

Social groups that fear market liberalisation and competition for jobs are also more likely to mistrust the EU.

by Blog Admin

Public opinion on European integration varies significantly across EU Member States. Based on data from the European Social Survey, [Kristel Jacquier](#) argues that one of the key factors in the growth of negative attitudes toward the EU is the perceived detrimental effect of market liberalisation and labour market flexibility on low skilled workers. Highly skilled workers are significantly more likely to support European integration than those in elementary occupations.



What are the determinants of public support for the European Union? Using individual-level data from two rounds of the [European Social Survey](#), we can see that in every member state, socio-economic characteristics shape preferences on European matters. It can be argued that the political agenda of the Union has become more and more detrimental to low skilled workers in the labour market, which leads them to be less and less supportive of further integration.

How the European Union became a distributional issue

During the 1950s and the 1960s, a [permissive consensus](#) existed in Europe. A large majority of citizens displayed tacit support for the European process. As a result of this public disinterest, political elites have been able to pursue their own policy interests. After the signing of the Single European Act (SEA) in 1986, citizen support for European integration started to rise and reached a peak in 1991. By then European integration was considered a purely economic arrangement that brought about macro-economic stability and, to some extent, prosperity.

In the aftermath of the Maastricht Treaty, public opinion was confronted by a more complex situation. The political jurisdictions of the EU were extended; the Union now had influence over social policy, environmental and defence matters. The year 1992 witnessed a sharp drop in public support. Since then public opinion on European membership has stabilised to leave a sizeable minority of supporters (the rest being hostile or indifferent). The implementation of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) exacerbated worries about European issues. From then on, not only was the European Central Bank delegated the sole authority to conduct monetary policy; budgetary policy would also be constrained by the Stability and Growth Pact. Such loss of sovereignty will be a burning issue when European authorities decide to adopt the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union to overcome the sovereign-debt crisis. At present, further integration of the Union boils down to reinforcing constraints. As for development plans (the Lisbon strategy, and Europe 2020), the European Council focuses mainly on deepening competition and liberalisation, and calls for “structural reforms”.

Why do citizens mistrust the EU?

Two motives of distrust towards the EU can be suggested: the loss of sovereignty and the economic liberalisation process. The first motive is linked to the European Monetary Union (EMU). Countries which adopted EMU have to bear constraints on both monetary and budgetary policies. And for the others, “more integration” might stand for the adoption of the common currency. Consequently citizens who fear a loss of sovereignty are unlikely to call for more European integration. Secondly, liberalisation is expected to harm the less skilled. When the labour market becomes more flexible, the risk of an individual losing their job becomes higher for unskilled workers. Considering those issues, it is reasonable to expect less competitive citizens to fear both a cut in government spending and a surge in labour market flexibility.

Who are integration supporters, and what can that tell us?

Empirical results tend to prove that the social groups who lack support for further European integration are

the same groups who traditionally fear liberalisation: i.e. low skilled workers. Conversely, managers and professionals favour integration. Among the EU 15 states (the members of the EU prior to the eastern enlargements in 2004 and 2007), the gap from one [ISCO](#) category to the other is wide. The likelihood of supporting European integration is 45 per cent lower for elementary workers compared to professionals. The gaps are much less pronounced among eastern member states (a 23 per cent drop in the support for elementary workers compared to professionals). Even though occupational clusters are taken into account, the highest income categories remain significantly more in favour of the European process than medium or low income ones.

Unemployed people do not have distinct preferences from workers; this might be due to heterogeneity among the individuals of the group. Union membership is significant and as predicted, unionised workers are less supportive of further integration than their non-unionised counterparts. Additionally, the partisan affiliation confirms that in European politics, socio-economic forces are not a mere reflection of the left/right spectrum. European integration appears as a political dimension in itself.

These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that the economic status of agents plays a crucial role in explaining cross-sectional variations in public support for the European process in every member state. Such a tendency is likely to persist if the European political agenda continues to promote liberalisation and budgetary constraints. It has to be noted that when European issues are concerned, preferences are not aligned to traditional partisanship, or well-known dimensions such as economic or cultural drivers. Although changes in party systems have not occurred until now, European integration appears increasingly like a political cleavage.

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