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In sickness and in health

Public opinion in the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic

Bachelor's thesis in European studies with spanish

Supervisor: Anna Brigevich

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
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NTNU

Kunnskap for en bedre verden

Sammendrag

Denne bacheloroppgaven bruker statistisk analyse av Eurobarometer-data for å undersøke måten COVID-19 pandemien har påvirket opinionen blant befolkningen i EUs medlemsland. Det som undersøkes er forholdet mellom tillit til EU og tillit til nasjonale regjeringer, forholdet mellom tillit til institusjoner og måten folk oppfatter den økonomiske situasjonen, og hvor tilfreds EUs befolkning er med forsøk på å håndtere pandemien på nasjonalt og EU-nivå. Oppgaven drar nytte av to «benchmarking»-teorier om oppslutning rundt EU, Sanchez-Cuencas og De Vries.

Abstract

This bachelor thesis uses statistical analysis of Eurobarometer-data to investigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on public opinion in the European Union. What is being studied is the relationship between trust in the EU and trust in national governments, the effect of perceptions of the economic situation on trust in institutions, and satisfaction with efforts to combat the pandemic at the national and EU-level. The paper draws on two benchmarking theories of public opinion in the EU: that of Sanchez-Cuenca (2000) and that of De Vries (2018).

For Luffy the cat

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest of the long list of crises to have affected the European Union (EU). Although the virus originated far outside the EU's borders in Wuhan, China, its impact has been severely felt in the Union. Countless people have died from covid. Additionally, the pandemic caused a severe economic shock and all member states experienced a period of negative economic growth.

In light of the high death toll and economic recession, one could expect Europeans to lose faith in national and EU institutions. That has certainly been the case in past crises, such as the financial crisis and the migrant crisis, which saw EU-citizens become less trusting of the EU. The pandemic has defied that trend, and instead of becoming less trusting of the EU, levels of trust have in fact increased. The fact that the European public has reacted differently to this crisis, compared to every other crisis of the 21st century alone makes this a subject worthy of investigation. Additionally, experience from the last two decades indicates that the end of one crisis only signals the beginning of another, so gaining an understanding of why EU-citizens have reacted differently to this crisis, compared to previous crises of the 21st century, can provide valuable insights for future crises. The COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the EU is still a new field of study, and the full impact of the crisis is still unknown, meaning that there is still room for more.

To explain why EU-citizens have reacted differently to the pandemic compared to previous crises, the paper draws on benchmarking theories of public opinion. According to these theories EU-citizens use their national institutions as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of EU institutions because they lack knowledge of the EU (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). More specifically the paper draws on Sánchez-Cuenca (2000) and De Vries (2018), which both state that there is an inverse relationship between the public's perception of the EU and their perception of their national governments. The theories also cover how the national economic situation affects this relationship.

Statistical analysis using the program Stata is the chosen method for investigating how the dynamic between trust in the EU and trust in national governments has been affected by the pandemic. The datasets used come from the 93rd and 94th Eurobarometers.

The paper is split into six chapters, the first of which is the introduction. The second provides background information describing how the pandemic has affected the EU, and how public opinion has changed during the pandemic. The third chapter gives a thorough description of the theories employed, the methodology used, and presents the paper's hypotheses. In the fourth chapter these hypotheses are put to the test using statistical analysis of Eurobarometer data. Chapter 5 contains a discussion of the findings in chapter 4, and how these findings compare to the hypotheses. Chapter 6, the last chapter is the conclusion.

2 Background

2.1 The COVID-19 pandemic in the European Union

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Europe was identified in France on the 24th of January 2020 (Forman & Mossialos, 2021, p. 4). The first uncontrolled outbreak of the virus occurred in Italy, with Spain following closely behind (Plümper & Neumayer, 2020). Governments in Europe had generally been slow to act, despite the dramatic reports emerging from Wuhan, and many did not expect the pandemic to reach Europe (Plümper & Neumayer, 2020). The outbreak in Italy served as a wakeup call for the rest of Europe inciting other European governments to take preventative measures. However, the outbreak soon spiralled out of control with Italy becoming the global epicentre of the pandemic (Forman & Mossialos, 2021, p. 4).

Although all European governments were forced to implement some kind of policy response to the pandemic, the exact content of these policies varied greatly from member state to member state. In Italy Italy, rapidly spiralling infection rates forced the government to impose a strict lockdown during spring 2020, as the country's healthcare system struggled to cope with the sheer number of sick people (Plümper & Neumayer, 2020). On the other end of the spectrum, we find Sweden, which stood out during the first wave of the pandemic for its relaxed response to the virus. The country chose not to implement a lockdown, instead adopting a policy of "freedom under responsibility" (Plümper & Neumayer, 2020).

The EU as a whole saw excess deaths begin to increase in March 2020 and by April excess deaths had reached 25.2%, compared to the average for the same month in the years 2016-2019. The EU managed to get the situation under control for the most part during the summer months, but by autumn excess deaths had begun climbing again, reaching 40% in November (Eurostat, 2022). Excess deaths thankfully never reached such astronomic heights again, but they peaked again in April 2021 at 21% and in November 2021 at 26.4% (Eurostat, 2022). These are numbers for the EU as a whole but mortality and infection rates varied greatly across Europe. Government response was shaped by the number of cases, with more severe measures being imposed when infection rates surged (Plümper & Neumayer).

2.2 The economic impact of the pandemic

The pandemic and the associated lockdown a significant adverse impact on the European economy. The EU saw a 3.1% decrease in GDP in the first quarter of 2020, followed by an even greater decrease of 11.2% in the second quarter (Eurostat, 2020a). In comparison, the worst quarter of the financial crisis, the first quarter of 2009, saw the EU's GDP decrease by "only" 2.9% (Eurostat, 2020a). The pandemic's effect on GDP varied across member states, with some countries experiencing more dramatic recessions than others. The country with the most dramatic decrease in GDP in the second quarter of 2020 was Spain, which saw the GDP shrink by 18% compared to the previous quarter (Eurostat, 2020a). No EU member state saw positive GDP growth during

this quarter, and the country with the smallest drop in GDP was Finland, whose GDP shrank by 4.5%.

The third quarter of 2020 saw a sharp increase in GDP, jumping by 11.4% in the EU as a whole (Eurostat, 2020b). This was the most dramatic increase in GDP since Eurostat began monitoring in 1995, although the GDP shrank again in the last quarter of 2020, by 0.2%. While the economy recovered greatly during the third quarter, GDP did not reach pre pandemic levels and by the end of 2020 it had shrunk by 5.9% compared to 2019 (Eurostat 2020b). Generally speaking, countries that saw the most dramatic drop in GDP in the first two quarters also experienced the greatest increase during the third quarter. The exception to this was Greece, whose GDP suffered a decrease of 14.1%, but only saw an increase of 2.3% (Eurostat, 2020a). In 2021 the economy of the EU fared better, with the GDP growing by 5.3% compared to 2020 but had still not recovered completely (Eurostat, 2021).

As during the financial crisis, the economic impact of the pandemic was unevenly distributed across member states. In assessing why some member states suffered greater damage to the economy during the pandemic André Sapir found that the severity of lockdown measures, quality of governance, and share of tourism in the economy were the most important factors in determining how much a country suffered economically from the pandemic (Sapir, 2020).

Similarly, the 2021 regional and local barometer assessed how sensitive the various subnational regions of the EU were to the impact of lockdown measures. All regions were classified as having either higher negative sensitivity, medium negative sensitivity or lower sensitivity based on a number of socio-economic factors: low education, young people without an education, people at risk of poverty, micro-enterprises, the self-employed, low quality of governance, limited financial means, and the number of people employed in high-risk sectors such as tourism. The regional and local barometer also classified regions as either having had high exposure, low exposure or medium exposure to lockdown restrictions. This report found that the overlap between high exposure and high negative sensitivity was greatest in the EU's southern member states, indicating that these countries would suffer the greatest negative consequences of the pandemic (European committee of the regions, 2021).

2.3 The EU's response to the pandemic

Treaty texts placed significant limits on the EU's ability to act in response to the virus, as member states have traditionally been reluctant to transfer power over healthcare policy to the EU (Anderson, et. al., 2009). Most efforts to fight the pandemic within the EU were conducted at the national level, with national governments implementing measures such as national lockdowns or border closures. In fact, at times member states responses to the pandemic have tended towards the parochial, with Germany, France and the Czech Republic all implementing temporary export bans on personal protective equipment (PPE), such as face masks (Anderson, et. al., 2009).

Despite the limits placed on the EU by the treaties, some action has been taken at the EU-level to combat the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic EU-institutions have worked to coordinate data-sharing and the purchase of PPE, however the latter was weakened by national governments' lack of solidarity as all member states scrambled to secure their own supply (Forman & Mossialos, 2021, p. 5). Perhaps the most high-profile EU policy response to the pandemic was the EU's joint vaccine-procurement programme. This

programme was already in place prior to the covid outbreak, having been created as a response to the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak (Anderson, et. al., 2020). Despite this, the programme did not run entirely smoothly, and a focus on price rather than rapid procurement resulted in the EU getting its vaccines later than the United Kingdom and the United States (Forman & Mossialos, 2020). There have also been efforts at the EU-level to implement policies aimed at reversing the economic damage caused by both lockdowns and the pandemic itself, the most important of which is a €2.018 trillion stimulus package (European Commission, 2021). Despite these efforts by the EU, it is clear that the majority of action aimed at fighting the pandemic was taken at the national level, as evidenced by the heterogeneity of national strategies.

2.4 Public opinion during the pandemic

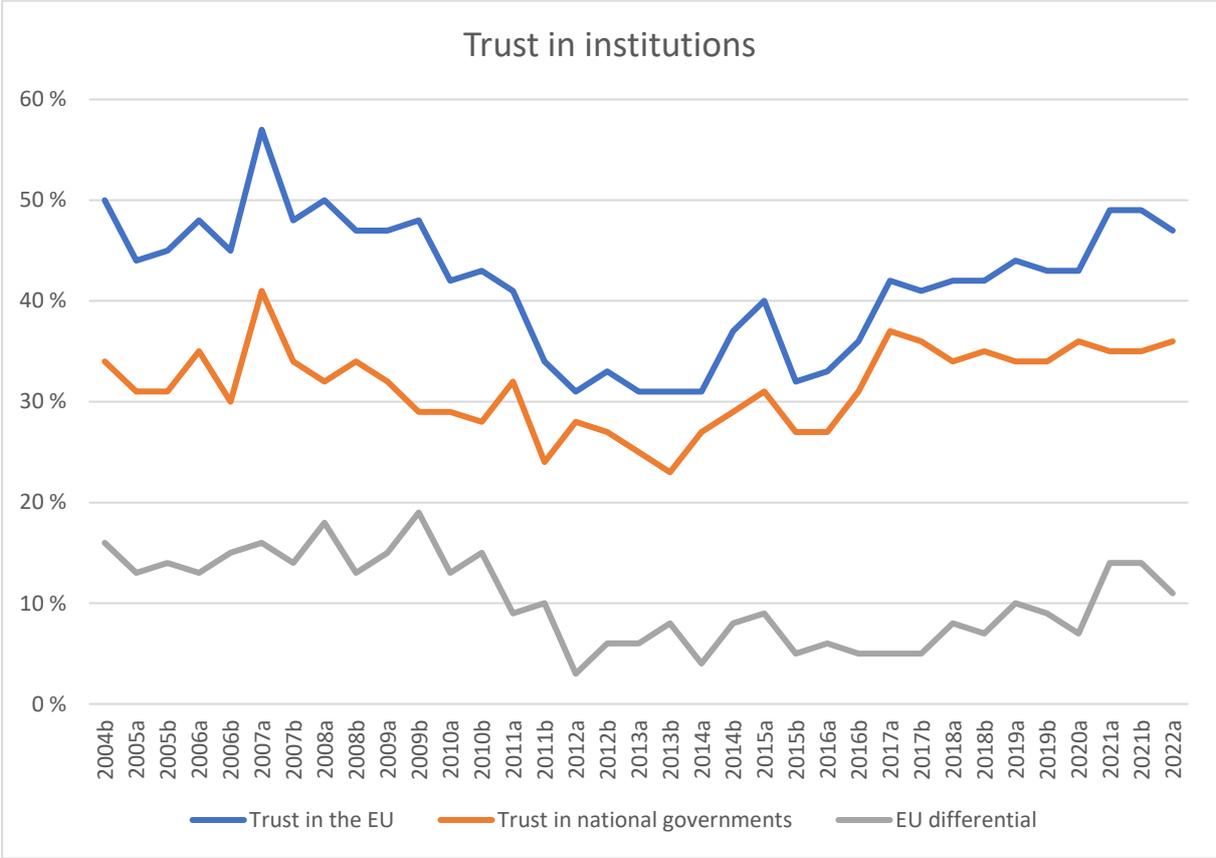


Figure 2.1

Trends over time show that trust in the EU and trust in national governments follow each other closely, increasing and decreasing almost in tandem (see figure 1). Although trust in the EU remained stable during the first phase of the financial crisis, gaining slightly against national governments, it began dropping rapidly in 2010 and reaching a low point in 2012 when Europeans’ trust in the EU had dropped below pre-crisis levels of trust in national governments. The EU managed to regain the public’s trust in late 2014-early 2015, but had lost it again by autumn 2015, timing which coincides with the migrant crisis of summer 2015.

Rather than causing a loss of confidence in the EU, the pandemic has seen the public’s trust in the EU increase. The effect was not instantaneous, levels of trust remained the same between autumn 2019 and summer 2020. The fact that trust in the EU remained

stable during the first phase of the pandemic is interesting in and of itself as the first phase of the pandemic was an uncertain time. Borders closed across Europe and citizens were increasingly confined to their homes while the news bombarded them with images of human suffering.

As figure 2.1 shows, trust in the EU remained unchanged between the 92nd Eurobarometer, conducted in autumn 2019, and the 93rd Eurobarometer, conducted in summer 2020. The winter Eurobarometer of 2020-2021, however, observed a sharp increase in trust in the EU as 49% of Europeans responded that they tended to trust the EU, an increase of 5% since summer 2019. This was the most positive result the EU had seen since spring 2008, before the financial crisis truly set in. Trust in the EU was equally high in the 2021 spring Eurobarometer, and although the Eurobarometer of winter 2021-2022 showed a slight decrease, levels of trust remained higher than they ever were during the 2010s (European Commission 2020, European Commission 2021).

In comparison, levels of trust in national governments remained relatively stable throughout the pandemic. Unlike the EU, national governments saw a slight increase in trust between autumn 2019 and summer 2020, going from 34% to 36% but with a small decrease of 1% between summer 2020 and winter 2020-2021, remaining stable for spring 2021. Levels of trust increased again slightly in winter 2021-2022, at the same time as trust in the EU went down, but with a difference of only 1% (European Commission 2020, European Commission 2021).

In the 2020 summer Eurobarometer satisfaction with the measures taken by the EU to fight the coronavirus pandemic was 2% higher than trust in the EU, at 45%. This decreased slightly in the Eurobarometer of winter 2021-2022, when 43% of respondents said they were satisfied. The amount of people who were dissatisfied with measures taken by the EU went from 44% in the summer to 49% in the winter (see figures 2.2 and 2.3) (European Commission 2020, European Commission 2021).

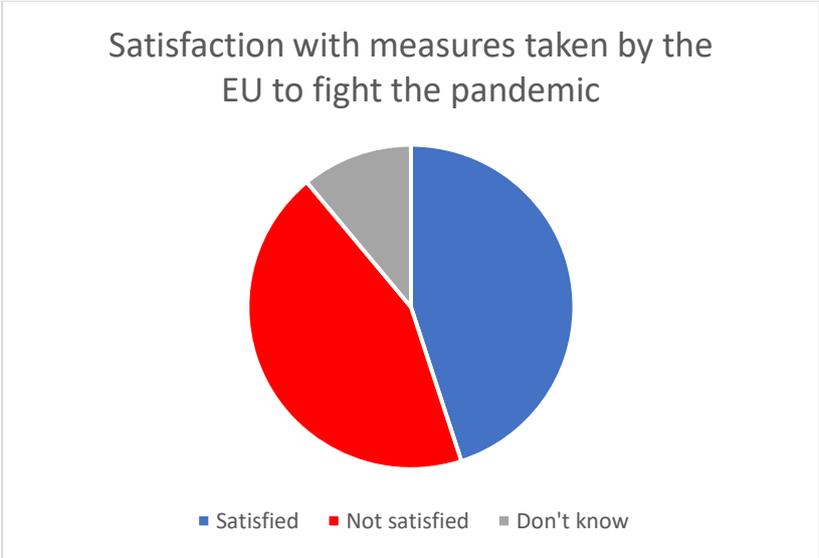


Figure 2.2 – EB93

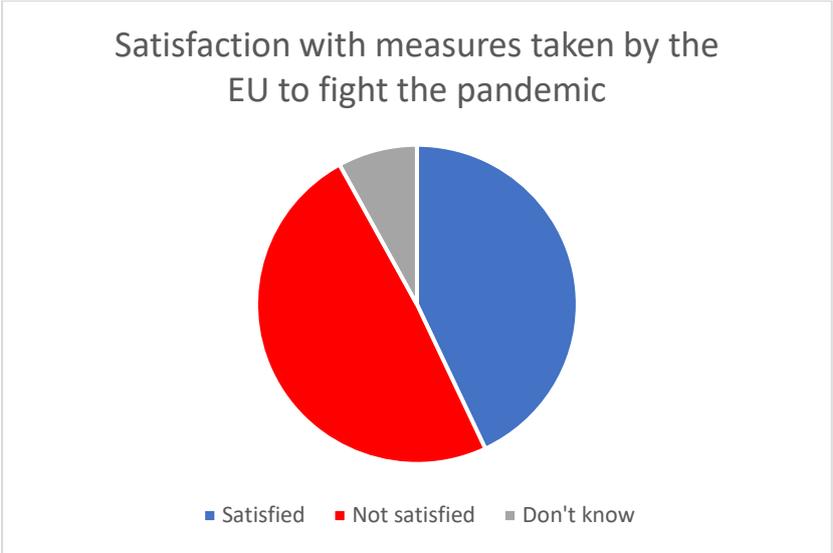


Figure 2.3 EB94

Looking at perceptions of the national economy we see that EU-citizens were much less optimistic about the economic situation in 2020, compared to 2019. Evaluations worsened in the 94th Eurobarometer, despite economies having made a substantial recovery (European Commission, 2021).

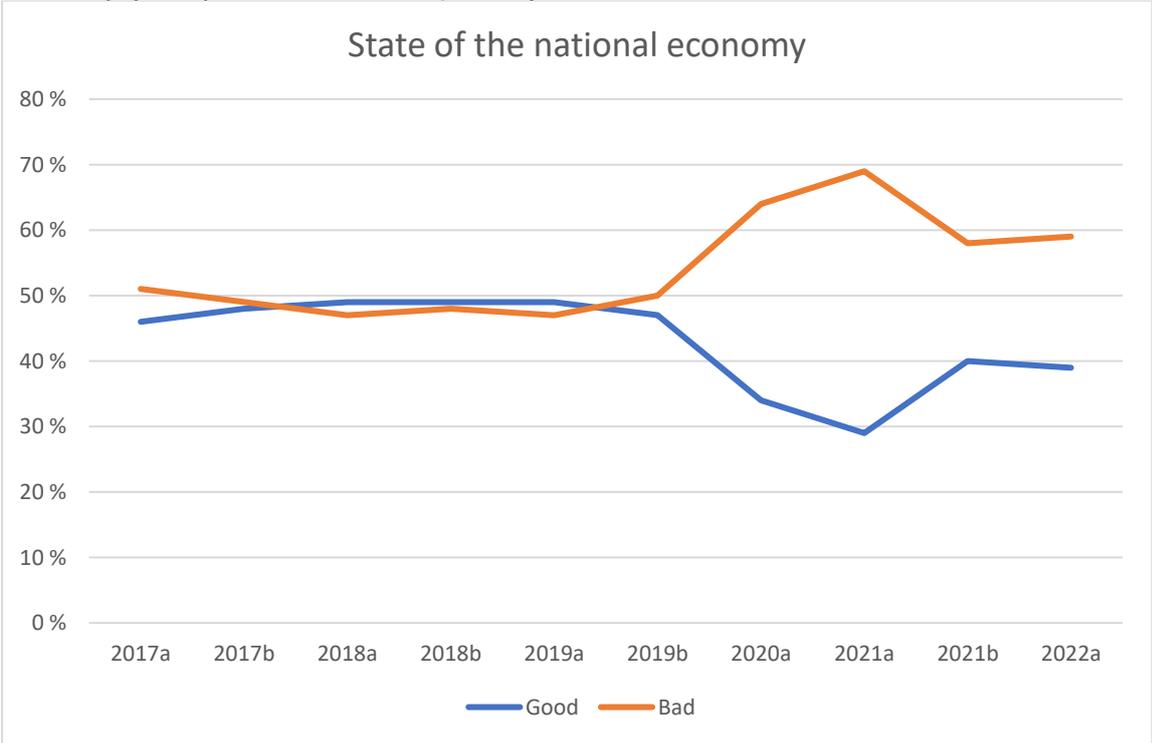


Figure 1.4

3 Theory

In the early days of EU-studies public opinion was seen as largely irrelevant because Europeans seemed to neither know nor care much about goings on in Brussels (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). The signing of the Maastricht treaty in 1994 is usually seen as the end of what scholars of the EU call "the permissive consensus," meaning that politicians were no longer able to act at the European level without public scrutiny. As the European public began to have opinions on EU-politics, EU scholars began to pay attention to those opinions and try to explain variations in support for the EU. One theoretical approach to public opinion in the EU is the benchmarking theory, which holds that citizens use the performance of their national political institutions as benchmarks for evaluating the EU (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016).

Benchmarking theory has several variations but in this paper the focus will be on the theories presented in Sánchez-Cuenca (2000) and De Vries (2018). What sets these theories apart from other theories of support for the EU is that Sánchez-Cuenca and De Vries see EU-support as having an inverse relationship with people's perceptions of their national economic institutions. They found that citizens living in high levels of corruption and poor economic performance were more likely to support EU-membership than citizens living in countries with little corruption and good economic situation.

3.1 Sánchez-Cuenca's benchmarking theory

Sánchez-Cuenca (2000) does take economics into account when explaining why some people are more supportive of integration than others. But rather than seeing support for the EU as a simple result of the economic benefits of European integration, Sánchez-Cuenca argues that support also depends on the functioning of national institutions and whether or not people perceive there to be a cost of transferring sovereignty to a supranational institution.

Membership in the EU offers a wide range of economic benefits that national governments can't provide alone, but at the cost of reduced decision-making power at the national level. For people living in countries with inefficient national institutions this can be a good thing with the EU being seen as providing a positive alternative, making people likely to support integration. The opposite occurs in countries where national institutions are perceived to be performing well as citizens oppose transferring power away from their national institutions, especially if European institutions are seen as inferior to national ones. Using Eurobarometer data Sánchez-Cuenca found that citizens living in countries with high levels of corruption, such as Spain and Italy, were more likely to support European integration than people living in countries such as Denmark where corruption is rare. The level of activity from the welfare state has an inverse effect on support for the EU. In countries with high levels of expenditure on social protection people are less likely to support European integration, perhaps because the EU is seen as a threat to the welfare state. Economic considerations also have a part to play, with people living in countries where the economy was doing well having a higher opinion of their national governments, and therefore a worse one of the EU.

In short: the highest levels of support for the EU will be found among people who have a negative perception of national institutions, but a positive perception of European ones, and the lowest levels of support will be found among people who have a positive perception of national institutions and a negative perception of European ones. People whose perceptions of national and European institutions are either both positive or both negative tend to be for and against European integration respectively but tend to occupy more moderate positions.

3.2 De Vries' Benchmarking theory

Catherine De Vries findings, published in her 2018 book *Euroscepticism and the future of European integration*, dovetail nicely with those of Sánchez-Cuenca. De Vries assumes that people compare the status quo of membership in the EU with what they assume would occur in the alternate state of leaving the EU. The gap between the perceived benefits of membership and the assumed benefit of the alternative state is what De Vries calls the *EU differential*. EU-supporters have a positive EU differential because they perceive greater benefits of EU-membership than in a hypothetical exit situation, while opponents of EU-membership perceive greater benefits of the alternative state, and therefore have a negative EU differential.

Furthermore, she argues that support for the EU has two dimensions: regime support and policy support. Regime support refers to support for the way decisions are made at the EU-level, while policy support refers to support for the outcome of those decisions: EU policy. De Vries argues that EU citizens can be divided into four groups depending on their support or scepticism for the EU regime and its policies, either supporting both, being sceptical of both, or supporting one but not the other.

To explain why the distribution of supporters and sceptics varies across the different member states De Vries looked at the relationship between national economic conditions and support for the EU's regime and policies. Even in countries with employment levels above the EU average, loyal supporters were the largest group, representing 37% of the population, but in countries with lower-than-average employment levels, 60% were loyal supporters. For De Vries this is because for member states with a strong economy leaving the EU is a viable option and people living in these countries assume that they would do just as well or even better outside the EU. On the other hand, member states with weak economies know that they would struggle outside the EU. Citing Hobolt and Tilley (2014) De Vries also speculated that people were more likely to attribute their country's economic success, or lack thereof, to the national government than the EU.

3.3 Predictions

Both De Vries and Sánchez-Cuenca show that the public's perception of the EU is closely tied to their perception of national governments. Since unfavourable economic conditions are tied to greater support for EU-membership, the economic downturn caused by the pandemic could lead to citizens becoming more supportive of EU membership due to the greater uncertainty associated with leaving the Union. This was not the case during the financial crisis, when trust in both institutions plummeted, and looking at figure 2.2 we can see that trust in the EU increased during the pandemic without there being significant change in levels of trust in the EU. Equally interesting is the fact that trust in the EU only increased after the economy had started to recover from the pandemic-induced slump. One possible explanation is that people's perceptions of the economic situation did not catch up with the reality, and people may still feel uneasy about the

economic situation despite its rapid recovery. This does seem to be the case, as the amount of people who thought the economic situation in their country was good decreased between summer 2020 and winter 2020-21 (European Commission, 2021), despite the economy across the EU showing significant improvement by this point (Eurostat, 2021). This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H₁ People who perceive the economy to be doing badly are more likely to trust the EU, and less likely to trust their national government.

However, considering the fact that the way trust in the EU has changed relative to economic perceptions contradicts past experience it would be foolish to completely discount the alternative hypothesis that the EU is benefitting from improved economic conditions.

H₂ People who perceive the economy to be doing well are more likely to trust the EU, and less likely to trust their national government.

In either case, the correlation between the economy and trust in the EU is expected to be weaker than the relationship between the economy and trust in the government.

Economic performance is only one possible explanation of support for the EU. As De Vries shows, people also take decision-making procedures and policy outcomes into account when evaluating the EU. For the purpose of this paper, we are primarily interested in the policy aspect of EU support and scepticism. More specifically, we are interested in how the public has responded to policies aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic, at both the national and European level, and how people's perception of policy at one level affects their perception at the other. Considering the fact that the EU's role in combatting the pandemic was limited it also seems unlikely that Europeans' increased trust in the EU is due to the Union's handling of the crisis. However, this is not a problem for the analysis as the idea that support for the EU its policies has more to do with the performance of national institutions than any actions the EU takes is at the core of DE Vries and Sánchez-Cuenca's theories. Taking this into account creates the following hypotheses:

H₃ People who are satisfied with their national government's handling of the pandemic will be less satisfied with the EU's response to the pandemic than people who are dissatisfied with their government's handling of the pandemic.

And

H₄ People who are satisfied with their national government's handling of the crisis will be less likely to support giving the EU more competencies to deal with similar crises in the future (i.e., a further transfer of power).

3.4 Method

To test the hypotheses the paper will analyse public opinion data collected in the member states during the pandemic, using logistic and linear regression. The data analysed will be from the 93rd Eurobarometer, collected in the summer of 2020, and the 94th Eurobarometer, collected in the winter of 2020-2021. These two surveys were selected for the obvious reason that they were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the Eurobarometer also collects responses from candidate countries, EFTA-members, and the UK, this analysis will only cover countries who are currently members

of the EU. This is because, while citizens living in some non-member states are affected by decisions taken at the EU level, their relationship with EU institutions is very different from that of EU-citizens. Another reason to exclude non-EU-members is to make comparisons across the two datasets easier as some countries covered by the 94th Eurobarometer are not covered by the 93rd. Weights have been applied to all regressions, to account for the different population sizes of member states.

In all cases people who have answered "don't know" have been discounted from the analysis for the variable in question. This is because, although it is tempting to place respondents that say they don't know in the middle of the scale, it seems like too much of a stretch to assume that people without enough knowledge to form an opinion on a given subject can be treated as though they represent a midpoint of opinions on that subject.

3.4.1 A note on the use of linear regression

While the analysis will also make use of logistic regression for variables that are dichotomous, non-dichotomous dependent variables will be analysed using linear regression. This will be done despite the fact that the variables in question are ordinal. However, despite the fact that the variables used are not linear in the strictest sense of the word, it makes sense to treat them as such as there is a clear high-low directional relationship between points in the variables.

4 Analysis

Trust in institutions: National government	Trust in institutions: European Union		
	Tend to trust	Tend not to trust	Don't know
Tend to trust	7,986	2,946	659
Tend not to trust	4,366	8,666	1,001
Don't know	313	193	551

Table 5.1

Table 5.1 shows respondents divided into groups along the same lines used in Sánchez-Cuenca (2000), according to whether they trust both the EU and their national government, only the EU, only their national government, or neither. Without accounting for the relative population sizes of the member states we see that respondents were almost twice as likely to only trust the EU and not the national government than the other way around. A majority have trust in at least one of the two institutions, however, the fact that those who trust neither the EU nor the national government, are the largest single group should be cause for concern for both institutions because, as Sánchez-Cuenca wrote, having a negative perception of both the national government and the EU “will give rise to rejection, and perhaps even alienation from politics” (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000, p. 152).

4.1 Perceptions of the economy and trust in institutions

Logistic regressions have been conducted to test the H₁ and H₂ hypotheses. What is being measured is the probability that a respondent will trust the national government based on his or her perception of the national economic situation, and the probability that a respondent will trust the EU based on the same evaluation. Both regressions have been conducted for both the 93rd and the 94th Eurobarometers.

To measure trust in institutions respondents were asked the question was “How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.” The question was repeated for several different institutions, but for the purpose of this paper we are only interested in levels of trust in the EU and national governments. Respondents were given only two possible answers, which were “Tend to trust” and “tend not to trust.” The question measuring respondents’ perception of the national economy is also part of a series of questions and is phrased as following: “How would you judge the situation in each of the following? The situation in the (nationality) economy?” Unlike the questions regarding trust in institutions, respondents were given four possible evaluations of the economic situation: “very good,” “rather good,” “rather bad,” and “very bad.” An important thing to note is that the

variable being used here does not measure the actual state of the economy, but rather people’s *perception* of the economic situation.

The variables were coded in the same way for all four regressions. For the questions regarding trust in the EU and in national governments “Tend to trust” was coded as 1 and “Tend not to trust” was coded as 0, meaning that the model is measuring the probability of trusting institutions. The variable measuring the public’s perception of the national economy is coded 1-4, as either very good, rather good, rather bad, or very bad, with a higher number indicating a more negative perception.

Logistic regression				Number of obs	=	25, 181
				Wald chi2(1)	=	1047.16
				Prob > chi2	=	0.0000
Log pseudolikelihood = -15047.925				Pseudo R2	=	0.1120
Trust in national government	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	Z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
Situation in national economy	-1.100655	.0340132	-32.36	0.000	-1.167329	-1.034
_cons	2.68481	.0963909	27.85	0.000	2.495887	2.873733

Table 5.2 – 93

Table 5.2 shows how citizens evaluations of their national economy affects their level of trust in the national government. The first thing to note is that the relationship between the two variables is statistically significant. The model shows that the relationship between trust in the national government and perceptions of the country’s economic state is negative but because a higher score on the economic variable indicates a more negative perception of the economy this means that those who think the national economy is doing well are more likely to trust the government than those who think the national economy is doing badly. The coefficient shows that a 1 unit change in respondents’ perception of the economy is associated with a lower probability of trusting the national government. The pseudo R2 does, however, indicate that how respondents perceive the national economy can only account for 11% of variation in trust in national governments.

Logistic regression				Number of obs	=	24,095
				Wald chi2(1)	=	418.54
				Prob > chi2	=	0.0000
Log pseudolikelihood = -15781.23				Pseudo R2	=	0.0382
Trust in the EU	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	Z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
Situation in national economy	-.6005041	.0293526	-20.46	0.000	-.6580341	-.5429742
_cons	1.536191	.0852918	18.01	0.000	1.369022	1.70336

Table 5.3 – EB93

Looking at the relationship between perceptions of the national economy and trust in the EU, as seen in table 5.3, we see that the coefficient is still negative. This indicates that a more negative perception of the national economy is associated with a lower likelihood of trusting the EU. However, the relationship the economy and trust in the EU is weaker than the relationship between the economy and trust in national governments, as can be seen by looking at the coefficient, which is less than half of that of the previous model. Additionally, evaluations of the national economy can account for less than 4% of the variation in trust in the EU, while the equivalent figure for national governments was 11% indicating that economic considerations are more important when evaluating the performance of national governments than when evaluating the EU.

Logistic regression		Number of obs		=	26,467	
		Wald chi2(1)		=	1133.03	
		Prob > chi2		=	0.0000	
Log pseudolikelihood	=	-15153.445		Pseudo R2	=	0.1118
Trust in national government	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	Z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
Situation in national economy	-1.091745	.0324341	-33.66	0.000	-1.155315	-1.028176
_cons	2.571339	.0916873	28.04	0.000	2.391635	2.751043

Table 5.4 – EB94

Running the same analysis on the data from the 94th Eurobarometer we find that the relationship between evaluations of the national economy and trust in the national government was almost identical for the two datasets, as can be seen by comparing table 5.4 with table 5.2.

Logistic regression		Number of obs		=	25,976	
		Wald chi2(1)		=	322.60	
		Prob > chi2		=	0.0000	
Log pseudolikelihood	=	-16815.555		Pseudo R2	=	0.0248
Trust in national government	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	Z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
Situation in national economy	-.4760932	.0265069	-17.96	0.000	-.5280457	-.4241407
_cons	1.522618	.0784545	19.41	0.000	1.36885	1.676386

Table 5.5 – EB94

Unlike the relationship between economic evaluations and governmental trust, the relationship between perceptions of the economic situation and trust in the EU was weaker in the 94th Eurobarometer than in the 93rd. Not only is the coefficient for this model closer to zero, but the pseudo R2 shows that in the 94th Eurobarometer economic evaluations can account for a smaller proportion of variation in levels of trust in the EU. Considering that the economic situation in the winter of 2020-2021 was better than when the 93rd Eurobarometer was conducted, a possible explanation could be that EU-citizens

are less likely to evaluate the EU on economic grounds when times are good, compared to when the economy is doing badly. However, since we know that people’s perception of the economic situation in the 94th Eurobarometer was worse than in the 93rd this does not seem to be the case. At the very least the relationship between economic growth and trust in the EU cannot be that simple.

The results of these models do not give full support to either H₁ or H₂ as the relationship between perceptions of the economic situation and trust in the national government, and the relationship between economic perceptions and trust in the EU point in the same direction.

4.2 Satisfaction with policy responses to the pandemic at the national and EU-level

To measure EU-citizens’ satisfaction with measures taken by various institutions in response to the pandemic respondents were asked the question “In general, how satisfied are you with the measures taken to fight the Coronavirus outbreak by [institution].” For both surveys there were four possible answers to the question: very satisfied, fairly satisfied, rather not satisfied or not at all satisfied.

Linear regression has been used to investigate the relationship between EU citizen’s satisfaction with measures taken at the national and European level. The variable measuring satisfaction with the EU’s COVID-19 measures and the variable measuring satisfaction with measures carried out by national governments, were coded in the same way, with each possible answer to the question assigned a numerical value from 1 to 4, with a higher number indicating less satisfaction.

Linear regression				Number of obs	=	24,079
				F(1, 2477)	=	3399.28
				Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.2921
				Root MSE	=	.78213
Satisfaction with measures:	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval	
national government						
Satisfaction with measures: EU	.6078289	.0104253	58.30	0.000	.5873947	.6282632
_cons	.7756748	.0259436	29.90	0.000	.7248237	.8265259

Table 5.6 – EB93

The resulting model shows a statistically significant positive correlation between satisfaction with covid measures at the national and EU level. Additionally, satisfaction with the EU’s covid measures can explain 29% of the variation in satisfaction with covid measures taken by the national government. However, contrary to H₃, the relationship between satisfaction with measures to fight the coronavirus pandemic at the national and European levels is positive, meaning that people who are satisfied with the measures taken by their national government also tend to be satisfied with measures taken by the EU.

Linear regression				Number of obs	=	26,200
				F(1, 2477)	=	4202.36
				Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.3092
				Root MSE	=	.74292
Satisfaction with measures: national government	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
Satisfaction with measures: EU	.6009808	.0092707	64.83	0.000	.5828097	.619152
._cons	1.105549	.0261357	42.30	0.000	1.054322	1.156777

Table 5.7 - EB94

Looking at the relationship between the same two variables for the 94th Eurobarometer yields very similar results, as shown in table 5.7.

In hindsight this unexpected result is perhaps not so surprising considering that most EU-citizens either support both the national government and the EU, or neither. A high opinion of an institution and satisfaction with policies enacted by said institution is interconnected, so it is to be expected that people who trust both the EU and the government will also have a high opinion of both institutions' policy responses to the pandemic.

4.3 Perceptions of the national economy and satisfaction with policy responses to the pandemic

As detailed earlier in the paper, policies aimed at combatting the pandemic often had a negative impact on the economy. Considering that, it is interesting to see how citizens' perceptions of the economic situation shape their satisfaction with policies aimed at combatting the pandemic.

Linear regression				Number of obs	=	25,882
				F(1, 2477)	=	1788.22
				Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.1634
				Root MSE	=	.84967
Satisfaction with measures: national government	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
Situation in national economy	.4758575	0.112529	42.29	0.000	.4538011	.4979139
._cons	.9937527	.0313491	31.70	0.000	.9323067	1.055199

Table 5.8 – EB93

Conducting a linear regression of the relationship between satisfaction with the national government’s coronavirus response and perceptions of the state of the national economy creates a model (see table 5.8) that shows that the relationship between the two variables is positive, meaning that higher levels of satisfaction with the government’s response to the pandemic correlate with a more positive perception of the national economy. The model shows that, on average, every positive increase in the perception of the state of the national economy is accompanied by an increase in satisfaction with government covid measures of 0.48, accounting for 16% of the variation in levels of satisfaction with the government’s coronavirus response.

Linear regression				Number of obs	=	23,787
				F(1, 2477)	=	743.47
				Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.0909
				Root MSE	=	.78763
Satisfaction with measures: EU	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
Situation in national economy	.3145109	.0115347	27.27	0.000	.2919023	.3371196
_cons	1.67717	.0328244	51.10	0.000	1.612833	1.741508

Table 5.9 – EB93

As we can see from table 5.9, respondents’ perceptions of the economic situation in their country does have a positive correlation with their satisfaction with the EU’s corona response. However, the effect is smaller, with every increase of 1 in the perception of the national economy causing average satisfaction with the EU’s covid response to increase by 0.31, less than for national governments. Furthermore, the state of the national economy can only account for 9% of the variation in satisfaction with the EU’s pandemic response. As with the relationship between the economy and trust in the EU, this is consistent with what De Vries says about EU-citizens being less likely to evaluate the EU and its policies on economic grounds, compared to the national government. This is also consistent with previous findings in this paper which showed that the correlation between trust in the national government and perceptions of the economic situation was stronger than the correlation between trust in the EU and perceptions of the state of the national economy.

Linear regression				Number of obs	=	26,937
				F(1, 2477)	=	1889.85
				Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.1562
				Root MSE	=	.81591
Satisfaction with measures: national government	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	T	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	

Situation in national economy	.4433674	.0101988	43.47	0.000	.42333771	.4633576
_cons	1.420659	.0297108	47.82	0.000	1.362425	1.478894

Table 5.10 – EB94

Running the analysis of the relationship between evaluations of national covid responses and perceptions of the economic situation for the 94th Eurobarometer produces very similar results as those obtained from the 93rd Eurobarometer, as can be seen by comparing table 5.8 with table 5.10.

Linear regression				Number of obs	=	26,047
				F(1, 2477)	=	415.50
				Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.0450
				Root MSE	=	.80696
Satisfaction with measures: EU	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
Situation in national economy	.4758575	0.112529	42.29	0.000	.4538011	.4979139
_cons	.9937527	.0313491	31.70	0.000	.9323067	1.055199

Table 5.11 – EB94

However, there is an observable change in the correlation between satisfaction with the EU's efforts to fight the pandemic, and perceptions of the state of the economy. Looking at table 5.11 compared to table 5.9 we see that perceptions of the state of the national economy have become considerably less important for the public's evaluation of the EU's response to the pandemic. In summer 2020 the national economy could account for 9% of the variation in EU-citizens evaluations of the EU's coronavirus policies. This is interesting considering that the economic situation in 2020 was significantly worse than in winter 2021, when the economy had begun to recover. Admittedly, the importance of the economy for explaining variation in evaluations of the national covid response has also decreased but by less than 1%, while for evaluations of the EU's covid response the figure has been slashed in half.

4.4 Satisfaction with national policy responses to the pandemic and support giving the EU more competencies

The fourth and last hypothesis presented in this paper concerns the relationship between satisfaction with the national coronavirus response and the support for giving the EU more competencies in this area.

Linear regression		Number of obs	=	23,617
		F(1, 2477)	=	169.12
		Prob > F	=	0.0000
		R-squared	=	0.0251
		Root MSE	=	0.0251

Qa21a_1	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]
Qa21a_2	.1435053	.0110351	13.00	0.000	.1218758 .1651247
_cons	1.343847	.0267951	50.15	0.000	1.291327 1.396367

Table 5.12 – EB93

H₃ assumed that because transferring decision-making power in a policy area comes at the cost of reducing the decision-making power of national governments in that policy area, people would be less likely to support giving the EU more power to deal with future pandemic-like crises if they were satisfied with the way their national government had dealt with the crisis. As table 5.12 shows, the data used provides no support for this hypothesis. The coefficient is positive, where it was expected to be negative but perhaps more importantly, it is very small. Furthermore, satisfaction with the government’s covid response can only account for 2.5% of the variation in support for giving the EU more powers in this area, suggesting that support is determined by other factors.

Linear regression	Number of obs	=	26,722
	F(1, 2477)	=	52.77
	Prob > F	=	0.0000
	R-squared	=	0.0063
	Root MSE	=	.77266

Qa13_3	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	T	P> t	[95% conf. interval]
Qa10_1	.0694542	.0095607	7.26	0.000	.05071 .0881936
_cons	1.528492	.024471	62.46	0.000	1.480528 1.576457

Table 5.13 – EB 94

Running the same analysis using the data from the 94th Eurobarometer gives even weaker results, both in regard to the strength of the correlation and its explanatory power (see table 5.13).

A possible explanation for the unexpected result can be found in the overwhelming support for giving the EU more powers to deal with future crises. According to the 93rd Eurobarometer 86% of respondents either totally agreed with the idea or tended to agree with the idea, with only 2% totally disagreeing. In the 94th Eurobarometer 86% of respondents were in some level of agreement, and 3% disagreed completely.

5 Discussion

The results of the analysis conducted in chapter 4 do not provide support for any of the hypotheses laid out earlier in chapter 3. H_1 and the alternative hypothesis, H_2 , concerned the effect of economic considerations on trust in the EU and in national governments. The prediction for H_1 was that there would be a negative correlation between a negative perception of the economic situation and trust in national governments while the relationship between trust in the EU and negative perceptions of the economy was expected to be positive. Although the correlation between trust in the government and positive perceptions of the economy was as expected, the correlation between a negative perception of the economy and trust in the EU was *also* negative, partially contradicting H_1 . H_2 was an alternative hypothesis which predicted the inverse of H_1 but since both correlations pointed in the same direction, there was no more support for H_2 than for H_1 .

The fact that a majority of respondents either trusted both the EU and national governments or neither can perhaps explain why the results were not as expected. A better research design would have been to split respondents into four groups based on whether or not they trusted the EU and national governments and conducted the analysis for the four groups separately.

The pandemic was much more than its economic fallout, so it is possible that economic considerations became less important for citizens evaluations of the EU and national governments as the pandemic wore on. This is supported by the findings above, which show that economic considerations became less important for predicting citizens opinion on EU-matters between summer and winter.

The unexpected positive correlation between satisfaction with national and EU coronavirus measures, contradicting H_3 , can probably be attributed to the same inadequacy in the research design identified above.

As for H_4 , the overwhelming support for giving the EU more competencies to deal with future crises indicates that EU-citizens support this, regardless of their opinion of their national government's handling of the situation. Considering that support for giving the EU more competencies was so overwhelming, one could perhaps infer that the reason why some citizens were dissatisfied with the EUs response to the pandemic was because they wanted more to be done at the EU level, not because they disliked what was being done. Alternatively, it is entirely possible that citizens see the need for more cooperation during crises that are exasperated by the interconnectedness of the EU. Support for giving the EU more competencies in this area could be due to citizens being dissatisfied with the cooperation between member states one example of a lack of cooperation during the crisis was the scramble to secure PPE, which is touched on in chapter 2.

5.1 Possibilities for further research

In addition to repeating the tests with a more rigorous research design, there are several possible directions one could take further research.

It is possible that looking public opinion in the EU as a whole, obscures trends at the national level. People living in different member states have had very different

experiences of the pandemic, both in terms of death toll and economic impact. It could be that divergent trends in different member states cancel each other out and conducting case-studies of individual member states could give stronger results.

The fact that the national economic situation became less important for predicting trust in the EU and support for EU policies provides another possible avenue for research, especially since perceptions of the national economy became more negative between the two surveys. If the economic situation can't predict trust in the EU, the question then becomes: what did determine public trust the EU during the pandemic?

First results from the 2020 Eurobarometer show that trust in the EU declined between the 95th Eurobarometer and the 96th, while trust in national governments has gone up. This could indicate that the high levels of trust in the EU were temporary, and it is entirely possible that they will continue to go down until they return to pre-pandemic levels. Perhaps the high levels of trust in the EU were a result of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, meaning that citizens no-longer feel the need to put their faith in the EU now that things have begun to return to normal. However, other factors such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which could be affecting public opinion.

6 Conclusion

When reports of the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Wuhan first emerged few were expecting the EU to be as badly affected as it was in 2020-2021. In addition to the tragic loss of life the pandemic caused significant disruptions to the economy, sending the entire EU into a recession. Trust in the EU increased during the pandemic, which was unexpected considering the EU's experience of previous crises.

To explain why levels of trust in the EU were so unusually high during the pandemic this paper has drawn on the benchmarking theories of Sánchez-Cuenca and De Vries. Both De Vries and Sánchez-Cuenca identified an inverse relationship between opinions on national institutions and opinions on the EU, and national governments are often evaluated based on economic performance. Because of this the expectation was that people who perceived the economy to be doing badly would be more likely to trust the EU, and less likely to trust their national government.

However, the statistical analysis conducted in chapter 4 did not find any support for this, and neither do the other hypotheses find support in the results of the statistical analyses.

One possible explanation for the unexpected results lies in the research design, as respondents should perhaps have been divided into four groups based on their level of trust or lack thereof in the EU and national governments. Another possible change to the research design would be to divide respondents by country.

Alternatively, benchmarking theory could be a poor fit for explaining the way public opinion in the EU reacts to a crisis such as the pandemic. The COVID-19 outbreak caused a large disruption of a kind very few Europeans had experienced before, and it is not unlikely that their perception of matters such as the economic took a back seat to other considerations.

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7.1 Datasets and software

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Annex

Variables used:

93rd Eurobarometer

Variable	Title
Qa61_9	Trust in institutions: National government
Qa6a_11	Trust in institutions: EU
Qa1a_2	Situation: National economy
Qa21a_1	Satisfaction coronavirus measures - natl government
Qa21a_2	Satisfaction coronavirus measures - EU
Qa26a_7	Corona consequences: EU should be given means to deal with future crises

94th Eurobarometer

Variable	Title
Qa6b_8	Trust in institutions: National government
Qa6b_10	Trust in institutions: EU
Qa1a_2	Situation: National economy
Qa10_1	Satisfaction coronavirus measures - natl government
Qa10_3	Satisfaction coronavirus measures - EU
Qa13_3	Corona consequences currently: EU should be given means to deal with future crises

