

# Spotlight on...



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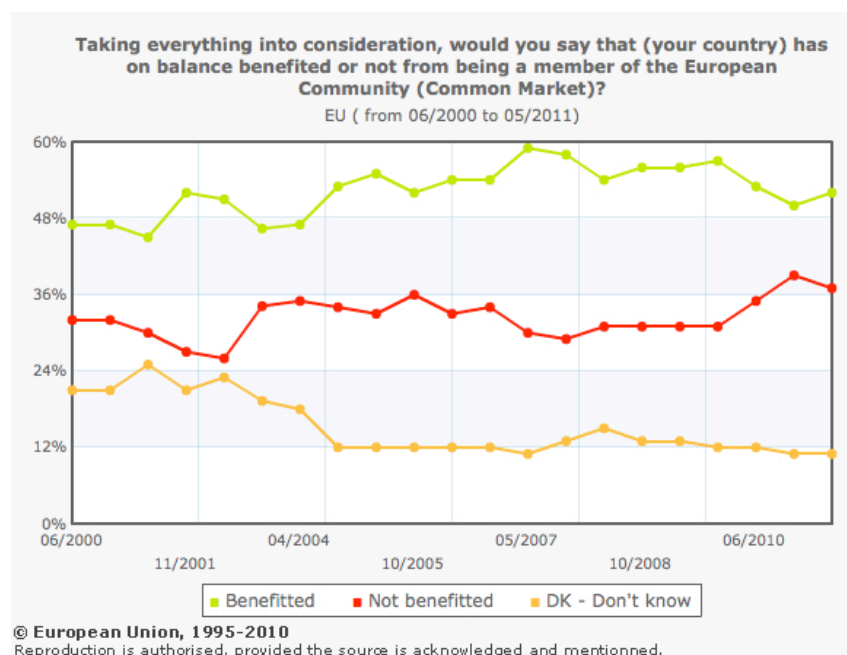
## Resilience of EU Support and of “Feeling European” in the Face of Economic Crisis

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The summer of 2011 has shown evidence of some of the additional effects of the economic crisis. Policy decisions to fight the danger of a crack of the Euro as a common currency have already been decided (specially regarding the rescue of the Greek national economy) but the “cure” is still far from certain, and the suspicion that something similar could happen to other countries is still quite widespread. Under these circumstances one should expect a general decrease in support for Europe and in citizens’ solidarity with other Europeans, given that the idea of a united Europe is under a deep credibility crisis. Recent data show, however, that support for Europe (measured with various indicators) is resilient, despite the stream of bad news and successive crises during the last three years. In particular, the perception of Europeans that their country benefits from EU membership is higher today than it was at the start of the previous decade, as shown in Figure 1, and even sees a slight increase in the latest Eurobarometre data.

Figure 1. Perceptions of benefit from EU membership, 2000 to 2011

Source: [ec.europa.eu](http://ec.europa.eu)<sup>1</sup>



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So much resilience in the face of manifest evidence of poor judgment by EU decision-makers, who introduced a single currency without putting into place the sorts of institutions that could have prevented or easily managed the current economic crisis, raises the question whether EU citizens have any sort of accurate appreciation of what is going on in the world

around them. However, if we look at the trend over time in a measure of trust in the European Commission (see Figure 2), we see that this indeed sees a pronounced dip at precisely the point in time that such a dip would be expected, on the part of a citizenry that suddenly became aware of Commission fallibility.

**Figure 2 Trust in the European Commission, 2000 to 2011**

Source: [ec.europa.eu](http://ec.europa.eu)<sup>2</sup>

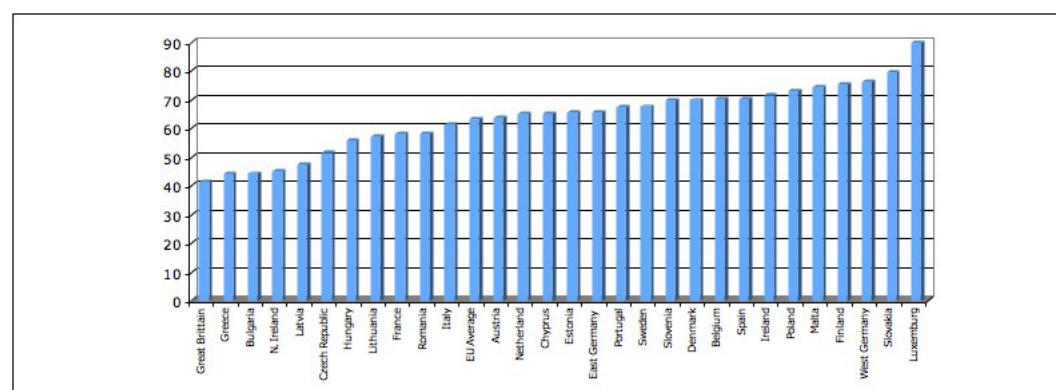


Yet, as we have seen, perceptions of utilitarian benefits from membership were not shaken in the same way as was trust in the Commission. This raises the question whether other kinds of support have held up equally well. In particular, what about sentiments of solidarity with other Europeans during this time of crisis? A new question, asked for the first time in the August 2011 Eurobarometer (75.3), reveals that an astonishing 63% of those interviewed feel themselves to be citizens of the EU. Figure 3 displays the percentage of people declaring that they feel citizens of the EU “definitively” or to “some extent”.

While 4 EU member states show responses that fall below the 50% mark (Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Greece, Bulgaria, and Latvia), the majority of EU countries show responses that are above the EU average (63%). In 22 countries of the Union a large majority of respondents feel themselves to be citizens of the EU. In the remainder of this Spotlight we focus on this Eurobarometer question, asking what connection there might be between perceptions of the economic crisis and feelings of citizenship in the EU.

**Figure 3. Percentages of people feeling European citizens by country**

Source: our own elaboration on EB 75.3.



## *European Citizenship and the economic crisis*

In the first report of this Spotlight series we saw that the effects of the financial and economic crisis on the world economy since 2007 transcended the economic sphere to influence people's attitudes towards national and European institutions. After analyzing the trend of pessimism about the economic situation and the perception of benefits coming from EU membership, we demonstrated that the two are related to each other. Particularly, people having pessimist views about the economy have a higher probability to not support EU membership. Moreover, the perceived economic downturn affects also the level of trust on EU institutions.

Although the crisis produced horrible consequences for some member states and now appears to be contagiously growing, we aim to see to what extent these dangerous threats to EU economic prosperity are able to negatively affect citizens' sense of belonging to the European Union. The question is particularly important since this sense of belonging is part of what has been called the "affective sphere" rather than falling into the sphere of utilitarian calculation of benefits. This affective sphere has also been defined as "diffuse support", namely the set of positive attitudes towards the institutional system and the collectivity that is subject to its rules. Diffuse support is supposed to concern the system and not its specific performance at a given point in time, thus serving to legitimize its institutions and provide resilience at times of poor performance.

We have used statistical tools to analyze the relationship between people's feeling of EU citizenship and their assessments of the present national economic situation.<sup>3</sup> In the analysis we have also considered the additional determinants of EU citizenship according to previous literature such as cognitive mobilization indicators, utilitarian benefit, image of Europe and trust.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1. Estimated percentages of feeling EU citizens by views about the economic situation and benefit from European membership**

Source: Our own elaboration on EB 75.3

Variables of interest	Feeling EU citizen (margin of error)
Citizens' judgements of the current situation	
Optimistic (N = 8,137)	. 81 (.80-.82)
Pessimistic (N = 18,218)	. 71 (.70-.73)
Difference	. 10
Benefit from European membership	
Benefit (N=14,952)	. 80 (.79-.81)
Not benefit (9,197)	. 65 (.63-.67)
Difference	. 15
Baseline probability	. 75 (.74-.76)
Total N= 26,713	

Note: Fitted value of European identity are calculated from equations predicting European identity as a function of citizens' assessments of the national current economic situation, socio-demographics (sex, age, education, subjective social class, size of the city of residence), their factual knowledge about European politics, along with some indicators of cognitive mobilization such as: talk about European

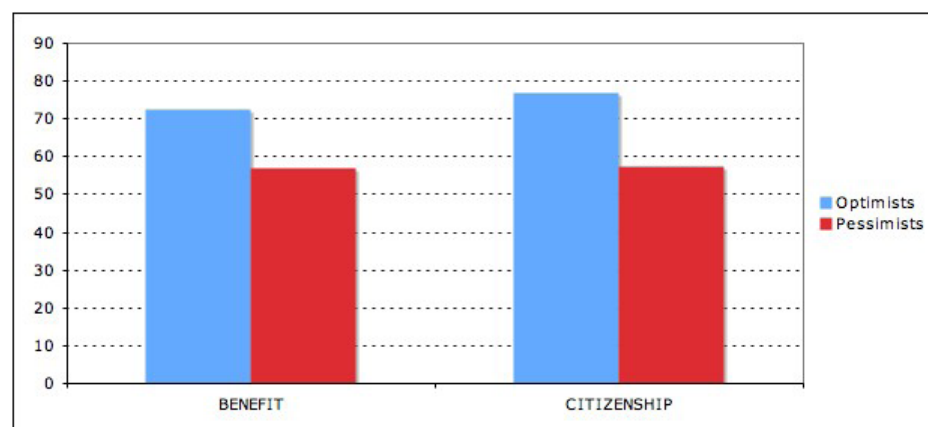
politics, understand European politics. Moreover we add also image of Europe and efficacy. The predicted probabilities are calculated with all predictors (except the one of interest) set to their typical values (i.e., means for quantitative variables and modes for categorical variables). Numbers in parenthesis correspond to the customary margin of error for each estimate.

We find that the sense of citizenship is negatively affected by pessimism regarding the national economic situation. Those who are pessimistic about the national state of the economy are less likely to feel themselves to be citizens of Europe (see Table 1). The table shows that the feeling of being a European citizen is lower (about 10% lower) in the case of a citizen with negative economic assessments regarding the present economic situation of the country. Additionally the feeling of being a citizen of Europe is lower (about 15% lower) in the case of someone who declares that EU membership by their country is not beneficial.

What is the difference between these two types of support, in terms of the effect on them of how people perceive the European economy? The differences are not great but, as we see in Figure 4, the difference in affective support (citizenship) is greater than the difference in utilitarian support (membership) when economic optimists and pessimists are compared. Perhaps surprisingly, people who do not feel that the European economy is in trouble are more likely to see themselves as citizens (support the EU affectively) than they are to see their country benefitting from membership (support the EU for utilitarian reasons). Those who do feel the economy to be in trouble cannot be distinguished in these terms. The two levels of support are roughly equal for economic pessimists, at about 58%.

**Figure 4. Effects of perceptions of economic conditions on different types of EU support**

Source: Our own elaboration on EB 75.3



So the expectations of scholars regarding the difference between affective and utilitarian support are confirmed, if not very strongly. The economic situation has greater effects on the latter type of support than on the former. However, the biggest lesson from these analyses is the extent to which support of both kinds holds up in the face of what is clearly the biggest challenge the EU has ever faced to the trust and confidence of its citizens. Even those who see the current economic situation at its gloomiest are still more likely than not to give their support to the EU, whether that support be in terms of solidarity with other Europeans (sense of citizenship) or in terms of considering their countries to benefit from membership. Of course there are variations by country in these figures, as we have pointed out in this and previous Spotlights. But overall they provide little evidence for the idea that Europeans are generally skeptical of, and lacking in support for, the EU.

The EU (and especially the Eurozone) may face an economic crisis at this time but, so far as we can tell, it does not face a corresponding crisis in support from its citizens or in the legitimacy those citizens accord to it.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Eurobarometer Interactive Search System: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/cf/showchart\\_line.cfm?keyID=6&nationID=16,&startdate=2000.06&enddate=2011.05#fcExportDiv](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/showchart_line.cfm?keyID=6&nationID=16,&startdate=2000.06&enddate=2011.05#fcExportDiv)
- <sup>2</sup> Eurobarometer Interactive Search System: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/cf/showchart\\_line.cfm?keyID=54&nationID=16,&startdate=2000.06&enddate=2011.05](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/showchart_line.cfm?keyID=54&nationID=16,&startdate=2000.06&enddate=2011.05)
- <sup>3</sup> We tried with both sociotropic (with regards to countries' economic situations) and egocentric (regarding personal financial situations) views about the economy. Confirming what previous literature has shown, only sociotropic assessments of the economy (in all variants included in the EB75.3, that is employment, economic, or financial situation of the country) show significant effects on people's feelings of belonging to the EU collectivity.
- <sup>4</sup> All these additional causes of EU citizenship feelings are considered along with some socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education, social status, residence area).