

# The relationship between national identity and European Union evaluations, 1993–2017

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**Nicholas J Clark**

Department of Political Science, Susquehanna University,  
Selinsgrove, PA, USA

**Robert Rohrschneider**

Department of Political Science, The University of Kansas,  
Lawrence, KS, USA

## Abstract

We examine two aspects of the connection between individuals' national identities and their European Union evaluations. First, we examine the *changing* relationship from 1993–2017, thus paying attention to not only recent crises years but also the time when political integration accelerated after the Maastricht treaty came into effect. Second, we draw on group-identity theory to explain the changing relationship for individuals with extreme *as well as* moderate ideological attitudes. We use a new cumulative Eurobarometer Representation dataset (1993–2017) to test three hypotheses. Our most important finding is that by 2017 the relationship between national identity and European Union evaluations among ideologically *moderate* citizens is stronger than it was in 1993 among individuals with *right-extreme* ideological views. While the economic crisis since 2007 reinforced this development, it was not responsible for its onset.

## Keywords

European integration, national identity, public opinion

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## Corresponding author:

Robert Rohrschneider, Department of Political Science, The University of Kansas, 1541 Lilac Lane, 504 Blake Hall, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA.

Email: roro@ku.edu

To what extent has the association between individuals' national identities and their negative evaluations of the European Union (EU) become stronger between the 1990s and the present (i.e. from 1993–2017)? While the relationship between these orientations has been documented in a number of persuasive studies (Carey, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Kritzinger, 2003), this article suggests that our knowledge about the *changing* connection between them should be developed further, for at least two reasons. First, recent dynamic studies mostly focus on the years bracketing the economic crisis that began to unfold around 2007 (Foster and Frieden, 2017; Fligstein et al., 2012). While extremely valuable, we also expect that EU-related controversies that arose before the recent crises—over national sovereignty, the introduction of the Euro, Eastern Enlargement, or the EU constitution—likely fortified the connection between these orientations from 1993 onwards (Eichenberg and Dalton, 2007; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Steenbergen et al., 2007). Accordingly, ours is one of the few studies to examine the relationship between national identity and EU evaluations from 1993 until 2017.

Second, it is important to determine whether national identities matter more for individuals with more extreme ideological orientations (i.e. those on the extreme left and especially the extreme right) who have historically been critical of the EU for different reasons (De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Van Elsas et al., 2016). Alternatively, if national identities have also become a stronger basis of EU evaluations for citizens with ideologically moderate views, this suggests a potentially larger crisis of confidence in the EU. Ideologically moderate citizens comprise the largest segment of mass publics (see below) and have historically provided the bulwark of support for the EU (Marks et al., 2002; Van Elsas and Van Der Brug, 2015). We therefore examine the connection between national identity and EU evaluations separately for major ideological groups over time.

We address these issues using a newly assembled, longitudinal Eurobarometer Representation Dataset (ERD, 1993–2017) that includes several measures of regime evaluation, ideological self-placements, and a slew of important control variables assessed over time in the Eurobarometer surveys.

The most important result is that the relationship between national identity and EU evaluations is about as strong among ideologically *moderate* citizens in 2017 as it was in the early 1990s among individuals with ideologically *extreme-right* views. The findings further suggest that the relationship between national identities and popular EU evaluations began to strengthen before the crises unfolded in 2007, suggesting that events prior to the crisis years also began to increase the salience of national identities to European publics, although we also demonstrate that the connection intensified after the economic crises.

The findings point to several implications. First, because citizens' negative EU evaluations have become increasingly anchored in their national identities (Foster and Frieden, 2017; Fligstein et al., 2012), negative judgments about the EU's performance have become more resilient and therefore exacerbate the difficulties for policy makers to improve the EU's reputation among mass publics. Second, because our findings indicate that the relationship<sup>1</sup> between identity and EU

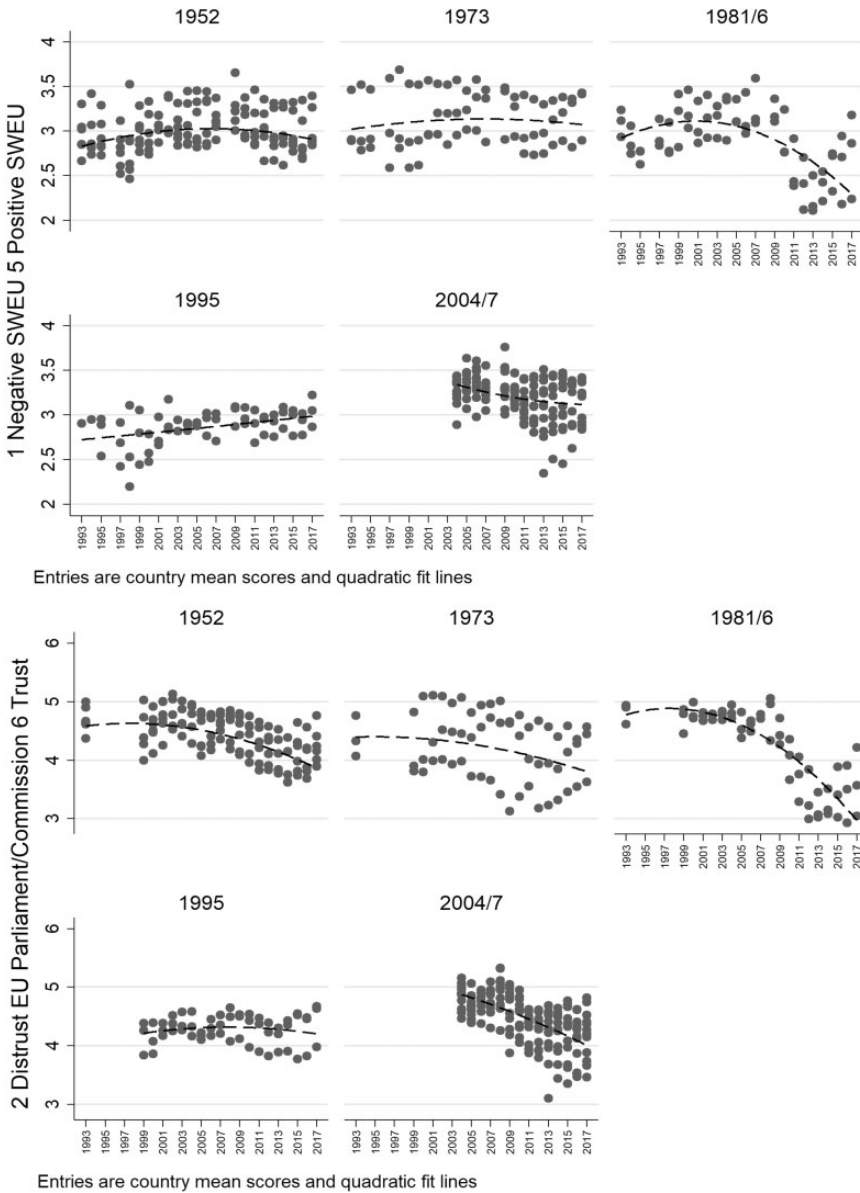
evaluations has become stronger for individuals with moderate as well as extreme ideological orientations, criticisms of the EU articulated by extreme right and left parties may resonate increasingly with citizens in the ideological center. Third, as we make clear below, the fact that national identities and EU evaluations became more strongly connected over time helps explain why aggregate EU evaluations became more negative since 2007 even though levels of nationalism have largely remained stable (Fligstein et al., 2012; Foster and Frieden, 2017).

From a theoretical perspective, the strengthening relationship between national identities and EU evaluations across left-right groups illustrates how cross-national tensions over integration-related issues can activate group conflict mechanisms that then increase the importance of national identities when publics evaluate the EU (Curtis, 2014; Huddy, 2004). Of course, as we will make plain below, there is more to the story than group conflict or social identity. Nevertheless, the conditions created by the recent crises and by controversies over political integration doubtlessly helped magnify the salience of national identities across ideological groups, just as social identity theory would lead us to expect (Brewer, 2001; Curtis, 2014; Huddy, 2013).

## Public evaluations of the EU

The financial and migrant crises since 2007 have taken a heavy toll on public evaluations of the EU. Especially in EU debtor countries, evaluations of the EU have declined dramatically (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014; Roth et al., 2013; see also Figure 1). This assessment is especially compelling because prior studies use various indicators that focus on performance evaluations of the EU and gauge publics' general system support for the EU. Importantly, regardless of which indicator is used, studies point to a decline in EU support. For example, scholars frequently employ an indicator of "trust in the EU", which comes close to measuring "the ideal type of an affective system of support" (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014: 88; see also Anderson and Hecht, 2018; Foster and Frieden, 2017; Roth et al., 2013). In turn, other studies use an indicator measuring public satisfaction with the way the EU democracy works (De Vries, 2018; Hobolt, 2012; Karp and Banducci, 2003). This EU-democracy satisfaction indicator gauges individual judgments about how well the EU delivers what citizens want, both in terms of policies (e.g. economic goods) and procedures (e.g. good governance) (Hobolt and De Vries, 2016)—in short, the performance of the EU. Together, the two indicators capture a range of different aspects of EU evaluations, including short-term performance and longer-term, diffuse confidence in the EU (for a similar interpretation, see Van Elsas et al., 2016; Verhaegen et al., 2017).

However, while the cumulative evidence reveals a significant decline in popular evaluations of the EU since 2007 for both types of indicators, none of the available measures gauges support for the ideals of integration itself. In other words, they capture popular views about the current EU but do not capture individuals' long-term visions about the preferred endpoint of European integration, or the best way



**Figure I.** Country mean scores of respondents' satisfaction with EU democracy (top figure) and trust in EU institutions (bottom figure), by year countries joined the EU.  
 Note: Entries are country mean scores and quadratic fit lines. SWEU: satisfaction with European Union.

to achieve it (Wessels, 2007). Because of the availability of indicators (see below), this article will examine individual trust in the EU as well as EU performance evaluations, but it does not analyze individuals' integration ideals.

## **National identity, ideological self-placement, and public evaluations of the EU**

How does individual national identity relate to EU evaluations over time? Prior research establishes that individual national identity leads to more negative EU evaluations (Carey, 2002; Christin and Trechsel, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Kritzinger, 2003; McLaren, 2002). While this relationship clearly holds in most cross-sectional studies, over-time analyses conducted since the onset of the economic crisis continue to debate the precise importance of national identity for EU evaluations. One recent study agrees that national identity relates to individual distrust in the EU but also concludes that the "longitudinal patterns of Eurobarometer responses to identity questions suggest that there has not been any increase in the portion of the population identifying in exclusively national terms" (Foster and Frieden, 2017: 525). In other words, this view suggests that the relatively stable *levels* of national identity among European publics make it an unlikely explanation for the recent *decline* in EU evaluations. In contrast, others argue, on the basis of data from 2005 and 2010, that "since the majority of people who live in Europe have predominately a national identity, it should not be surprising that many European political issues end up being framed to national as opposed to European-wide interests" (Polyakova and Fligstein, 2016: 64; see also Serricchio et al., 2013).<sup>2</sup> Virtually all authors acknowledge that national identity plays some role in shaping EU evaluations, though the precise relationship to EU evaluations over time remains debated.

Undoubtedly, these differences stem in part from a focus on the years bracketing the economic and migration crises and in part from a focus on *levels* of national identity. We suggest that one must also examine the potentially changing *relationship* between national identity and EU evaluations in order to understand why EU evaluations have worsened substantially in recent years. If individuals' national identity becomes increasingly linked to EU evaluations, this may have gradually moved EU evaluations into negative territory even when levels of national identity remained mostly stable.

Why would individual national identity become more strongly connected to EU evaluations over time? Consider that prior EU research typically conceptualizes the link between these orientations by pointing to the potential for intergroup conflicts that exists between most countries (Brewer, 2001; Carey, 2002; Curtis, 2014; Hooghe and Marks, 2005). According to group conflict theory, many individuals develop strong affective connections with the political-territorial unit in which they reside, usually the unit recognized as the nation-state (Eisenstadt and Geisen, 1995; Reeskens and Hooghe, 2010). This tendency to identify with a

specific territorial community often coincides with the demarcation of in-groups and out-groups; in other words, national identity creates the *potential* for inter-group conflict (Brewer, 1996, 2001; Curtis, 2014).

However, group-boundaries (like nation-states) by themselves often do not trigger actual conflicts. Instead, such conflicts occur in situations where perceived or actual competition (or threats) exists over power or resources (Fowler and Kam, 2007; Hardin, 1995; Monroe et al., 2000). When natural differences across groups (like nation-states) coincide with heightened intergroup competition (over the economy or migration, for example), these changing conditions may activate intergroup tensions. Thus, this potential endures as a latent feature across most countries, but the broader political context “helps to explain why group membership can powerfully cue beliefs and action in one context and have no effect in another” (Huddy, 2004: 959).

And the EU context appears ripe for mobilizing conflicts on the basis of national identities (Hooghe and Marks, 2005, 2009). As Steenbergen et al. (2007: 15) note *before* the onset of the economic crisis, “[t]he EU of the 1990s and of today is more relevant to the lives and interests of European citizens, as it increasingly affects their individual welfare and involves policies (notably the common currency, citizenship, immigration, the common defense and foreign policy) that are both highly salient and highly controversial”. Because these controversial issues have increasingly evolved since 1993 when the Maastricht treaty came into effect, we hypothesize that the relationship between individuals’ national identities and EU evaluations has increased since 1993 (and not just after 2007). Additionally, however, if the salience of individual national identity indeed reflects cross-national conflicts, we expect a further increase in the strength of the identity-EU evaluation relationship since 2007, given the pressing nature of economic and migration issues and the accompanying conflicts between nations over rescue packages and migration policies:

*H1: The relationship between individuals’ national identities and EU evaluations began to strengthen in the 1990s.*

*H2: The relationship between individuals’ national identities and EU evaluations continued to strengthen after the onset of the economic crisis in 2007.*

The logic of the two hypotheses suggests an additional question. Do these expectations hold primarily for individuals with extreme ideological views? Or do they apply to individuals regardless of their ideological orientations? To establish the relevance of this issue, consider that people with left and especially right extreme ideological orientations have always been skeptical about the EU, whereas people with moderate ideological orientations have typically supported the EU’s integration (Otjes and Louwerse, 2015; Van Elsas et al., 2016).

On the extreme right, individuals often criticize the loss of sovereignty and national borders (De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Kriesi et al., 2006); on the extreme

left, individuals typically bemoan the lack of social cohesion within the single market and the threat of the EU's neo-liberal approach to national welfare states (De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Van Elsas et al., 2016). However, the left is less adamantly opposed to integration in principle than the extreme right (Van Elsas et al., 2016). We may thus expect that national identity has always been connected to EU evaluations among individuals with ideologically right-extreme views, although less so on the left.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, ideological moderates typically support the integration project, just as ideologically moderate parties support European integration (Kriesi et al., 2006; Marks et al., 2002; Steenbergen et al., 2007). However, group conflict theory does not limit perceptions of intergroup conflicts to individuals with ideologically extreme views.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, group conflict theory would raise the expectation that individuals across the ideological board perceive rising tensions across nations. In other words, individuals' predispositions may stimulate the rise of national identities first among citizens with right-extreme predispositions but once conflicts become sufficiently salient and visible, citizens with ideologically moderate orientations may also become caught up in inter-group rivalries. If this is the case, we generally expect national identity increasingly to matter not just among ideological extremes but also among ideologically moderate citizens. Such a finding would be of utmost importance. For if national identity is increasingly linked to EU evaluations among ideological moderates, they may become more receptive to the appeal of EU-critical parties and thus contribute to the decline of EU evaluations over time. National identity alone cannot explain the dramatic decrease in EU evaluations we observe since 2007 (Foster and Frieden, 2017). But a long-term strengthening of the relationship between the two variables in this large group would help explain why EU evaluations have become more negative over time despite relatively stable levels of national identity. The third hypothesis sums up this discussion and provides the basis for much of the empirical analyses:

*H3: The relationship between individuals' national identity and their assessments of the EU has strengthened over time among both ideologically extreme and ideologically moderate individuals.*

Note that the three hypotheses allow for the possibility that the relationship between national identity and EU evaluations is reciprocal: national identity likely shapes EU evaluations, but negative perceptions of the performance of the EU, or distrust in it, can also enhance the salience of individuals' national identities. In fact, as pointed out above, such a reciprocal relationship is expected by social identity theory. Just how far this spiral extends depends in no small measure on elite cues (Steenbergen et al., 2007), coverage of the EU in mass media (Bruter, 2009), and the degree to which pressing problems like fiscal and migration issues persist (Huddy, 2004). But the potential for a negative dynamic clearly grows as the relationship between national identity and EU evaluations strengthens, especially in the ideological center that comprises a majority of citizens. We therefore



test whether the connection becomes stronger over time among different ideological groups, without asserting the causal hegemony of one path over the other.

## Data, measurement, and results

To test these hypotheses, we assembled the RDE, 1993–2017. The ERD combines nearly 400 indicators of political attitudes about both the domestic and European political systems across countries and years into a single dataset file, including perceptions of representation, trust in various national and EU institutions, and evaluations of the EU and national regime's performance. In addition, the ERD includes several predictors of regime evaluations, such as sociodemographic characteristics, ideological orientations, and economic evaluations.

In line with the theoretical discussion, we rely on two different indicators to measure EU evaluations. First, we use individual satisfaction with the way EU democracy works: "On the whole, are you very satisfied (coded 5), fairly satisfied (4), not very satisfied (2) or not at all satisfied (1) with the way democracy works in the EU?" with "don't know" responses coded to the midpoint (3) of the scale. The Eurobarometer has asked this question every year since 1993, with the exceptions of 1996 and 2008. In line with our discussion above, we expect this measure to capture individuals' evaluations of the EU's performance over time, just as satisfaction with a national democracy reflects the performance of national institutions (Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014; Hobolt, 2012).

Second, we construct a measure of "trust in the EU" that combines indicators of trust in the European Parliament and the European Commission in response to the question: "For each of the following institutions, tell me if you tend to trust it or not". This question is available from 1999 through 2017 at intermittent time points. We recoded each indicator to 1 (Distrust), 2 (Don't know), and 3 (Trust) and then summed the responses so the summative scale ranges from 2 (Distrust) to 6 (Trust). As argued above, we interpret this measure to reflect diffuse support for the EU.

We present results grouping EU countries by enlargement cohorts for three reasons. First, prior research has shown that longer EU membership increases the public's commitment to democratic values (Oshri et al., 2016), which may partially affect their judgments about the EU's performance. Second, publics in nations that joined the EU early may have experienced some of the beneficial consequences of long-term EU membership; this is less likely to be the case in countries that joined more recently as in Central and Eastern Europe (Easton, 1975; Klingemann and Weldon, 2013). Finally, with the exception of Ireland, the membership waves roughly coincide with the degree to which the economic and migration crisis unfolded in various countries. We thus view membership length as a broad, albeit imperfect, control for these (and other) macro-level factors.

Figure 1 shows the waxing and waning of public performance evaluations of the EU's democracy (top) and their trust in EU institutions (bottom) across accession



cohorts. We computed the mean score for each country at each time point and plotted it over time by accession wave. We generally observe an uptick in performance evaluations until about 2005, but from then onwards note a decline in EU evaluations; a pattern that is especially marked for the trust indicator. As others have shown, the most dramatic decline occurs in countries that joined the EU in the 1980s (Greece, Portugal, and Spain), which have suffered dramatic economic consequences since 2007 (Magalhães, 2016). We note less spectacular declines in other regions, including the affluent Northwestern European countries that (mostly) make up the 1952 cohort and the affluent 1995 cohort (Austria, Finland, and Sweden).

Country-by-country analyses naturally show a bit more fluctuation but do not fundamentally alter the overall conclusion that the recent calamities have led to a sustained drop in evaluations of the EU especially in crisis countries (see the Online appendix). Whether the slight uptick in support since 2017 represents a temporary deviation or a sustained reversal toward better performance evaluations and increasing trust in the EU is an important question for future research.

Turning to the key concept—national identity—we employ two indicators. First, we draw on responses to a widely used question asking respondents: “Do you see yourself as [...]?”. The response categories are as follows: (NATIONALITY) only (coded 1); (NATIONALITY) and European (2); European and (NATIONALITY) (4); and European only (5), with “don’t knows” coded to the midpoint (3) of the scale. The wording allows respondents to indicate a dual identity, albeit with different identities ranked by preference. We use the original response metric and not a frequently used operationalization that dichotomizes the measure, because we wish to measure the range of orientations from exclusively national to exclusively EU identity (see the Online appendix for a detailed discussion of the measure).<sup>5</sup>

Second, as a robustness check, we also construct a measure of “net EU attachment” by subtracting the degree of attachment people express to the EU from that of the nation, based on the following question: “People may feel different degrees of attachment to their town or village, to their region, to their country or to Europe. Please tell me how attached you feel to (each of the territorial units stated above)?”. Response categories range from “very attached” (1) to “not at all attached” (5), with the small number of “don’t knows” coded in the middle (3). After subtracting the national attachment score from the EU attachment score, the net EU attachment indicator ranges from “−4”, which denotes a strong national and no EU attachment, to a score of “4” indicating a strong EU attachment and no national attachment.

The identity and attachment indicators have been criticized for not adequately capturing respondents’ EU identity. One especially scathing critique suggests that the first question in particular is “seriously unusable” (Bruter, 2008: 281) because it (1) underestimates mass support for the principles of European integration, (2) does not distinguish between a cultural and a civic national identity, and (3) does not truly permit individuals to express simultaneous national and EU identities (Bruter, 2008: 276–280). The second question has also come under attack because

“attachment is not identity”, which makes it a “proxy for the ‘affective’ dimension of identity” (Bruter, 2008: 281).

We agree that it would be desirable to have more refined measures—in particular, to gauge individuals’ integration ideals and their civic and cultural identities separately. Unfortunately, we do not have indicators allowing us to gauge these aspects. However, both national identity measures presume that individuals can have more than one identity or attachment—in this case, the nation and the EU—so both indicators permit respondents to indicate their *relative* attachment to each. This is the key for predicting their influence on individual evaluations of the EU, or their trust in it, because social identity “involves a subjective sense of belonging to a group [ . . . ]” (Huddy et al., 2015: 3). Additionally, a strength of especially the second measure is that it captures the idea that national identity is an expressive attachment to a nation. Finally, as a practical matter, these indicators have been employed in multiple studies and are available over a longer stretch of time. Thus, while we agree that the identity indicators are imperfect, we also consider them to be useful measures to assess the changing relationship between national identity and EU evaluations.<sup>6</sup>

Empirically, both indicators produce a lop-sided frequency distribution of national identities outweighing European identities over time (see Figures 2 and 3). Figure 2, which averages responses for each accession wave, shows that about 90% of all respondents adhere to an exclusive form of national identity (category 1) or a predominantly national identity inclusive of some EU identity (category 2). The remaining 10% fall into categories 3 and 4, which denote a predominant or exclusive EU identity. We observe a similarly skewed distribution in Figure 3 where national attachments clearly outrank EU attachments for most individuals.

All told, we concur with previous research that there is a sustained development toward negative evaluations of the EU regime and declining trust in it between the onset of the financial crisis in 2007 and 2016, which may then have begun to taper off in 2017. We also concur with others (e.g. Foster and Frieden, 2017) that there has not been an overwhelming rise of nationalist sentiments. However, one unresolved question concerns the extent to which the *relationship* between EU evaluations and national identities has changed over time. We address this question next.

## Tracing the relationship between national identity and EU evaluations, 1993–2017

Our three hypotheses predict a strengthening of the connection between national identity and EU evaluations since 1993 (*H1*) that has been further amplified since 2007 (*H2*) for individuals with both extreme and moderate ideological views (*H3*). We face two partially conflicting goals in testing the hypotheses. On the one hand, we would like to use the longest possible time series, all the while controlling for potentially confounding factors. On the other hand, the more predictors we include in a model, the more sporadic annual coverage becomes because one or more variables were excluded in a particular Eurobarometer survey. We deal with this as follows.

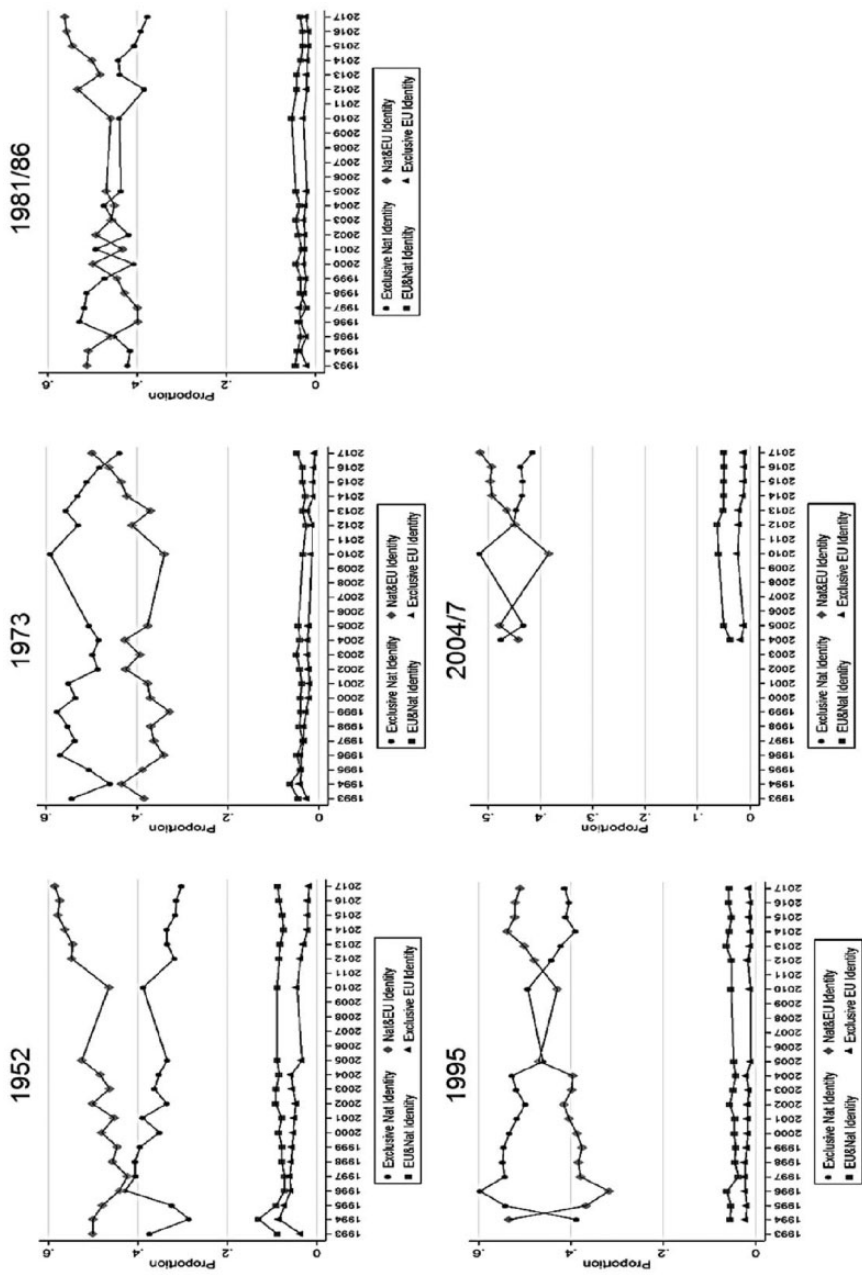
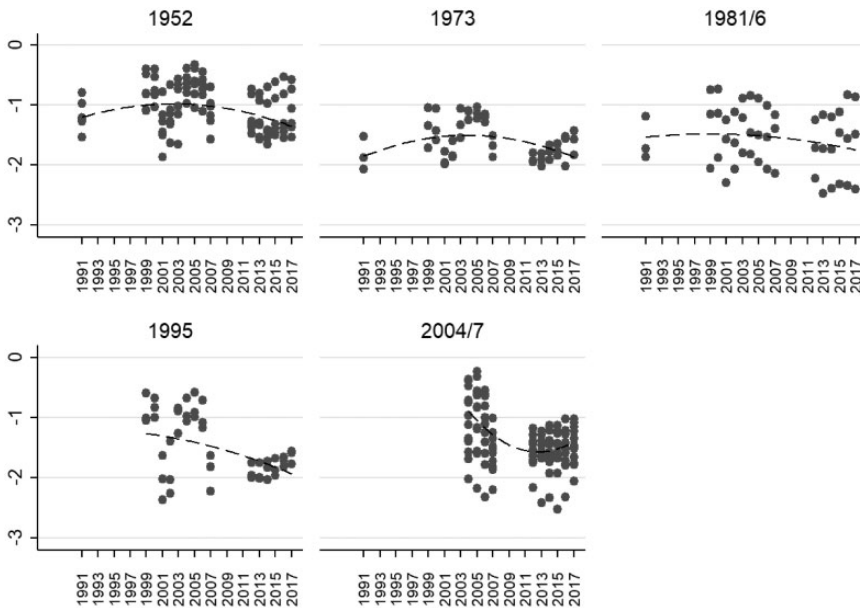


Figure 2. Proportion of respondents selecting an identity category, by year countries joined the EU. EU: European Union.



**Figure 3.** Country mean scores of respondents' EU attachment (1991–2017), by year countries joined the EU.

Note: Entries are country-based mean scores of respondents' national-versus-EU attachment indicator. A negative score means national attachments dominate. The indicator ranges from  $-4$  (individuals feel exclusively attached to the nation-state) to  $4$  (individuals feel exclusively attached to the EU).

We estimate multivariate models starting in 1993 that include as predictors either national identity or net attachment,<sup>7</sup> respondents' perceptions of the national economy and evaluations of their own financial situation, along with several sociodemographic variables such as age, education, and occupation for which we have nearly complete coverage across time (see the Online appendix). Importantly, these variables are frequently included in Eurobarometer surveys and gauge the utilitarian considerations that influence popular EU evaluations (Foster and Frieden, 2017; Gabel, 1998). Additionally, since our primary interest lies in the relationship between national identities and EU evaluations, we include country fixed effects in order to control for time-invariant contextual differences; and we estimate robust standard errors clustered by country (Bryan and Jenkins, 2016).<sup>8</sup>

We measure ideological views with a standard question in which respondents place themselves on a 10-point scale where 1 means left extreme and 10 means right extreme. For the multivariate analyses, we recoded this ideology measure into a left extreme category (1, 2), which comprises 9.4% of all respondents; a left-moderate category (3, 4; 22%); a center category (5, 6; 42%); a right-moderate category (7, 8; 19%); and an extreme right category (9, 10; 7.7%). We use this five-

point ideology variable to enlarge the number of cases within each ideological group. The ideological self-placement indicator provides an overarching summary of individuals' left-right positions across a large number of economic and cultural issues (Dalton et al., 2011). However, it does not permit us to infer where individuals stand on sub-dimensions of the spectrum, such as economic left-right conflicts or GAL-TAN cultural divisions (Marks et al., 2006). Still, since more refined measures are not available over time, we consider the left-right self-placement indicator a useful, if imperfect, measure for the purpose of this research.

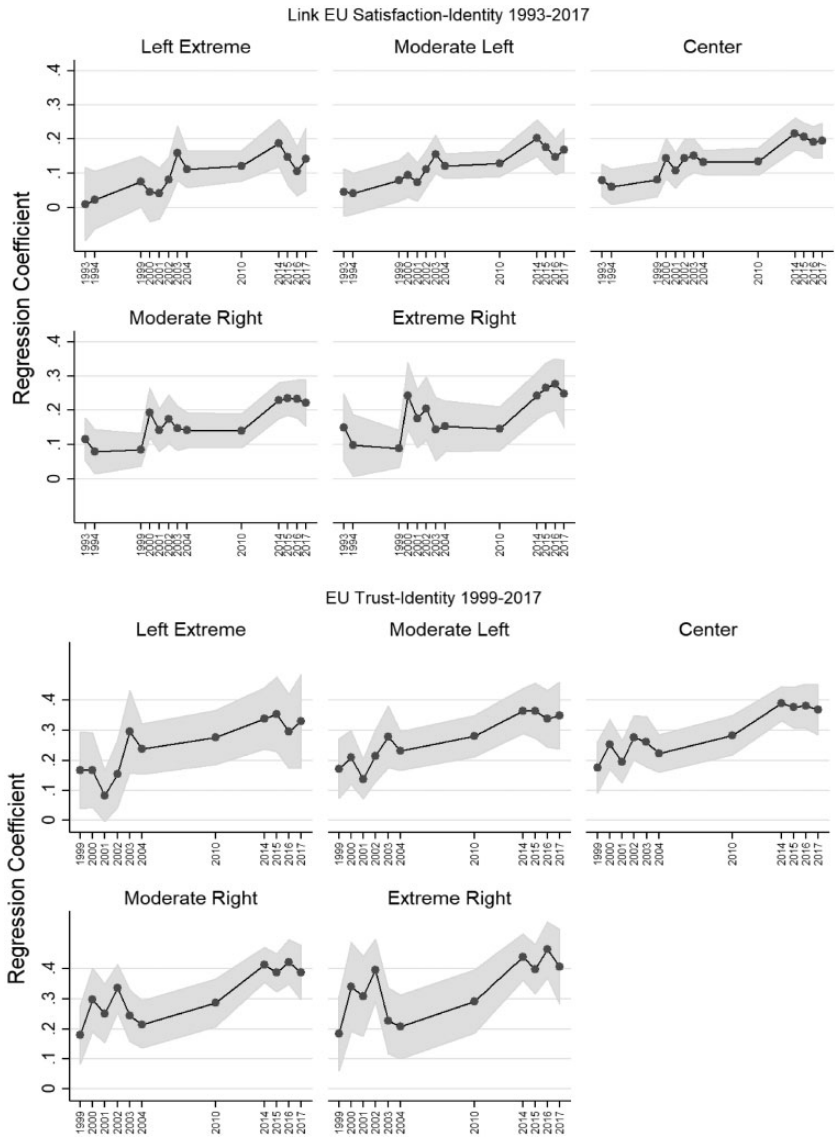
Time is measured as the year a survey was conducted. In some instances, this means that two annual Eurobarometer surveys included all variables; at other times, it means that only one (or no) Eurobarometer contains the variables required to estimate the model.

To analyze whether the relationships change across time within the five ideological groups, each model includes a three-way interaction term between identity, survey year, and individual ideology. We treat year as a nominal variable because it is possible that individual identity matters more for EU evaluations in some years than in others as controversies over the EU have flared up and subsided over time (*H3*).<sup>9</sup> We then use the information from these model estimates, which we present in the Online appendix tables, to compute the marginal regression coefficients of the relationship between identity (or attachment) and EU evaluations (or trust) for a given year within each of the five ideological groups.

For instance, the top of Figure 4 presents the marginal regression coefficients expressing the connection between national identity and individual satisfaction with the EU democracy for each ideological group between 1993 and 2017. The x-axis displays the survey year; a gap denotes that variables were missing for some years. The y-axis displays the size of the estimated regression coefficient. The shaded area represents 95% confidence intervals.

Several noteworthy patterns emerge. Generally, individual national identity is rather weakly connected to perceptions of the EU's performance outside of the right-extreme spectrum at the time the Maastricht Treaty came into effect. Early in the 1990s, the relationship between national identity and satisfaction with the EU democracy tends to be statistically *insignificant* in the two left-leaning ideological groups (the confidence intervals include the horizontal "0" line). Among individuals with center right ideological views, the regression coefficient is significant in 1993 and 1994, as it is for individuals with right-extreme ideological views.

Second, as we move across time, we note a general uptick in the magnitude of the regression coefficients for each ideological group up to 2015, then the coefficients level off by 2017 (the last available survey year). Note that the size of the coefficients at least tripled between 1993 and 2017 among individuals with center-left, center, and center-right ideological views. Perhaps nothing better illustrates the transformation of public opinion about the EU than the result that the relationship between identity and EU evaluations among *moderate* voters by 2017 is roughly as strong as it was among *right-extreme* voters in 1993. In other words, among those who typically supported the EU in the past, which constitutes the



**Figure 4.** Marginal effects of national identity on satisfaction with the EU democracy (top figure) and on trust in EU institutions (bottom figure), by ideological groups.

Note: Entries are marginal coefficients based on a regression analysis presented in model 1 (top figure) and model 2 (bottom figure) in Table 1 of the Online appendix; shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals. Satisfaction with the EU is the dependent variable in the top figure and trust in EU institutions in the bottom figure. The main independent variables are the interaction between national identity, ideology, and the year of survey which constitute the basis for marginal effects. Country fixed effects are included in the estimation; clustered standard errors by country are estimated. Gaps on x-axis indicate that at least one variable is missing in survey year. EU: European Union.

numerically largest segment of the public, we observe a substantial strengthening of the relationship between national identity and EU performance evaluations over time. (The Online appendix shows that the same pattern emerges with a dichotomized identity indicator.)

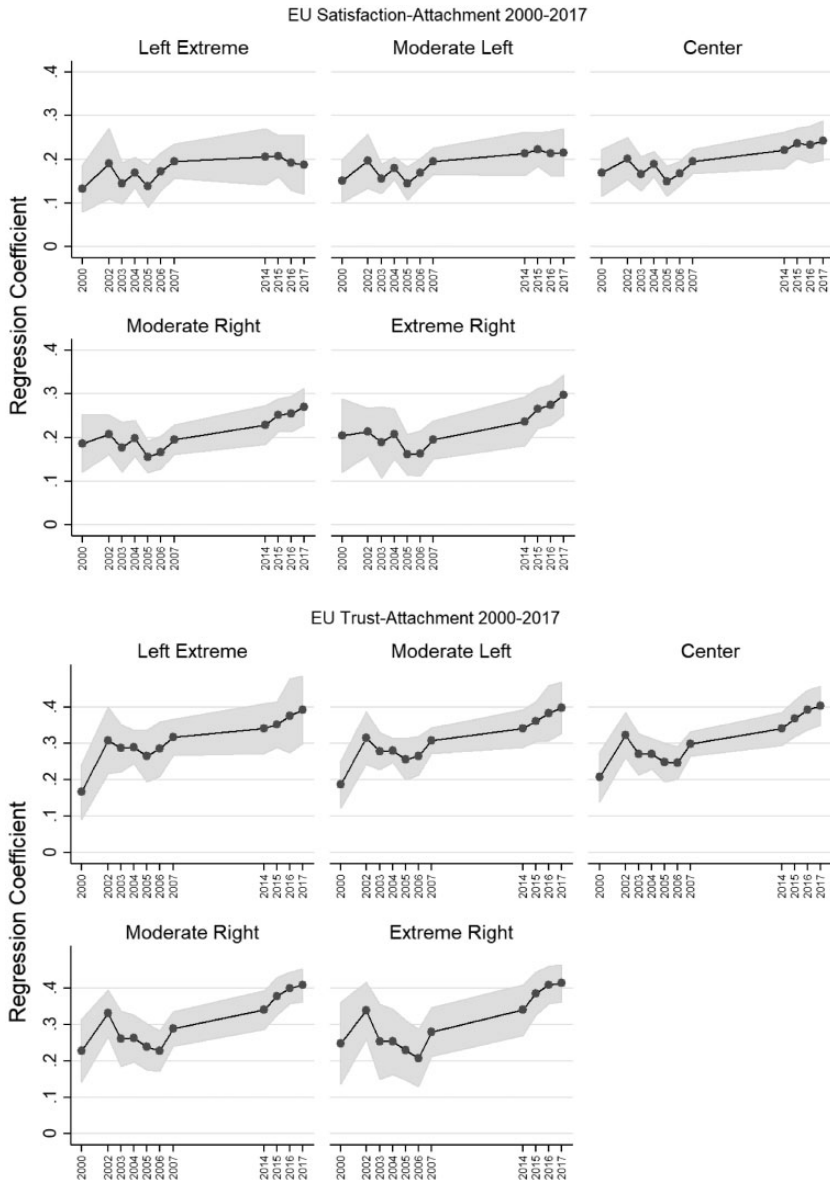
As an illustration, in 1993, when we move from the exclusive national identity category to the exclusive EU identity category, the predicted EU regime satisfaction score changes from 3.0 to 3.2 in the moderate left group, from 3.1 to 3.4 in the center group, and from 3.2 to 3.6 in the moderate right group. By 2015—the peak in the top of Figure 4—the predicted EU regime satisfaction score changes from 2.8 to 3.5 in the moderate left group, from 2.9 to 3.7 in the center group, and from 2.9 to 3.8 in the moderate right group. Thus, the predicted difference in regime satisfaction more than doubles over time. Given the lopsided focus on individual national identities (Figures 2 and 3), and the fact that these three ideological groups comprise about 83% of respondents in the pooled data, the patterns illustrate the growing contribution of national identity to declining EU evaluations over time.

Third, we observe some fluctuations around the general upward trend line; for instance, an uptick of the marginal coefficients between 1993 and 2000 (around the time the Euro was introduced). Unfortunately, most surveys between 2004 and 2014 omit at least one theoretically relevant variable so that we cannot carefully trace the dynamics during this turbulent period. Still, taking the coefficients in the late 1990s as a baseline, we again notice an upward pattern across nearly all ideological groups around 2010. The strengthening of the connection no doubt results at least in part from controversies over economic rescue packages, the enormous problems created by the economic crisis, and the rise of EU-critical elites.

Turning to popular trust in the EU (the bottom of Figure 4), we observe a similar upward movement between 1999 and 2017 for the more truncated series. In short, both public's regime evaluations and their generalized trust in the EU become increasingly linked to individual national identity since the introduction of the Euro at the turn of the millennium. Finally, as a robustness check, we replace the identity indicator with the net EU attachment indicator (Figure 5). We observe virtually identical patterns for the time covered by the data (2000–2017). The consistency across two dependent variables and two different measures of individual national identity is reassuring and suggests that national identity became increasingly linked to individuals' evaluations of the EU's performance and their trust in it. (When we estimate a random effects model instead of the fixed effects model, we find virtually identical patterns; see the Online appendix.)

Next, we replicate the analyses by year of EU accession in order to move from a birds-eye view to one that begins to consider regional variation across Europe. Note that the occasionally small number of cases, especially among respondents with left and right extreme ideological views, produces large confidence intervals. While we cannot explain all cross-national variation within the confines of a single





**Figure 5.** Marginal effects of EU attachment on satisfaction with the EU democracy (top figure) and trust in EU institutions (bottom figure).

Note: Entries are marginal coefficients based on a regression analysis presented in model 3 (top figure) and model 4 (bottom figure) in Table 2 of the Online appendix; shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals. Satisfaction with the EU is the dependent variable in the top figure and trust in EU institutions in the bottom figure. The main independent variables are the interaction between net national versus EU attachment, ideology, and the year of survey which constitute the basis for marginal effects. Country fixed effects are included in the estimation; clustered standard errors by country are estimated. Gaps on x-axis indicate that at least one variable is missing in survey year. EU: European Union.

contribution, we would like to examine whether the pooled analyses cover up systematic differences across the groups of countries (see the Online appendix).

First, the patterns for the oldest EU cohort mirror the pooled pattern. We clearly see the growing link especially within the moderate ideological groups. Second, to varying degrees, we observe a strengthening of the link among individuals with centrist, moderate right, and extreme right ideological views for countries in each accession wave. This result also reflects the conclusion from the pooled analysis.

Third, however, we observe the greatest variation in the left moderate category across nearly all accession waves except for nations that joined the EU in 1952. In later accession countries, we do not observe a clear increase over time for individuals with ideologically moderate left views as the link has *always* been fairly strong. One possible explanation for this variation is that EU-critical positions have been quite prevalent among several parties on the left in later accession countries; for example, British and Swedish labor parties (Carl et al., 2018). Similarly, post-communist successor parties in Central-Eastern Europe were initially the least supportive of integration within democratizing nations in the region, whereas parties and individuals on the (moderate) right were the most supportive (Whitefield, 2002).<sup>10</sup> Since parties both reflect and partially shape the preferences of voters (Gabel and Scheve, 2007; Steenbergen et al., 2007), these regional and country-specific developments may produce this partial deviation from the pooled pattern. Again, this interpretation is a preliminary attempt to begin to explain variation across regions and ideological groups—a topic, however, which will require the space of a separate article.

## Conclusion

To recap, three findings stand out. First, we note a clear increase in the strength of the relationship between individual national identity and EU evaluations over time. Second, while the recent turmoil in the EU fortified the linkage, the upsurge in the strength of the linkage began in the early 1990s long before the recent problems unfolded (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Third, the strengthening occurs within each of the five ideological groups in Europe, to a point where the relationship is nowadays stronger within the ideologically moderate camp than it was in the early 1990s within the right-extreme group. The findings are robust as they emerge for two indicators for EU evaluations—EU regime satisfaction and trust in the EU—and for two indicators of national identity. Finally, we note that the results mostly hold for various European countries regardless of when they joined the EU, with the partial exception of variation at the left ideological spectrum in nations which joined the EU more recently. Our study raises questions about the reasons for this variation—but it should not overshadow the central result: the link between national identity and EU evaluations strengthened nearly everywhere across the ideological range since the EU moved integration from the

economic to the political realm in 1993, and not just since the economic crisis unfolded in 2007.

The findings are particularly problematic for the EU because they do not just emerge for the EU-regime satisfaction indicator, which can be expected to reflect performance deficits during difficult times, but also for the EU-trust indicator which gauges the “reservoir of trust” (Easton, 1975) in the EU and supposedly helps bolster the EU’s reputation during times of crises. Since we find virtually identical results for both dependent variables, it does reflect the depth of the confidence crisis the EU currently experiences.

One clear implication is that the EU will face obstacles in improving popular evaluations of its performance as the majority of publics mainly identify with their nation-states. Hence, to the extent that migration and fiscal issues remain debated issues between nations, we expect that individual national identity will continue to exert a downward effect on evaluations of the EU. Additionally, given the likely reciprocal nature of the relationship between national identity and EU evaluations, policy difficulties may stimulate a negative spiral with regard to the EU’s performance: individuals’ emphasis on national identity may prompt them to evaluate the EU critically which, in turn, likely increases the odds that they become more receptive to EU-critical appeals from elites, which in turn entails that individuals further rely on their national identity when they evaluate the EU. This dynamic is all the more likely to persist when EU-critical parties consistently clamor about the EU’s underperformance in the face of unresolved policy problems (Bruter, 2009; Rooduijn et al., 2017; Steenbergen et al., 2007).

How may the EU redress this situation? Short of clear and visible policy successes—over bailouts, migration, or Brexit—could the EU emphasize the principles of integration in order to mobilize European public opinion in support of further integration? In other words, would it help the EU to advocate for a more fully integrated, EU-wide polity in order to redress popular perceptions of the EU’s under-performance? While this is a theoretical possibility, we would point to the fact that the deepening-the-EU solution raises the question whether those who view the EU’s performance negatively because of their national identity are ready to endorse *more* integration to solve current problems. It appears to be almost a contradiction in terms that individuals would forego their national affinities in order to overcome the EU’s policy problems. At a minimum, this consideration points to the protracted difficulty the EU likely faces if protagonists of the EU stress the long-term principles and ideals of integration in order to bolster the EU’s image among publics.

Additionally, we observe a strengthening of the linkage between national identity and EU evaluations before the crisis unfolded around 2007 which suggests that the growing emphasis on political integration already reinforced the relationship. This too would suggest that arguments pushing for more *political* integration based on the EU’s long-term ideals may galvanize more resistance to it on the basis of individual national identity. Whether or not the EU will be able to alter this dynamic must be monitored in future studies. For the time being, it bodes

poorly for the reputation of the EU and may contribute to the success of populist parties in elections to the European Parliament.

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### Notes

1. Because we assume that the link between these two attitudes is likely reciprocal, we will refer to it as relationship, or link, between these orientations. Our study cannot determine which causal pathway is stronger—from identity to EU evaluations or the reverse—but as long as we assume that it runs both ways, the argument laid out in this contribution holds (see also the discussion below).
2. Serricchio et al. (2013: 53) conclude that the “‘deepening’ of the EU [...] was combined with the ‘widening’ of the EU [...] bringing [...] identity and political institutions [...] to the forefront in explaining public opinion support [...] for the EU”.
3. Since we do not have measures of individual integration ideals, we cannot further develop this potential difference among left-right extremes in this study.
4. However, individuals’ predispositions may stimulate the rise of national identities first among citizens with right-extreme predispositions.
5. Prior research often dichotomizes the indicator into 1 (NATIONALITY only) and 2 (all other responses). However, for reasons explained in the Online appendix, we prefer to use the five-point indicator. As we will discuss below, the results do not depend on this coding decision.
6. The empirical relationship ( $r = .37$ ) for the pooled data across time suggests indeed that both tap partially different aspects of individuals’ national identity. It is reassuring, therefore, that the conclusions of the multivariate analyses reported below point in the same direction.
7. As the Online appendix shows, we estimated two separate equations: one model includes national identity as a predictor which has the longest temporal coverage (1993–2017), and as a robustness check, we report another model with individuals’ net attachment as a predictor which has a shorter temporal coverage (1999–2017).
8. A Hausman test comparing a multi-level model including a random intercept with the fixed effect model presented here suggests statistically significant differences. For that reason, we present fixed effects models.
9. In Stata terms, “year” becomes an indicator variable. Thus, the marginal coefficients for identity or attachment are allowed to increase, decrease, or remain steady between adjacent years. We therefore do not have to assume a specific functional form (e.g. linearity) to model the relevance of time. We would like to thank the reviewers to suggest this possibility.

10. For example, it is possible that we observe here the traditional reluctance of Labor parties in some countries to support the EU, such as Britain, Sweden, or post-communist successor parties in Central-Eastern Europe. We will examine this nuance in a future study.

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