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Public Support for European Integration

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Keywords

attitudes, elections, European integration, European Union, Euroskepticism, public opinion

Abstract

Public opinion is increasingly at the heart of both political and scholarly debates on European integration. This article reviews the large literature on public support for, and opposition to, European integration, focusing on conceptualization, causes, and consequences: What is public support for European integration? How can we explain variation in support and Euroskepticism? What are the consequences of public support for elections and policy making in the European Union? The review reveals that although a growing literature has sought to explain individual support for European integration, more work is needed to understand the ways in which opinions are shaped by their national context and how increasing public contestation of the European Union poses a challenge to, and an opportunity for, the future of the integration project.

INTRODUCTION

The future of the European Union hinges more than ever on citizens' support for the European integration project. Gone are the days when elites could pursue European integration with no regard to public opinion. With a proliferation of referendums on EU matters, the rise of Euroskeptic parties, and the politicization of EU issues in national and European elections, there has been a move away from the "permissive consensus" (Lindberg & Scheingold 1970) of the early period of integration toward a "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe & Marks 2009). This has been clearly illustrated during the recent sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone, which resulted in a decline in trust in both national and EU institutions and in an increase in support for Euro-critical parties (Cramme & Hobolt 2014). The European Union faces an existential challenge: The unprecedented development in supranational governance has led to greater public contestation of the European Union, but at the same time the Union is increasingly reliant on public support for its continued legitimacy.

Not surprisingly there is a burgeoning literature on public attitudes toward European integration. Early studies focused on support for European integration (see, e.g., Gabel & Palmer 1995, Inglehart 1970, Sánchez-Cuenca 2000), whereas the focus in the last decade has shifted to opposition to European integration, or so-called Euroskepticism (e.g., Hakhverdian et al. 2013, Hooghe 2007, Leconte 2010). However, the core question examined in this literature remains the same: What explains variation in attitudes toward European integration? In most studies, public opinion on European integration refers to the general approval or disapproval of EU membership and European unification (see Gabel 1998; Hooghe & Marks 2004, 2005; McLaren 2006). Some recent studies have challenged this one-dimensional approach and have begun to explore multifaceted, and more policy-specific, opinions (see Boomgaarden et al. 2011, De Vries & Steenbergen 2013, Stöckel 2013). What these different viewpoints have in common is that they treat public opinion as the dependent variable. The literature has broadly focused on three sets of explanations for support: a utilitarian approach to the benefits of membership, identity-driven motivations, and cue-taking and benchmarking with reference to the national political context.

Far less attention has been paid to EU attitudes as an explanatory variable, that is, to the effects of public opinion on European integration. The consensus has been that EU attitudes are largely irrelevant in European Parliament elections and that mainstream political parties prefer not to compete on issues relating to European integration (see Hix & Marsh 2007, Mair 2000, Reif & Schmitt 1980, Van der Eijk & Franklin 1996). Yet, recent studies have shown that such attitudes can be an important determinant of vote choices, especially among the politically sophisticated, and that the integration issue is becoming increasingly politicized by challenger parties (Hobolt & De Vries 2015, De Vries et al. 2011, Hobolt et al. 2009, Spoon 2012). Moreover, the Eurozone crisis has demonstrated how public opinion can act as a constraint on national governments' negotiations in the European Union. Nonetheless, there is limited systematic research on how public attitudes shape policy outcomes, at both the national and the European level.

This article reviews the literature on support for European integration, focusing on conceptualization, causes, and consequences: What is support for, and opposition to, European integration? What are the antecedents of these attitudes? And what are the effects of these attitudes on policy makers and policy making in the European Union? In reviewing the existing literature, we highlight three themes in need of further research: first, the relationship between diffuse and policy-specific support for European integration and the stability of such attitudes; second, how the diverse national contexts shape people's perceptions of the European Union; and finally, when and how public opinion acts as a constraint on policy making and with what consequences for the efficiency and legitimacy of the European Union.

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT OF PUBLIC SUPPORT

For decades European citizens were viewed as largely irrelevant to the process of integration. One of the leading thinkers on European integration, Ernst Haas, stated over 50 years ago: “It is as impracticable as it is unnecessary to have recourse to general public opinion surveys It suffices to single out and define the political elites in the participating countries, to study the reactions to integration and assess changes in attitude on their part” (Haas 1958, p. 17). Yet, as the European Union has evolved from an international organization primarily concerned with trade liberalization to an economic and political union with wide-ranging competences, public opinion has also become more important, and the very idea of European integration has become increasingly contested. The rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 in a referendum in Denmark marked a turning point in the study of European integration, sparking scholarly interest in the role of public opinion (Franklin et al. 1994, Siune & Svensson 1993, Worre 1995). Since then, thousands of articles have been dedicated to understanding the contours of public opinion toward Europe.¹ The first wave of studies in the 1990s focused on support for European integration, whereas the second wave of studies in the 2000s was aimed at understanding opposition to the European Union, popularly coined Euroskepticism. What both waves have in common is that they focused almost exclusively on the determinants of public opinion and paid less attention to the definition and measurement of the concept. This raises the question of what we actually mean when we refer to and measure support for European integration.

Studies have generally treated public support as a single latent variable of fixed attitudes toward European integration, ranging from rejection of the European project to high levels of support for European unification (e.g., Hooghe & Marks 2005). Empirically, this has been captured with one or more survey questions concerning support for EU membership and attitudes toward European unification. Recent studies, however, have challenged this approach in two ways. First, some studies suggest that attitudes toward European integration are inherently variable, reflecting differential degrees of certainty and ambivalence (De Vries & Steenbergen 2013, Stöckel 2013). Second, Boomgaarden et al. (2011) suggest that a one-dimensional approach to support for European integration is insufficient (see also Hobolt & Brouard 2011); instead, they advocate a multidimensional understanding including the dimensions of performance, identity, affection, utilitarianism, and strengthening—all of which are closely linked to the different explanatory approaches that we discuss below. These studies thus raise important questions about whether citizens have consistent and unidimensional attitudes toward European integration or whether we need to distinguish between several dimensions.

A useful starting point is the seminal work by Easton (1965, 1975). Easton pioneered the study of public support for systems of government, which “refers to the way in which a person evaluatively orients himself to some [political] objects through either his attitudes or his behavior” (Easton 1975, p. 436). He distinguishes between two different modes of political support: diffuse and specific. Whereas diffuse support refers to the evaluation of the regime, broadly defined as the system of government and the constitutional arrangements underlying it, specific support relates more to policy, that is, the binding collective decisions and actions taken by political actors operating in the broader system of government (see Norris 1999).

In the context of European integration, it is also useful to distinguish between regime support and policy support (e.g., De Wilde & Trenz 2012). Regime support denotes support for the

¹A simple Google Scholar search using the keywords “public support for European integration” and “public support for the EU,” for example, retrieved 1,690 and 912 hits, respectively. The “Euroscepticism”/“Euroskepticism” search terms generated approximately 12,000 hits.

constitutional settlement of the European Union as laid down in the various treaties, including support for membership of the Union. This type of support is crucial to any system, since it allows it to retain legitimacy even when people become disillusioned with the performance of specific governments and policies (see Norris 1999). In established democracies, regime support is often taken for granted, yet in the context of the European Union, it is still inherently fragile. Unlike most established nation states, the European Union is characterized by an inherent ambiguity. It is a hybrid multilevel political system, far more integrated than an international system, yet it is not a nation state. The Union's external boundaries are continuously redrawn, there is uncertainty about the scope of its competences, the underlying demos is fuzzy, and its aims are contested by politicians and publics in many member states. The lack of elite and public consensus about the nature of the EU polity presents an existential challenge to the European project (De Wilde & Trenz 2012, Mair 2007). Given its far-reaching economic and political integration, the European Union is increasingly dependent on wider popular legitimacy, yet it lacks a long-lasting attachment to its constitutional order that can serve as a buffer against short-term policy failures. Because the actions of all elites will occasionally fail to meet public expectations, dissatisfaction with policy outcomes is endemic to any system of government (Scharpf 1999). In contrast to what happens with other international organizations, however, the ambiguity surrounding the European Union is increasingly politicized in the public and media discourse as well as in party and electoral competition (e.g., De Vreese 2003, De Vries 2007, Hobolt 2009, Hooghe & Marks 2009). As a consequence, it remains important to examine the causes and consequences of regime support in the European Union.

Policy support refers to support for the content of collective decisions and actions taken by EU actors. In practice, however, it can be difficult to clearly separate the notions of regime and policy support, since EU policies often involve transfers of sovereignty from the national to the European level. European integration has created a complex and multilevel division of power between various European institutions and between EU institutions and national governments, which also deeply affects national policies and practices (Hooghe & Marks 2001). Hence, EU policy support is characterized by a fundamental problem of attribution of policy responsibility (Hobolt & Tilley 2014), and it may not be easily disentangled from support for national policies (see also Rohrschneider 2000, Sánchez-Cuenca 2000). What is more, for much of its history the European Union was presented to citizens as a matter of foreign policy, about which citizens tend to have little knowledge (De Vries et al. 2011, Holsti 1992, Karp et al. 2003). Although interest in and knowledge of EU affairs has grown as integration has deepened and has become more contested, public opinion toward the European Union is still characterized by a high degree of uncertainty (De Vries & Steenbergen 2013). This allows national political elites to use the European Union as a scapegoat for domestic problems, which might dampen EU policy support. Policy-specific EU public opinion should therefore be analyzed and interpreted in its multilevel context rather than as an isolated phenomenon.

Just as most studies have paid relatively little attention to the conceptualization of support for European integration, the precise measurement of public attitudes toward European integration has also received somewhat limited consideration. Studies have employed a variety of measures to capture the empirical dynamics of support, such as trust in EU institutions, support for membership, or desired speed of integration. Most scholars rely on the Eurobarometer surveys because these constitute the only data source that allows for cross-national and longitudinal comparisons. One problematic issue, however, is that several questions have been reworded or excluded from the surveys, and hence very few questions cover the entire period since the early 1970s. As a result, there is often a trade-off between analyses that rely on one or a small set of items to measure support over time and a cross-sectional analysis of various dimensions of support captured at a

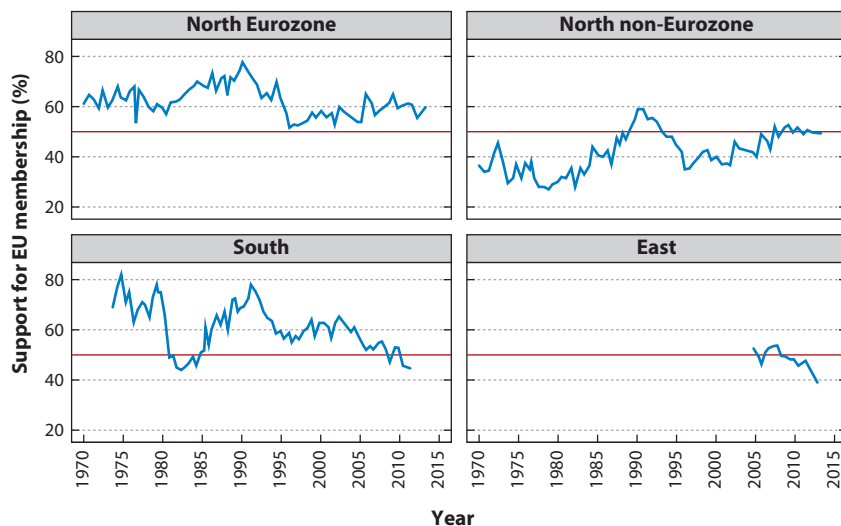


Figure 1

EU regime support by region.

single point in time. Recent work, for example Bechtel et al.'s (2014) study of support for bailouts in the German context, employs new data collection techniques such as conjoint survey experiments to capture the multifaceted nature of public opinion toward European integration (see also Boomgaarden et al. 2011).

The distinct advantage of Eurobarometer data is that they allow us to illustrate some cross-national and cross-temporal dynamics in EU regime and policy support, which we present in **Figures 1–3**. To capture regime support, we use the classic measure of citizens' support for membership.² Specifically, **Figure 1** shows the percentage of people who view their country's membership in the European Union as a "good thing." Because policy support relates to the content of collective decisions and actions taken by the European Union, we capture this dimension by measuring citizens' preference for speeding up policy integration within the European Union. **Figure 2** shows the percentage of people who prefer policy integration to speed up rather than to come to a standstill.³ In **Figure 3** we look specifically at support for one of the most salient EU policies, the single currency. These figures display trends in regime and policy support by EU regions—North (Eurozone versus not), South, and East—to capture the different political and economic circumstances within the Union.⁴

Much has been made of the supposed rise of Euroskepticism, so it is noteworthy that the figures do not show any clear downward trend in support. Instead, **Figure 1** shows that support

²This item asks respondents if their country's membership in the European Union is a "good thing," a "bad thing," or "neither good nor bad," and it has been used by many scholars to assess EU regime support.

³The question asks respondents: "In your opinion, what is the current speed of building Europe? No. 1 is standing still; No. 7 is running as fast as possible. . . . And which corresponds best with what you would like?" **Figure 2** plots the percentage of citizens who rate their opinion as 4 or higher on a 7-point scale.

⁴The following member states are included in each region: North Eurozone: Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands; North not Eurozone: Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom; South: Cyprus, France, Italy, Greece, Malta, Portugal, and Spain; East: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

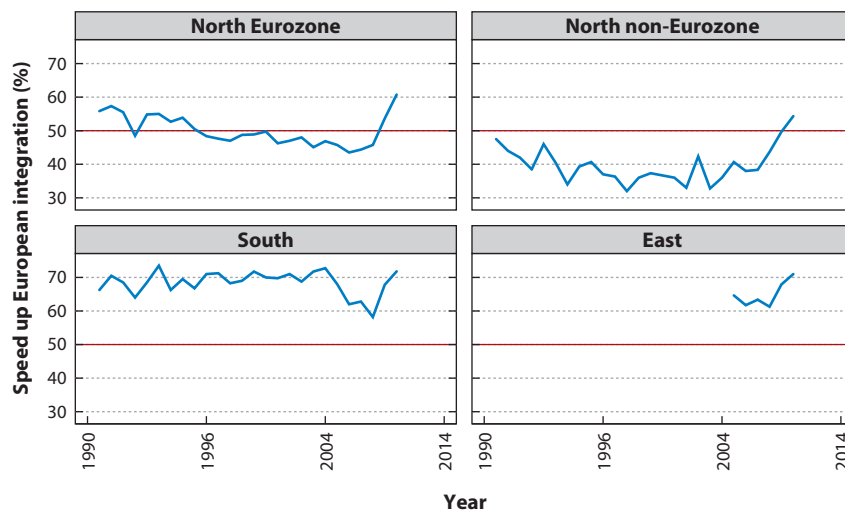


Figure 2

EU policy support by region.

for membership has been fairly stable and markedly above 50% in the Northern member states albeit it has been lower in non-Eurozone members, Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. In the Southern member states, average support is above 50% with two exceptions: a decline in the early 1980s due to the accession of Greece, Portugal, and Spain (countries in which public opinion was at first more skeptical of European integration than in Italy and France), and a more

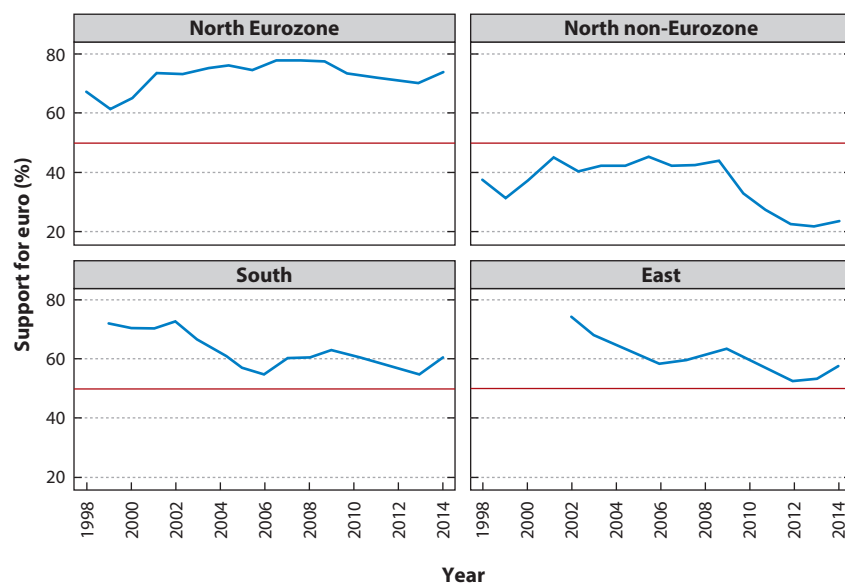


Figure 3

Support for the euro by region.

steady deterioration of support since the start of the Eurozone crisis. Even slightly more negative views about membership can be found in Central and Eastern Europe in recent years.

Interestingly, whereas **Figure 1** shows that regime support is currently higher in the North compared to the South and the East, **Figure 2** displays a contrasting pattern. General policy support is much higher in the South and the East compared to the Northern regions. Since the start of the Eurozone crisis in 2010, support for further integration has increased throughout the Union. However, when we turn specifically to support for the euro,⁵ displayed in **Figure 3**, we see that the Eurozone crisis has also led to increasing divergence in support for the single currency. First, we can observe an increasing divide between Eurozone members and nonmembers: Support inside the Eurozone has remained high and relatively stable, whereas it has declined sharply outside the Eurozone, both in the North and in the East (see Hobolt & Wratil 2015). Second, the figure shows that support has remained higher in the richer creditor countries in the North than in the Southern member states. This is not surprising, given that Southern member states have been most severely affected by the sovereign debt crisis and several countries have faced far-reaching austerity policies and structural reforms as part of sovereign bailout programs of the International Monetary Fund and the European Commission.

These findings are interesting in two respects. First, although citizens on average display high levels of regime support, that does not necessarily imply that they favor further policy integration in Europe, and vice versa. Second, although regime support is currently higher in the founding member states of the North compared to the South and the East, this trend is somewhat different when we look at policy support. On the one hand, support for the euro has declined most sharply outside the Eurozone and in bailout countries in the South. On the other hand, the publics in the South and the East are the most enthusiastic about further European integration. This suggests that even though citizens in the South and the East, who have experienced considerable economic hardship in the context of the financial crisis, may have become less enthusiastic about EU membership in recent years, their support for further EU policy integration is still very high, over 70% in 2013. This may be partly due to a desire for greater economic redistribution across the European Union in the South and the East and to the widespread public perception that despite the poor performance of the European Union during the crisis, national governments do not offer better solutions (see Hobolt & Leblond 2013). This evidence highlights the context-specific nature of public support for European integration and may suggest that for some countries European integration still constitutes a lifebuoy for national policy performance (e.g., Hartevelde et al. 2013, Sánchez-Cuenca 2000). This leads us to the literature on how to explain such variation in support.

CAUSES OF PUBLIC SUPPORT

Most of the literature on public opinion on European integration has emerged since the early 1990s⁶ and has focused on EU regime support, although some studies have concentrated on policy-specific support for enlargement (e.g., Hobolt 2014, McLaren 2007, Schuck & De Vreese 2006) and the single currency, the euro (e.g., Banducci et al. 2009; Gabel & Hix 2005; Hobolt & Leblond 2009, 2013; Hobolt & Wratil 2015; Kaltenthaler & Anderson 2001). These studies adopt

⁵The figure shows Eurobarometer survey responses in favor of a “European Monetary Union with one single currency, the EURO.”

⁶A notable exception is Inglehart’s (1970) early studies of support as well as work on voting behavior in European Parliament elections published in the 1980s (e.g., Reif & Schmitt 1980).

three main explanatory approaches to explaining variation in support for European integration: utilitarian, identity, and cue-taking and benchmarking approaches.

Utilitarian Approach

“Ever closer union among the peoples of Europe” was the bold political vision set out in the founding treaty;⁷ yet for the first four decades the reality of European integration was focused overwhelmingly on economic cooperation and market integration. Not surprisingly, therefore, studies of public support for European integration in the 1990s were dominated by utilitarian explanations of support based on an individual cost-benefit analysis. The basic idea in these studies is that European trade liberalization will favor citizens with higher levels of income and human capital (education and occupational skills) and that as a consequence such individuals will be more supportive of European integration (Anderson & Reichert 1995, Gabel 1998, Gabel & Palmer 1995, Tucker et al. 2002). The removal of barriers to trade allows firms to shift production across borders and increases job insecurity for low-skilled workers, whereas high-skilled workers and those with capital can take advantage of the opportunities resulting from a liberalized European market. Studies have consistently shown that socioeconomic factors influence public support, and recent work even suggests that education has become a more important determinant of EU support over time, as the less educated are becoming less supportive of the integration project (see Hakhverdian et al. 2013).

The utilitarian explanation has also been applied to the national level: In countries that profit directly from net fiscal transfers from the European Union or indirectly from improved trade and favorable economic conditions, public support for membership is expected to be higher (Anderson & Kaltenthaler 1996, Carrubba 1997, Eichenberg & Dalton 1993). However, the simple argument that net beneficiary countries are more supportive has found mixed empirical support. More recent studies have shown that the economy has a powerful moderating effect on how identity and ideology shape integration attitudes. For example, it has been shown that people on the left are more opposed to integration than people on the right in countries with extensive welfare states, because integration can lead to the dilution of their welfare systems, whereas the opposite is true in countries with high income inequality and limited public ownership where further integration may increase redistribution (see Brinegar & Jolly 2005; Brinegar et al. 2004; Burgoon 2009; Garry & Tilley 2009, 2015). Hence, these recent developments in the literature highlight the importance of studying how EU attitudes are embedded in diverse national contexts, a theme we will return to later.

Identity Approach

As the European Union has evolved from an international organization primarily concerned with trade liberalization to an economic and political union with wide-ranging competences, the literature has also shifted its attention to explanations for support that build on notions of identity, group conflict, and symbolic politics. The major contention in this literature is that European integration is not only, or even primarily, about a single market, but also about a pooling of sovereignty that potentially erodes national self-determination and blurs boundaries between distinct national communities (Carey 2002; Hooghe & Marks 2005, 2009; McLaren 2006). Not

⁷The EEC Treaty (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=URISERV%3Axy0023>) established the European Economic Community in 1957.

surprisingly, therefore, individuals' attachment to their nation and their perceptions of people from other cultures influence their attitudes toward European integration. Carey (2002) has shown that people with strong national identity and pride are less supportive of European integration. There is also evidence in studies by McLaren (2002, 2006) and others that Euroskepticism is closely related to a general hostility toward other cultures, such as negative attitudes toward minority groups and immigrants (De Vreese & Boomgaarden 2005, Hobolt et al. 2011). Hooghe & Marks (2004, 2005) have demonstrated that individuals who conceive of their national identity as exclusive of other territorial identities are likely to be considerably more Euroskeptic than those who have multiple nested identities.

Because most empirical studies of public support for the European Union rely on Eurobarometer survey data, as discussed, it is possible to compare different theoretical explanations using the same data. Analyses have shown that identity-related concerns are as important as, if not more important than, utilitarian factors (socioeconomic characteristics) in explaining support for integration (see Carey 2002, Hooghe & Marks 2005, McLaren 2006). One concern with such comparisons is that some of the measures used by scholars to measure national and European attachment⁸ and attitudes toward minorities could be endogenous to EU support. That is to say, it is difficult to establish whether it is support for the European Union that causes people to say that they feel European or vice versa. Indeed, scholars of identity formation in the European Union have pointed out that further work is needed to understand the conceptual basis of European identity and how this relates to support (see Bruter 2003, 2005). Moreover, most of the studies assessing the impact of identity versus utility are relatively static in nature.

Rather than assuming that identity concerns necessarily become more important as the integration process deepens, recent studies have suggested that the Eurozone crisis has meant that citizens increasingly form opinions on the basis of utility calculations (Hobolt & Wratil 2015). As shown in **Figure 3**, support for the euro has remained high and stable inside the Eurozone, especially in the North, but has declined significantly in non-Eurozone countries and to a lesser degree also in debtor countries in the South. This reflects differences in the economic and political context: For EU members the prospect of abandoning the single currency is highly perilous, whereas for EU outsiders the adoption of a currency in turmoil is not an attractive option (see Hobolt & Leblond 2013). At the individual level, studies have shown that such economic cost-benefit analyses have become a more important determinant of euro support since the onset of the crisis. This is especially the case in poorer member states where economic considerations are more salient and therefore national identity is less of a constraint on support for deeper European integration (Hobolt & Wratil 2015, Kuhn & Stoeckel 2014). This raises the fundamental question of how such attitudes are formed and mobilized in changing national political settings.

Cue-Taking and Benchmarking Approaches

Before the Eurozone crisis and the associated bailout programs in debtor states, few people had direct personal experiences with the European Union, and knowledge of the Union was generally low. Studies have therefore focused on the role of parties and other intermediaries such as the media in shaping support for the European Union. The core argument is that European integration is too complex and remote from the daily lives of most citizens for them to have sufficient interest, awareness, or emotional attachment to base their attitudes on an evaluation of the implications of

⁸For example: "Do you see yourself as 1) [nationality] only, 2) [nationality] and European, 3) European and [nationality], or 4) European only?"

the integration process (Anderson 1998, Weßels 1995). Instead, citizens rely on proxies or cues to overcome their information shortfalls. Such information shortcuts may take various forms, but given that citizens generally pay more attention to the national political arena than to European politics, it makes sense that they employ domestic cues to form opinions about European integration. The notion of citizens relying on national proxies was first developed in the context of research on European elections and referendums (Franklin et al. 1994, Hobolt 2009, Reif & Schmitt 1980, Schneider & Weitsman 1996), but it has also been applied to the study of support for integration.

The national news media is a crucial source of political information for citizens, and a growing strand of literature examines how media coverage shapes attitudes toward the European Union. Although it is notoriously difficult to clearly identify media effects empirically, several studies—using a mix of time-series analysis, panel studies, and experimental methods—have shown that the way in which the media frame the European Union has a significant, albeit modest, effect on support for European integration at both the individual and the contextual level (see, e.g., Azrout et al. 2012, De Vreese & Boomgaarden 2006, Schuck & De Vreese 2006, Vliegenthart et al. 2009). Another important type of cue is the one provided by national political parties. It is well established that political elites shape public support for the European Union and that citizens who support pro-European parties are more likely to be supportive of European integration (Hellström 2008, Hobolt 2007, Hooghe & Marks 2005), although some studies have shown that this is a reciprocal process, whereby party elites both respond to and shape the views of their supporters (Gabel & Scheve 2007, Steenbergen et al. 2007). Much less attention is paid to the exact content of party cues. A study by De Vries & Edwards (2009) focusing on Euroskeptical party cues suggests that whereas left-wing Euroskeptical parties mobilize economic anxieties and antiausterity concerns against the European project, right-wing Euroskeptical parties rally opposition by highlighting national identity considerations and feelings of cultural threats. This has become particularly evident in recent years, when left-wing Euroskeptical parties such as Syriza and Podemos, in Greece and Spain, respectively, have campaigned successfully on an antiausterity platform, whereas right-wing Euroskeptical parties in the North, including the Front National in France, the Freedom Party in Austria and the Netherlands, and the Danish People's Party have gained votes by appealing to anti-immigration sentiments.

Despite these elite-mass linkages, mainstream political elites on average remain considerably more supportive of the European integration than citizens (Aspinwall 2002, Hooghe 2003, Müller et al. 2012). Part of the reason for this disconnect between voters and mainstream political parties is that there is no straightforward relationship between the dominant dimension of contestation in Europe, namely left-right politics, and the European integration dimension (De Vries & Hobolt 2012, Marks & Steenbergen 2002). Hence, most mainstream parties have preferred not to politicize an issue that could lead to internal splits and voter defection. As a consequence, Euroskeptical positions have mainly been adopted by parties on the fringes of the left-right spectrum that mobilize Euroskepticism to attract new voters (De Vries & Edwards 2009, Green-Pedersen 2012, Hobolt & De Vries 2015, Hooghe et al. 2002, Spoon 2012, Taggart 1998, Van de Wardt et al. 2014). Recent work shows that a similar U-shaped relationship between voters' left-right ideology and EU support has evolved since the Maastricht Treaty (Van Elsas & Van der Brug 2015).

Citizens can also use the national context as a heuristic in other ways. In particular, it has been argued that the domestic political institutions are a benchmark for people's views on European integration. In its simplest version, the argument is that because citizens overall lack knowledge about the European Union, they use national proxies to evaluate the Union, such as government performance, about which they have more direct information (Anderson 1998, Kritzinger 2003). A slightly different view is put forward in the seminal study by Sánchez-Cuenca (2000), which

argues that the national context provides a contrasting lens producing an inverse perception of national and European institutions: Those citizens who are dissatisfied with the performance of their national systems will be more willing to transfer sovereignty to the EU level, and vice versa. This finding fits with the conclusion reached in other studies showing that individuals, particularly those who are politically aware, are capable of distinguishing between EU and national institutions when making their evaluations (Karp et al. 2003).

The significance of benchmarking for public opinion formation has also been established in other areas such as economic voting (e.g., Kayser & Peress 2012). This form of benchmarking not only applies to national performance based on the economy, but also to the functioning of democracy at the national level. Rohrschneider (2000) for example shows that citizens who consider their national democratic institutions to be working well display much lower levels of EU regime support irrespective of economic performance evaluations, because they perceive politics at the European level to be democratically deficient. Other work suggests that the exact content of national benchmarks, either economic or political in nature, used by citizens to evaluate the European Union crucially depends on the level of national prosperity. Whereas citizens in less affluent nations evaluate the European Union mainly on the basis of economic performance, in more affluent nations publics rely mostly on political criteria and benchmark the European Union's perceived democracy deficit against the functioning of their national democracies (Rohrschneider & Loveless 2010). This is similar to the findings by more recent studies of support for European economic governance (Kuhn & Stoeckel 2014), and it may help to explain the growing divergence in policy-specific EU support across the regions of the European Union. Overall, these studies underscore the importance of the national context in providing benchmarks against which the public can judge the European Union.

CONSEQUENCES OF SUPPORT

Whereas an extensive literature has focused on the antecedents of popular support for European integration, far fewer studies have examined whether public opinion has any discernable effect on European policy making. As discussed, the issue of European integration was for many years regarded as one of limited relevance to the public and to domestic party competition. However, scholars argue that public opposition to the European Union is increasingly acting as a constraint on the integration process; this is most clearly illustrated in referendums on European integration that have introduced a popular element into the process of European integration, forcing national and European elites to consider how to garner public support for the integration project (Hobolt 2009, Hooghe & Marks 2009). The election of the Euro-critical Syriza-led government in Greece in 2015 has demonstrated not only how the crisis has changed Greek public attitudes toward policies originating from the European Union, but also the extent to which Euroskeptic voices in government complicate the EU policy-making process. Therefore, recent studies have started to pay more attention to the effects of EU attitudes by investigating the connection between the public and policy makers in the European Union, in particular focusing on the extent to which attitudes toward Europe matter in elections.

Most of the literature on the impact of EU attitudes on electoral behavior has highlighted the absence of an electoral connection, both in European and in national elections and referendums. Scholars have argued that despite successive reforms to make the European Parliament (the European Union's only directly elected institution) a more powerful legislature, European elections are still not genuinely European contests, but rather second-order national elections (Reif & Schmitt 1980) in which domestic concerns dominate the agenda. Because less is at stake in European Parliament elections, parties and voters treat them as midterm national contests rather

than as opportunities to influence policy making at the European level. Repeated studies have shown that attitudes toward European integration, both regime and policy support, play a limited role when citizens cast their vote in European elections; instead, voters use elections to protest against the incumbent and vote sincerely on domestic political issues (see Hix & Marsh 2007, Marsh 1998, Van der Eijk & Franklin 1996). Recent work, however, has suggested that some voters decide to abstain or defect not because of domestic concerns, but because they disagree with the (pro-)integration positions adopted by mainstream political parties (Clark & Rohrschneider 2009, De Vries et al. 2011, Hobolt & Spoon 2012, Hobolt et al. 2009). As a consequence of the politicization of the European integration issue and the persistent gap between the more pro-European position adopted by mainstream parties and the more Euroskeptical attitudes of a large proportion of the electorate, we have witnessed the rise of parties with Euroskeptical positions in European Parliament elections. Of course, the success of such parties is not driven solely by voters' attitude on Europe; research suggests that anti-immigration attitudes drive much of the support for populist right-wing parties (Hobolt 2015, Treib 2014). However, public opinion on European integration explains some of the success of challenger parties on both the left and the right (De Vries & Hobolt 2012).

Some European electorates have also had other opportunities to express their opinions on the European integration process, namely in referendums on European integration, and with great consequence. Direct democracy has become an increasingly common feature of European politics, with over 50 referendums on aspects of European integration, including accession to the Union and approval or disapproval of treaty reform (Hobolt 2009, Mendez et al. 2014). In a number of cases, the domestic electorates have rejected the proposals for further integration, despite broad consensus among national elites. Most notably, Danish voters rejected the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 (leading to a special protocol with opt-outs for Denmark), and French and Dutch voters sounded the death knell to the Constitutional Treaty when they voted no in 2005 (leading to the adoption of the amended Lisbon Treaty). Nevertheless, there is some disagreement over whether EU referendums have served to strengthen the bond between citizens and politicians in the Union. Several scholars have argued that EU referendums, just like European Parliament elections, are second-order ballots determined by domestic political issues and satisfaction with the government (Franklin et al. 1994, 1995), whereas others have suggested that voters do base their vote choices on attitudes toward European integration (Hobolt 2009, Siune et al. 1994). If referendum outcomes are plebiscites on the national governments reflecting the will of ill-informed, dissatisfied voters, they are less desirable as a mechanism of decision making on European integration than they would be if they indicated choices made by knowledgeable voters on the basis of their attitudes toward the issue at stake. In the same way, the debate on whether EU attitudes matter in European Parliament elections has implications for democracy in the Union, because the absence of a truly European element in these elections means that they fail to translate public preferences on EU policy issues into policy outcomes. Recent studies suggest that much depends on the national context, in particular on how much information is provided to citizens during the campaign and the role of issue entrepreneurs (e.g., De Vries et al. 2011, Hobolt 2009, Hobolt & Spoon 2012).

The national political sphere provides another important avenue for citizens' EU preferences to feed into the policy-making process, namely through national elections. National governments are represented in the Council of the European Union (as well as the European Council), which remains the single most powerful decision-making body in the European Union. As in the literature on European elections, the broad consensus has shifted from a position that saw European integration as a sleeping giant in national elections (Mair 2000; Van der Eijk & Franklin 2004, 2007)—an issue not yet politicized by domestic political actors—to one in which this sleeping

giant has indeed been awoken. More and more evidence suggests that attitudes toward European integration affect vote choices, at least in national elections in which the issue has been mobilized by Euroskeptical issue entrepreneurs (De Vries 2007, 2010; Evans 1998; Tillman 2004, 2012). Although the literature on the role of EU support in elections is evolving, the focus still remains on the impact of regime support, and particularly the lack of regime support (Euroskepticism), whereas there is less research on how policy-specific support affects vote choices (exceptions include Hobolt & Brouard 2011, Schoen 2008), and importantly on how the contestation of the European Union is linked to other issues, such as anti-immigration or antiausterity attitudes, in different electoral contexts.

A potentially bigger gap in the literature is the lack of research on whether public opinion on European integration shapes policy making in the European Union. Very little attention has been paid to whether the electoral connection also leads to changes in policy outcomes. Indeed, the general assumption in much of the work on policy making in the European Union is that European institutions, including the national governments represented in the Council, are largely insulated from electoral pressures, not least because electorates are usually not well informed about EU decision making (see, for example, Bailer et al. 2014). Public opinion, however, is not entirely absent from the literature on EU policy making. Some studies have examined systemic responsiveness by analyzing whether the amount of legislation passed reflects public demands for further integration, showing a relationship between EU support and amount of legislation (see Arnold et al. 2015, Bølstad 2015, Toshkov 2011). Toshkov (2011) finds that public opinion has had an effect on the legislative output of the European Union (policy responsiveness), at least until the introduction of the Maastricht Treaty. However, he finds no strong evidence for causation in the opposite direction (public responsiveness). In contrast, a study by Franklin & Wlezien (1997) finds that the public has become less supportive of further integration in the presence of more legislative output, in line with the thermostat model of responsiveness (Wlezien 1995), though only as the salience of the European Union has increased over time (see also Arnold et al. 2015). These studies are based on the rather strong assumption that it is sensible to conceive of a sort of Europe-wide public mood toward European integration. A recent time-series study by Bølstad (2015) finds support for this assumption, but his analysis points toward a periphery trend of public mood, driven by Northern Europe (in particular the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark), in contrast to a core trend driven by the founding member states.

Although this work is valuable for studying systemic responsiveness in the European Union, it provides limited insight into when and why we would expect politicians to act responsively in the Union. Policy outcomes are generally operationalized as the number of legislative acts (or directives), based on a debatable assumption that more legislation equals more integration. Given that electoral research has shown that European integration is becoming a more salient dimension of contestation in elections, there is clearly scope for more research on how this translates into more policy outcomes. Some important studies have examined the impact of the public mood and of parties' EU ideology on governments' positions in intergovernmental negotiations in the European Union. These studies show that national governments adjust their position on the scope of political integration to the partisan composition of national parliaments as well as to the domestic public opinion on European integration (e.g., Aspinwall 2002, 2007; Finke 2010; Koenig-Archibugi 2004). Building on these recent studies, further research should explore the dynamic responsiveness of governments to their domestic public opinion on European integration: When and why do governments in the Council, and indeed policy makers in other EU institutions, shift their positions in response to the public mood? And what is the impact on policy outcomes? The next section discusses this and other avenues for further research.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

For a long time public opinion toward the European integration was viewed as largely irrelevant for understanding political and economic integration in Europe. Yet, as the process of integration has deepened, the study of public support for, and opposition to, the European Union has become an essential part of the study of the Union. The Eurozone crisis has made the integration process more contested than ever, and diverging public opinion in Europe's Northern and Southern regions presents a growing challenge to EU policy making, as many voters in the North oppose open borders and fiscal transfers, whereas voters in the South call for more EU redistribution (Hobolt 2015). The study of public opinion on integration provides important insights into an understanding of the European Union, and it contributes more broadly to the literature on international organizations, which has traditionally paid limited attention to the role of domestic public opinion (for exceptions see Bechtel & Scheve 2013, Milner & Tingley 2013). The recent evidence from the EU context suggests that public opinion may be increasingly acting as a constraint on the positions and actions of governmental elites in the international realm.

The extensive literature on public support for integration that has emerged during the last two decades has generally been strong in terms of explaining individual-level variations of support, but weaker in terms of conceptualizing support and examining the wider effects of public opinion. As a consequence, we know a great deal about what type of people are likely to support the European Union—well-educated citizens who support the political mainstream and have multiple, overlapping identities—but less about what it actually means to support the European Union, or what are the consequences of variations in public support on policy making. Based on this review of the rich literature on public opinion on European integration, we thus highlight three themes that deserve more attention.

First, this review has revealed that more research is needed to understand the concept of support for European integration. How stable are people's attitudes toward European integration? Is support for the European Union multidimensional in nature, and if so, how do these different dimensions relate to each other (and to other ideological dimensions)? Recent contributions suggest that EU preferences are far from unidimensional or unambiguous. Rather, they are multidimensional, inherently variable, and characterized by a large degree of complexity. Instead of measuring if the public is on average supportive of or opposed to the European Union, we may want to establish the variance in support and opposition across individuals and member states and the multiple dimensions that characterize the integration process and its institutions. At this point, we lack solid evidence as to whether citizens hold consistent and stable predispositions on European integration that shape political behavior in a predictable manner. What is more, in the context of the Eurozone crisis, in which policies originating from the European level are increasingly contested, it is crucial to explore how changes in policy support might affect regime support. In order to address these important issues, new forms of data collection and analysis may prove necessary. The dominance of Eurobarometer data when aiming to capture public opinion toward European integration has allowed researchers to capture temporal and contextual dynamics, but only using a small set of generic questions. Future research should thus build on recent developments in this field and make greater use of conjoint analysis, experimental methods, and panel data to enhance our understanding of the nature of public opinion on European integration.

Second, although a wide range of studies demonstrate the importance of national benchmarks in shaping people's perceptions of the European Union, many questions still need to be addressed in this respect. For example, the economic voting literature suggests that citizens benchmark economic performance across borders by determining their countries' performance relative to neighboring countries or trading partners (Kayser & Peress 2012). Do citizens do the same when

it comes to the European Union? Do they support or oppose European integration based on their countries' economic or political performance relative to other EU member states or neighboring non-EU countries? Also, the integration process itself presents citizens with an ever-evolving reference point. In other words, the changing character of the European Union and its competencies should also be taken into account when examining the dynamics of public opinion. The increasingly intertwined nature of European and national politics today raises the question if it is still feasible to distinguish between national and European performance as previous studies have done. Given that citizens' knowledge about and experience with EU politics seem to have increased substantially over the past decade, could it be equally likely that EU performance evaluations influence people's views about the performance of their national political systems? This brings about questions about the possible endogenous nature of national and European benchmarks. These important questions about the precise nature of benchmarking performance within the European Union and how it relates to regime and policy support should in our view be a topic of future research.

Finally, more research is needed on when and how public opinion acts as a constraint on policy making and with what consequences for the efficiency and legitimacy of the European Union. As we have highlighted, current research suggests that public opinion on European integration is increasingly important for domestic and European electoral and party politics. Yet, to date we lack precise insights into how public opinion feeds into the policy process, especially at the European level. Does public opinion act as a constraint on EU policy making as national government leaders in the Council and European parliamentarians are increasingly held accountable for their actions in national and European elections? This politicization of European integration may serve to strengthen the electoral connection in the European Union: Political entrepreneurs that mobilize opposition to European integration are on the rise in a number of countries. Ironically perhaps, a stronger electoral connection between citizens and politicians on European issues may also imply a break on the level and scope of integration, given that European publics tend to be more Euroskeptic than the elites. When given a direct say on the integration process, even some of the most pro-European publics have turned down proposals for wider and deeper integration. If public opinion indeed constrains European policy making, it might potentially limit the room to maneuver within the European Union, as politicians fearing the wrath of an increasingly Euroskeptic electorate will naturally become more cautious. Moreover, given that research suggests that public opinion is highly conditional upon the national context in which citizens find themselves and consequently varies significantly across regions, striking policy bargains between different member states and their representatives might prove increasingly hard to achieve. This divergence has been exacerbated by the recent Eurozone crisis, which has unmasked structural imbalances between regions and highlighted the redistributive consequences of integration. This is the dilemma that the European Union is facing: Greater public contestation may be an essential ingredient for more democratic decision making in the European Union, yet it also makes it more difficult to arrive at common solutions to shared problems.

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