

Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 15, Issue 3 (2019)

Research Article

What Helps Cement Feelings of Connection between EU Citizens

Pierre Philippe Balestrini

Citation

Balestrini, P.P. (2019). 'What Helps Cement Feelings of Connection between EU Citizens', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 15(3): 299-318. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v15i3.1015>

First published at: www.jcer.net

Abstract

There is a growing body of literature on EU public opinion. Yet the feelings of connection between Europeans and how these influence EU model type preferences are an unexplored area. The present article addresses this gap in the research. Using Eurobarometer data, our results demonstrate that while being in a more favourable personal situation helps cement bonds between EU citizens and in turn stimulate public support for the EU, perceived EU policy contribution to unemployment, immigration and crime tend to damage the related bonds and successively boost public opposition to the EU. Terrorism management, multiculturalism, economic deprivation or 'putting aside' Europe's Christian identity are also not found to help EU citizen cohesion. The article then discusses the implications of these findings.

Keywords

European Integration; Christianity; Terrorism; Public opinion; Income redistribution; Bonds between EU citizens

The popular rise of mainstream and radical Eurosceptic political parties may threaten the perennialism of the European project in the long term. This context has stimulated academic thought on how to make the EU more popular and whether Brexit could have been avoided (see for example, Goodwin, Hix and Pickup 2018). Extant literature about the EU has shown that, by and large, citizens evaluate European integration on the bases of personal and national cost/benefit calculations. In other words, utility explanations about the EU produce public support for (or opposition to) integration. This vector of support depends on subjective socio-economic appraisals (Carey 2002; Gabel and Whitten 1997; Hooghe and Marks 2005). It also hinges on objective personal socio-economic circumstances (Gabel 1998; Hix 1999; Hooghe, Huo and Marks 2007) and the objective national socio-economic context (Sanchez-Cuenca 2000; Gabel 1998). Yet, the great majority of existing research relies on two dependent variables to draw these conclusions, namely 'EU membership as a good thing' and 'EU benefit' variables¹. While these two variables measure national utilitarian support, they tend not to gauge the economic and cultural proximity that citizens can feel towards one another and how perceived or real current EU developments influence this relationship. The need to explore other facets of public support for the EU, including the influence of the national context on the latter, has been underlined by researchers (see, for example, Hobolt and De Vries 2016). This article makes some contributions towards this.

Expanding the public opinion literature on European integration, the aim of this article is to examine empirically how the shared interests² between citizens affect public attitudes towards the EU. More specifically, the article analyses how subjective national and European economic and political assessments affect feelings of connection between EU citizens and, in turn, public support for European integration. It also investigates how objective personal socio-economic circumstances influence EU citizen cohesion and thus stimulate public support for (or opposition to) integration. It explores how the objective national socio-economic context can stimulate bonds between fellow Europeans and hence public opinion on integration. Finally, it examines whether, in countries where

Christianity is recognised as the official or preferred state religion, citizens are more likely to develop links with citizens in other EU states and support the EU.

In line with previous research, the findings show that the integration winners – those with human and financial capital – and citizens who are satisfied with their country's direction and their influence on the workings of the EU, are more likely to bond with other EU citizens and be supportive of the European Union. However, citizens are found to be more sceptical about the EU contribution to unemployment, crime and immigration. The results also show that people are failing to see the EU's added value in domains such as terrorism, social redistribution, the preservation of Europe's Christian heritage or the management of immigrants' integration into EU societies. The findings suggest public anxiety with some current EU policy developments and the impact of the latter on the welfare of citizens across the EU. I start with a discussion of previous research on public attitudes towards the EU, then set out seven hypotheses, which I test on the basis of Eurobarometer (EB) datasets for all the member states in 2015 and 2016. The findings are then discussed and conclusions are drawn.

PAST RESEARCH ON CITIZEN SUPPORT FOR EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Prior empirical research has established that utility calculations underlie citizens' opinion about European integration. This approach relies on self-interested explanations of political attitudes and suggests that citizens are more likely to support integration if it results in a net personal or national benefit. Thus, people's positive perceptions of national and personal economic conditions³ increase the level of support for the EU (Carey 2002; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005; Gabel and Whitten 1997; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Llamazares and Gramacho 2007 and McLaren 2007). Furthermore, better educated individuals and those of higher social conditions – in other words, people with human and financial capital – have been shown to back integration as market liberalisation pertaining to integration offers more opportunities for them (Gabel 1998; Hix 1999; Hooghe et al. 2007). Finally, the objective national socio-economic context sways public opinion of the EU. Thus, unemployment, crime, immigration and social redistribution have been demonstrated to affect public attitudes towards the EU (for example, Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996; Gabel 1998; Gabel & Palmer 1995).

Identity-related concerns also explain variations in public support for the EU. The pooling of sovereignty inherent to European integration can be interpreted as potentially eroding national self-determination and blurring boundaries between distinct national communities.⁴ Various studies (for example, Hooghe and Marks 2005; Kaltenthaler & Anderson 2001; McLaren 2007) have thus demonstrated the relationship between the importance of exclusive national identity and lack of support for European integration. Euroscepticism can also be related to a general hostility towards other cultures, such as negative attitudes towards minority groups and immigrants (DeVreese and Boomgaarden 2005; Hobolt et al. 2011). However, national economic and social utility calculations about the EU have been found to have greater explanatory power than identity issues (Hobolt and Wratil 2015; Kuhn and Stoeckel 2014). Benchmarking approaches play a role in accounting for differences in public attitudes towards European integration. The national context provides economic and political benchmarks against which the public can judge the European Union (Kritzinger 2003 and Kuhn and Stoeckel 2014). Belot and Guinaudeau (2017) have found that public EU support increases (decreases) when Europeanisation makes individuals' desired policies more likely (less likely). However, most of this research resorts to two dependent variables to draw conclusions – namely 'EU membership as a good thing' and 'EU benefit' variables. Whilst these two variables measure national utilitarian support (and are recognised as such by earlier research literature), they tend to gauge potential national gains from EU membership rather than potential citizen gains. They also fail to take account of the potential economic and cultural proximity that EU citizens can feel towards one another. The related closeness can arise from current EU policy developments and/or from policies citizens would like the EU to implement. EU countries are relatively culturally close (Hofstede 1991).

Their country's EU membership also gives them a shared sense of community and destiny. They are subject to the same EU policies.⁵ Yet they tend to view economic and cultural globalisation (promoted by the EU) as negatively impacting on their welfare and more generally on their way of life.⁶ They thus tend to see globalisation as increasing social inequalities, benefiting primarily large companies and threatening national cultures (see for example, Eurobarometer 69.2, 72.4 and 73.4; Balestrini 2016a and b). Nevertheless, despite these concerns, citizens are not opposed to globalisation altogether, but are opposed to its excesses. They are inclined to favour more regulated international trade (see Rodrik 2018). A large majority of Europeans are opposed to leaving the EU or even the euro (as evidenced by Eurobarometer data). The argument of the state's economic 'survival' may play a part in this, as has been seen in the Brexit negotiations (de Vries 2017). This sense of common threats and belonging may help to forge common interests and connections between EU citizens. These research issues are important markers to appreciate better the conditions upon which public support for the EU can happen on a more durable basis and help design policies which fulfil this objective. Several policy issues and theories – albeit with utilitarianism as an overarching pillar – are examined in the present research to grasp the nature and scope of EU citizen cohesion.

Testing the following Eurobarometer question (Eurobarometer 84.1 and 85.1 2015, 2016) enables us to address this gap in the literature: 'Can you tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'what brings the citizens of the different EU Member States together is more important than what separates them'. Tables 1, 2 and 3 demonstrate that citizens tend to be more positive about what they share with one another than when they evaluate EU membership itself.⁷ Thus, 71.89 per cent (2015) and 74.06 per cent (2016) of respondents think that they have common ground with other EU citizens as opposed to 55.16 per cent and 59.97 per cent of respondents who respectively view their country's EU membership as a good thing and consider their country has benefited from EU membership. This may entail that, when responding to this question, they do not only appraise current EU policies but also consider what they have in common with other EU citizens and how 'wanted' EU policies could reflect this.

Table 1: Sense of proximity between EU citizens (in percentage)

| Can you tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'what brings the citizens of the different EU Member States together is more important than what separates them' | | | | | |
|--|--------------------|---------------|------------------|------------------|------------|
| Year | Totally agree | Tend to agree | Tend to disagree | Totally disagree | Don't know |
| 2015 EU 28 | 24.95 ¹ | 46.94 | 16.42 | 4.82 | 6.87 |
| 2016 EU 28 | 25.93 | 48.13 | 14.92 | 4.22 | 6.80 |

Note:¹ EU weighted score **Source:** Eurobarometer Surveys 84.1 and 85.1 (2015 and 2016)

Table 2: EU membership evaluation (in percentage)

| Generally speaking, do you think that (our country)'s membership of the European Union is...? | | | | |
|---|--------------------|----------------------|-------------|------------|
| Year | A good thing | Neither good nor bad | A bad thing | Don't know |
| 2015 EU 28 | 55.16 ¹ | 27.58 | 14.99 | 2.27 |

Note:¹ EU weighted score **Source:** Eurobarometer Surveys 84.1 (2015)

Table 3: EU benefit (in percentage)

| Taking everything into consideration, would you say that our country has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Union? | | | |
|---|--------------------|---------------|------------|
| Year | Benefited | Not benefited | Don't know |
| 2015 EU 28 | 59.97 ¹ | 31.33 | 8.70 |

*Note:*¹ EU weighted score *Source:* Eurobarometer Surveys 84.1 (2015)

Table 4: Factor analysis

| Item | Varimax Rotated Factor Loadings | |
|---|---------------------------------|---|
| | 2015 Factor 1: EU Assessment | 2015 Factor 1: Specific EU Assessment |
| 'Generally speaking, do you think that (our country)'s membership of the European Union is...?' | .83 | – |
| 'Taking everything into consideration, would you say that our country has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Union?' | .77 | – |
| 'What brings the citizens of the different EU Member States together is more important than what separates them' | .61 | .69 |
| 'When it comes to the issue of migration, please tell me if you believe that more or less decision-making should take place at a European level or no change is needed.' | .49 | .65 |
| 'In the current context of migratory flows from outside the EU, to what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? The country needs legal migrants to work in certain sectors of the economy' ⁸ | .51 | .69 |
| Eigenvalues | 2.16 | 1.38 |
| Percentage of variance explained | 43 | 46 |
| α | .60 | .51 |

Note: N = 28149 (2015) *Source:* Eurobarometer Surveys 84.1 (2015)

'EU membership as a good thing' and 'EU benefit' variables tend to measure general, diffuse public support for the EU while specific EU public support tends to relate to policy support (see for example, De Wilde and Trenz 2012; Easton 1965, 1975). Thus, public support for more migration policy decision-making at an EU level or support for economic migration in certain sectors of the economy are examples of variables gauging specific, policy public support for European integration. A factor analysis revealed that 'EU membership as a good thing', 'EU benefit', 'EU citizen cohesion', 'EU migration policy decision-making' and 'EU economic migration' variables represent one underlying construct (see Table 4).⁹ It measures public opinion about integration. However, the third, fourth and fifth variable load on the construct significantly less than the first two, that is .61, .49 and .51. versus .83 and .77. Moreover, when considered on their own, these three variables load on the construct more uniformly (see second column of Table 4). This means that the third, fourth and fifth variables are likely to gauge specific EU public support. Furthermore, the terms 'what brings the citizens of the different EU Member states together...' contained in the third question refer to the idea of unity, cohesion or connection between

EU citizens based on common interests. Bearing in mind the nature of this question and these results, the idea that, when responding to the third question, citizens do not solely evaluate current integration but also what bonds them to other EU citizens and how EU policy does or could enact those bonds seems to be corroborated. In other words, besides expressing their opinion about current integration, they also formulate EU model type preferences¹⁰ based on what they feel they share with other fellow Europeans.¹¹ Testing a fairly broad range of issues with the third variable will enable us to uncover how the economic and cultural proximity that EU citizens can feel towards one another influences EU policy preferences.

One can next ponder how subjective and objective personal and national socio-economic calculations shape connections between citizens and how integration fits into this. In line with previous research (Carey 2002; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005; Gabel and Whitten 1997; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Llamazares and Gramacho 2007; McLaren 2007), it is first contended that subjective national and European economic and political assessments influence EU citizen cohesion. More specifically, one expects here that the more positively citizens view their country direction or the more citizens are satisfied with their voice on the workings of the EU, the more they are likely to bond with other EU citizens. The rationale for this is that perceived economic and political gains are likely to boost feelings of connection between fellow Europeans and in turn stimulate public support for integration.

The EU complex and multilevel division of power between various European institutions and between EU institutions and national governments makes it more difficult for people to attribute policy responsibility. Citizens tend to use national economic and political benchmarks to assess European integration (see for example, Kritzinger 2003; Kuhn and Stoeckel 2014). The EU of the early twenty-first century has though become more relevant to the lives and interests of European citizens as it increasingly affects their national and individual welfare. It involves policies (especially the common currency, European citizenship, immigration, border control and foreign and security affairs) that are highly salient and can even be controversial (Gabel 2000; Hooghe and Marks 2005). These changes have made the EU more visible, politicised and contested by political parties, social movements, interest groups and citizens which have, in turn, modified the public's EU cost/benefit calculations.

Individuals partly take cues from political parties (usually mainstream political parties) that can lay the blame on the EU for some unpopular policy measures or from those (especially radical political parties or factions within mainstream parties) that underscore the fact that much of national socio-economic decision-making is outside national governments' control under current EU agreements. To this effect, the migration emergency and the British referendum campaign (and its Brexit outcome) have shown that citizens may not just be benchmarking the performance of domestic institutions versus that of EU institutions or other EU states but also the same versus that of non-EU states or even benchmarking against the present and past performance of domestic institutions (see for example, Bulman 2016). Political parties¹² play a role in cueing mass attitudes towards this end (De Vries 2017; Polakow-Suransky 2017).

The perspective of real or potential citizen gains may help to strengthen EU citizen cohesion. Thus, consistent with earlier research (Gabel 1998; Hix 1999; Hooghe et al. 2007), individuals who have human and financial capital are more likely to take advantage of opportunities stemming from market liberalisation pertaining to integration. These opportunities may help to create links with other EU citizens which can successively enhance public support for integration. It is therefore secondly argued that individuals of higher social positions, with better levels of education or financial capital, are more likely to connect with other EU citizens.

Thirdly, in agreement with the literature on public attitudes towards the EU (Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996; Gabel 1998 and Sanchez-Cuenca 2000), national levels of unemployment, immigration, crime and social redistribution are expected to affect national publics' opinion about

integration. Unemployment, immigration¹³, crime and social issues have remained highly salient issues for citizens for most of the last two decades (as evidenced by Eurobarometer data). In citizens' minds, socio-tropic instrumental relationships exist between immigration, unemployment, crime and loss of (or threat to) national identity. These interconnections affect their views of national and European institutions of governance (Kehrberg 2007; Lahav 2004). The EU free trade stance¹⁴ also tends to be seen negatively by citizens. Some form of European protectionism is moreover favoured by a large majority of Europeans, this largely irrespective of the socio-economic traditions of EU member states (see, for example Ifop-AMDLE 2011). A national context of high unemployment, immigration, crime and social redistribution is likely to undermine bonds with other fellow Europeans and foster public opposition to integration. Although citizens can sympathise with fellow citizens in other EU nations and acknowledge that these policy issues tend to be EU-wide, popular discontent in more adverse national contexts is likely to prevail and lessen feelings of connection between EU individuals. In countries where social redistribution is high, the reverse is true. In these nations¹⁵, people are more opposed to integration as they fear that the market liberalisation impetus of the EU weakens social redistribution. However, the 2008 economic crisis has provided 'opportunities' for national governments across the EU¹⁶ to reduce social expenditure. This context could limit the effect of social distribution levels on EU citizen cohesion.

Furthering the public opinion literature on the EU, I examine here the effect of terrorism, the positioning of party leaderships on multiculturalism and Christianity as an official or preferred state religion on public support for integration. These factors are connected to immigration which is a key concern for national publics. Multiculturalism, the foreign nature of terrorism (Islamic terrorism) and Christianity relate to identity and security (safety) concerns. They may affect citizens' sense of national identity, what they feel they share with other EU citizens, and how they view EU policies – especially towards migration and European identity. It is maintained that terrorism, the positioning of party leaderships on multiculturalism and Christianity as an official or preferred state religion do not affect EU citizen cohesion. National and European political actors often stress the arguments that European integration has made it possible to preserve peace between countries and that European states are stronger together in the fight against crime and, in particular, terrorism (see European Commission 2016). With the significant increase in acts of terrorism in Europe in the last 15 years (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) 2019) and the fact it is a transnational phenomenon, the electorate may partly buy into this argument. However, the fear of terrorism among national publics is fairly widespread and goes beyond the actual level of terrorist activities in a country (see for example, Eurobarometer 75.4 and 85.1, 2011 and 2016). The enduring migration emergency and repeated media reports about potential or real terrorists infiltrating the wave of refugees in Europe may have played a part in this (Grierson 2016). National publics' perceived economic, cultural and physical (safety) insecurities nurture national public opinions about terrorism. It is likely that these factors make altogether redundant the sway of the level of terrorist activities (in a state) on public opinion about integration.

'National multiculturalism' could help citizens to feel closer to one another in the European context and contribute to a higher support for European integration. In national contexts where the positioning of political party leaderships favours the integration of immigrants into society on a multicultural basis, individuals can have a propensity to 'reach out' to other individuals and therefore find common ground with other Europeans more easily¹⁷. To this effect, European institutions are striving to construct European identity on a more universal basis, relying on values such as freedom, equal rights and solidarity (see Pinxten, Cornelis and Rubinstein 2007). Large scale immigration¹⁸ has however contributed to reducing national differences in immigrant integration policies towards a more multiculturalist perspective¹⁹. Radical political parties have been 'skillful' in exploiting and developing citizens' sense of cultural dispossession and linking it to economic deprivation in a globalised world. People's scepticism towards globalisation and mass immigration yet exceeds the electoral weight of

such parties (Rodrik 2018). This political climate could neutralise the impact of immigrant integration (national) strategies on public attitudes towards the EU.

Furthermore, it is argued that citizens' cultural insecurities are likely to be resistant whether Christianity is recognised as an official or preferred state religion in a country or not. As such, it is hypothesised as not impacting on public attitudes towards the EU. In countries where Christianity is recognised as the official or preferred state religion, the multicultural character of the EU, its inclinations towards free markets and mass immigration may not be considered as less threatening to national identity than in other countries. Thus, countries such as Italy, Poland and Spain have argued unsuccessfully for the inclusion of Christian roots in the EU constitution (see for example, Black 2004). Governments in a number of eastern and central European EU member states also criticise the multicultural character of the EU which is seen as threatening national identity and in particular the Christian heritage of their country. This finds echoes in public opinion in these countries (Szczerbiak 2007, 2012 and 2015; Heinisch and Landsberger 2012). In the British referendum on EU membership, questions about national identity and mass immigration were key reasons for endorsing Brexit (Bulman 2016). Lately, in the Italian 2018 general election, Salvini (Lega) specifically referred to the need to protect the Christian heritage of Italy in a campaign dominated by national identity and immigration issues (see, for example, Boschi 2018). The same type of argument is used, perhaps though not as forcefully, by radical parties in laic nations such as France where the ancient status of Christianity in France is used to 'push' the argument for a preferred status. In sum, it is maintained that current EU policies towards terrorism, multiculturalism and the 'side-lining' of the European Christian heritage may be perceived by citizens as not helping to sustain or grow bonds between fellow European citizens.

Formalising these ideas yields the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: subjective national and European economic and political assessments

H1.1: the more positively citizens view their country direction, the more they are likely to bond with other EU citizens.

H1.2: the more citizens are satisfied with their influence on the workings of the EU, the more likely they are to bond with other EU citizens.

Hypothesis 2: objective personal socio-economic circumstances

H2: individuals' education, social class or financial situation strengthens EU citizen cohesion.

Hypothesis 3: objective national socio-economic context

H3.1: the higher the crime rate in the country is, the higher unemployment and immigration in the country are and the lower income dispersion in the country is, the lower EU citizen cohesion is.

H3.2: terrorism does not sway EU citizen cohesion.

H3.3: positioning of party leaderships on multiculturalism does not influence EU citizen cohesion.

Hypothesis 4: Christianity as the official or preferred state religion

H4: in countries where Christianity is recognised as the official or preferred state religion, citizens are no more likely to bond with other EU citizens than those in countries where it is not.

METHODOLOGY

In order to test the hypotheses, public support for the EU has been analysed within 28 EU member states using a two-level hierarchical linear model that allows the combination of individual-level and country-level data²⁰. For the individual-level data, Eurobarometer surveys 84.1 (2015) and 85.1 (2016) are used. The country-level data are mainly based on Eurostat data for 2015 and 2016. The choice of

data derives from the availability of required questions to test the hypotheses. The central goal in developing the regression models is to examine the unique effects of independent variables on the dependent variable²¹. National weights are used to ensure the national representativeness of the samples.

The dependent variable used to test the hypotheses is the following: 'Can you tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'what brings the citizens of the different EU Member States together is more important than what separates them', 'totally agree' (coded 1), 'tend to agree' (coded 2), 'don't know' (coded 3), 'tend to disagree' (coded 4), or 'totally disagree' (coded 5)²². With regard to independent variables, country direction, EU democracy satisfaction, education, social class, financial position, unemployment, income dispersion, immigration, crime, terrorism impact, positioning of party leaderships on multiculturalism and Christianity as state religion are employed to test the hypotheses.

Country Direction – employing the question 'In general, things are going in the right direction, neither in the right nor in the wrong direction or in the wrong direction in our country'. Two variables were created as follows. In the first variable, the response 'things going in the right direction' was coded as 1 and all the other responses were coded as 0. In the second variable, 'neither in the right nor in the wrong direction' was coded as 1 and all other responses were coded as 0. 'Things going in the wrong direction' is as a result the baseline group for both variables.

EU Democracy Satisfaction – using the question 'Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: 'My voice counts in the European Union', 'totally agree' (coded 1), 'tend to agree' (coded 2), 'tend to disagree' (coded 3), or 'totally disagree' (coded 4).

Education – age when stopped full-time education. Education attainment is generally a reliable indicator of citizens' skill levels, employment and earnings (see for example, Carnevale, Rose and Cheah 2011; OECD 2011).

Social Class – Two dummy variables were created as follows. In the first variable, respondents belonging to the middle class of society were coded as 1 and the other 2 groups (working and higher classes of society) were coded as 0. In the second variable, respondents belonging to the higher class of society were coded as 1 and the other 2 groups were coded as 0. Working class is the baseline group which is expected to be the least in favour of European integration (see, for example, Gabel 1998). Social class generally remains a reliable indicator of citizens' education, occupation and earnings (Whitty 2001 and Wright 1997).

Difficulties in Paying Bills – Difficulties in paying bills at the end of the month. Two dummy variables were employed as follows. In the first variable, respondents who occasionally have difficulties in paying bills were coded as 1 and the other two groups (those who 'most of the time' and 'almost never or never' have payment difficulties) were coded as 0. In the second variable, respondents who almost never or never have payment difficulties were coded as 1 and the remaining two groups (those who 'most of the time' and 'occasionally' have the related difficulties) were coded as 0. 'Most of the time' is the baseline group since it is the group which is expected to oppose European integration the most (Gabel 1998).

Unemployment – Unemployment rate (Eurostat definition - source: Eurostat 2016a).

Terrorism Impact – Terrorism impact score in 2015 and 2016 (source: Institute for Economics and Peace 2016). It gauges the direct and indirect impact of terrorism in a country in terms of its effect on lives lost, injuries, property damage and the psychological after-effects of terrorism. The higher the figure, the higher the terrorism impact in a country is.

Income Dispersion in Society (Gini coefficient) – Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income (source: Eurostat 2016a). The Gini coefficient measures the extent to which the distribution of income or consumption expenditure among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality (in income distribution).

Net Migration – Net migration into EU countries per thousand inhabitants (source: Eurostat 2016b). This variable has been selected as it is the most frequently publicly reported and commented upon variable by political actors and field experts. Since most countries do not have accurate figures on immigration and emigration and given the public sensitivity of the information, these figures need to be assessed with caution.

Crime – Crime per head of population (recorded by the police) (source: Eurostat 2016b).

Positioning of Party Leaderships on Multiculturalism – (source: Bakker, Edwards, Hooghe, Jolly et al. 2015). Weighted aggregate expert scores per country are calculated from the raw expert data for the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Surveys on the positioning of political parties on multiculturalism in EU member states. The score of each political party is weighted according to the percentage of votes obtained at the national election most proximate to the Eurobarometer year. A score of 0 means the leadership of a political party strongly favours multiculturalism whilst a score of 10 means the same leadership strongly favours the assimilation of immigrants.

Christianity as Official or Preferred State Religion – (source: Pew Research Center 2017). Two dummy variables were created as follows. In the first variable, countries in which Christianity is the official state religion were coded as 1 and the other 2 groups (countries in which Christianity is the preferred state religion and those in which there is no official or preferred state religion) were coded as 0. In the second variable, countries in which Christianity is the preferred state religion were coded as 1 and the other 2 groups were coded as 0. Countries in which there is no official or preferred state religion are the baseline group.²³

In line with earlier research on public opinion about the EU, the following are control variables: gender, age and ideology.²⁴

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

An analysis of variance is first conducted to determine whether there is significant variation in public opinion on European integration at the individual and national levels (see Table 5). As both the individual and national variance components are significant, there is significant variance in EU opinion at both the individual and national levels: in 2015, 93.66 per cent of the variance are explained at the individual level $[(1.227/(1.227 + 0.083) * 100)]$ and 6.34 per cent at the national level $[0.083/(0.083 + 1.227) * 100]$; in 2016, 91.05 per cent of the variance are explained at the individual level $[(1.150/(1.150 + 0.113) * 100)]$ and 8.95 per cent at the national level $[0.113/(0.113 + 1.150) * 100]$. The fact that the data are measured at the individual level explains this unequal split (Steenbergen and Jones 2002). Two models are specified in Table 6.

The coefficients for country direction and EU democracy satisfaction are (statistically) significant in all models – in other words, both in 2015 and 2016. The direction of these coefficients indicates that the more positively citizens view their country direction or the more citizens are satisfied with their say on the workings of the EU, the more they are likely to feel closer to citizens in other EU countries and support European integration. In light of these results, Hypotheses H1.1 and H1.2 are supported. Therefore, the more positively citizens view their country direction or the more citizens are satisfied with their influence on the workings of the EU, the more they are likely to bond with other EU citizens.

Perceived economic and political gains strengthen links between European citizens and in turn enhance public support for the European project. The results obtained for education, social class²⁵ and citizens' financial positions proceed from the same logic. The coefficients for education, social class and citizens' financial positions (the latter only in 2015) are (statistically) significant. The direction of the related coefficients denotes that individuals of higher social positions, with better levels of education and/or financial capital are more likely to connect with other EU citizens and support integration. In view of these results, Hypothesis H2 is overall supported. Thus, individuals' education, social class or financial situation strengthens EU citizen cohesion. The opportunities that market liberalisation (relating to European integration) offers to individuals with human and financial capital explain these results. The real or potential benefits brought by market liberalisation to them contribute to stimulating feelings of connection with fellow Europeans and the process of European integration. Cost/benefit calculations are the root of public support for the EU. The findings for Hypotheses H1.1, H1.2 and H2 confirm earlier research results (for example, Hix 1999; Hooghe and Marks 2005; and Gabel 1998). However, here, it is the prospect or fulfilment of personal gains that cements bonds between Europeans, which successively provides public support for the European Union.

Table 5: ANOVA

| | Estimates (2015) | Estimates (2016) |
|---------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Fixed Effects | | |
| • Constant | 2.037** (.039) | 1.910** (.037) |
| Variance Components | | |
| • Individual Level | 1.227** (.010) | 1.150** (.009) |
| • Country Level | .083** (.023) | .113** (.029) |
| -2 x log likelihood | 42250.84 | 41165.20 |

Notes: Table entries are maximum likelihood estimates with estimated standard errors in parentheses. ** Significant at $p < .01$
Source: Eurobarometer Surveys 84.1 and 85.1 (2015 and 2016)

Turning to the results for the objective national socio-economic context, the coefficients for unemployment, immigration and crime tend to be (statistically) significant while those for income dispersion are not significant. The direction of the coefficients implies that the higher the crime rate in the country is, the higher unemployment and immigration in the country are, the more Europeans feel 'detached' from citizens in other EU nations and oppose European integration. Bearing in mind these results, Hypothesis H3.1 is supported. Therefore, the higher the crime rate in the country is and the higher unemployment and immigration in the country are, the lower EU citizen cohesion is. However, national levels of income dispersion do not predict the same outcomes. The results for unemployment, immigration and crime can be explained by the fact that while most EU citizens are generally concerned about these issues and tend to be sceptical about the national and EU inputs in the related fields, popular discontent in the most unfavourable national contexts dents bonds between Europeans. In this configuration, citizens are more likely to oppose European integration. The effect of the Euro on national competitiveness²⁶, the financial crisis and the migration emergency have not affected all EU member states uniformly. Some countries such as Italy and Greece have been affected more heavily. Euroscepticism in these settings has found fertile ground to grow and prosper. However, while these results are in line with previous research (for example, Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996 and Gabel 1998), the size of the coefficients in the present research²⁷ tends to be smaller. It is likely that the extent of popular malaise with national levels of immigration, crime and, to a lesser extent, unemployment is such nowadays across EU member states that if this trend continues in the future, actual levels of immigration, crime or unemployment may not be a differentiator of public attitudes towards the EU any longer.

Table 6: Regression estimates of public attitudes towards European integration

| | 2015 | 2016 |
|--|----------------|----------------|
| Constant ^a | 2.207** (.026) | 2.118** (.033) |
| Education | -.086** (.013) | -.080** (.013) |
| Gender | .002 (.006) | -.014* (.007) |
| Age | -.047** (.008) | -.007 (.008) |
| Ideology | .029** (.006) | .032** (.007) |
| Occasional Financial Difficulties | -.027* (.011) | -.008 (.012) |
| Almost No & No Financial Difficulties | -.057** (.012) | -.006 (.013) |
| Middle Class | -.017* (.008) | -.043** (.008) |
| Higher Class | -.010 (.008) | -.045** (.008) |
| Right Country Direction | -.148** (.008) | -.098** (.007) |
| Neither Right nor Wrong Country Direction | -.079** (.007) | -.058** (.007) |
| Voice Counts in the EU | .270** (.007) | .176** (.007) |
| Unemployment | .061 (.030) | .100** (.026) |
| Terrorism Impact | -.014 (.030) | -.066 (.036) |
| Gini Coefficient | .034 (.031) | -.008 (.029) |
| Net Migration | .071* (.031) | .075* (.029) |
| Crime | .062* (.027) | .069* (.029) |
| Positioning of Party Leaderships on Multiculturalism | .051 (.025) | .029 (.019) |
| Christianity as Official State Religion | -.027 (.026) | -.016 (.028) |
| Christianity as Preferred State Religion | .008 (.029) | .008 (.029) |
| N (Nations) | 28 | 28 |
| N (Individuals) | 26334 | 25907 |
| -2 x log likelihood | 36061.74 | 32172.48 |

Notes: Table entries are maximum likelihood (standardised) estimates with estimated standard errors in parentheses.

^a Values for the Constant are B coefficients.

** significant at $p < .01$; * significant at $p < .05$

Source: Eurobarometer Surveys 84.1 and 85.1 (2015 and 2016)

This may explain what seems to have happened with income dispersion. The non-significance of the latter here contradicts earlier findings by, for example, Sanchez-Cuenca (2000). Whilst some differences exist in the extent of social redistribution between countries, market liberalisation and the 2008 economic recession have tended to reduce the level of social redistribution across countries. This downward trend and its causes – the EU free market stance – are probably noted by citizens. Whatever the degree of national social redistribution, individuals do not see integration as helping the matter. The lower grade of social policy fitting with market imperatives pursued by the EU and national governments clashes with popular support for social redistribution across EU nations (see EES 2009; ESS 2012). EU institutions seem to have distanced themselves from a strong source of public EU support.

Our findings for terrorism, positioning of party leaderships on multiculturalism and Christianity as an official or preferred state religion somewhat echo those for social redistribution. The coefficients for terrorism, positioning of party leaderships on multiculturalism and Christianity as an official or preferred state religion are not (statistically) significant. In view of these results, Hypotheses H3.2, H3.3 and H4 are supported. Therefore, terrorism and positioning of party leaderships on multiculturalism do not sway EU citizen cohesion. In countries where Christianity is recognised as the official or preferred state religion, citizens are no more likely to bond with other EU citizens than those in countries where it is not.

It is not only the economic side of globalisation which is generating concerns among people but also its cultural side. National publics tend to be preoccupied with mass immigration, multiculturalism, crime (terrorism included) and loss of national identity. While there are some national differences, immigration tends to have significantly increased in the last 20 years (see Eurostat data). EU institutions and national governments have also generally adopted a more multiculturalist philosophy for the integration of immigrants into European societies. Furthermore, they have defined European identity on a more universal basis.²⁸ These policies are driven by the globalisation of markets and the search for global competitiveness that it implies. Radical political parties are adding fuel to the flames by attempting to exacerbate the tensions and difficulties that these policy changes bring about. Among citizens, however, there are widespread perceived economic, physical (safety) and cultural insecurities associated with globalisation. There is thus a popular convergence on opposing mass immigration and the need to be tougher with crime which tends to cut across class and ideological divides and the socio-economic traditions of each state (Balestrini 2016a and 2016b). Whatever the level of terrorist activities in a country, the related insecurities feed into public opinion about terrorism. National publics seem also to be attached to Christianity, perhaps less so for religious reasons than for reasons of national identity – national history, values and traditions - that it symbolises. These matters are likely to explain the non-significance of terrorism impact, positioning of party leaderships on multiculturalism and Christianity as an official or preferred state religion as a distinguisher of public attitudes towards European integration. Therefore, tweaking policies to address popular concerns about immigration, safety and identity issues may be a powerful lever to influence public attitudes towards the EU positively.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Furthering the literature on public opinion about European integration, this article shows how current and coveted EU policy developments shape feelings of connection between Europeans. More specifically, it does this firstly by demonstrating that perceived economic and political gains bolster links between fellow Europeans which in turn stimulate public support for integration. Secondly, it shows that the real or potential benefits brought by market liberalisation to individuals of higher social positions, with better levels of education and/or financial capital contribute to stimulating feelings of connection with fellow Europeans and the process of European integration.

Thirdly, the findings of this paper demonstrate that while national levels of unemployment, immigration and crime influence EU citizen cohesion, national levels of income redistribution do not. The influence of national levels of unemployment, immigration and crime on the related attitudes is, however, found to be more modest than in previous research. This may be explained by the fact that while EU countries tend to have all been affected by, *inter alia*, national competitiveness issues, the financial crisis and significant migrations, they have not all been equally exposed to these. In the states most impacted by these issues, such as Greece and Italy, Euroscepticism grows and prospers, damaging bonds between Europeans. Widespread perceived economic, cultural and physical (safety) insecurities among citizens seem to be threatening yet to make actual levels of immigration, crime and unemployment a non-differentiator of public opinion about integration. My findings reveal that this has already occurred for income redistribution. Citizens across the EU tend to back social redistribution. Market imperatives inherent to free trade pursued by national and European decision-makers have nevertheless contributed to reducing it substantially. European integration is not, therefore, perceived to be helping the matter. It undermines an important 'historical' source of public support for the EU.

Fourthly, this article expands the public opinion literature on the EU by showing that rife security and identity concerns among citizens weaken another important potential basis of EU support. Thus, terrorism impact, positioning of party leaderships on multiculturalism and Christianity as an official or

preferred state religion are not found to influence EU citizen cohesion. There is a convergence among national publics on rejecting mass immigration, multiculturalism and the absence of reference to Christianity as part of national and European identities. Economic, physical (safety) and cultural insecurities also explain public attitudes towards terrorism no matter what the level of terrorist activities is in a member state. National and European policies relating to these aspects seem to be failing to sustain and grow ties between EU citizens and could in turn jeopardise public EU support.

The political implications of this research are that besides attending to economic anxieties, policymakers need to pay closer attention to addressing citizens' concerns relating to their safety and cultural identity. Sustaining and growing bonds between Europeans – and as a result, building a powerful basis of support for the European project – depends on taking into better consideration public preoccupations with social protection, policing and their sense of being Europeans, more specifically what unites and distinguishes EU citizens from other citizens. This entails reviewing policies such as, *inter alia*, terms of trade²⁹, immigration, social protection, policing but also what it means to be European. Considering the sheer changes brought about by economic and cultural globalisation and the concerns it generates for most people, paying tribute to the past and present role of Christianity in European societies may help alleviate some of these concerns even if in a purely symbolic way. Changes in national and European policies need not be wholesale. What is required though is bringing the latter closer to citizens' preoccupations. The extent and nature of popular discontent with EU and national socio-economic outputs together with one of its symptoms – the growing popularity of radical Eurosceptic parties – seem to indicate that weathering the popular storm without noticeable changes in political orientation is likely to be a tall order. Future research may extend the current research to the post 2016 period and investigate the extent and nature of changes needed to help cement feelings of connection between citizens.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and feedback.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Pierre Philippe Balestrini, Independent Scholar [pbalestrini08@gmail.com].

ENDNOTES

¹ The questions used to operationalise these variables are the following: 'Generally speaking, do you think that our country's membership of the EU is a good thing, a bad thing or neither a good thing nor a bad thing?' and 'Taking everything into consideration, would you say that our country has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Union?' (see for example, Eurobarometer 77.4 and 71.4).

² I use the terms 'EU Citizen Cohesion', 'Bonds', 'Links', 'Shared Interests', 'Connections', or relatedly 'Sense of Proximity' (between citizens) in the article. Extant literature has shown that national and individual utilitarian appraisals of the EU play a central role in moulding public attitudes towards it. As developed further in the article (see page 3), the economic and cultural proximity between EU citizens stems from the relative cultural closeness of EU nations (see for example, Hofstede 1991) and a relatively similar integration into the world economy of EU nations (OECD 2018) – EU nations are generally more exposed to globalisation than, for example, China, the Russian Federation and United States. It also arises from economic and social policy choices which are largely shaped by their country's membership of the EU. These choices are not always popular among national publics – *the economic and cultural globalisation endorsed by the EU is thus deemed excessive* (see page 3). This context is likely to create a common sense of threats and belonging among EU individuals and help shape common interests and connections between EU citizens.

³ More precisely, citizens considering that things are going in the right direction in their country or those who have positive expectations over the coming 12 months for the country's economic and employment situations or the financial situation of their household.

⁴ The EU induces changes in policy fields as diverse as economic affairs, social redistribution, commercial matters, foreign trade, working conditions, cultural affairs, immigration, education, transport, environment and foreign and security affairs. It has developed as a distinct polity that sits above the national level. In such a political system of governance, it is increasingly difficult to pursue distinct national group interests. Boundaries between national communities are blurred and norms of 'us' and 'them' can erode. The one-size-fits-all monetary policy pertaining to the Euro exemplifies this to some extent. The management of the Euro currency is considered as primarily benefiting Germany to the detriment of nations such as Greece, Spain, France and Italy (see for example, Stiglitz 2016).

⁵ This is tantamount to socialisation theory (see for example, Inglehart and Rabier 1978; Inglehart, Rabier and Reif 1991; Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996). According to these scholars, when a country joins the EU, it starts a political socialisation process, which leads to greater public awareness and appreciation of some of the benefits derived from integration and the set of institutions making up the EU more generally.

⁶ This scepticism towards globalisation has moreover played a role in the rise of populism and growing public support for radical political parties (see Inglehart and Norris 2016).

⁷ The EU membership and EU benefit questions are not available in Eurobarometer 85.1 (2016).

⁸ Response categories include: 'totally agree' (1), 'tend to agree' (2), 'don't know' (3), 'tend to disagree' (4), or 'totally disagree' (5).

⁹ The result of the Kayser–Meyer–Oklin test was 0.68 (0.58 for second column of Table 4), exceeding the recommended value of 0.5 and the Bartlett's test of Sphericity reached statistical significance ($< .01$) which supported the use of factor analysis (Bartlett 1954; Kaiser 1974). The EU assessment scale has a reasonable internal consistency ($\alpha = .60$ and $.51$). With short scales (for example scales with fewer than ten items), it is common to find quite low Cronbach's alpha values (Tabachnick & Fidell 2001).

¹⁰ In other words, the type of EU they favour, and more specifically the type of policies they would like the EU to implement.

¹¹ The results of the factor analysis empirically establish that the perceived economic and cultural proximity between Europeans – and therefore an identification with Europeans and Europe – sways public support for the EU. This brings support to the notion that a form of European identity exists (Cram 2012; Citrin and Sides 2004; Risse 2010).

¹² Radical political parties – such as Vox (Spain), La Destra, FdI and La Lega (Italy), UKIP and BNP (UK), RN (France), AFD (Germany), and FPÖ (Austria) – as well as factions within mainstream parties – PP (Spain), The Conservative Party (UK), CDU/CSU (Germany), LR (France), ÖVP (Austria) and FI (Italy). Many of these parties and factions also view Trump's trade policy (and especially its defence of protectionism) as a model.

¹³ The majority of immigrants in EU countries are from non-EU countries and tend to be lower-skilled workers (Lahav 2004).

¹⁴ The EU is a key exponent of globalisation. Citizens tend to view the latter as primarily benefiting large companies rather than individuals (see for example, Eurobarometer 69.2, 72.4 and 73.4; Balestrini 2015). The extent of citizens' knowledge about the EU's free trade stance may be arguable. However, media coverage about European corporate outsourcings in developing countries, citizens' personal experience with customer facing functions located outside of the EU and political parties regularly commenting on these deemed excessive outsourcings provide citizens with informational cues and shortcuts.

¹⁵ Such as Denmark, France and Sweden.

¹⁶ Especially Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Sweden and the United Kingdom (Eurostat 2018).

¹⁷ One can draw here a parallel with the intergroup contact theory (see for example, Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; and Schneider 2008). The granting of equal status to different cultural communities, the nurturing of dialogue and cooperation (between these), the sharing of common goals (i.e. achieving community and national welfare) and the support of social and institutional authorities (including political parties) to achieve this can help to reduce prejudice between communities and find common ground. To this effect, the contact between communities does not need to be direct (face to face). It can be indirect (e.g. imagined contact, knowledge of contact among others or positive presentation of intergroup relations in the media) (see for example, Crisp and Turner 2009 and Husnu and Crisp 2010).

¹⁸ Especially since the beginning of the 21st century, see Eurostat data on immigration.

¹⁹ In essence, mass immigration makes it difficult to follow assimilationist policies towards immigrants, especially if, as tends to be the case in Europe, most of this immigration is culturally distant from traditional Judeo-Christian European cultures. France exemplifies this situation. It has abandoned its traditional immigrant assimilation policies and adopted instead immigrant integration strategies where multiculturalism is embraced (see Tribalat 2013; Choquet 2017).

²⁰ As one examines how the objective national socio-economic context shapes individual differences in attitudes towards European integration, a two-level hierarchical linear model is employed. This method is appropriate since the concern is with explaining variation at both the individual and national levels. A multi-level model enables us to explore causal heterogeneity and test the generalisability of findings across different national contexts (Steenbergen and Jones 2002). This model also corrects for the dependence of observations within countries – intra-class correlations – and makes adjustments both within and between the parameter estimates for the clustered nature of the data (Snijders and Bosker 1999).

²¹ In other words, examine the unique contribution of independent variables to the explanation of the dependent variable, controlling for other variables.

²² The 'do not know' response was retained in the dependent variable as it can help to capture the opinion of people who neither agree nor disagree with the statements - and not only those who have no opinion on the issues - in the absence of such an option in the response categories proposed to respondents. The regression results were very similar with or without integrating the 'do not know' category.

²³ Countries in which Christianity is the official state religion include Denmark, Greece, Malta and the United Kingdom, while Christianity is the preferred state religion in Bulgaria, Finland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Spain. In Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden, there is no official or preferred state religion.

²⁴ Operationalisation of these variables: Gender – (0) Male and (1) female categories; Age – in years; Political Ideology – ideological views of respondents from 1 (left) to 10 (right).

²⁵ In 2015, only the middle class variable is (statistically) significant.

²⁶ More generally, national competitiveness issues.

²⁷ More recent data are used in the present research.

²⁸ It is probable that not all central governments share this conception of European identity but have been unable to influence the matter. The Franco-German partnership, often key to the integration of Europe, may have been particularly directive towards other EU nations on this question and have influenced them to follow suit. For a discussion of group processes in the context of EU decision-making, see, for example, Balestrini and Gamble 2011.

²⁹ This is especially the case in emerging economies such as Brazil, China and India, all of which have a significant cost advantage. People tend to view mass immigration and industrial or service offshoring as a 'double penalty' (Balestrini 2016a).

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