



# Spotlight on...

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## Support for Europe at a Time of Crisis

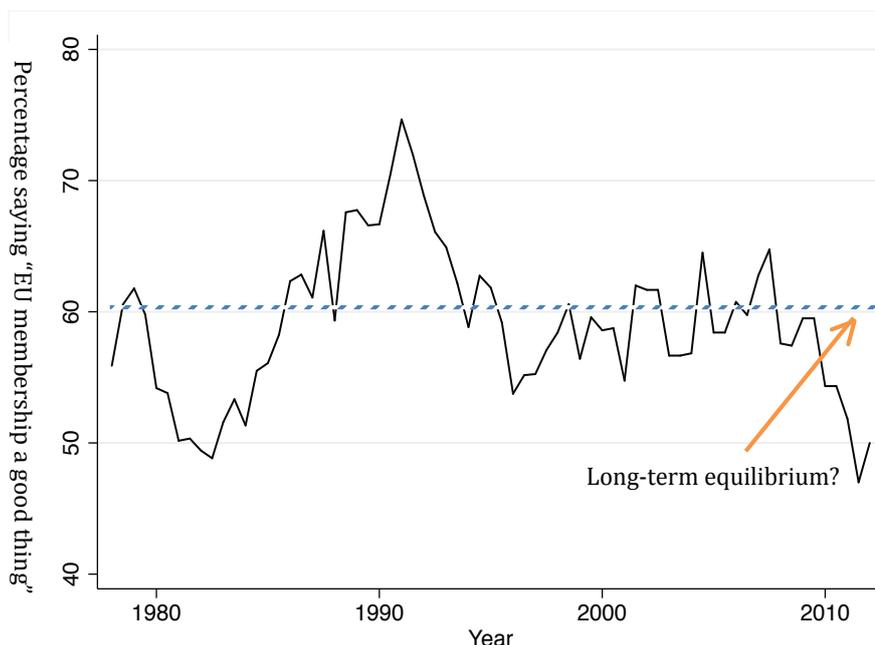
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Revision of a presentation for the Standard Eurobarometer Seminar, Brussels July 19th 2012

Is the decline in support for Europe that we see in the light of the current Eurozone crisis going to establish a new (low) level of long-term support for the European project among European publics? Or can we expect, after the crisis is over, to see levels of support returning to pre-crisis levels? These are important questions for those who see public support as a necessary condition for the effective governance of the European Union and perhaps even for its continued existence.

That support for the European Project should have seen a dramatic drop is not surprising in current circumstances (European Union, Directorate General for Communication Directorate C, 2012). Indeed it would have been amazing had there been no change in public support despite incontrovertible evidence of leadership failure at the highest level (failure to anticipate a crisis of this kind and to have institutions in place ready and able to deal with such a crisis). Not only would lack of public reaction have been amazing, it would have put into question the indicators we

**Graph 1.** Percentage saying "Membership is a good thing" over the years 1978- 2012.



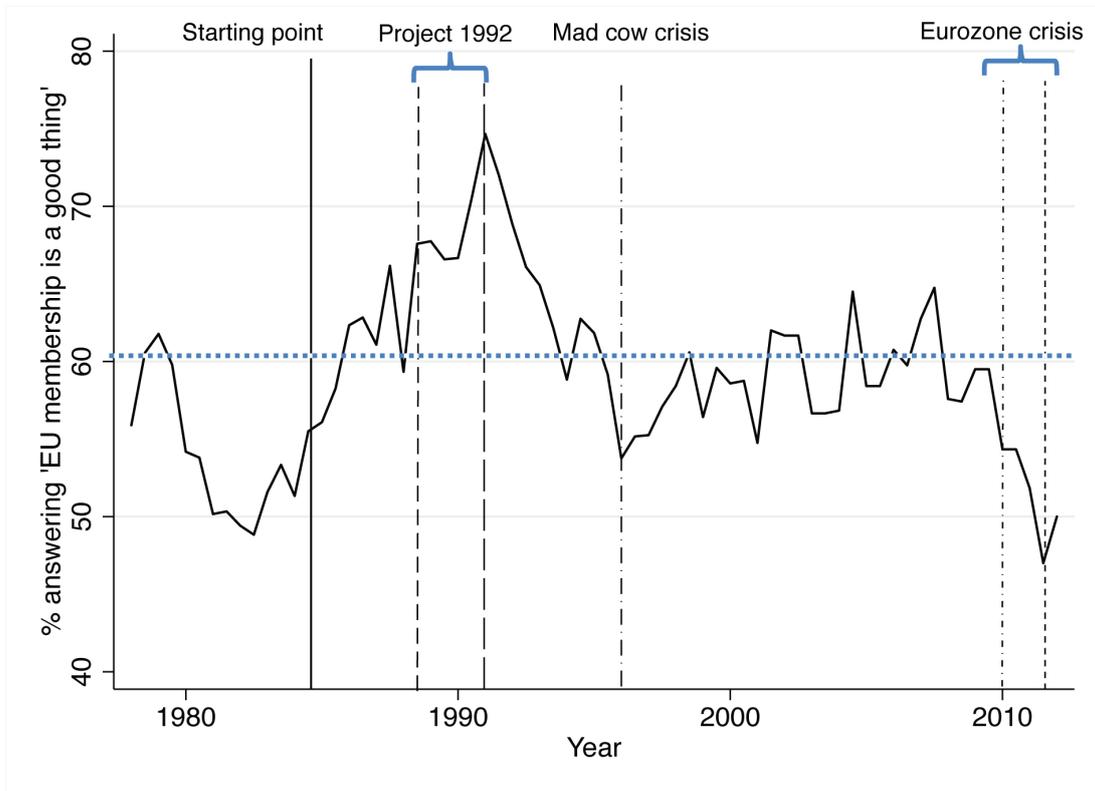
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**Graph 2:** Some candidates for analysis as events that were “shocks” to the membership series



use for measuring those reactions. One of the few good things that might come out of the sorry effects of the Eurozone crisis is new confidence in the measures we use to gauge public support for the European project.

Of the various measures available, the Eurobarometer question “Generally speaking, do you think that (your country’s) membership of the European Union is ... a good thing?” has been asked almost continuously, every six months, since the start of the Eurobarometer series. In past work, the present authors have established that it attracts answers that are far more consistent over time than responses to other questions (Franklin and Wlezien 1997). It seems to us to be a question that measures support for unification as an idea – the European project as a good thing in itself. In what follows we focus on this question.

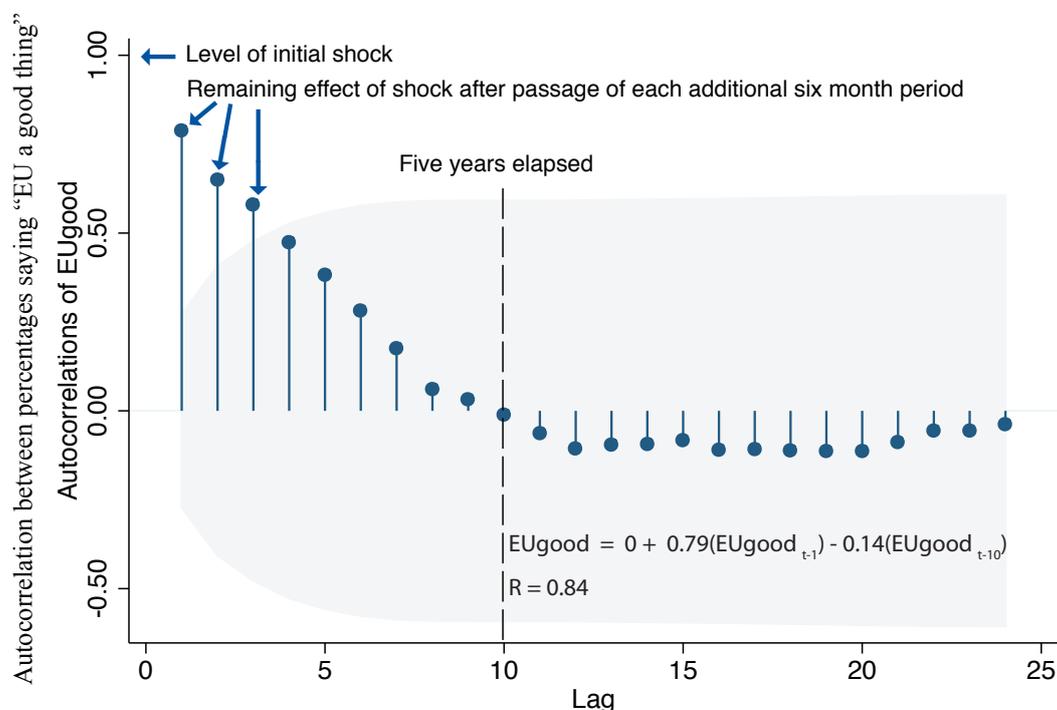
Graph 1 charts (solid line) the proportions answering this question in the affirmative over the years until 2012. It shows ups and downs in the series that, however, do not appear to have any clear trend. Indeed there would appear to be an “equilibrium level of support” to which the trend keeps returning (broken line). Deviations from such a long-term equilibrium might be the results of ephemeral “shocks to the

system” such as those superimposed on the same series in Graph 2. If there *were* indeed such a long-term equilibrium this would be quite comforting to those who are concerned about current trends in support for Europe. It would mean that there is something like a “natural level of support” for the European project to which the series returns after any temporary deviations. In that case, after the current doldrums into which support for Europe has dropped, we would expect recovery as a natural phenomenon.

There are two alternative possibilities, if there is no long-term equilibrium:

1. that support for Europe proceeds in what is known as a “random walk” under the influence of whatever events happen to come along. Then there would be no reason to expect any particular future development in the level of support – no reason to expect any recovery from the current doldrums unless as a result of a favourable turn of events.
2. that support for Europe is subject to a long-term trend, either up or down.

**Graph 3.** Decay over time after any shock to percentage saying “EU Membership is a good thing”



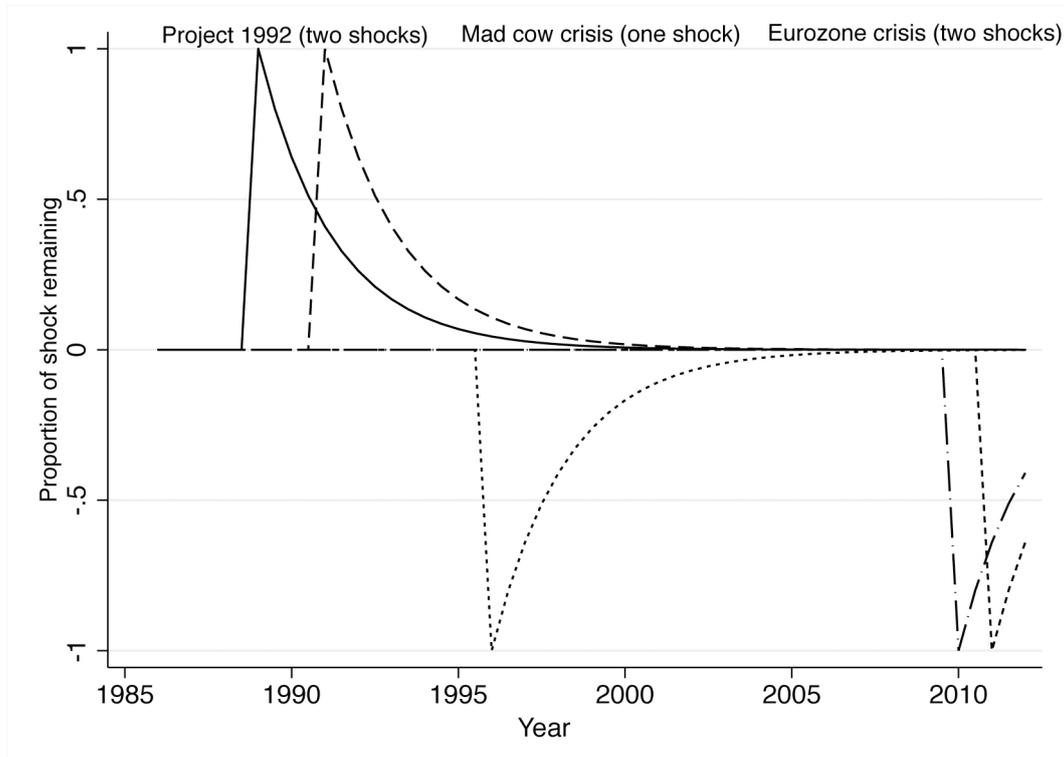
It must be said, looking at these graphs, that the ups and downs do appear to be ups and downs from a long-term equilibrium, rather than evincing a random walk or long-term trend. Graph 2 shows such a “long-term” level of support, judged simply by eyeballing the series. The actual equilibrium level (if there is one) could be higher or lower than pictured (we will use statistical methods, below, to estimate it more accurately). We do not investigate mechanisms that would restore equilibrium after a shock, but many possible mechanisms can be imagined – above all behavior that is the result of socialization processes.

How can we tell whether what we see are movements about an equilibrium, a random walk, or a long-term trend? Econometricians have diagnostic tools for identifying the relevant characteristics of any series of measurements spread out over time (a “time-series”). The primary tool of interest to us is a corrgram. This tool draws a graph that charts the extent to which points in the series (taking points in general rather than each specific point) are affected by points earlier in time sequence – specifically, the proportion of each effect carried forward in time.

The next graph is such a corrgram. It is drawn in such a way that all shocks, of whatever magnitude, are pictured as inducing a “standard effect” of 1.0. The graph then shows what proportion of that standard effect is transmitted to the next time-point in the series. It indicates what every up and down in the opinion series has in common with every other up and down. It tells us what is the common pattern of reactions by the European public to events of every possible kind, real or imaginary. It is like a finger-print: unique to this particular series. Think of it as picturing the ripples in a pool that a stone was dropped into, larger or smaller depending on the size of the stone. It does not tell us *what were the events* that caused this pattern, just that *this is the pattern* caused by those events.

This particular finger-print tells us that, on average across shocks of all sizes and types, the correlation between the magnitude of the shock and its magnitude six months later is 0.79 (0.8 for short). That is the proportion of the effect still being felt 6 months later, 0.8 of which will be transmitted forward another 6 months. After 10 six-month periods the effect has dwindled to within 1 percent of zero. Though we do not show it in this article, the same pattern is evident in

**Graph 4:** Shock and decay functions for various events, 1986-2011



the opinion series for all 12 of the countries whose support has been averaged in Graph 3, with only minor differences between countries.

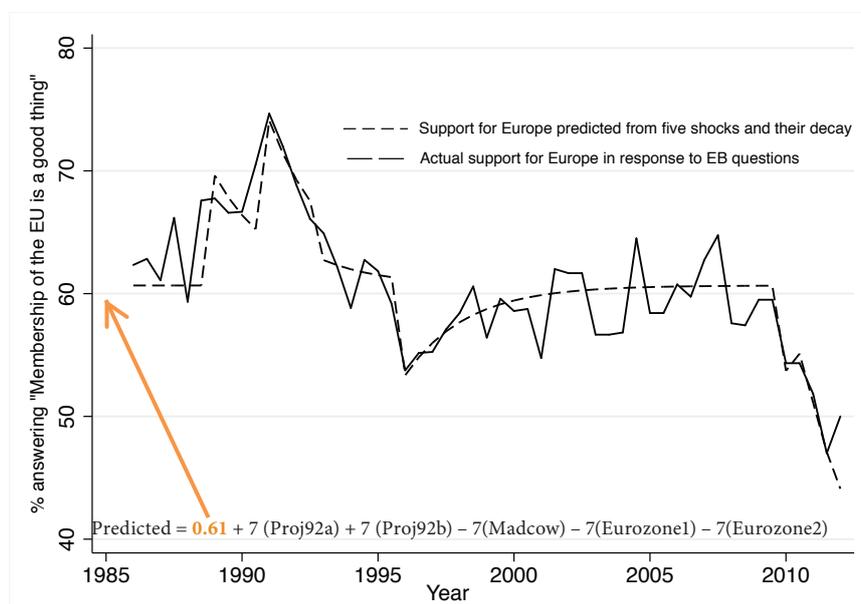
Once the effect of the shock has worn off, what we see are persistent negative relationships (blobs below the horizontal zero-line). These negative relationships between the level of support for Europe at one time point and a point that comes five years later are too small to tell us anything reliable, but they are suggestive of a mechanism that keeps the system at a long-term equilibrium – a mechanism yet to be explained.

As mentioned above, the pattern does not tell us what are the events responsible for the pattern. However, it is not hard to imagine what sort of events would have provided these shocks, and Graph 2 already indicated three likely candidates (two of these events continued long enough to appear more than once) as vertical lines superimposed on the opinion series whose character we are trying to diagnose. We did not look for possible events before the Single Market Act of 1986. The events picked out are chosen simply because they coincide in time with the most dramatic peaks and troughs in the series.

The analysis does not tell us that these are the events of importance. Additional events that were considered for

possible inclusion were the Maastricht Treaty, German unification, the Amsterdam treaty, the introduction of the Euro, Eastern enlargement and the Lisbon Treaty. Taking account of some of these shocks does enable us to explain particular ups or downs in the series, but the general shape of public opinion trends is captured by just three events, as we shall see. Still, this is not a story about the particular events that moved public support for Europe. This is a story about the resulting pattern of public reactions. We might be wrong about the particular events involved. The pattern is what we are sure of.

The question of how to deal with events that continue for more than a year is tricky. We have used the simplest method: including a shock for each year that an event continues. For Project 1992 there were three shocks for the one event, all of them positive, as the most successful public relations programme in the EU’s history informed European publics of what was seen as the imminent completion of the European Project. Only two of these shocks proved significant. For the creation of the Eurozone there were two shocks for the one event, both negative as the new currency was seen to have given rise to price increases. Only one proved barely significant. Two other shocks that cause significant effects are the

**Graph5.** Actual support for Europe compared with support predicted by shocks and their decay

Maastricht and Lisbon treaties, but any effects the first of these may have had are hard to disentangle from the decay in support for Europe associated with the end of Project 1992 and the second produces a response no greater than several other perturbations in the series for which we find no good explanation.

In the analysis that follows we model only three shocks using five shock variables, as shown in Graph 4. The individual curves for each shock show the timing of the shock and the extent to which it affected support for Europe during the years immediately following, taken as a proportion of the total effect of the shock. The year after an event, the shock is still affecting support for Europe to the extent of about 64% ( $0.8 \times 0.8$ ) of its original value (positive or negative). A year after that only some 40% ( $0.64 \times 0.64$ ) of the original effect (positive or negative) remains – but it takes three more years for that last 40% to dissipate.

These effects are cumulative. If a new shock arrives before prior shocks have dissipated, the effect of the new shock has to be added to whatever is left of the effects of previous shocks, as evidently was the case for the second of the Project 1992 shocks and the second of the Eurozone shocks. The consequence of adding up all these partial effects of previous shocks produces a surprisingly nuanced picture of the level of support for Europe to be expected at any particular point in

time. These expectations are plotted in Graph 6 (dashed line) along with the actual support registered by the series (solid line), which is the same series of “membership a good thing” percentages as has already been shown in earlier graphs.

This graph shows extraordinarily close tracking of the actual evolution of the percentage saying that membership is a good thing by the estimate based on shocks and their decay. The two lines are correlated 0.92. The estimated levels of support for Europe that so closely mirror the actual levels of support are entirely due to adding up the different amounts of (positive and negative) effects of different shocks still being felt at each point in time.

The equation from which the estimated line is generated is included with the graph. It contains an estimate of the level of the long-term equilibrium of the series from which the various shocks cause deviations. That long-term equilibrium is close to what we estimated earlier by just eyeballing the series: 61 percent. Individual countries’ equilibriums of course deviate from the mean (Britain’s equilibrium, for example, is 22 percent lower) but the pattern of increasing and reducing support for Europe in response to these shocks is virtually the same across the twelve countries.

So the findings are very robust across countries. They strongly imply a long-term equilibrium level of support for the European Project. However, we cannot rule out the

possibility that this equilibrium is drifting somewhat over time, perhaps under the influence of developing concerns of one kind or another (a particular candidate is increasing concern over time regarding welfare provision in the EU – see Beaudonnet 2012).

We can conclude that there is an equilibrium level of support for Europe that stands at around 60 percent. Effects of shocks to public opinion can move support away from this equilibrium, but those effects decay. Following any shock, long-term equilibrium is restored after about 5 years – other things being equal. The intervention of additional shocks before equilibrium is restored creates the picture that we see.

If our assumptions could be confirmed, our prognosis for the outcome of the current crisis would be that bad news about Eurozone finances will continue to reduce support for Europe until the bad news stops. Once the bad news stops, the equilibrium level of support for the European project will be restored within five years, other things being equal. Though there seems to be an equilibrium level, this could shift somewhat over time. In addition to the possibility of a trend in public opinion, multiple shocks in the same direction could serve to move the long-term equilibrium, if only by small amounts. The current economic crisis provides us with an excellent opportunity to study these public opinion dynamics.

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