

# Exploring the link between the economy and public attitudes to the European Union

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## **Abstract**

The past decade has seen a profusion of studies investigating the sources of public attitudes towards the European Union. Many hypotheses are based upon linking positive economic performance with higher levels of support for European integration. No research sufficiently addresses the problem of establishing the causal mechanism between improvements in economic well-being with the integration of Europe. In this paper, a model of economic evaluations on attitudes towards European integration is estimated that incorporates voters' perceptions of the relative influence that the EU and the British government have on the national economy. This study connects individual and aggregate level inferences by analysing repeated cross-sections of monthly opinion polls in Britain between 1997 and 2001, examining how the parameters vary across individuals and over time. Consistent with previous studies, we expect there to be a stronger link between economic perceptions and attitudes towards Britain's membership of the EU amongst voters identifying the EU as influencing the national economy the most. We also investigate the connection between the economy and the primary economic issue concerning the EU during this period, joining the Single European Currency.

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## **Introduction**

It has been rather emphatically asserted that “economics moves political behaviour” (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992, p. 597), but how this occurs has long been a focus of empirical research. The influence that economic factors play on public evaluations of European integration has been the primary focus of research in the study of public opinion towards the EU and its predecessors until quite recently. Yet, the European Union does not control macroeconomic policy in its member states, few citizens think about the economy at the European level or have much knowledge about what the EU does, and national governments remain the dominant entity perceived to influence economic well-being of individuals and states.

Recent empirical studies have found that political and cultural factors have more explanatory power than economic factors. Research has found that important determinants of attitudes to European integration are based upon feelings of national identity (Hooghe and Marks 2004, 2005), fear and hostility towards other cultures (McLaren 2002), the influence of political parties (Steenbergen and Jones 2002, Edwards, Netjes and Steenbergen 2005) and the media (Carey and Burton 2004), and the level of satisfaction with domestic political institutions (Anderson 1998, Sánchez-Cuenca 2000). Most of this research has challenged the orthodoxy that economic factors account for variations in public attitudes towards European integration that prevailed in the previous decade.

This paper does not attempt to reconcile economic factors with the emerging literature that emphasises political and cultural effects. Unfortunately that is beyond the scope of this study. Here I present a case for when economic factors are more likely to influence attitudes towards European integration. One of the drawbacks of the economic explanation of support for the EU is the assumption that individuals or electorates assign economic responsibility to the EU can be perceived to be a major leap that lacks empirical validation. Using individual level data from Great Britain collected at monthly intervals between 1997 and 2001, a model is developed that demonstrates the differences in the performance of the economic hypothesis between those individuals that do assign economic responsibility to the European Union and those that do not.

## **Economic Explanations of Support for European Integration**

The main argument supporting the economic explanations of public support for European integration is that the European Union, and its predecessors, has essentially been an economic project and therefore is judged on its achievement of this aim of promoting economic prosperity. There are two potential drawbacks with this line of reasoning. One is that it is difficult to identify whether the EU is delivering on this objective of economic prosperity. Indeed, one could also argue, as George (1992) does, that if economic times are hard then an individual may be more inclined to transfer support to the European level as an alternative to the national government, which is more likely to be deemed responsible for the economic fortunes of the country. The second is that if responsibility for the economy is to be attributed to the EU a

certain amount of knowledge about its institutions and actions would be expected. But investigation into the levels of political knowledge and awareness of even the most basic features of European integration find that European citizens are poorly informed (Wessels 1995a, Anderson 1998). Duch and Palmer (2005) have identified the application of economic theories of voting to a substantive context only loosely related to that for which it was developed as 'theory drift'. They cite the work on attitudes to European integration as a prime example of theory drift, as the EU has not been responsible, until recently, for either fiscal or monetary policies and only has an indirect influence on national economies that most citizens would not have the sophistication to recognise.

There is a reasonably substantial body of work that investigates the effects of the economy on levels of support for European integration. Whilst the general hypotheses for these studies are similar – economic prosperity leads to higher levels of support – the levels of analysis of the models and operationalisation of economic variables differ widely. Previous studies have analysed this relationship by testing models including objective measures of the economy such as inflation, unemployment and Gross Domestic Product (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993, Anderson and Kalthenthaler 1996, Duch and Taylor 1997), subjective measures such as retrospective and prospective evaluations of the national economy (Gabel and Palmer 1995, Carey 2002, Rohrschneider 2002) or both objective and subjective economic variables (Gabel and Whitten 1997, Gabel 1998a).

Eichenberg and Dalton (1993) draw on economic models of voting to derive their hypotheses, which stresses the relationship between economic conditions and evaluations of national governments. They argue this relationship transfers to support for the EU because it has such a major impact on economic welfare that the European public should recognise this (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993, 512). However, they also acknowledge that the public's lack of knowledge about EU affairs and the dominance of national politics on most Europeans' everyday experiences is a problem they cannot reconcile in their research. Duch and Taylor state that the impact of the economy on support for the EU found in empirical analyses is not a link between European integration and economic welfare, but actually an artefact of voters' evaluations of national incumbents (1997, 67). They argue that the clarity of responsibility between the EU and the economy is far from clear and, as Powell and Whitten (1993) demonstrate, citizens are less likely to hold institutions accountable when responsibility for public policy is unclear. There is no clear evidence of a macroeconomic effect on levels of support for European integration, with results varying depending on the scope of the study, operationalisation of the dependent variable and control variables in the model (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993, Anderson and Kalthenthaler 1996, Duch and Taylor 1997). Duch and Taylor conclude that macro-economic fluctuations do not directly affect evaluations of the EU, not even when comparing less developed regions that receive targeted spending with those that over-contribute. Gabel and Palmer describe national economic

evaluations as “noisy’ measures of EC policy implications” and claim that they “will be weakly correlated with EC support” (1995, 5).

Gabel and Whitten (1997) examine the effects of both subjective evaluations of national and personal economic fortunes and objective regional and national economic conditions on support for integration. They find that all three macroeconomic indicators that they test, inflation, unemployment and GDP, are insignificant at the national level. They find that it is the subjective economy, rather than the objective economy, which really influences support for integration, and the relationship is a positive one. Their results also indicate that an individual’s subjective economic assessment is significant, but this significance is greater for an individual’s perception of the change in the national economy than of their personal economic situation.

Other studies try to tap into the variation of economic factors that affect different individuals in different ways. Anderson and Reichert suggest that EU membership involves both winners and losers. The operationalisation of the ‘winners’ of European integration is difficult, but is largely the focus of Matthew Gabel’s research (1998a, 1998b, Gabel and Palmer 1995), where he develops a cost-benefit model primarily focused on economic factors. This approach sees the European Union evaluated in terms of the consequences of its policies rather than as an institution responsible for the general economic situation (Gabel and Palmer 1995, 5). Gabel (1998a) argues that the gains from integration are unevenly distributed among individuals according to their levels of ‘human capital’. Those with higher levels of education, wealth or who work in more skilled professions are better positioned to realise gains from increased trade liberalisation. Duch and Taylor’s analysis also suggests that individuals that gain from the comparative advantage of integration, determined by education, wealth, occupation and region, are found to be more supportive of the integrative process, but at a decreasing level over time (1997, 77-8).

### **Economic Responsibility of Institutions**

Whilst a decade ago Gabel and Palmer stated that “it seems unlikely that the European public hold the European Community primarily responsible for their nation’s economic well-being” (1995, 4), this is no longer the case. In surveys conducted between 1997 and 2001 a majority of the British public did indeed hold the national government responsible for the economy. When asked “which one of the following do you think affects the general economic situation in this country most: The British Government or the European Union?” 55.2% of respondents answered that British government did. But a substantial number also responded that the European Union affects the British economy more than the national economy, 35.6% of respondents plus an additional 2% who thought that both institutions affected the economy in equal measure<sup>1</sup>. Clearly the assignment of responsibility for the performance of the British economy amongst its electorate resides with both the British government and the European Union. The distribution of this economic responsibility variable is

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<sup>1</sup> An additional 7.2% responded don’t know, refused to answer or stated that neither affected the national economy.

graphed in Figure 1, and there is relatively little variation in the aggregate distribution of this variable across these four years of data.

[Figure 1 here]

If an individual believes that the European Union affects the national economy more than the British government then that person will use evaluations of the economy to appraise the European Union. Following from previous research that establishes a positive relationship between the economy and attitudes to European integration, I expect that the more positive an individual views the British economy the more likely that individual will be to approve of Britain's membership in the European Union.

If an individual believes that the British government affects the national economy more than the European Union then that person will not use evaluations of the economy to appraise the EU. Therefore we would not expect to see significant relationships between the economic variables and support for British membership of the EU.

### **Data**

The majority of studies that examine the determinants of attitudes to European integration rely on data from the Eurobarometer project that allows for the analysis of data going back over 30 years. Whilst the over-time component can be an invaluable source for investigation, it can also be restrictive as there are only a limited number of variables repeated across many surveys. An additional criticism levelled at these over-time analyses that can span decades is that the European Union cannot be compared with the European Community or European Economic Community because what integration meant in 1975 and what it means in 1995 are completely different (Anderson and Reichert 1996). Whilst there is a potentially richer source of data when using a static research design that uses data from one snapshot in time, there could potentially be limitations with generalisability depending on the salience of European related issues that can vary depending on the politics of the day. Whilst the data used in this research does not adequately resolve either of these problems, it does go some way to testing the impact of the economic determinants of support over time and is able to utilise a number of variables not available in Eurobarometer datasets.

The data is taken from monthly public opinion surveys conducted by the Gallup organisation in Great Britain<sup>2</sup>. There are 47 continuous months of data for virtually the entire length of the first 'New Labour' government between June 1997 and April 2001, sampling more than one thousand people per month. Whilst it would be preferable to analyse comparative data from numerous countries, the UK is a notable country to investigate. There is an established body of research that has found strong links between perceptions of the economy and political attitudes amongst British voters, particularly voting intentions and government/Prime Ministerial approval (e.g. Clarke and

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Harold Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne Stewart, and Paul Whiteley for sharing their data.

Stewart 1995, Sanders 2003, Clarke and Lebo 2003). There is also evidence that the impact of national identity and sub-national identity on attitudes to European integration is strong in the UK (Carey 2002).

### *Dependent variables*

There are a number of variables used in previous studies to evaluate attitudes towards European integration. The most frequently used variable is taken from a question in Eurobarometer surveys that assesses the approval of an individual's country's membership of the European Union. A similar question is asked in the Gallup surveys, although with different response items than the Eurobarometer question<sup>3</sup>.

Overall, do you strongly approve, approve, disapprove or strongly disapprove of Britain's membership in the European Union?

[Figure 2 here]

A second dependent variable is also operationalised. Whilst our primary aim is to evaluate general attitudes towards European integration, there is also a strong motivation to test the impact that perceptions of the economy has on policy-specific areas of the European integration. The only area that has high enough salience to generate potentially meaningful responses is over the issue of the single European currency. A question was asked in the Gallup surveys that asks British citizens about their attitudes to adopting the Euro:

Thinking of the Single European Currency, which of the following would come closest to your own view? Do you think Britain should definitely join, wait and see how it develops or definitely stay out?

[Figure 3 here]

The distributions of these variables are graphed in Figures 2 and 3. There are some trends in the aggregate distribution of the variables across these four years of data. Although the variation in the aggregate distribution of the membership question tends to fluctuate fairly randomly over time, there is a relatively clear increase in the overall number of respondents who think that the UK should definitely stay out of the Single European Currency from late 1999 onwards, and a decrease in those who prefer to wait and see how the situation develops.

### *Independent variables*

There is debate as to which subjective economic questions should be used to best predict voting behaviour or Presidential approval in the US (e.g. Norpoth 1996, MacKuen, Eriksson and Stimson 1996). In the British case there is relative agreement that the following questions tap into, respectively, the egocentric prospective, sociotropic retrospective, sociotropic prospective and egocentric retrospective dimensions:

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<sup>3</sup> The Eurobarometer question is: "Generally speaking, do you think that your country's membership of the European Union is a good thing, bad thing or neither good nor bad?"

- i. How do you think the financial situation of your household will change over the next 12 months?
- ii. How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months?
- iii. How do you think the general economic situation in this country will develop over the next 12 months?
- iv. How does the financial situation of your household now compare with what it was 12 months ago?<sup>4</sup>

Whilst there is evidence in the EU support literature (e.g. Gabel and Whitten 1997) that there is variation in the efficacy of these variables, previous analysis of British popularity functions finds that to a considerable degree they all measure the same underlying phenomenon (Sanders and Carey 2002). As such there is concern that there is potential collinearity between the variables. The analysis conducted here uses one measure of the subjective economy, the national (sociotropic) retrospective variable. We are seeking to understand the impact that evaluations of the economy play on attitudes to the European Union, therefore it seems most reasonable that individuals will use the recent state of the national economy in order to apply economic assessments to the supranational institution. However, the model is virtually identical when substituting with any of the other three subjective economic measures.

A number of studies highlight the difference between levels of support for the EU from men and women, with women frequently cited as being less supportive of European integration (Gabel 1998b). Gelleny and Anderson (2000) assert that women are losers from the integration process because of their position in the labour market, and have been disproportionately affected through resulting cuts in the welfare system. Nelson and Guth (2000) suggest a number of explanations to account for the gender gap in EU support. These include economic factors such as women being more economically vulnerable from economic integration and integration sacrificing social needs to economic interests. There are also control variables included in the model to account for some of the cost-benefit factors discussed above, including education (age left education), income and a proxy variable for wealth (home owner). The evidence on the influence of parties on attitudes to the EU generally argues that identifiers with political parties tend to follow the line that their preferred parties take on this issue (Franklin, Marsh and McLaren 1994, Wessels 1995b, Ray 2003). This relationship tends to be stronger when the party stance is clear and the party is unified behind the stance. In the period of this study, 1997-2001, the positions of the major political parties are relatively clear. The leadership of the Labour Party is as pro-European as it has ever been and less divided on the issue than previously. However, over specific policy issues such as joining the Single European Currency it is far more cautious than the more pro-European Liberal Democrats. The Conservative Party, under the leadership of William Hague, hardens its Euroscepticism during these years and whilst major divisions are apparent, they are far less divisive than in the previous parliament. Therefore, we would expect a

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<sup>4</sup> Possible responses to each question are: Get/got a lot better, get/got a little better, stay(ed) the same, get/got a little worse or get/got a lot worse.

negative relationship for Conservative party identifiers, and a positive relationship for Labour and Liberal Democrat identifiers.

## Results

The dependent variables to be tested are ordered categorical measures and coded so that higher values correspond with more support for the measure of European integration. The data from the Gallup surveys are pooled, and ordered logit is used to estimate the model to explain attitudes to European integration. To assess the impact that responsibility for the economy plays on the effectiveness of the subjective economic variable, an interaction term of these two variables is included in the model. The economic responsibility variable is dichotomous with individuals who think the EU is accountable for the state of the national economy coded as 1 and the UK government as 0. Table 1 shows the estimates of the model explaining public attitudes towards membership of the European Union for the pooled data.

[Table 1 here]

The national retrospections variable is significant and positive, confirming the hypothesis that higher perceptions of economic well-being are associated with higher levels of support for the EU. The Economic responsibility variable is negative and significant, suggesting that individuals who hold the EU accountable for the state of the economy are less supportive of Britain's membership of the EU than those who hold the British government accountable for the state of the national economy. The interaction effect between these two variables is positive, suggesting that the impact of the subjective economy variable increases at a higher rate for individuals who hold the EU accountable than for individuals who hold the UK government accountable. Contrary to the hypothesised expectations, there is a relationship between the economy and attitudes to the EU for individuals who do not hold it accountable for the British economy. However, the impact of the economic variable is stronger for individuals who hold the EU accountable than those who do not.

The effects of the party ID variables are as we would expect from previous research, positive for Labour and Liberal Democrat, and negative for the Tories. The reference category for these variables is having no party identification. The control variables for income, gender and income are also positive as predicted, although there is no significant effect of the homeowner variable.

[Figures 4-7 here]

The estimates are broadly as we would expect, but further analysis of the predicted probabilities of the model will allow us greater understanding of the substantive significance of the effects on the dependent variable with changes in the values of the main independent variables of interest. Figure 4 shows the effect that perceptions of the economy plays on the likelihood of strongly approving of Britain's membership of the EU. The probability of such a pro-

European perspective is very small, but increases roughly equally for all respondents as economic optimism increase, and it increases at an increasing rate. However, this relative parity between those who hold the EU or British economy is not repeated for the probabilities for the other values of the dependent variable shown in Figures 5, 6 and 7. Figure 5 shows the effect that perceptions of the economy plays on the likelihood of approving of Britain's membership of the EU. The impact of the subjective economy is positive as with that for strongly approve, but the impact is of the economic variable is steeper for those who hold the EU accountable. This can also be seen for the negative categories of the dependent variable, graphed in Figures 6 and 7, although the impact of the national retrospective economy variable is negative, but steeper for individuals who hold the EU accountable.

[Table 2 and 3 here]

The changes in the predicted probabilities are also summarised in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 shows the difference between the predicted probabilities for the four values of the dependent variable of the lowest and highest values of the subjective economic variable and the change between these minimum and maximum values for respondents who hold the EU accountable. Table 3 shows the same information for respondents who hold the British government accountable for the UK economy. Taken together the tables demonstrate that the impact of the economy on support for the EU is substantively larger between the range of values for this variable for those who hold the EU accountable for 3 of the 4 possible outcomes, and negligible for the other (strongly approve). The difference is greater for those who are predicted to approve of Britain's membership of the EU by 11.2 percentage points.

[Table 4 here]

A further investigation is conducted using attitudes towards the Single European Currency as the dependent variable. The results are shown in Table 4 are very similar, with the direction and significance of the main variables of interest the same. Indeed, the size of the interaction effect in this model is identical with the previous model suggesting that the differences between the efficacy of the economic variable conditional on assignment of economic responsibility are robust across the two conceptualisations of support for European integration.

[Figure 8 here]

A further preliminary analysis is conducted without pooling the data across the various months, but conducting separate analyses for each month. Figure 8 shows the difference in the effects of economic responsibility on the effectiveness of the national retrospective perceptions variable on explaining support for the EU for each month from June 1997 to April 2001. This figure attempts to summarise the information that was displayed for the pooled analysis above for 47 estimations by graphing the linear combination for the interaction effect and original terms. A couple of conclusions can be gauged at

this early stage, one that the effects are mostly negative, and two that the effects are statistically significant in approximately half of the months.

The findings presented here demonstrate that, in Britain between 1997 and 2001, economic factors influenced attitudes towards both Britain's membership of the EU and judgments about whether or not the country should adopt the Euro currency. This relationship was found for individuals who believed that the EU was mostly responsible for the British economy and those who thought the national government was. But the impact of the economy appears to be stronger for those who hold the EU responsible, confirming to expectations that when there is greater clarity of responsibility, there is greater assignment of credit or blame for the institution (Powell and Whitten 1993). This finding could be important in directing further studies to further explore the way in which economic variables are operationalised as the effects are conditional on an assignment of responsibility that has not been considered in previous studies seeking to explain attitudes to European integration.

**Table 1:** Ordered logit model of public support for British membership of the EU

	Coefficient	Robust std error
National Retrospective Evaluations	0.24	(.01)*
Economic Responsibility (EU=1)	-0.77	(.07)*
Interaction (economy*responsibility)	0.10	(.02)*
Conservative Party ID	-0.33	(.05)*
Labour Party ID	0.51	(.05)*
LibDem Party ID	0.25	(.05)*
Education	0.32	(.01)*
Gender (male)	0.27	(.02)*
Owner-occupier	0.01	(.03)
Income	0.14	(.01)*
Wald Chi <sup>2</sup> (d.f.)	5922.3 (10)	
Log Likelihood	-36123.5	
N	35321	

\* Significant at  $p \leq .05$  level

**Table 2:** Change in predicted probabilities of public support for British membership of the EU for individuals who hold the EU responsible for the UK economy

	National economy has got a lot worse	National economy has got a lot better	Change
$\Pr(y=1 x)$	0.0443	0.1494	-0.1052
$\Pr(y=2 x)$	0.2563	0.4704	-0.2141
$\Pr(y=3 x)$	0.6138	0.3561	0.2577
$\Pr(y=4 x)$	0.0856	0.0241	0.0615

**Table 3:** Change in predicted probabilities of public support for British membership of the EU for individuals who hold the British government responsible for the UK economy

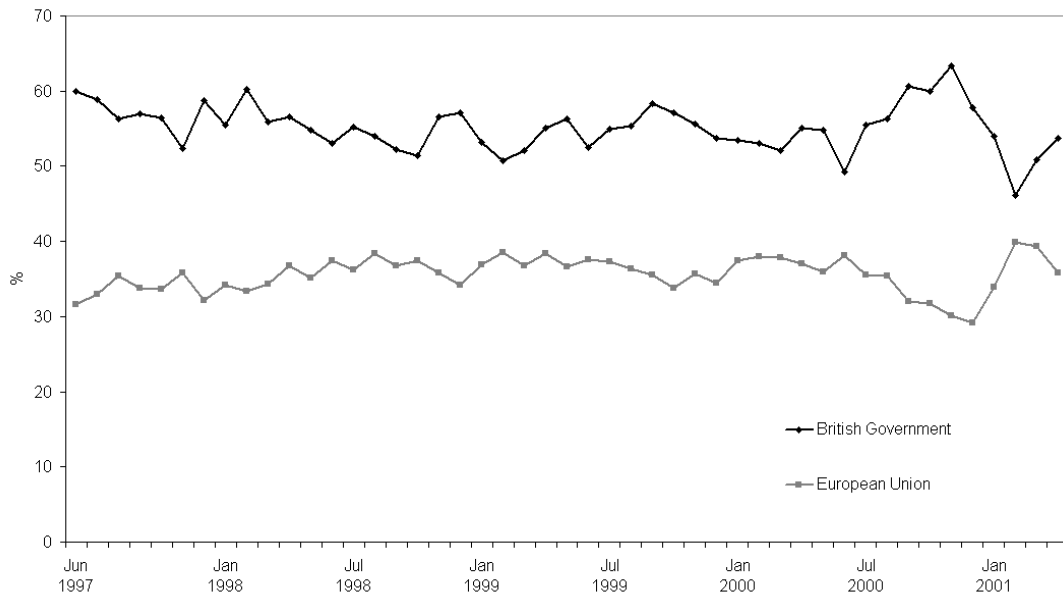
	National economy has got a lot worse	National economy has got a lot better	Change
$\Pr(y=1 x)$	0.0337	0.0824	-0.0487
$\Pr(y=2 x)$	0.2107	0.3722	-0.1615
$\Pr(y=3 x)$	0.6449	0.4993	0.1456
$\Pr(y=4 x)$	0.1106	0.046	0.0646

**Table 4: Ordered logit model of public support for Britain joining the Single European Currency**

	Coefficient	Robust std error
National Retrospective Evaluations	0.13	(.01)*
Economic Responsibility (EU=1)	-0.48	(.07)*
Interaction (economy*responsibility)	0.10	(.02)*
Conservative Party ID	-0.37	(.04)*
Labour Party ID	0.41	(.04)*
LibDem Party ID	0.30	(.05)*
Education	0.22	(.01)*
Gender (male)	0.21	(.02)*
Owner-occupier	0.07	(.03)*
Income	0.09	(.01)*
Wald Chi <sup>2</sup> (d.f.)	3542.73 (10)	
Log Likelihood	-35987.8	
N	36102	

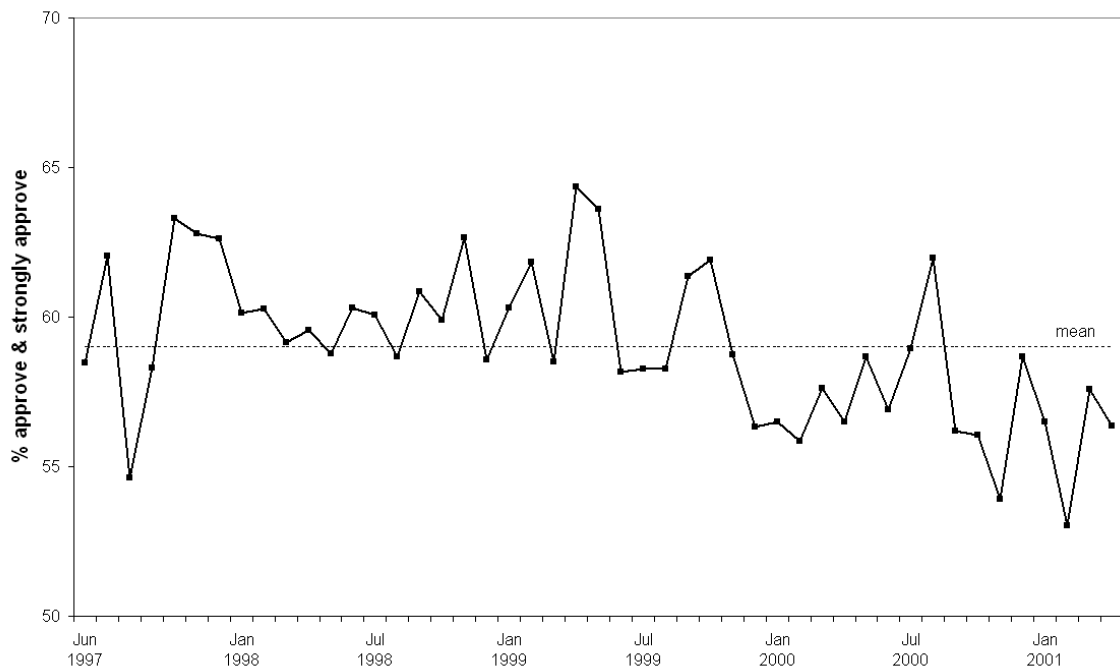
\* Significant at p≤.05 level

**Figure 1:** Which one of the following do you think affects the general economic situation in this country most: The British Government or the European Union?

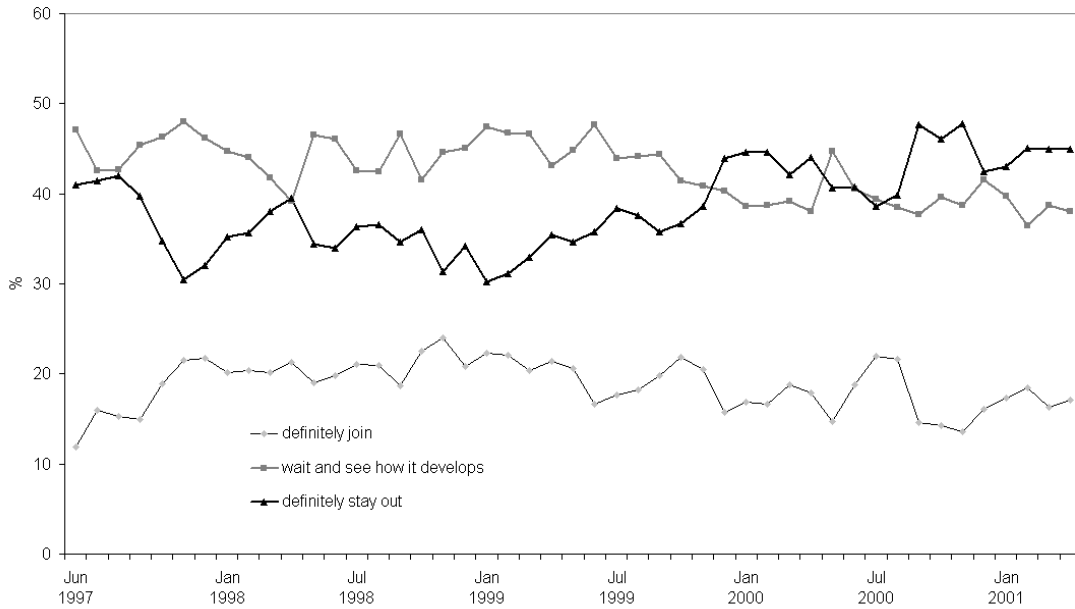


**Figure 2:** Overall, do you strongly approve, approve, disapprove or strongly disapprove of Britain's membership in the European Union?

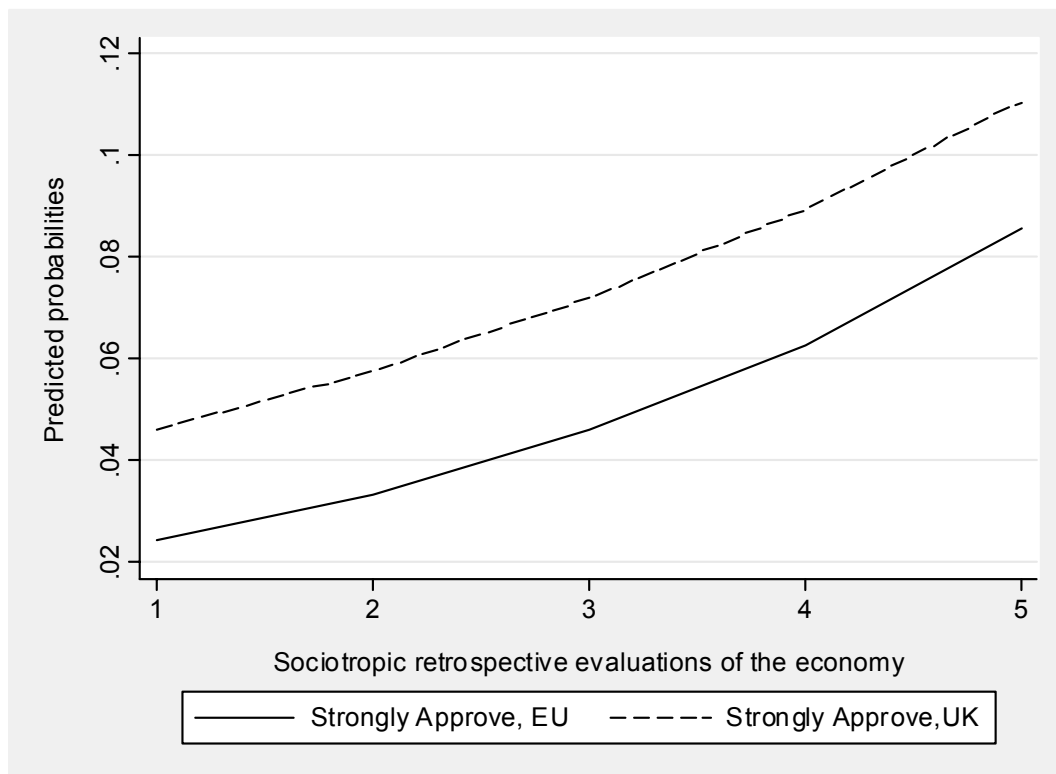
*(Line represents the sum of approve and strongly approve responses)*



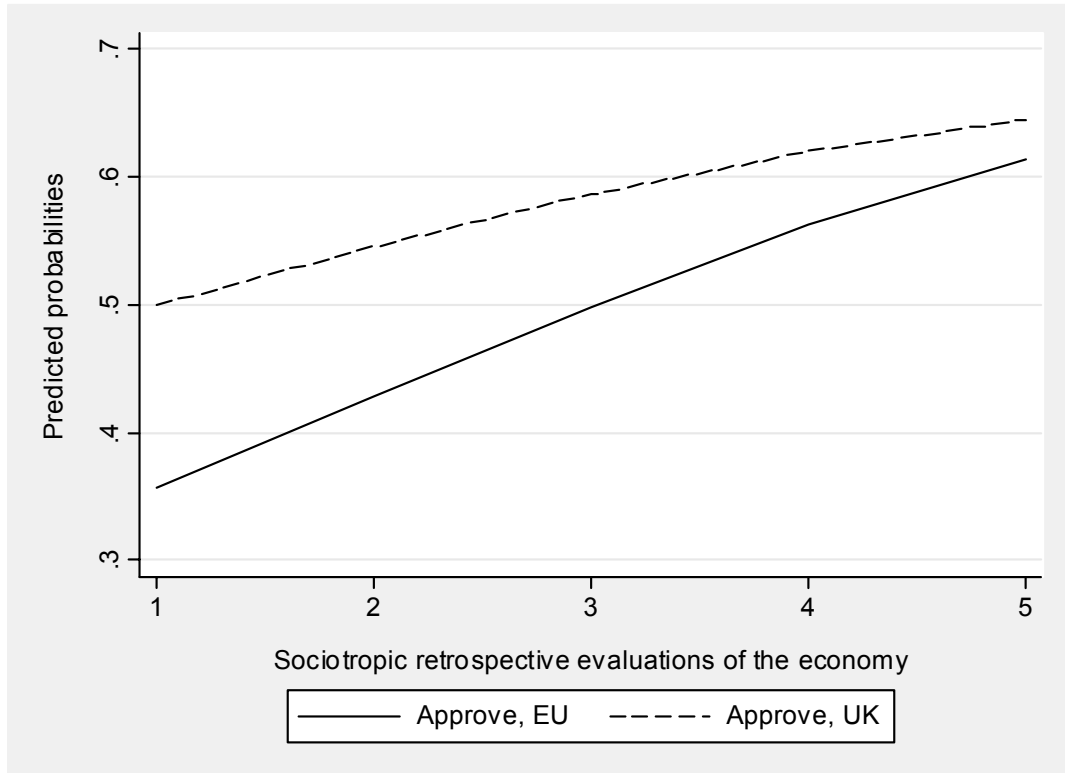
**Figure 3:** Thinking of the Single European Currency, which of the following would come closest to your own view? Do you think Britain should definitely join, wait and see how it develops or definitely stay out?



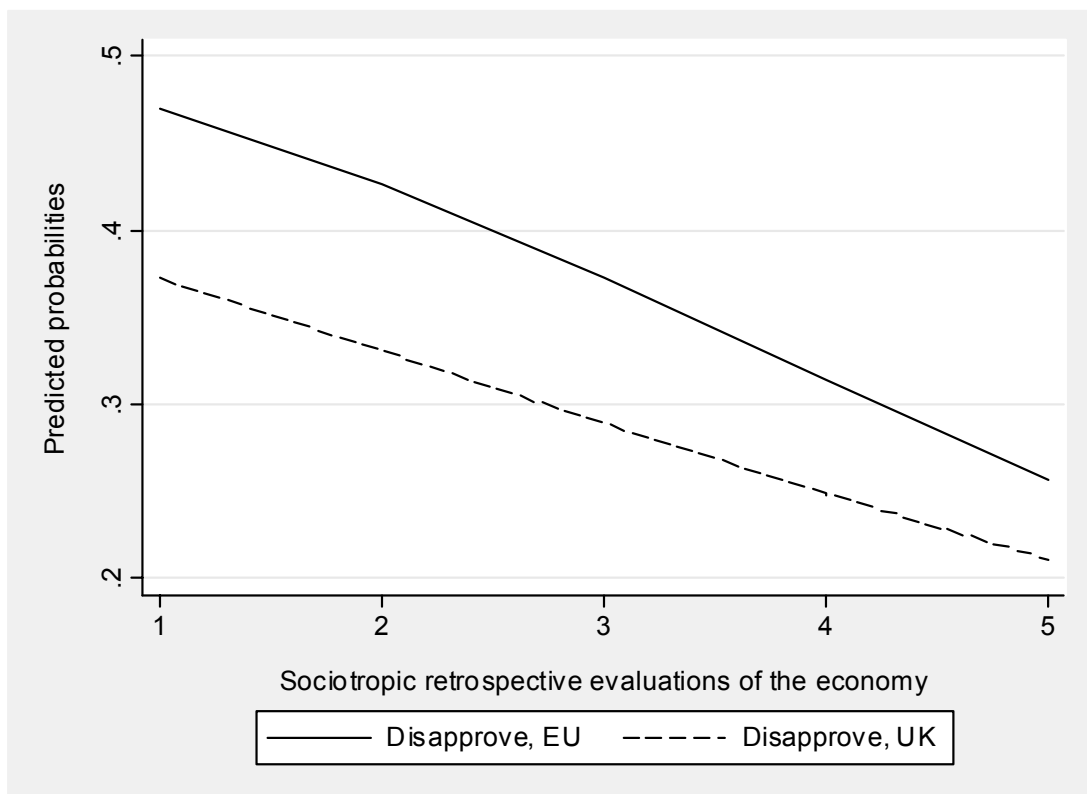
**Figure 4:** Predicted probabilities for strongly approving of membership of the EU for increasing levels of subjective economic optimism for individuals who hold either the EU or UK government responsible for the economy



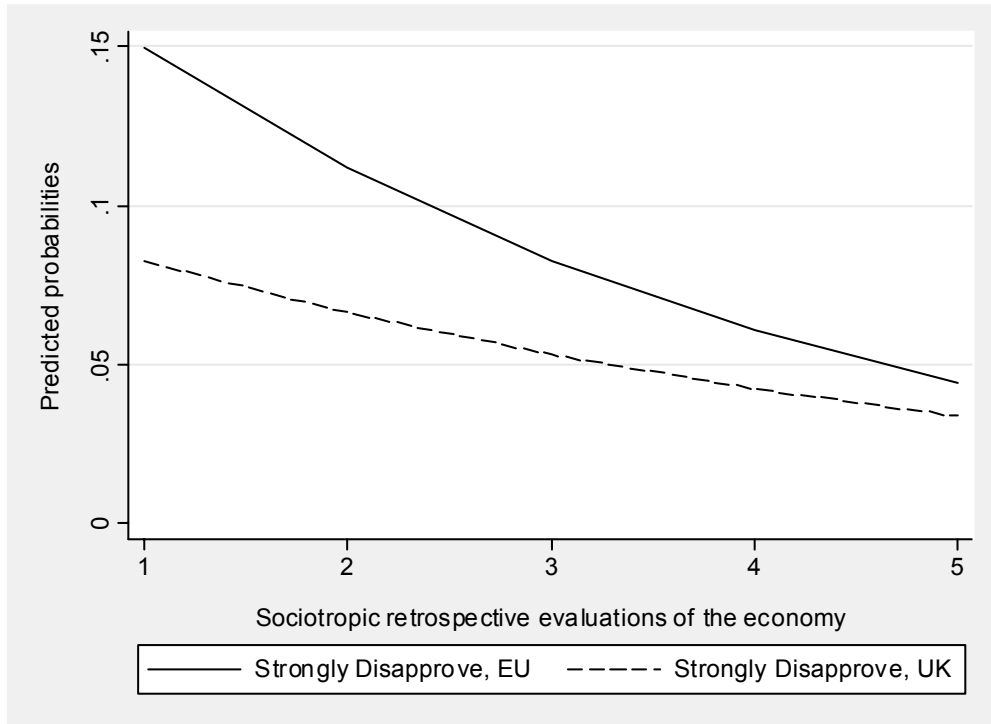
**Figure 5:** Predicted probabilities for approving of membership of the EU for increasing levels of subjective economic optimism for individuals who hold either the EU or UK government responsible for the economy



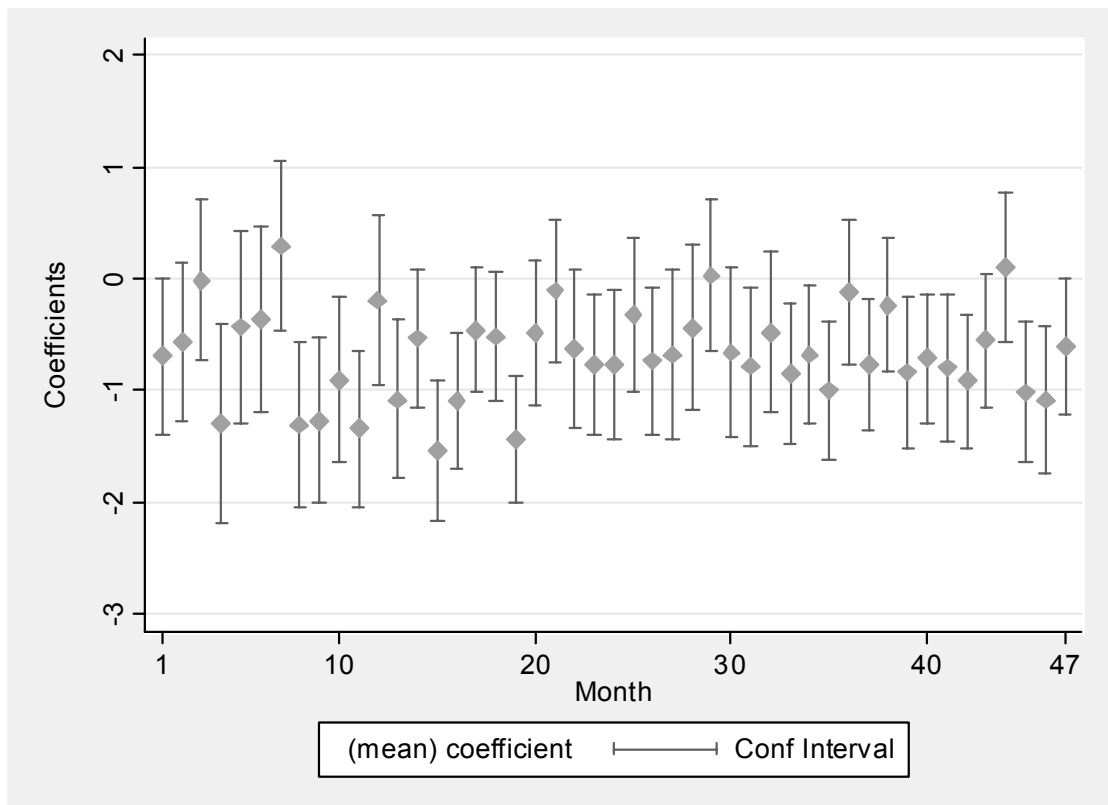
**Figure 6:** Predicted probabilities for disapproving of membership of the EU for increasing levels of subjective economic optimism for individuals who hold either the EU or UK government responsible for the economy



**Figure 7:** Predicted probabilities for strongly disapproving of membership of the EU for increasing levels of subjective economic optimism for individuals who hold either the EU or UK government responsible for the economy



**Figure 8:** Difference in the effects of economic responsibility on efficacy of national retrospective evaluations of the economy on explaining support for the EU over 47 months, June 1997 to April 2001



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