

The Covid-19 outbreak has exposed deep-rooted weaknesses in the EU's institutions



The Covid-19 outbreak could push the EU to the brink again, write [Piergiuseppe Fortunato](#) and [Marco Pecoraro](#). But the EU's inability to stage a united response to the pandemic is simply a symptom of a much deeper problem that began with the erosion of public trust following the financial crisis.

A pivotal element in dealing with pandemics is [trust](#) in public institutions and compliance with lockdowns, emergency protocols, and any other containment measure adopted by the competent authorities. But Covid-19 is not only a health emergency, it is also posing [economic challenges](#) of a tall order. Without solidarity from other members, the more fragile EU economies will not be able to respond adequately to the crisis and run the risk of experiencing a prolonged economic depression on top of a humanitarian catastrophe. Unfortunately, this pandemic is hitting Europe at a time when mutual suspicion seems rife in the union and public trust in its institutions is as weak as ever.

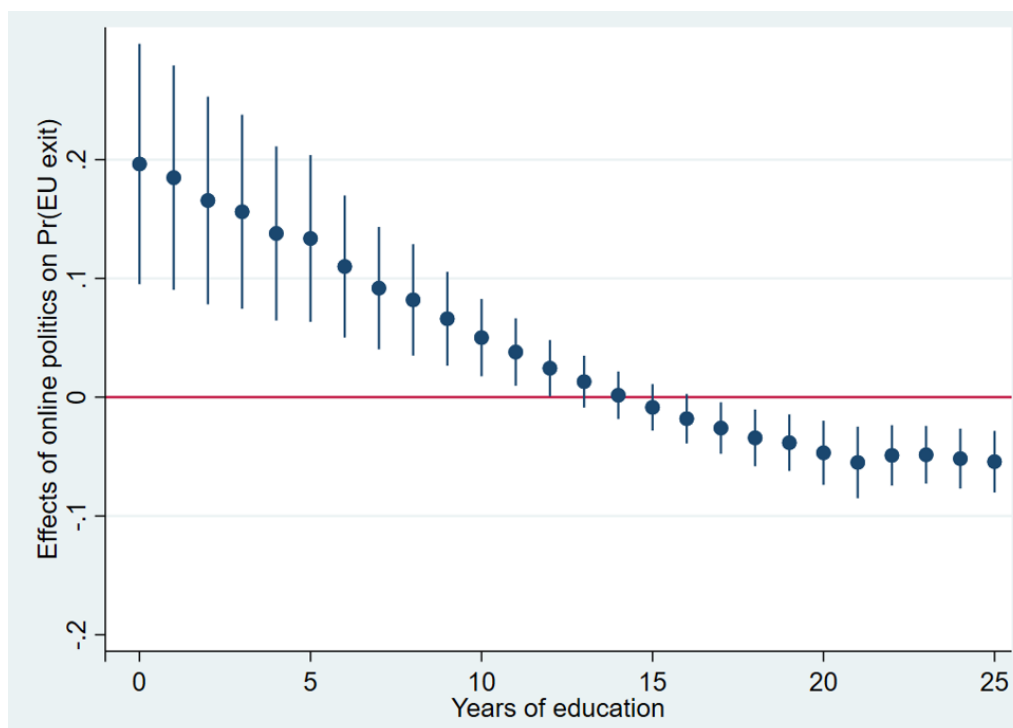
Trust in communitarian institutions has been progressively deflated since the global financial crisis. [Real wages](#), especially those of low educated individuals, stagnated, unemployment soared and [inequality](#) continued on its long-run upward trajectory. This generated a diffuse sense of anxiety, especially among the most vulnerable sectors of the population, and increased the [space](#) for Eurosceptic and populist political proposals designed to match the [demand](#) for social justice. The combined vote share of parties not belonging to the traditional political families – be they on the far right or on the far left – has more than [doubled](#) since 2007, reaching a figure above twenty-five per cent. The last time we saw a comparable diffusion of anti-establishment parties in the continent was in the mid-1930s, right before the collapse of the Weimer Republic.

Such a boom has also been aided by important changes that took place in the technology of political communication. Social media has [changed](#) how political actors and citizens relate to each other. By increasing the frequency of interactions and (allegedly) eliminating any filter, social media-driven communication has favoured the diffusion of emotionally charged political platforms and simple clear-cut messages, especially among the most vulnerable social categories. During the 2016 EU referendum campaign in the UK, for example, the leave side dominated the day-to-day volume of tweets. Overall, along the last three weeks leading up to the vote, [support for leaving](#) on the platform outstripped support for remaining by a factor of four. Similarly, from October 2018 to May 2019 before the EU elections, eighty five per cent of all shared Facebook posts [originating](#) from German political parties stemmed from the AfD.

In a [recent paper](#), we show that social media has been instrumental for the diffusion of Eurosceptic ideas among those individuals that suffered the most from the 2007-08 meltdown. More specifically, using both European-wide and national surveys, we demonstrate that individuals with low educational attainment, or unsecure and low-paying occupations, are more likely to manifest alienation towards European institutions if they engage with politics using social media. This effect disappears when considering the attitudes of individuals less exposed to the waves of the financial crisis.

This is illustrated in the figure below that plots the estimated effect of exposure to online political activity on Euroscepticism at different levels of education. The data comes from the 8th round of the [European Social Survey](#), which monitors public attitudes and values within several European countries and covers over 50,000 individuals. Euroscepticism is assessed with a specific question on whether respondents declare themselves in favour of their own country leaving the EU. Exposure to politics online, in turn, is measured with a dummy variable that takes value 1 if the respondent declares to have posted or shared something about politics online during the last 12 months, and 0 otherwise.

Figure: Estimated effect of exposure to online political activity on Euroscepticism at different levels of education



Note: For more information, see the authors' [accompanying paper](#).

The estimated effect turns out to be positive and statistically significant only for those individuals with less than 12 years of education (roughly equivalent to the first two educational cycles in most European countries) while it is negative (albeit more moderate) for individuals with higher educational attainment (i.e. tertiary education and above). This means that the impact of exposure to online political activity on attitudes towards the EU critically depends on the level of education of the individual concerned. Similar results hold when we look at individuals with different employment histories (i.e. those who experienced long periods of unemployment versus respondents with a more stable work experience).

This evidence clarifies the role played by the digitalisation of the public sphere in the diffusion of Euroscepticism. Economic insecurity and heightened anxiety among a growing number of European citizens has progressively hollowed out trust in communitarian institutions and led to much more open questioning of the official story on the shared benefits of European integration. Populist movements have managed to turn this discontent into an electoral consensus exploiting the disintermediation made possible by social media.

Trust in the EU has been lost right when the continent was approaching its darkest hours, when trust would be needed the most. In such a fragile situation, European leaders seem to be [incapable](#) (or worse: unwilling) to stage a united response to the pandemic. Even in the face of a symmetric shock, the EU is responding in random order. Unless this inertia is changed soon, the integration project risks becoming yet another fatality of Covid-19.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Union](#)

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