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# Preface

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# European Union Politics

## FOURTH EDITION

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## 26

## Public Opinion and the European Union

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## Reader's Guide

This chapter provides an overview of trends in public opinion toward the European Union. The chapter also discusses the key factors thought to explain differences in mass opinion regarding the EU. These include rational utilitarianism (opinions stemming from calculations about the costs and benefits of the EU), perceptions of the national government (domestic proxies), elite discussion of the EU, political psychology factors such as cognitive mobilization (attentiveness to politics) and concerns about the loss of national identity, and finally the role of the mass media in driving opinions regarding the EU.

## Introduction

The European Union began primarily as an elite-driven process. The early days of agreements and negotiations were seen as too complicated for the ordinary citizen and so most decisions were taken outside of the public limelight. Hence early observers of public opinion toward the European project

remarked on what was perceived as a 'permissive consensus' of public opinion (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970), whereby citizens generally held neutral opinions regarding what their governments were doing in Brussels, giving these governments considerable leeway to pursue policies outside of the purview of an attentive public. It was only after the addition of Eurosceptic member states (particularly

the UK and Denmark) in the first enlargement (1973) that the European Community (EC) began to consult with mass publics on issues related to European integration (see Box 26.1). Even then, such consultation tended to be limited and was primarily focused around referenda campaigns. In general, through the mid-1980s, EU member governments and bureaucrats were interested in limited public involvement in the integration process. The Single European Act (SEA) seems to have marked a turning point in this regard, as member state governments began selling their varying visions of a renewed European project that would contribute to further economic development of the member states. It is also at this point that more EU policies began to impinge upon national policy-making because of increased economic coordination within the European Community/EU.

Nowadays, it would be difficult to argue that mass European publics are providing a 'permissive consensus' for EU-level policy-making. Referenda since the 1990s have come very close to putting the brakes on European integration. The 2005 referenda in France and the Netherlands on the Constitutional Treaty (CT) and the subsequent rejection of the revised treaty, the Lisbon Treaty, in Ireland in 2008

(see Box 26.2) highlight the important role that the mass public now plays in the integration project. Moreover, it is clear that public opinion is important in constraining integration outside of referenda settings as well. This chapter outlines the leading explanations for differences of opinion regarding the EU. It begins, however, with an overview of general trends in the European public's opinions toward the EU.

## General perceptions of the European Union

Since the early 1970s, the European Commission has sponsored regular opinion polls that monitor public support for various aspects of the European project (along with a whole host of other topics). The reports—known as 'Eurobarometer' polls—are published by the Commission and are freely available online (see [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm)). One of the key questions that has been used to determine levels of support for European integration is: 'Generally speaking, do you think that [our country's] membership of the European Union is a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?' (See Table 26.1.)

## BOX 26.1 Euroscepticism

The term 'Euroscepticism' was first used in 1986 to describe the position of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (*The Times*, 30 June 1986) and later was used in the 26 December 1992 issue of *The Economist* with regard to the increasingly negative German public opinion on European integration after Germany was ordered to adjust its rules on beer purity to conform with the internal market (Hooghe and Marks, 2007). In academic discourse, the term has tended to refer to 'doubt and distrust on the subject of European integration' (Flood, 2002: 73). The terms 'hard Euroscepticism' and 'soft Euroscepticism' have been used to describe the varying types and degrees of Euroscepticism.

- *Hard Euroscepticism* exists where there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration. It is therefore associated with parties who believe that their countries should withdraw from EU membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to opposition to the entire project of European integration.

- *Soft Euroscepticism* arises when there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership, but rather concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas, leading to the expression of *qualified* opposition to the EU, or a sense that the 'national interest' is at odds with the EU's trajectory (Taggart and Szcerbiak, 2002: 7).

Kopecky and Mudde (2002) develop a four-part typology to describe public opinion on the EU: 'Eurorejects' are those who oppose the ideal of integration and the reality of the EU; 'Euroenthusiasts' support both the EU and the ideal of ever-closer union; 'Europragmatists' do not support integration, but view the EU as useful; and 'Eurosceptics' support the idea of integration, but not its realization through the current EU. As Ray (2007) indicates, although this conceptualization has the theoretical appeal of separating out Europe from the EU, it is not clear whether this distinction is reflected in political debate. Thus, for the most part, experts on the topic tend to assume a range of negative opinions on European integration, including outright opposition to the EU, when using the term 'Eurosceptic' (Hooghe and Marks, 2007).

Table 26.1 Public opinion on EU membership, 1991 and 2011

	EU membership a good thing			EU membership a bad thing			EU membership neither good nor bad			N	
	1991	2011	Diff	1991	2011	Diff	1991	2011	Diff	1991	2011
France	73%	46%	-27%	8%	20%	13%	19%	34%	15%	963	998
Belgium	79%	67%	-12%	4%	11%	7%	17%	22%	5%	1,019	1,009
Netherlands	91%	69%	-22%	2%	12%	10%	7%	19%	12%	1,014	1,004
West Germany	74%	59%	-15%	8%	15%	7%	18%	26%	7%	1,009	972
Italy	83%	43%	-40%	3%	18%	16%	14%	38%	24%	953	985
Luxembourg	86%	75%	-11%	3%	12%	9%	10%	13%	2%	491	490
Denmark	63%	55%	-8%	18%	17%	-1%	19%	28%	9%	979	998
Ireland	80%	67%	-13%	6%	14%	8%	14%	19%	5%	971	954
UK	60%	29%	-31%	13%	33%	20%	27%	38%	11%	1,282	1,234
Greece	80%	37%	-43%	7%	35%	28%	13%	28%	15%	947	991
Spain	82%	58%	-24%	4%	19%	15%	14%	23%	9%	949	947
Portugal	83%	41%	-42%	3%	29%	25%	14%	31%	17%	951	991
East Germany	83%	49%	-34%	1%	18%	17%	16%	33%	17%	1,019	507
Finland	—	45%	—	—	22%	—	—	33%	—	—	990
Sweden	—	57%	—	—	18%	—	—	26%	—	—	1,029
Austria	—	37%	—	—	26%	—	—	36%	—	—	995
Cyprus (Republic)	—	38%	—	—	26%	—	—	36%	—	—	493
Czech Republic	—	31%	—	—	19%	—	—	50%	—	—	1,001
Estonia	—	47%	—	—	10%	—	—	43%	—	—	983
Hungary	—	32%	—	—	23%	—	—	45%	—	—	991
Latvia	—	26%	—	—	21%	—	—	53%	—	—	977
Lithuania	—	52%	—	—	16%	—	—	32%	—	—	984
Malta	—	42%	—	—	21%	—	—	38%	—	—	481
Poland	—	54%	—	—	10%	—	—	36%	—	—	958
Slovakia	—	52%	—	—	10%	—	—	38%	—	—	1,004
Slovenia	—	38%	—	—	21%	—	—	40%	—	—	1,005
Bulgaria	—	49%	—	—	11%	—	—	40%	—	—	953
Romania	—	59%	—	—	11%	—	—	30%	—	—	985
Average	78%	48%	-30%	6%	19%	12%	16%	33%	17%	12,547	25,909

Sources: Eurobarometer 35, Spring 1991; Eurobarometer 75(3), Spring 2011; data downloaded from <http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp>

In the period leading up to the Maastricht Treaty ratification, there was a marked increase in levels of Euroenthusiasm (see McLaren, 2006; see also Chapter 3). By 1991, over 70 per cent of Europeans (on average across the European Community) were claiming that their country's membership of the Community was a good thing. In general, Europeans were enthusiastic about the EC in 1991 (see Table 26.1). The only countries in which less than two-thirds of the public thought their country's membership of the EC was a good thing were the UK and Denmark, and even in these countries an overwhelming majority still thought that EC membership was a good thing.

Since the early 1990s, Europeans have been markedly less enthusiastic about the EU and, not surprisingly, the eurozone crisis (see Chapter 27) has produced some recent fluctuations in attitudes toward the European Union (see Table 26.1). Indeed, by 2011, only in Ireland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands do we find at least two-thirds of the public saying that their country's membership of the EU has been a good thing. In many other countries in 2011, we do still find a clear majority who think their country's membership of the EU is positive, in spite of the eurozone crisis; this includes Denmark, Spain, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania. Based on respondents who say that EU membership has been a good thing, the decline in support between 1991 and 2011 is quite substantial in Greece, Portugal, Italy, the eastern regions of Germany, the UK, and France. The shift in responses has not all been toward thinking EU membership has been a bad thing; some have moved toward having mixed feelings about the EU. However, not surprisingly in Greece, the change in percentages saying the EU membership is a bad thing is fairly large, as is the case in Portugal. In addition, in several of the newer member states, particularly Latvia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, support for EU membership appears to be quite low. The British public also remains amongst the most Eurosceptic and public support for EU membership in the UK has clearly declined since 1991.

Perhaps most surprisingly, public opinion regarding the EU amongst the member states that joined the EU in May 2004 and January 2007 is fairly lukewarm (see McLaren, 2006; see also Chapter 17). The cross-time trends in the Central and East European (CEE) Candidate Barometers—that is, polls conducted by the European Commission prior to the entry of these countries into the EU—indicated that, even in the early 1990s, the image of the EU in the CEE countries was not all that

positive. Moreover, amongst many of the CEE candidates, citizens became less and less positive toward the EU through the mid-1990s, presumably as a result of the EU's initially hesitant response to the prospect of a CEE enlargement. It was only after the EU finally opened accession talks with these countries in 1997 that its image was bolstered amongst their mass publics. However, levels of enthusiasm for the EU amongst the CEE countries are nowhere near the level of enthusiasm seen in the member states in 1991 (see Table 26.1).

#### KEY POINTS

- Trends in public opinion toward the European Union are collected through regular opinion surveys known as 'Eurobarometer' polls.
- Enthusiasm for the European integration project was generally on the rise until 1991.
- Enthusiasm for European integration was considerably reduced by 2011.
- Public opinion on the EU in Central and Eastern Europe has been relatively lukewarm.

### Explaining public attitudes towards European integration

Ever since the rejection of the 'permissive consensus' on the part of European publics, theories have been developed to try to explain why some Europeans tend to be more positive about the European integration process, while others tend to be more negative. These theories generally fall into the following groups: political economy and rationality; attitudes to the national government (domestic proxies); the influence of political elites; political psychology (including cognitive mobilization and identity); and media effects. We discuss each of these in turn.

#### Political economy and rationality

In the mid-1980s, the discipline of political science was becoming heavily influenced by rational, utilitarian approaches to the study of politics. More specifically, models of political behaviour were being developed around the assumption that individuals rationally pursue their



self-interests. This approach has had a considerable impact on the study of attitudes to European integration. Some of these theories have been *egocentric* in nature—that is, individuals support or oppose the integration project because they have personally benefited (or will benefit) from it or have been harmed (or will be harmed) by it. Other approaches that would fit within this context are more *sociotropic* in nature: citizens of some of the EU member states are said to be more supportive of the European project because their *countries* have benefited from the European project.

With regard to the *egocentric utilitarian theories*, the contention is that individuals from certain socio-economic backgrounds are doing far better economically than individuals of other backgrounds as a result of European integration. In particular, the opening up of the single market and the introduction of the common currency are thought to benefit top-level business executives the most, who no longer face trade barriers and exchange rate differences across most of the EU. Similarly, individuals with higher levels of education will be more likely than those with little education to feel that their knowledge and skills will serve them well in a wider EU market. Furthermore, those with higher incomes are argued to be more favourable towards European integration because of freed capital markets and *monetary union*, which makes it more possible for such individuals to move capital across the EU to earn better interest rates. On the other hand, those with poor job skills, educations, and incomes are expected to be the most fearful of a common market and monetary integration (see Gabel, 1998).

These theories are generally supported empirically. For example, *Eurobarometer 71(3)*, conducted in summer 2009, reported that while 71 per cent of professionals and executives claim that their country's membership of the EU has been a good thing, only 51 per cent of skilled manual workers and 40 per cent of unskilled manual workers say the same; similarly, only 43 per cent of the unemployed across the EU think that their country's membership of the EU has been a good thing. In addition, while 39 per cent of those with lower levels of education are happy about their country's membership of the EU, an overwhelming 65 per cent of those with higher levels of education claim that their country's EU membership is good. There are almost identical percentages for income. It must be noted, however, that the lack of positive attitudes towards the EU does not necessarily translate into negativity; in general,

those who are not thought to do very well from an expanded market lean towards neutral responses more heavily than groups such as professionals and executives. Thus the potential losers of EU integration do not appear to perceive themselves as such and instead tend to be generally neutral about the project. Although it might have been expected that these relationships would be reversed in the newer member states because workers and those with lower education and skills levels would eventually benefit from the free movement of labour within the EU, it appears that even in this group of countries it is the educated professional class that is generally most positive about the EU (Tilley and Garry, 2007; Guerra, 2013).

In addition to proposing the notion of *egocentric utilitarianism*, rational approaches have also focused upon the *sociotropic costs and benefits* that the EU brings. The EU can provide economic benefits to member states in two realms—namely, trade and budgetary outlays (see Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993). Analyses indicate that, at least up until the 2004 enlargement of the EU, these factors explain attitudes to integration fairly consistently. A country's EU Budget balance in particular had a strong impact on the percentage in the country saying that EU membership is a good thing (see McLaren, 2006; see also Chapter 3). For example, key net contributors to the EU Budget—the UK and Germany—contained the smallest percentage of citizens claiming that their country's EU membership is good (at about 30 per cent in the UK and 40 per cent in Germany). On the other hand, citizens in countries that had been the largest beneficiaries of the EU Budget—particularly Spain and Ireland—were far more positive about their country's membership of the EU, with approximately 65 per cent in Spain and 75 per cent in Ireland claiming to feel positively about EU membership. The trend for trade benefits was not quite as clear, however (McLaren, 2006). Moreover, based on post-2004 enlargement estimates of Budget contributions and benefits, it appears that nowadays being a net recipient of EU funds has little bearing on whether citizens of a country think their country's membership of the EU has been a good thing—that is, the goodwill 'purchased' with EU funds in countries such as Spain and Ireland does not appear to be working in the same way in the newer member states. It is also important to note that, despite the current economic crisis, there remains a high level of positive feeling about the EU in these two countries, although

people in the other traditional recipient countries, Greece, Italy, and Portugal, have become less enthusiastic about the European Union in recent years.

### Domestic proxies and attitudes to the national government

The arguments presented under 'Political economy and rationality' assume that EU citizens are able to consider rationally the impact of economic costs and benefits of EU membership on their own personal lives or on their countries. The approaches discussed in this section and the next argue that support for or opposition to integration may have very little to do with perceived economic gains or losses. This is because it is unlikely that most Europeans are able to calculate whether they have indeed benefited or not from European integration: the *egocentric utilitarian models* demand a great deal of knowledge of both the integration process and the economy, and for the ordinary European to come to any conclusion about whether he or she is going to be harmed by the process is likely to be extraordinarily difficult. Thus many researchers have argued that, because of the complexity of the integration process (and the EU institutions), the EU is often perceived in terms of *national issues* rather than European-level ones. This effect is seen most clearly in the context of referenda on European issues (Franklin et al., 1994) in that referenda often turn into a vote on the national government's popularity. For example, the French nearly voted against the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, not because of opposition to the components of that treaty (for example, monetary integration), but because of unhappiness with the government of the day (see Box 26.2). Further, it is likely that the French and Dutch votes in the 2005 Constitutional Treaty referenda were also driven to some extent by unhappiness with the government of the day. Moreover, European elections are generally fought on national issues rather than European-level issues (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996).

Even outside of the context of referenda and elections, general feelings about the EU are also driven in part by feelings about the national government. As argued by Christopher Anderson (1998), survey after survey shows that few Europeans know much about the details of the European project; so they must be formulating their opinions toward this project from something other than their own knowledge and experience. Anderson's contention is that such attitudes

are in part projections of feelings about the national government—that is, hostility to the national government is projected onto the EU level, while positive feelings about one's national government also translate into positive feelings about the EU.

On the other hand, and somewhat confusingly, other research has argued the opposite. Specifically, when the national political system is functioning well, particularly when there is little corruption, a strong rule of law, and a well-developed welfare state, individuals are less positive about the EU than when they live in countries in which there is a high level of corruption, weak enforcement of the rule of law, and a weak welfare state. In the case of the former, it is thought that some individuals may see little need for an additional level of government when the national government is functioning so well, while in the case of the latter, individuals may look to the EU to counterbalance the weak national political institutions.

### Mass publics and political elites

Another approach examines the mass–elite linkages. These linkages can mainly be structured in two forms:

- *political elites* can be instrumental in helping to determine citizens' attitudes in a top-down approach, which views the cueing process as a form of information flowing from elites to citizens (see Zaller, 1992);
- *mass opinion* can also cue elites, in that elites can assume a position on European integration that reflects citizens' views in a bottom-up manner (Carubba, 2001).

Both of these approaches have been found to be correct, but the former has been more widely examined and supported (Franklin et al., 1994; Ray 2003a, 2003b). For example, early research shows that negative attitudes in countries such as the UK, Norway, and Denmark follow the negative connotation of discourse about the EU emerging from the political elites in these countries (Slater, 1982). Some research suggests that there might be different outcomes in the top-down approach, depending on which political parties are doing the cueing and which political party a citizen generally supports (Wildgen and Feld, 1976). Other evidence indicates that, when political parties are united in their position on the EU (as in Siune and Svensson, 1993), they can further strengthen their influence on

**BOX 26.2** The constitutional referenda in France and the Netherlands, and the Irish rejection of the Lisbon Treaty

In 2001, EU member states established a European convention for the purpose of drafting a Constitutional Treaty (CT) for the EU. The creation of a 'European Constitution' was to be both symbolically and substantively important, and implied a further move toward supranational governance in the EU. While the majority of EU member states ratified the CT, in 2005 French and Dutch voters put a brake on the process by voting 'no' in referenda held 29 May 2005 and 1 June 2005, respectively. Why?

While the French are not overly Eurosceptic, trends in support for the EU indicate that positive feelings about the EU have been in decline since the early 1990s (see McLaren, 2006). Thus, in considerable contrast to the Netherlands (as we shall see), the French 'no' vote was perhaps less of a surprise. Indeed, previous experience indicates that even when feelings about the EU are generally positive, votes in EU referenda in France can be very close indeed. This was the case with the vote on the Maastricht Treaty on European Union, in which a bare majority of 51.05 per cent voted to support the Treaty. While there was some discussion that the vote in the French referendum on the CT was really a vote on Turkey's eventual membership of the EU, in fact the 'no' vote in France appears to be the product of two key issues: the state of the French economy; and opposition to the incumbent government. Concerns about France's economic outlook came to light during the referendum campaign. Amongst these were general worries about unemployment in France, fears about the relocation of French business and the decline of the small business sector; and anxiety about undermining of the French 'social model', in conjunction with the failure of the CT to address the issue of 'social Europe'. The latter were predominantly concerns amongst the French Left. At the same time, the government—and French President Jacques Chirac in particular—was becoming increasingly unpopular, so that for many French voters the referendum became a confidence vote. Thus, on 29 May 2005, 54.7 per cent voted against the CT (with 70 per cent voter turnout).

While referenda in France are relatively common nowadays, they are far less so in the Netherlands. In fact, the constitutional referendum held on 1 June 2005 was the first such referendum in modern Dutch history. The Dutch are generally amongst the most enthusiastic EU supporters, and so it was widely predicted that they would provide resounding support for the CT. However, with a relatively high turnout of 62 per cent, 61.8 per cent voted against it. While the referendum was to be consultative only, most major parties had pledged to respect the voters' wishes, whatever the outcome.

Given the widespread support for the EU and European integration in the Netherlands, the big question posed with regard to the referendum result was why the vote went the way it did. One of the key explanations seems to be that Dutch citizens were unclear as to what they were being asked to approve. The referendum campaign had got off to a very slow start, and media and politicians

had struggled to find ways in which to frame the debate about the Treaty. Moreover, in the absence of clear information as to what that CT meant for the EU and for the Netherlands, many Dutch citizens relied on the sorts of cues discussed in this chapter—especially opposition to the government. There may have been some EU-related reasons for the 'no' vote as well, however. One of these relates to the Budget contribution made by the Netherlands; another is connected to unhappiness with the way in which the Dutch government had adopted the euro, because many commentators at the time had argued that it had led to the Dutch guilder being devalued against the euro. It was also perceived that the introduction of the euro had led to an increase in prices. The prospect of Turkish membership of the EU contributed in part to the 'no' vote too, both because of the threat of cheap labour and because of the perceived threat to Dutch culture. Finally, as the EU has continued to expand, two fears have subsequently developed: one is whether this small (original) member state can continue to wield influence in the new Europe; the other is whether Dutch interests can still be protected within the EU. Ultimately, however, the 'no' vote may have been in great part a result simply of the disorganization of the 'yes' campaign.

Since their entry into the EU, the Irish have been, like the Dutch, among the most enthusiastic supporters of the EU. This is in great part a result of the large-scale economic development of the country shortly after it became a full EU member state, with many Irish citizens attributing this development specifically to the EU. Thus Irish votes against EU projects tend to come as fairly major surprises. The most recent of these occurred on 12 June 2008 when the revised CT, named the Lisbon Treaty, was rejected by 53.4 per cent of Irish voters (with a turnout of 53.1 per cent).

Although Irish enthusiasm for the EU might have been expected to guarantee a 'yes' vote, events in previous years provided clues that a 'yes' was far from secure. In 2001, Ireland voted against the Nice Treaty, which was primarily stipulating rules on voting and the functioning of EU institutions in preparation for the 2004 enlargement. At that time, the 'no' vote was mainly a result of issues of Irish neutrality, prompted by revised provisions within the Nice Treaty on the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The Irish eventually supported a revised treaty that took these concerns into consideration.

Why did the Irish vote 'no' again in 2008? The answer seems to mirror the events in the Netherlands from 2005—namely, the Irish vote appears to be a result of the failure of the 'yes' campaign to inform and mobilize. In the absence of a coordinated 'yes' campaign, the 'no' camp was able to spread fears about the impact of the treaty on Irish neutrality, as well as on abortion laws, taxation laws, and workers' rights. At least some portion of the negative vote also appears to be connected to dissatisfaction with the government. Ultimately, ordinary citizens were—yet again—able to put the brakes on EU plans on institutional reform.

mass publics. Thus consensus across political parties emerges as an important factor explaining public support or opposition to European integration.

Moving away from this top-down approach, Marco Steenbergen and his colleagues (2007) show that both the top-down and bottom-up approaches seem to be correct: political parties are responsive to mass opinions, and mass opinions are shaped also by parties' cues. However, public opinion can cue parties in systems that use proportional representation (PR), but not in plurality systems, while in the run-up to national elections, political parties may be less responsive towards the masses on the EU issue. Finally, leadership is a significant factor (Ray, 2003a): mainstream parties seem to have less mobilizing ability than parties on the fringes of the political system, and there is a stronger disconnection between citizens and mainstream parties with regard to the EU issue. This means that the electorate is more likely to be mobilized by protest parties that frame the EU in Eurosceptic terms.

Political parties may have a weak mobilizing force in post-communist countries, where trust toward political parties is often very low (Klingemann et al., 2006). The EU is highly salient in these countries (Tilley and Garry, 2007), but because of the deep distrust of political parties, the latter tend to be less credible on international issues related to the EU. As a consequence, there tends to be far less top-down elite cueing of citizens on the issue of European integration in these countries.

### Political psychology: cognitive mobilization and identity

Early studies of attitudes to European integration conceptualized the project in terms of 'cosmopolitanism' and contended that those who were more 'cognitively mobilized', specifically those who think about and discuss political issues, would gravitate toward the new supranational organization. It was also contended that differences in opinion regarding the European Community were likely to stem from familiarity with the project itself—that is, the more people knew about it, the less fearful, and thus the more supportive, they would be of it. Evidence indicates that those who talk about politics with their friends and family—the 'cognitively mobilized'—are indeed more supportive of the European integration project (see Inglehart, 1970). Moreover, knowledge of the EU appears to have positive implications for public opinion: those who are

able to pass a 'knowledge quiz' about the history and institutions of the EU are, on the whole, more enthusiastic about the project than those who know very little about the EU (see Karp et al., 2003).

The quest for rational explanations of individual-level feelings toward the EU was motivated by the assumption that the European project was mostly economic in nature. Such an assumption is not unreasonable, in that much of the integration that has occurred has indeed been in various sectors of the economy. However, the overriding goal of such integration has always been political—namely, the prevention of war on the European continent. Because the most recent of these large-scale wars, the Second World War, is often perceived as having been motivated in part by nationalist expansion, one of the phenomena to be thwarted was therefore to be the roots of such expansion. While the project as a whole has mostly been sold to Europeans as an economic one, particularly through the 1980s and 1990s, some are likely to perceive it not in economic terms, but instead in terms of threat to one of their key identities.

The body of work known as 'social identity theory' leads us to the firm conclusion that identities are extremely important for people and that protectiveness of 'in-groups' (social groups to which an individual belongs and with which he or she identifies) can develop even in the context of seemingly meaningless laboratory experiments and even when individuals expect no material gain for themselves by maintaining such an identity (Tajfel, 1970). The reasons for this behaviour are still not entirely clear, but the major explanations are that many people use in-group identity and protectiveness to bolster their self-esteem, while others use identity to help them to simplify and understand the world (Turner, 1985).

European integration may be perceived by Europeans as a potential threat to a basic identity that they have used for either (or both) of these purposes—namely, their *national* identities. A Eurobarometer poll conducted in May 2011 asked Europeans about a range of possible problems that they worry might result from European integration. In Cyprus, 24 per cent mentioned that they worry about the loss of national identity resulting from European integration, with 20 per cent in both the UK and Greece also perceiving this as a problem of European integration. In non-member states Iceland and Croatia, 24–25 per cent also mention this. On average, though, only approximately 12 per cent across Europe mention this as



a potential result of European integration. Generally, then, it appears only to be a minority in all EU member states who report being concerned about this.

As argued by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2004), however, what may be important is the *exclusiveness* of national identity. Thus the important distinction may be between those who hold multiple territorial identities and those who feel themselves to identify only with their nationality. In fact, exclusively national identity seems to vary widely across the EU. In the original six member states, as well as Spain and Ireland, fewer than half of those surveyed by Eurobarometer tend to see themselves in exclusively national terms, while clear majorities of the samples in the UK, Lithuania, Hungary, and Estonia claim to identify exclusively as nationals. Evidence also indicates that this factor is important in explaining general feelings about the EU.

### The media: framing the EU

Research on how sources of information can influence mass publics is a relatively recent field of analysis in the realm of public opinion regarding the EU. In the 1980s, it was found that negative or positive media coverage can impact citizens' attitudes, but only when citizens can identify with the views being expressed in the media (Dalton and Duval, 1986)—that is, mass media cannot affect public opinion unless the messages ring true to a great extent. In the realm of public opinion on European integration, news clearly matters (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004) and, as an analysis of the British media stresses (Carey and Burton, 2004), readers of pro-EU newspapers have different views from readers of the Eurosceptic media.

Debate on the role of the media in public opinion has further developed around questions about the competency of the ordinary citizen, and whether such a citizen can take decisions on a rational and informed basis. Citizens can fill their gaps in information through two main channels: first, through education, cognitive skills, and the socialization process, which includes family, peers, and social networks; and second, from lifetime learning through the media. However, the role of the media in filling gaps in knowledge may vary according to the type of source, and the amount and duration of the exposure, as well as the prominence and tone of the media coverage. Further, research shows that 'people with higher education . . . learn at a faster rate' and are also the key individuals seeking more information (Norris, 2010: 3–4). Citizens with higher levels of knowledge are also

more aware and tend to be clearer in their views, ideology, and beliefs, limiting the effect of the media and other potential cues; mass publics that are less aware are likely to rely more on such cues for information.

Day-to-day reporting of the EU in particular has a generally low profile, and can be described as a sort of 'dog who never barks'. Controversy and scandal can increase the prominence of EU debates, however. In the past decade, there are three key areas that have produced controversy about the EU and which the media has covered: the EU has increased its size, and its population is now more heterogeneous, with a higher number of pro-EU, but also Eurosceptic European citizens; there are more opportunities for Euroscepticism to become visible, particularly after the French (2005), Dutch (2005), and Irish (2008) referenda, and the economic crisis; and finally enlargements have provided further opportunities for political elites to enter a Eurosceptic discourse and channel citizens' discontent towards such a perceived distant project as European integration (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2005). Thus Euroscepticism becomes embedded within the EU integration process and can find an outlet in the media. This is because the media tend to publish or broadcast heated disputes and controversies; this tendency can, in turn, have an impact on the information received by mass publics about the EU.

'Framing' is also an important component of how the media can (be used to) affect public opinion. A frame is 'an emphasis in salience of certain aspects of a topic' (de Vreese, 2002; de Vreese et al., 2011) and, before accession to the EU, in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) the EU tended to be framed in contradictory ways: it was 'democracy' and 'good Europe', but it was also 'demon Europe' (Horolets, 2006: 171–6). In Poland, newspaper articles used titles such as 'Europhobia', forecasting a future in which foreigners would buy up Polish land while the Polish farmers would starve. The debate became more controversial, particularly during the accession referendum in 2003 (Szczurbiak and Taggart, 2004: 575), and people's preferences became more strongly defined as the media campaign progressed.

Evidence suggests that political communication (mass publics–political party linkage and the media) explain much of the variation in public attitudes towards European integration compared to other theoretical explanations. Further variations can be explained by contextual differences, such as elections, or political and media systems, a field of research that is currently growing.

### BOX 26.3 News coverage during European Parliament elections

Media coverage of the EU or European integration is generally limited in EU member states. It might be expected that such coverage would increase during European Parliament elections; however, studies of the 1999 European Parliament (EP) election media campaigns indicated that even when citizens are being mobilized to vote in elections that one would expect to be about European issues, media coverage of the EU is still relatively low and the main actors and debates during these elections are national.

Analysis of the news coverage of the 2004 EP elections (de Vreese et al., 2006) found evidence that there were different patterns across the EU member states. The visibility of EU news in television newscasts and on newspaper front pages had increased since the 1999 EP elections in half of the EU15. Nevertheless, the average news visibility on the newspapers' front pages decreased between these elections (from 6.2 to 5.6 per cent) and, despite the increase in media attention, the main actors of the electoral campaigns were still predominantly national political actors. Old and new member states also showed

a mixed pattern with regard to the *tone* of the news, with a more negative coverage in the old member states and more positive evaluative coverage in the broadsheet press and television news of newer member states, albeit with rather negative coverage in the tabloid press across these newer member states (de Vreese et al., 2006).

In 2009, media campaigns during the EP elections focused on European issues only in the campaigns of the Eurosceptic far-right and far-left parties. The mainstream parties were more reluctant to focus on European issues, unless they had agreed on common campaigns at the transnational level (Davidson-Schmich and Vladescu, 2010).

Overall, news matters, but news on the EU rarely appears on the front of the page and is mainly debated by domestic political actors. In the political parties' campaigns, Europe is most relevant in the Eurosceptic far-right and far-left parties. With turnout at EP elections very low, it appears that the combined effect of Eurosceptic news and no news leads to an absence of EU enthusiasm.

### KEY POINTS

- *Egocentric utilitarianism* explains support for the European Union in terms of the economic costs and benefits of the European project to the individual, while *sociotropic utilitarianism* explains support for the EU in terms of the benefits that the EU has brought to the country.
- Political elites can cue mass attitudes, in a top-down approach, and mass publics can cue elites, in a bottom-up approach. Consensus across political parties on European integration, ideological closeness, and leadership influence are all important for top-down elite cueing to occur, while elites who are divided on the issue of European integration decrease political parties' influence on this issue, and intra-party dissent favours a bottom-up approach.
- Cognitively mobilized Europeans are amongst the strongest supporters of the European project. Exclusiveness of national identity may be more important than concern about the loss of identity in explaining hostility to the EU.
- The framing of the EU by the media or elites (via the media) can have a substantial impact on how citizens come to view the EU.

### The perceived poverty of the European Union

Since the 1970s, levels of trust towards national institutions and political parties have been eroding, first in the UK and then across Western Europe more generally. Similarly, EU institutions have also suffered from declining levels of trust.

Generally, EU citizens trust the European Parliament more than any other institution, while the Council is ranked as last after the European Commission and the European Central Bank (ECB). In September 2006, *Eurobarometer 65* reported that 52 per cent of EU citizens trusted the European Parliament; after six years, only 41 per cent trusted the EP and only one citizen out of three (32 per cent) trusted the Council. A steady decrease in trust in the European Commission and ECB has also occurred (*Eurobarometer*, 2011c).

As discussed under 'Domestic proxies and attitudes to the national government', research on levels of trust at the aggregate level shows that high levels of distrust for the political elites and negative perceptions of the domestic situation generally correlate with higher levels of public support for the EU (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000). Those countries in

which citizens perceive that their national institutions perform poorly, for example in Mediterranean countries, usually have higher levels of trust for the EU, because joining the EU could improve the domestic situation. Nonetheless, Anderson (1998) found that, at the individual level, satisfaction with democracy and support for the government had a positive impact on support for the EU. His results are more significant in Denmark, but less so in Italy or Ireland. This shows that, again, the domestic context affects patterns of support for EU integration and opposition to it. Anderson's model does not work well for Spain, but the explanation proposed by Sánchez-Cuenca does. Looking at the data on the evaluation of the economic situation at the domestic level, Nordic countries—that is, Sweden (86 per cent), Finland (65 per cent), and Denmark (43 per cent)—have a high percentage answering that the economic situation is 'good', while Italy (9 per cent), Spain (4 per cent), and Ireland (3 per cent) have very low percentages of positive answers (*Eurobarometer*, 2011c). That could explain why Anderson's model is less significant in Italy or Ireland, where citizens perceive a negative economic situation. Nonetheless, data on trust towards the EU

## Conclusion

The analyses discussed in this chapter point to several conclusions. The first is that feelings about the European Union seem to range from ambivalence to support. Only very small numbers across the EU are openly hostile to it. However, these proportions do vary by country, and hostility is far greater in countries such as the UK and Latvia than in the rest of the EU. It was also noted that, despite the current economic crisis in the EU, high numbers of EU citizens remain relatively positive about the EU.

This chapter also outlined the explanations for differences of opinion regarding the EU. First, some of this difference in opinion was argued to be *utilitarian* in nature. There were said to be two components to this utilitarian approach: egocentric and sociotropic. Egocentric utilitarians support the EU because it has brought them economic benefits or is likely to bring them such benefits; others in this category are ambivalent toward the project because they have not received any benefits themselves. Sociotropic utilitarians support or oppose the project because of the budgetary outlays that they have received

shows that it gains more positive support (34 per cent) compared to national institutions, such as the parliament (27 per cent) and the government (24 per cent) (*Eurobarometer*, 2011c). Overall, although levels of trust towards the EU institutions have decreased, and the alleged democratic deficit of the EU and its legitimacy in tackling the economic crisis (see Chapter 25) are still debated, the EU is still judged a more effective and trustworthy actor compared to national institutions.

### KEY POINTS

- Trust in the European Union institutions has declined in the first decade of the twenty-first century.
- Trust in the EU institutions is, on average, higher than trust in national institutions.
- For many countries, trust in EU institutions may be lower because national institutions work relatively well, making a shift to supranational governance unnecessary.
- Many EU citizens are said to trust the EU's institutions because their own national institutions function poorly.

from the EU, which have presumably increased economic development and growth, or because of the large amount that their country contributes to the EU Budget.

Second, some of the differences in attitudes to the EU are thought to be related to perceptions of the national government—that is, some individuals project their feelings about their own government onto the EU level: when they feel positively about the national government, the EU gets an extra boost of support, but when they feel negatively about the national government, the EU is punished.

Third, the chapter introduced two political psychology explanations for differences in opinion regarding the EU: cognitive mobilization and identity. With regard to cognitive mobilization, it was argued that higher levels of political discussion (or cognitive mobilization) and greater knowledge of the EU both appear to lead to more positive opinions about the EU. Those who do not talk politics much with friends and family, and who do not know much about the EU, tend to be far more ambivalent about the European

project. In addition, some portion of public opinion toward the EU is argued to be driven by concerns regarding the loss of national identity. More specifically, individuals who identify exclusively in national terms (*vis-à-vis* Europe) are either more hostile or, in some cases, more ambivalent to the EU.

Fourth, an analysis of the mass–elite linkages shows that it can take two forms: political elites can cue mass attitudes in a top-down approach; and mass publics can cue elites, in a bottom-up approach. Elites and the domestic context matter, but dissent across political parties and within a political party can favour a bottom-up approach. Increasing levels of distrust towards political parties further undermine their possible influence on citizens.

Finally, recent research on the role of the media finds that news matters and becomes the strongest factor impacting on citizens' attitudes when compared to the other theoretical frameworks. That can assume further normative connotations, because news coverage can be framed strategically, with implications for what information citizens receive regarding the EU.

Overall, then, we have a fairly good idea as to why some individuals are positive about the EU, some are negative, and many others are simply ambivalent. Still, even when we take all of the factors that we have considered in this chapter into account, it is also clear that there is room for improvement in our explanations. Thus it is highly likely that research in this field will continue to develop further alternative theories in the near future.



### QUESTIONS

1. What is 'Euroscepticism'?
2. What explains votes against EU treaties in countries in which citizens are generally positive about the European Union, such as France, the Netherlands, and Ireland?
3. To what extent are European citizens utilitarian in their approach to the EU?
4. How can cognitive mobilization contribute to positive feelings about the EU?
5. What role does identity play in public opinion regarding the EU?
6. Do political parties cue citizens on Europe, or can citizens influence political parties' attitude on EU integration?
7. How can the media shape citizens' attitudes towards the EU?
8. How can trust towards national institutions impact on public support for the EU?



### GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Checkel, J. T. and Katzenstein, P. J. (eds) (2009) *European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) This book examines European identity after the latest EU enlargement and the challenges ahead for the European political process.

Hooghe, L. and Marks, G. (eds) (2007) *Acta Politica*, 42/2–3 (special issue entitled 'Sources of Euroscepticism') This special issue examines economic interest and identity as sources of Euroscepticism among Europe's citizens, and how public opinion is cued by the media and political parties.

Lecante, C. (2010) *Understanding Euroscepticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) This book examines the process of European integration, and how different actors can engage with the process and oppose it.

Sanders, D. Magalhaes, P., and Toka, G. (eds) (2012) *Citizens and the European Polity: Mass Attitudes towards the European and National Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) This book presents an overview of mass attitudes in the European Union from 1970s.

Taggart, P. and Szczepiński, A. (eds) (2008) *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism, Vols I and II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) This two-volume analysis of Euroscepticism offers both a theoretical and empirical investigation of patterns of opposition towards EU integration, with case studies and country surveys in the first volume.



## WEBLINKS

[http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm) The Public Opinion Unit of the European Commission writes regular reports on Eurobarometer and Candidate Barometer Polls.

<http://www.europeanelectionstudies.net/> The European Election Studies group has led the way in studying voting behaviour in European elections since 1979.

<http://www.gesis.org/en/home/> The German Social Sciences Infrastructure Services is the key European archive for Eurobarometer data, and offers online access to codebooks and data.

<http://www.piredeu.eu/> The Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union (PIREDEU) project (2008–11) starts from the previous studies undergone by the European Election Studies group, and provides data and documents on the 2009 European Parliament elections.

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/research/europeanpartieselectionsreferendumsnetwork> The website of the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN), coordinated by the Sussex European Institute.

## 27

## The European Union and the Economic Crisis

Dermot Hodson and Uwe Puetter



## Chapter Contents

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- Conclusion 377

## Reader's Guide

This chapter discusses the European Union's response to the economic crisis that began in mid-2007. The chapter covers the period up to the middle of 2012. It identifies what challenges this crisis poses to the existing institutional set-up of economic and monetary union (EMU) and the EU as a whole. A timeline of the crisis thus far is provided and the main changes to the institutional framework of European economic governance are reviewed. It is considered whether the crisis can be understood as a catalyst for further integration or rather uncertainty over the fate of the euro constitutes an existential threat to the process of European integration itself. Mention is also made here of the potential impact of the crisis on relations between euro area members and the rest of the EU, and on the Union's role as an actor in the international arena. The chapter concludes by discussing how the crisis might unfold and what further responses it may trigger.

## Introduction

Looking back on the history of European integration, it is difficult to remember a time when the European Union or its predecessors were not facing a crisis of

one sort or another. The 1950s were marred by the political fallout from the failure of the European Defence Community Treaty, just as the 'empty chair' crisis came to dominate the 1960s (see Chapter 2). The 1970s, meanwhile, saw initial plans for economic and