



RESEARCH PAPER

Beyond Brexit: The Relative Roles of Knowledge, National Identity, and Mass Media Visibility as Competing Determinants of UK Citizens' Trust in EU Institutions

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ABSTRACT

The efficacy of democratic states depends on the level of trust the public have on state institutions, which is evident in case of Brexit. To understand such distrust the study investigates the determinants of Trust in EU institutes among UK citizens by employing quantitative research design. The Eurobarometer 90.3 survey was adopted to utilize the relevant data from only UK national respondents. Crosstabulation and correlation tests were performed for data analysis to determine the relationship between dependent (Trust in EU institutions) and independent variables (Political Knowledge, National Attachment, and Visibility in Mass Media). The findings suggested that political knowledge has a significant relationship with level of trust whereas there is insignificant relationship between Trust and both National Attachment and Visibility of Mass Media. These results raise a question regarding Euroscepticism emphasizing the impacts of nationalism and media and require further investigation into the significant determinants contributing towards lack of trust.

KEYWORDS Brexit, Trust in EU Institutions, Eurobarometer 90.3, Mass Media Visibility, National Attachment, Political Knowledge, UK Citizens

Introduction

In democratic systems, trust is considered as one of the crucial components which provides a strong basis for democracies to work effectively (Arnold, Sapir, & Zapryanova, 2012; Brosius, Elsas, & Vreese, 2018; Bonasia, Canalea, Liotti, & Spagnolo, 2016). Where trust can be conceptualized in terms of support, democracies gain for its institutions from citizens even when they are uncertain about the institution's performance and actions (Meer, 2017). The degree of trust people have in their political organizations or institutions indicates the efficacy of that specific democracy's political and institutional bases (Arnold, Sapir, & Zapryanova, 2012). So, this mere component is a key aspect while defining a country's political acceptance and legitimacy (Brosius, Elsas, & Vreese, 2018). However, democracies in the European Union (EU) are facing complications because of the distrust among their member states (Brosius, Elsas, & Vreese, 2018; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Imtiaz & Muzaffar, 2025; Torcal & Christmann, 2018).

The prominent reasons behind this decline in the level of trust are for example, lack of knowledge about the EU institutions among the citizens of EU, dismembered socio-political and economic conditions because of 2008 and 2010 financial crisis (Foster & Frieden, 2017). Furthermore, visibility or representation of EU institutions in mass media also plays an effective role in defining trust among citizens. But, the role of the media's influence is ambiguous, whether it positively affects the level of trust or negatively (Brosius, Elsas, & Vreese, 2018). Moreover, the literature also argues that if

citizens of EU member states have a high level of nationalistic approach, and attachment than they will also tend to trust the institutes of the EU (Drakos, Kallandranis, & Karidis, 2016; Persson, Parker, & Widmalm, 2019).

So, the present study aims to further investigate this aspect in detail for a clearer stance by answering the question that how can trust in the institutions of the European Union be explained? To accomplish this said objective, the researcher has chosen "trust in European Union institutions" as a dependent variable. Whereas the determinants to measure the dependent variable, are knowledge/awareness about EU institutions, national attachment of UK's citizens, and visibility of EU institutions in mass media.

Literature Review

Literature provides some living examples of these factors' contribution to the declining level of trust is 'Brexit'. Brexit happened in 2016, and recent researches (Ababakr, Njilo, & Chima, 2019; Abrams & Travaglini, 2018; Chung & Kim, 2019; Somai & Biedermann, 2016) discussed the prominent contributors of this withdrawal of UK from European Union. Which consist of, disorganized and dismembered political and socio-economic conditions, immigration, inefficient political efficacy, lack of knowledge, attachment and trust in European political institutions. So, while studying the European Union institutions, one cannot ignore the aspect of trust, the study in hand is investigating the level of trust among the people of the United Kingdom, as the researcher wants to explore and to see the influence of other determinants (additional independent variables) as well, i.e., media and national identity behind Britain's distrust.

These determinants are the independent variables (IVs), as the literature provides sound evidence that these aspects can significantly affect the level of trust. The rationale for selecting these above-mentioned IVs is that awareness or knowledge can affect the trust of citizens, because if the citizens are not well aware of the policies and performance of EU institutions then they will hardly trust these institutions. Likewise, the national attachment means attachment with the local or national government, and institutions can also affect trust. So, this study wants to explore whether this is true in the Brexit case or not? Lastly, mass media usage and visibility of EU institutions on mass media can contribute towards developing trust as people will comply with credible sources which will enhance trust.

These rationalities are based upon the evidence from the literature (Bonasia, Canalea, Liotti, & Spagnolo, 2016; Drakos, Kallandranis, & Karidis, 2016; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Brosius, Elsas, & Vreese, 2018; Persson, Parker, & Widmalm, 2019; EuropeanParliament, 2023). In contrast, (Kiratli, 2023; Sergei, Nikita, & Ekaterina, 2021) argues that the high level of social media usage negatively impacts the trust level as it highlights that the regions with higher utilization of mass media particularly social media showed lower levels of trust in EU institutions. Leaving a gap in literature to investigate further, henceforth this study is testing this determinant of mass media to examine its significance with respect to UK citizens' trust level in European Union institutions.

Hypotheses

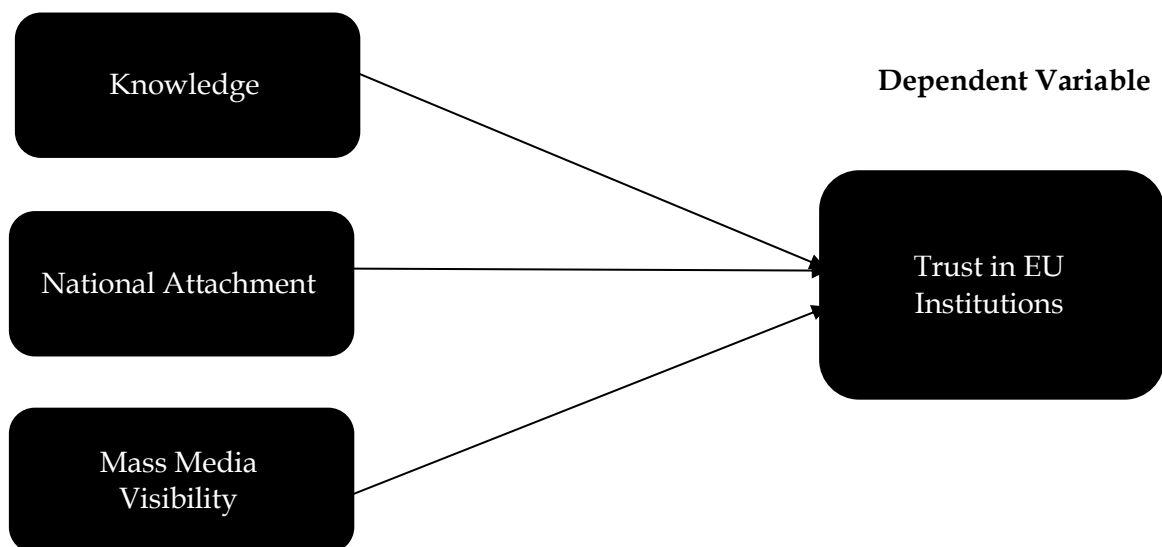
H:1 Citizens who have more knowledge about the institutes of European Union, will have a higher level of trust in the institutes of European Union than others who have less knowledge

H:2 As the level of trust in the national institutions increases, the level of trust in the institutions of the European Union increases

H:3 As the visibility of institutes of European union in mass media increases, the level of trust in the institutions of the European Union increases

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The role of information in media regarding the European Union and national identity effect or can explain the trust in European institutions. This theoretical framework is shown in the following conceptual framework (Figure 1) depicting the determinants of trust in EU institutes and the relationship among the three independent variables of the study and a dependent variable.



Independent Variables

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of Independent and dependent variables.

Material and Methods

As the nature of the research is explanatory, the study is employing the Quantitative research design under which Eurobarometer 90.3 survey questionnaire has been adopted. Relevant questions were selected as per the nature and objective of the research. The following operationalization highlights the selected questions from the survey "Eurobarometer 90.3" (EUROBAROMETER 90.3, 2018) to measure the variables for testing the hypothesis and data analysis. Whereas, this study selected only those respondents whose nationality is of "United Kingdom", because the purpose of the study is to investigate/explore the possible determinants behind the "Brexit" (Ababakr, Njilo, & Chima, 2019; Abrams & Travaglini, 2018; Chung & Kim, 2019). So, to investigate the level of trust in EU institutions among the UK's citizens this country's responses are the most relevant.

The operationalization of the dependent variable is being done by incorporating the question; "And please tell me if you tend to trust or tend not to trust these European institutions?" 1) The European Parliament 2) The European Commission 3) The European Central Bank 4) The European Council 5) The Council of the European Union.

To get the required response, the respondents were asked to choose between the possibilities; 1) Tend to trust 2) Tend not to trust 3) DK. However, the study included only two possibilities (Binary scale response/dummy variable), i.e., 1 and 2 while ignoring the 3 "DK" (Torcal & Christmann, 2018). Because the third possibility has no significance while evaluating the level of trust, as either, one trusts or do not trust the institutions, there is no other possible answer. Moreover, the labels of these possibilities were reversed, 1) No Trust 2) Trust, at the time of analysis, to make the interpretation of results and tests easy. Previously, for the evaluation of trust this question has been used in other studies as well (Arnold, Sapir, & Zapryanova, 2012; Dominiononi, Quintavalla, & Romano, 2020; Nancy, 2016; Roth & Jonung, 2019; Torcal & Christmann, 2018).

The first independent variable "knowledge" is being operationalized via the question, "Have you heard of...?" 1) The European Parliament 2) The European Commission 3) The European Central Bank 4) The European Council 5) The Council of the European Union. The respondents were asked to choose between these options. This is because these are the prominent and established institutions that are involved in supranational decision making (Union, 2020; McBride, 2020). And researcher wanted to explore that whether the UK's citizens have awareness/information or knowledge regarding them or not over the years, as according to (McGowan & O'Connor, 2004) in 2002 UK's citizens were recorded for the least knowledge about EU institutions. To get the required response three possibilities were given 1) Yes 2) No 3) DK. Where, the study converted the variables into a dummy variable at the time of analysis, as the researcher did not include 3rd possibility (DK). This is because 3rd option is not contributing to results/analysis and either one has the knowledge or does not. These possibilities were also reserved 1) No 2) Yes, to make it easy to understand while analysis and interpretation of tests.

The second independent variable is measuring the level of citizen's national attachment and its effects on the level of trust. The operationalization of this variable is being done by incorporating the question "Please tell me how attached you feel to..." 1) Your city/town/village 2) OUR COUNTRY 3) European Union 4) Europe. However, the study included only 2nd option "(OUR COUNTRY)", Out of four options. That's because this option is highly related to the study's hypothesis (H2) and can directly measure 'national attachment' and its relationship with trust. EU is the supranational entity so when locals/citizens have more sense of attachment with national entities then they will have more attachment with EU institutes (Arnold, Sapir, & Zapryanova, 2012). To get the required responses, a 5-point Likert scale has been used 1) Very attach 2) Fairly attached 3) Not very attached 4) Not at all attach 5) DK. However, for data interpretation, the researcher did not include the 5th response and have merged/combined the 3rd and 4th responses because these two options have more or less the same meaning. Moreover, the researcher repeated the same step of reversing the responses and relabeled them as; 1) Weak 2) Average 3) Strong, for the sake of analysis. Furthermore, for the t-test, the researcher converted the variables from three response scales to a dichotomic response scale, where two extremes were chosen, as in this case 1) Weak 2) Strong.

Finally, the third independent mass media variable is being incorporated to assess the amount of visibility of EU institutes on media so that the relationship between the visibility and level of trust could be investigated (Brosius, Elsas, & Vreese, 2018). Operationalization is being done by utilizing the question, "Generally speaking, do you think that the (NATIONALITY) ... talk(s) too much, about the right amount or too little about the EU?" 1) Television 2) Radio 3) Written press 4) Websites 5) Online social networks. To record the responses, respondents were asked to choose between the

options 1) Too Much 2) About the right amount 3) Too Little 4) DK. But the study included first 3 possibilities while ignoring the fourth one, because only selected possibilities could answer the question effectively. Furthermore, the researcher once again reversed the responses; 1) Too little 2) About right amount 3) Too much. But additionally, for t-test the responses were once again converted into dichotomic responses, with 1) Too little 2) Too much. Considering the previously mentioned concepts and operationalization, the upcoming section represents the findings and data analysis.

Results and Discussion

This section consists of findings and results which are acquired by performing different statistical tests, which outline and elaborate the differences, associations and relationship between the DV and IVs. The following **Table 1** shows the crosstabulation for first hypothesis (H1), which explains whether there is a possible link between the two categories or not, i.e., Trust and Knowledge. It is evident that 84.3% of people have no knowledge and do not trust EU institutions, whereas 41.1% of people have the knowledge and tend to trust the EU. On the other hand, 58.9% of people have the knowledge but do not trust the EU institutes and 15.7% of people have no knowledge but trust the EU institutes. So, The Chi-square test was done, which signifies that these variables have significant association, $\chi^2 (1, N= 576) = 32.2$, $p < .001$, which is highly significant.

Table 1
Crosstabulation between Trust and Knowledge about EU Institutions

UK\$EU.TRUST.rec2	UK\$eu.Knowledge.rec2		Row Total
	No	Yes	
No Trust	129 84.3%	249 58.9%	378
Trust	24 15.7%	174 41.1%	198
Column Total	153 26.6%	423 73.4%	576

Note: Pearson's Chi-squared test

$\chi^2 = 32.25677$, d.f. = 1, $p = 0.00000001350855$, minimum expected frequency: 52.59375

As an extension of cross-tabulation, t-test is done, which shows the difference between the means of these mentioned categories is approximately 26%. So, if group 1 is compared to group 2 it demonstrates a significant flow, $t(361.89) = -6.69$, $p < .001$, which is sufficiently and statistically significant. Furthermore, correlation test in **Table 2** highlights the relationship among Trust and Knowledge about EU institutions is positive, $(r(574) = .23, p < .001)$. Which shows the strength of this relationship is positive and moderately significant, as the value of coefficient is positive, $cor = .23$ and p-value is less than 0.05 Hence, all these tests, signifies the assumption of first hypothesis (H1) that, the higher the level of knowledge about EU institutes, the higher will be the trust among the UK's citizens about EU institutions than those who have less knowledge.

Table 2
Correlation between Trust and Knowledge about EU Institutions

	UK\$EU.TRUST.rec1	UK\$eu.Knowledge.rec1
Pearson Correlation	1.00	.23**
UK\$EU.TRUST.rec1	.	0.0000000089

Sig. n	596	576
Pearson Correlation UK\$eu.Knowledge.rec1	.23**	1.00
Sig. n	0.0000000089 576	. 930

In case of second hypothesis (H2), the crosstabulation in **Table 3** demonstrates the association between the Trust in EU institutes and National Attachment of UK's citizens. As per the frequency, 67.2% of the people have weak/less attachment and do not trust the EU institutes, whereas 30.3% people have strong sense of attachment and they tend to trust EU. However, 69.7% have strong sense of attachment and do not trust the EU institutions and 32.8% of the people have weak sense of attachment and tend to trust the EU institutions. Here, the Chi-square test signifies that these variables have moderate significant association, $\chi^2 (2, N= 594) = 6.18$, $p < .04$, which is moderately significant.

Table 3
Crosstabulation between Trust in EU institutes and National attachment

UK\$EU.TRUST.rec2	UK\$Nationalattachment.rec2			
	Weak	Average	Strong	Row Total
No Trust	43 67.2%	108 59.0%	242 69.7%	393
Trust	21 32.8%	75 41.0%	105 30.3%	201
Column Total	64 10.8%	184 30.8%	347 58.4%	594

Note: Pearson's Chi-squared test

$\chi^2 = 6.188634$, d.f. = 2, $p = 0.04530595$, Minimum expected frequency: 21.65657

And if we refer to t-test, it clearly confirms that the difference between the averages of these two groups (Trust and National attachment) is moderately significant, i.e., 0.086 (approx. 9%). Hence, the comparison of these two groups demonstrates a moderate significant flow, $t(510.15) = 2.1682$, $p = 0.03$, which is statistically significant. To reveal the relationship between these above-mentioned groups/variables, the study incorporated the correlation test, shown in **Table 4**. Which highlights that the relationship between the level of trust in National institutions and level of trust in EU institutions among the citizens of UK, is in negative or opposite direction, ($r(592) = -0.06$, $p = .1$). So, it means with the increase in one variable, the other variable will tend to decrease. Because, the value of coefficient is negative, i.e., $cor = -0.061$ and value of p is greater than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), which is 0.1. Hence, the strength of this relationship is weak and statistically insignificant as well. So, together all these tests, tend to accept the null hypothesis and reject the alternative hypothesis (H2), which assumes that as the level of trust in national institutions increases, the level of trust in EU institutions also increases.

Table 4
Correlation between Trust in EU institutes and National attachment

		UK\$EU.TRUST.rec1	UK\$Nationalattachment.rec1
UK\$EU.TRUST.rec1	Pearson Correlation	1.00	-0.061**
	Sig. n	. 596	0.13 594
UK\$Nationalattachment.rec1	Pearson Correlation	-0.061**	1.00
	Sig. n	0.13 594	. 1007

To test the last hypothesis, some tests have been incorporated. As shown in **Table 5**, crosstabulation was used to explain the relation between the two variables known as, level of trust and visibility of EU in mass media. The table shows that 58.7% of people tend not to trust if the visibility of EU is too much on mass media, whereas 30.2% of people state that they tend to trust if the visibility is too little. However, 69.8% of the people comply that if visibility is too little, they tend not to trust the EU institutes, on the other hand 41.3% of people confirm that they tend to trust the EU institutes when the visibility is too much. In case of neutral responses, 61% of people responded that they do not trust the EU, if the visibility is on an average level as compared to 51% people who responded that they tend to trust the EU. The table projects, $\chi^2 (2, N= 291) = 5.9, p = 0.05$, that the categories have a significant association but that too at a minimalistic level.

Table 5
Crosstabulation between Trust in EU institutes and Visibility of EU in Mass Media

UK\$EU.TRUST.rec2	UK\$media.rec2			Row Total
	Too Little	About Right Amount	Too Much	
No Trust	37 58.7%	61 54.5%	81 69.8%	179
Trust	26 41.3%	51 45.5%	35 30.2%	112
Column Total	63 21.6%	112 38.5%	116 39.9%	291

Note: Pearson's Chi-squared test

$\chi^2 = 5.943842$, d.f. = 2, $p = 0.05120486$, Minimum expected frequency: 24.24742

Now, to examine the link between the means of these variables, t-test shows that, there is 0.14 (approx. 14%) difference between the mentioned variables. Here, the comparison of these two groups determines a moderate significant flow, $t(259.15) = 2.4262$, $p = 0.01$, which is statistically but moderately significant. To explain the relationship between the variables, correlation in **Table 6** establishes, $(r(289) = -0.10, p = .07)$. Here, the value of $p > 0.05$ and value of coefficient is negative, which means the trust in EU and visibility in mass media is in opposite direction. So, the strength of their relation is weak, and their relationship is statistically insignificant. On the basis of these tests and values, null hypothesis is accepted rather than alternative hypothesis that trust and visibility has a direct relationship.

Table 6
Correlation between Trust in EU institutes and Visibility of EU in Mass Media

		UK\$EU.TRUST.rec1	UK\$media.rec1
		1.00	-0.10**
UK\$EU.TRUST.rec1	Pearson Correlation		
	Sig.	.	0.07
	n	596	291
UK\$media.rec1	Pearson Correlation	-0.10**	1.00
	Sig.	0.07	.
	n	291	460

In a nutshell, results indicated that the additional determinants of trust, i.e., national attachment and mass media has insignificant relation with the level of trust among the UK's citizens. This is because the assumed hypothesis, especially H2 and H3 has been rejected.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed some interesting facts and proposed different perspectives toward the citizen's level of trust in the EU institutions. The undeniable fact is that the knowledge is the key contributor of the trust, as awareness and to be informed plays a critical role in one's beliefs and conformity to the national or supranational institutions (Arnold, Sapir, & Zapryanova, 2012). Hence, the first hypothesis of this study is in accordance with this revelation, which assumed that the higher level of knowledge will result in a higher level of trust. Based on this revelation one can infer that among the noticeable factors behind Brexit, knowledge played a crucial role. Because in 2002, UK's citizens were recorded to be least informed about the European Union institutions and their functioning (McGowan & O'Connor, 2004). So, the lack of knowledge among the UK's citizens regarding the EU institutions is expected to be one of the key determinants behind the Brexit. The core concept of this study was to identify the additional possible determinants behind Brexit, which were underexplored in the existing literature, e.g., National attachment and Visibility in mass media.

So, moving on towards the second proposed hypothesis of this study, which was based on the national attachment of UK's citizens, revealed, it is expected that if the nationalism/nationalistic approach increases among the citizens, then their trust in supranational entities will dropdown. This discovery opposed the proposed hypothesis, that said, if the national attachment increases, trust in EU institutions also increases, which is not the case in the scenario of UK. Because, as per the findings, UK's public was more attached and inclined towards their local/national institutes, so they developed a sense of distrust regarding the EU institution's power, functioning, decision making, and strategy. This finding is complying with a report (Standard Eurobarometer 81, 2014), as it shows 57% of UK's citizens distrust the EU institutions. So, national identities were a substantially impactful factors behind this distrust (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017).

However, as per the other determinant, i.e., visibility in mass media, the last hypothesis states that if the visibility of European union institutions increases on mass media, it will have a positive and direct impact over the level of trust. Whereas the results indicated that these variables work the other way around, they do not have a positively significant relationship. In short, one can infer that the visibility on mass media has an insignificant non-linear relationship with trust (Brosius, Elsas, & Vreese, 2018). The study's finding suggests that instead of having a negative impact as advocated in the previous literature (Kiratli, 2023; Sergei, Nikita, & Ekaterina, 2021) mass media usage and trust level in EU institutes has an insignificant relationship. In other words, media has a very minimalistic influence or impact on the higher level of trust, which too is unnoticeable. Conclusively, these discoveries let the researcher to conjecture that the trust level could be impacted through the level of knowledge rather than national attachment or visibility in mass media (Arnold, Sapir, & Zapryanova, 2012; Brosius, Elsas, & Vreese, 2018; Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017).

Recommendations

Based on the discussed results and conclusions, researcher recommend for further investigation on bigger sample size and other parameters of Eurobarometer, as this study has targeted selective questions from the survey and used the respondents with UK nationality.

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