

The Eurozone crisis has increased soft Euroscepticism in Greece, where Greeks wish to remain in the euro, but no longer trust the EU.

by Blog Admin

Nearly six years of recession have taken their toll on Greece, and the country is now facing difficult austerity measures from the EU, the IMF, and the European Central Bank. But what has austerity meant for Euroscepticism in the country? Using Eurobarometer statistics, [Kyriaki Nanou](#) and [Susannah Verney](#) find that while there is now a deep distrust of the EU and its institutions on the part of the Greek people, there is little appetite for the country to exit the EU or leave the euro.

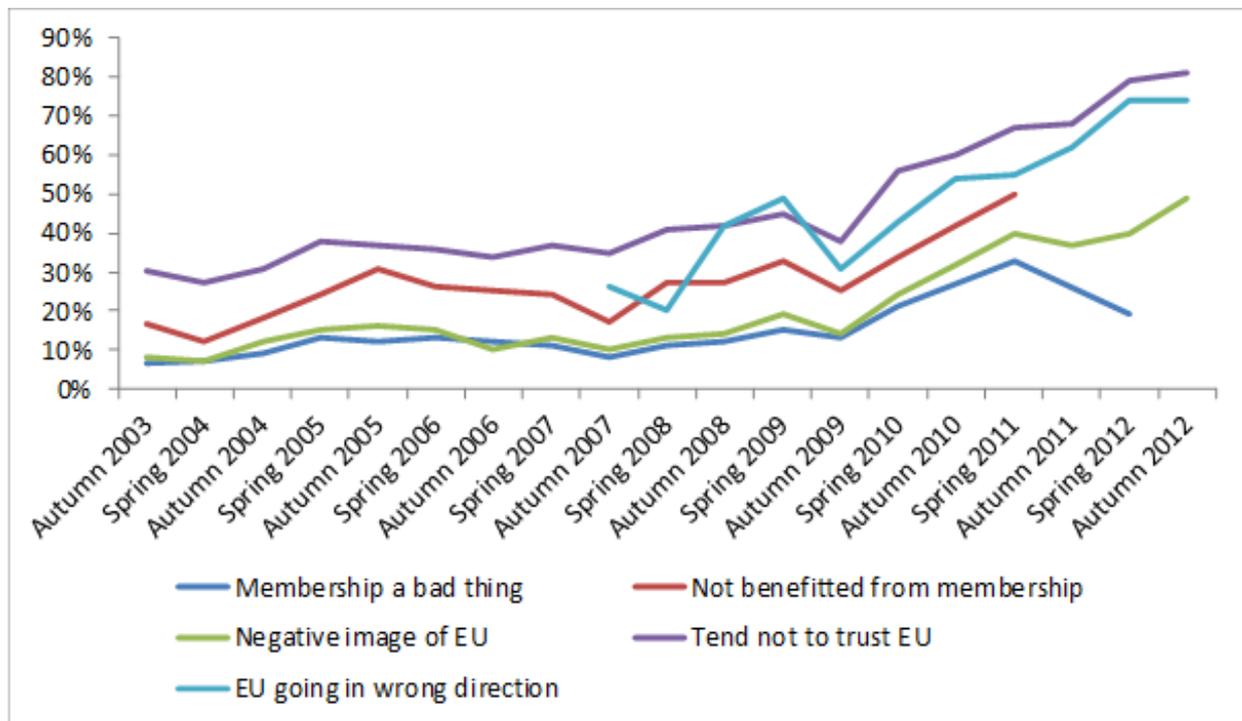


An important consequence of the eurozone crisis has been a rise in Euroscepticism across Europe, weakening the legitimacy of the integration process and undermining the political representation of the citizens in the member states. Just how extensive has the increase in euroscepticism been and what are its implications for the future of European integration? In investigating these questions, Greece offers a particularly interesting case. Greece, at the centre of the crisis, has been deeply affected by a recession entering its sixth year, with the total decline in GDP expected to exceed 25 per cent before the end of 2013. The crisis has caused much political controversy, electoral volatility and civil strife, affecting political parties, voting behaviour and governing institutions. The agreement of joint IMF-EU rescue packages in May 2010 and July 2011 were accompanied by austerity measures and recurrent speculation about a 'Grexit'. Before the crisis, Euroscepticism was a minority viewpoint in Greek public opinion. Consistent majorities of Greek citizens and the mainstream parties, from the late 1980s onwards, have been amongst the strongest supporters of the integration process, recognising the social, political and economic benefits of membership.



Public opinion data from the Eurobarometer surveys show that the crisis caused many supporters of the EU project to become critics or even sceptics. Figure 1 shows the evolution of the views of Greek citizens between 2003-12, using a series of long-standing Eurobarometer indicators showing negative evaluations towards the EU and the integration process. While there was a small and gradual increase in Euroscepticism during the early 2000s, reflecting an EU-wide trend, the figure reveals a striking rise in negative sentiment during the crisis.

Figure 1: Indicators of attitudes towards the European Union (negative responses)



Source: Eurobarometer surveys.

As Figure 1 shows, it was not the outbreak of the global financial crisis which triggered the change. Instead, the turning point came immediately after autumn 2009, with the onset of the Greek sovereign debt crisis when the newly elected Socialist government admitted that the country's official economic statistics had been misreported. Revised figures revealed the grim state of the Greek economy with a very high deficit and public debt. From this point onwards, as the eurozone's initial hesitation to intervene in Greece was followed by an EU/IMF bailout delivering harsh austerity measures, the five indicators of negative sentiment towards the EU follow parallel upward paths.

In a period of three years, the proportion of Greek respondents holding a negative image of the EU almost tripled (from 14 per cent in November 2009 to 49 per cent in November 2012), while those tending not to trust the EU and those believing the EU was going in the wrong direction more than doubled (from 38 per cent to 81 per cent and from 31 per cent to 74 per cent, respectively). For the latter two indicators, the overwhelming majority now held a negative stance. Those viewing EU membership as 'a bad thing' jumped from 13 to 33 per cent in Spring 2011, which is the last time this question was included in the Eurobarometer surveys, but showed a notable drop at 19%, based on a survey conducted by the [European Parliament](#) in spring 2012. In spring 2011, this made Greece the EU member-state with the highest proportion of respondents giving a negative answer, marginally ahead of the traditionally Eurosceptic UK. Meanwhile, between November 2009 and May 2011, those Greek citizens who considered the country had not benefitted from membership doubled from 25 to 50 per cent, the second highest proportion in the EU (this time behind the UK).

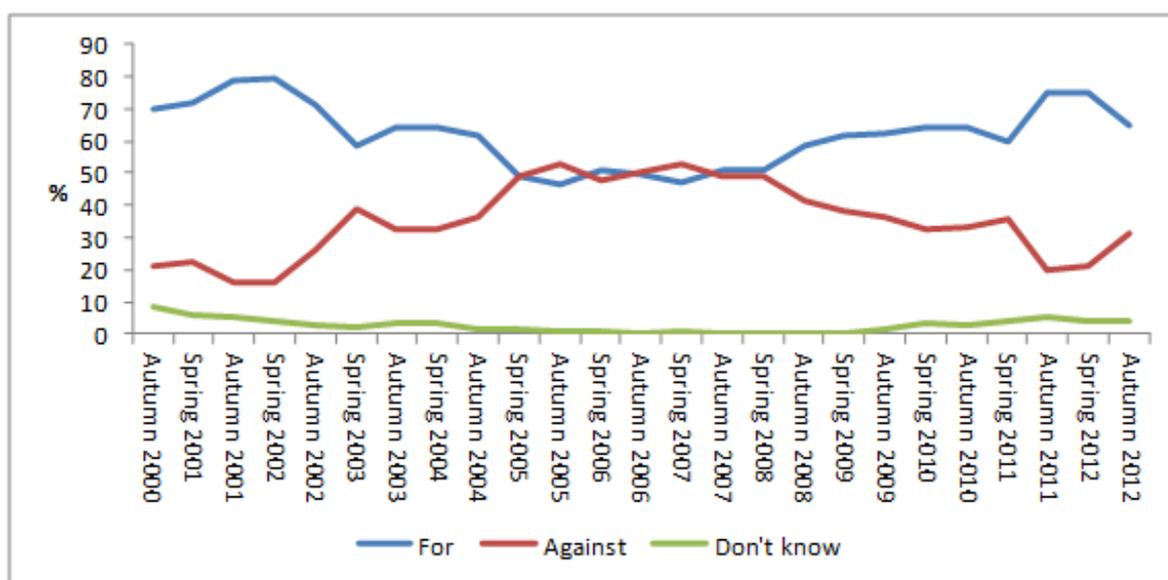
The speed and extent of the Greek opinion shifts are startling. This change in attitudes reveals that there is a potential message to send to political elites in Greece and Europe. The increase in negative attitudes towards the EU could reflect a crisis of "output legitimacy" and the fact that the EU can no longer guarantee prosperity and growth for its citizens. It could also reflect a crisis of "input legitimacy" and the realisation of the irreversible impact of the process of integration on decisions that touch the most important political issues for ordinary voters such as growth and job creation. Citizens in Greece have become increasingly aware that they can no longer influence public policy through traditional forms of political participation, such as voting in national elections. The realisation that the EU matters a lot could trigger a positive process whereby citizens demand to become more actively involved in debates on the future of the integration process, the content of EU policies, their ideological direction and their impact on questions of equity and solidarity within their societies. Several of the indicators cited above can be regarded as measuring soft Euroscepticism, entailing opposition to the current direction of integration or

the content of key policies. Unlike hard Euroscepticism, the soft variety does not challenge either the principle of European integration or national membership. In May 2011, while almost three-quarters of the Greek sample agreed the EU was going in the wrong direction, an indicator of criticism rather than scepticism, only one-third concurred with the statement that EU membership was 'a bad thing', a hard Eurosceptic response.

Perhaps what is more disconcerting is that the proportion of citizens that expressed distrust in EU institutions reached 81% in autumn 2012, a huge increase from 30% in autumn 2003. This is particularly worrying since negative attitudes towards the EU are for the first time closely accompanied by increasing distrust in national institutions, such as the government, parliament and political parties (reaching by autumn 2012, 91%, 89% and 94%, respectively). The crisis has clearly shaken Greek citizens' trust in the EU and its institutions. The thought of where those citizens would turn to when they no longer trust any of the formal political channels of representation at both the national and EU level opens up some worrying and potentially dangerous possibilities for the future.

On the more pressing matter of speculation of a disorderly Greek departure from the eurozone, we can look at attitudes towards membership of the single currency.

Figure 2: Attitudes towards the single currency



Source: Eurobarometer surveys.

Figure 2 paints a different picture from that in Figure 1 and shows that, after a period of declining support in the euro in the years after its introduction, there has been a clear reaffirmation of Greek support from 2008 onwards. By 2011, positive attitudes towards the euro had returned to the very high levels of the early 2000s, with an overwhelming 75 per cent of Greeks in favour compared to an EU average of 53 per cent. In the context of the unfolding economic crisis and sharply increased negative evaluations of the EU, this result initially appears paradoxical. But it is consistent with an interpretation which distinguishes between hard and soft euroscepticism. It confirms that Greek citizens still very much want to be part of the EU since anything else is a much less attractive alternative and most importantly they want to have a say about what kind of EU they belong to. There is very clearly a crisis of confidence in the EU, which is no longer trusted in Greece. However, this does not extend to rejection of the EU. While the European Union is currently not loved unconditionally, membership remains legitimate and Greeks are still willing to endure the austerity measures in order to hold on to their EU status. What is uncertain is for how long.

This post is part of a collaboration between [British Politics and Policy](#), [EUROPP](#) and [Ballots & Bullets](#), which aims to examine the nature of Euroscepticism in the UK and abroad from a wide range



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