

Measuring Implicit Identification with the EU and its Effects

Written by Laura Cram

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LAURA CRAM, NOV 20 2011

Analysts should expect neither too much from European Union identity and its causal role in driving the integration process, nor too little, by underestimating the stabilising force of *banal Europeanism*. Daily transactions in an EU institutional context embed an acceptance of the EU as a legitimate political authority and underpin passive consent to the continued functioning of the EU. The emergence of an explicit EU identity is contingent upon the value (real and symbolic) attached to those transactions, the extent to which valued goods are perceived to be under threat and whether competing political authorities are viewed as legitimate.

Gellner (1997:90) in his blunt question 'Do nations have navels?' referred to the tension between 'primordialists', who saw national identity as a historically determined given and the 'modernists' who saw national identity as a creation in response to modern social requirements and conditions. Identity, from this latter perspective, was not a precondition for the emergence of political regimes (in this case national states) but was used to support the development and maintenance of such regimes. In answer to the question 'do nations need navels?', Gellner (1997:36) concluded: 'My own view is that some nations possess genuine ancient navels, some have navels invented for them by their own nationalist propaganda, and some are altogether navel-less'. So, does the EU need a 'navel'? I argue, in a recent contribution to the *Journal of Common Market Studies* (Cram, 2011), that the EU does not need a navel, though it may develop one or have one invented for it. Tempting though navel-gazing is, analysts must ask what function such a navel might serve and for whom rather than simply going looking for one.

To fully understand the extent and impact of EU identity, both *implicit* and *explicit* aspects of identity must be taken into account – in particular, the importance of implicit identification in creating a latent political community in the EU needs to be recognised. Even if a surge in conscious identification with the EU takes place and the EU, in Gellner's (1997) terminology, discovers its 'navel', identity is contingent and contextual. A more meaningful measure of the relationship between EU identity and European integration, I argue, is the extent to which implicit or unconscious identification with the EU exists and has become sufficiently embedded to underpin ongoing public consent to the functioning of the EU as a system.

Banal Europeanism

From the perspective of *Banal Europeanism* (Cram 2001, 2009) identification with the European Union is underpinned by a process which is banal, contingent and contextual. The importance of *implicit* as well as *explicit* identification with the EU in securing consent to the continued functioning of the EU is key, even in the absence of support for European integration. Implicit or unconscious identification with, or attachment to, the EU, is essential to the continued functioning of the Union. This is manifested in a (often unconscious) normalisation of the EU as a legitimate political authority such that to challenge this norm is to challenge the status quo. Conscious or explicit identification with the EU may also emerge in the latent political community as the EU becomes *ammeaningful presence* for its citizens. I argue that:

1. explicit *identification as a European*, and measures of *support for the EU*, are less reliable predictors of European integration than the extent to which a degree of *identification with the EU*, whether implicit or

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- explicit, exists;
2. implicit *identification with* the EU, is more widespread than measures of either *support for* the EU or *identification as* Europeans would suggest;
 3. implicit *identification with* the EU, may co-exist with a degree of Euro-scepticism;
 4. as *identification with* the EU becomes more explicit this may increase *support for* the EU but not necessarily *identification as* Europeans;
 5. explicit identification with the EU is most likely to emerge when (or if) the EU becomes a positive *meaningful presence* in the daily lives of its citizens and, in particular, when hitherto unrecognised benefits from the integration process come under threat;
 6. the extent to which explicit identification with the EU results in support for the EU or European integration is contingent upon the actions, and perceived legitimacy, of any alternative providers of such valued goods (for example) at the national level.

Measuring Implicit Identification and Its Effects:

What is often neglected in the study of EU identity is the day to day, low-level, reinforcement of a shared consciousness, albeit passive, which is crucial to the maintenance of the regime. Coins, symbols, background flags, policy interventions and legal frameworks provide constant daily reinforcement, at an unconscious level, of EU membership. Of course, in a daily low-level manner, such symbols may also present a constant source of annoyance. Nevertheless, they serve as a daily reminder of an emerging status quo ante which might cost more to challenge than to tolerate. Even if few are prepared to die for the EU, membership of the European Union has become increasingly entrenched as part of everyday life in the European Union. For EU citizens identification is largely based on daily low-level engagement with the EU in unremarkable ways (carrying passports or driving licences, conforming with legislation, walking past EU flags) which remind citizens of their involvement in the larger EU system whether for good or ill. Both identification with the EU and identification as a European might, over time, be accompanied by a sentimental attachment to the EU as symbols become attached to valued functions, thus providing a shorthand connection between valued goods and sentimental association with the European Union as provider of those goods. The challenge is to establish the extent to which EU symbols, from flags to more mundane reminders, have become associated in the popular perception with valued public goods and the extent to which symbols associated with the EU affect public attitudes towards the European Union.

In our ESRC-funded research project: *Implicit Triggers, Identity(ies) and Attitudes: An Experimental Approach* (<http://ewds.strath.ac.uk/euidtriggers>) the Strathclyde team (Laura Cram, Stratos Patrikios and James Mitchell) examine the relationship between implicit exposure to EU-related symbols, attitudes to the European Union, and identification with the European Union. We test this relationship using large-scale online survey experiments containing visual stimuli, comparing findings within the UK, and between the UK and Ireland. Our analysis of 4350 responses, collected for us by YouGov, finds that exposure to implicit cues that raise the salience of the European Union interacts with supranational identification to shape related attitudes. This effect differs by national context and according to the type of trigger presented.

Existing empirical research on EU identity has focused predominantly on the extent to which individuals claim to identify as Europeans. The focus on self-reported identification as a European in cross-sectional surveys cannot assess the extent of often unconscious or implicit identification with the EU, the impact of this on attitudes and behaviour, or how this interacts with conscious attachment to the EU or to the nation. Our research employed experimental methods derived from political psychology to examine the link between implicit exposure to EU-related symbols, attitudes to the European Union, and identification with the European Union. Existing experimental studies of the role played by EU symbols in relation to EU identity have explored the effect of such symbols in association with positive and negative news reports about the EU (Bruter, 2003; 2009). The Strathclyde study is the first attempt to assess, in an experimental framework, the extent to which implicit exposure to EU symbols provokes a shift in attitudes to the EU. A key distinction in this study is between *functional* and *symbolic* primes and between *instrumental* and *affective* responses. We compare the impact of implicit exposure to banal functional triggers, related to the everyday, practical interactions between citizens and the EU, with that of implicit exposure to the symbolic trigger of the EU ceremonial flag. The EU is a multi-level governance structure with a strong presence of

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existing national state and sub-state national identities. EU identity, to the extent that it exists at all, is still under construction. As such, the ability of the EU flag to trigger a strong associated narrative that evokes feelings of attachment to a group or an ideology or to shape the behaviour of individuals in a consistent direction is expected to be limited. In this context, it is likely that the ceremonial EU flag will evoke weaker associations, and have less measurable effects on political attitudes, than other, more mundane, everyday reminders of the instrumental realities of EU membership.

The experimental approach, the exposure to implicit cues, and the conceptual distinction between 'functional' and 'symbolic' triggers and between 'affective' and 'instrumental' responses proved fruitful (Cram, Patrikios and Mitchell, 2011). The results from the online survey experiments containing visual cues were compared within the nations of the UK, and between the UK and Ireland. It was demonstrated that 'functional' rather than 'symbolic' EU triggers have a significant effect on attitudes towards the European Union. The symbolic version of the EU flag had no effect on EU-related opinions. The effect of 'functional' triggers was observed only in relation to 'instrumental' rather than 'affective' attitudes. We found that exposure to the EU 'functional' trigger led to a polarisation of opinion. In particular, the effect varied according to the degree to which subjects were attached to the EU. It is also important to note that these effects were only applicable to the respondents of two nations (Scotland and Wales). These two nations are thought to view the EU as an instrument in ongoing debates on their constitutional status. Overall, these results are consistent with the claims of banal Europeanism: that EU identity is best understood as a process which is banal, contingent and contextual; low-level and instrumental, rather than 'hot' and passionate.

The large-scale online study produced 4350 responses pre-selected on the basis of national attachment. The study also produced a comparative research design which can be extended to include other nations, whether EU member states or stateless nations. The study, however, has additional, policy-related implications. The results of this study and the scope for extension of this experimental approach to the study of identity more generally also have a wider resonance in relation to efforts at national, European and international level to understand and shape the relationship between identity and regime support. In the context of a crisis of democracy, when public trust in political institutions and in politicians is at a low ebb, political elites have an interest in engendering identification with and support for their regimes and in understanding the factors which underpin these processes. Throughout Europe the shifting borders of the traditional national state have been challenged from above, by the supranational European Union, and from below by processes of devolution and decentralisation. Political regimes, new and old, seek to engage their publics, to gain or maintain their support and to encourage identification with their regimes. At the EU level, following the failure of the Constitutional Treaty of the European Union, the EU has been engaged in a determined effort to 'bring Europe closer to the people'. More generally, there is growing concern internationally with community building in failed and failing states (for example Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia). The role that functional and symbolic identity triggers can play in overcoming historic divides and in generating a sense of identification with emerging regimes is of high significance.

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