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## The European Union: Cross-National Variation in Public Support, 1993

### Abstract

With the adoption of the Single European Act in 1985 and the Maastricht Treaty in 1991, the EU began dealing forcefully with issues pertaining to monetary union, social policy, foreign policy, and constitutional reform. Public opinion became increasingly important as national governments began formulating policies based on decisions in Brussels, Strasbourg, and Luxembourg that affected domestic policies.

# Jarrett Ruffino

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### Introduction

The European Union was established in 1951 with the adoption of the European Coal and Steel Community. Many of its early integrative policies were technical in nature and received little attention from the general public. Consequently, a permissive consensus developed allowing the elite to pursue the ideals established by the European Union (EU) (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993, Gabel and Palmer 1995, Gabel 1998). In time, integrative policies became increasingly aggressive in their scope and influence. With the adoption of the Single European Act in 1985 and the Maastricht Treaty in 1991, the EU began dealing forcefully with issues pertaining to monetary union, social policy, foreign policy, and constitutional reform. Public opinion became increasingly important as national governments began formulating policies based on decisions in Brussels, Strasbourg, and Luxembourg that affected domestic policies (Gabel 1998, Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996, Anderson and Reichert 1996, Gabel and Palmer 1995, Eichenberg and Dalton 1993).

European integration was still largely driven and advanced by the elite, but it could no longer progress without the support of the mass public (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993). In Ireland, France, and Denmark, national public referenda required the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. Ultimately public protests in France and Denmark on the Maastricht Treaty delayed and modified the institutional reform of the EU. In 1994, Norway voted in a national referendum to reject the EU altogether despite being granted admission. In 1995 parties in Sweden campaigning specifically against European integration recognized significant gains.

Public opinion clearly influences policymaking in the EU. Furthermore, the literature illustrates that there is measurable cross-national variation in public support for the EU. It is necessary to understand what contributes to these differences in order to facilitate continuing integration. This paper expands on the existing literature explaining cross-national variances in support by examining economic rationality and political culture explanations.

### Economic Rationality

For most of its history, the EU has existed purely as an economic block. Economic rationality posits that citizens seek to influence public policy by voting according to their economic interests regarding international economic policy (Katzenstein 1998). A large amount of existing literature suggests that economic rationality explanations are strong predictors of a country's level of support for the EU. Specifically, the literature has tended to examine macro- and micro-economic, and direct and indirect economic explanations.

Macroeconomic explanations focus on the national economic indicators of member states. Many countries joined the EU because of the anticipated economic benefits associated with membership (Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996, Eichenberg and Dalton 1993). Where membership has paid off (i.e. member states with better economic conditions), citizens should be most supportive of integration. GDP growth, unemployment, and inflation are strong measures of national economic performance and should vary predictably with support for the EU (Gabel 1998, Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996, Eichenberg and Dalton 1993). GDP growth measures the overall living standard in a country and should therefore be positively related to national support for the EU. Unemployment and inflation measure economic hardship in a country and should therefore be inversely related to national support for the EU.

Microeconomic explanations focus on individual level economic indicators. These explanations posit that citizens form attitudes on the EU that are consistent with their occupation based economic interests (Gabel 1998, Gabel and Palmer 1995, Anderson and Reichert 1996). The reallocation of goods, capital, and labor across borders affects occupations differently because certain skills are more valuable and transferable in an international economy (Gabel 1998, Gabel and Palmer 1995, Anderson and Reichert 1996). Existing literature focuses on the differences between skilled and unskilled workers. Gabel (1998) argues that in international economic blocks, national comparative advantages disappear because goods, capital, and labor move readily across borders. Consequently, occupational groups' support for economic integration is dependent on how well they can compete in or benefit from an integrated market. Gabel's relative human capital hypothesis states that support is positively related to human capital. Thus, skilled workers should be more supportive of the EU than unskilled workers because their levels of education and experience are more valuable and marketable in an international economic block.

Direct economic explanations focus on a country's percent return of money contributed to the EU (EC-budget ratio). EC-budget ratios vary cross-nationally because some countries contribute more to the EU than others and receive a lower percent in return. Countries with higher EC-budget ratios should have higher levels of support for the EU because they receive more financial benefits in return from integration (Anderson and Reichert 1996, Gabel and Palmer 1995, and Eichenberg and Dalton 1993).

Indirect economic explanations focus on a country's trade balance with EU members (intra-EC trade level). Countries with higher levels of intra-EC trade should have higher levels of support for the EU because they stand to benefit more from the liberalized market resulting from integration (Anderson and Reichert 1996, Gabel and Palmer 1995, Eichenberg and Dalton 1993).

## **Political Culture**

The European Union is composed of many different countries, each with its own distinct historical and cultural traditions. It is important to examine how these distinct historical and cultural traditions have influenced cross-national variances in public support for the EU. Political culture is difficult to pinpoint and may explain why it is severely underrepresented in the existing literature as a possible explanation for cross-national variation. The political culture explanations this paper develops should add to our understanding of the variation in cross-national support. Specifically, the literature examines the time and circumstances of entry, cognitive mobilization, European identification, and nationalism.

The time and circumstances surrounding the entry of member states are critical to understanding the variation in cross-national support for the EU because each wave of entry is representative of a country's political history and enthusiasm for European integration (Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996). Countries in the first wave of entry (Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Germany, and Italy) should have the highest levels of support because they were convinced earlier that the benefits of European integration would outweigh the associated costs. Countries in the second wave of entry (Britain, Denmark, and Ireland) should have lowest levels of support because they were initially reluctant to commit to the idea of European integration. Only later did they realize their participation was vital to their survival as influential European powers. Countries in the third wave of entry (Greece, Portugal, and Spain) should have levels of support between countries in the first wave and second wave of entry. Because membership for these countries was contingent on them establishing democratic governments and economic stability, rather than a desire to commit to European integration, these countries should have levels of support between the countries in the first and second wave of entry (Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996).

Cognitive mobilization explanations focus on an individual's level of political awareness and skills in political communication that allow them to identify with international political institutions. Inglehart (1970) posited that well-developed cognitive skills are necessary for understanding information about European integration and that cognitive mobilization is message independent. That is, any discussion will promote support for the EU. Empirical research indicates that these theories are inconclusive and only make sense at the individual level (Gabel 1998, Jansen 1991). I posit that cognitive sophistication matters only in the presence of political awareness. Therefore, higher levels of political awareness of the EU should lead to higher levels of support for that organization.

European identification explanations focus on the extent to which countries identify with the goals of the EU. A primary concern has always been whether Europeans could successfully put aside their distinct historical and cultural traditions (Smith 1992). Could Europeans relinquish centuries of fiercely guarded political sovereignty and move toward a common foreign policy, a common defense policy, and a single currency? Or, would history inhibit any significant moves toward a supranational institution? Logically, countries that are more willing to relinquish some control, and favor a supranational institution acting in the interests of all Europeans, should be more supportive of the EU. Therefore, this paper posits that countries with higher levels of European identification should show higher levels of support for the EU.

One measure of nationalism is the degree of pride and belief in one's own nationality over that of another nationality. Nationalism is measured by the degree of trust that Europeans have in the other nationalities of the EU. Despite the world's increasing globalization and interdependence, Europeans are witnessing a resurgence of nationalism (Smith 1992). Logically, member states that display higher levels of trust in other nationalities should have higher levels of support for the EU. These countries should be more willing to place their trust in a supranational institution charged with acting in the interests of all nationalities under its control and influence.

## **Research Design**

In an attempt to explain the state of public support during the year in which the Maastricht Treaty became effective, only those countries that were members of the EU in 1993 are included in this study. The countries included are

Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The dependent variable in this study is national support for the EU. It is derived from the following two public opinion survey questions (Reif and Melich 1993):

“Generally speaking, do you think that membership in the European Community is a good thing, neither good nor bad, or a bad thing?”

“In general, are you (very much/to some extent) for or against efforts being made to unify Western Europe?”

Specifically, this variable is calculated by adding the percentage of respondents that believe the EU is a good thing to the percentage of respondents that are to some extent supportive of efforts to unify Western Europe and then finding its average.

### **Independent Variables**

Among the independent variables used here are those measuring economic rationality and political culture. The macroeconomic variables in this study are measured by calculating the percent growth in GDP, the percent growth in unemployment, and the percent growth in inflation from 1991-1992 (IMF). The microeconomic variable is measured by the percent of skilled workers in each country (Reif and Melich, 1993). The direct and indirect economic variables are measured by calculating the EC-budget ratio (OECD, 1993) and the intra-EC trade ratio (Eurostat, 1995), respectively, in 1992.

The time and circumstances of entry variable is measured by assigning to each country a value of 3, 2, or 1 based on their wave of entry; higher values should indicate higher levels of support. The cognitive sophistication variable is expressed as an average, within each country, of the percentage of respondents who correctly identified the capital of the European Commission, the percentage who correctly identified the President of the European Commission, and the percentage who correctly identified one member of the European Parliament (Reif and Melich 1993). Similarly, the European identification variable is expressed as an average, within each country, of the percentage of respondents who support a common foreign policy, the percentage who support a common defense policy, and the percentage who support a common currency (Reif and Melich 1993). The nationalism variable is measured by averaging the percentage of respondents that have some trust in the nationalities of each country in the EU, excluding their own nationality (Reif and Melich 1993).

### **Hypotheses**

A rational-actor model of popular influence posits that citizens can influence public policy by voting according to their economic interests regarding international economic policy. Economic rationality is measured by six variables.

H1: GDP growth is a measure of the overall living standard. Higher levels of GDP growth lead to higher levels of EU support.

H2: Unemployment growth is a measure of economic hardship. Higher levels of unemployment growth lead to lower levels of support.

H3: Inflation growth is a measure of economic hardship. Higher levels of inflation growth lead to lower levels of support.

H4: Percentage of skilled workers is a measure of potential benefits from integration. A higher

percentage of skilled workers leads to higher levels of support.

H5: EC-budget ratio is a direct measure of potential benefits from integration. Higher EC-budget ratios lead to higher levels of support.

H6: Intra-EC trade is an indirect measure of potential benefits from integration. Higher intra-EC trade levels lead to higher levels of support.

A political culture explanation posits that nation-specific political and historical values influence cross-national variances in support. Political culture is measured by four variables.

H7: The time and circumstances of entry is representative of a country's enthusiasm for integration. Countries in the first wave of integration have higher levels of support than countries in the second wave of entry, and countries in the third wave of entry have higher levels of support than countries in the second wave of entry.

H8: Political awareness is a measure of a country's awareness of the institutions of the EU. Higher levels of political awareness lead to higher levels of support.

H9: European identification is a measure of country's identification with the ideals of the EU. Higher levels of European identification lead to higher levels of support.

H10: Nationalism is a measure of trust in other nationalities of the EU. Higher levels of trust in other nationalities lead to higher levels of support.

## **Analysis and Findings**

Bivariate correlation tables were used to test the strength of the relationships between the dependent variable and each independent variable. The findings indicate surprising behavior of many independent variables in their ability to explain the dependent variable.

An examination of Table 1 illustrates how support for EU varies cross-nationally. The difference between the highest and lowest supporter is more than twenty percentage points. The remaining analyses in this section attempt to explain why these variations exist across member states.

Explaining this cross-national variation poses a challenge. Table 2 shows the bivariate correlations between the economic variables and support for the EU. This analysis indicates no relationships between the macroeconomic variables and the dependent variable. None of these correlations achieves statistical significance.

Table 2: Macroeconomic and Microeconomic Correlates of Support for the EU (Pearson coefficients)	
GDP growth	.075
Unemployment growth	.194
Inflation growth	.028
% skilled workers	-.077

There are two possible explanations for these findings. First, the earlier study suggesting that macroeconomic variables are strong predictors of cross-national variation in support was conducted over a longer period time (Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996) than the study that found the same results that this paper found (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993). In other words, the effect of macroeconomic variables is seen only over time indicating, that any variation in support is the result of the cyclical nature of the economy. Second, and perhaps more importantly, individuals may not have held the EU responsible for national economic conditions in pre-Maastricht Treaty years. Studies conducted after adoption of the Maastricht Treaty are needed to confirm or reject this as a possible explanation.

Table 3 indicates mixed results between support for the EU and the direct and indirect economic variables. Consistent with the initial hypothesis, the intra-EC trade ratio is positively correlated (.551) with a statistical significance at better than the .10 level.

Table 3: Direct and Indirect Economic Variables (Pearson coefficients)	
EC-budget ratio	.139
Intra-EC trade ratio	.551*
* p<.10	

The results produced by the EC-budget ratio are surprising. Logically, the more financial benefits a country receives as a percentage of its contributions, the more supportive it should be of the EU. However, the data indicate that this clearly is not the case. Eichenberg and Dalton (1993) also found these results. It is possible that citizens are simply unaware of EC budget concerns. However, as other scholars have noted, this is unlikely because the EC-budget is a constant topic of discussion in public arenas. Rather than a lack of awareness, Eichenberg and Dalton argue that citizens form their opinions in spite of the budget. For example, Germany is one of the strongest supporters, but it has one of the lowest EC-budget ratios. Additionally, Denmark is one of the weakest supporters, but it has one of the highest EC-budget ratios.

Two countries stand out as exceptions to the indirect hypothesis. Italy has a high level of support (61.1%) but a comparatively low intra-EC trade ratio (57.7%). Portugal has a low level of support (48.9%) but a comparatively high intra-EC trade ratio (75%). Italy's variance may be explained by its status as a founding member of the EU and the relative importance of the time and circumstance of entry variable to the other variables in this research. Regarding Portugal, the existing literature and data do not provide any obvious explanation as to why it varies with the initial hypothesis.

The data indicate mixed results between the dependent variable and political culture variables. To begin, Table 4 indicates the time and circumstance of entry helps explain cross-national variation in support for the EU. Consistent with the initial hypothesis, the time and circumstance measure positively correlates with the dependent variable ( $r=.556$ ;  $p<.10$ ).

Ireland stands out as an exception to the time and circumstance hypothesis. Ireland shows a high level of support despite being in the second wave of entry. Accordingly, Ireland should have one of the lowest levels of support. A possible explanation is that Ireland has a significantly higher percentage of farmers (7.3%) than the group average (2.3%) among member states (Reif and Melich 1993). This is significant because the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) consumes roughly 80% of the EU's annual budget. Because Ireland also has the highest EC-budget ratio, this suggests that the people of Ireland are directly receiving significant financial guarantees from the EU. As a result, Ireland should have a higher level of support despite the implications of the time and circumstance hypothesis.

Table 5: Cognitive sophistication, European identification, and nationalism variables (Pearson coefficients)	
Political awareness	.112
European identification	.610**
Trust	.371
** $p<.05$	

European identification, on the other hand, is positively correlated with support for the EU. One might argue that the reason European identification is statistically significant is that these two are essentially parallel measures. However, I posit that there is a clear and significant difference between general support for the EU and attitudes towards specific policy proposals pertaining to the EU's future integrative goals. Countries may be supportive of the EU as it currently stands but be less supportive of or even opposed to continuing integration.

## Conclusions



The findings presented here illustrate a significant cross-national variation in support for the European Union. Surprisingly, the findings indicate that macroeconomic, microeconomic, direct economic, and cognitive mobilization explanations are poor predictors of cross-national variances in support. Consistent with the original hypotheses, the findings suggest that indirect economic explanations, the time and circumstances of entry, and European identification are strong predictors of cross-national variances in support. To a much lesser extent, nationalism is also an important factor.

Common to all these significant variables, whether economic or political, is the degree to which support is linked to a European identity. The indirect economic explanation suggests that countries are more supportive of the EU when they depend more on European markets for their economic well being. The time and circumstances of entry suggest that countries are more supportive of the EU when they believe more in the intrinsic value gained from working together in mutually benefiting relationships. European identification suggests that countries are more supportive of the EU when they believe more in the intrinsic value gained from the specific integrative policies of the EU. Nationalism, while not statistically significant, suggests that countries are more supportive of the EU when they place more trust in other nationalities of the EU. All of these variables attest to a sense of European identity.

To the extent support for the EU is strongly linked to a country's European identity, more than, say, to specific economic or political factors in a given country, then support may be unlikely to vary significantly over time. As European integration advances, the support of each member state is going to be crucial to the EU's success. Member states that are less supportive of the EU will have to make a decision. Will they become active supporters or remain passive members? Member states that are more supportive of the EU are also will have to make a decision. Will they continue to push for further integration, or will they continue to be constrained by the delays of other member states? Regardless, cross-national variation in support for the EU cannot be ignored at this critical time of European integration.

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