

Does Identity or Economic Rationality Drive Public Opinion on European Integration?: Exploring heterogeneity in the newly enlarged EU

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Why are some EU citizens in favour of further EU integration and some EU citizens against it? A number of different explanations have been elaborated (for recent comprehensive reviews see: Hooghe and Marks, 2004, McLaren, 2004, Gabel, 1998). One theoretical approach relates to 'economic utilitarianism'. Simply stated, this approach argues that citizens who are likely to fare well, economically speaking, from further EU integration are likely to support integration. Such citizens are likely to be relatively highly educated and skilled citizens who are well equipped with the appropriate human capital to avail of the opportunities that arise from further integration. On the other hand, citizens who are likely to economically suffer from further integration (the relatively vulnerable working class who have low education and skill levels) are expected to be much less supportive of integration. This economic utilitarian model may take a number of forms. Citizens may, for example, be assumed to be either egocentric or sociotropic. According to the former it is the individual's own economic position that is crucial and according to the latter it is the economic well being of the country as a whole that is most important. Also, it may be assumed that subjective economic assessments are what is crucial (for example, how the citizen perceives the economy to be (or likely to be) doing) or it may be assumed that it is aggregate – or macro level – economic information that is most influential (such as how much the country 'gets')

from the EU, or the country's employment or interest rates, or whatever). Whichever, particular take on economic utilitarianism one runs with it is usually assumed that *positive* economic factors are associated with *support for* further integration. As Hooghe and Marks (2004, p1) state:

It seems reasonable to expect that residents in countries that are net recipients of European Union spending will be inclined to support European integration, while those in donor countries will tend to oppose ... [and] citizens who feel confident about the economic future – personally and for their country – are likely to regard European integration in a positive light, while those who are fearful will lean towards Euroskepticism.

A second theoretical approach hones in on the notion of identity. One might initially expect that a strong sense of national identity would be associated with opposition to EU integration. However, Hooghe and Marks, make the important point that it is not a strong national identity *per se* that leads to scepticism. Rather, it is an *exclusive* sense of national identity that is likely to lead to scepticism. In other words, it is perfectly possible for a strongly patriotic Welshman to be pro-integration, or for a very strongly Irish Irishwoman to be a keen EU fan. However, a Welshman who is Welsh and Welsh alone is likely to frown upon EU integration (as would a merely Irish Irishwoman). As Hooghe and Marks (2004, p2) state:

We begin with the basic distinction between exclusive and inclusive national identity, and we hypothesize that citizens who conceive of their national identity as exclusive of other territorial identities are likely to be considerably more Euroskeptical than those who conceive of their national identity in inclusive terms.

The relative predictive strength of these two theoretical approaches to explaining attitudes to EU integration has been assessed using data from pre-enlargement EU (i.e. the 15 member states rather than the now 25 member state Union) (Gabel, 1998, McLaren, 2004, Hooghe and Marks, 2004). The very nature of the EU has arguably changed radically, however, since the expansion of the Union in 2004, taking in central and eastern European states and

enlarging to 25 members. The question arises as to whether the determinants of attitudes to EU integration that have been applied pre-enlargement actually apply post-enlargement. Perhaps we must theorise EU citizens' attitudes quite differently in the new, much larger and much more diverse Europe. Arguably there are now two quite distinct 'contexts' contained in the newly enlarged EU: the pre-existing 15 member states and the new formerly communist central and eastern European states. We here assess the extent to which our two theories work in both of these contexts. Our hunch is that economic factors are likely to be more important than the identity factor in former communist countries and that the reverse will be the case for pre-existing member states. Our reasoning is simply that the former communist states are, on the average, less wealthy than the existing member states. Thus, material concerns might be particularly salient for the citizens of such countries when they are generating their attitudes towards EU integration. In the relatively wealthy existing states, citizens may have more mental time and space to worry about non-material matters such as their identity. We hesitate to posit these as very strict hypotheses. Rather, our investigation of citizen heterogeneity is fairly exploratory (albeit driven by this relatively crude hunch).

We draw on data from the aggregate EES 2004 file. For the sake of simplicity and ease of interpretation we use a single survey item as our dependent variable, which captures basic attitudes to EU integration:

European Unification has already gone too far versus European unification should be pushed further (1-10 scale, with high score indicating pro-integration position)

For our 'economy' variables we use subjective class grouping and educational level. We also use both retrospective and prospective economic evaluations (coded such that high scores indicate positive economic perceptions). At the aggregate level, we use a measure of the extent to which each country is a net contributor to the EU budget. (2004 figures are used for this, which represent the percentage of GNP that the country receives net of contributions). Level of pride in being a citizen of the EU is used as our identity variable

In Table 1 we report the results of a multi-level linear regression model in which we assess the extent to which the economic and identity factors enjoy different predictive strengths in our two contexts. The interaction between being a new entrant and pride in the EU has a negative sign. This indicates, in line with our 'hunch' that identity is a less salient factor in

determining attitudes to integration in former communist countries compared to pre-existing member states. The interaction is statistically significant but the effect size is not very large (-.13 compared to 1.13 for pre-existing member states). In terms of the economic factors we have mixed results. The relationship between being highly educated and being supportive of EU integration is much weaker in former communist countries than in pre-existing states (a negative interaction of -.32 compared to the .41 effect for existing member states). Also the impact of 'what money do we get from the EU' on attitudes to integration is much much lower in former communist states than elsewhere (negative interaction of -.60 compared to .78 for existing states). However, there is one key economic variable that 'works much better' in new states than in existing states: having positive prospective economic perceptions is a much better predictor of being pro-integration in 'new' countries than in 'old' countries. We graphically illustrate the relative size of the effects of these different economic factors in Figure 1. The most stark effect relates to net transfers. It seems that variation among new states in terms of what they get from the EU doesn't impact on how citizens shape their attitudes to integration. However, variation in net transfers in existing states is very important in determining whether a citizen is pro or anti integration. We are currently puzzling over how to explain this. The next biggest difference in the two contexts relates to perceptions of the future economy: these matter a lot more, in terms of determining preferences to integration, in new entrants than in existing member states.

Our overall, very tentative, provisional and very sketchy, conclusions are that we do not find a clear pattern of one theory working better in one context than another. More thinking and analysis to be done.

References

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- Lauren M. McLaren. 2004. 'Opposition to European integration and fear of loss of national identity: Debunking a basic assumption regarding hostility to the integration project' *European Journal of Political Research* 43: 895-911.
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Table 1
Multi-level linear regression models predicting
support for further European integration

	Model	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	1.87***	0.20
Economy		
Degree educated	0.41***	0.05
Upper middle class	0.28***	0.07
Middle class	0.15***	0.05
Lower middle class	0.08	0.07
Working class	0.00	-
Retrospective economic perceptions	0.09***	0.02
Prospective economic perceptions	0.07***	0.02
Net transfers from EU (as % of GDP)	0.78***	0.15
Identity		
Pride in being European (0-3 scale)	1.13***	0.05
Interactions with 2004 entrants		
2004 entrant state	1.66***	0.37
Interactions with economy		
2004 entrant*degree holder	-0.32***	0.08
2004 entrant*prospective econ. perceptions	0.25***	0.04
2004 entrant*net transfers	-0.60**	0.31
Interaction with identity		
2004 entrant*EU pride	-0.13**	0.05
Log likelihood	-44890.9	

* p<.10 ** p<.05 ***p<.01. Unweighted N = 19156, number of groups = 23. Source: EES 2004.

Note: This model also contains political interest, age and trade union members as controls (co-efficients not shown) and also includes a number of other (exploratory) interactions (co-efficients not shown)

FIGURE 1: *Predicted changes in levels of support for further European integration for people from the old EU 15 and the new 2004 entrant states: different economic variables*

