamentally different than the nature of political competition in the more northern European Protestant legacy countries. And so, the basic argument is although religious divisions currently are not the central content of competition on the GALTAN dimension—now it's immigration, for the most part—those fundamental structures to the party systems are still largely determined by cleavages in the past.

So, there's a way that this Lipson draconian cleavage perspective is still quite relevant despite the fact that it looks substantially different in the day to day politics of the way cultural competition is taking place these days.

Simon Fredholm: Are there any final thoughts you'd like to share with our listeners? Any key takeaways?

Dr. Polk: No, I think that's good, thanks.

Simon Fredholm: Thank you very much.

Dr. Polk: Okay.

[Ode to joy plays in the background]

Katie Lindner: Please note that any opinions expressed in the EU today podcast are solely those of our guests and our hosts, and not of the UNC Center for European studies, which takes no institutional positions. Be sure to tune in for more episodes, and subscribe to *EU Today* wherever you listen to podcasts.

[Ode to Joy fades out]

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