Another Europeanisation Case: British Political Activism?

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ABSTRACT:

 In dealing with the issues of Europeanisation and political activism, the res[1]earch explores the possibility of citizens in the United Kingdom been affected by the European integration process, especially in their levels of political participation. Since the EU factor has generally become more important in recent years, its presence in the national daily life should have also influenced the intensity of political activism, whether in its conventional or unconventional style. In this situation, if Europeanisation has contributed to support citizens' political commitment (any how measured), it might have achieved yet another goal on its agenda: a contribution to an improved political participation in the United Kingdom. The study uses several sources of data to test the hypothesis and bases its conclusions on different measures of activism.

INTRODUCTION

The European integration process has unquestionably achieved many goals since its beginning. In addition to the many predetermined policy targets, many others have also indirectly developed as a spin-off of comprehensive integration efforts. As the term *Europeanisation* becomes more common in the literature (Cowles, Caporaso, and Risse, 2001; Goetz and Hix, 2000), European citizens are relating more frequently to the decisions taken by the bodies of government of the European Union (EU): EU residents are also incorporating EU policy-making actions in their daily lives. Representing the successful merger of the European and national levels of governance, the Europeanisation of policy-making has had an equal impact on the political interest articulation and aggregation process. In so doing, the European integration process has affected the way political participants in Europe join together and act to express themselves politically (Imig and Tarrow, 2001).

In the wake of the introduction of the EURO in twelve member states of the European Union, a new element of European integration seems to knock on Great Britain's door. The media pressure on the newly introduced currency is probably one of many factors of the Europeanisation phenomenon to affect the United Kingdom, its institutions, policies and political leaders. If many scholars would not deny that the relationship with Europe has certainly changed the UK and its political priorities, it remains interesting to discover, for once, how far the European process has affected the political culture of British citizens. The EU has become an unquestionable source of attention on a daily basis for many individuals in the UK. In particular, the political realm has devoted more energy to discuss, debate, contrast and lobby the EU, as a way to resolve many points of disputes between British interests on one side and European ones on the other. As a source of such a high interest, the European process may have been, therefore, a catalyser of citizens' political activism and interest in general. If the EU does indeed have a positive, significant impact on British citizens' involvement, the European integration process might actually have affected, indirectly, the British political scene, by fostering more political participation.

This paper plans to research the link between European integration and political activism in the UK. The hypothesis underlining the investigation is the possible positive relationship between the increasing relevance of EU-related matters in Great Britain and the citizens' political involvement in society. The assumption may indeed sound counter-intuitive, especially if overall voting turnouts in Great Britain in the past decade are considered. [2] However, the reader can agree that the importance of the EU, especially in relation to British policies, may have re-energized citizens' active commitment to politics. Not only as a direct act against further integration, but also as a good opportunity to support internal political independence, the EU factor has the potential to foster political interest, involvement and consequently democratic participation of more citizens in the political arena in general. This last achievement would probably have a slightly ironic flavor: an organization that has been correctly accused of democratic deficit may actually be a source for more political involvement in one of its member states.

The questions asked in the following sections pertain directly to the level of influence that the EU currently has in the UK, and the corresponding impact on the country's level of political interest and participation. If the European integration has indeed become "the most significant single public policy issue" (Evans, 1999: 207), citizens' levels of political involvement should have been affected by this new important element. British political activism may be a good case of Europeanisation,

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[2] British Election Studies data have confirmed a consistent decrease since 1992, with a drop of more than 15% in the number of registered voters, to a voting turnout of about 60% in the 2001 elections.

where the European process affects yet another sector of a national context. Whether strictly related to political participation directed at the European policy-making[3] or not, British citizens' activism may be reinforced by the increasing relevance of Europe at the national political level.

On the contrary, if Great Britain still shows the "refuse of the electorate to elevate Europe into a "first-order" issue" (Baker and Seawright, 1998: 9), political participants' scores of activism in the UK would not be affected by their position towards the EU. An analysis of British Election Studies (BES)[4] data for 1997, in conjunction with secondary data from the EU Commission Eurobarometer report (n. 56) and World Values Survey data (1981, 1990), will attempt to provide some answers to the research questions. Interpretation of aggregate-level data will allow a first understanding of the situation in the next two sections, whereas the fourth section of the paper will present correlations and regression results from the BES dataset. The final part of the paper will discuss the conclusions and possible further questions to be addressed for a further understanding of the issue.

Before dealing with the data directly, the next section of the study will introduce the reader to some of the current positions in European Studies with regards to Europeanisation. As a matter of fact, the term itself would need a book chapter to be fully presented, but for the sake of the research questions, only the main points will be highlighted in the following section.

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[3] See this type of focus in Riesing's work (1998).
[4] British Election Panel Study, 1997-2002, Waves 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (1997-2001). Principal Investigators: A. Heath, R. Jowell, and J.K. Curtice. Sponsor: Economic and Social Research Council. Datasets provided by the UK Data Archive.

EUROPEANISATION'S IMPACT

Scholars have been using the word "Europeanisation" for quite some time. The meaning of the term has changed, as the evolution of the European integration process has done as well. Europeanisation affects different levels and actors of a national context, in an extensive manner, "well beyond government institutions (Bulmer and Burch, 2000: 2)." It is most of all a mutual influence between the supranational actor (the EU) and the member state's institutions and policy-making agents, while national structures and traditions filter the European impact and adapt it to specific needs (Risse, Cowles, and Caporaso, 2001: 1-3). In brief, the word can be used to identify an on-going process or a final result, whose main characteristics may actually change according to the EU specific member state's national context. In the British case, Janet Mather has labeled the EU impact as a "means of exposing UK citizens to a range of cultural influences and constitutional traditions unlikely to have been experienced without "ever closer political union" with other member states (2000: 63)." The extension and depth of Europeanisation in any of the member states varies according to the national system and institutions in place, lacking a possible homogenization or convergence towards a similar policy-making unit (Bulmer and Burch, 3). European integration does not create clones.

Depending on the timeframe of analysis a work is referring to, Europeanisation has two possible meanings. It can represent the study of the EU-centered policy-making impact at the national and local level (top-down view), as well as the influence of local and national goverments in the way EU policies are implemented or the EU decision-making is directly affected (bottom-up view). Multi-level governance, as the EU governing structure has been depicted in the past (Marks, 1993), and multi-dimensional focus on several issues do not allow perfect predictions on how the European integration modifies the national context. Scholars seem to be more successful with analyses on the process itself than with its final results. The co-existence of bottom-up and top-down acting forces can give the study a more comprehensive view, but it also complicates the analysis of the overall big picture. In conclusion, the process of Europeanisation itself changes as well as the type and level of impact it has in the EU members at large.

The study of the Europeanisation element of member states' contexts and issues is extensive and still in flux. The evolution of the EU structure requires a constant adjustment on the part of the research. Since the Europeanisation process is not the main element of study in this paper, it will be considered as a constant variable. The reader can accept that European integration affects the policies and polities of national territories, without limiting the possible impact of the European unification process, that constantly evolves as the Union follows its path. In the end, Europeanisation is best represented by a group of processes[5] and actors in full motion at the same time. The final outcome of the integration efforts is probably unknown even to the agents and agencies involved.

If the assessment of how EU policies and institutions affect a national context cannot be fully delineated, it is still possible to determine whether countries are subject to the EU's influence in several aspects of policy decision making. The methodological focus adopted in this research will be constrained to a top-down approach of analysis, "the domestic effects of international institutions and norms" (Risse and Börzel,1). In this case, the scholar can refer, more appropriately may be, to "Europeification" (Risse and Börzel, 2), since the underlining assumption is on the consequences of direct absorption of EU elements and interests into a national/local context of politics.

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[5] Or multiple types of logic as Bulmer and Burch call them (2000: 5).

A second limit in this paper is the unit of analysis: whereas past works have focused more frequently on institutional and structural agents (for example, see Bulmer and Burch (2000) for an analysis on the impact of Europeanisation on the British national administration), the main dependent variable in this study is political culture, and not institutions (see an example of this last focus in Ladrech, 1994). Away from regulating bodies and committees as sources of political power, citizens' commitment to politics is the final element to be explained. Other works have had such a similar focus of analysis. With regards to the direct impact of Europe on national and cross-state political movements, Imig and Tarrow (2001) have investigated the possibility of a truly cross-European political involvement based upon the Europeanisation of policy issues. Their results are probably disappointing for all the scholars who have insisted on the vital influence of the EU on the formation of citizens' movements. In particular, previous publications on regional empowerment and the overcoming of democratic deficit within the EU must deal with a EU-wide citizens participation that is not well developed. Based upon the figures introduced by Imig and Tarrow (see data in their second chapter), only 5% of all protest movements in the EU were indeed characterized as Euro-protests, namely truly cross national political action movements (2001: 33).

However, if social movements have not developed evenly across EU internal borders, Europeanisation still seems to have a positive political empowerment in other cases. The most used example to make this point is the self-government status achieved by Scotland. Dardanelli (2001) points out the direct link between the recently achieved Scottish policy-making autonomy and the EU dimension's impact on the public opinion. European integration and its implications for the UK have been used to foster the Scottish demand for more autonomy, to the point where EU policies instigated the Scottish electorate to vote more for independence than they did in the previous referendum (Dardanelli, 2001: 5, 15).

From the more specific example of the Scottish self-government, to the more general assessment of the EU impact on British politics, the research has recently started to see a stronger link between the two. The discussion had started with some caution, when scholars determined the level of influence the EU integration process was having on British politics in general (Evans, 1998: 173; Evans, 1999: 208). It is more clear by now that not only the UK, as the other EU member states, had to adapt to the Europeanisation phenomenon (Risse, Cowles, and Caporaso, 2001: 2), but that the EU is indeed a new political cleavage which has caused an electoral realignment (Webb, 2000: 66). Citizens, therefore, are affected by EU policies and institutions, and consequently they react to a new element of political interest.

In this circumstance, the British case may still represent a peculiar situation. Citizens are indeed affected by Europeanisation, but the gap between political elites and society, in relation to how to interpret the EU, still remains (King, 1997: 29). This factor becomes very important once the scholar has to weigh the relevance of European integration on citizens' political involvement. Political elites still retain control over the presentation to the public of the EU *machine*. Since society is less involved directly in the analysis of the EU, citizens' views of the European process are "more ambivalent and less polarised (Evans, 1998: 186)" than the corresponding opinions of the more informed political elites. In addition, the same situation is perceived to be more troublesome, if scholars state that citizens "don't have settled opinions (King, 1997: 29)" and that public opinion remains inconsistent (Baker and Seawright, 1998: 9).

In sum, Europeanisation is a factor that influences citizens' opinions overall, even if, in the British case, public opinion seems to be leaning more on the government's official interpretation of how Europeanisation belongs to the daily life. In this regards, Evans has highlighted that "underlying perceptions of the EU and its role seem to survive independently of people's views of the merits or otherwise of further integration (1998: 183)," suggesting that the European variable in the British

political environment is perceived as a constant. An assumption that fits very well with the analysis in this study, as more evidence is presented in the next section.

EUROPEANISATION AND PARTICIPATION

The relationship between Europeanisation and the political context in the UK is rather established. Nonetheless, the strength of the connection between European integration and political involvement is more complicated to assess. The two components could be considered as parallel agents that do not interfere with each other, but a closer look at several sources of data could point out whether this is indeed the case.

The BES surveys for 1992 and 1997 have questions on both political involvement and perception of the EU in British society. The recording of the second set of questions is particularly interesting because its findings can be directly compared to corresponding official data from the EU Commission Eurobarometer survey. The study allows for a comparative analysis that will match data collected in the UK with data collected directly by the EU, in relation to the public opinion's view regarding European integration.

PARTICIPATION

The first measure of political participation that can be presented is UK's voting turnout level for European elections. Not unsurprisingly, British citizens seem to be very consistent when they refuse to vote, more at the European elections than at the national ones. Following other EU member states, the gap between citizens' voting turnout levels at the national vs. European elections is considerable. The UK has always had one of the lowest voting turnouts at elections for the European Parliament. In the most recent occasion (1999), Great Britain had the lowest turnout rate among all EU countries: 24%, a far figure from the 60% level for the national elections turnout of the late 1990s[6] (Dearlove and Saunders, 2000: 736).

This first assessment of how the EU influences the political activism level in the British case brings a rather disappointing result, although Evans has claimed that Europe has become an important element in choosing which party to vote for, more than to determine whether to vote at all (Evans, 1992: 212): a statement that is very relevant, simply by thinking at the internal debates of all British political parties with regards to the relationship with EU institutions and policies. It could be said that the EU went from being totally ignored by the electorate in the UK (Evans, 1998: 187), to being one determinant factor of voting. However, Europe still does not have that type of impact to foster electoral participation when it comes to determine who is going to sit in the Parliament in Strasbourg.

If voting is considered the most important, easiest form of political action, it should also be viewed as a very simplistic option for political expression. The electorate does not have many possible choices, especially if political elites retain the final say on the voting options. Other forms of political expression come to mind as derivatives of possible measures of political activism: political interest, the examination of newspaper articles on politics, attention to TV news on political issues, frequency of political discussion, self-assessed relevance of politics, or protest acts (boycotts, street marches, strikes, etc…). The presentation of data on these forms of political expression as well is necessary to have a comprehensive view of the British political participation levels across the spectrum of possible political acts, in addition to voting.

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[6] According to BES data, in 1997 78.6% of the electorate voted, 87.5% was instead the corresponding figure for 1992.

Figures from the World Values Survey (WVS, 1981, 1990) suggest that the UK has a good level of political involvement and that political participants do use the full repertory of political acts to express themselves politically. Data for political interest, political discussion, and saliency of politics, nine years apart, confirm that there is an upward trend. Although the percentage of the respondents who declared to discuss politics "often" has only slightly increased (from 10.9% to 13.9%), the value for the individuals who declared to be very interested in politics has doubled (from 5.6% to 12.8%). The BES dataset for 1997 shows the same group of individuals very interested in politics as representing 9.6% of the sample – a possible slight decrease from the early 1990s value.

Judging from the WVS and BES data available, the UK seems to have followed an upward trend in regards to political involvement in the 1980s, but a downward path in the 1990s.[7] Citizens' attention to political issues in newspapers articles or on TV has decreased: up to 40% of the sample in 1997 (BES) skipped political articles (almost 7% more than the respondents in 1992). Data from the WVS 1990 can explain why so many individuals did not read about politics in the newspapers. Among the respondents to the survey, 10.3% stated that politics is very important, although 12.8% declared to be very interested in politics. This finding might suggest a discrepancy between interest in politics and motivation, since politics might not be very important to the individual. A parallel element linked to information on politics is more satisfactory: only 5% in 1997 avoided political programs on TV. The much higher value for newspaper articles might then be a consequence of that specific type of communication means.

Unconventional political involvement too shows a much more interesting result. From 1981 to 1990, several acts of political protest have actually represented citizens' political activism much better. Four acts in particular have become more frequent with time: petitions, boycotts, demonstrations and strikes. According to WVS data, all four types of unconventional actions have seen an increase in participation. The percentage of individuals who signed a petition went up to 75.3% from 63.3% in 1981. The value of the respondents taking part in boycotts has achieved 14% in 1990, whereas in 1981 it was 7.2%. Lawful demonstrations too have been more popular in 1990 than in 1981: 14% vs. 9.9%. And finally, participation in unofficial strikes has increased to 10% of the sample interviewed, vs. 6.9% in 1981. The early 1990s showed a potential for strong political activism through protest-based action, but the decade in general confirmed a possible decline in political participation, based upon more conventional forms of involvement.

The level of political activism overall seems to have declined in the late 1990s. Although Great Britain has shown some weakening in certain forms of political expression, political interest and protest acts do show a stable political involvement in society. Political participants may vote less now than they used to in the early 1990s, especially with regards to European Elections, but they have also found new forms of political participation that may satisfy them better, like unconventional acts of political expression. A similar look at the other variable of this research's analysis, the perception of the EU, portrays a similar, but not completely identical pattern of evolution.

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[7] The interpretation of the voting turnout rate might simply be correct.

EUROPEANISATION

A question like "Do British citizens support the UK's membership in the EU?" was more appropriate in the 1970s and 1980s than nowadays. Yet, it is still a vital point to repeatedly assess whether citizens support the UK's participation in the EU and whether they link their commitment to political matters to the perception of the EU's influence in their own country. Whereas a major trend has always been present in the analysis of the relationship between Brussels and UK citizens, the most recent events seem to have possibly changed that interpretation.

As the participation trend showed a decline in political involvement, the respondents' pattern with regards to the EU behaves similarly. Only 58.1% of the individuals interviewed in 1997 for the BES stated that Britain should continue to be a member of the EU, whereas in 1992 the same group of EU supporters was 71.3% of the sample. The value of such a low figure is very important if the reader considers the fact that, during the Thatcher years, support for a continued membership was much higher (high 60%-low 70%) (Evans, 1998: 174) than during the current pro-European government. The decline is even more significant and serious, because in that 5 year gap between the two BES surveys, the EU managed to achieve a further integration status, committing its member states to become more Europe-oriented.

The same conclusion can be presented in relation to another question in the survey. When the respondents were asked if Great Britain should leave the EU in the long-term, 16.9% said yes in 1997 (10.1% has said the same in 1992), and, more concerning, 42.9% of the sample stated that the UK had to reduce the EU powers, although keeping the membership. The individuals who supported the membership, but not the EU integration process in general, grew one third from the 1992 survey, adding more evidence to the negative opinion British citizens had of the EU in general.

Although the weaker endorsement of the EU since 1992 is generally agreed upon (Evans, 1999: 211; Evans, 1998: 175), data from the Eurobarometer concerning the same position present a slightly different picture. The EU Commission's survey is based on four different questions to assess how European citizens feel in relation to the EU. This more comprehensive type of measure is certainly more reliable because it is able to test the perception of the EU from different perspectives, every semester. Eurobarometer 56 (Autumn 2001) was the report used in this research and it proposes a new interpretation with regards to the British position vis-à-vis the EU and European integration.

The most important finding overall is the consistent increase in the British sample in the support to the EU and its institutions. For instance, support to a EU constitution has been declared by 58% of the individuals in the British sample. Although the value is still below EU average (67%), the British figure increased by 14% since its previous measurement. The second largest increase (+10% since its previous survey) belongs to the trust in the commission question: although the UK occupies the last spot among all EU member states when it comes to trusting the European Commission (only 35% of the British sample said yes), that value is one third higher than what it was in the previous Eurobarometer.

Results from two other questions concord that the UK seems to have strengthened its supportive position towards European integration and its consequences. When the British citizen has to make a decision based upon benefit from the EU membership, the absolute result is rather disappointing, since the UK has the second lowest score,[8] well below EU average. However, it remains true that

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[8] Membership is a good thing has a 33% response rate, and benefit from membership has a 36% one.

the British value in judging EU membership a good thing and even a source of benefit has increased in both cases: +4% and +7% respectively. Additionally, other scholars have pointed out how in recent years the group of respondents with no answer has increased constantly since the mid-1990s, to a situation in which in 1999: "there were more "don't knows" than there were positives (Mather, 2000: 66).

At the same time, the critical position of most British citizens towards the EU does not mean necessarily that the respondents have alternative options available. As a matter of fact, their negative responses do not mean the EU is not the best option, according to one scholar (Gamble, 1998: 30): a well taken point since theoretically speaking no way out of the Union is legitimately foreseeable. Morever, Great Britain does support other aspects of the EU that might work better for the country. As a result that might turn out as a surprise to all researchers who have worked on the democratic deficit issue within the EU, 32% of UK respondents in the same survey declared to be satisfied with EU democracy (Mather, 2000: 66). Ambivalence seems to prevail then.

The overall British position towards European integration in the form of EU institutions and policies seems to have improved in some way, but also worsened in general for other matters. More abstract questions dealing with general principles have highlighted how the gap between British respondents and the EU government has widened. In particular, one question in the BES datasets, for both 1992 and 1997, gives a good representation of this new Euro-skeptical mood. When individuals were asked whether they would support to either fully unite with the EU or fully protect the country's independence, the balance between the two sides shifted in the 5 year period. In 1992, 43.2% of the respondents positioned themselves to the left of the mid-point on the 11-points scale between the two extremes. The group to the right of the mid-point, closer to the full independence extreme, represented 38.3% of the sample. Five years later, the first group, more leaning towards fully integrate the country into the EU, has shrunk to 34.2%, whereas the opposite faction has grown to 42.7%. In consideration of the British problems with EU policies in the 1990s, this type of change is not unexpected, but it remains significant to note that although citizens like the Commission and the EU goals more than before, the sense of national independence in the UK is still very strong.

In sum, an analysis of the two main elements of discussion in this research has several conflicting aspects to highlight. Great Britain's political activism has slightly increased conventionally, although the easiest form of political expression, voting, has actually become less popular. Other forms of political involvement, especially if unconventional, have generally grown in the 1990s, supporting the interpretation that citizens' activism in the UK has become stronger. On a parallel note, British attitude towards Europeanisation and its consequences for the UK seems to have become more critical of the EU. Although some of the measures have indeed portrayed a more favorable position from citizens in the UK overall, the general level of EU support in the country is still rather low. The most important point to evoke from the data presented and the interpretations of other scholars is that the EU is not yet well-loved in the UK, but it has definitively gained momentum as an important factor in the British decision making at the national level. Therefore, whether British citizens support unconditionally European integration or not, they have to reckon with its impact in their daily lives, and in the way they understand political activism. A more clear relationship between the two factors is emphasized in the next section, where appropriate statistical methods are used to test whether elements of European integration have a say in the level of political involvement in the UK.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based upon the variables available in the BES 1997 dataset, the following two sections try to verify whether a relationship between European factors and political involvement in the UK exists. This scholar's assumption is that a positive link between the two elements studied should be present, especially since the Europeanisation component has become more important recently. However, the strength of the relationship is more uncertain and somewhat more complicated to predict, since many more variables are usually involved with an individual's level of political activism. In particular, the analyses below exclude the type of contextual situation present in 1997 in Great Britain and in the EU at large, focusing exclusively on the individual's personal responses as a way to test the hypothesis. Section A deals entirely with correlation findings, whereas section B presents results from a regression model.

A. CORRELATIONS

As the first step towards the understanding of the European component determining political activism in the UK, the correlation option gives the reader a general assessment of which measure to focus on. Of all the possible elements that could/should have been considered, vote, political knowledge and gender were not significant. The result is in itself quite surprising, especially for the vote variable. Whether or not individuals have voted is not correlated to their position towards the EU membership. It can be concluded that voting does not make a difference in the way individuals in Great Britain perceive the relevance of the EU membership, suggesting that the interpretation of their position towards the EU is determined by other, indirect factors. Debates on what is actually driving support for the EU in member states have shown how, most of the times, EU citizens use proxies (especially national measures) to assess the EU (Anderson, 1998). In this regards, the lack of significance in the correlation between vote and the UK's EU membership continuation supports this interpretation. At the same time, the finding suggests that voting is not related to the EU sphere for British individuals, weakening the hypothesis that activism and Europeanisation are indeed connected.

TABLE 1: Britain's Position towards the EU Membership – Correlations

Correlating Variables	Should Britain Stay Member of EC?
Voting System Should Change	.107**
Party ID (Conservative/Labour)	-.103**
European Identity	-.252**
Age	.106**
Highest Educational Qualification	.250**

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed). BES 1997 Data.

In Table 1 the reader can find the correlation values for all the significant elements included in the analysis. Overall, the interpretation from the table is very traditional: the results respect previous research analyses and the direction of the correlations is not atypical. The strongest correlation is represented by the European identity measure. Individuals who declared to be European are more likely to support the continuation of the EU membership for the UK. The result does not need

comments, since citizens who feel European would probably support the European integration, even when the membership benefits might not be very clear.

The second highest correlation appears with the educational level score. Supporting initial research on the relationship between European supporters and political sophistication in general, this correlation factor has a negative value. Based upon the direction of the variables included, the negative value suggests that respondents who have achieved a lower educational degree are more likely to support a withdrawal for the UK from the European process. The interpretation is generally supported by many other works on the link between international matters and education. On the same point, Evans (1998: 180), among many other scholars, has claimed that usually a greater knowledge of the EU leads to a more popular support of the European process. The degree of education achieved is only an indirect measure to possibly assess knowledge in general, but it still supports the logic shown by the EU Commission, in the UK in particular, that knowledge of the EU mechanism and of its goals can increase British support for European integration.

Two of the other variables used belong to the political involvement area. The individual's position towards the British voting system and the respondent's party ID present the figure of a pro-EU membership supporter who is closer to the Labour party and more in favor of a change in the electoral system in Great Britain. In this case specifically, European integration affects the area of political participation by supporting a possible political change in the British voting system, possibly related to the chance of using the same PR system as many other EU member states. Although the strength of the correlation is not as robust as for the other elements, it is still very significant.

The last measure to be related to support for EU membership is age, a factor that still has much relevance in assessing citizens' positions in politics in general. Following the overall results presented in the study of European integration and public opinion support, the age value in Table 1 confirms that younger respondents in the British sample are more likely to be supportive of the UK's membership in the EU than older individuals in the same sample. The relevance of the age factor is also important to assess whether and how political participation takes place. More clearly, if young individuals are more likely to support the EU, and are also more likely to act unconventionally than conventionally, then the link between Europeanisation and political activism in the UK can be more strongly affected for what concerns possible levels of activity and style of action.

As a simple overview of the possibility for a link between European integration and political activism, the UK data in the correlations analysis suggest that a connection between the two elements exist, although the strength of that connection is not clear. A more direct comparison of regression standardized coefficients can be more helpful in making that claim.

B. REGRESSION

The first findings from the correlation section above do not give a clear, direct reading of a possible relationship between the European issue and political activism. Because of the many intervening variables for both concepts, a final conclusion remains weak. The use of regression analysis can better help the scholar to determine how important the EU element is in assessing political integration. Since voting has always been considered the most direct, simple way of political expression, a first attempt was made using voting in a categorical analysis model. The results were not significantly meaningful to be interpreted. Although categorical analysis remains the most appropriate statistical method to assess the impact of Europeanisation on conventional activism like

voting, the findings from that attempt were not useful in answering the research question in this case.

Consequently, the focus of the statistical analysis shifted towards using the level of declared political interest for the respondent as the dependent variable in a linear regression model. Since the categories available for the political interest variable were at least six[9], categorical analysis findings with this type of dependent variable would have been too complex to summarize. The results presented in Table 2 are more convincing and helpful in answering the research question of this study, even when linear regression is used. With an adjusted R square of .158, the overall significance of the model was still perfect and, more important, the significance of many independent variables was beneficial in assessing the research's validity.

TABLE 2: Regression Results on Political Interest

Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficients	Significance
Vote	-.128	.000
Voting System Should Change	.089	.000
Should Britain Stay Member	.096	.000
European Identity	-.078	.001
Political Knowledge Level	-.054	.017
Gender	.112	.000
Age	-.204	.000
Highest Educational Qualification	.208	.000

Dependent Variable: Political Interest. Adjusted R squared: .158. BES 1997 Data.

Among all the independent variables included in the equation, two of them were clearly representing the EU factor (Membership continuation and European identity); three of them were other indicators of political involvement; and the remaining three belonged to the individual's socio-demographic characteristics. All the variables included are perfectly significant, the political knowledge measure is the only component to be significant at the .005 rather than .001 level. More importantly, the two elements representing the main hypothesis in this research were significant: Britain's membership continuation and the European identity variables are indeed affecting the level of political interest and the size of their standardized coefficient is supportive of the hypothesis. Although vote, age and educational qualification are the variables with the strongest impact on the respondent's level of political interest, both European factors in the regression contribute to determine the individual's interest in politics.

The direction of the coefficients does not show any surprises. Voting does support a higher level of political interest, maybe because any voter becomes more involved with what he or she has voted on. There is certainly a mutual relationship between the two variables, as the literature on political participation has discussed in the past. Along the same line, the education variable coefficient confirms exactly what mentioned in the previous section regarding the relationship between higher education and political interest/sophistication. A higher level of education reinforces the

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[9] A great deal, quite a lot, some, not very much, none at all, not answered.

individual's political interest, a link that is based probably on an improved knowledge. As a matter of fact, the political knowledge level itself strengthens that interpretation: the negative value of the coefficient backs up the positive relationship between sophistication and interest. However, a higher score on the political knowledge scale increases only slightly the level of self-declared political interest, hinting to a situation in which political knowledge does not indeed make an important impact on political interest - a theory that was supported by studies on political parties' militants.

Other variables present results that agree with the general findings in the literature. The age factor supports the position that a higher age increases the level of political interest, a link that has been debated and agreed upon in the discipline. The strength of the age coefficient is particularly relevant: being one year older increases the political interest level score by .204 standard deviations, slightly the same result as with achieving a higher level of education, but definitively easier to accomplish! In addition, the gender coefficient and the voting system position add more to the interpretation of an individual with a high political interest level: women and respondents who do not favor a change of the political system are associated with lower levels of political interest variable. The gender element remains more concerning for the scholar since it represents the everlasting debate regarding gender participation levels in politics: a gap that cannot be closed, it appears.

Lastly, but more directly related to this research, the impact of the two European factors respects the hypothesis formulated at the beginning of the study: a closer attachment/support for Europe does increase the level of political interest in an individual. Although both coefficients are not as strong as most of the other independent variables, they do make a difference in the direction predicted. On a parallel note, the traditional elements of the political interest equation, the socio-demographic variables that is, still retain the most relevant impact on the interest measure. The findings from Table 2 suggest, therefore, that the relationship to the EU factor has started to have a say in the assessment of an individual's political interest and possibly commitment to politics. Although the shortcomings of the BES dataset have not allowed for a more direct analysis of other forms of political activism, like protest acts, the initial assessments from the use of political interest as the dependent variable encourage further research down the same path.

CONCLUSIONS

As a country that has been very concerned with the planned evolution of integration, the United Kingdom has closely followed the effects of Europeanisation on national soil. Among the many changes that studies on the UK's social and political evolution have presented, some works in the recent decade have highlighted a reinvigorated political interest among British citizens and a more active participation in the political domain. The impact of Brussels' decisions may have possibly shifted British participants' interests towards different levels of political action (local vs. national vs. European) and multiple styles of political involvement (less conventional, and more protest-oriented). It appears that, consequently, the research should look more closely to the connection between Europeanisation's effects in the UK and corresponding levels of political activism. An overview of how measures for both concepts have evolved, based upon different sources of data, confirms that parallel to increasing levels of unconventional, and partially conventional action as well, British support to the EU has regularly declined since the early 1990s. Two consistent trends that have developed in the opposite direction, but that have also interfered with each other.

An analysis of the possible relationship between the lower levels of British support to the EU in general, and the usually higher levels of political activism, especially when not measured by simple voting, gives an initial confirmation that Europe does have an influence on the intensity of political activism in a member state. The finding is a further reason to assess the full, deep impact of the European integration process, even in areas that were not clearly delineated or targeted originally. Supplying a possible additional success to the Europeanisation process, the British case can convince scholars of the EU of the national impact of EU decisions, even on political participants' intensity and style of activism.

The correlation and regression equation findings suggest that the European element has an important place in the assessment of political interest in the British Election Studies sample. Respondent's self-declared level of interest in politics was affected by the traditional, expected socio-demographic variables as well as by two measures of Europeanisation. The significance of the European elements is the first step towards a more comprehensive examination of how the EU can influence British respondents' involvement degree in political matters.

A first suggestion for further research to come out of the findings deals with the recording of more variegated measures of political action. The BES datasets used only have data for mostly conventional forms of political action, whereas they could also benefit from questions on protest-oriented acts, which are indeed already studied in this particular area of the discipline. The following suggestion for next studies on the same topic concerns the types of Europeanisation items to consider. This research has dealt mainly with a general concept of effects of European integration, but it would be more resourceful to use the respondents' positions on specific EU policies to test their corresponding level of political activism. The relationship might probably be stronger than the one presented here.

In the end, Europe does matter again, it could be stated. But it is indeed in how it matters for British citizens that remains the focus of analysis. In the context of this specific study, the impact of Europeanisation supports citizens' activism, achieving another result for an integration process that is clearly not completely supported by the UK. The national context of political action is not immune from purely European motives. Citizens' political actions included.

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