

Does Identity or Economic Rationality Drive Public Opinion on European Integration?

How do citizens respond to the reallocation of authority across levels of government? This article investigates the relative importance of economic versus identity bases of citizen support for the most far-reaching example of authority migration—European integration.

Most scholars have explained preferences over European integration in terms of its economic consequences. We have precise expectations concerning how individual attributes (e.g., education, occupation, factor mobility, and sectoral location) affect support for international regimes. The search for plausible economic sources of preferences has widened to include economic perceptions (as well as objective conditions), group (as well as individual) utility, and national economic institutions that mediate individual interests.

But there is a new—or, rather, old—kid on the block. Its hard core is the assumption that citizen preferences are driven by group attachments, by the loyalties, values, and norms

that define who a person is. This line of analysis is as old as the study of European integration (Deutsch 1957; Haas 1958; Inglehart 1970), but while the pioneers were chiefly concerned with how regional integration affects identity, recent research flips the causal arrow.¹

One would expect European integration to convey home field advantage to both research programs. The European Union (EU) is a regional trade regime with sizeable distributional effects. It is also a system of multi-level governance in which national authority is pooled and limited. So we are conducting what Arend Lijphart describes as a crucial experiment, a case in which “all of the variables which the researcher tries to relate to each other are present” (1979, 444).²

There need be no suspense concerning our conclusion. Citizens do indeed take into account the economic consequences of European integration, but conceptions of group membership appear to be more powerful.

We proceed in two steps. First, we set up an economic explanation of public opinion on European integration. We identify six lines of theorizing. We cannot sacrifice comprehensiveness to parsimony because our analysis will be convincing only to the extent that we bring the main economic contenders into the ring—and there are many.

Second, we theorize identity as a source of public opinion on European integration. What would one expect if group identity drove preferences? The answer is not obvious. Citizens who attest strong national identity are more, not less, likely to identify with Europe. We argue that the way a citizen conceives her national identity is decisive. Does a citizen conceive her national identity in exclusive or inclusive terms? Is that citizen positively or negatively oriented to multiculturalism?

Theorizing Support for European Integration

Political Economy

The main thrust of European integration has been to sweep away barriers to economic exchange, facilitate mobility of capital and labor, and create a single European monetary authority. So it is not surprising that explanations of public opinion on European integration have focused on economic factors.

The simplest expectation is that reducing trade barriers favors citizens with relatively high income, education, and occupational skills (Gabel 1998; Inglehart 1970). There are several reasons for this. International economic openness rewards those with high levels of human capital. It increases the international substitutability of labor as firms are more able to shift production across borders, and this intensifies job insecurity, particularly for less skilled workers. Finally, international economic openness puts pressure on welfare systems and shifts the burden of taxation from mobile factors of production (e.g., financial capital) to immobile factors (e.g., labor).

Economic internationalization also affects relative scarcity of assets. According to the Stolper-Samuelson theorem, trade benefits individuals who own factors with which the national economy is relatively well endowed and hurts individuals who own factors that are relatively scarce (Mayda and Rodrik 2002; O’Rourke and Sinnott 2001). Hence, in the wealthiest, most capital-rich member states we expect unskilled workers to be Euroskeptical and managers and professionals to be Euro-supportive, while in the poorest, most labor-rich member states we expect the reverse.³

Citizens may be sensitive to their *collective* economic circumstances, as well as to those that affect them *individually* (Anderson 1998). It seems reasonable to expect that residents in countries that are net recipients of European

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Union spending will be inclined to support European integration, while those in donor countries will tend to oppose (Brinegar et al. 2004). The same logic is often at work in regional or federal states, where poorer regions champion centralization to increase the scope for redistribution while prosperous regions favor decentralization.

Subjective economic evaluations can be expected to influence public opinion on European integration alongside *objective* factors (Rohrschneider 2002; Eichenberg and Dalton 1993). European integration is perceived by most citizens to shape their economic welfare in a general sense. Citizens who feel confident about the economic future—personally and for their country—are likely to regard European integration in a positive light, while those who are fearful will lean towards Euroskepticism.

Finally, preferences may be influenced by *institutions*. The European Union encompasses countries with contrasting degrees of labor and business coordination, each of which is costly to change (Hall and Soskice 2001). We assume that the further a country is from the EU median (low labor coordination, relatively high business coordination), the greater the costs imposed on its citizens by EU legislation.

Political-economic institutions may *interact* with support or opposition to redistribution (Brinegar et al. 2004; Marks 2004; Ray 2004). If European integration converges on a mixed-market model, citizens in social democratic Scandinavian economies can expect to see their welfare systems diluted, while citizens in liberal market economies, such as Britain, can expect more redistribution. Hence in social democratic systems, the left will be opposed to European integration and the right will be supportive. In liberal market systems, the left will support integration and the right will be opposed.

Economic theories of preference formation work best when economic consequences are perceived with some accuracy, are large enough to matter, and when the choice a person makes actually affects the outcome. To the extent that these conditions are not present, group identities are likely to be decisive (Chong 2002; Elster 1990; Sears and Funk 1991; Young et al. 1991). What would one expect to find if public opinion were shaped by group identity?

National Identity

Humans and their ancestors evolved an emotional capacity for intense group loyalty long before the development of rational faculties, and such loyalties can be extremely powerful in shaping views toward political objects (Citrin et al. 1990; Massey 2002; Sears 1993). The strongest territorial identities are national, and we suspect that such identities constrain preferences on European integration.⁴

To understand the effect of national identity one must come to grips with a paradox. On the one hand, individuals often identify with several territorial communities simultaneously (Citrin and Sides forthcoming; Klandermans et al. 2003). It is not at all unusual for citizens to have multiple identities—to feel, for example, strongly Catalan, Spanish, and European—at one and the same time (Diez Medrano 2003; Marks 1999). Haesly (2001) finds positive, rather than negative, associations between Welsh and European identities and between Scottish and European identities. Klandermans and his co-authors (2003) detect a cumulative pattern of identities, in which farmers who identify with Europe tend also to identify with their nation. Risse (2003) conceptualizes the relationship as akin to a marble cake in which multiple identities are meshed together. Van Kersbergen (2000) conceives of European allegiance as embedded in national allegiance. Citrin and Sides find that “even in an era in which perceptions of the European Union as successful seemed to decline, the tendency to identify with both nation and Europe

Table 1
Explaining Support for European Integration -
A Multi-Level Analysis

	Multilevel estimates	
	understandardized coefficients	standard errors
Constant	71.96***	(2.185)
National Identity		
National Attachment	1.712***	(0.415)
Exclusive National Identity	-12.740***	(0.559)
Multiculturalism	4.163***	(0.309)
Political Economy		
Education	0.932**	(0.338)
Professional/Manager*Gross National Income	0.072*	(0.044)
Manual Worker*Gross National Income	-0.033	(0.028)
Fiscal Transfer	3.973***	(0.970)
Type of Capitalism	5.370**	(1.796)
Personal Economic Prospects	2.292***	(0.615)
National Economic Prospects	3.074***	(0.445)
Variance Components		
Country-Level	27.316**	(11.024)
Party-Level	4.599**	(1.838)
Individual-Level	453.831***	(7.382)
-2 x Log Likelihood	68833	

Note: * = p < .10, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001

increased” (forthcoming, 8; also Hermann, Brewer, and Risse forthcoming).

But it is also true that opposition to European integration is often couched as defense of the nation against control from Brussels. Radical right-wing political parties in France, Denmark, Italy, and Austria tap nationalism to reject further integration, and since 1996 such parties have formed the largest reservoir of Euroskepticism in the EU as a whole (Hooghe et al. 2002; Taggart 1998). Christin and Trechsel (2002) find that the stronger the national attachment and national pride of Swiss citizens, the less likely they are to support membership in the European Union. Carey (2002) shows that national attachment combined with national pride have a significant negative effect on support for European integration.

To resolve these conflicting expectations, we need to theorize how national identity can both reinforce and undermine support for European integration. Diez Medrano argues that national histories are crucial. Constructing patterns of discourse in the UK, Spain, and Germany, Medrano finds that English Euroskepticism is rooted in Britain’s special history of empire, that West German pro-Europeanism reflects World War II guilt, and that the Spanish tend to support European integration as proxy for modernization and democratization (Diez Medrano 2003). A research team led by Stråth and Triandafyllidou links party programs, public opinion, educational curricula, and media within nine EU and prospective EU countries. Such studies reveal the stickiness of national identity within unique national contexts.

Can one generalize about the connection between national identity and public opinion? We begin with the basic distinction between exclusive and inclusive national identity, and we hypothesize that citizens who conceive of their national identity as exclusive of other territorial identities are likely to be considerably more Euroskeptical than those who conceive of their national identity in inclusive terms. We know, for example,

that individuals who identify themselves exclusively as Belgian or exclusively as Flemish oppose multi-level governance, while those who identify themselves as both Belgian and Flemish support it (Maddens et al. 1996). We expect to find something similar at the supranational level.

Under what circumstances will citizens perceive their national identity as exclusive or inclusive? While national identities are normally formed before adolescence (Druckman 1994), we hypothesize that their consequences for particular political objects, such as European integration, are continuously *constructed* through socialization and political conflict (Stråth and Triandafyllidou 2003; Diez Medrano 2003). But who does the framing? Literature on American public opinion suggests that public opinion may be cued by political elites (Zaller 1992, 97–117). The sharper the divisions among national elites on the issue of European integration, the greater the scope for national identity to be mobilized, and the more we expect exclusive national identity to bite. One sign of such division is the existence of a radical right political party. Parties like the Vlaams Blok in Belgium and the French Front National make a fetish of exclusive national identity with slogans such as “Boss in Our Own Country” and “We give them our factories; they give us their immigrants. One solution: The Nation.” Such sentiments reinforce Euroskepticism.⁵ In countries where the elite is squarely behind the European project, we expect national identity to lay dormant or to be positively associated with support for integration. In countries where the political elite is divided on the issue, national identity is likely to rear its head.

Analysis

To measure support for European integration we combine three complementary elements of support: the *principle* of membership, the desired *speed* of integration, and the desired *direction* of future integration. The results reported below are robust across these component measures. This and other variables in our analysis are detailed in the appendix.⁶ We use multilevel analysis to probe variation at the individual, party, and country level.⁷ Table 1 presents unstandardized coefficients and standard errors for variables of interest.⁸

Figure 1 illustrates the relative effect of the most powerful variables. The solid boxes encompass the inter-quartile range and the whiskers indicate the 5th to the 95th percentiles, holding all other independent and control variables at their means. For example, an individual at the 5th percentile on *Multiculturalism*

has a score of 65.9 on *Support for European Integration* on a 0–100 scale, and an individual at the 95th percentile scores 74.3. The variables towards the left of Figure 1 have the largest effect across their inter-quartile range.

Citizens do appear to take economic circumstances into account. The EU redistributes money from rich to poor countries, and this gives rise to a predictable pattern of opposition and support. *Fiscal Transfer* is the most powerful economic influence that we find. A citizen of Greece, the country with the highest per capita net receipts from the EU, will be 15% more supportive of European integration than a citizen from Germany, the country with the highest net contribution, controlling for all other variables in our analysis. The differing length of the 95% whiskers in Figure 1 for this variable indicates that its association with support for European integration is not linear. *Fiscal Transfer* sharply delineates four countries (Greece, Portugal, Spain, and Ireland) that receive the bulk of cohesion funding and which tend to be pro-EU.

We also confirm the effect of *Type of Capitalism*. Support for European integration is higher in countries whose economic institutions are less likely to be challenged by EU legislation because they are close to the EU median.⁹

Together, seven variables that tap individual and group economic interest (listed in the appendix) account for 15% of total variance in public opinion, which is in line with previous studies. The surprise is that these economic influences are overshadowed by identity.

Three variables that tap identity—*Exclusive National Identity*, *Multiculturalism*, and *National Attachment*—together explain 20.8 % of the variance in *Support for European Integration*. These variables also account for more than two-thirds of the variance across countries.

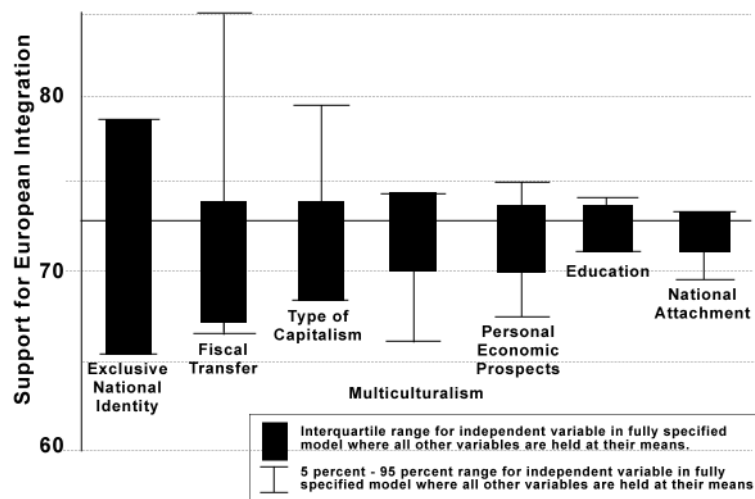
The paradox that we identified earlier is apparent: national identity both contributes to and diminishes support for European integration. Attachment to one’s country is positively correlated with *Support for European Integration* in bivariate analysis.¹⁰ But national identity is Janus-faced: under some circumstances it collides with European integration.

The extent to which national identity is exclusive or inclusive is decisive. A Eurobarometer question compels respondents to place either European or national identity above the other, and separates those who say they think of themselves as “only British (or French, etc.)” from those who say they have some form of multiple identity. Estimates for *Exclusive National Identity* are negative, substantively large, and significant in the presence of any and all controls we are able to exert.¹¹

On average, an individual in our sample who claims an exclusive national identity scores 53.3 on our thermometer scale for support for European integration, compared to 72.8 for a person who does not. The difference, 19.5%, is the baseline in Figure 2.¹² In some countries, citizens who have exclusive national identity are only slightly more Euroskeptical than those with multiple identities. In others, exclusive national identity is powerfully associated with Euroskepticism. In Portugal, exclusive national identity depresses a citizen’s support by just 9.5%. In the UK, at the other extreme, the difference is 29.5%.

How can one explain this variation? Our hunch, derived from what we know about American public opinion, seems to be on the right track. The more divided a country’s elite, and the more elements within it mobilize against European integration, the stronger the causal power of exclusive national identity. Political parties are decisive in cueing the public, and the wider their disagreement, the more exclusive identity is mobilized against European integration. Divisions within political parties are positively correlated

Figure 1
Effects of Independent Variables



with the causal power of exclusive national identity, as is the electoral strength of radical right parties. These two variables account for an estimated 57% of the country variance illustrated in Figure 2.

We have argued that there is no necessary connection between national identity and support or opposition to European integration. The dots have to be filled in, and we find that the connection is stronger when elites, particularly those leading political parties, are polarized on the issue.¹³

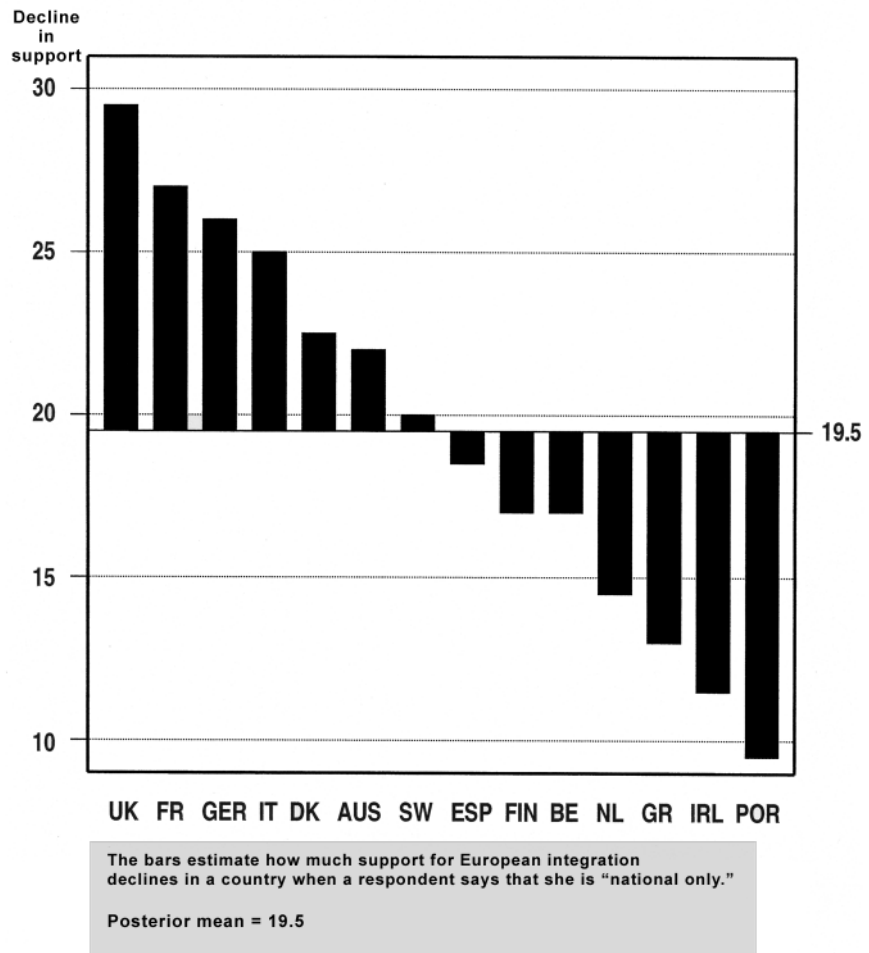
Conclusion

It is fruitless to seek general validity in either economic or identity theories of preferences. We need to inquire into their relative causal power. In this article, we do this for a single object: public opinion on European integration. Most scholars have conceptualized European integration as an economic phenomenon, and the bulk of research has therefore theorized public opinion as a function of the distributional consequences of market liberalization. But the European Union is also a supranational polity with extensive authority over those living in its territory. It is therefore plausible to believe that European integration engages group, and above all, national identities.

Both theories bite. A multi-level model that combines both sources of preference can explain around a third or more of the variance across individual citizens in the EU, and the bulk of variation across countries. However, we find that identity appears to be the more powerful influence. To understand how the public views European integration, one needs to consider how individuals frame their national identity. Do citizens consider national identity as something that can go hand in hand with European integration, or do they believe that European integration limits or threatens their national identity? There is nothing mechanistic or inevitable about one or the other position.

Identity is simple and complex. Citizens can answer the question “What is your nationality” with much greater ease and validity than they can tell you for which party or candidate they voted in the previous election. Like some in-group/out-group identities, national identities are formed early in life. Children as young as six know full well whether they are British, German, or Swedish. Yet the political implications of national identity emerge from debate and conflict. Whether a person is Belgian or British is (usually) a simple fact, but what does this national identity imply for the political choices one makes?

Figure 2
Exclusive National Identity and Support for European Integration



To understand the political implications of identity one therefore has to probe how identity is constructed and mobilized. Political elites and parties appear to be key. Exclusive national identity is mobilized against European integration in countries where the elite is polarized on European integration, where political parties are divided, and where radical right parties are strong. Data over time would help scholars probe further.

In terms of deductive sophistication, identity theory cannot compete with economic theory—yet. But this is like comparing a gasoline engine, honed over decades, with a hydrogen engine. If group identities are decisive for preferences over a wide range of political objects, as recent research suggests, then we can safely predict that the theories of group identity will become more sophisticated and more powerful.

Appendix: Variable Descriptions

Support for European Integration	An index of three items: (1) Principle of membership – “Generally speaking, do you think that [our country’s] membership of the European Union is [a bad thing, neither good nor bad, a good thing]?” (2) Desired speed – (1=integration should be brought to a “standstill”; 7= integration should run “as fast as possible”), and (3) Desired direction – “In five years’ time, would you like the European Union to play [a less important role, same role, a more important role] in your daily life?” The correlation is 0.409 between (1) and (2), 0.448 between (1) and (3), and 0.473 between (2) and (3). Standardized item = 0.706. The index is recoded as a 0-100 thermometer scale, with higher scores indicating greater support.
Education	Measured by the age of respondents when they stopped full-time education (D.8) and recoded on a 4-point scale.
Professional/ Manager* Gross National Income	Interaction term of (1) a dichotomous variable Professional Manager that takes a value of 1 when respondent is professional (self-employed or employed), general manager, or business proprietor (D.15), and (2) gross national income per capita for respondent’s country of residence (in US dollars at exchange rate prices for 2001, divided by 1000). Values range from zero to 30.6 for Denmark. <i>Source:</i> World Development Indicators Database (Worldbank, April 2003.)
Manual Worker* Gross National Income	Interaction term of (1) a dichotomous variable Manual Worker that takes a value of 1 when respondent is skilled or unskilled manual worker, or non-desk employee (e.g., salesman, driver) (D.15), and (2) gross national income per capita for respondent’s country of residence (in US dollars at exchange rate prices for 2001). Values range from 0 to 30.6 for Denmark. <i>Source:</i> World Development Indicators Database (Worldbank, April 2003.)
Personal Economic Prospects	An index of three items measuring respondents’ expectations (worse, same, better) concerning their future life, the financial situation in their household, and their job situation (Q.501, Q503, Q505). Standardized item = 0.763. Values range from 1 to 3.
National Economic Perspectives	An index of two items measuring respondents’ expectations (worse, same, better) concerning the economic situation and the employment situation in their country (Q.502, Q504.) Values range from 1 to 3.
Fiscal Transfer	Net fiscal transfers per country as percentage of GDP as an annual average over the period of 1995-2000. Values range from -0.56 for Germany to 3.88 for Greece. <i>Source:</i> Commission of the European Union (2001.)
Type of Capitalism	Categorization based on type of national production system (liberal market vs. mixed vs. coordinated) and extent of welfare redistribution (limited, medium, extensive—measured by Gini index). Country scores reflect distance from the median (mixed system, medium redistribution) whereby the median category is 2, adjacent cells are 1, and two cells removed are 0. <i>Source:</i> Gourevitch and Hawes (2001.)
National Attachment	Question Q. 803: “People may feel different degrees of attachment to their town or village, to their region, to their country, or to Europe. Please tell me how attached you feel to ... (3) [our country]: very attached, fairly attached, not very attached, not at all attached, don’t know.” This is a 4-point scale.
Exclusive National Identity	A dichotomous variable that takes the value of 1 for respondents with exclusive national identity ([nationality] only). Recoded from: “In the near future, do you see yourself as (1) [nationality] only, (2) [nationality] and European, (3) European and [nationality], or (4) European only?” (Q.23.)
Multiculturalism	“Thinking about the enlargement of the European Union to include new countries, do you tend to agree or tend to disagree with the following statement ... ‘With more member countries, Europe will be culturally richer’ (tend to disagree, don’t know, tend to agree).” (Q.399.) This is a 3-point scale.

Note: Q and D notations refer to questions in the Eurobarometer codebook (Hartung 2002).

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