

## **EUROPEAN ATTITUDES AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AFTER ECONOMIC CRISIS: STRESSING THE IMPACT OF THE EUROPEAN IDENTITY**

This paper analyses the determinants of people's support for European institutions, mainly focusing on the impact of European identity, after the economic crisis and in a moment in which – after profound uncertainty for its immediate future – there is a new feeling toward European integration. Previous research on support for European institutions, before the economic and financial crisis which had hit Europe since 2008, found that people's evaluations followed mainly an instrumental logic – support being contingent on a perception of personal or national benefit accruing for EU membership – with an additional role played by European identification. This contribution expands the analysis after the beginning of the economic crisis, so to assess whether the former has affected the structure of such support, and deepens the analysis of the impact of EU identity on European institutional confidence. Using a recent Eurobarometer survey (86.2, 2016) and combining both individual and contextual data, the paper shows that European identity plays a crucial role in explaining European support also after the crisis.

*Keywords:* European Identity; Trust; Institutions; Eurobarometer; Citizens.

### *1. Introduction*

In March 2017, in a climate of profound uncertainty for its immediate future, the European Union celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. The «Brexit heritage» and the growing size and influence of Europhobic parties, together with a legacy of economic and financial crisis, cast a dark light on the future of the European Union. Never as in those months have the questions about the prospects of a united Europe become complicated. Even the *White Paper*, handed down by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, hasn't tackled the root of the problem.

*A first version of this paper was presented at the 31<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Italian Political Science Association, University of Urbino, September 2017, panel Euroscepticism Mainstreamed? Patterns of Euroscepticism in Europe under Multiple Crises, chair Nicolò Conti. I wish to thank the discussant Fedra Negri for her useful comments and all the participants to the discussion. Thanks also to the anonymous referees for their very useful comments.*

The political events that took place in the following months – especially the elections in France – have removed the most pressing concerns, but there is no doubt that the situation is not yet completely outlined. Even the elections in Germany at the end of September 2017 – the other political-electoral appointment on which the attention of observers and political actors focused on – haven't allowed the knots to loosen. Thus, the future definitely seems to be something to be written, although some signs of optimism are beginning to emerge. However, to what extent has the economic crisis, after threatening the very existence of Europe, altered the structure of relations between citizens and the EU?

The goal of this paper is to inquire into the determinants of people's support for European institutions, also considered as institutional confidence, focusing in particular on the attitudinal consequences of holding an affective feeling towards Europe that can be labelled as European identity. In more detail, the goal is to assess to what extent European identity contributes to the explanation of European support (in this case, European institutional trust) compared to other determinants. Previous research on such support found that people's evaluations followed mainly an instrumental logic – support being dependent on a perception of personal or national benefits accruing from membership in the European Union (EU) – with an additional role played by European identification and other factors, such as trust in Europeans. This contribution expands the previous analysis, done well before the beginning of the economic crisis, and aims to offer a comprehension of the structure of European attitudes.

The paper is organized as follows: in the first section, I discuss the concepts of European identity and European institutional trust. Subsequently, I review the main theories that have been elaborated to explain the development of political support for the EU. Thus, after a description of data and measurements, in the second section I offer a description of distributions of European institutional trust across Europe. Finally, I test a model that assesses the explanatory power of European identity on EU support as compared to other variables. The concluding section reviews the findings and the implications for future research.

## *2. European Identification and Trust for European Institutions*

European identity is often seen in literature as a component of more general attitudes towards European integration; in early researches it is

even interpreted as being synonymous of support (see Inglehart 1970); European identity is also seen as diffuse support of the political community as a part of the political system (e.g. Duchesne and Frogner 1995); later research has explicitly interpreted European identity as a link to a political community distinct from general support for the EU itself (e.g. Scheuer 1999).

According to social identity theory (SIT, Tajfel and Turner 1986), identity is a feeling of attachment to a salient group: so European identity is an attachment to a salient supranational community. Differently from a nation, the EU faces difficulties in becoming a proper polity because people's primary loyalty is still weak. Europeans do not share a single common history, culture and values. On the other hand, this traditional reasoning can be questioned, since Europeans do share a relevant past (the Greek *polis* and the Roman Empire, the Crusades, the Renaissance, Romanticism and the French Revolution). However, together with a common heritage, Europeans share religious conflicts such as the cleavages between Catholics and Protestants, Latin and Orthodox, the Christian and Islamic world. Moreover, there are extreme political divisions within Europe: its history is a history of wars, culminating in the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War. In addition, Europeans do not share a common language. On balance, it might therefore be argued that, since basic elements of a common identity are lacking, the divisions are stronger than the commonalities. This perspective sheds a bleak light on the possibility of a European identity.

However, stressing the identity achieved component's (Huddy 2001), defining European identity could be easier also because together with the vertical dimension (the sense of belonging to), a collective identity could also imply a horizontal dimension (the so-called sense of community, or sense of belonging together, Green 2007; Kaina and Karolewski 2013). Another point is stressed by Checkel and Katzenstein that contrasts a cosmopolitan vision with a national-populist declination of identity projects (2009, 11). There are few doubts that European identity is something closer to a cosmopolitan allegiance, because it stresses political rights and citizenship, while national-populist European identity focuses on cultural authenticity.

Political support could be instrumental and diffuse (see Easton 1965); this latter is crucial for a political system's life. In Europe, with the end of the initial permissive consensus on EU integration, people's support was conceived as a possible remedy to bridge the gap between supranational governance and citizens. Then, in this paper, the basic

idea is that European identity might increase the legitimacy of EU governance, also via a resilience mechanism.

Public perception of the EU covers several dimensions and literature suggests a number of typologies to conceptualize them. Moving from Easton's (1965; 1975) notions of specific and diffuse support, Norris (1999) distinguishes five objects of political support (political community, regime principles, regime processes, regime institutions, and political authorities). Conceptually, popular support for the basic principles of the EU is conceived as the level of popular approval for integration project as whole. But citizens' orientations towards the EU also include evaluations of the institutions of the EU. These assessments of the institutional design of the EU are most commonly assessed by asking respondents about their level of trust or confidence in various institutions. Institutional trust is explicitly linked to regime stability since it enhances the likelihood of support by citizens believing that the political system will produce ideal outcomes.

In Easton's words, institutional trust could be seen as support for regime institutions; European institutions make decisions so – in a way – they are directly considered responsible for policies and answers given. During the crisis, European institutions were directly under observation, because of lack of responses. For these reasons the focus in this paper is on the European institutional trust, as a dependent variable. Before exploring the trends and the distribution of European institutional trust among countries, the possible source of Europeanism should be considered. Therefore, the next paragraph will revise the literature on the predictors of European attitudes.

### *3. Theoretical Perspectives and Research Hypotheses on the Sources of European Institutional Trust*

The sources of Europeanism are of various nature. In a first step, the study of public opinion on European integration drew on the tools and methods of the comparative study of regime support at the national level (Loveless and Rohrschneider 2011, 5). At first, scholars followed the model of the permissive consensus (Lindberg and Scheingold 1971). Pro-European sentiments began to weaken with the Single European Act of 1987 and the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which broadened the sphere of action and the range of competences of the EU and brought about its transformation into an unstable system of gover-

nance. Rejections of the Constitutional Treaty in France and Holland in June 2005 – even though for different reasons – and the bumpy road taken by the Lisbon Treaty before it became effective in December 2009, again recall the question of the link between citizens and Europe. New theories were proposed and the subsequent empirical research on the determinants of European support is quite copious. They point to four theoretical perspectives that have been developed over time: cognitive mobilization, instrumental rational perspectives, political mobilization and affective and identitarian explanations (Bellucci *et al.* 2012; Toka *et al.* 2012).

Chronologically, the first theoretical perspective used to explain attitudes to Europe was the cognitive mobilization theory advanced by Inglehart (1970). This was followed by a series of studies in which motivations of a utilitarian nature had a predominant role (Gabel 1998). Subsequently, a number of authors studied Europeanism according to the idea that political explanations offered the key to its understanding (Anderson 1998; Sanchez-Cuenca 2000). More recently, the identity paradigm has been established, where national (and local) identities are seen as the variables explaining most of the variation of the orientations of public opinion towards Europe (Carey 2002; Hooghe and Marks 2005; McLaren 2002). Summing up, the possible predictors of pro-Europeanism could be placed into two broad categories: economic and non-economic, as suggested by Hooghe and Marks (2005).

The economic-utilitarian theory (Gabel, 1998), interprets the pro-European sentiments of public opinion as the product of rational thinking and therefore of a calculation. Membership of Europe is in other words evaluated on the basis of criteria of expedience and utility of the choice involved. This literature presupposes that citizens are capable of rational evaluation, and therefore of calculating the economic consequences of European integration both for themselves and for the social groups to which they belong, including the nation. Attitudes towards the EU are thus the product of this calculation. The results of Gabel's investigations showed that citizens that benefitted directly from community assistance (such as farmers) had a higher level of support for Europe: this is a reflection of the so-called egocentric utilitarianism. The utilitarian approach also takes into account aggregate economic factors, according to economic voting literature (Lewis-Beck 1988). From this perspective, support for European integration is influenced by the performance of the national economic system. In particular, support for integration is strong when the state of the national economy (in

terms of inflation, unemployment and growth) is good (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993): this is the so-called sociotropic utilitarianism. In sum, the central assumption of the economic or instrumental theory is that individuals' orientations towards the EU result from a calculation of costs and benefits.

In very recent years, economic crisis played a crucial role in Europeanism, as several studies show (see Serricchio *et al.* 2013). This perspective in particular is useful because the economic crisis has threatened the very existence of the European Union. Kuhn and Stoeckel (2014) look at the effects of the crisis on support for European economic governance. As far as the utilitarian approach is concerned, the authors hypothesize an opposite relationship with support for EU governance during the crisis. Lastly, Di Mauro and Serricchio (2016) assess the role of national institutions as proxy for Europeanism, stressing also the role of some contextual variables.

Among non-economic factors, cognitive mobilization (based on growth in levels of education among citizens, exposure to a wider range of information sources and consequently greater awareness of Europe and of the way it works) was thought to favour pro-European sentiments. However, in recent years, especially following the expansion in the range of competences of the EU and its various enlargements, the identity explanation has become more relevant. In this perspective, national identity becomes a key predictor of the orientations of public opinion with respect to the EU. In Carey's view (2002), the danger of a loss of power on the part of the citizen's own member state deriving from the growing interference of the supranational institutions produces a negative reaction in those citizens who do not see the EU as a legitimate entity, and who in any case do not see or clearly recognize the outline of a European identity. So, for Carey, strong national identities, in some cases reinforced by sentiments of belonging to a subnational territory, constitute an obstacle to European integration.

McLaren (2002) focuses on the perception of a threat to one's own identity. The perceived threat posed by integration with other populations and cultures could be economic, deriving from possible conflicts over economic benefits enjoyed by minority groups, or it could derive from purely cultural considerations. The conclusion reached by McLaren is in line with that of Carey: strong national identities obstruct the process of European integration. However, the relationship between national identity and attitudes towards Europe seems to be more complex. For Duchesne and Frogner (1995), Bruter (2005) and Citrin and

Sides (2004), in contrast to the interpretations of Carey and McLaren, the relationship between a sense of national belonging and pro-European sentiments is rather positive, and a strong national identity is fully compatible with positive attitudes towards Europe. Similar conclusions are reached by the authors of studies carried out by social psychologists (Catellani and Milesi 1998; Cinnirella 1997; Huici et al. 1997).

Hooge and Marks (2005) have suggested that the national context has a mediating role: national identity works in opposite directions, in favour of or against European integration, according to the context concerned, and especially as a consequence of specific political events with the power to trigger nationalistic sentiments in citizens (in the case in point, the holding of a referendum on Europe). Accordingly, people holding exclusive national identity – in contrast to people expressing dual allegiance to both nation and Europe – would be less supportive of European integration. Other authors (Bellucci *et al.* 2012; Serricchio 2010 for the Italian case) stress the impact of different component of national identity (civic *vs* ethnic or, as social psychologists claim, achieved *vs* ascribed, see Huddy 2001). The role of European identity in determining pro-European attitudes is quite clear. In the Intune project (e.g., Serricchio 2011; Sanders *et al.* 2012) European identity has a relevant role as a predictor in European attitudes and, in fact, according to Toka *et al.* (2012), European identity can be grouped into an affective and identitarian factor. According to Serricchio and Bellucci (2016), European identification is one of the most powerful predictor of pro-European attitudes also because could be seen as source of resilience.

The third perspective introduces political mobilization factors and judgemental heuristics. The main idea here is that mass perceptions of Europe are defined in national political arenas and that parties, political elites and the mass media may cue voters in their views towards Europe and its institutions (Hooghe and Marks 2005). Political explanations (or political cues) encompass theoretical perspectives whose wide range is reflected in a corresponding heterogeneity of empirical findings. One perspective emphasizes the way in which individuals use certain political cues – which come to them from their own ideological orientations and the messages put in circulation by the political elites – to form their ideas about Europe. Underlying this approach is the conviction that individuals are not able to obtain complete information; that their capacity for rational thinking is limited; that they have only partial awareness of the relevant issues and therefore must make use of institutional and other forms of delegation. These studies therefore give special empha-

sis to the role of political parties as the suppliers of cognitive shortcuts (Gabel 1998).

A second perspective focuses on citizens' confidence in national institutions and in the national political system more generally. Anderson (1998) shows that the attitudes of citizens towards the EU – which is now a polity for all practical purposes, a polity *sui generis* though it may be – are to a degree filtered by the national political and institutional system. In other words, confidence in institutions has a positive impact on citizens' attitudes to Europe because the national institutions are used as cognitive shortcuts. Those who have confidence in their own political system are likely to develop attitudes of closeness to, if not confidence in, the institutions of Europe. However, the impact can also be negative, as Sanchez-Cuenca (2000) shows: those mistrustful of the national political system may develop strongly pro-European attitudes. So on the one hand, Anderson (1998) establishes a mechanism of institutional proxy in the context of which the national institutions are shortcuts to feelings of confidence in Europe. On the other hand, Sanchez-Cuenca (2000) provides confirmation of the hypothesis of a substitution mechanism whereby a lack of confidence in the national political system leads to the prediction of strong pro-European sentiments. Bellucci *et al.* (2012) show that the relationship between confidence in the national institutions and pro-European attitudes is in fact mediated by a third variable, namely, the quality of governance. In countries where this is high, the relationship is negative.

Based on this literature review, two hypotheses to be tested can be drawn: the first (H1) is that European identity increases European institutional trust (Serricchio and Bellucci 2016); the second (H2) assumes that context differentiates the role of some relevant factors: thus, national institutional confidence is positively correlated with European institutional trust when the quality of national governance is low (Bellucci *et al.* 2012).

#### 4. Data and Measurement

In order to conduct the analysis and test the two hypothesis, I use a very recent Eurobarometer survey, the 86.2, which was released in November 2016 by the European Commission. Together with individual level data, contextual data are employed: these are taken from Eurostat (GDP, growth and unemployment rate) and also provided by



Transparency International (the corruption perception index, CPI). In the following analysis, the dependent variable is the European institutional confidence, an index that combines some classic measures of European institutional trust, including both elected and not elected institutions: so, the scale includes general European trust, trust towards Parliament, European Commission, European Central Bank and a measure of satisfaction on how European democracy works; the variables were combined into an additive index and rescaled into a 0-10 point range, where 0 is the lowest level of confidence and 10 the highest.

Usually, European identity is measured with survey instruments pertinent to belonging, territorial-geographical attachment and future feelings (Citrin and Sides 2004; Moreno 2006; Sinnott 2006). In previous research (Serricchio and Bellucci 2016), European identity is conceptualized and measured according to social identity theory, that imply belonging and salience, captured by two questions which have been elaborated from Lilli and Diehl's (1999) as reformulation of the collective self-esteem scale originally proposed by Luhtanen and Crocker (1992); unfortunately, the Eurobarometer survey employed for this paper doesn't have the same items nor any similar. Nevertheless, it contains several parameters that measure emotional and affective feeling toward Europe thus allowing to well grasp the feeling of European identification.

The questions included are: Europe perceived image, the European and the European Union attachment, the European citizenship and the classic measure of European identity, the so called Moreno question; the variables were combined into an additive index and rescaled into a 0-10 point range, where 0 is the lowest level of identification and 10 the highest.

##### *5. European Attitudes Across Time: A Return of Europeanism?*

The 2016 survey reveals an innovation: a significant revival of Europeanism. The (small) tendencies of some selected indicators – some of them are shown in figure 1 – describe a growing trend: from 2013, positive EU image gains five points, EU attachment four (going back to 2007 levels), trust toward European Parliament increases by four points; exclusive national identity (that is, according to literature – a measure of opposition to European identity and Europe in general) decreases by five points; the remaining indicators reveal a minor

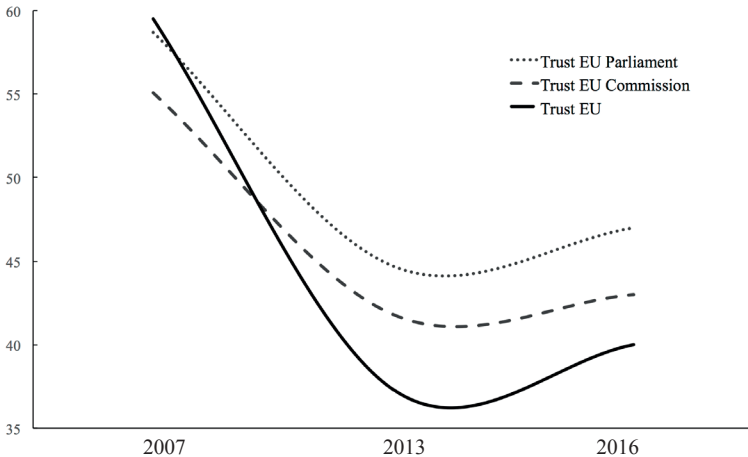


FIG. 1. Europeanism across time (selected indicators).

Source: author's elaboration based on Eurobarometer 67.2 (2007), 80.1 (2013) and 86.2 (2016).

growth. In general, the pre-crisis level has not yet been achieved (except for EU attachment), but the increase is evident. These trends need to be confirmed in the following months. Therefore, next survey most probably will tell us something more on this subject. However, the results are quite clear.

Focusing on the described dependent variable, it has a moderate average intensity (4.9 on a 0-10 scale,  $N=27,405$ ) with a 3.2 of standard deviation, that reveals a good variability among nations; so, as suspected, this new enthusiasm is not common to all Europeans; indeed, the level of European institutional trust varies considerably across European nations, depending on national context, with sixteen countries over the average. Therefore, a question could be raised: which factors explain this great variations among different national contexts? A preliminary explanation recalls the different impact of economic and financial crisis, the different level of national attachment but also – and possibly most importantly – the potential different role of national institutional confidence, also taking into account the already mentioned different levels of quality of governance. A more complex explanation is thus needed. In order to do so, some multivariate regression models are set up. In these models the dependent variable is always the European institutional confidence, measured as explained; the predictors are se-

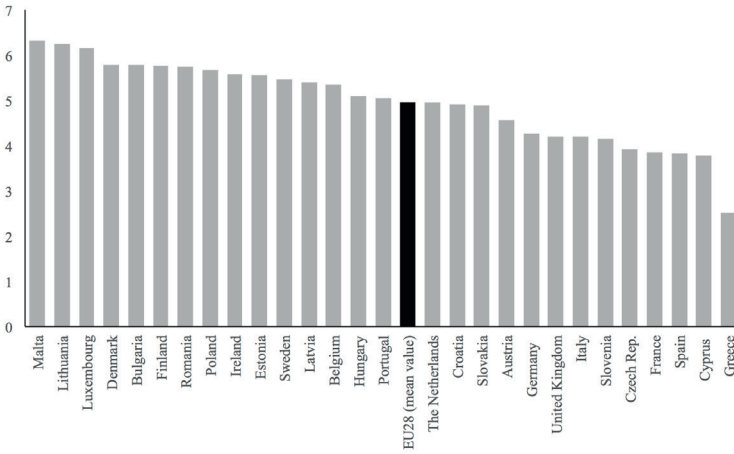


FIG. 2. Mean level of European institutional trust (0-10 scale), by country (2016).  
 Source: author’s elaboration based on Eurobarometer 86.2 (2016).

lected and included according to the theories presented and discussed in section 3. The next sections will present and discuss empirical findings. This also allows me to explain the relevance of European identity.

### 6. Determinants of European Institutional Confidence

The literature review has shown that several factors affect the level of pro-EU attitudes and may lead to changes over the years and between countries. To ascertain their impact I start with a basic regression model (OLS) with only individual level predictors: this is model 1 presented in table 1. The sociodemographic variables are included mainly as control variables, without any specific hypotheses. The coefficients at the individual level suggest that economic variables are associated with great strength of support, also after the crisis. So, it is confirmed that the economy does directly impact the EU support. Observing the confidence in national institutions, this predictor is very strongly correlated with the index of EU institutional trust, with a positive direction. This is a very relevant finding, as the role of domestic governance is not always univocal and sometimes uncertain, as explained. With these data and this analysis its role appears to be quite clear: national identity has a weak

impact, although positive. In general the model fit the data reasonably well as r-square reveals (.31).

In the second model (model 2 in table 1) I add European identity: this has one relevant impact on general explanation, as r-square increases from .31 to .44. Moreover, the impact of European identity on European institutional confidence is very relevant (coefficient is .55). The other predictors keep more or less the same effect, without relevant exceptions. In the third model (model 3 in table 1) there is a further step ahead, because contextual predictors are included in the regression model: so the quality of governance, measured by the corruption perception index<sup>1</sup>, unemployment rate and GDP growth<sup>2</sup> are incorporated in order to test the effect of context on individual perception of European institutions; next to individual and aggregate level predictors, I add two micro-macro interaction terms: one is between national institutional confidence and the corruption perception index in order to assess whether (and in which way) the measured quality of governance interacts with popular perception of the performance of domestic institutions; the second one is between European identity and GDP growth; the reason why I include this interaction is to test if a sense of European attachment and national economy could be linked in citizens' mind. So, indirectly, this interaction could be useful to test the hypothesis that European identity could have served as reserve of resilience in times of crisis. Therefore, there are micro-macro interactions<sup>3</sup>.

In model 3 we can observe some relevant findings: first of all, economic contextual variables have no impact: unemployment and GDP growth are statistically not significant. So, while economic individual perception has a quite relevant role (mainly the questions that refer to actual economy in Europe and expectation in European economy), the economical contextual variables have an uncertain impact. Why? Probably because whereas indicators suggests that crisis is now overcome, citizens still perceive the negative effect and believe that the European institutions in economic governance are responsible at least

<sup>1</sup> A higher level of CPI reveals a less corrupted nation.

<sup>2</sup> CPI is provided by Transparency International; GDP growth and unemployment rate come from Eurostat. For a better interpretation of results I coded as binary the contextual variables (1: low level; 2: high level). For the same reasons I have coded as binary the national institutional trust variable.

<sup>3</sup> The model has standard error corrected for cluster (nations). This model is similar to a multilevel model. I also run a classic multilevel model with random effect that gives substantially the same results. This model is not shown but available upon request from the author.

TABLE 1. *European identity as predictor of European institutional confidence. Individual and contextual determinants (2016)*

	1	2	3
National economy	-0.05***(0.02)	-0.12***(0.02)	-0.08(0.06)
European economy	0.80***(0.02)	0.60***(0.02)	0.57***(0.05)
Economic expectation	0.07***(0.03)	0.06**(0.02)	0.04(0.04)
Economic expectation (european)	0.40***(0.02)	0.22***(0.02)	0.21***(0.02)
Media use index	0.20***(0.02)	-0.01(0.02)	0.02(0.03)
National institutional confidence	2.40***(0.04)	1.88***(0.04)	1.39***(0.33)
European identity		0.55***(0.01)	0.57***(0.02)
National identity	0.07***(0.01)	-0.031***(0.01)	-0.03(0.02)
Left-right scale	0.006(0.03)	-0.02(0.03)	0.01(0.06)
Left-right scale squared	0.002(0.003)	0.01**(0.00)	0.00 (0.01)
Sex	-0.16***(0.04)	-0.19***(0.03)	-0.20***(0.03)
Education	0.16***(0.02)	0.01(0.02)	-0.00(0.03)
Age	-0.17***(0.02)	-0.09***(0.02)	-0.08**(0.03)
Occupation (unemployment)	0.30***(0.09)	0.02(0.08)	0.03(0.03)
<i>Contextual variables</i>			
Unemployment rate			-0.03(0.11)
GDP growth			0.05(0.22)
CPI			0.30*(0.17)
<i>Interaction</i>			
Interaction CPI*National institutional confidence			-0.43**(0.19)
Interaction European identity* GDP growth			0.36*(0.19)
			-0.19***(0.06)
Constant	-0.36**(0.18)	-0.230(0.165)	-0.49(0.54)
Observations	22.513	22.513	21.877
R-squared	0.31	0.44	0.44
Number of clusters (nation)			28

Source: author's elaboration based on Eurobarometer 86.2 (2016).

Note: Standar errors in parentheses: \*\*\*: p<0.01, \*\*: p<0.05, \*: p<0.1.

Model 1 and 2 are OLS regression. Model 3 is linear regression with standard error corrected for 28 clusters (nation).

as national governments are. CPI, that measures quality of governance, is negative and the magnitude effect is relevant (-.44). Since a high value of CPI means a low level of corruption, the less corrupted nations strongly support the European institutions. The positive sign of interaction means that popular perception of quality of governance and objective measurement goes in the same direction: in other words, citizens in less corrupted countries (that are those in which quality of governance is higher) are more prompt to transfer allegiance to a supranational polity due to a higher level of confidence in national institutions.

The second interaction is between European identity and GDP growth: the direction is positive, the magnitude is high and the relation is statistically significant. What does it mean? In essence, it means that the perception of being part of a supranational community has actually mitigated the effects of the economic crisis, measured as change in GDP level. Therefore, the hypothesis 1 (H1) in actual facts is largely confirmed: the sense of European identification greatly increases the confidence in European public institutions. This confirms the idea that European institutions and the project of European integration are somewhat linked in the mind of citizens: in other words there are no dramatic differentiations between Europe as geographic and historical concept and European Union as project of integration of the whole of Europe. Concerning the hypothesis 2 (H2) there are two basic relevant findings: first of all the role of the context is confirmed as prominent; then, the public perception of national governance performances is effectively conditioned from the level of «objective» quality of governance and this confirms previous research on this topic.

## 7. Conclusion

In the first months of 2017 European Union was highly contested: in March 2017, the united Europe celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in a very heavy climate (remembering Brexit and the growing influence of Eurosceptic parties across Europe) nor the *White Paper*, handed down by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, seem to indicate useful solutions. The presidential and parliamentary elections in France seem to have removed the most pressing concerns, but the picture is not yet completely outlined and the future of a United Europe is still under observation. What will be the future is a very hard question but some signs of optimism are beginning to emerge. So, in this general

climate, this paper aimed to assess if the economic crisis altered the structure of relations between citizens and the EU.

Previous research on support for European integration found that citizens' evaluation followed mainly an instrumental logic – support being contingent on a perception of personal or national benefit accruing for EU membership – with an additional role played by European identity. This contribution expanded the analysis already done, mainly when the financial and economic crisis began to affect popular confidence towards political institutions and, mainly, the supranational polity. The findings are quite surprising. First of all, pro-European attitudes show an increasing level, although level of trust in European institutions (and other indicators too) considerably varies across countries.

The first result to highlight concerns the role of European identity that is able to contribute significantly to the explanation of the support. Probably this affective attachment constitutes a reserve of resilience, able to drive public perception toward Europe across times of crisis, allowing to maintain support at an acceptable level during peaks of disaffection too. This could be good news for the future of the united Europe and an indication for political actors. The second relevant finding concerns the trust in national political institutions and the impact of the quality of governance. National institutional confidence appears always positive in all models, although the magnitude decrease when European identity and aggregate variables enter the models (2 e 3). So, if in previous research (Serricchio e Bellucci, 2016) the two factors seem to work only if combined, it now appears this is not necessarily the case.

Further researches should focus firstly on the level of pro-European attitudes, seeking confirmation of their increasing levels. In addition, and most importantly, all the possible interaction between context and individual attitudes are yet to be verified because according to these results the question is only partially solved.

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