

Religion and Attitudes toward the European Union: The New Member States

A Research Note

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Abstract

This research note represents a first attempt at exploring the impact of religion on attitudes toward integration in post-communist Europe. Using *Central and Eastern Euro-Barometer 2: Current Affairs and the Media, September-October 1991* we develop a multivariate regression model of support for the European Union in Central and Eastern Europe, paying particular attention to the role of religious tradition and church attendance to the formation of attitudes. Alternative theories also tested include: ideology, cognitive mobilization, European identity, economic optimism, urban living and sex. The results show that since religious variables only emerge in multivariate analysis, religion, mainly Catholicism, matters, but not in as direct a way as it does in the West. Cognitive mobilization demonstrates the most powerful impact on attitudes toward integration. The model is also run for each country in the study demonstrating differences between Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant countries.

In 1997 Eichenberg and Dalton (1997: 6) could claim that “the dominant theme of the literature [on attitudes toward European integration] is now the primacy of economic and utilitarian concerns.” In a series of studies we have sought to “bring culture back in” by focusing on religion as a determinant of European attitudes toward integration and the European Union (EU). We first identified religion as an important factor in shaping EU attitudes in a study on the gender gap in attitudes toward integration (Nelsen and Guth, 2000). We followed that study with a fuller treatment of the role of religion in attitude formation using almost three decades of Eurobarometer data (Nelsen, Guth and Fraser, 2001). Finally, we looked at a sample of European youth to determine if religion had any power to shape attitudes among 15 to 24 year olds, which might have profound implications for the future (Nelsen and Guth, 2003a). In each of these studies one important message comes through: religion matters to the formation of attitudes, even when controlling for a host of demographic factors and alternative explanations.

Religion matters to the shaping of EU attitudes in two ways. First, *religious tradition* matters. Catholics are most supportive of integration efforts, Orthodox believers slightly less so, and Protestants lag significantly behind.¹ As for those with no religion, the evidence is mixed. In early years seculars were more favorable toward integration than Protestants, but recent evidence, especially among youth, indicates that those with no religion are now the most euroskeptical of the major religious traditions. Second, *religious devotion* matters. Those Catholics and Orthodox who attend church and consider religion important in their lives are more likely to support integration than nominal believers. The same tends to work for Protestants as well (although at much lower levels), but the results are less clear (Nelsen, Guth and Fraser, 2001; Nelsen and Guth, 2003a). In sum, evidence from a number of data sets over several decades indicates that Christian devotion increases support for integration, with Catholics showing the strongest support of the major European religious traditions.²

Why does religious tradition and devotion matter? The answer is complex,³ but can be summarized in five points. First, Christianity as a whole has a strong universalist tendency in response to the call of Jesus to “go into all the world and make disciples” (Matt. 26:19). Second, Catholic and Orthodox Christians each believe the unity of all believers is made visible in their own churches. The Orthodox church of the Roman Empire and the Byzantine Age united eastern Christians in a single, visible Kingdom of God on earth that united both spiritual and temporal authority in the person of the emperor. Latin Christians claimed the same universal authority for the Roman Catholic Church that united the disparate political units of the West in a single spiritual kingdom under the spiritual and, at least in theory, temporal authority of the pope. The two churches do not recognize each other’s universality, and since the EU contains most of the Catholic European countries, it is no wonder the Orthodox may be less enthusiastic than Catholics about the Union. But what unites both traditions is a distrust of modern nation states that have so deeply and disastrously divided Europe. Third, Protestants broke from Rome in the sixteenth century and found protection and liberty in the very nation states the Catholic Church found destructive. Any attempt by the Catholic nations of Europe to reduce the importance of nation states looks to the Protestant like a reassertion of Catholic hegemony. Protestants are, thus, reluctant integrators. Fourth, the European Union was founded by Catholic or predominantly Catholic countries in the 1950s that were led by Christian Democratic politicians

¹ Other religious traditions are difficult to analyze due to their small numbers.

² Recent analysis of Europeans who identify themselves as “Europeans,” as opposed to member state nationals, finds a higher proportion coming from Catholic countries (Green, forthcoming).

³ For a more complete explanation, see Nelsen and Guth, 2003b and Nelsen, 2004)

committed to European integration. Catholics found the new Community comfortable and contributed to the developing “we-feeling” (Deutsch, 1956) that added an emotional bond to a largely nuts-and-bolts enterprise. Protestant countries stayed out of the initial Community, and when invited to join in 1973 promptly gained reputations as reluctant partners. Finally, religious communities socialize their members into the thought and culture of the group. The more closely tied a member is to the community, the more likely the member will think and act as expected. Thus, religious devotion matters to the shaping of public attitudes.

Our studies to this point have focused on the countries of Western Europe where religion seems to play an influential role in shaping attitudes toward the EU. But do the patterns of religious influence observed in the West hold for Central and East European countries after forty or more years of aggressive state secularism? The central role played by churches in the democratization process, especially in East Germany and Poland, and the general western orientation of those churches make it likely that religion still influenced public opinion in the early 1990s in at least some of the former communist countries. The strength of the Catholic or Orthodox churches in countries such as Poland and Romania may have also helped push public opinion toward integration with Europe. No work has been done to this point on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, many of which have now joined the Union. This research note represents a first attempt at exploring the impact of religion on attitudes toward integration in post-communist Europe. The study focuses on the years just following the fall of the communist regimes. While more recent data from eastern countries is just now coming available to the research community, the study of public opinion in the transition period provides us with a baseline that will be used to measure shifts over time. This study represents a snapshot of a world in transition.

I. Data and Method

We use *Central and Eastern Euro-Barometer 2: Current Affairs and the Media, September-October 1991* (henceforth *EB2*) (Reif and Cunningham, 2002) to assess the impact of religion on attitudes toward integration. The data set has several advantages. First, it includes respondents from several countries that are now in the EU (Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland), as well as two applicant states (Bulgaria and Romania) and two states not currently under consideration for membership, Albania and European Russia.⁴ *EB2* thus provides an array of countries with differing current relations with the EU. Second, this distribution of countries includes predominantly Catholic countries, such as Czechoslovakia, Lithuania and Poland, Orthodox countries, such as Bulgaria, Romania and European Russia, and historically Protestant countries (although now quite mixed), such as Estonia and Latvia. It also includes the religiously mixed country of Hungary. Third, the data set also includes important religion variables (which are not always present in Eurobarometer data sets) in addition to questions on the EU. Finally, *EB2* has a range of variables that help us test alternative hypotheses similar to those we have tested in previous studies.

⁴ Albania is in the data set, but due to a number of problems, including the absence of several important variables, the country was excluded from this analysis.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is *support for the European Union*.⁵ We constructed an additive index ($\alpha=.75$) using four questions dealing with whether the respondent felt positively or negatively toward the EU, whether the respondent was in favor of joining the Union, and if it should be sooner or later (see Appendix for details).

Explanatory Variables

Religion

EB2 measures *religious tradition* in the standard way by asking respondents “Do you consider yourself as belonging to a particular religion?” We expect, as described above, that Catholics will support integration most strongly, with the Orthodox next and Protestants falling in behind them. Religious devotion in this study is measured by “church” attendance (more than once per week, once per week, a few times per year, one or fewer times per year, never). Attendance is used here as an interactive term, meaning it is applied to people within the categories of “Catholic,” “Orthodox,” etc. We expect higher attendance at religious services to boost support for integration.

Ideology

In previous work we have found ideology, partisanship, cognitive mobilization, economic vulnerability, values, social capital and demographic factors, including sex, age, education, occupation and income, to contribute to support for integration. *EB2* allows us to test some, but not all of these variables, against the explanatory strength of religion.

Evidence from the early 1970s indicates that European leftists tended to oppose integration, while the right supported it. By the early 1990s that tendency had shifted, so that leftists in Western Europe tended to favor integration more than those on the right (Nelsen, Guth and Fraser, 2001: 201). We can test to see if this is the case in Central and Eastern Europe using a ideological self-placement variable (*right ideology*) and two variables that tap 1) a respondent’s attitude to the free market (*favors market system*) and 2) his or her opinion of the way democracy and human rights are progressing in the country (*democratic optimism*) (see Appendix). Left-Right placement in the East in 1991 is admittedly problematic: old-line communists, for instance, were often deemed “conservative,” although seldom on the “right.” The large numbers answering this question “don’t know” (typically 25 percent in each country), indicates confusion. We are assuming, however, that those who did place themselves had already absorbed a western-style ideological spectrum. Attitude to the free market taps a respondent’s economic ideology. We expect those who favor the market to also favor the European Union, which at that time was pushing to complete the Single Market. The “democracy” variable combines a respondent’s view of the progress of democracy and human rights in his or her country. We expect that democratic optimists might be less supportive of integration than pessimists who might think that joining Europe could speed the progress of democracy.

⁵ The survey was conducted before the “European Union” had replaced the “European Community.” To avoid confusion, however, we use “Union” throughout.

Cognitive Mobilization

Cognitive mobilization refers to the “skills needed to cope with an extensive political community” (Inglehart, 1990: 336-338). These skills are acquired through education and are demonstrated through an interest in politics and political discussion and awareness of the political world. It is reasonable to believe, and past studies demonstrate, that greater cognitive mobilization leads to greater support for the most extensive political community in Europe, the EU. In this study we operationalize cognitive mobilization using several measures (see Appendix). First, we measure the *level of information* the respondent has about Western European institutions, such as NATO and the OECD. Second, we measure the level of *political engagement* by determining how often the respondent engages in political discussions and attempts to influence friends. Third, we measure *newspaper use* and *western media use*. Finally, we determine the respondent’s level of *education*. We expect that high scores on these variables will predict strong support for the EU.

European Identity

Individuals who think of themselves as “European” support the EU at higher levels than those who do not (Green, forthcoming). *Thinks of oneself as European* measures European identity. We predict that those scoring high on the European identity scale will support integration.

Economic Factors

As we stated above, most studies of attitudes toward integration focus primarily on economic factors (see Gabel, 1998). Respondents are seen as utility maximizers who evaluate the EU based on a calculation of costs and benefits. Those who perceive they have a reasonable chance of benefiting from the economic changes brought about by integration will support the EU; those who see heavy costs are likely to support integration at lower levels or even oppose the EU. In previous studies we have found evidence to support the utilitarian thesis, but we have also shown that culture, namely religion, remains an important predictor of attitudes, even when controlling for economic utility (Nelsen and Guth, 2000; Nelsen, Guth and Fraser, 2001).

In this study we use two economic measures to tap economic utility. The first, *economic optimism* is an additive index of four questions that ask the respondent to evaluate the present state and future prospects of the national economy and his or her personal economic condition (see Appendix). We believe that those who are more optimistic about the economy will be more likely to support the EU. The second measure, *income*, is the self-reported weekly income of the respondent. Since those with higher incomes are more likely to be in a position to take advantage of new economic opportunities, we believe respondents with higher incomes will support integration.

Demographic Factors

We add two additional demographic factors to our list of alternative hypotheses. *Size of place* measures the respondent’s degree of urbanization. Individuals who live in cities tend to be more cosmopolitan and open to foreign influences than their more parochial rural counterparts.

We expect people from larger cities to support integration at a higher level. Finally, following our earlier work, we expect *males* to support integration at a higher level than females, due possibly to a greater sense of economic vulnerability among women, especially those most directly dependent upon the state (Nelsen and Guth, 2000).

Method

We use multiple regression analysis (ordinary least squares) to test our explanatory factors. The resulting standardized coefficients represent the strength of each factor as a predictor of support for the European Union, while controlling for all of the other factors in the model. This allows us to assess the independent influence of each variable on support for the EU.

As will become apparent below, we run the model for the entire pooled sample first, and then run it for each country separately. The sample is weighted by country.

II. Results

Multivariate Analysis of the Pooled Sample

At first blush the results for the religious variables are not encouraging. At the bivariate level Catholicism and Protestantism predict *lower* support for integration (-.06 and -.03 respectively), while Orthodoxy weakly predicts higher support. Furthermore, church attendance seems to have no effect at all on support for the EU. Thus, taking nothing else into account, a Catholic (or, less so, a Protestant) in Eastern Europe in 1991 would most likely demonstrate little enthusiasm for the EU. Such an outcome is contrary to the evidence from the West and undermines our main hypothesis.

The picture changes completely, however, when we control for other variables. As Table 1 demonstrates, religion clearly matters, especially Catholicism, all other things being equal. Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox believers all demonstrate greater support for the EU than the suppressed reference category (all other respondents, including those identifying with other religions and those who claim no religious tradition). Religious devotion within each Christian tradition also matters. The smaller coefficient means that most of the independent influence of church attendance is “soaked up” by the religious tradition coefficient, but nevertheless those who identify with one of the major Christian traditions are even more likely to support integration if they attend services frequently. While all of the religion coefficients point in the expected direction, only the Catholic variables achieve statistical significance. But the Catholic coefficients are very strong relative to the other coefficients in the model. Quite clearly from the multivariate analysis religion matters to support for the EU in the East, but we must look at the remaining results before we can fully understand what the data is telling us.

[Table 1 about here]

As Table 1 also demonstrates, our alternative variables play a significant role in shaping public opinion toward the EU. Ideology, for instance, influences attitudes, but in somewhat more complex ways than we expected. Respondents identifying themselves as on the ideological right are, in fact, more supportive of integration than those identifying themselves as moderate or on the left. Likewise, those supporting market reforms are strong supporters of the EU (the

coefficient rises almost to the level of “Catholicism”), as we expected. The surprising result was the strength of the democratic optimism variable in a positive direction. As noted above, we predicted that those *disappointed* with the progress of democracy in their country would be more likely to support the EU as a possible spur to democratic development. In fact, respondents who were *optimistic* about the progress of democracy were more likely to support integration. It is clear from the bivariate results (data not shown) that those on the ideological right were also supporters of the market and optimistic about the progress of democracy. What seems to have been happening in 1991 is that these respondents, who were supporters of change, saw the EU as a means of consolidating democracy and a market economy rather than as a means to further progress. It is also likely that the democratic pessimists were more sympathetic to the old regime and, therefore, distrustful of the EU as a symbol of the West.

The cognitive mobilization variables all work in the expected direction (see Table 1). The single most powerful predictor of support for integration in this model is the level of information a respondent has on West European institutions. The other variables are less powerful, but nevertheless, significant. Thus, the more educated and “tuned in” (especially to the West) the eastern respondent, the more likely he or she supported integration in the early 1990s. The same also holds for those who think of themselves as European at some point and for those who are optimistic about the economy. Income is the only variable that seems to have no impact when controlling for other variables (see Table 1).

As for the demographic factors, those who live in larger metropolitan areas and who were males supported integration at higher levels. These variables, along with those already discussed, explain almost 40 percent of the variation, a very high level for this large a sample.

From the pooled sample, we get a fairly good idea of the “ideal” East European supporter of the EU from both the bivariate correlations (data not shown) and the multivariate analysis. Such a supporter would be an urban male, who was well educated and well informed about the West, optimistic about the economy and the progress of democracy, a supporter of the free market and a strong non-socialist. What role, then, does religion play in shaping attitudes? What our data suggests is that religion plays a deep, almost hidden role that only emerges when you hold constant the most obvious factors. If, for instance, we had two “ideal” EU supporters, but one was a Catholic and one was secular, we would expect the Catholic to be more enthusiastic about the EU than the secular. Or, to take the opposite example, if you take two “ideal” euroskeptics—rural females, who are uneducated and uninformed about the West, pessimistic about the economy and democratic development, opposed to the market and ideologically to the left—the devout Catholic will be more favorable to the EU than the secular, even if both are less than enthusiastic about integration. Thus Catholicism works beneath the surface in the East to make supporters of the EU more supportive and opponents less euroskeptical, unlike in the West where Catholicism is more directly related to EU support.

Country Analysis

Table 2 shows the results of our model run separately for each country in the sample. The results paint a slightly different picture from the one we get from the pooled sample. Religion and church attendance only matter in three countries: Czechoslovakia (Catholic), Estonia (Protestant) and Romania (Orthodox). Czechoslovakia looks the most like the Catholic countries of the West in this regard, but ironically, Catholic Poland does not. Estonia looks most like its Scandinavian neighbors, with Protestant identity and attendance working to weaken support for

the EU (Nelsen and Guth, 2000).⁶ Scandinavians tend to be most sensitive to the Catholic flavor of much of the EU. In Romania Orthodoxy is a strong predictor of support for integration, but Orthodoxy is not a significant factor in other Orthodox countries, such as Bulgaria and European Russia, although the signs run in the right direction. What seems to be happening is that religion matters most in countries with significant religious diversity. In religiously homogenous countries, religious tradition and attendance drop out as important determinants of support. Of course, religion rises in importance in the pooled sample because religious diversity is guaranteed. Thus when Polish Catholics are compared to other East Europeans, their Catholicism becomes important.

[Table 2 about here]

In most of the countries in the sample, non-religious factors play a more important role than religion in shaping attitudes toward the EU. Ideological factors work about as expected in each country, with the market factor showing particular strength in Lithuania and European Russia. Measures of cognitive mobilization work well in Russia and Latvia, but the most important factor in most countries is the level of information concerning Western institutions. European identity works well everywhere but the Baltic States, probably due to their very recent independence from the Soviet Union. Many citizens in the Baltic States in 1991 were just getting used to the fact they were not Soviets. Economic optimism is a significant factor almost everywhere, while income only contributes in Estonia. Finally, size of place and sex show no discernable pattern among countries, although all of the signs are positive.

The model explains over 30 percent of the variance in each country, with the Romanian model reaching almost 50 percent and the Bulgarian model explain an astounding 60 percent of the variance. Clearly the model is identifying important factors in the shaping of East European attitudes.

III. Conclusion

Comparing the populations of Western Europe and Eastern and Central Europe in the early 1990s regarding their support for the EU is statistically impossible. But to the extent that we can make rough comparisons, the Easterners were similar to their Western neighbors. Ideological orientation, cognitive skills, calculations of economic utility, cosmopolitanism and sex all helped shape attitudes toward integration. What is different is the more direct relationship in the West between religious tradition and devotion and positive attitudes toward the EU. Religion matters in the East, but not as directly as in the West.

The East, in fact, may be a harbinger of things to come in the West. Our own studies show some decline in religion's independent influence in the West (Nelsen, Guth and Fraser, 2003). Religion in the West may be receding into the background as it has done in the East. And the future may be even more grim for religion. Preliminary analysis on recently released Eurobarometer data for the new member states of the EU indicates little or no religious influence at the bivariate or multivariate levels (data not shown). But much work needs to be done before we can make definitive statements.

⁶ Latvia should look most like Estonia in this regard, but the coding for the religious tradition variable for Latvia is problematic. Too few Protestants are identified and too many "others." If we can determine that the "others" are mostly Protestant (as we suspect), the determination will change the results for Latvia and for the pooled sample.

Christian religious traditions, particularly Roman Catholicism, have contributed to the ideological and cultural support of the European Union. As we have shown here, this contribution could be seen in the years just after the Eastern transitions to democracy and may have helped carry many of these countries into the Union. If in fact this contribution is now diminishing, the question for European elites is whether or not ideological support for the market and individual cost-benefit analyses will be enough to maintain affective support for the Union in both the East and the West.

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Appendix

Variable Coding and Construction
Central and Eastern Euro-Barometer 2:
Current Affairs and the Media, September-October 1991
Karlheinz Reif and George Cunningham
Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research
ICPSR 6105
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Support for the European Union is a four variable additive index ($\alpha=.75$), using recoded versions of questions 15,18,19 and 23. These items ask respondents whether their country should join the EU, how soon it should join, whether they had a positive or negative impression of the EU, and whether they would favor a treaty providing for accession to the EU. The index has a minimum of 4 (strongest possible pro-EU attitude) and a maximum of 18 (strongest possible anti-EU attitude). The mean is 7.55 and the standard deviation is 2.98.

Ideological Variables:

Right Ideology is derived from question D1. Respondents choosing one of the three most “rightward” positions on the ten-point left-right scale were scored “1,” others were scored “0”.

Favors Market System (0=do not favor) (1=favor).

Democratic Optimism is an additive index of question 10 on rights observance in the respondent’s country, and question 12, on satisfaction with the progress of democratization ($r=.324$).

Cognitive Mobilization Variables

Level of Information is an additive index of the number of Western European institutions the respondent had heard of (questions 14a to 14q). The score has a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 7. The mean is 4.14 and the standard deviation is 2.21.

Political Engagement is an additive index of questions on how frequently respondents engage in political discussion and attempt to influence others about politics ($r=.337$).

Newspaper use is a recoded version of question B1e.

Western Media use is an additive index of questions B1b and B1d ($r=.65$).

Education is number of years of schooling the respondent has received. (Question D8.)

European Identity

Thinks of Oneself as European is drawn from question 13: “often,” “sometimes” or “never”.

Economic Factors

Economic Optimism is an additive index of questions 4 through 7 ($\alpha=.65$).

Income is a recoded version of question D11, weekly income.

Demographic Factors

Size of Place is a recoded version of question D7.

Male (1=Male)(0=Female).

Religion and Attendance derived from questions D14 and D15, respectively.

Table 1.
OLS Analysis of Factors Influencing East European Support for the European Union, 1991

	<i>Beta</i>
<i>Religion</i>	
Catholic	.154***
Attendance	.083***
Protestant	.028
Attendance	.051
Orthodox	.030
Attendance	.005
<i>Ideology</i>	
Right Ideology	.084***
Favors Market System	.151***
Democratic Optimism	.132***
<i>Cognitive Mobilization</i>	
Level of Information on West European Institutions	.291***
Political Engagement	.059***
Newspaper Use	.039***
Western Media Use	.034***
Education Level	.028*
<i>European Identity</i>	
Thinks of Oneself as European	.106***
<i>Economic Factors</i>	
Economic Optimism	.085***
Income	.008
<i>Demographic Factors</i>	
Size of Place	.081***
Male	.039***
<i>N</i> =	9025
<i>Adj. R</i> ² =	.389

*Coefficient significant at $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. OLS Analysis of Factors Influencing East European Support for the European Union, 1991

	BULGARIA	CZECHO	ESTONIA	HUNGARY	LATVIA	LITHUANI A	POLAND	EU. RUSSIA	ROMANIA
<i>Religious Factors</i>									
Catholic		.205***		-.086	-.007	.013	.021		
Attendance		.144**		-.036	.009	.003	-.043		
Protestant			-.198*	-.074					
Attendance			-.207*	-.080					
Orthodox	.079		.012		.094			.159	-.108*
Attendance	.065		.023		.073			.108	-.126**
<i>Ideological Factors</i>									
Right Ideology	.078***	.092***	.109***	.172***	.048	.056*	.036	.005	.122***
Favors Market System	.140***	.155***	.075**	.157***	.113***	.217***	.151***	.255***	.058*
Democratic Optimism	.161***	.185***	.185***	.078**	.174***	.047	.130***	.086**	.082**
<i>Cognitive Mobilization</i>									
Level of Information	.256***	.225***	.311***	.212***	.322***	.306***	.265***	.201***	.382***
Political Engagement	.034	.015	.114***	.111***	.053*	.065*	.060*	.096***	.044
Newspaper	.150***	.037	.012	.006	.060*	.017	.028	.132***	.037
Western Media	.035	.038	.046	.007	.063*	.047	.058*	.099***	.081***
Education	.035	.061	.112***	.012	.110**	.048	.017	.022	.044
<i>European Identity</i>									
Thinks European	.100***	.095***	.051	.087**	.062*	.052	.115***	.086**	.101***
<i>Economic Factors</i>									
Economic Optimism	.045	.133***	.043	.057*	.079**	.064*	.098***	.098***	.051*
Income	-.011	.009	.067**	.013	.026	.014	.026	.055*	--
<i>Demographic Factors</i>									
Size of Place	.146***	.097**	.074*	.057	.015	.108*	.079*	.038	.041
Male	.058**	.060*	.003	.064*	.037	.044	.031	.062*	.050*
N=	989	1076	999	987	999	1000	1000	975	1000
Adj. R²	.600	.349	.332	.344	.357	.311	.364	.355	.476

*Coefficient significant at p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.