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Journal homepage	http://www.kyklos-review.ch/
Author contact	your email soetkin.verhaeghen@soc.kuleuven.be your phone number +32 16 32 32 44
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European identity and support for European integration: A matter of perceived economic benefits?

Soetkin Verhaegen, Marc Hooghe and Ellen Quintelier

Summary

Economic utilitarian theory assumes a relationship between economic benefits, support for European integration and European identity. While the relationship between economic benefits and support for European integration has already been empirically investigated, this is not the case for European identity. Therefore, we test the association between economic indicators and European identity, while performing the same analysis for support for European integration. Eight different objective and perceived economic parameters are tested, covering the whole spectrum of sociotropic, egocentric, objective and perceived benefits. The multilevel analyses on Eurobarometer data show that economic considerations are positively associated with support and European identity. This is especially the case for perceived benefits, indicating that earlier findings about perception of benefits in the study of support for European integration are valid for European identity as well.

Keywords

European identity, European integration, support for European integration, economic utilitarianism, Eurobarometer

Introduction

From the early start on, one of the main objectives of European integration has been to assure democratic stability, peace and freedom on the continent (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In order to reach this goal, the process of European integration started with economic cooperation in a limited number of domains between six countries, gradually increasing to a union of 28 member states that delegated a wide range of policy domains to the EU-level. This description of European integration follows the neo-functionalist logic of gradual integration towards a political union (Haas, 1958; Risse, 2005; Schimmelfennig, 2012). Starting with a few policy domains, it was expected that spill-over effects and the politicization of the EU public sphere would help the member states to evolve from an economic union towards a well-integrated social and political union (Fligstein, Polyakova, & Sandholtz, 2012; Haas, 2001).

Economic utilitarian theory assumes that an ever-closer integration and more economic benefits eventually will strengthen loyalty (which includes both support and identification) to the ideal of European integration (Gabel & Palmer, 1995). Support for European integration is a theoretically important measurement, because the EU is confronted with a lack of democratic legitimacy in numerous countries. This is especially important when referenda about EU treaties are taking place and when more democratic input of citizens is gaining ground (Weder & Grubel, 2012). Previous studies have shown that less supportive citizens are more receptive to Eurosceptic mobilization (Usherwood & Startin, 2013) and that governments are unlikely to favour further political, social or economic integration if their citizens are not (or no longer) supportive of the European Union (Down & Wilson, 2013; Klingemann & Weldon, 2013). Therefore, already at the end of the twentieth century empirical findings hinted at the importance of economic benefits for the way in which the EU is evaluated (Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993; Gabel & Whitten, 1997; McLaren, 2004). Later, it was found that on the aggregate level the link between economic benefits and support for integration diminished after the Maastricht Treaty because the treaty increased the scope of European integration towards a political union instead of merely an economic union (Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007). The current economic crisis entices us to update these findings to ascertain how these events that brought economics back to the centre of EU debates have had an impact on support for European integration (Schimmelfennig, 2012; Serricchio, Tsakatika, & Quaglia, 2013).

Loyalty to the European institutions, however, is not only based on support for European integration, but it also entails a sense of European identity. Various authors have claimed that European identity is an essential condition for a sustainable level of legitimacy of the European Union (Bruter, 2003; Habermas, 2011). For citizens to feel represented in the decision-making process at the EU-level, a common European identity is necessary because only when citizens feel part of this community, they will accept decisions that are made for and by this community as a whole (Habermas, 2011). A common identity allows citizens to put the interests of the community before their personal interests and to accept the legitimacy of policies of solidarity and redistribution. Therefore, it is important to understand how European identity is developed and how economic utilitarianism can help to understand this (Fligstein et al., 2012).

Because of these considerations, in this paper our interest is directed to the relationship between economic benefits on the one hand, and both support for European integration and European identity on the other hand. The latter are both important building blocks for the EU and are often alleged to be driven by utilitarian considerations (Cinnirella, 1997; Cram, 2012;

Gabel, 1998; Kritzinger, 2005). The concept of economic utilitarianism suggests that an economic cost-benefit calculation will be associated with support for European integration and with European identity. Van Klingeren et al. (2013) and Hooghe and Marks (2005) rightfully claim that the attention of researchers has shifted from ‘hard’ economic factors to the more ‘soft’ identity factors in the explanation of support for European integration, so research on European identity becomes increasingly important. In recent years, the study of European identity has developed into an important sub-discipline in European studies (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009; Mols & Weber, 2013). However, as economic utilitarianism is a new field for empirical tests of European identity, we will perform the same test of economic utilitarianism on support for European integration as a replication of earlier work and as a reference point for our analyses of European identity. Given this research design, we will be able to determine whether economic indicators are differently related to both dependent variables. In operationalizing these theoretical concepts, it is important to determine what kind of economic indicators should be taken into account. Empirical research often tests the validity of economic approaches by using only a single or a few indicators. However, a different operationalization of economic benefits or costs might lead to different conclusions with regard to the empirical validity of the utilitarian model. Therefore, in this paper we model the effect of different economic indicators simultaneously. We use perceived and objective measures, measuring both economic benefits and costs for individual citizens and for the member state as a whole (Loveless & Rohrschneider, 2011).

In this article, we first present a review of the literature concerning economic utilitarianism with regard to support for European integration and European identity. Subsequently, we define our two dependent variables. Next, we elaborate on the operationalization of the included economic indicators and the used data. Further, two multilevel regression analyses will be presented to test our hypotheses. To conclude, the implications of our findings will be discussed.

(...)

We derive the first hypothesis for this study: *Economic benefits will be positively related to support for European integration and European identity.*

(...)

The second hypothesis therefore is: *Perceived economic benefits are more strongly related to support for European integration and European identity than objective indicators.*

Table 1. Categorization of the economic indicators according to scope and type

		Scope of evaluation	
		Sociotropic	Egocentric
Type of evaluation	Objective	Net contribution	Occupation
		Received structural funds	
		Intra-EU export	
		Spread of sovereign bonds	
Type of evaluation	Perceived	Perceived economic situation of the country	Perceived financial situation of the household
			EU means economic prosperity to me personally

Source: Adapted from Hooghe and Marks (2005). The indicators from Hooghe and Marks are complemented by indicators from other studies such as Serricchio, Tsakatika & Quaglia (2013) and McLaren (2004).

Support for European integration and European identity

Support for European integration can be defined as a positive attitude towards a closer cooperation between European member states (Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993). (...)

European identity goes beyond a positive or negative attitude about European integration. It has been defined as the feeling of belonging to a social group, to the EU community, and social identity theory offers an ideal theoretical starting point to investigate this form of identity. (...)

As we include the same economic indicators in the analyses of support and European identity, we assess whether there is a different impact of economic indicators on both dependent variables. While a sense of identity usually is stable, support for integration can respond more quickly to short-term fluctuations in public opinion. Especially during the past two decades support for European integration has changed, sometimes even quite rapidly (Van Ingelgom, 2013). Some authors claim in this regard that the permissive consensus on European integration has weakened (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Identity, to the contrary, is more stably installed in the self-conception of an actor than attitudes are (Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010). This stability has also been found in previous studies on the evolution of European identity over time (Risse, 2010). This implies that, even though the process of identification with the EU might be driven by utilitarian considerations, economic considerations are expected to have a more limited impact on European identity. Consequently, we expect that support is more strongly influenced by the current economic downturn and this is reflected in our third hypothesis: *Economic benefits will have a stronger effect on support for European integration than on European identity.*

Data and methods

The dataset used for the analyses is wave 75.3 of the Eurobarometer survey (...)

Operationalization

Support for European integration is measured as: ‘Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership in the European Union is a good thing (1); a bad thing (2); neither good nor bad (3)?’ (...)

For the measurement of European identity we rely on the question: ‘For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your own opinion... You feel you are a citizen of the EU? No, definitely not (1); no, not really (2); yes, to some extent (3); Yes, definitely (4)?’ (...)

Analysis

We start the analysis by presenting some descriptives of the dependent variables (...)

Subsequently, we explore the determinants of support for European integration using a two-level multinomial regression model with support for European integration as a dependent variable (...)

Table 2. Two-level multinomial regression for support for European integration

	Model I Null model	Model II Controls included	Model III All indicators
Intercept	0.685***	2.353***	-3.343***
<i>Individual level controls</i>			
Age		-0.015***	-0.010***
Female		-0.124***	-0.030
<i>Country level controls</i>			
GDP growth		0.045***	0.079***
Eurozone membership Accession (ref. 1957)		0.070	0.229***
Accessed 1973-1995		-0.399***	-0.722***
Accessed 2004-2007		-0.021	0.413***
Inflation		-0.028	-0.071**
Unemployment		-0.031***	0.051***
<i>Individual level indicators</i>			
Occupation (retired ref.)			
Homemaker			-0.084
Student			0.583***
Unemployed			-0.098
Farmer			-0.142
Self-employed			-0.058
Manager			0.603***
Clerk			-0.010
Manual worker			-0.388***
Other			0.529**
Financial situation household			0.571***
EU means economic prosperity to me personally			1.629***
Perceived national economy			0.631***
<i>Country-level indicators</i>			
Net contribution			0.092**
Received structural funds			-0.004***
Spread government bonds			0.213***
Intra-EU export			2.131***
Variance (level 2)	0.105	0.131	0.070
Log Likelihood	-26421.985	-25990.244	-22831.881
Pseudo R ² (Cox and Snell)		3.3%	25.6%
N (level 1)	25909	25909	24258
N (level 2)	27	27	26

Note: Coefficients are presented for the comparison between ‘my country’s membership in the EU is a good thing’ and ‘my country’s membership in the EU is a bad thing’ (reference category); *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001. N(level 2)=26 in Model III because no measure of spread is available for Estonia.

In a second analysis, we investigate the determinants of European identity, using a two-level logistic regression model (Table 3). The model is built up in exactly the same manner as the support model. (...)

Table 3. Two-level logistic regression for European identity

	Model I Null model	Model II Controls	Model III All indicators	Model IV Parsimonious
Intercept	0.613***	1.284**	-2.882***	-1.772***
Individual level controls				
Age		-0.013***	-0.009***	-0.009***
Female		-0.178***	-0.101**	-0.107***
Country level controls				
GDP growth		0.068*	0.051	
Eurozone membership		0.591**	0.884***	0.644**
Accession (ref. 1957)				
Accessed 1973-1995		0.123	0.362	0.195
Accessed 2004-2007		0.008	0.572*	0.483*
Inflation		-0.060	-0.054	
Unemployment		-0.031	0.009	
Individual-level indicators				
Occupation (retired ref.)				
Homemaker			-0.061	-0.045
Student			0.336***	0.336***
Unemployed			-0.073	-0.065
Farmer			-0.033	0.005
Self-employed			0.178*	0.210**
Manager			0.213**	0.225**
Clerk			0.050	0.071
Manual worker			-0.171**	-0.153**
Other			0.414***	0.396***
Financial situation household			0.370***	0.378***
EU means economic prosperity to me personally			0.832***	0.831***
Perceived national economy			0.538***	0.534***
Country-level indicators				
Net contribution			-0.081	
Received structural funds			-0.001	
Spread government bonds			0.027	
Intra-EU export			1.229	
Variance (level 2)	0.269	0.171	0.116	0.172
ICC	0.076	0.049	0.034	0.050
Log Likelihood	-16754.082	-16571.296	-14579.022	-15140.518
Pseudo R ² (Cox and Snell)		13.7%	16.1%	11.8%
N (level 1)	26,435	26,435	24,726	25,682
N (level 2)	27	27	26	27

Note: Coefficients are presented for the comparison between identifying as a European citizen and not identifying as a European citizen (reference category); *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001; N(level 2)=26 in Model III because no measure of spread is available for Estonia.

(...)

Discussion

The results of the analyses demonstrate that there is a significant association between economic indicators and both support for European integration and European identity. We can therefore conclude that economic utilitarian considerations are not only at play for the formation of an attitude about European integration, but also for the development of identification as a European citizen. Given the theoretical relevance of European citizenship for the future democratic legitimacy of the European, we do consider this to be an important finding.

In the current paper three distinct steps were taken. First, we replicated the findings of previous studies that tested economic utilitarianism with regard to support for European integration using more recent data. The fact that we find the same results as previous studies on support for integration strengthens our confidence that the results found for European identity are not due to the specific sample or to the specific point in time of the data collection. Including the same explanatory variables in both analyses also provides us with the opportunity to put the explanatory capacity of economic utilitarianism for European identity into perspective. In this regard, our expectation is met that economic utilitarianism has more explanatory power for support for European integration than for European identity.

Second, we compared the impact of different types of economic indicators by which economic utilitarianism can be operationalized. We found that most indicators are robust for the control for other economic indicators, but that the perception of respondents is more important in the development of support and identity. Therefore, we can conclude that it is important to be aware of the potential impact of a different operationalization on the conclusions drawn and to carefully select the different economic parameters included when operationalizing the economic utilitarian model in further research. Obviously, theoretical considerations should motivate the choice for objective, perceived, egocentric or sociotropic considerations to be tested, but awareness should be raised about the empirical consequences of these choices.

Third, as the debate about the nature of the relationship between attitudes about European integration and European identity has currently not been settled yet (Cram, 2012), this study indirectly engages with this debate by demonstrating how economic utilitarian explanations are relevant for both variables. Economic utilitarian explanations prove to be

relevant to a different extent (explained variance) and in a different way (objective or perceived benefits). Support for European integration can be better explained by economic benefits than European identity and objective economic indicators are also better at explaining support. We can understand this difference by thinking about the definition of social identities as including both a cognitive aspect and an affective aspect. Utilitarian considerations probably tap more into the cognitive aspect of European identity and less into the affective aspect. We also expect that the cognitive aspect of identity is an important part of the explanation of why we find a significant correlation between support for European integration and European identity. Our study pictures similarities and differences between support for European integration and European identity in their relationship with economic utilitarian considerations. However, the current data do not allow for the study of the causal relationship between support and identity, so further research is needed.

We should, however, also be aware of the limitations of the current analysis. Both the available data and the timeframe in which the study took place should be taken in mind. First, both dependent variables are measured by one survey item only. While our measurement of support for European integration is commonly used in empirical studies, there are definitely limitations given the limited number of response options and discussion exists about the interpretation of the middle category (Van Ingelgom, 2013). Also, the changing content of the Eurobarometer surveys did not allow us to perform the same analysis over different waves in order to see whether results are robust over time. Second, we should take in mind that the data were collected during a specific timeframe – the Eurozone crisis – which might have influenced the salience of economic costs and benefits related to being part of the EU and to the Eurozone more specific. However, the finding that support for integration and European identity seem to be related to the economic context is also especially relevant during times of economic difficulties. To assess whether the current data can be used to compare the use of different economic indicators in pre-euro crisis studies, we have carried out the same test for support for European integration on 2008 Eurobarometer data. In line with recent findings (Serricchio et al., 2013), our test confirms the stable influence of different economic parameters on support for European integration. Economic indicators therefore seem to have the same effect, independently from the specific economic situation.

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