

## **Trust and Heterogeneity in Preference Formation about European Integration**

Research on public support for the European Union has not reached a consensus on the factors that drive attitudes about integration. Rather, there is a wide range of explanations which have found support in the published literature. This paper argues that one reason for this diversity of research findings in this area is heterogeneity in the process of opinion formation across individuals. Simply put, individuals differ in the way they form opinions on the issue of Europe. These differences mean that some individuals will act much more in accordance with a particular theory and diverge from the expectations based on another theory. This individual level heterogeneity is not random, but is systematically related to a number of individual level characteristics. This paper argues that trust in various sources of information about the EU is one such factor. Trust in information sources is related to overall levels of information about the European Union, and also to the degree to which individuals act in accordance with particular theories of public opinion formation.

Early research on support for European integration generally posited a rather low level of information and cognitive complexity in the process of mass 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. These more information intensive models assume Europeans are aware of trends in EU activity (Wlezien and Franklin 1997) positions taken by political parties (Ray 2003) or the economic consequences of integration (Gabel 1998b).

Clearly these theories are making assumptions (often heroic) about the amount of information individuals possess about the European Union. More realistic assumptions about the relative ignorance of the mass public can, however, be consistent with the

opinion formation predicted by theory if individuals are following the cues of political, economic, and media actors who themselves possess a greater level of information about European integration.

### **Information dependent theories of opinion formation**

Partly in response to the series of national referenda on treaty revisions since 1992, the literature is increasingly recognizing that Europeans vary greatly in their awareness of and information about the European Union. This variation is explicable in part as a function of the timing of EU accession and national referenda (Sinnott 1997, Benz and Stutzer 2004) and also impacts referenda outcomes (Kennedy and Sinnott 2007). Information has been shown to impact opinion directly. Higher levels of information are associated with support for the EU (Gabel 1998a, Aldrich 2009) and information levels condition the degree to which assessments of the EU simply reflect assessments of national institutions. (Kritzinger 2003, Karp, Banducci, and Bowler 2003).

Information about the EU should also have an indirect effect on support for integration through the process of opinion formation. To the degree that theories of opinion formation depend on the presumed knowledge of individuals in the mass public, the source and quality of information conditions the applicability of these theories. Several approaches to the explanation of public support for the European Union make implicit assumptions about the level and source of Europeans' information about the process of integration. One example is the "thermostat" theory of public opinion which argues 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. Another approach holds that voters reflect the positions taken by the political parties which they support, an argument which assumes that they

accurately perceive the position of those parties, and rely on parties as sources of information (Ray 2003).

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. Theories which posit differences in human capital as the sources of opinions about integration (eg. Gabel 1998b) presume that voters can accurately assess how competitive their set of skills would be in a wider European marketplace. Gabel suggests that Europeans obtain the information needed to act in accordance with the predictions of economic theory “through ‘cheap’ information from informed elite, interest groups, associates, and the media” (1998a: 12).

The media are an obvious source of information about the European Union. Research from the Netherlands and Denmark suggest that individuals who rely upon the news media for their information about European Integration will to some degree reflect the tone of the media coverage. This effect, however, does depend on the consistency of the tone of media coverage (DeVreese and Boombaarden 2006). Pippa Norris also finds a relationship between media tone and support for the EU (2000).

This paper addresses the role of specific information sources in the process of opinion formation. I hypothesize that the factors which influence individual opinion about the EU will depend in part on the sources that individual trusts to provide information about European integration. I also examine differences in information quality across individuals who rely on different sources of information. The paper uses data from the Eurobarometer<sup>1</sup> surveys to address the following questions: What level of information do Europeans have about the EU? 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?

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<sup>1</sup> 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. While more recent Eurobarometers have included questions on the respondents’ level of objective knowledge about the EU, only this survey includes both objective knowledge and a self report on the sources of information used by the respondents.

## 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. At the easy end, 67% of respondents were able to correctly identify Brussels or Luxembourg as the city where most of the EU institutions are located. Conversely, only 15% knew that the Euro coins and notes were going to be introduced in 5 years time (in 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 (correct answer in parentheses)**

Do you happen to know ... ?	% answering correctly
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

**Table 2. Summary results for EU Information Quality Index**

# correct	Percent of respondents
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 they feel provide credible information about the European Union. This question was open ended, and respondents could name a number of sources. 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 newspapers, TV, or the radio were recoded as MEDIA sources. References to the institutions of the EU were recoded as EU 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.

There was great variation in the sources Europeans considered as credible providers of information about European integration. Table 3 presents the relative frequencies for each type of 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.)**

Type of Source	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 by type of source named as credible.**

Variable	Coefficient / (se)
Media Source	.435* (.021)
Political Source	.610* (.021)
EU Source	1.282* (.028)
Economic Source	.766* (.029)
Other Source	.058* (.021)
Constant (No source named)	2.855* (.014)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.08
N	65177

\* = P < .01

These results indicate that information levels are highest 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, the choice of a source of information also helps to determine which forces will shape their opinions about the EU.

### **Political sources of information and political cue taking**

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 2003, 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 then 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 for European integration) to 1 (opposition to European integration.)<sup>2</sup> 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 <sup>2</sup>	.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.)<sup>3</sup> This

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

<sup>3</sup> 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 (1998b), 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. Gabel 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 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 <sup>2</sup>	.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 here 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 <sup>2</sup>	.06
N	33422

\* = P < .01

<sup>a</sup> Only Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom included in this analysis.

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

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 respondents about the frequency with which they watch television news. This question provides a more accurate indicator of a 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 <sup>2</sup>	.03
N	33334 <sup>a</sup>

\* = P < .01

<sup>a</sup> Only Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom included in this analysis.

## Conclusion

There is considerable diversity in the sources Europeans trust to provide information about the EU. This diversity of sources is related to differences in the quality

of information about the EU possessed by individuals. Individuals trusting the EU as a source of information are objectively better informed than those who trust political or economic sources. Individuals who trust the news media to provide information are particularly poorly informed. Reliance on particular sources of information also conditions the applicability of several of the theories which have been proposed to explain public opinion about the EU. Perceived credibility of political sources enhances the persuasive power of political parties, and magnifies the effects of political cue taking models. Reliance on economic sources has a modest but significant effect, boosting the power of an economic (human capital) explanation of opinion formation. While perceived credibility had weaker effects in a model of media tone, it is the intensity of media use increases the influence of media coverage.

In this paper, direct measures of the content of media and political cues were available from a European wide content analysis of news coverage and from expert surveys of political party positions on the issue of European integration. The data to test the effects of information sources on 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. The assumption in this analysis is that the economic associations take positions on the EU based upon the human capital of their audience. Future research should measure the the actual position taken by economic actors, and provide more direct evidence of the cues actually sent by these organizations.

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### Appendix A.

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

#### Responses for Germany

Recorded 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

Recorded 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

Tone of TV coverage of EU affairs in six European nations.  
Data drawn from Dec 1995 issue of Commission publication *Euromedia*.

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

