

**T**he process of European Union (EU) integration, together with the increased mobility of EU and extra-EU citizens, has impinged on territorial and conceptual boundaries that shape whether citizens see and understand immigration as an opportunity or a threat. Historically, European social security institutions were established and developed during an era of high cultural and ethnic homogeneity. The constant growth in intra- and extra-EU mobility in Western Europe during the past decades, along with the 2015 refugee crisis, has introduced greater diversity in European communities, reducing popular consent to indiscriminate redistributive policies ([Alesina and Glaeser, 2004](#); [van Oorschot, 2006](#); [Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2018](#)).

**This study presents an analysis of public support for ‘welfare chauvinism’, the idea that nationals should have priority in accessing available social security benefits.** It does so by adopting a longitudinal perspective enabling an evaluation of correlates of welfare chauvinism in different contexts – in 1992, just before the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, and in 2016, in the aftermath of the great recession, of the Eurozone and Schengen crises and of the Brexit referendum.

## **A changing political landscape: the increased relevance of EU integration and immigration**

In the last couple of decades, EU integration and immigration have become the two central pillars around which the re-structuring political competition in Europe have taken place ([Kriesi et al., 2008](#); [2012](#); [Hooghe and Marks, 2018](#)).

**The politicisation of EU affairs has gradually increased since the early 1990s, with peaks matching major integration steps such as the Maastricht Treaty** ([Bolzer and Risse, 2018](#)). As a consequence, the post-Maastricht public opinion has shifted from a ‘permissive consensus’ to a ‘constraining dissensus’ ([Hooghe and Marks, 2009](#)), becoming progressively more manifest in the current political contestation over cross-border welfare rights that have disrupted the century-long process of ‘bounding’ and ‘bonding’ within European welfare states ([Ferrera, 2005](#); [2014](#)).

**Simultaneously, immigration of EU and non-EU nationals became central in the debate on European integration.** This is due not only to the 2015 refugee crisis that heightened citizens’ attention on this topic but also to the constant increase in intra-EU

mobility and migration from non-EU countries for labour and family reasons. Patterns of migration started also to be directed toward previously emigration states in Southern and Central Europe: Italy, Spain, Greece, Hungary, and Poland ([Geddes and Scholten, 2016](#)).

**These transformations were followed by an increase in support for anti-immigration policies and for Eurosceptic political parties opposing immigration and multiculturalism all around the EU.** The constant rise of internal mobility and international migration have become focal points in political debates on the future of the EU and of the welfare state, with appeals for exclusionary politics fuelled by Eurosceptic right-wing populist parties ([Keskinen et al., 2016](#)). In this context, it has become more legitimate than ever to claim that welfare benefits should be reserved to certain groups only, notably natives who ‘truly’ belong to the nation.

## **Welfare chauvinism across time: a new sense of community?**

One of the ways in which this contestation is evident is with regard to preferences for welfare chauvinism. Recently, this attitudinal stances in favour of exclusionary welfare policies have received considerable academic attention ([van der Waal et al., 2010](#); [Mewes and Mau, 2012](#); [Hjorth, 2016](#); [Kootstra, 2016](#)). It promotes nativism as the fundamental principle on which social policy should rest: the in-group, defined by citizenship, ethnicity, race or religion, is the deserving group, while the out-group composed of foreigners should receive limited social support ([Ennsler-Jedenastik, 2018](#)).

Here, we measure welfare chauvinism through a question repeated in [Eurobarometer \(1992\)](#) and in the [RESceEU](#) project mass survey conducted in late 2016:

*Which of these three statements on the access to social security benefits by citizens of other EU Member States comes closest to your own point of view?*

*1 - All foreigners legally resident in (OUR COUNTRY) should have the same social security benefits as the (NATIONALITY).*

*2 - Only nationals of other EU Member States should have the same social security benefits as the (NATIONALITY).*

*3 - A foreigner, even if legally resident in (OUR COUNTRY), should not have the same social security benefits as the (NATIONALITY).*

We take into consideration five EU member states: France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. These are the largest EU countries both in terms of GDP and population, and also accommodate about three-quarters of the total migrant population of the EU28. Moreover, these countries received the highest number of immigrants and granted more citizenship acquisitions in 2016 ([Eurostat 2018](#)).

**Thanks to this question, we can define three broad categories of citizens according to their deservingness criteria: cosmopolitans, citizens who hold that no barrier should impede access to welfare benefits to anyone, regardless of their citizenship** (measured by the response category 1); Eupolitans, citizens who identify themselves as Europeans, implicitly or explicitly, and would allow only their fellow Europeans to access social security benefits (response category 2); and, chauvinists, individuals favouring exclusionary policies, and that would limit access to welfare to non-nationals (response category 3).

Tables 1 and 2 present the distributions of the measure of welfare chauvinism in 1992 and 2016 respectively.

It emerges that in 1992 the most inclusive option received the widest support in each member state, with the highest levels in Italy (65%) and Spain (78%), two countries that at that time were ‘sources’ of immigration rather than recipients. The citizens of the UK, Germany and France were already less willing to open up their social security systems to foreigners. The share of cosmopolitan respondents strongly decreased in 2016 compared to 1992 in each of the five countries considered. With the exception of the UK, other countries have experienced a recalibration of attitudes towards the central option, that guarantees access to social benefits only to citizens of other EU member states. On one hand, this result highlights how, in recent years, **extra-EU immigration has become a much more salient and threatening issue that worries European voters**. On the other hand, these figures suggest also the **emergence and (re)definition of the sense community and of its boundaries at the European level**. The increased integration and intra-EU mobility might have bonded citizens together and drawn new boundaries granting access to welfare services across the EU. The proportion of chauvinist respondents increased between 1992 and 2016 in Spain and the UK. For the former, the earlier figure was particularly low, while for the latter it was already among the highest ones. This result is not surprising given the extreme salience of immigration, even intra-EU, in the politics which led to the ‘Brexit’ vote ([Martinsen and Pons Rotger, 2017](#)). *Source: REScEU data.*

## Exclusivist attitudes and country-level differences

In this section, we look at whether country-level factors are associated with differences in the three categories of welfare preferences in 1992 and 2016. Tables 3 and 4 report bivariate associations between-country differences in levels of welfare cosmopolitans/Eupolitans/chauvinists with the following system-level characteristics: the share of foreigners (EU and non-EU), the level of unemployment, and the level of social spending over GDP in means-tested, and non-means-tested benefits.

In 1992 differences in immigration levels had an association with differences in welfare attitudes in line with ‘threat’ theories: as the number of immigrants increased, also the exclusivist attitudes tended to rise too, following an economic logic of self-interest. This is not the case in 2016 when the association with immigration variables lost power to explain aggregate levels differences. Only the share of non-EU foreigners returns significant correlation coefficients but going in an unexpected direction: **a country with more non-EU foreigners tended to have more cosmopolitans and fewer chauvinists**. This suggests that immigration attitudes are not necessarily dependent on real immigration numbers, [as we have already seen in the previous focus on misperception](#). Even if, due to the low number of observations, findings have to be interpreted with a lot of caution, some interesting regularity emerges.

Looking instead at the association with unemployment rates, we find the same logic both in 1992 and 2016: a country with more unemployment tends to have more cosmopolitans and fewer chauvinists. An interesting result that suggests that in the aggregate **an economic logic of self-interest may take the shape of cosmopolitan attitudes, rather than closure**. Citizens of countries with high levels of unemployment might be willing to take advantage of the benefits of the single market.

When it comes to social spending, the association between differences in means-tested benefits is the only one significantly related to chauvinism both in 1992 and 2016: results highlight that **if country A spends more in means-tested benefits than country B, then country A will have a higher share of chauvinists**. This seems to support a logic of competition over scarce resources.

To sum up, we have shown that trans-national cosmopolitan solidarity has weakened and that **citizens are increasingly concerned about extra-EU immigration**. While

From cosmopolitans to “Eupolitans”: citizens’ attitudes on welfare  
before and after Maastricht  
By Francesco Visconti

cosmopolitan views decreased, **the acceptance of cross-border welfare rights for ‘fellow’ EU citizens, a form of EUpolitanism**, increased. Moreover, a complex association between self-interest and chauvinism emerges: attitudes supporting closure are higher in richer countries with lower unemployment rates and in countries with higher spending on means-tested benefits.

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