Mixed feelings:

Britons' conflicted attitudes to the EU before the referendum

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policy network paper

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Summary

Euroscepticism will weigh heavily in the UK's referendum debate on EU membership, but do we know exactly what we are talking about? Beyond general assertions, it is necessary to understand the sources, patterns and effects of Euroscepticism among the British people. This paper aims to provide a detailed picture of how Britons think about the EU based on an online survey conducted two weeks before the 2015 general election. It shows that there is significant variation in UK support for different EU policies. Beyond economic calculations, emotions also form a key component of people's attitudes towards the EU.

About the Author

Sofia Vasilopoulou is a lecturer at the Department of Politics at the University of York. Her work examines the theme of political dissatisfaction with democracy and democratic institutions across Europe. Topics include Euroscepticism, the far right, and the EU's democratic legitimacy. Her work appears in the European Journal of Political Research, Journal of Common Market Studies, Journal of European Public Policy, Government and Opposition, Nations and Nationalism, South European Society and Politics, among others. She is the co-author of The Golden Dawn's Nationalist Solution: Explaining the Rise of the Far Right in Greece (Palgrave 2015). She has been awarded support from The UK in a Changing Europe Commissioning Fund to run a series of public engagement events on the impact of Euroscepticism on UK national politics.

Introduction: More entangled and less attached

The victory of the Conservatives in the 2015 UK parliamentary election has paved the way for a referendum on the UK's EU membership by 2017. British prime minister David Cameron has a mandate to hold the referendum on the question of whether Britain should remain a member of the EU. Prior to the referendum, Cameron is expected to renegotiate the UK's place in the EU on a number of key issues, which include giving greater powers to national parliaments, cutting red tape, an opt-out for Britain from the principle of ever-closer union, and restrictions to welfare entitlements of EU migrants.

Britain's place in the EU is now one of the most important questions in British politics. The result of this referendum will determine not only Britain's future in the EU but also its international status more broadly. Given the nature of this type of public consultation, the debate has been structured in binary terms: should the UK stay in or leave the EU? Discussions have taken a predominantly economic angle, focusing on an economic cost-benefit analysis of the country's EU membership. Specific debates relate to the cost of red tape and regulation to UK businesses, and the financial impact of EU migration on the welfare state and ultimately UK political independence. Other important issues, however, such as the role of public opinion, have not yet entered the UK political debate. What are the different aspects of UK citizens' attitudes towards the EU? What are the sources of UK Euroscepticism? What type of renegotiation do UK citizens want?

This paper revisits the debate on British attitudes towards the EU. Going beyond existing evaluations of public attitudes, which focus on the EU project in general terms, this paper examines public opinion on specific policy areas and from a socio-demographic perspective. Using data from an original survey of 3000 respondents conducted two weeks prior to the 2015 general election, it provides a nuanced picture of British public opinion on the EU.

Findings indicate that there is great variation not only on the level of power that Britons want to give to the EU but also in their support for specific policy areas. Somewhat against expectation, there is a substantive section of the population that supports a greater role for the EU in all EU policy areas. About a quarter of respondents on average also neither agree nor disagree with the statement that the EU should have more authority over the EU member states in specific policy areas, which suggests that they are broadly happy with the current levels of integration. The British public tends to support a greater role for the EU in policies that are perceived to be optimal for all countries involved, such as trade and the digital economy. They also support integration in policies such as environment and climate change, which by their nature require international cooperation. They tend to oppose further integration in social policies, such as labour market, employment and social affairs, education and health, as well as economic and monetary policies, which are perceived to belong to the realm of the nation state.

Britons are reluctant to support policies that entail a level of redistribution across the EU that goes beyond traditional EU funding, such as EU citizens' right to work and access to the welfare state of another EU country. This is problematic as opposition to free labour movement infringes upon a fundamental EU principle. Changing this may require a full EU treaty change, which is unlikely to occur by 2017. Consistent with previous research, opposition to EU citizens' right to work in another EU country derives primarily from older, less educated and working-class citizens, who may feel threatened by such mobility. UK Independence party and Conservative party supporters tend to be less supportive of free movement of labour within the EU.

Britons tend to have a utilitarian perspective on their country's EU membership as they support policies where no one is perceived to be worse off as a result of European integration, and they tend to agree that Britain has benefited from being a member of the EU. Yet, the EU also provokes emotive reactions among British citizens, which range from uneasiness to hopefulness and to indifference. This suggests that there is a clash between interest-based rational thinking and emotional attitudes to Britain's EU membership. Beyond economic calculations, emotional reactions may be central to determining the outcome of the forthcoming referendum.

The paper starts with a historical overview of British attitudes to European integration. It proceeds with an analysis of the British public's attitudes on specific EU policy areas as well as their emotional reactions towards the country's EU membership. It then provides an in-depth focus on Britons' attitudes towards EU migration, including EU citizens' right to work and access the welfare state of another EU country. It ends with some concluding remarks on the relevance of these attitudes to the referendum debate.
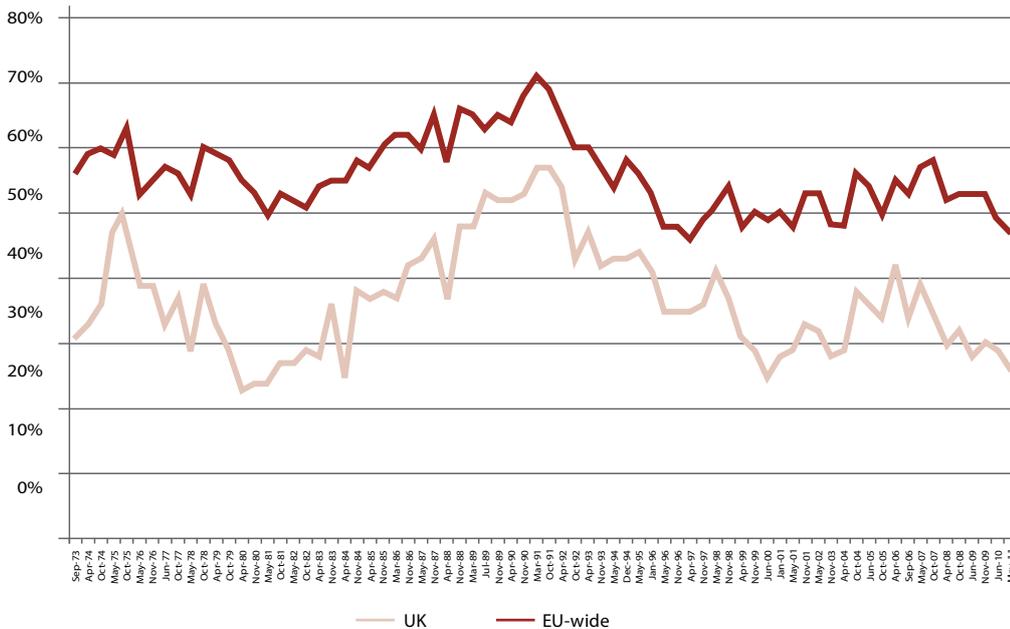
British Euroscepticism in retrospect

The debate over Britain's relationship with the EU is not new. It has been a persistent feature of British politics since the end of the second world war.[1] Britain has been historically characterised as the "awkward partner" in Europe.[2] Disagreements over the country's European Community membership resulted in a referendum in 1975 on the question "Do you think the UK should stay in the European Community (Common Market)?" when 67 per cent of Britons voted in favour. Despite this result, Euroscepticism continued to play a significant role in British politics. Political parties found it hard to unite and develop a stable policy commitment to European integration. This is also mirrored in public opinion. Figure 1 reveals persistent high levels of Euroscepticism with a degree of fluctuation over time. Support for membership was high at 50 per cent in 1975, coinciding with the referendum. It dropped in the late 1970s and then rose consistently from the early 1980s onwards. It reached a peak in 1991 at 57 per cent prior to the signing of the Maastricht treaty, which established the EU. Since then support has been deteriorating with a small fluctuation in the mid-2000s during the debate over the ratification of the EU constitution. The lowest levels of support have been recorded in 1980 at 23 per cent, followed by 1984 and 2000 at 25 per cent and 2011 at 26 per cent.

British support for membership is not only low in its own terms but has also been persistently lower than the EU average. Positive evaluations of British membership have been on average 19 percentage points lower than EU-wide support. The widest gap was reported in April 1980 – about a year after Margaret Thatcher became prime minister – when 32 per cent less Britons thought that their country's membership was a good thing compared to the community-wide average. The smallest gap, 10 per cent, was reported in May 1998.

1. Baker, D., Gamble, A., Randall, N. and Seawright D. (2008) Euroscepticism in the British Party System: 'A Source of Fascination, Perplexity, and Sometimes Frustration, in Szczerbiak, A. and Taggart, P. (eds.) Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism, Volume 1, Case Studies and Country Surveys. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2. George, S. (1998) An awkward partner: Britain in the European Community, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 3rd edition.

Figure 1: UK and EU-wide support for membership of the European Union, 1973–2011

Source: Eurobarometer.

The sources of UK Euroscepticism

When examining the sources of British Euroscepticism one must be cautious about appealing to British 'exceptionalism'.[3] Nevertheless, there are three interrelated features of British society that have been associated with Britons' negative evaluation of European integration. First, British Euroscepticism may be understood as related to the country's historical experiences. Britain is an island nation geographically separate from the European continent. Unlike other European states, Britain did not experience a break with its parliamentary tradition during the war years; in fact Britain emerged as the winner from the second world war. This came to symbolise "Britain's independence, liberty, and democratic evolution",[4] reinforced a feeling of 'otherness', and reduced the functional need for cooperation as a means of avoiding war.[5] Its historical ties to the Commonwealth and its special relationship with the US also created a feeling of kinship with English-speaking peoples seen as culturally closer.[6] Second, the British political system and its majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system are associated with an adversarial political culture, which does not resemble the more consensual style of EU politics premised upon negotiation and compromise.[7] The parliamentary sovereignty principle of the UK constitution makes the parliament the ultimate legal authority in the UK. As such, ceding authority to EU supranational institutions goes against this very principle. Third, Britain belongs to the Anglo-Saxon model of welfare capitalism, which relies on a weak state, low taxation and limited regulation. The EU is portrayed as embodying the continental model of dirigisme and state involvement, which is fundamentally different to the UK model. Britain's commitment to a weak state, an open market and a free international economy is perceived as fundamentally different to the EU model of governance.[8] The country's strong trade links with the English-speaking world also reinforce the idea of Britain as a global nation.[9]

These cultural, political and economic conditions have served to reinforce British Euroscepticism. The eurozone crisis, which has revealed the need for economic redistribution across the EU, has further undermined British support for political integration. The image of the EU has been severely compromised as a result of the crisis (figure 2). Over 30 per cent of Britons have had a negative image of the EU since the early 2000s, with this number reaching the highest value at 49 per cent in 2011. Since then, however, less Britons have a negative image of the EU, reducing the gap with the EU-wide average at 10 percentage points.

3. Eg see: Buller, J. (1995) Britain as an awkward partner: Reassessing Britain's relations with the EU, Politics, 15(1): 33-42. Garton Ash, T. (2001) Is Britain European?, International Affairs, 77(1): 1-13.

4. Baker, D., Gamble, A., Randall, N. and Seawright D. (2008) Euroscepticism in the British Party System: 'A Source of Fascination, Perplexity, and Sometimes Frustration', in Szczerbiak, A. and Taggart, P. (eds.) Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism, Volume 1, Case Studies and Country Surveys. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 110.

5. Spiering, M. (2004) British Euroscepticism, in Harmsen, R. & Spiering, M. (eds.) Euroscepticism: Party politics, national identity and European integration, Amsterdam: Rodopi.

6. George, S. (2000) Britain: Anatomy of a Eurosceptic state, Journal of European Integration, 22(1): 15-33.

7. Wallace, W. (1996) What price independence? Sovereignty and interdependence in British politics, International Affairs, 62(3): 367-389.

Spiering, M. (2004) British Euroscepticism, in Harmsen, R. & Spiering, M. (eds.) Euroscepticism: Party politics, national identity and European integration, Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Baker, D., Gamble, A., Randall, N. and Seawright D. (2008) Euroscepticism in the British Party System: 'A Source of Fascination, Perplexity, and Sometimes Frustration, in Szczerbiak, A. and Taggart, P. (eds.) Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism, Volume 1, Case Studies and Country Surveys. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

8. Wallace, W. (1996) What price independence? Sovereignty and interdependence in British politics, International Affairs, 62(3): 367-389.

9. Baker, D., Gamble, A., Randall, N. and Seawright D. (2008) Euroscepticism in the British Party System: 'A Source of Fascination, Perplexity, and Sometimes Frustration, in Szczerbiak, A. and Taggart, P. (eds.) Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism, Volume 1, Case Studies and Country Surveys. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Figure 2: Image of the EU, UK and EU-wide average compared, 2003-2014
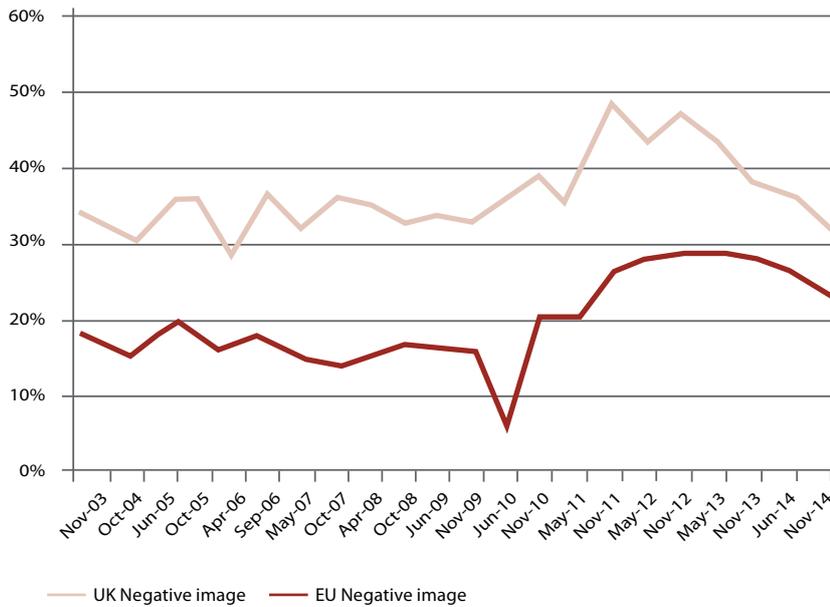
Source: Eurobarometer.

The political salience of the EU

But how important is the issue of Europe in the hearts and minds of Britons? Do historically low levels of support for the EU project imply low importance? A popular and journalistic contention is that the question of Europe ranks very low in the issue priorities of Britons. Figure 3 shows that – despite overtime volatility – concern with Europe as a political issue features in public evaluations. Nineteen per cent of Britons thought that Europe was the most important issue facing the country in September 1974, about half a year prior to the 1975 referendum. The issue of Europe became very low in importance in the 1980s; but from the end of the decade onwards we observed a trend towards high political salience, coinciding with discussions over Britain's participation in the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. This number reached its first peak in November 1991 – only a few months prior to the signing of the Maastricht treaty in February 1992 – when 32 per cent of Britons thought that Europe was the most important issue in British politics. The high salience of Europe in 1991 also coincides with the highest levels of British support for EU membership (see figure 1).

On average, Europe was most salient as political issue in the 1990s when about 17 per cent of Britons thought that Europe was the most important issue facing the country (see table 1). This coincided with the founding of two Eurosceptic parties. First, Ukip was established in 1993 as a single-issue Eurosceptic party with the aim of securing Britain's withdrawal from the EU.[10] Its success at politicising the EU was manifested in its electoral support during the 1999 European parliament elections – the first elections held under a party list electoral system – when it gained 6.52 per cent of the vote translating to three seats in the European parliament. Second, the Referendum party was founded in 1994 also putting forward an explicit Eurosceptic agenda, calling for a referendum on Europe.[11] The party came fourth in terms of votes in the 1997 general election, but due to the first-past-the-post electoral system did not gain any seats. Its comparative success, however, indicates that public concern about Europe played a part in the 1997 general election. This also suggests that British public opinion responds to elite cues. Not only did British support for membership sharply deteriorate during the 1990s (see figure 1) but also the question of Europe became much more prominent among the British public.

10. Usherwood, S. (2008) The dilemmas of a single-issue party: The UK Independence Party, Representation, 44(3): 255-264.

11. Heath, A., Jowell, R., Taylor, B. and Thomson, K. (1998) Euroscepticism and the referendum party, British Elections & Parties Review, 8(1): 95-110.

Table 1: Average percentage feeling that Europe is an important issue per decade

Decade	Average %
1974-1979	12.2
1980-1989	4.63
1990-1999	17.14
2000-2009	9.18
2010-2015	5.97

Source: www.ipsos-mori.com

Figure 3: Percentage feeling that Europe is an important issue 1974-2015
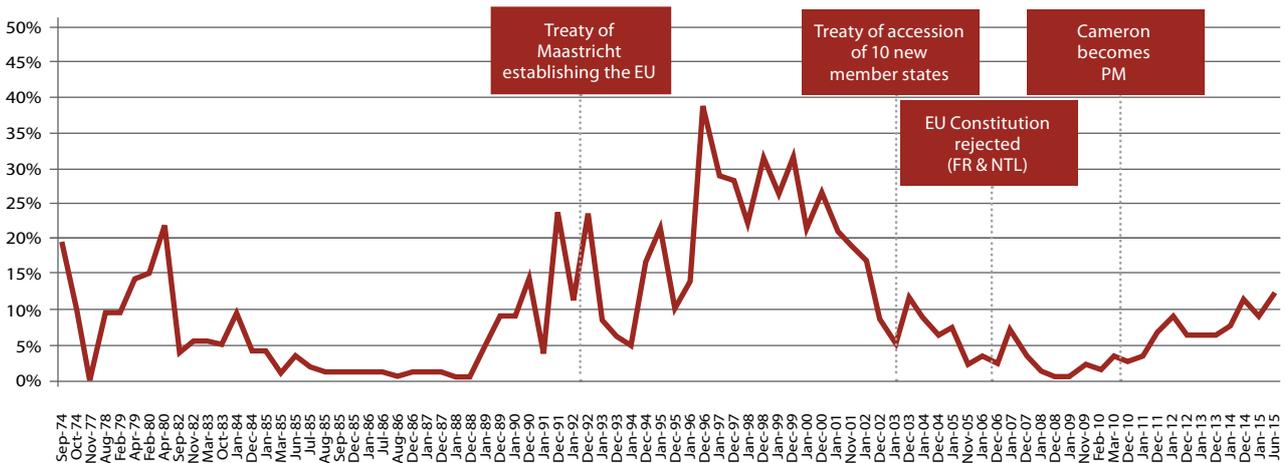
Source: www.ipsos-mori.com

In the 2000s and 2010s the importance of Europe decreased compared to the 1990s. Moments of sharp but short-lived rise were observed in 2003 when the treaty of accession between the EU and 10 countries was signed, in 2004 around the enlargement period, and in 2005 when France and the Netherlands rejected ratification of the EU constitution. Since then Europe's importance has been on average much lower. Interestingly Europe has been slowly gaining importance from the end of the 2010s onwards, coinciding with Cameron becoming prime minister and Ukip's high levels of success in the 2009 and 2014 European parliament elections, when it came second and first in the polls respectively. In June 2015, a few weeks following the 2015 general election, 13 per cent of Britons thought that Europe was the most important issue in British politics. In fact, the UK's EU membership and its negotiating position were central to all parties' pre-electoral campaigns, given that Cameron had promised to hold a referendum on the issue if he was re-elected to office. The question of Europe featured prominently in the leaders' election TV debate as one of the key election issues, especially related to the issue of immigration and negotiating freedom of movement within the EU. This centrality of Europe in the public debate owes a lot to Ukip's claim that Britain is not able to freely control immigration as EU member.[12] Also, immigration has consistently been among the most salient issues since 2010.[13]
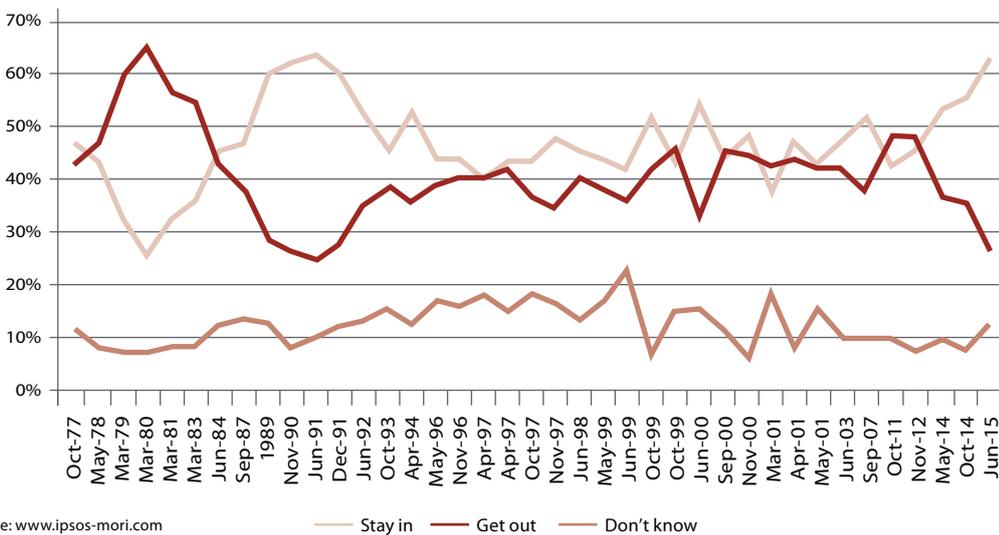
The in-out question

Cameron's decision to hold an in-out referendum if re-elected was announced in early 2017. Yet, survey questions asking the British public what they would vote "if there were a referendum now on whether Britain should stay in or get out of the European Union" have been regular since the 1970s. Despite low levels of support for the EU as indicated above, trend polling suggests that when Britons are faced with the in-out dilemma, they have not been unequivocally in favour of their country's withdrawal from the EU. Figure 4 shows that support for remaining in the community was the highest during the 1989-92 period. From 1993 onwards, support for remaining in the EU has been volatile, which suggests that Britons are continuously changing their mind about the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership. From 2011 onwards, the percentage of Britons who want to stay in the EU is rising, and the gap between the two camps is widening. Interestingly from the end of 2011 onwards the percentage of Britons who have a negative image of the EU has been steadily decreasing (see figure 2). It is noteworthy that about 10 per cent of the population do not know what they would vote if a referendum was held on British EU membership. This points to the significance of the 'undecided voters' who are likely to influence the referendum's outcome beyond predictions, as it is unclear how they would vote on the polling day.

Figure 4: If there were a referendum now on whether Britain should stay in or get out of the European Union, how would you vote? 1977-2015

Source: www.ipsos-mori.com — Stay in — Get out — Don't know

Before the referendum: what do Britons want from the EU?

Going beyond the general in-out question, we should also explore public attitudes on specific policy areas. Over the past decades, the EU has enlarged to include 28 member states and has expanded its jurisdictional authority over a number of key policy areas, including market regulation, education, foreign policy, defence, citizenship, development, trade, and social policy. Decisions taken at the EU level are highly significant because they impact upon national policymaking. The complexity of the EU system and the fact that EU policies spread over the overwhelming majority of national public policy entails that attitudes towards the EU may also be complex and multifaceted.[14] It is thus conceivable that citizens may have different attitudinal orientations towards different policy areas. For example, based on individuals' positioning on the left-right dimension, their educational level, their occupation status and so on, they may support or oppose giving more authority to the EU in different areas of public policy. It is also possible that citizens find the current levels of EU cooperation acceptable and do not wish for either less or more integration.

14. Eg see: Boomgaarden, H., Schuck, A., Elenbaas, M. and de Vreese, C. (2011) Mapping EU attitudes: Conceptual and empirical dimensions of Euroscepticism and EU support, European Union Politics, 12(2): 241–266.

When British citizens evaluate their country's EU membership, which EU policies do they oppose or support? Are there any EU policies in which Britons want to see more integration? To answer this question, this paper relies on data collected from an original survey of 3000 respondents conducted two weeks prior to the 2015 general election.[15] We recruited participants from a sample of citizens, which is representative in terms of gender, age and region. We asked them a number of questions related to their general EU orientation, their perceived benefit from their country's EU membership, and their views on specific policies.

Overall, more people think that integration has gone too far compared to those who feel that it should go further (figure 5). Interestingly this question provokes strong reactions among some respondents, as 17 per cent of our sample is situated on the negative extreme of this scale feeling that integration of Europe has gone too far. This indicates that a section of the population has very strong negative feelings on Europe, and presumably is unlikely to be convinced otherwise. Two more points are worth noting. First, citizens seem to be happy with the current levels of EU integration: a quarter of our sample thought that levels of integration are about right. Second, about a quarter of respondents think that European integration should be pushed further, which suggests that a significant number of Britons are strongly committed to the EU.

An examination of citizen responses to the question of whether the UK has greatly benefited from being a member of the EU reveals strong utilitarian support for European integration. The majority of respondents agree with this statement (41 per cent) and a quarter of them "neither agree or disagree" (figure 6). This suggests that when it comes to a cost-benefit analysis of EU integration, most Britons accept that EU membership has generally benefited the UK.

Figure 5: Some say European integration should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. To express your views use a scale from 1 to 11, where 1 means that the integration of Europe has already gone too far and 11 means that European integration should be pushed further. Which of the numbers on this scale best describes your position?
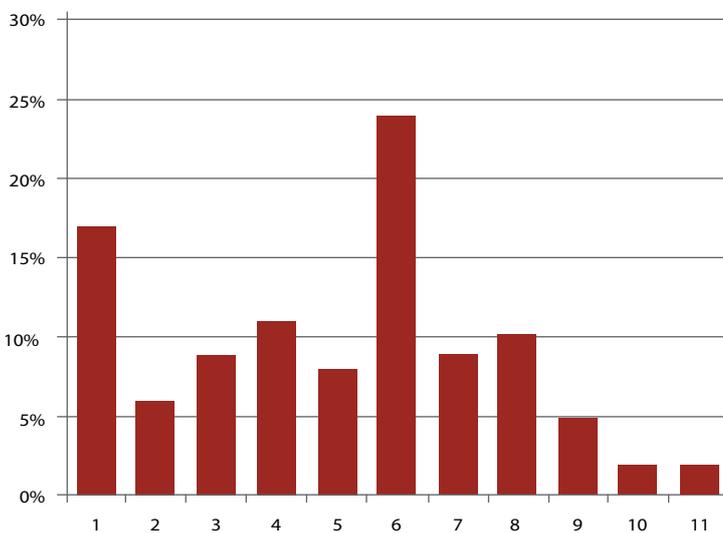
Source: Data from original survey of 3000 respondents conducted in the period 23/04/2015-05/05/2015,

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Figure 6: The UK has greatly benefited from being a member of the EU
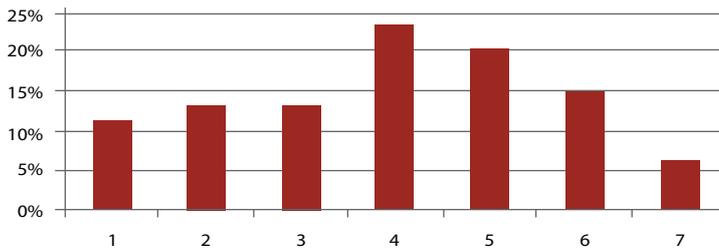
(1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree)

Source: Data from original survey of 3000 respondents conducted in the period 23/04/2015-05/05/2015,
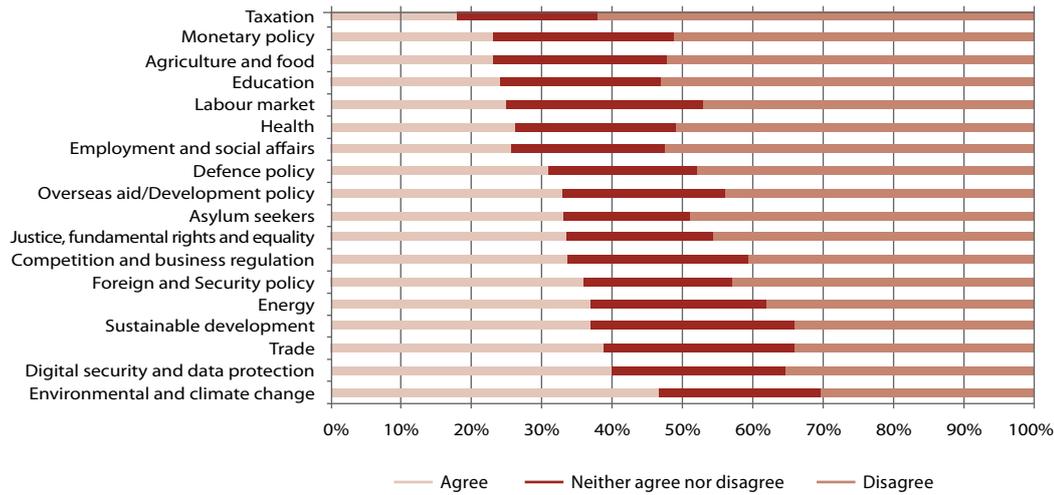
© Sofia Vasilopoulou and John Bone, University of York.

A closer look on respondents' support for a greater role for the EU in specific policy areas reveals a great degree of variation (figure 7). Disagreement with giving more power to the EU tends to be higher on average with taxation provoking the most disagreement at 62 per cent followed by education and employment and social affairs jointly at 53 per cent. But a significant number of Britons are happy to see more integration in all EU policy areas. This number ranges from the highest in environment and climate change at 47 per cent to the lowest in taxation at 18 per cent, and monetary policy and agriculture and food at 23 per cent. Crucially, a substantive percentage of respondents neither agree nor disagree with the statement that the EU should have more authority over the EU member states in specific policy areas, which suggests that they are broadly happy with the current levels of integration. This number varies from the highest in sustainable development at 29 per cent to the lowest in asylum seekers at 18 per cent.

There is great variation not only in terms of how much authority Britons want to give to the EU but also in which policy they want to do so. The British public tends to be more Eurosceptic when it comes to social policies, such as relating to the labour market, employment and social affairs, education and health. Interestingly in all these policies decision-making responsibility lies primarily with member states. In employment and social affairs, the EU has an arm's length role; but legislation related to workers' rights (eg the working time directive) has been controversial. Opposition to economic and monetary policy is linked to the euro. Britain has already negotiated an opt-out in this area. The EU does not have a direct role in taxation when it comes to tax collection and spending; but again this is a hotly contested issue especially among eurozone members. Interestingly, Britons do not wish to give more power to the EU in the area of agriculture and food. This possibly relates to the historical disagreements with the common agricultural policy, which in the UK has been perceived as benefiting the French and was a key trigger of Thatcher's rebate in the 1980s.

In other areas, however, such as digital protection, environment and climate change, sustainable development, trade, and, to a lesser extent, energy, British citizens wish to see more EU integration. Free trade among EU member states is one of the EU's founding principles. The EU also negotiates agreements with a range of partners worldwide. This sits well within British support for economic openness and free international trade. Support for the digital economy also relates to trade. This is a relatively new policy area that has the potential to transform Europe's industries by reducing barriers to online goods and services. In this sense, no one is perceived to be worse off as a result of this policy. Other policy areas such as the environment and sustainable development require cross-border cooperation in order to ensure the wellbeing of citizens and to address global challenges. Given the EU's role as a pioneer in environmental standards, the UK could benefit from further integration in this policy area. The electorate is divided on energy policy with about the same number of individuals disagreeing and agreeing with the statement that EU should have more authority over the member states in this policy area.

Figure 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the EU should have more authority over the EU member states in the following policy areas
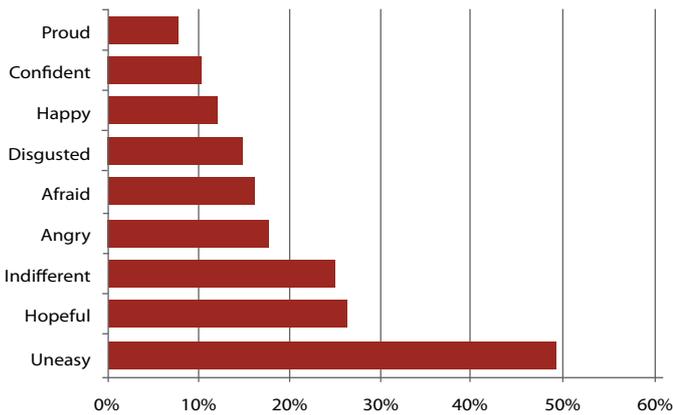

Source: Data from original survey of 3000 respondents conducted in the period 23/04/2015-05/05/2015,

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Beyond attitudes to specific policies, we also asked respondents which words describe their feelings about Britain's membership of the EU. Survey participants were invited to choose up to four words from a selection, which included four positive words (happy, hopeful, confident, proud), four negative words (angry, disgusted, uneasy, afraid) and one word indicating indifference. Findings suggest that emotions form a key component of people's attitudes towards the EU and British membership of it (figure 8). Not only do British citizens differ in terms of their attitudes towards EU integration, but also in terms of their emotional reactions vis-à-vis their country's EU membership. When asked to describe their feelings about Britain's membership of the EU, almost half of respondents reported that they felt uneasy about it. Other negative emotions that the EU provokes are anger (18 per cent), fear (16 per cent) and disgust (15 per cent). This suggests that negative political campaigns and particularly those which intend to tap into people's emotions are likely to be successful in persuading people against Britain's EU membership. Emotiveness can play a major role in the run-up to the referendum, as it can be strategically exploited by Eurosceptic actors. Quite strikingly, a quarter also feels indifferent, which indicates that this pool of voters may not turn out to vote; or if they do turn out to vote, they might decide how to vote quite late. In addition, although on average the EU provokes less positive emotions, data suggest that a quarter of the respondents feel hopeful about Britain's membership of the EU. This indicates that there might be scope for pro-EU actors to also tap into people's emotions by showing the importance of British EU membership and the economic benefits that derive from it.

Figure 8: Which, if any, of the following words describe your feelings about Britain's membership of the EU (choose up to four words)

Source: Data from original survey of 3000 respondents conducted in the period 23/04/2015-05/05/2015,

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Special focus: Immigration, Welfare and the EU

According to the latest Eurobarometer survey, the most important issue facing both Britain and the EU at the moment is immigration, with over a third of Britons ranking it first (35 per cent and 36 per cent respectively).[16] This is a key issue that relates not only to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean but also to the British domestic debate on intra-EU migration. The latter forms one of the agenda items in Cameron's renegotiation agenda. The prime minister has claimed that he wants to see EU migration curbed and to reduce EU migrants' ability to access the British welfare state.[17] Given the current prominence of this issue in British politics, this section unpacks the public's views on redistribution and welfare across the EU. It does so by examining people's levels of agreement with three statements that relate to redistribution across the EU, EU citizens' right to work and access to welfare benefits in another EU country.

Figure 9 shows that over a third of British citizens (34 per cent) agree that redistribution of resources from richer to poorer EU regions and countries should be taking place. A quarter of the sample neither agree nor disagree with this statement, and 42 per cent feel that this type of redistribution should not be taking place. Interestingly, when it comes to EU citizens' right to work in another EU country and their access to the welfare state, responses are much more negative (figure 10). Only 27 per cent of respondents disagree with the statement that the right of EU citizens to work in other EU countries should be restricted; 17 per cent neither agree nor disagree with the statement, while over half of the respondents (56 per cent) think that this right should be restricted (although to varying degrees). The overwhelming majority of respondents (73 per cent) agree that EU citizens should be allowed to receive welfare benefits only in their country of origin, and only 13 per cent disagree with this statement. These findings reveal that British people are feeling uncomfortable with labour movement, ie the right to move and work freely in another EU member state, which is one of the EU's fundamental freedoms guaranteed by EU law. This suggests that employment and welfare are perceived to be of zero-sum nature, ie EU citizens are gaining from EU labour movement at the expense of British citizens. It is felt that jobs, housing, and access to social services belong only to a country's own nationals. British Euroscepticism has thus assumed an anti-EU migration dimension, which taps into not only economics but also identity and raises the question of who should be entitled to have access to the collective goods of the state.

16. Eurobarometer (2015) Public opinion in the European Union, First results, Eurobarometer 83, Spring.

17. Telegraph (2014) David Cameron's plans to limit immigration through quotas for EU workers is illegal, European President says. Available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/11172379/David-Camerons-plans-to-limit-immigration-through-quotas-for-EU-workers-is-illegal-European-President-says.html

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Figure 9: To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: The EU should redistribute resources from richer to poorer EU regions and countries
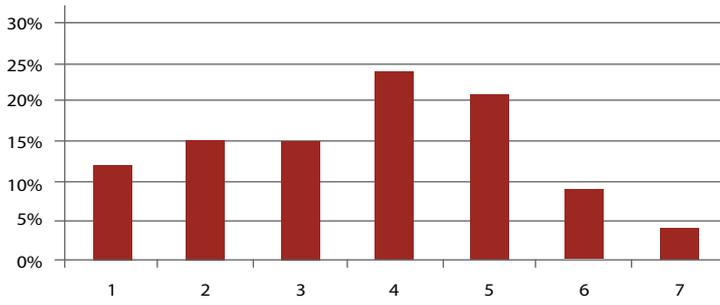
(1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree)

Source: Data from original survey of 3000 respondents conducted in the period 23/04/2015-05/05/2015,

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Figure 10: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:
1. The right of EU citizens to work in other EU countries should be restricted.
2. EU citizens should be allowed to receive welfare benefits only in their country of origin

——— 1. The right of EU citizens to work in other EU countries should be restricted.

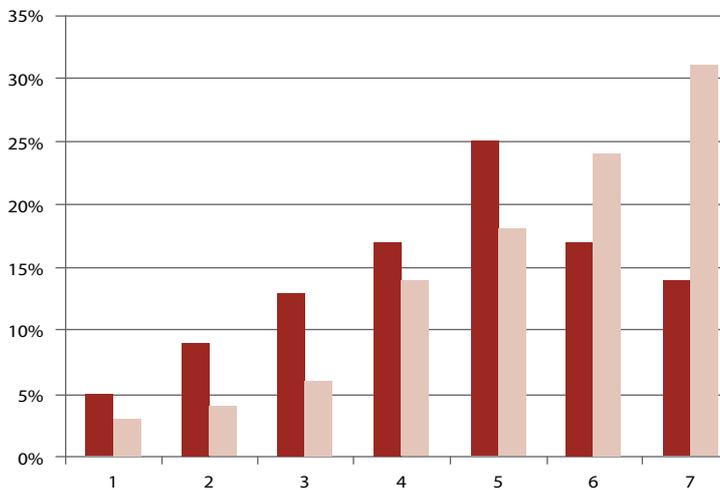——— 2. EU citizens should be allowed to receive welfare benefits only in their country of origin.

(1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree)

Source: Data from original survey of 3000 respondents conducted in the period 23/04/2015-05/05/2015,

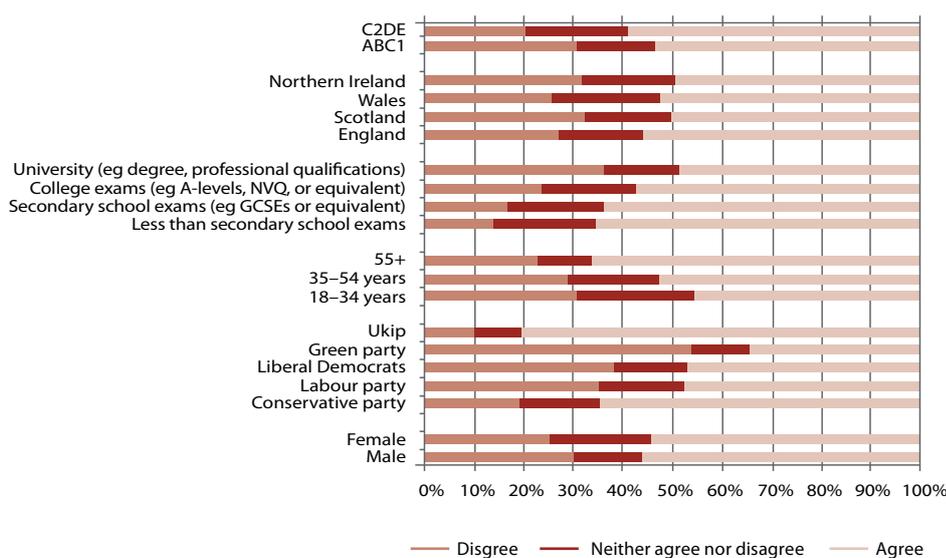© Sofia Vasilopoulou and John Bone, University of York.

These attitudes have severe consequences as they constrain the attempts of EU leaders to manage the crisis. Since the outbreak of the crisis, redistribution has been taking place not only in terms of fiscal transfers within the eurozone but also in terms of intra-EU labour migration from poorer to richer EU countries. EU schemes such as the 'Your First EURES Job' programme, which is a targeted mobility scheme, are also encouraging labour movement across the EU. Britain is perceived to be one of the largest recipients of such migration as national insurance numbers issued to EU citizens have increased in the past years.[18]

18. BBC (2014) UK migration: What's really happening? Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-30243472

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An analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics and political affiliation of Britons' response to the EU citizens' right to work statement reveals a number of interesting patterns (figure 11). There is no significant variation in the responses based on region. In other words, people who live in England gave similar responses to the statement compared to those who live in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. All other characteristics are significantly associated with responses to the statement.[19] In terms of gender, we observe that men are slightly more likely to agree with the statement, and thus express opposition to free labour movement in the EU; women tend to express a more neutral opinion. There is a clear pattern when it comes to age, education and social status. Older respondents, and particularly those over 55 years old, tend to agree more that the right to work in other EU countries should be restricted. Those with a university degree are more likely to be open to free labour movement across the EU compared to less educated respondents. In fact, the more years a respondent spends in education, the more likely he/she is to disagree that EU citizens' right to work across the EU should be restricted. Social class also matters. Middle and upper-middle classes (category ABC1) tend to disagree more with the statement compared to the working class (category C2DE). These results are consistent with previous research, which has shown that older, less educated and working-class citizens tend to be less supportive of European integration in Britain.[20] They also serve to demonstrate that similar dynamics are at play when it comes to support for free labour movement within the EU. These are the typical losers from globalisation processes who "seek to protect themselves through protectionist measures and through an emphasis on the maintenance of national boundaries and independence".[21]

Crucially we also observe significant differences in terms of party affiliation and responses to the statement, which suggest the importance of political parties shaping opinions and party cues deriving from partisanship.[22] Ukip supporters have overwhelmingly supported the restriction of EU citizens' right to work at 80 per cent. Levels of agreement with the statement have also been high among Conservative party supporters at 64 per cent. Very interestingly just under half of Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters also agree with the statement. Undecided or more neutral opinions are the highest among Labour and Conservative party supporters, which suggests that cues deriving from these parties may not be as clear. The highest levels of disagreement derive from Green party supporters at 54 per cent.

Figure 11: To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: The right of EU citizens to work in other EU countries should be restricted. Data broken down in terms of gender, party affiliation, age, educational attainment, region and social status

Source: Data from original survey of 3000 respondents conducted in the period 23/04/2015-05/05/2015,

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19. Two-tailed tests: p-value <.01 for gender, party affiliation, age, education and social status; p-value >.01 for region.

20. Clements, B. (2009) The sociological and psychological influences on public support for the European Union in Britain, 1983–2005, British Politics, 4(1): 47–82.

21. Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Borschnier, S. and Frey, T. (2006) Globalization and the transformation of the national political space: Six European countries compared, European Journal of Political Research, 45: 921–956. 922.

22. Anderson, C.J. (1998) When in doubt, use proxies: Attitudes toward domestic policies and support for European integration, Comparative Political Studies, 31(5): 569–601. Steenbergen, M.R., Edwards, E.E. and de Vries, C.E. (2007) Who's cueing whom: Mass-elite linkages and the future of European integration, European Union Politics, 8(1): 13–35.

British support for membership has been persistently low over time and much lower than the EU-wide average. The eurozone crisis has further undermined British support for political integration and has worsened Briton's image of the EU. However, despite low support for the EU, trend polling indicates that when Britons are faced with the in-out dilemma, they have not been unequivocally in favour of their country's withdrawal from the EU. From 2011 onwards, the percentage of Britons who want to stay in the EU is rising, and has been persistently higher than those who want to see their country exiting the EU. The continuing electoral success of Eurosceptic parties, such as Ukip, has resulted in an on-going debate over Britain's relationship. Somewhat against prior expectations, Europe is an important political issue in Britain. Despite overtime volatility, concern with Europe features in the public's political evaluations. The question of Europe was prominent during the 2015 general election. The discussion over the referendum is likely to further increase its salience in the coming months.

Overall, public opinion on the EU is nuanced and conditional. The question of Europe polarises a significant part of the electorate that is unequivocally against the EU. However, when it comes to a cost-benefit analysis of EU integration the majority of the British public is aware of the benefits arising from their country's EU membership. Research in this paper shows that there is great variation not only in terms of how much authority Britons want to give to the EU but also in which policy they want to do so. Opposition to further integration is higher in areas related to employment, social affairs and monetary policy. Support for further transfer of policymaking from the national to the EU level may be observed in the areas of trade, sustainable development, the environment and digital security. It appears that British people are happy to support a greater role for the EU in policy areas that are perceived to be Pareto efficient, ie where no one is perceived to be worse off. However, they are much more reluctant to support policies that entail a level of redistribution across the EU, including EU citizens' right to work and access to the welfare state of another EU country. This is now important more than ever as one of the implications of the ongoing eurozone crisis is increased labour mobility within the EU.

The debate on the referendum must take into consideration the multiple dimensions of EU policy and the complexity of EU attitudes. Restricting choice to a binary and potentially divisive question conceals this diversity. This paper has revealed which EU policies tend to receive the most support; and which ones the British public would wish to see change of authority from the European to the national level. It has also shown – contrary to expectations – that British public opinion is not overwhelmingly Eurosceptic. About a quarter of the sample in this survey supports more integration and about a second quarter is happy with the current levels of integration. Support, however, tends to be utilitarian, as Britons find that their country has benefited from EU membership. The analysis has also revealed that the question of Europe provokes emotional reactions, which may be strategically exploited by Eurosceptic actors. Emotions – and not only economic calculations – are at the heart of British Euroscepticism. Negative emotions such as anger, fear and disgust in relation to the UK's membership of the EU tend to be more prominent among the electorate, but it must also be noted that positive emotions such as hopefulness and neutral emotions such as indifference also exist.

These findings should inform the prime minister's approach to the UK renegotiation and political actors' campaigning in the run-up to the referendum. Going beyond the in-out question, politicians should articulate a much more nuanced discourse focusing on the merits and drawbacks of European integration in specific areas. It appears that a focus on the economic benefits of Britain's relationship with the EU would be beneficial to the campaign to remain part of it. But it is also important to notice that – in a somewhat contradictory fashion – rationality co-exists with an emotional dimension of people's attitudes to the EU. This would also need to be considered in the campaigns.

Lastly, the issue of EU migration matters a lot in British politics given its major redistributive consequences. Labour movement and access to member states' welfare systems is prominent in people's minds and it is likely to feature in parties' referendum campaigns. Here the government is caught in a catch-22 situation: on the one hand the majority of Britons want to see restrictions in free labour movement within the EU; on the other hand this is a fundamental EU freedom unlikely to change in the short timeframe of the prime ministers' renegotiation. The lack of support for EU citizens' right to work in another EU country derives primarily form older, less educated and working-class citizens, who may feel threatened by such mobility. This indicates that such attitudes go beyond Euroscepticism. They are a symptom of a general feeling of malaise, political dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties, fear of globalisation and weakening electoral alignments.

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