

Intermediary Institutions and Information about the European Union.*

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Abstract: Much of the recent literature on public support for European integration assumes a fairly high level of sophistication on the part of European publics. In particular, individuals are presumed to have reasonably accurate perceptions of the costs and benefits of integration. This paper identifies the institutions such as political parties, labor unions, professional associations, and the news media which are used as sources of information about the European Union, and examines systematic differences in the subjective and objective levels of information among individuals relying on each major source of information. The results help to identify those individuals who are more likely to behave according to economic utility maximizing models, political cue taking theories, or hypotheses about media influence.

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Early research on support for European integration generally posited a rather low level of cognitive complexity in the process of opinion formation. Theories ranged from the diffusion of the attitudes of opinion leaders (Feld and Wilgden 1976) to differences among Europeans in their cognitive mobilization or post-bourgeois values (Inglehart 1970, 1971.) European integration was often described as an issue where the low level of public interest produced a “permissive consensus” which afforded elites a certain latitude of action. (Slater 1982) More recent models of public support for the European Union often posit individuals who make relatively sophisticated judgments about integration, and possess a respectable amount of information about the EU.

One example of this more recent approach is the “thermostat” theory of public opinion. Authors have argued that shifts in public support for the EU respond to changes in the overall level of EU activity. By becoming more euroskeptical during times of increased EU activity, and reducing their skepticism when European integration slows, the public is able to keep the process of integration from proceeding at an intolerably fast or slow pace. (Wlezien and Franklin 1997.) Such a model does, of course, depend on the public’s accurate perceptions of EU activity. Other authors argue that voters reflect the positions taken by the political parties which they support, and argument which assumes that they accurately perceive the position of those parties (Ray 2001). Arguments about the economic interests of Europeans often make the greatest demands on the cognitive capabilities of voters. Applications of trade theory to opinion formation presume that individuals understand the competitiveness of their sector, or the relative factor endowments of their nation (Ray 2000.) Theories which posit differences in human capital (see Gabel 1998) as the sources of opinions about integration presume that voters can accurately assess how marketable their set of skills would be in a wider European marketplace.

This paper addresses the role of information sources in the process of opinion formation. The paper uses data from the Eurobarometer¹ surveys to address the following questions: What information do Europeans have about the EU? How accurate is that information? Who do they trust to provide information about the EU? And how does reliance upon a particular source affect both the accuracy of knowledge and the type of factors which influence opinion?

Levels and Sources of information about the EU

I measure the level of information Europeans possess about the EU using a battery of ten questions about the EU included on Eurobarometer 44.2bis. These questions, along with the percent of respondents who gave the correct response to that question, are presented in Table 1. The questions covered a wide range of difficulty levels. 67% of respondents were able to correctly identify Brussels or Luxembourg as the city where most of the EU institutions are located. Only 15% knew that the Euro coins and notes were going to be introduced in 5 years time (2002). I summed the number of correct responses to produce an index of information levels. This index, summarized in Table 2, reveals a wide range of information levels, albeit with a pronounced downward skew. The mean is only 3.4 on the 10 point scale, with only 1.3% of respondents answering all 10 questions correctly.

Table 1. Components of the EU Information Quality Index

Do you happen to know ... ?	% correct
The city in which most of the European Union institutions are located (BRUSSELS OR LUXEMBURG)	67
One of the two colours of the European flag (YELLOW/GOLD OR BLUE)	62
The recently chosen name for the European currency (EURO)	44
The name of one (NATIONALITY) Commissioner	39
The current number of states in the European Union (15)	26
The country which holds the Presidency of the European Union since January 1 and until the end of June 1996 (ITALY)	25
The number of (NATIONALITY) Commissioners (2 IN D,E,F,IT,UK - 1 IN ALL OTHERS)	24
The current value of the ECU in (NATIONAL CURRENCY)	23
The name of the President of the European Commission (JACQUES SANTER)	16
The year, when notes and coins in the European currency will be introduced (2002)	15

¹ All of the survey data used in this paper were drawn from the first ICPSR release of Eurobarometer 44.2 bis. The fieldwork for this survey was conducted between January and March 1996.

Table 2. Summary results for EU Information Quality Index

Value	Percent
0	13.0
1	11.8
2	14.8
3	15.4
4	13.8
5	11.0
6	8.1
7	5.7
8	3.4
9	1.8
10	1.3
Mean	3.4
Median	3

The same Eurobarometer asks respondents to name which institutions or organizations which they feel provide credible information about the European Union. This question was open ended, and respondents could name a number of sources which they felt provided credible information. In the dataset released by ICPSR, the responses for each nation were recoded into a number of nation specific categories. In order to compare information sources across nations, I recoded the responses to this question into five categories. References to political parties, national political institutions, and local or regional elected officials were recoded as POLITICAL sources. References to economic interest groups including trade unions, consumer associations, and employers associations were recoded as ECONOMIC sources. References to the institutions of the EU were recoded as EU sources. References to newspapers, TV, or the radio were recoded as MEDIA sources. References to any other named source were recoded as OTHER sources. To illustrate the recoding process, Appendix A presents the original eurobarometer codes for Germany and Italy, along with my recodes. The full set of recodes is available from the author.

Table 3 presents the relative frequencies for each source. Almost three fourths of all respondents named at least one source as providing credible information. The most frequently named sources were the media, followed closely by political sources. European institutions and economic interest groups were the least frequently cited

sources. The fairly large category of “other” sources consists primarily of references to environmental organizations, schools, universities, and international organizations such as the UN, as well as responses that INRA found impossible to classify.

Table 3. Type of organization or institution thought to provide credible information about the EU. (More than 1 answer permitted.)

	Of all Respondents	Of Respondents naming a source
Media Source	29%	40%
Political Source	27%	38%
EU Source	13%	19%
Economic Source	12%	16%
Other Source	28%	39%
No Source Named	28%	-

The ability to name a credible source of information is, not surprisingly, related to the quality of one’s information about the EU. Respondents unable to name any credible source averaged 2.80 on the information index, while those naming a source averaged 3.63. The type of source named is also related to the quality of an individual’s information. Table 4 presents a regression of respondents’ information levels on a set of dummy variables indicating which type of source(s) they named as credible.

Table 4. Predicting quality of information about the EU with type of source named as credible.

Variable	B (se)
Media Source	.435* (.021)
Political Source	.610* (.021)
EU Source	1.282* (.028)
Economic Source	.766* (.029)
Other Source	.058* (.021)
Constant	2.855* (.014)
Adjusted R ²	.08
N	65177

* = P < .01

These results indicate that information levels are much higher among respondents who named EU institutions as credible sources of information. (Their conditional mean is 4.13.) This could be interpreted to mean that the EU provides high quality information about itself, although one must also admit that only individuals with relatively good information about the EU will know which of its institutions to turn to for information. Respondents with confidence in political or economic sources have roughly the mean level of information quality (3.46 and 3.62 respectively). Confidence in the media is associated with slightly below average information quality (3.29). Reliance on other sources is associated with only a marginal improvement in information quality over those respondents who could name no source.

The sources Europeans trust for their information about the EU clearly influence the quality of their information. As the remainder of the paper demonstrates, it also helps to determine which forces will shape their opinions about the EU.

Political sources and political support for the EU

One potential set of factors influencing individual opinions about the European Union are the positions taken on this issue by the political leaders of Europe. Past research has demonstrated the strength of the association between the positions taken by political parties and the opinions of supporters of those parties (Ray 2001, Wessels 1995, Van der Eijk and Franklin 1991.) It is reasonable to suppose that the link between an individual's opinion, and the position taken by the political party supported by that individual will be strongest for those people who view political institutions as credible sources of information about the EU.

OLS regression was used in order to test whether the effect of political party cues is greater for individuals who trust political sources. Support for European integration was measured using an additive index constructed from two survey questions. The first asks respondents whether their nation's membership in the EU is a "good thing." The second question asks whether the individual is in favor of "efforts to unify Europe."

Responses to these questions were added together, and the resulting index was re-scaled to range from 0 (opposition to Europe) to 100 (support for Europe).

Support for the EU was regressed on a variable indicating the position on the issue of European integration taken by the political party the respondent said they would vote for “if a national election were held tomorrow.” This indicator ranges from 7 (support) to 1 (opposition).² In order to determine whether this variable has a larger effect among respondents who trust political sources, an interaction term multiplying party position with the dummy variable for trust of political sources was included in the model. Controls for trust in political sources and for information level were also included, as were 14 dummy variables for nationality.

Table 5. Political Model of EU Support

Variable	B (se)
Party Cue	3.415* (.123)
Party Cue * Political Source Named	.725* (.215)
Political Source Named	-1.453 (1.220)
Information Level	2.036* (.062)
Country Dummies (omitted from Table)	-
Constant	36.163* (1.156)
Adjusted R ²	.12
N	36728

* = P < .01

As the results reported in Table 5 indicate, there is a strong relationship between the positions taken by political parties and the opinions of the voters who support these parties. This relationship is significantly stronger for respondents who named political institutions as credible sources of information about the EU (4.140 vs. 3.415).³ This

² The data on party positions was derived from an expert survey described in detail in the European Journal of Political Research (Ray 1999.)

³ It is possible that the overall relationship between party positions and voter opinion reflects a reciprocal relationship where parties adjust their positions to reflect the views of voters. That argument is a fairly implausible explanation for the observed interaction effect.

interaction effect is independent of the effect of trust in political sources on information levels.

Economic sources and economic support for the EU

The economic costs and benefits of integration undergird another approach to the explanation of differences in support for the European Union which is also relatively information intensive. Any argument that individuals assess the economic consequences of the EU presumes that the individuals will possess the same information which the researcher uses to predict respondents' opinions. In most cases, researchers have to search for this data, which suggests that it may not be part of the background knowledge of ordinary Europeans. One way to reconcile the cognitive demands of economic arguments with our received wisdom about "rationally ignorant" citizens is to posit that individuals receive cues about the economic consequences of the EU.

One of the leading arguments about the economic effects of European integration refers to the human capital of Europeans. As formulated by Matthew Gabel (1998), this theory holds that individuals with high levels of skills are more able to compete in a pan-European free market than are low skill individuals. Those individuals with higher levels of skills (or human capital) should therefore support European integration because of the economic benefits they will reap from market liberalization. Gable uses a number of demographic variables as indicators of human capital including education, income, and occupation (professional or executive employment vs. manual work vs. unemployment). If the ability of individuals to follow this economic model of opinion formation depends on the cues sent by economic interest groups, then the effects observed by Gabel should be greater among individuals who trust economic interest groups to provide information about the EU.

I test this argument by replicating the human capital analysis of Matthew Gabel with the addition of interaction terms multiplying each of the demographic variables with a dummy variable for respondents who trust economic sources for their information about the EU. This regression, like the one above, also includes controls for trust in economic sources, overall information level, and 14 dummy variables for nationality.

Table 6. Economic Model of EU support

Variable	B (se)
Professional	3.460* (.681)
Executive	4.182* (1.005)
Manual Worker	-3.544* (.344)
Unemployed	-1.880* (.448)
Low Education	-1.153* (.285)
High Education	3.814* (.338)
Income	1.826* (.133)
Econ Source * Professional	.361 (1.580)
Econ Source * Executive	-2.462 (2.156)
Econ Source * Manual Worker	-3.003* (.973)
Econ Source * Unemployed	-1.588 (.214)
Econ Source * Low Education	1.370 (.083)
Econ Source * High Education	.668 (.845)
Econ Source * Income	-.560 (.361)
Economic Source Named	2.310 (1.098)
Information Level	1.661* (.051)
Country Dummies (omitted from Table)	-
Constant	58.995* (.763)
Adjusted R ²	.11
N	58248

* = P < .01

As Table 6 indicates, individuals with higher levels of human capital do appear more supportive of European integration than those with low skill levels. However, only one of the interaction terms is statistically significant. This term, corresponding to the interaction of a reliance on economic sources with employment in manual labor, suggests that the decrease in support for integration associated with manual work is almost twice

as great for those workers who name economic interest groups as credible sources (-6.547 vs. -3.544.) This effect is both substantively large and statistically significant. The restriction of the hypothesized effect of economic sources of information to manual workers may reflect the frequency with which respondents name labor unions as economic sources. The analysis above also presumes that economic interest groups will be sending cues based on the “human capital” model of the economic consequences of integration. It is always possible that some alternate economic theory is driving these organizations’ assessments of the costs and benefits of integration.

The media hypothesis

The final source of individual opinions to be considered in this paper is the news media. Very few Europeans have much direct experience interacting with the institutions of the European Union. As we have seen above, almost 30 percent of respondents named the news media as a credible source of information about the European Union. European news outlets do differ in their interpretation of European events. Understanding the “spin” different media sources place on their coverage of the EU is an important part of any explanation of individual level opinion formation. The influence of media can be expected to vary according to the perceived credibility of the news media as well as the intensity of an individual’s media use.

I estimate the impact of media coverage on public opinion by regressing support for the EU on a measure of the pro or anti EU slant of the national TV coverage of European issues. The data on European television coverage is drawn from a study of the European media conducted by the European Commission. From 1995 until 1997, the EU commissioned a monthly report, titled “Euromedia,” analyzing the coverage of EU issues by the major newspapers and television networks of Europe. The December 1995 edition of this study provides an excellent overall measure of the pro or anti EU spin of television coverage for the 6 months preceding the fieldwork for Eurobarometer 44.2bis. Each TV news story on an EU issue was coded on a five point scale ranging from -2 for very negative coverage, to +2 for very positive coverage. These scores were averaged to produce an indicator of the direction of media coverage for each month in the six largest

member nations, Germany, France, the UK, Italy, Spain, and Belgium.⁴ By averaging these values, I produced a summary indicator of the tone of coverage of European issues in these six nations for the six months prior to the mass survey data. These values are reported in Appendix B.

Two OLS regressions were estimated in order to test for the conditional effect of media cues. In the first model, I regressed EU support on the measure of media coverage, and on an interaction term which multiplied media coverage with a dummy variable for respondents who named media sources as credible. This model also included the media credibility dummy, as a control along with a control for information levels and 14 country dummies. The results of this model are presented in Table 7. The large and significant effect for media tone suggests that public support is related to the tone of a nation’s television coverage of European issues. However, the small and insignificant interaction effect suggests that this overall influence does not differ markedly between respondents who named the media as a credible source, and those who did not.

Table 7. National Media and EU support Model I

Variable	B (se)
Tone of Coverage	22.977* (.950)
Tone of Coverage * Media Source Named	-3.504 (1.765)
Media Source Named	1.435* (.325)
Information Level	1.850* (.065)
Constant	60.396* (.285)
Adjusted R ²	.06
N	33422

* = P < .01

^a Only Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom included in this analysis.

Unlike political or economic sources of information about the EU, there is a more precise measure of respondents’ use of the news media. The Eurobarometer asks

⁴ These data were also used by Norris (2000) in her analysis of the influence of media on European opinion.

respondents about the frequency with which they watch television news. This question provides a more accurate indicator of respondent's media exposure than does the credibility question. For a second test of the contingent effect of media cues, I again regressed EU support on national media tone, but this time interacted media tone with a five point scale of media use. Again, controls for media use and 14 country dummy variables were included in the model. These results, presented in Table 8, suggest that the tone of television coverage has a powerful effect on opinions, and that the effect increases dramatically as the frequency of television viewing increases. At first sight, the large negative effect for media tone presented in Table 8 would seem to suggest that positive coverage erodes support. However, this parameter must be interpreted in conjunction with the interaction term. The negative relationship is predicted only for respondents who never, or almost never, watch television, a tiny minority of the sample. As TV viewing increases, the effect of coverage tone increases by about 11.3 for each increment on the 5 point scale of media use. The effect of the coverage tone variable for each level of media use is presented graphically in Figure 1.

Table 8. National Media and EU support Model II

Variable	B (se)
Tone of Coverage	-26.697* (5.398)
Tone of Coverage * Media Use	11.291* (.134)
Media Use	1.748* (.192)
Constant	59.173* (.896)
Adjusted R ²	.03
N	33334 ^a

* = P < .01

^a Only Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom included in this analysis.

Conclusion

The results presented in this paper demonstrate the variety of sources which Europeans believe provide credible information about the European Union. This diversity of sources is related to differences in the quality of information about the EU possessed by individuals. Reliance on particular sources of information is also an

important factor which conditions the applicability of several of the theories which have been proposed to explain public opinion about the EU.

The results for political and media effects are particularly substantial and significant. The credibility of political sources enhances the persuasive power of political parties, and the intensity of media use increases the influence of media coverage. The results for the economic theory of “human capital” are weaker, with only manual workers behaving as predicted. The weakness of these economic results could be the result of limitations in the data, or of a theoretical misunderstanding of the economics of European integration.

The data for the human capital theory differ from the political and media data in that I had no direct evidence of the type of message being sent by the various economic sources. I did not have a measure of the positions taken by trade unions, the communiques of employers associations, and so on. The absence of such data forces my analysis to posit, implicitly, what those messages must have been. The assumption in this analysis is that the economic associations take positions on the EU based upon the human capital of their audience. More direct evidence of the cues actually sent by these organizations would permit a test of this assertion, as well as a more direct test of the influence these groups may exert over the formation of public opinion.

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Appendix A.

Examples of recoding of institutions/organizations named as credible sources of information about the EU.

Responses for Germany

Recoded as ...	Response Codes
Political source	Political parties CDU/CSU SPD Bündnis 90/Grüne F.D.P. PDS Republikaner Parliament, Bundestag National Government, Bundesregierung Upper house of German Parliament, Bundesrat Governments of the Federal States Ministry of Economy Local authorities
EU Source	EU-information offices European Parliament European Court of Justice European Council of Ministers European Commission
Media Source	The press Radio Television
Economic Source	Trade Unions Consumer Organisations Banks, savings banks Professional Organisations Institutes for economy Schools, Universities
Other Source	UNO (and its institutions) The church Environmental Organisations Post Other

Responses for Italy

Recoded as ...	Response Codes
Political source	National political bodies (Chamber, Senate, politicians...) Ministry of Foreign Affairs
EU Source	European political bodies (Parliament, Cabinet, Commission)
Media Source	the press/the newspapers TV/radio
Economic Source	the unions the banks/bank associations consumer associations associations categories (Industrial/Trade...)
Other Source	school/university Other

Appendix B

Nation	TV Coverage Tone (June-Dec 1995)
Italy	.14
Germany	.10
Spain	.05
France	-.07
Belgium	-.19
UK	-.40

Figure 1. Conditional effect of media content by levels of media exposure

