



Article

Exploring the Determinants of Public Support and Euroscepticism in the European Union: A Macro and Micro-Level Analysis of Democratic Perceptions

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Abstract

This article explores how perceptions of democracy, both at the domestic and European levels, influence public attitudes towards the EU through empirical tests conducted at both macro and micro levels. Satisfaction with the way democracy operates in the EU emerges as the most significant factor in determining public support for the EU, while economic variables clearly explain the recent rise of Euroscepticism. Our findings suggest that securing public support for the EU will require addressing political and economic issues, particularly by involving more citizens in the decision-making process. Additionally, the relationship between satisfaction with domestic democracy and EU democracy shows a compensational dynamic at the macro level, contrasted with an opposite relationship at the micro level. This analysis highlights that, while complexities such as the macro-micro puzzle exist, the perception of EU democracy remains a key factor in the rise of Euroscepticism.

Keywords

Euroscepticism, Perception, Democratic deficit, European integration, Determinant

Introduction

The democratic legitimacy of the EU is an old topic that accompanied the EU from its beginning. When European policymakers invited the UK to join the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, the British Premier Clement Attlee refused this invitation, arguing that it is “an authority that is utterly undemocratic and is responsible to nobody” (McCormick, 2011, p. 73) . As

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questions of democratic legitimacy became more controversial in the EU, policymakers and academics have discussed many ideas and incremental measures to make the EU's decision-making system more open and responsible towards the European citizens. However, as the concept of "unfinished democracy" indicates, no achievable and ground-breaking solution to this question has been suggested (Eriksen, 2009). The perceived democratic deficit within the EU—characterized by a lack of transparency, accountability, and representation in its decision-making processes—has significantly contributed to the rise of Euroscepticism across several member countries. This growing skepticism is fueled by citizens' concerns that their voices are not adequately heard or represented at the EU level, leading to increasing discontent with the EU's governance and policies.

There is a prevailing view among many citizens and scholars that democratic processes function more effectively at the national level than at the EU level. This perspective is rooted in the belief that national governments are more attuned to the specific needs and concerns of their citizens, allowing for greater accountability, transparency, and public participation. In contrast, the EU is often perceived as a distant and bureaucratic entity where decision-making is less accessible and responsive to the electorate. Consequently, many people feel that democracy is better served within the familiar and more immediate context of their own nation-states, rather than through the complex and multi-layered structures of the EU. However, democracy in member states is also facing a legitimacy crisis, as many governments have taken more controls on economic and social issues since the economic crisis in the late 2000s. A common feature in many European countries is that trust in the government and satisfaction with the domestic democracy have declined at the same time. The retrenchment of welfare policies and high unemployment, and long-term low growth and austerity measures have had a complex impact on these changes. If trust in government continues to decline, it may also lower the confidence in the EU, whose operating system the government participates to represent its citizens. In this case, it will be more difficult for the EU to exert strong power as a global actor. The role of the EU is more important than ever to cope with Europe-wide low growth, climate change, and health crises caused by COVID-19. It is necessary to ensure trust and robust governance in the EU to fulfil this role. Moreover, the EU's democratic legitimacy should include the national-level democracy, which is affected by the changing global economic and political environment (Corbett, 2018; Hoeksma, 2011).

Against this background, this study analyses how public perception of the EU and national democracy affects Euroscepticism. Existing studies have dealt with the trust and perception of the EU and national democracy as separate topics, and studies that combine these two variables into one single conceptual framework are rare. Higher satisfaction with democracy in the EU is positively associated with more trust in the EU. However, since the financial crisis of the late 2000s, the public perception of the EU's democracy and the trust in the EU has become more complex (Arpino & Obydenkova, 2019; Nicolaidis, 2013; Ruiz-Rufino & Alonso, 2017). This relationship means that national democracy and its perception by citizens in the national political arena is an independent vector that shapes people's attitudes towards the EU. In this regard, it is essential to investigate how public perceptions of their national democracy affect the spread of Euroscepticism, adding to the conventional framework that focuses on the democratic deficit in the EU decision-making process. By understanding these dynamics, we can gain deeper insights into the factors that drive Euroscepticism and develop more effective approaches to address it.

This article has originality in two aspects. First, it explores the relationship between perceptions of democracy at both domestic and European levels and public attitudes towards the EU. Previous studies on the legitimacy of the EU have examined how satisfaction with EU-level democracy is associated with public support for European integration or trust in the

EU. In other words, research has focused on the functioning of democracy within the EU and the corresponding perceptions or satisfaction of its citizens at the European level. Our study extends this analytical framework to include satisfaction with democracy at the national level. We assume that public attitudes towards the EU are linked to how democracy operates within individual countries and how citizens perceive or are satisfied with it. Second, this article conducts empirical analysis at both macro and micro levels. Macro-level analysis allows us to verify how country-specific situations influence public support for the EU at the national level. Characteristics such as evaluations of the democratic functioning of the EU and domestic governments, domestic economic crises, and domestic political contexts can shape preferences or skeptical attitudes toward the EU. Understanding how citizens perceive the EU and European integration is increasingly essential. Using micro-level data collected from individual surveys of Eurobarometer, this article examines how individual satisfaction with both EU and national democracy affects public trust in the EU. Most existing studies conduct analyses using either macro-level or micro-level data. This study is original in that it employs empirical analysis using both dimensions of data. Conducting two-dimensional empirical analyses at different levels provides a richer understanding of democracy and public trust.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The second section reviews previous studies that examine how Euroscepticism is affected by satisfaction with EU and national democracy. The third section introduces several research hypotheses on how different factors may influence public opinion about the EU, including trust and image. The following section presents empirical tests using both macro-level national indicators and micro-level survey data. Finally, the last section discusses how satisfaction with the functioning of democracy at both the EU and domestic levels interacts with public opinion about the EU in the context of rising Euroscepticism.

Public Perception of EU's Democracy and Euroscepticism

Theory and Literature Review

Political trust refers to citizens' support for political institutions or actors and plays a crucial role in linking democratic principles to everyday life within a political system (Van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017). David Easton categorized political trust into two types: specific and diffuse support. Specific support relates to citizens' perceptions of political authority and their satisfaction with it, acting as a heuristic for whether the authority is perceived positively or negatively at a given moment (Ares et al., 2017). In contrast, diffuse support is a more affective and enduring evaluation, providing a 'reservoir of favorable attitudes' that can accommodate dissatisfaction (Easton, 1975, pp. 437–444). Existing studies have primarily analyzed citizens' diffuse support for the EU, noting that public support for the EU is intertwined with European identity. This form of political trust helps to secure resilience in times of crisis (Mitchell, 2016; Ringlerova, 2015).

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, subsequent recessions and Europe-wide austerity measures have increasingly been associated with declining public support for the EU and heightened political distrust in its operating system. The lack of democratic legitimacy within the EU has compounded public dissatisfaction with economic issues. Many countries faced high unemployment rates, and national governments were obliged to implement austerity measures framed at the EU level by the European Commission and Council, which hindered economic recovery by suppressing domestic demand. Additionally, countries with better economic conditions and relatively sound fiscal statuses experienced "bail-out fatigue," with public opinion

becoming increasingly sensitive to the potential burdens of aiding fiscally fragile neighboring countries within the EU system. These economic factors became major causes of increasingly skeptical attitudes towards the EU throughout the 2010s. This combination of political and economic factors has gradually fueled the rise of Eurosceptic sentiments. Confidence in EU institutions significantly declined and remained low in most countries, especially after the 2008 financial crisis (Van Erkel & Van Der Meer, 2016). Euroscepticism spread widely as the economic crisis exposed the weaknesses of the existing EU system.

EU's austerity policies have contributed to the decline in support for EU institutions, particularly in European countries that suffered the most from the economic crisis (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014; Gomez, 2015; Verney & Katsikas, 2021). The introduction of strict measures in exchange for financial aid in Greece, Spain, and Portugal provoked intense opposition and mass protests (Busch et al., 2013; Real-Dato & Sojka, 2020). Furthermore, deepening inequalities within EU member states have negatively impacted trust in the EU (Lipps & Schraff, 2020).

The public perception of the EU's democracy also reflects the relationship between European institutions and citizens. The democratic deficit of the EU implies a lack of citizen participation and may lead to a legitimacy crisis (Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Hix, 2008). This topic has been analyzed in three dimensions: input, output, and throughput legitimacy (Cengiz, 2018; Hobolt, 2012; Jano, 2008; Schmidt, 2013, 2015). Firstly, input legitimacy derives from the bottom-up support of EU citizens. The EU, as a public sphere, should represent people at the European level, which is essential for achieving social justice and redistributive policies. However, few scholars argue that the EU has sufficient input legitimacy, as there is no EU demos equivalent to the national public (Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Majone, 2009; Nicolaïdis, 2013; Weiler, 1997). Secondly, output legitimacy reflects the effectiveness and performance of EU policies based on public acceptance of community norms and institutional authority. The legitimacy of the EU's policy is assessed through normative principles such as distributive justice and equity, as well as citizens' identity and interests (Follesdal & Hix 2006; Hurrelmann & DeBardeleben, 2009; Karp et al. 2003; Schmidt, 2015). Finally, throughput legitimacy depends on the inclusiveness and openness of governance processes to the public. If EU democracy lacks accountability and transparency at the institutional level, it cannot secure adequate responsiveness and public trust. If European citizens cannot participate in the decision-making process, public trust in the EU will be undermined (Schmidt, 2013, 2015). Ultimately, as the EU's policy domain expands into more specialized fields and the EU moves toward an ever-closer union, the democratic deficit inevitably rises.

In addition, recent discussions on the EU's democratic deficit are expanding to include the lack of democracy at the national level. The democratic deficit in EU member states may increase following an economic crisis. Recent studies have expanded the research areas of Euroscepticism by incorporating variables at the national level and have demonstrated that trust in domestic governments influences support for the EU. Trust in national institutions and trust in the EU tend to show a compensatory relationship. Even when domestic institutions function well, support for European institutions may still decline (Muñoz et al., 2011; Rohrschneider, 2002).

Furthermore, democracy at both the EU and national levels may collide rather than converge, creating a trilemma in achieving European, national, and local democracy simultaneously (Kelemen, 2017; Nicolaïdis & Youngs, 2014; Rodrik, 2011). Populism, which is spreading as a backlash against European integration, has also regressed democracy at the national level (Schmidt, 2015).

Research Hypothesis

Several factors can affect public opinions leading towards a more Eurosceptic direction. These factors encompass both political and economic dimensions, and they operate at both domestic and European levels. We develop the following hypotheses and examine them to identify the determinants of Eurosceptic trends in public opinion:

H1. Trust in the EU depends on how much European citizens are satisfied with democracy at the European level.

This hypothesis stems from the democratic deficit in EU politics and the increasing demand for “throughput legitimacy” as a condition for gaining more support for the EU’s operating system (Schmidt, 2013). The perception that EU institutions lack democratic accountability and transparency can erode trust. Therefore, greater satisfaction with the democratic processes within the EU is likely to enhance trust in EU institutions.

H2. Trust in the EU is affected by how much Europeans are satisfied with democracy at the level of their countries.

If people are satisfied with the way democracy functions in domestic politics, this may lead to higher trust in the EU system. Many studies argue that the rise of Eurosceptic attitudes is related to specific contexts in domestic politics. In this sense, trust in the EU (or European institutions) aligns with trust in domestic political institutions (Roth, 2009, 2011). Alternatively, this relationship may be oppositely formed if people perceive democracy at the European level as compensating for deficiencies at the domestic level. This means that dissatisfaction with national democracy could either increase or decrease trust in the EU, depending on whether citizens see the EU as an alternative or complementary democratic entity.

In addition to these two hypotheses on political factors, we assume that economic conditions contribute to the spread of Eurosceptic public opinions in many European countries:

H3. Deteriorating economic conditions in domestic economies are systematically correlated to the rising Eurosceptical sentiment in the EU.

Rising unemployment and declining purchasing power are closely related to the rise of Eurosceptic parties in national politics (Gomez, 2015). High unemployment and economic hardship create fertile ground for Eurosceptic parties, especially when these issues highlight problems related to EU governance, including the fragility of the single currency (Anderson & Hecht, 2014; Emanuele et al., 2016). Economic difficulties can prompt citizens to question the effectiveness of the EU’s economic policies and governance, which, in turn, may amplify Eurosceptic sentiment.

H4. Trust in the EU is positively correlated to the overall economic outlook of the EU.

Trust in the EU could increase when people expect the EU’s economic situation to improve. It is also reasonable to assume that the more citizens expect their economies to improve, the more confidence they have in the EU. A positive economic outlook can foster a sense of optimism and stability, which, in turn, enhances trust in EU institutions that play an increasingly important role in economic governance. This hypothesis suggests that improving economic conditions and positive future expectations are crucial for maintaining and building trust in the EU.

Empirical Analysis: Macro-level Analysis

Data and Model Specification

To test our hypotheses, we have analyzed the determinants of Euroscepticism using the indicator of ‘trust’ in the EU. This indicator is based on the proportion of European citizens who responded ‘tend to trust’ in the EU in the Eurobarometer surveys conducted across 28 EU member countries from 2004 to 2018.¹ The indicator ranges from 0 to 1.

We employed this indicator as the dependent variable and utilized the following groups of explanatory variables: (1) variables related to satisfaction with democracy at both the EU and national levels, (2) variables reflecting the quality of domestic institutions, (3) economic variables reflecting economic performance, and (4) variables representing future economic prospects.

First, for the variables related to democratic perception, we used the share of respondents who expressed satisfaction with democracy at both the EU and national levels. A lower proportion of respondents expressing satisfaction with the EU’s democracy may causally contribute to an increase in Eurosceptic public opinion. This variable serves as a proxy for the ‘democratic deficit’ in the EU’s decision-making system. Additionally, public perception of national democracy may be correlated with the level of support for the EU, although the direction of this correlation requires empirical verification. Drawing on Anderson (1998), a body of research suggests that perceptions of national political institutions are often reflected in attitudes toward EU institutions (Diez Medrano, 1995; Kritzinger, 2003; Rohrschneider, 2002). This perspective aligns with the ‘syndrome’ effect, which posits that trust or distrust in national and EU institutions tends to manifest similarly, as noted by Harteveld et al. (2013). However, other studies argue that satisfaction with democracy at the national and European levels can be compensational, indicating that high trust and satisfaction with national institutions may reduce support for the EU. When national standards are high, comparative evaluations may favor national institutions, resulting in lower levels of trust in EU institutions (Burgoon, 2009; Kritzinger, 2003; Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000). Conversely, lower national standards may lead to increased trust in European institutions (De Vreese et al., 2006, 2007; Peter, 2007).

Second, to reflect the level of domestic institutions, we used the governance indicators developed by the World Bank. These variables allow us to examine how institutional development levels, such as political stability and the rule of law, influence Eurosceptic sentiment. If these variables are positively correlated with trust in the EU, it suggests that Eurosceptic sentiment is influenced more by domestic factors rather than EU-related factors.

Third, for economic variables, we used the unemployment rate. As many studies argue, poor economic performance, such as a soaring unemployment rate, negatively affects support for governments and trust in the EU (Gomez, 2015; Kang & Oh, 2020). This relationship is particularly evident when economic downturns are associated with failures in the EU’s economic governance. Some studies indicate that rising income inequality can lead to increased Euroscepticism (Burgoon, 2013; Heidenreich & Wunder, 2008; Kuhn et al., 2016). This is especially relevant in the context of economic crises, where disparities in income distribution become more pronounced and can exacerbate public dissatisfaction. To test this argument and capture the impact of economic inequality on public attitudes towards the EU, we used the Gini coefficient as an explanatory variable.

Finally, our research investigates how individual perceptions of the economic outlook influence trust in the EU at a national level. A positive economic outlook can foster confidence and optimism among citizens, which may translate into higher trust in EU institutions. To verify this relationship, we used the proportion of respondents who provided a positive answer to the

Table 1. Variables and data: macro-level data

Item	Variables	Variable names	Source
Dependent variables	Share of respondents to tend to trust in the EU	<i>Trust_EU_{it}</i>	Eurobarometer
Independent variables			
Satisfaction with EU democracy	Share of respondents who answered 'very or fairly satisfied'	<i>EU_democracy_{it}</i>	Eurobarometer
	Share of respondents who answered 'not very or not at all satisfied'	<i>EU_democracy_def_{it}</i>	
Satisfaction with national democracy	Share of respondents who answered 'very or fairly satisfied'	<i>Nat_democracy_{it}</i>	
	Share of respondents who answered 'not very or not at all satisfied'	<i>Nat_democracy_def_{it}</i>	
Institutional development	Political stability	<i>Stability_{it}</i>	World Bank
	Voice and accountability	<i>Accountability_{it}</i>	
	Regulatory quality	<i>Regulation_{it}</i>	
	Government effectiveness	<i>Effectiveness_{it}</i>	
	Rule of law	<i>Law_{it}</i>	
Economic situation	Control of corruption	<i>Corruption_{it}</i>	Eurostat
	Unemployment rate	<i>Unemployment_{it}</i>	
Expectations for the year to come: share of respondent with positive answer	Gini coefficient	<i>Gini_{it}</i>	Eurobarometer
	Economic situation in our country	<i>Nat_eco_{it}</i>	
	Economic situation in the EU	<i>EU_eco_{it}</i>	
	Employment situation in our country	<i>Employment_{it}</i>	
	Financial situation of your household	<i>Household_{it}</i>	
	Your life in general	<i>Life_{it}</i>	
Your personal job situation	<i>Job_{it}</i>		

question about their future economic expectations. This variable helps capture the forward-looking aspect of economic sentiment, providing insights into how anticipated economic conditions shape public trust in the EU.

Based on Equation 1 below, we constructed two datasets: one for the analysis of macro-level (country) data and the other for testing micro-level (individual) data. For the empirical test at the macro-level, the dataset includes 31 periods (t). In the equation, the dependent variable is the proportion of respondents who declared that they 'tend to trust' in the EU. The independent variables are categorized into four groups to test the aforementioned hypotheses.

Equation 1:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Trust\ in\ EU_{it} = & c_1 + \\
 & c_2 \sum_{k=1}^l Democracy_{it} + c_3 \sum_{k=1}^m institutions_{it} + c_4 \sum_{k=1}^n Economics_{it} + \\
 & c_5 \sum_{k=1}^o Expectations_{it} + \mu_{it} \quad (\mu_{it} = \mu_i + \epsilon_{it})
 \end{aligned}$$

Note: *i* and *t* mean country and time, respectively. Log transformation is used.

Macro-Level Analysis: Results

We conducted both pooled ordinary least squares (OLS) estimations and fixed effect estimations. Table 2 summarizes the results of the OLS estimations. In this analysis, most variables report statistically significant coefficients, indicating robust findings.

Our results show that trust in the EU is positively correlated with satisfaction with EU democracy, while it is negatively associated with satisfaction with national democracy. This suggests that public trust in the EU tends to be higher in countries where citizens perceive a lower ‘democratic deficit’ within the EU. Conversely, higher satisfaction with national democracy is associated with lower public trust in the EU, indicating a compensational relationship between satisfaction with democracy at the two levels. Even when analyzing different groups of countries, satisfaction with EU-level democracy and national-level democracy were found to have coefficients in opposite directions. To check the robustness of this finding, we divided ‘satisfaction with EU democracy’ into ‘very satisfied’ and ‘fairly satisfied’ categories and conducted empirical tests. The results remained consistent. We also used the inverse variable, ‘unsatisfied with EU democracy’, and obtained consistent results, with a negative coefficient. For the institutional variables, we used six governance indicators developed by the World Bank: political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, control of corruption, and voice and accountability. Due to the high correlation among these indicators, which could cause multicollinearity issues, we included only one variable at a time in our models. Among these, political stability and accountability reported statistically significant coefficients, both positively associated with public trust in the EU. This suggests that countries with higher political stability and accountability tend to have higher levels of trust in the EU. Unemployment was also a significant variable in our analysis. It consistently reported statistically significant coefficients, supporting our hypothesis that economic decline negatively affects public trust in the EU. Model 4 of Table 2 shows that a 1% increase in the unemployment rate reduces the level of trust in the EU by 0.6%. This finding underscores the importance of economic performance in shaping public opinion about the EU. Interestingly, the Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality, had an unexpectedly positive coefficient. This unexpected result suggests a complex relationship between income inequality and trust in the EU that may need further investigation with more regional or individual data.

Our dataset includes six variables indicating future economic expectations at different levels (individual, national, and European). Among these, the expectations for a better economic situation for national and European economies reported statistically significant coefficients, although with different signs. Public trust in the EU increases when more people are optimistic about future economic prospects at the European level, while it declines if more people expect a better economic situation for their own countries. This phenomenon aligns with previous research findings that suggest member state variables and EU-related variables exhibit a compensatory relationship in macro-level empirical studies on Euroscepticism (Muñoz et al., 2011). In this context, the EU’s economic outlook is considered a more straightforward variable that causally affects trust in the EU.

Table 3 summarizes the results of the regression analysis with the country’s fixed effects. The estimation results are very similar to those obtained from the pooled OLS estimations. First, public trust in the EU is positively associated with satisfaction with the way democracy works in the EU and negatively associated with satisfaction with national democracy. Additionally, higher unemployment is associated with lower public trust in the EU. Notably, the absolute values of the coefficients are larger than those obtained from the pooled OLS estimations. For example, in Model 4 of Table 3, a 1% increase in the unemployment rate reduces trust in the EU by 1.4%.

This finding supports the observation that Eurosceptic public opinion rose in some southern European countries, where the unemployment rate was exceptionally high during the economic recession. Conversely, the regression analysis reveals that variables reflecting institutional quality lose their explanatory power in the estimations with fixed effects. This suggests that once country-specific characteristics are accounted for, the perceived quality of domestic institutions does not significantly influence trust in the EU. The variables representing economic perspectives report similar coefficients to those in the OLS estimations. However, an exception is the Gini coefficient, which loses its statistical significance. We also attempted to use the quintile indicator instead of the Gini coefficient, but similarly, the coefficient values lacked statistical significance or meaningfulness. One possible reason for this outcome is that both the Gini coefficient and the quintile indicator measured at the national level do not sensitively capture changes in economic inequality or are too abstract to reflect the nuances of economic disparity accurately. These findings suggest that while macroeconomic indicators like unemployment are robust predictors of Eurosceptic sentiment, measures of income inequality may require more granular data or alternative metrics to reveal their impact on public trust in the EU.

Table 2. Determinants of trust in the EU (Pooled OLS), Period: 2004–2018, 31 periods, EU 28

Variables	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)
<i>EU_democracy_{it}</i>	0.964*** (0.043)		0.992*** (0.045)	0.753*** (0.050)
<i>EU_democracy_def_{it}</i>		-0.727*** (0.035)		
<i>Nat_democracy_{it}</i>	-0.195*** (0.024)		-0.210*** (0.032)	-0.088*** (0.029)
<i>Nat_democracy_def_{it}</i>		0.066*** (0.023)		
<i>Stability_{it}</i>	0.040*** (0.010)	0.055*** (0.010)		0.046*** (0.010)
<i>Accountability_{it}</i>			0.027* (0.015)	
<i>Unemployment_{it}</i>	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)	-0.007*** (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.001)
<i>Gini_{it}</i>	0.002*** (0.000)	0.002*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.000)	0.002*** (0.000)
<i>EU_eco_{it}</i>				0.627** (0.084)
<i>Nat_eco_{it}</i>				-0.269*** (0.067)
Constant	-0.815*** (0.035)	-0.200*** (0.025)	-0.797*** (0.036)	-0.826*** (0.034)
Observations	486	486	486	426
R-squared	0.619	0.588	0.608	0.681

Standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Table 3. Determinants of trust in the EU (Pooled OLS), Period: 2004~2018, 31 periods, EU 28

Variables	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)
<i>EU_democry_{it}</i>	1.074*** (0.061)		1.051*** (0.061)	0.774*** (0.065)
<i>EU_democry_def_{it}</i>		-0.978*** (0.041)		
<i>Nat_democracy_{it}</i>	-0.274*** (0.058)		-0.279*** (0.058)	-0.158*** (0.058)
<i>Nat_democracy_def_{it}</i>		0.029 (0.027)		
<i>Stability_{it}</i>	-0.001 (0.012)	-0.002 (0.010)		-0.003 (0.012)
<i>Accountability_{it}</i>			0.049*** (0.017)	
<i>Unemployment_{it}</i>	-0.011*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.012*** (0.001)	-0.014*** (0.001)
<i>Gini_{it}</i>	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
<i>EU_eco_{it}</i>				0.572*** (0.072)
<i>Nat_eco_{it}</i>				-0.291*** (0.057)
Constant	-0.673*** (0.042)	0.019 (0.021)	-0.719*** (0.044)	-0.606*** (0.041)
Observations	28	28	28	28
Number of panels	0.621	0.698	0.628	0.649
R-squared	28	28	28	28

Standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Empirical Analysis: A Micro-level Analysis

Data and Model Specification

Our dataset for micro-level analysis is based on the Eurobarometer survey data, covering 28 EU countries from 2011 to 2019. This comprehensive dataset includes 16 surveys, ranging from Eurobarometer No. 76.3 (November 2011) to No. 91.2 (March 2019). For the micro-level analysis, we used the image of the EU as the dependent variable reflecting Eurosceptic attitudes, instead of the trust in the EU used in the macro-level analysis, due to data availability. Given that both indicators, trust in the EU and image of the EU, are commonly used as measures of Eurosceptic opinion, we believe this choice maintains coherence in selecting dependent variables. As summarized in Table 4, the models for empirical analysis include similar variables that

Table 4. Variables and data: micro-level data

Item	Variables	Variable names	Value
Dependent variables	Image of the EU	<i>Image_{ic}</i>	1~5
Independent variables			
Satisfaction with Democracy	EU democracy	<i>EU_democracy_{ic}</i>	1-4
	National democracy	<i>Nat_democracy_{ic}</i>	
	Life	<i>Life_{ic}</i>	
Personal status	Age	<i>Age_{ic}</i>	1-6
	Gender	<i>Gender_{ic}</i>	male=1, female=0
	Education	<i>Education_{ic}</i>	1-9
	Life	<i>Life_{ic}</i>	1-4
Direction of the country and EU	Direction of the EU	<i>EU_direction_{ic}</i>	1-2
	Direction of the country	<i>Nat_direction_{ic}</i>	
Profession	Student	<i>Student_{t_{ic}}</i>	Dummy variables, 1 or 0
	Unemployed	<i>Unemployed_{ic}</i>	
	Retired	<i>Retired_{ic}</i>	
	Farmer	<i>Farmer_{ic}</i>	
	Fisherman	<i>Fisherman_{ic}</i>	
	Specialized profession	<i>Specialist_{ic}</i>	
	Shop owner, craftsmen	<i>Owner_{ic}</i>	
	Skilled manual worker	<i>Skilled_{ic}</i>	
Unskilled manual worker	<i>Unskilled_{ic}</i>		

measure respondents' satisfaction with democracy at both the national and European levels, as well as their individual assessments of the directions their countries and the EU are heading. Additionally, the models incorporate variables reflecting individual characteristics, such as age, gender, education, and profession.

Equation 2:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Image of } EU_{ic} = & c_1 + \\
 & c_2 \sum_{k=1}^l \text{status}_{ic} + c_3 \sum_{k=1}^m \text{democracy}_{ic} + c_4 \sum_{k=1}^n \text{Direction}_{ic} + \\
 & c_5 \sum_{k=1}^o \text{profession}_{ic} + \mu_{ic} \quad (\mu_{ic} = \mu_i + \epsilon_{ic})
 \end{aligned}$$

Note: *i* and *t* mean country and time, respectively. Log transformation is used.

Micro-level Analysis: Results

Table 5 summarizes the regression results. Models 1 to 3 are based on pooled OLS analysis, while Models 4 to 6 use fixed effect estimations, considering country-specific effects. Both pooled and fixed effect analyses provide very similar results regarding the factors influencing the perception of the EU.

First, individual characteristics such as age, gender, and education levels clearly explain the positive or negative image respondents have of the EU. Younger individuals, males, and more educated citizens tend to have a positive image of the EU, indicating a less Eurosceptic attitude. These results are consistent with findings from other studies (Biancotti et al., 2017; Drakos et al., 2016 ; Van Elsas & Van Der Brug, 2015). This suggests that demographic factors play a crucial role in shaping public opinion about the EU. Younger and more educated individuals may have more opportunities to benefit from EU policies, such as educational exchange programs and the free movement of people, which could explain their more positive outlook.

Second, satisfaction with the way democracy works in the EU is the most pronounced single indicator associated with a positive image of the EU. Its coefficient is statistically significant and consistent with the overall regression model. Contrary to the macro-level analysis, satisfaction with democracy at the national level reports a positive coefficient, suggesting that satisfaction with democracy at both national and European levels aligns in the micro-level analysis, creating a 'congruence' relationship rather than the 'compensational' relationship observed in the macro-level analysis. Even when the analysis was divided into Western European countries (EU members before 2004) and Central and Eastern European countries (EU members after 2004), satisfaction with democracy at both levels was found to positively influence the image of the EU. The same results were obtained when various combinations of countries were analyzed to check robustness. This observation aligns with findings from previous studies conducted with pre-crisis data (Muñoz et al., 2011). This 'macro-micro puzzle' presents a challenge in interpreting the results. Some possible explanations lie in the composition of countries, survey framing, and aggregation bias. To begin with, there is significant variability in institutional trust across EU member states. In some countries, trust in EU institutions and national governments is positively correlated, while in others, low trust in national institutions is offset by higher trust in EU institutions.² This variability suggests that the relationship between national and EU trust may differ across countries (Harteveld et al., 2013). Additionally, the format of the Eurobarometer survey could influence response patterns. Given the extensive nature of the survey and the sequential positioning of questions regarding trust in EU institutions and national governments, respondents may provide similar answers without deep reflection. Scholars have noted that the framing of questions might inadvertently lead to integrationist outcomes, potentially skewing results (Brosius et al., 2020; Höpner & Jurczyk, 2015). Finally, aggregation bias is a critical factor to consider. As discussed by Sellin (1990), aggregation bias occurs when data from lower levels, such as individual responses, are aggregated to higher levels, such as national averages. This bias could represent an unexplored channel in the field of EU public policy that explains the discrepancies between macro-level and micro-level analyses, which might otherwise be misinterpreted as a paradox. Therefore, while the macro-micro puzzle offers one possible interpretation, exploring aggregation bias in the Eurobarometer survey could open new avenues for debate in future studies.

Third, individual perceptions of the direction in which their country and the EU are heading significantly influence their image of the EU. Individuals with positive views on the direction of both their country and the EU tend to have a favorable image of the EU. The perception at both levels, national and European, exhibits a 'congruence' relationship, similar to satisfaction with democracy at both levels. This indicates that individuals who are optimistic about the future trajectory of their country and the EU are more likely to trust and support EU institutions. Positive perceptions of future directions may reflect confidence in current policies and governance, leading to a more favorable view of the EU.

Fourth, several dummy variables reflecting professional status provide interesting insights into public opinion on the EU across different professions. Students and individuals with specialized

Table 5. Determinants of EU image, pooled and fixed-effect logit regression

	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)	Model (4)	Model (5)	Model (6)
EU democracy	0.320 ^{***} (0.002)	0.400 ^{***} (0.002)	0.320 ^{***} (0.002)	0.344 ^{***} (0.002)	0.286 ^{***} (0.002)	0.285 ^{***} (0.002)
National democracy	0.06 ^{***} (0.002)	0.074 ^{***} (0.002)	0.059 ^{***} (0.002)	0.146 ^{***} (0.002)	0.117 ^{***} (0.002)	0.116 ^{***} (0.002)
Age	-0.013 ^{***} (0.001)	-0.017 ^{***} (0.001)	-0.010 ^{***} (0.001)	-0.011 ^{***} (0.001)	-0.009 ^{***} (0.001)	-0.005 ^{***} (0.001)
Male	-0.016 ^{***} (0.002)	-0.008 ^{***} (0.002)	-0.013 ^{***} (0.002)	0.004(0.002)	-0.006 ^{***} (0.002)	-0.001(0.002)
Education	0.004 ^{***} (0.000)	0.005 ^{***} (0.000)	0.004 ^{***} (0.000)	0.004 ^{***} (0.000)	0.004 ^{***} (0.000)	0.004 ^{***} (0.000)
Life satisfaction	0.089 ^{***} (0.002)	0.105 ^{***} (0.002)	0.082 ^{***} (0.002)	0.175 ^{***} (0.002)	0.147 ^{***} (0.002)	0.139 ^{***} (0.002)
Direction of EU	0.535 ^{***} (0.003)		0.534 ^{***} (0.003)		0.467 ^{***} (0.003)	0.466 ^{***} (0.003)
Direction of country	0.048 ^{***} (0.003)		0.047 ^{***} (0.003)		0.066 ^{***} (0.003)	0.064 ^{***} (0.003)
Student			0.059 ^{***} (0.005)			0.056 ^{***} (0.005)
Unemployed			-0.091 ^{***} (0.005)			-0.079 ^{***} (0.005)
Retired			-0.015 ^{***} (0.004)			-0.020 ^{***} (0.004)
Farmer			-0.020(0.012)			-0.046 ^{***} (0.012)
Fisherman			-0.123 ^{***} (0.062)			-0.150 ^{***} (0.061)
Professional			0.061 ^{***} (0.010)			0.068 ^{***} (0.009)
Owner			-0.034 ^{***} (0.007)			-0.029 ^{***} (0.007)
Skilled			-0.038 ^{***} (0.004)			-0.072 ^{***} (0.004)
Unskilled			-0.064 ^{***} (0.007)			-0.070 ^{***} (0.007)
Constant	1.342 ^{***} (0.008)	1.153 ^{***} (0.008)	1.382 ^{***} (0.009)	0.792 ^{***} (0.009)	1.034 ^{***} (0.009)	1.074 ^{***} (0.009)
Observations	468,674	491,245	468,674	491,245	468,674	468,674
R-squared	0.280	0.209	0.282	0.217	0.275	0.277
Number of country			30	30	30	30

Standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

professions are more likely to have a positive image of the EU, while retirees, farmers, business owners, and both skilled and unskilled manual workers tend to have a negative perception of the EU. Many studies suggest that younger individuals are more pro-European because they benefit from the EU's free movement of people and Europe-wide student exchange programs. This indicates that individual perceptions of interests based on occupation significantly affect attitudes towards the EU and European integration projects. For example, specialized professionals and students may see more tangible benefits from EU policies in terms of career opportunities and educational experiences, while retirees and unskilled manual workers may feel more threatened by economic competition and regulatory changes associated with EU membership.

Conclusion

Euroscepticism is not a new concept. It manifests in various forms and has been present since the idea of creating an 'ever-closer union' was conceived. Whenever support for creating a more politically integrated union develops as a centripetal force, various forms of Euroscepticism emerge as significant centrifugal forces. This balance of forces is well reflected in the current institutional structure of the EU. However, some argue that the political and economic challenges the EU has faced over the past decade have caused a substantial shift toward Euroscepticism in many European nations. An example of this shift is the growing support for Eurosceptic parties in successive European elections. The EU has reached a decisive crossroads, as highlighted in the debates on its future (European Commission, 2017).

In this article, we proposed several hypotheses based on the political and economic perceptions of the EU and its member countries. First, we hypothesized that the more people are satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, the more they tend to trust the EU and have a favorable image of it. Second, we suggested that the evaluation of personal well-being and national economic performance can determine attitudes toward EU membership. Thus, citizens who have confidence in the economic future will positively view European integration, whereas those with a pessimistic outlook tend to have a more skeptical view of the EU. We tested our hypotheses using a comprehensive dataset at both the macro and micro levels. Both hypotheses were supported in regression models with various variable settings. The most critical factor affecting public support for the EU is people's satisfaction with the way representative democracy operates in the EU. This finding ties into the debate on the democratic deficit in EU politics. Increasing "throughput legitimacy" has been discussed as a condition for gaining more support for European institutions (Schmidt, 2013).

The rise in Euroscepticism in public debates has two significant consequences for both domestic and EU politics. First, as anti-EU discourses spread within general society, it becomes more likely that Eurosceptical parties will gain political ground in domestic elections. Although it is still improbable that any party with strong Euroscepticism will form a single-party government due to the inability to secure a majority of seats in national parliaments, there are many cases where these parties can join coalition governments or compete with mainstream parties—particularly right-wing and conservative parties—to win votes from former supporters of the main parties. This political phenomenon could make the stance of the concerned member countries less supportive of various European agendas. These less supportive positions can influence the EU decision-making process through discussions and decisions in the Council of the EU, which has the ultimate say on many important issues. Second, Eurosceptical parties have been securing an increasing number of seats in the European Parliament and are performing much better than they used to in domestic elections. In the context where the EU has endeavored to reform many areas

under its supervision, securing support from members of the European Parliament is crucial. The growing influence of Eurosceptical parties poses a challenge to these reform efforts, potentially affecting the EU's ability to implement and sustain its policies effectively.

Enhancing the democratic legitimacy of the EU is essential for addressing Euroscepticism. For the many reform agendas that the EU has presented so far to be successful, it is crucial to improve the general perception that ordinary citizens have of the EU and its operating system. It is necessary to involve more citizens in the decision-making process, as well as consolidate the political role of the European Parliament. The EU should also invite diverse civil society actors to participate in policy-making discourse, creating a more visible European public sphere. On the economic front, achieving broad economic recovery and sustained growth is essential for job creation and maintaining the purchasing power of ordinary citizens. Economic growth will foster more favorable conditions for public support of European projects and trust in European institutions.

Main implication of this study is that Euroscepticism is closely linked to dissatisfaction with domestic politics. At the individual level, the more dissatisfied people are with domestic democracy, the stronger their Eurosceptic tendencies become. This phenomenon can be observed in the European Parliament elections in many countries, where dissatisfaction with domestic politics leads to an increase in the vote share of Eurosceptic parties. More generally, several studies have found a positive correlation between trust in government and support for specific policies. Issues of trust in government are particularly relevant when the policy under consideration carries risks, and it is unclear whether the benefits will outweigh the losses (Hetherington, 2005 ; Macdonald, 2024; Ryan et al., 2022). Applying these general principles, trust in government influences the government's compliance with EU policies., trust in government influences the government's compliance with EU policies. In this sense, a link is established between domestic democracy and preference for or scepticism toward the EU. Under the EU system, when pursuing reform policies that are unpopular in the short term but aim to provide benefits in the mid- to long-term, the alignment with the relevant member state's policies is crucial, and this alignment stems from trust in the government (Crum, 2018; Krelinger, 2016). Based on data from the 2010s, this study provides a theoretical and empirical basis for further research, given that the phenomenon of Euroscepticism in the domestic politics of EU member states continues in the 2020s.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest. (If there are conflicts of interest, list them in detail, specifying the nature of the conflict and the involved parties.)

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Notes

1. Would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it, or tend to not trust it.
2. We checked the correlations of answers to paired questions at the micro-level about satisfaction with democracy at the EU and domestic levels, and found a relatively high correlation coefficient of 0.50, with country-specific variations ranging from 0.31 to 0.77. The correlation coefficients are relative low in Hungary (0.39) and Romania (0.31) and high in Spain (0.77), Ireland (0.73) and France (0.71).

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Statistical description of macro-level data

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Trust_EU _{it}	799	0.464247	0.120489	0.130693	0.744071
EU_democracy _{it}	615	0.505246	0.104028	0.156638	0.757448
EU_democracy_def _{it}	615	0.382242	0.122834	0.115279	0.774598
Nat_democracy _{it}	614	0.527351	0.209017	0.131345	0.998392
Nat_democracy_def _{it}	614	0.483333	0.207553	0.113328	0.996938
Stability _{it}	812	0.827293	0.488922	-0.98695	1.97984
Accountability _{it}	812	1.194204	0.369105	0.299219	1.97569
Regulation _{it}	812	1.264003	0.446995	-0.41146	2.47448
Law _{it}	812	1.171563	0.671438	-0.98473	2.96355
Effectiveness _{it}	812	1.188589	0.644156	-0.75428	2.989345
Corruption _{it}	812	1.088999	0.830947	-0.99498	2.9897
Unemployment _{it}	868	8.809677	4.316295	2	27.7
gini _{it}	751	28.01398	7.737916	3	39.8
EU_eco _{it}	664	0.217293	0.076261	0.042	0.455868
Nat_eco _{it}	842	0.222861	0.090224	0.042871	0.607178

Appendix 2. Correlation matrix of macro-level data

	<i>Trust_EU_{it}</i>	<i>EU_democracy_{it}</i>	<i>EU_democracy_def_{it}</i>	<i>Nat_democracy_{it}</i>	<i>Nat_democracy_def_{it}</i>	<i>Stability_{it}</i>	<i>Accountability_{it}</i>	<i>Unemployment_{it}</i>	<i>Gini_{it}</i>	<i>EU_eco_{it}</i>	<i>Nat_eco_{it}</i>
<i>Trust_EU_{it}</i>	1										
<i>EU_democracy_{it}</i>	0.7128	1									
<i>EU_democracy_def_{it}</i>	0.1351	0.4504	1								
<i>Nat_democracy_{it}</i>	-0.7367	-0.8412	-0.2123	1							
<i>Nat_democracy_def_{it}</i>	-0.0618	-0.3385	-0.8391	0.1677	1						
<i>Stability_{it}</i>	0.2641	0.3658	0.5062	-0.2046	-0.4701	1					
<i>Accountability_{it}</i>	-0.1462	0.0649	0.6881	0.1507	-0.6058	0.4535	1				
<i>Unemployment_{it}</i>	-0.4026	-0.5073	-0.5608	0.4486	0.5232	-0.505	-0.2415	1			
<i>Gini_{it}</i>	0.0448	-0.192	-0.2823	0.0921	0.2882	-0.321	-0.2682	0.1513	1		
<i>EU_eco_{it}</i>	0.4858	0.326	-0.1481	-0.4377	0.1553	-0.0535	-0.2767	0.0159	0.1573	1	
<i>Nat_eco_{it}</i>	0.2313	0.2758	0.3799	-0.2628	-0.316	0.213	0.1856	-0.2326	0.0416	0.6007	1