

The strength of exclusive national identity is the most important indicator of Euroscepticism

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13/02/2014

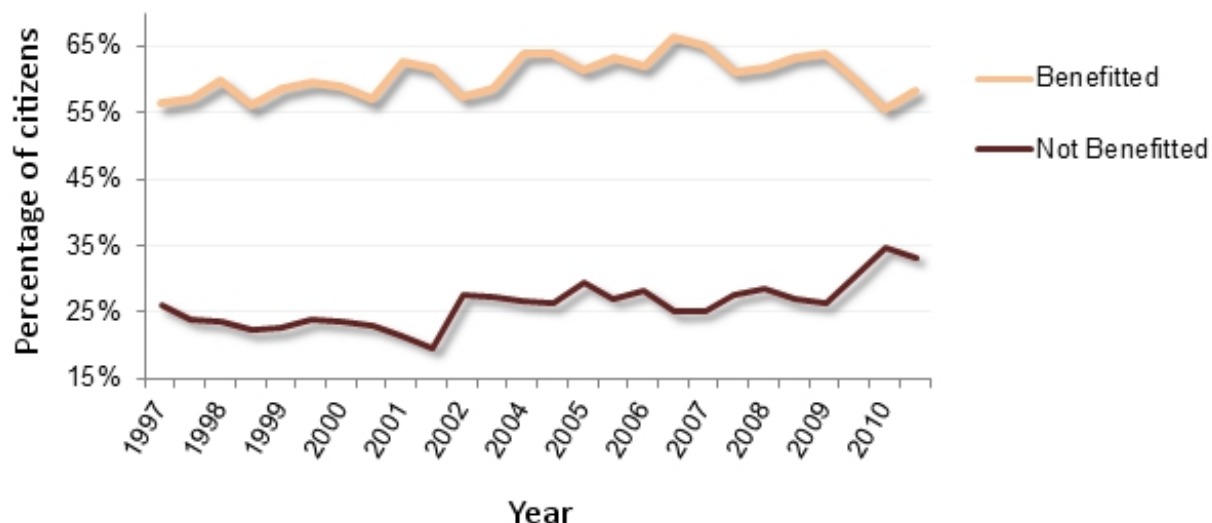
Who is most likely to have scepticism toward European integration? [Marijn van Klingeren](#) and [Hajo Boomgaarden](#) write that in the early years of studies on public Euroscepticism explanations tended to focus on 'hard' factors such as citizens' economic status. Taking issue with this approach, they argue that an individual's strength of national identity is more important than economic status for determining their tendency to hold Eurosceptic views. Based on a survey of Eurobarometer data, they suggest that national identity is not only the most important indicator of Euroscepticism today, but that this was also the case in previous decades.



The share of people thinking that their country has not benefitted from EU membership has been steadily increasing in most European countries since the late 1990s (see the Chart below). Indeed, observers look at such trends in public opinion and at the increasing success of outspokenly Eurosceptic parties in national and European elections when claiming that Euroscepticism is on the rise. While up until the early 1990s the EU was seen primarily as an economic endeavour, developments since the Treaty of Maastricht have put Europe in a more central position in people's everyday lives. This has potentially affected how, as well as the grounds on which, European citizens base their evaluations of the European Union. These developments may explain some of the rise in Euroscepticism.



Chart: Average percentage of EU citizens (EU-12) who indicated that their country has benefited or not benefited from being a Member of the EU



Note: Figures are an average for the EU-12: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the UK. **Source:** [Eurobarometer \(1997-2011\)](#)

Two main approaches can be identified when reviewing the history of research on public Euroscepticism. Explanations of why people are Eurosceptic have traditionally focused on the so-called 'hard' factor, emphasising

the importance of, for instance, individuals' work status, income or economic evaluations. A second and more recent stream of research takes a 'soft' factor approach, which focuses on more affective identity and culturally driven predictors. We contend and show that it is these identity factors which matter considerably more than economic aspects when explaining Euroscepticism. Moreover, this observation does not appear to be time dependent. Even in the economy-dominated EU of the 1990s, peoples' identity concerns still weighed more heavily than economic considerations.

Let us take a short look back at research on public Euroscepticism. The utilitarian, hard approach to explaining Euroscepticism was the most common in the 1990s. In short, it showed that people in higher occupational positions were more supportive of European integration. This line of research was hardly questioned at the time, also due to the predominant economic focus of the EU. With the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, however, the focus of European integration also shifted toward softer aspects. Intergovernmental policies were created for foreign affairs and defence (CFSP) and justice and home affairs (JHA), which began to have an impact in the second half of the 1990s.

The shift in emphasis regarding EU policy areas was argued to also have affected the judgement criteria people used when evaluating the EU. Today, research suggests that soft factors relating to national identity attachments and immigration perceptions have a stronger impact on Euroscepticism than hard economic factors. The literature implies a shift in the explanatory powers of utilitarian factors towards identity factors. But did this alleged shift actually take place? Or was identity always important, just not taken into account by earlier research in the area of study?

There are two main assumptions underlying the idea of a shift in importance of explanatory factors. First, as discussed above, the focus of the EU has shifted over time. Social policies were implemented for the first time following the Maastricht Treaty. This meant that the EU took a more social turn in its approach towards European integration, without however leaving its utilitarian qualities behind. These newly implemented policies gradually altered the European context. As a consequence, European citizenship competes with national citizenship, and the fear of losing one's national identity due to progressing European integration became real.

Second, a number of international events took place in the decade between the late 1990s and mid-2000s – the 9/11 terrorists attacks in New York in 2001 and the terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005 are specific examples. These events altered the discourse within politics, the media and the public sphere, with more of a focus on religious and national identities. Hence, national identities were perhaps strengthened and feelings of threat to the peoples' culture and identity were intensified. Given these observations, we argue that people in the 2000s were more inclined to take into account soft factors than hard factors when judging the EU.

Using Eurobarometer surveys from 1994 and 2005 in twelve long-term member states, we assessed the impact of individual-level soft indicators, such as national pride and exclusive national identity, and hard factors, such as socioeconomic position and perceived financial status. We also included soft and hard contextual characteristics, such as immigration inflows and GDP. The results showed remarkable similarities at the two time points. Overall, people who were more positive about their personal and their country's financial situation were less Eurosceptic. The influence of occupational status was small, while a relative improvement of the country's economic situation led to less scepticism. More importantly, exclusive national identity increases Euroscepticism. National pride, however, shows the opposite effect. This difference can be explained by the fact that an exclusive identity creates opposing attitudes toward "others" (hence, the EU), whereas national pride can more easily co-occur with European pride.

But what about the differences in the predictive power of economic versus identity factors over time? In both time periods, economic factors had a somewhat more limited influence on Euroscepticism compared to identity factors. This suggests that EU developments toward more social policies and external events did not affect the leverage of socially and culturally driven factors on which people base their EU attitudes. Arguably these soft factors have dominated the hard factors all along. This refutes the general idea in research on public Euroscepticism that identity and culture only recently became important.

What does this mean with regard to the alleged rise in public Euroscepticism? It seems that people have not become more critical towards the EU despite the increasing breadth of EU policies. This shift in policy emphasis does not translate into a change with regard to the importance of soft or hard judgement factors. Although this may seem like an anticlimactic result, it is not in reality. These findings demonstrate the existence of a common misconception with regard to the impact of identity and culture on Euroscepticism. We knew that these factors were of importance with regard to explaining Euroscepticism. We now know that they were important all along. This extends our understanding of what Europe means to its citizens and how this meaning is affected by identity and culture.

For a longer discussion of the topic covered here, see the authors' [article](#) in the *Journal of European Integration*

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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