

CHAPTER 3. AGGREGATE POLITICAL SUPPORT AND THE 2008 ECONOMIC CRISIS

In 2008 the European Union entered the most serious economic crisis in its history. How much did the economic crisis affect public support for the EU? Did public support for the EU demonstrate diffuse characteristics by remaining stable over the economic downturn? Or did public support for the EU just dissipate, following the decline in ratings of the economy? The present chapter examines these questions by looking at aggregate trends in public support for the EU.

First, I present background information on the economic situation in the European Union in the time of the 2008 economic crisis. I explore the trends in major macroeconomic indicators as well as trends in citizens' views of the economic situation. Then, I examine how well the aggregate trend public support follows the trend in economic indicators. If public support for the EU were specific, we would expect public support to closely follow the indicators of economic performance. If, on the other hand, public support for the EU were diffuse, we would expect the trend in support to remain stable, despite the drop in economic performance. In my analysis I find that there is a fair amount of stability in public support for the EU, despite a considerable drop in citizens' view of the economic situation.

3.1 The 2008 economic crisis

In 2008 an economic crisis hit the European economy. Figure 3.1 shows GDP growth in the European Union between 2005 and 2013. The economic crisis arrived in the fall of 2008. As Figure 3.1 shows, the first year of the crisis saw a 4.4% contraction in European Union's GDP. Although there was a weak growth in 2010 and 2011, the 2012 GDP shrank again. The economic crisis showed itself in public opinion as well. Public opinion surveys provide various measures of citizens' view of economic matters. Figure 3.2 shows data from the Eurobarometer surveys on citizens' evaluations of economic issues. The figure shows the percentage of respondents who provide the particular answer.⁵ The long-dashed line in Figure 3.2 provides a measure of citizens' view of the European economy. The line reports the percentage of respondents who evaluated the current situation in European economy as good or rather good. In 2007, European citizens had a fairly sanguine view of the economy in Europe: about 67% said the European economy was very good or rather good. In Fall 2008 only 34% of respondents thought so and this number became even lower as the crisis progressed.

⁵ The percentage is out of valid answers, missing data are excluded from the analysis (the same holds for all figures in this chapter). All public opinion data presented in the figures in this chapter are for the EU 25. Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia are excluded from the data because they only joined the EU in 2007 or later. See Appendix B for more information on operationalization of variables.

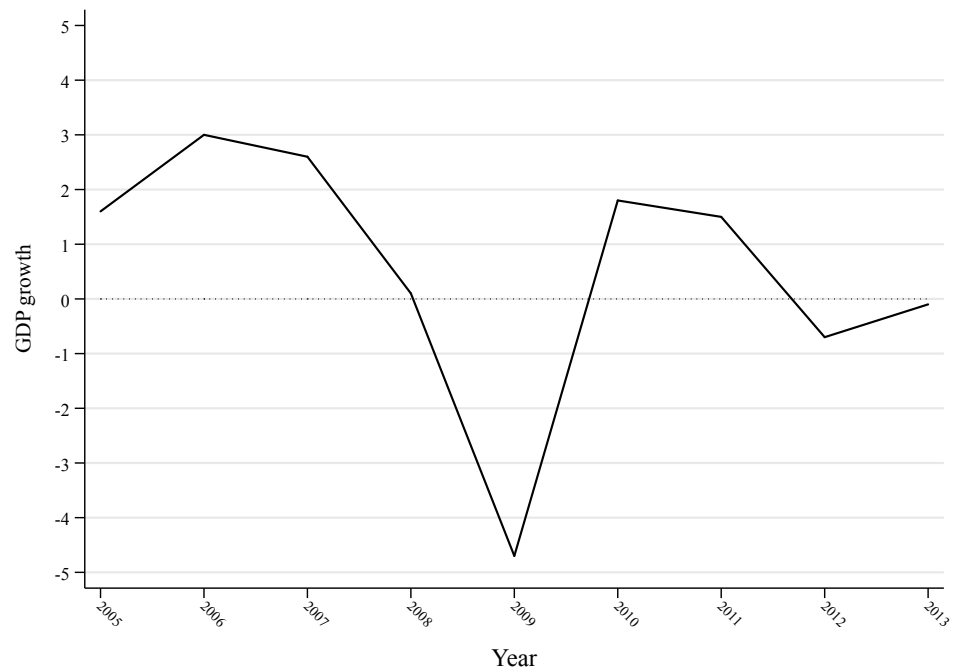


Figure 3.1 GDP growth in the EU over time (GDP volume).

Figure 3.2 also reports a measure of sociotropic evaluations of the economy: an evaluation of the situation in the country's economy (dotted line). This measure broadly follows the trend observed in the evaluation of the European economy. The drop in evaluation of the national economy is not so deep. This may be partly because evaluation of the national economy did not fare as well even before the crisis. Nevertheless, the decrease in evaluation of national economic situation is still substantial.

Individuals' evaluation of their personal job situation is the only dimension of economic evaluations that stayed largely the same throughout the crisis (grey line in Figure 3.2). This seems rather odd, given that that unemployment rate increased during

by about 2 percentage points in the first two years of the economic crisis (see Figure 3.3). Although European citizens did not become more negative in the evaluation of their personal job situation, they became more negative in the evaluation of the employment situation in their country (the short-dashed line in Figure 3.2). While shortly before the economic crisis, about 30% of respondents thought the employment situation in their country is very good or rather good, in the first years of the crisis the figure dropped to 14%, later it climbed to about 20%. Overall, with the exception of evaluation of personal job situation, economic indicators dropped as the economic crisis arrived.

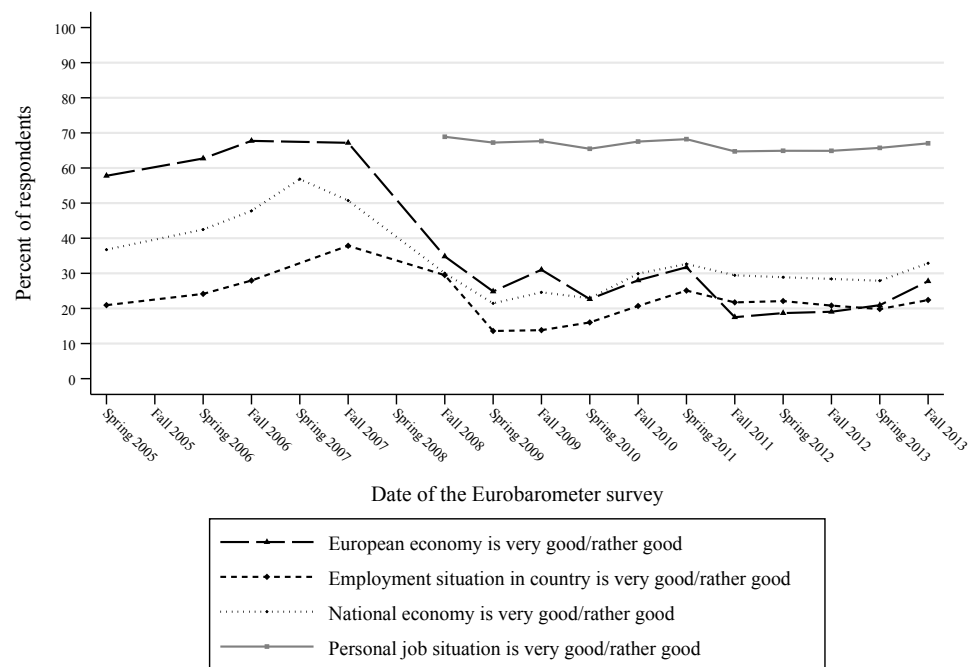


Figure 3.2 Aggregate trend in indicators of economic performance.

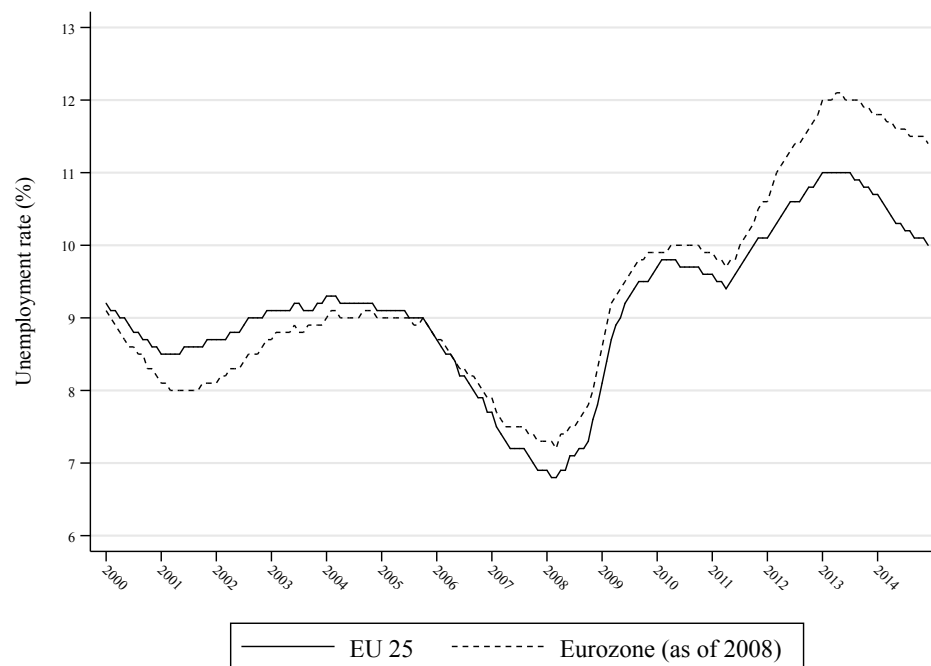


Figure 3.3 Unemployment rate in the EU (2000-2014).

3.2 Political support and the 2008 economic crisis

Given the theoretical distinction between specific and diffuse support, we would expect political support for the European Union to follow the evaluations of EU's performance if it is specific. If it is diffuse, however, it should stay largely the same over the crisis. In Figure 3.4 I explore aggregate trend in different measures of support for the EU. First, I explore the trend in citizens' evaluation of EU membership. Before the 2008 economic crisis 50-60% of citizens thought membership in the EU is a good thing. Support for membership remained above 50% in the first two years of the crisis. In May 2011, which is the last point in time when this item was measured, 47% percent of respondents thought that their country's membership is a good thing.

As pertains to citizens' trust in European institutions, over 60% of respondents expressed trust in the European Parliament or the European Commission before the economic crisis. As the crisis progressed, trust in European institutions dropped to about 45%. Citizens' trust in the European Union as a whole shows a similar trend although the drop is somewhat greater than in the case of trust in European institutions. While before the crisis, around 55% of respondents trusted the EU, in 2010 it was only 50% and by 2013 the figure dropped to 33%.

The indicator of European identity is the last measure of support reported in Figure 3.4. The measure of identity indicates the percentage of respondents who "in the near future" see themselves as European, European and national (European and Czech, for example), or national and European. Although the measure of European identity has wider gaps in the time series than the other measures, it still allows us to observe levels of European identity before and after 2008. In 2005 58% of respondents expressed European identity. In 2010 the number decreased to 52% and in 2013 it went up again to 61%.⁶ The trend in European identity thus differs from the trend in other dimensions of support for the EU. While the other dimensions of support for the EU decreased over time, European identity decreased only a little at the beginning of the crisis and then increased again. European identity thus shows a high level of stability in the presence of an economic crisis.

⁶ The newly released 2014 Eurobarometer survey shows a similar level of European identity. The 2013 figure is therefore probably not an artifact of sampling error.

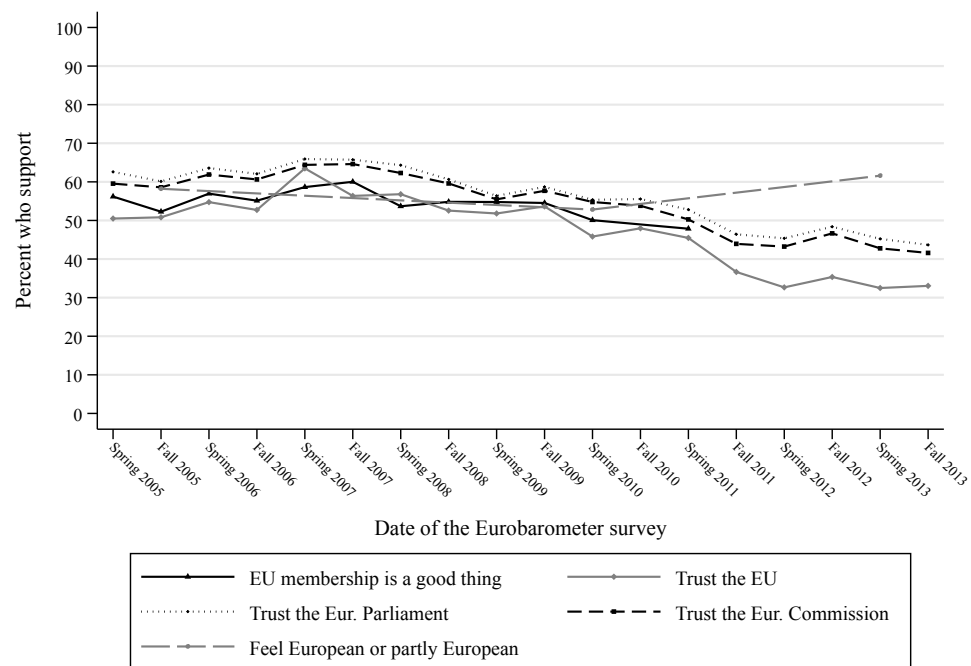


Figure 3.4 Aggregate trend in dimensions of political support for the EU.

In order to get a view of how the measures of support for the EU trend with the economic crisis in the background, I present a series of figures in which I plot each measure of support for the EU together with the measures of economic evaluations. These figures allow me to observe how well each measure of support for the EU follows citizens' evaluations of economic performance. Figure 3.5 shows the trend in support for EU membership in comparison to the trend in indicators of economic performance. Support for EU membership is represented by the solid line. We see that support for EU membership dropped in 2008 and then again in 2010. The drop is, however, less severe than drop in indicators of economic performance. It is unfortunate, however, that the

membership question was not included in Eurobarometer surveys beyond May 2011. We therefore cannot observe the trend in this measure after 2011.

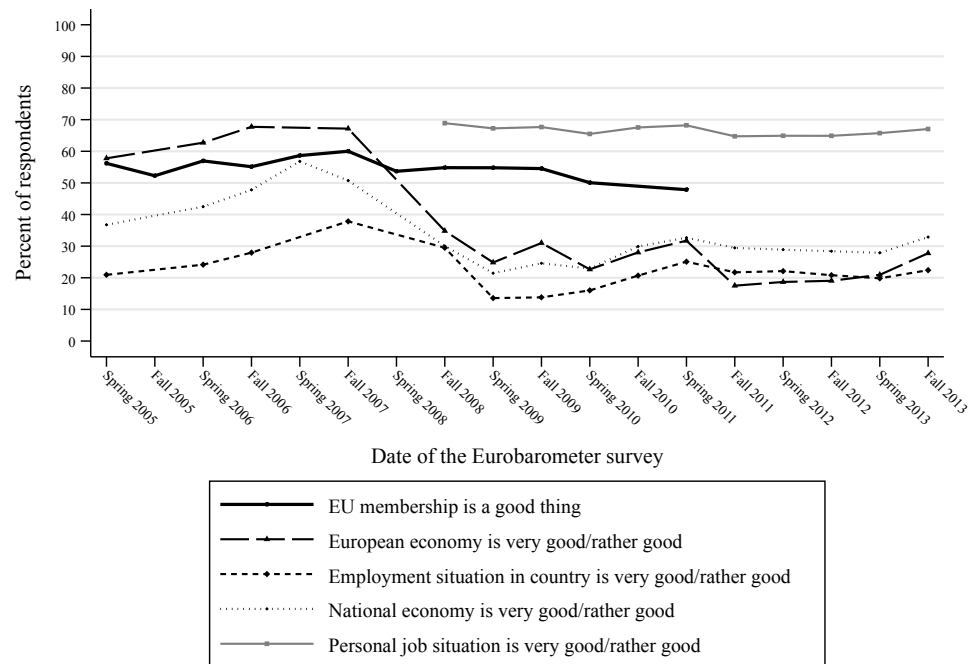


Figure 3.5 Aggregate trend in support for EU membership against trends in indicators of economic performance.

The next set of figures explores how much stability there is in citizens' trust in the European Parliament and trust in the EU.⁷ Figure 3.6 focuses on trust in the EU. Although in the first year of the crisis trust in the EU seemed resistant to the drop in economic evaluations, later on, trust in the EU followed the trend in economic evaluations, especially evaluation of the situation in European economy. Trust in the European Parliament (reported in Figure 3.7) shows somewhat more stability than trust in

⁷ I do not present a figure for trust in the European Commission because the trend in trust in the European Commission is almost identical to the trend in trust in the European Parliament.

the European Union and trends downward at a slower pace. Figure 3.8 then offers a closer look at the trend in European identity. It shows that the trend in European identity is largely resistant to drops in indicators of economic performance.

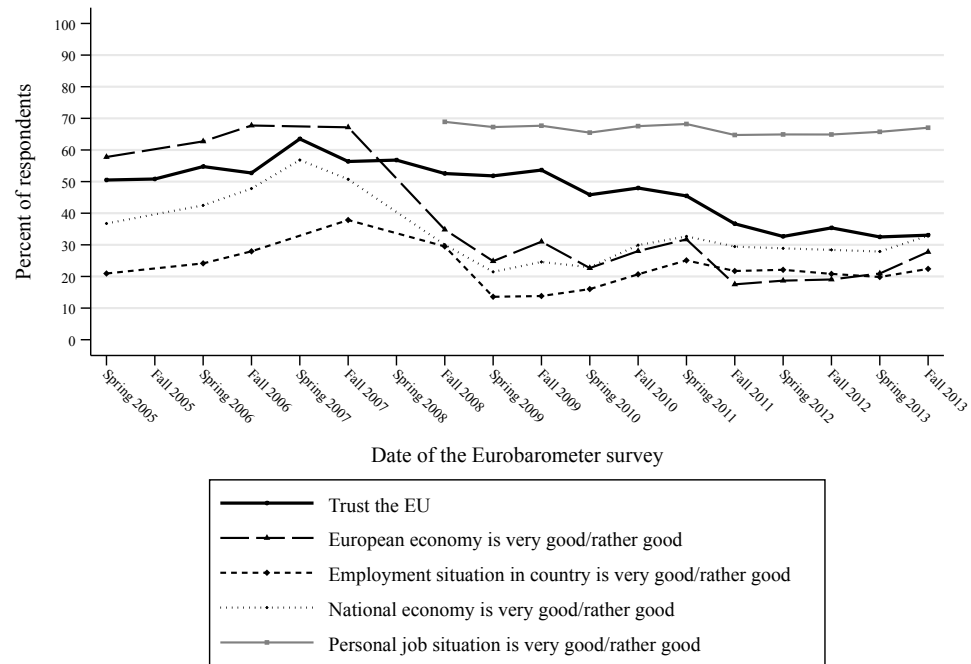


Figure 3.6 Aggregate trend in trust in the EU against trends in indicators of economic performance.

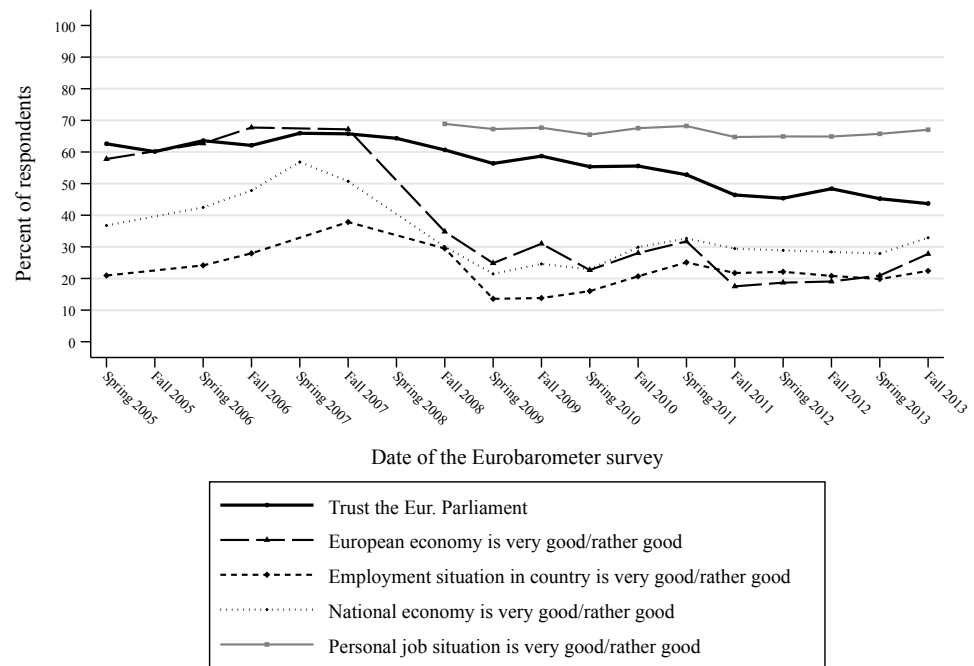


Figure 3.7 Aggregate trend in trust in the European Parliament against trends in indicators of economic performance.

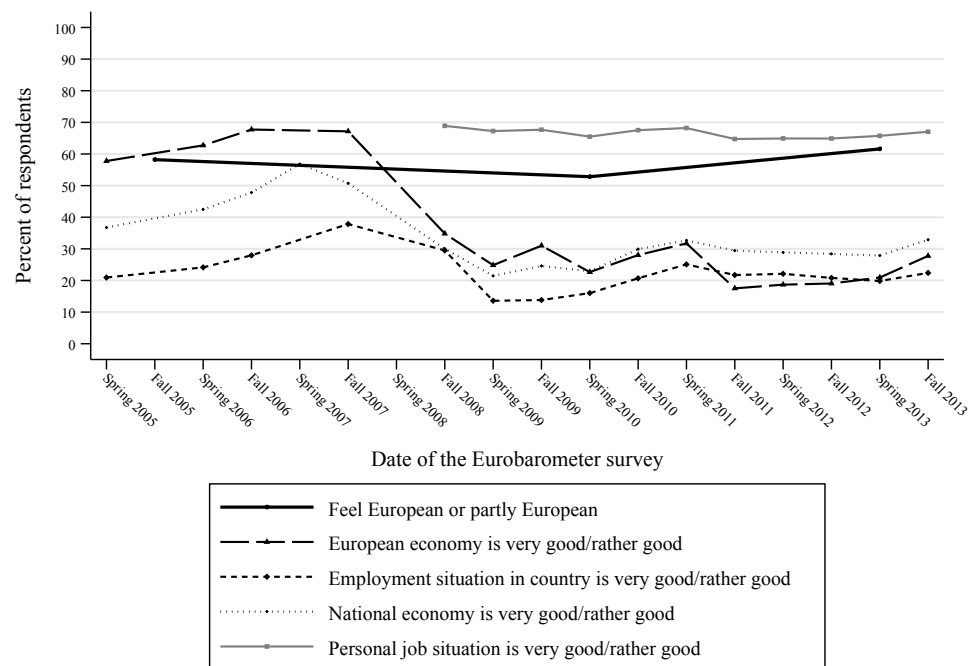


Figure 3.8 Aggregate trend in European identity against trends in indicators of economic performance.

3.3 Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to provide an overview of the aggregate trend in political support for the EU over the period of the 2008 economic crisis. The chapter showed that the 2008 economic crisis was a major challenge for European Union's economy. The GDP dropped considerably and unemployment rose. These economic trends affected public opinion as well. After 2008 European citizens noticed the worsening economy and became much less sanguine about the state of the economy both in Europe and in their own countries.

The main goal of this chapter was to explore how public support for the EU fares when faced with such serious economic crisis. The presented data suggest that there is a

fair amount of resilience in support for the EU. True, most indicators of support for the EU experienced a downward trend. The downward tendency, however, is nowhere near as sharp as the downward trend in evaluations of economic performance. Furthermore, the analysis shows that different measures of support for the EU have a varying level of stability. While trust for the EU and trust in European institutions are less stable, support for EU membership has a higher level of stability to the decrease in evaluations of economic performance. The feeling of European identity then shows most stability out of all measures of support for the EU.

There are, however, limitations to a simple aggregate-data analysis of this kind. The inferences drawn from the analysis presented in this chapter are therefore only suggestive. The chapters that follow explore the resilience of political support in a more rigorous manner. Chapter 4 zooms in to the individual level of measurement and studies individual-level stability in political support. Chapters 5 and 6 examine whether support for the EU is more diffuse among individuals who grew up in the EU or whether early life political socialization is immaterial for resilience of political support in adulthood. Chapter 8 complements the observational designs of the other empirical chapters and examines political support for the EU in an experiment.