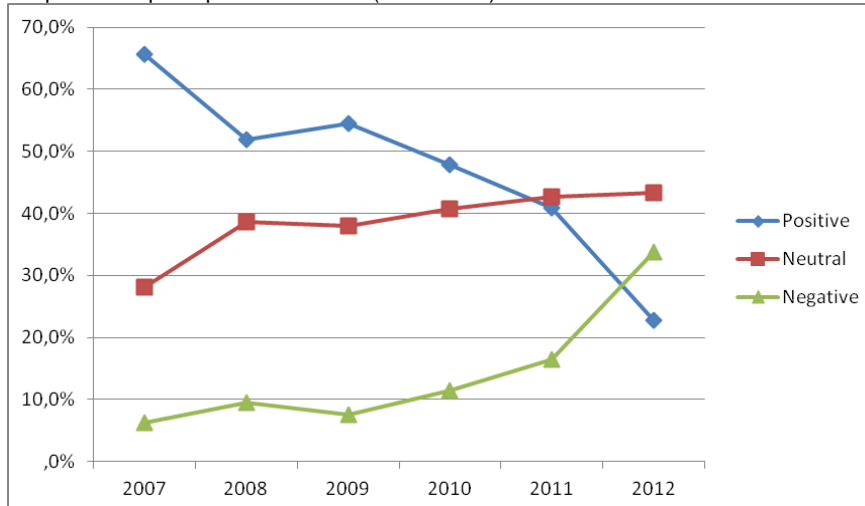


Marta Paradés Martín

Attitudes towards the European Union: the Situation in Spain

In 1986 Spain became a Member State of the European Union (EU). During these 26 years the support for the EU has been constant and Spain is considered one of the most pro-European countries. The perception of EU membership meant progress for Spain in terms of economic, social and political development and it was the main reason for supporting the integration of Spain in this supranational body. However, the economic and financial crisis has eroded the image of the EU. The following graph, related data from Eurobarometers, shows how Spaniards have changed their opinion on the EU. Before the beginning of the crisis, almost 70 per cent of citizens considered that the EU conjures up for them a very or fairly positive image and in 2012 this percentage drops to 22 per cent. On the contrary, the negative image of the EU is extending among Spaniards for the last years.

Graph 1. The perception of the EU¹ (2007-2012)



Source: Self-elaboration using Eurobarometer data.

The results are important but even more important is to know if the context of the economic crisis has put into question the stable support for the European integration project in Spain. The perception of responsibility of the EU for the difficult economic situation Spain is in could mean a change in this stable pattern of support, which is also increasing Euro-skepticism. As I mentioned before, Spain is considered to be one of the most pro-European countries (Strath y Triandafyllidou, 2003). There are various reasons that can explain this support. According to Strath and Tryandafyllidou (2003)

¹ In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?

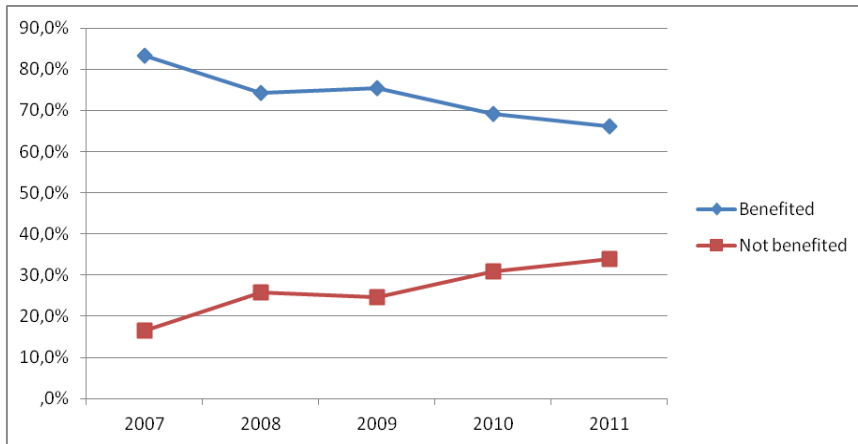
Spain joined the European Union for three main reasons. First of all, in Spain democracy had just been set up and it needed to be recognised by Europe. Spain wanted a political development and consolidation of democracy after Franco's dictatorship. The second reason had to do with overcoming its recent past. Spain expected to achieve economic development and social modernisation. In this context, the adherence to the supranational body was the ideal setting to equate to the levels of development of the rest of Europe. The last one was referring to the need to break its international isolation period. Spain had undergone a period of isolation during Franco's dictatorship and its entry into the European Union meant a return to its history.

The project of European integration was born as a process based on economic aspects. Some of the EU policies implemented were the removal of barriers for free trade, the free movement of capital and goods as well as the creation of the euro as the single currency. For this reason, it may not be strange that a large part of the explanation of the attitudes towards the EU is based on the positive results which were reported on EU membership (Anderson and Reichter, 1995; Gabel y Palmer, 1995; Hooghe y Marks 2005). As you can see in the following graphs, the perception considering the EU as a good thing, or thinking that Spain has benefited from being a member of the EU has been declining with this crisis. However, more than half of the data shows the EU as a good thing.

Graphs 2 and 3. Perception of Spain's membership of the EU and perception Spain has benefited from being a member of the EU (2007-2011)²



² Generally speaking, do you think that Spain's membership of the European Union is...?
Taking everything into account, would you say that Spain has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the EU?

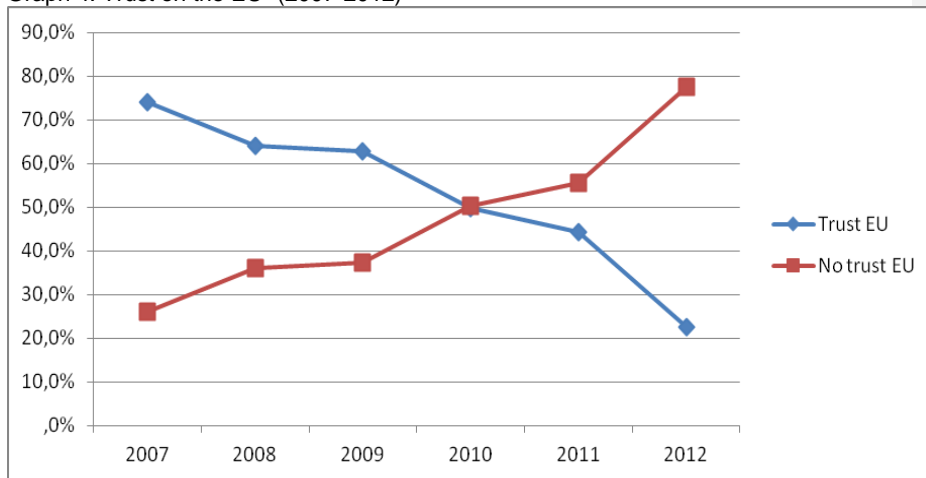


Source: Self-elaboration using Eurobarometer data.

The economic and financial character of the crisis can explain these results. The most worrying aspect emerges when we look into attitudes in relation with the legitimacy of the EU. After the first stage of the European project when it was based on economic factors, the EU wanted to pay more attention to their citizens and to develop a common political project. With the Maastricht Treaty a new stage started with the goal of creating a sense of belonging to a community among all members of the EU. In this context, a second group of theories (Carey, 2002; Díez Medrano, 2003; Hooghe y Marks, 2005; de Vries y van Kersbergen, 2007) have been putting a greater emphasis on cultural or identity factors and a third one on institutional factors (Anderson, 1998; Sánchez Cuenca, 2000).

The dramatic impact of the crisis on the trust in the EU deserves special attention. According to the data from Eurobarometer, the decline of trust in the EU in Spain is the highest of all the EU Member States. Against all expectations, confidence levels have been affected more than the ones mentioned before, in connection with the economic character of the crisis. During the five years of the economic crisis since 2008, the confidence of citizens in the EU has fallen more than 50 percentage points; the decline being particularly strong in the last year. This has important implications for the future of the EU. This is not only an economic and financial crisis; it is also an institutional crisis where the legitimacy of the EU is questioned.

Graph 4. Trust on the EU³ (2007-2012)

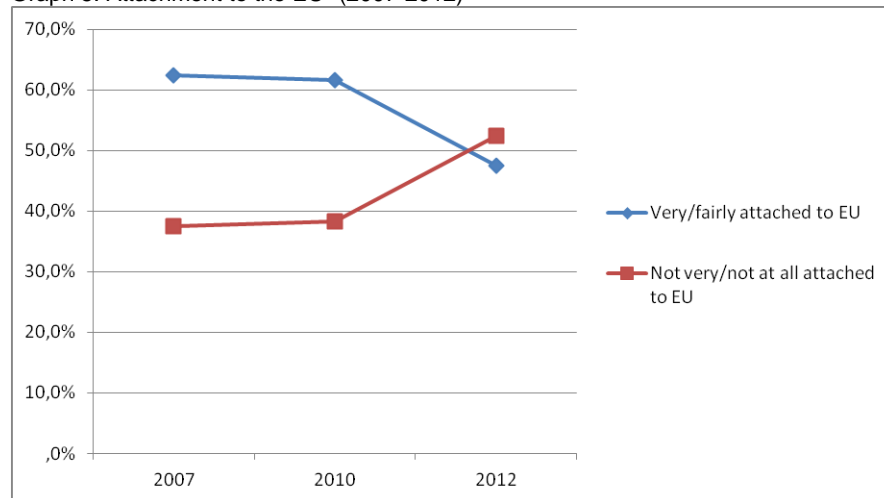


Source: Self-elaboration using Eurobarometer data.

This context of the crisis shows the implications and responsibilities that entails European monetary and political integration not only in good times but also in times of difficulty like today. In this context, European identity is of particular importance to foster social cohesion and solidarity among all the citizens of the EU Member States and prevent the rise of nationalist and anti-EU discourses. In this respect, we find results, which are more optimistic. It seems that the attachment to the EU is stable and the drop from 2010 to 2012 is only 5 per cent, which means that it is not significant. Moreover, in spite of the fact that Spain consists of 17 Autonomous Communities, the increasing regional nationalism (particularly in Catalonia) in Spain is not anti-European. On the contrary, people want to be part of the EU even considering an existence outside of Spain.

³ For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.

Graph 5. Attachment to the EU⁴ (2007-2012)



Source: Self-elaboration using Eurobarometer data.

In conclusion, although it seems that the tough time of the economic crisis is behind us, European leaders have been unable to avoid a growing disaffection among citizens. These results reveal the institutional and political character of the crisis. This adverse situation is posing a challenge to the legitimacy of the EU and leads to discussions on the future of Europe. Spaniards are increasingly pessimistic about the common project and the crisis is highlighting the important problem of legitimacy, which has, in fact, to be taken more seriously than the economic problems.

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⁴ Please tell me how attached you feel to EU.

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