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# Opportunity or threat? Public attitudes towards EU freedom of movement

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## ABSTRACT


This article examines the effect of individual and contextual variables on preference formation towards European Union (EU) freedom of movement. Our multilevel analyses of Eurobarometer data show that citizens with low levels of human capital and strong feelings of national identity are more likely to oppose intra-EU migration. However, we argue that in order to fully grasp variation in public preferences, we need to consider the domestic context. Utilitarian and affective theories have more explanatory power in richer countries, but in less affluent member states support for free movement is evenly high irrespective of individual dispositions. Our findings have implications for the progress of European integration, especially at a time when the EU is in the process of deciding on a course of action about its future direction.

**KEYWORDS** Attitudes; EU freedom of movement; identity; macro-economic conditions; utility

## Introduction

Mobility is one of the key principles of European integration. It relates to the four fundamental freedoms guaranteed by EU law: the freedom of movement of labour, capital, goods and services. These underpin the EU's single market, and are seen as complementary to the EU's political objectives. While free movement of persons has a strong symbolic value because it relates to EU citizenship rights, it also embodies a variety of challenges. There is a tension between the EU's objective to increase competitiveness and address unemployment on the one hand, and member states' ability to regulate their domestic labour market institutions on the other. The progressive lifting of transnational restrictions to workers from Central and Eastern Europe from the mid-2000s onwards in combination with the financial crisis and subsequent economic difficulties in many EU member states resulted in high

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intra-EU migration flows, which increased significantly from poorer to richer member states (European Commission 2014a, 2014b; Portes 2015). The number of EU nationals working in another EU country increased from 5.8 million to 6.6 million in the period 2008–2012, which translates into a 14 per cent increase (Eurofound 2014: 17). This trend continued with the proportion of EU nationals living in a member state other than the one that they were born in rising approximately 5.3 per cent from 2014 to 2015 (European Commission 2017: 10).

Although intra-EU mobility is low compared to migration flows from outside the EU and in comparison to the United States (European Commission 2014b), concerns over the impact of intra-EU migration have become a major political issue (Portes 2015), fuelling Eurosceptic attitudes combined with anti-immigrant sentiment, and contributing to Brexit (Hobolt 2016; Vasilopoulou 2016). Against this background, this article explains attitudes towards EU free movement, conducting multilevel analysis of four Eurobarometer surveys, carried out between 2015 and 2017. Our contribution is three-fold. First, we fill a substantive gap in the literature by examining for the first time Euroscepticism from the perspective of preferences for EU freedom of movement. Second, we build on and extend literature that examines the domestic foundations of EU preferences (De Vries 2017; Rohrschneider 2002; Rohrschneider and Loveless 2010; Sánchez-Cuenca 2000) by pointing to the role of country-specific factors in understanding why some individuals support freedom of movement and others oppose it. We show that national GDP is the most prominent determinant of opposition to free movement. It also moderates the impact of individual-level variables on mobility-related preferences. Utilitarian and affective theories have more explanatory power in richer countries, but in less affluent member states support for free movement is evenly high irrespective of individual dispositions. Third, we empirically substantiate that the structure of attitudes towards EU freedom of movement does not fully mirror the structure of general attitudes towards European integration.

## **Modelling public attitudes towards EU freedom of movement**

The first step for explaining citizen preferences towards free movement is to try to unpack the policy itself. Freedom of movement is a fundamental principle of cooperation within the EU framework, which relates to EU citizens' right to freely work and reside in another EU country and to enjoy equal treatment with nationals in access to employment, working conditions, and all other social and tax advantages. Free movement of persons was set out in the Treaty of Rome and is the cornerstone of EU citizenship, which was established by the Treaty of Maastricht. EU citizenship is an automatic right conferred upon nationals of EU member states, which is practically activated through free movement.

Very low levels of mobility were observed until the 2000s with approximately 1 per cent of EU citizens living in a country other than their country of birth. Intra-EU migration flows increased following the EU's enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, primarily in those countries that had not placed restrictions, including the UK, Ireland and Sweden. The financial crisis, along with the progressive lifting of transnational restrictions to workers from Central and Eastern Europe, further contributed to an increase in labour mobility. Intra-EU migration primarily occurred from poorer towards richer EU member states (European Commission 2014a, 2014b, 2017) with the number of EU migrants born in another EU country rising to 4 per cent in 2013 (European Commission 2014b: 5; for a brief history, see Portes 2015). The education levels of the 'new' active EU movers' cohort, i.e., those who moved to another EU member state during 2008–2015 with up to two years of residence, are primarily medium and high. The proportion ranges from 34 to 49 per cent for highly educated movers and from 29 to 46 per cent for medium educated movers. During the same period, the percentage of low educated individuals ranged from 17 to 21 per cent. This suggests that primarily skilled individuals moved abroad, although often migrants from Central and Eastern Europe tend to be overqualified for their jobs in their new 'homeland' compared to EU-15 movers and natives (European Commission 2017: 12; 65).

EU freedom of movement should not be equated with immigration from outside the EU. The facilitation of shared experiences through the right of free movement has been thought to foster common European values and identity, and is a constitutive element of political identity and an EU polity-in-the-making. This is also substantiated empirically in our pooled data where the correlation between people's attitudes towards EU freedom of movement and attitudes towards immigration from outside the EU is very low ( $r = .12$ ) (see McLaren 2001). That being said, European integration, freedom of movement, and immigration, all contribute towards a change in demographics and the weakening of territorial boundaries (Hooghe and Marks 2018). While developing our hypotheses, we thus draw upon research on Euroscepticism and anti-immigration sentiment, while at the same time showing where expectations regarding attitudes towards freedom of movement differ. These two strands of literature tend to put forward at least two main contrasting hypotheses regarding the nature of opinion formation, pitting the utilitarian perspective against the affective approach (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Hobolt and De Vries 2016).

### ***Economic self-interest***

The rational model suggests that support for European integration is a function of economic utility (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993; Gabel and Whitten

1997). Citizens in different socio-economic situations may experience different costs and benefits from European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kriesi *et al.* 2012). The EU divides citizens between those who win from transnationalism and thus support the EU, and those who lose from the same process and prefer demarcation. Whereas economic liberalisation provides more opportunities to highly-skilled and highly-educated individuals, it increases insecurity among citizens with low levels of human capital. Well-educated and highly-skilled citizens have the cognitive, professional and behavioural skills to successfully compete in changing environments, and are thus more likely to embrace change and mobility (Hakhverdian *et al.* 2013; Inglehart 1970). Relatedly, political economy approaches to immigration attitudes suggest that a native person's occupation and education influence how they view immigration. The labour market competition hypothesis suggests that, when considering immigration policy, individuals make an assessment of its potential impact on the wages of similarly skilled nationals (Mayda 2006; Scheve and Slaughter 2001). If capital is internationally mobile, then immigration inflows are likely to affect factor prices, by lowering the wages of low-skilled workers and by raising the wages of high-skilled workers. Examining the United States, Scheve and Slaughter (2001) found that low-skilled citizens are significantly more likely to oppose immigration.<sup>1</sup> More broadly, globalisation and economic openness tend to increase wage volatility, which results in workers feeling economically insecure because they tend to face higher risks of unemployment or receiving low wages (Walter 2010).

It is conceivable that a similar mechanism underpins attitudes towards EU freedom of movement. Free movement has a strong utilitarian component related to the potential financial costs and benefits of employing EU workers in the domestic labour market.<sup>2</sup> At the individual level, the way in which citizens interpret opportunities and threats deriving from freedom of movement may depend on their own level of skills and education. On the one hand, those with high levels of human capital, who are more likely to benefit from international competition and flexible access to low cost employment, may perceive freedom of movement as an opportunity. On the other hand, individuals with low levels of human capital may see freedom of movement as a threat to their status because it adds an extra layer of competition with non-natives, and thus oppose the opening up of borders.<sup>3</sup>

H1: Individuals with low levels of human capital are less likely to support EU freedom of movement.

### ***Identity and perceived threats to in-groups***

The affective approach suggests that, rather than driven by self-interest, citizens form their preferences with reference to sociotropic concerns regarding

their evaluation of societal needs (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Hobolt 2014; McLaren 2007). The division between those who support and those who oppose the EU is increasingly one of identity, openness and tolerance (Hooghe and Marks 2018). Individuals who feel a strong bond with their community tend to perceive the EU as a source of threat to national integrity, culture, and the nation-state's control over resources. They tend to express hostility against other groups, which they perceive as posing a threat to their own group. Strong feelings of national identity tend to lower general EU support (Carey 2002) and influence support for specific EU policies, including European Economic Governance, EU enlargement, Turkish EU entry and the deepening of integration (Hobolt 2014; Kuhn and Stoeckel 2014; McLaren 2007). Immigration-related factors are also key antecedents of EU attitudes with citizens who feel threatened by immigrant groups being more sceptical towards integration (Lubbers and Scheepers 2007). Similarly, the literature on anti-immigration attitudes demonstrates that immigration attitudes are a question of differences among citizens in terms of cultural values, ethnocentrism and group-specific stereotypes (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; Sniderman *et al.* 2000).

This framework may also apply to EU freedom of movement. EU citizenship is of an inherently cosmopolitan nature. EU citizens can simultaneously be citizens of the country they were born in and citizens of the European community. If people have limited information on how specifically EU mobility will affect their personal well-being, they may rely on sociotropic concerns related to the potential threat that EU migrants may pose to the in-group in order to form their judgement on freedom of movement. It is plausible that those who identify exclusively with their national community will view the entry of EU migrants as changing the social fabric of their country and thus oppose freedom of movement; whereas individuals who feel strong attachment to Europe may see EU mobility as a policy promoting the European project.

H2: Individuals who strongly attach to the nation-state are less likely to support EU freedom of movement.

## The domestic context

As stated in the literatures on EU integration and migration, the above model suggests that attitudes towards EU freedom of movement depend on individuals' utilitarian calculations and affective considerations. This model, however, does not help us explain country-level variation. The level of opposition to free movement varies considerably across EU member states. We postulate that citizens employ the context of domestic politics in order to evaluate the costs and benefits of EU freedom of movement. We build on existing research

that views national conditions serving as ‘benchmarks’ against which Europeans judge and evaluate integration (De Vries 2017; Rohrschneider 2002; Rohrschneider and Loveless 2010; Sánchez-Cuenca 2000). Specifically, we posit that citizen attitudes towards intra-EU mobility are likely to be affected by a country’s macro-economic performance.

The standard expectation is that -given that economic prosperity is one of the core motivations behind integration- as a member state’s affluence increases, citizens tend to be more favourable of the EU (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993; see Gabel and Whitten 1997 for mixed results). However, our intuition regarding the effect on support for freedom of movement is the reverse. Intra-EU mobility has been primarily observed from poorer towards richer countries (European Commission 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Portes 2015). In 2009–2014, the largest increase of intra-EU migration inflows occurred in Germany (+219%), Austria (+86%), the UK (+57%), Denmark (+54%) and Finland (+60%) (European Commission 2017: 11). Outflows increased primarily from Eastern and Southern Europe, with countries affected by the debt crisis experiencing a reduction in net migration (European Commission 2014b). By contrast, emigration from more affluent EU member states was much lower during the same period. The key drivers of intra-EU migration were economic, related to labour market factors, with EU migrants moving abroad to seek better job opportunities rather than being attracted by the host country’s welfare generosity (Giuletti 2014; Kahanec *et al.* 2014; Portes 2015).

These domestic conditions are likely to influence the salience and politicisation of issues in a given country (Rohrschneider and Loveless 2010). The context of macro-economic performance as a pull-factor of intra-EU migration may direct individuals in more affluent member states to pay more attention to the potential consequences of EU freedom of movement. In rich member states, increased intra-EU mobility may stimulate discussions regarding its potential effects on domestic employment and access to labour markets. It may also raise concerns over redistributive politics, provision of public services, access to welfare, and competition for the collective goods of the state with EU citizens -who are nonetheless non-nationals.<sup>4</sup> This is substantiated by economic models of migration, which suggest that wealthier countries tend to prefer free trade over free migration (Schiff 2002; Wellisch and Walz 1998: 1597). In other words, living in wealthier EU member states, which tend to attract more migrants, intensifies the salience of the question of immigration, and in turn increases the likelihood of popular backlash. In contrast, not only is this question likely to be of much less importance in poorer member states (Garry and Tilley 2009), but also there are lower opportunity costs of transferring sovereignty to the EU in this policy (Sánchez-Cuenca 2000).



H3: Citizens in richer EU member states are less likely to support EU freedom of movement.

National prosperity may also moderate the link between individual-level considerations and support for freedom of movement. Whereas individuals who live in poorer member states tend to form their EU preferences primarily on the basis of economic performance, those who reside in richer states tend to rely on other criteria, e.g., political (Rohrschneider 2002; Rohrschneider and Loveless 2010). First, related to human capital, free movement may benefit not only the winners of denationalisation, i.e., those with high levels of human capital, but also low-skilled and low-educated citizens traditionally placed on the losing side, especially in countries that do not fare well economically. Although emigration from poorer EU member states may cause concerns about brain drain (see Schiff 2002 on social capital), low-skilled and low-educated individuals in poorer member states may view freedom of movement as an opportunity to go abroad to a richer EU member state in order to pursue a more prosperous future. Moving to and working in another member state for such individuals may be associated with the prospect of upward economic mobility and may be seen as an opportunity to break out of their position at the bottom of the labour market. However, similar individuals living in richer member states are not faced with analogous prospects. Since they already live in the most affluent EU countries, freedom of movement does not provide them with similar opportunities.

H4: Individuals with low levels of human capital living in poorer EU member states are more likely to support EU freedom of movement compared to the same individuals living in richer EU member states.

Second, the domestic context also moderates the extent to which identity influences preferences on freedom of movement. For example, contextual factors influence the effect of perceived threat to in-group resources and way of life on support for Turkish EU membership (McLaren 2007) and the effect of European identity on support for European economic governance (Kuhn and Stoeckel 2014). The effect of identity on support for the EU may be conditional on economic context. In countries that are net beneficiaries of the EU budget, 'incoming funds from the EU act as a "buffer" offsetting or diluting the possible impact of exclusive national identity on attitudes to integration' (Garry and Tilley 2009: 364). We similarly posit that the potential benefits from freedom of movement will weaken the effect of identity on support for this policy in poorer member states.

H5: Individuals who strongly attach to the nation-state in poorer EU member states are more likely to support EU freedom of movement compared to the same individuals living in richer EU member states.

## Data and methods

To assess the attitudes of EU citizens towards EU freedom of movement, we rely on individual-level data from the Eurobarometer survey waves 84.3 (November 2015), 85.2 (May 2016), 86.2 (November 2016) and 87.3 (May 2017),<sup>5</sup> which ask:

What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it. 'The free movement of EU citizens who can live, work, study and do business anywhere in the EU'.

These are the only Eurobarometer surveys that have explicitly asked respondents to indicate their attitude towards intra-EU mobility. Our dependent variable is measured as 1 if respondents support EU freedom of movement and 0 if they are against it. Data from four survey waves were pooled into a combined, hierarchically structured dataset. 'Don't knows' have been omitted from the analysis.

To test the robustness of our results, we repeat the analyses using an alternative dependent variable, measuring general support for the EU. For this, we utilise a survey item which asks respondents whether the EU conjures up for them a positive, neutral or negative image.<sup>6</sup> The variable was recoded in a similar manner to our original dependent variable, with 1 referring to supportive attitudes and 0 to all other categories (for similar coding, see Kuhn and Stoeckel 2014). 'Don't knows' are not included. The correlation between the two dependent variables is weak ( $r = .15$ ), suggesting that attitudes towards EU freedom of movement differ from opinion towards the EU in general.

To determine individuals' level of human capital (H1), we rely on occupational skills and education (Hobolt 2014). Pre-coded occupational categories in the Eurobarometer surveys include managers, other white collars, self-employed, manual workers, house persons, unemployed (reference category), retired, and students.<sup>7</sup> Level of education was measured with reference to age when respondents stopped full-time education. The answers were recoded into categories 'up to 15 years' referring to low education, '16 to 19 years' referring to medium education and '20 years or older' referring to high education. Respondents still studying were assigned to these categories according to their actual age. To measure the strength of identity (H2), we utilise the following question: 'Do you see yourself as nationality only, nationality and European, European and nationality or European only?'. We have reversed the scale, with higher values indicating stronger feeling of national identity. To test whether citizens in richer member states are less supportive of EU freedom of movement (H3), we employ countries' macro-economic performance measured as national GDP in euros per capita for a quarter previous to survey fieldwork. The data are obtained from Eurostat. For GDP, log-transformation is used in order to improve the

normality of the distribution. We also include interaction terms between national GDP and individual-level measures of human capital (occupational skills, education) (H4) and cultural dispositions (identity) (H5).

The models are estimated with a standard set of socio-demographic controls that have been shown to influence EU support, e.g., age (in full years) and gender (1 = male, 2 = female). They also include respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale (1–10), as right-wing and conservative individuals are more likely to oppose outsiders (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007), and a squared term of left-right ideology to account for the possibility that attitudes towards freedom of movement are more pessimistic among voters placed at the extremes of the political spectrum. We also control for domestic proxies, such as levels of trust in the national government (Armingeon and Ceka 2014). Additionally, we include a variable measuring feelings towards immigration from outside the EU (1 = very negative, 2 = fairly negative, 3 = fairly positive and 4 = very positive). This helps us account for the possibility that opinions on EU freedom of movement are coloured by citizens' overall views on immigration and influenced by the refugee crisis. Finally, we include a dummy for Eurozone membership (Appendix 1 for descriptive statistics).

To account for the hierarchical structure of the data, i.e., the possibility that responses are correlated within national surveys and standard errors are biased, we employ multilevel regression analysis where respondents ( $n = 106,178$ ) are nested in country-waves ( $n = 112$ ). We also use this modelling technique due to our substantive interest in the effects of group-level predictors on individual-level outcomes, which requires modelling variation on both levels (Snijders and Bosker 1999). We run binary response random intercept models, which include both individual- and aggregate-level variables. The intraclass correlation of 0.13 at the aggregate-level in a null model (not shown) indicates a weak but still existing correlation of respondents within countries and survey waves, supporting our choice of using a multilevel estimation approach.

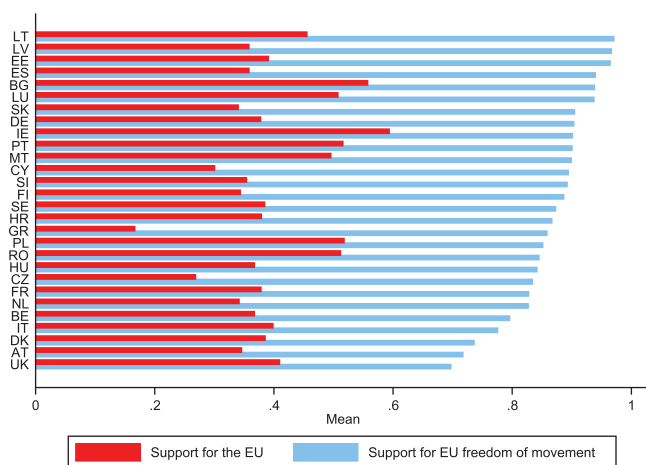
## Results

A first look at the descriptive statistics reveals high support towards EU freedom of movement. On average, 82.4 per cent of all respondents are in favour and 13.1 per cent against free movement of citizens, with only 4.5 per cent not expressing a clear viewpoint. Support levels have largely remained the same from one survey to another, ranging between 80 and 83 per cent. However, there is a great degree of variation across countries, with opposition to free movement being stronger in Western Europe. Countries with the highest opposition score include the UK (27.3 per cent), Austria (27 per cent) and Denmark (24.6 per cent). These results contrast with Southern European countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain (14,

9.4 and 5.8 per cent respectively). The Baltic states show the lowest levels of negative attitudes. Attitudes towards EU freedom of movement clearly differ from EU opinions more generally. Support for the EU is much lower among Europeans compared to their approval of free movement. On average, only 27.6 per cent of respondents have a positive image of the EU, as opposed to the 82.4 per cent who hold optimistic views towards mobility rights. Patterns of country variation diverge between the two dependent variables as well, with levels of general EU support being highest in Ireland and Bulgaria and lowest in Greece (Figure 1). These tendencies indicate that the two items do not merely capture different facets of the same reality; rather they are separate phenomena.

Next, we estimate a multilevel logistic model to identify the effect of a set of selected explanatory variables on attitudes towards freedom to work, study and travel freely across the EU. Table 1 shows the results of a model with all theoretically derived predictors and control variables. The variance in random intercept, not reported here, is different from zero, implying that support for freedom of movement differs significantly across country-waves. A likelihood-ratio test confirms that the random-intercept model offers significant improvement over a logistic regression model ( $p = .0000$ ).

Results in the form of log odds are reported in Table 1 below. At the individual level, we are firstly interested in the effects of levels of human capital (H1), measured as occupational skill and level of education. There are significant differences between people's views on mobility rights depending on their socioeconomic position. For example, compared to unemployed citizens,



**Figure 1.** Support for the EU and for EU freedom of movement by country. Source: Eurobarometer 84.3 (November 2015), 85.2 (May 2016), 86.2 (November 2016) and 87.3 (May 2017). Results for general EU support without Eurobarometer 84.3.

**Table 1.** Additive models of support for the EU and for EU freedom of movement.

		Model 1: Support for EU freedom of movement	Model 2: Support for the EU
Constant		7.48*** (0.85)	0.21 (0.63)
Individual-level variables	Self-employed	0.24*** (0.06)	0.27*** (0.05)
	Managers	0.26*** (0.06)	0.44*** (0.05)
	Other white collars	0.07 (0.05)	0.26*** (0.05)
	Manual workers	0.11** (0.05)	0.16*** (0.04)
	House persons	0.16** (0.07)	0.14** (0.06)
	Retired	0.17*** (0.05)	0.24*** (0.05)
	Students	0.65*** (0.08)	0.51*** (0.06)
	Education 16–19 y	–0.02 (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)
	Education >20 y	0.19*** (0.04)	0.26*** (0.03)
	Feels European and national	0.12 (0.12)	0.30*** (0.09)
	Feels national and European	0.19* (0.11)	0.14* (0.08)
	Feels national only	–0.63*** (0.11)	–0.76*** (0.08)
	Age	0.00 (0.00)	–0.00* (0.00)
	Gender	0.02 (0.02)	–0.13*** (0.02)
	Left-right ideology	0.04** (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
	Left-right ideology <sup>2</sup>	–0.01*** (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)
	Trust in national government	0.42*** (0.03)	0.84*** (0.02)
	Feelings towards non-EU immigrants	0.41*** (0.01)	0.45*** (0.01)
Aggregate-level variables	GDP per capita logged	–0.86*** (0.10)	–0.33*** (0.07)
	Eurozone member	0.81*** (0.13)	–0.01 (0.10)
Observations		74,644	57,377
Number of groups		108	81
Log Likelihood		–26,278	–33,353

Source: Eurobarometer 84.3 (November 2015), 85.2 (May 2016), 86.2 (November 2016) and 87.3 (May 2017). Model 2 estimated without Eurobarometer 84.3.

Notes: Multilevel logistic regression model. Entries are regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Reference categories: unemployed; education < 15 y; feels European only.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.10$ .

almost all other occupational groups have a higher probability of endorsing freedom of movement. Likewise, education appears significant, suggesting that higher-educated individuals are more likely to support intra-EU mobility

compared to those with low levels of education. These results lend support to our first hypothesis by showing that utilitarian considerations influence the attitudes towards free movement. At the same time, differences between socioeconomic groups are not large in substantive terms. Holding all other variables at their means, the predicted probability of being in favour of freedom of movement is 93 per cent for students, the group most supportive of the policy, and at 88 per cent only slightly lower for the unemployed. In a similar manner, the likelihood of being in favour of free movement is 89 per cent for people with low or medium levels of education and 90 per cent for higher-educated individuals. Thus, although higher levels of human capital increase optimism towards EU freedom of movement, support levels are also high among citizens with lower social standing.

**Table 1** also corroborates our expectation that citizens with stronger national identity are significantly less supportive of intra-EU mobility (H2). The substantive differences, however, are not large for this variable either. For example, the predicted probability of being in favour of the policy is 91 per cent for those who exclusively identify as European, but at 84 per cent also quite high for individuals with strong attachment to their own nation.

As individual-level factors do not seem to have a major substantive impact, we next examine contextual effects. We are interested in differences in attitudes towards EU freedom of movement depending on the distribution of wealth across EU member states (H3). The effect of national GDP per capita appears significant in the model with a negative sign, indicating that – as hypothesised – citizens in wealthier countries are more opposed to free movement than their counterparts in poorer member states (see Model 1 in **Table 1**). The differences are statistically significant and are also substantial in terms of predicted probabilities. For example, the likelihood of approval of free movement is 96 per cent for the country with the lowest GDP per capita in the sample (Bulgaria in May 2017), 88 per cent for the median country (Spain in November 2015), and only 71 per cent for the wealthiest one (Luxembourg in May 2017).

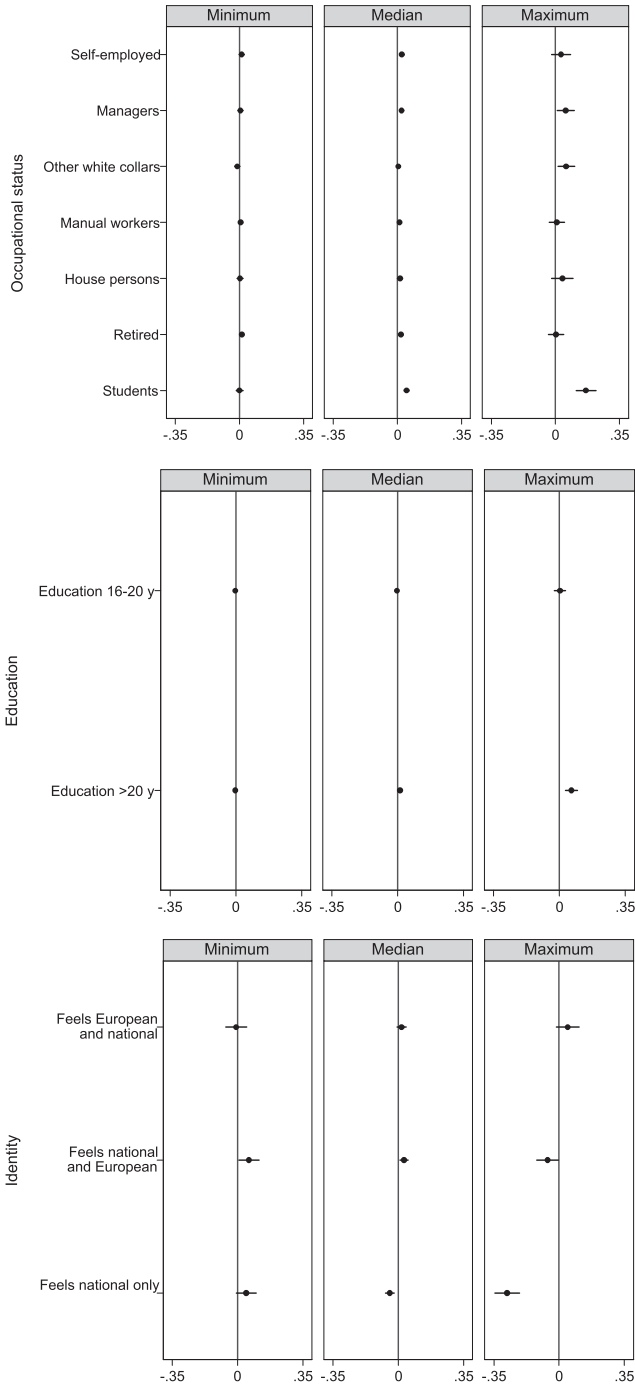
Results are different when modelling support for the EU more generally. In contrast to attitudes towards free movement, general EU support is strongly determined by individual-level factors such as identity (Model 2 in **Table 1**). The predicted probability of having a positive image of the EU is highest for citizens with strong European identity (49 per cent) but notably lower for people who identify as nationals only (25 per cent). Country macroeconomic effects are significant as well but remain smaller in substantive terms compared to those on support for freedom of movement (49 per cent for the poorest and 30 per cent for the wealthiest nation).

The findings thus far imply that citizens living in countries that are most likely to directly benefit from the possibilities to move freely in the EU tend to express higher support for the policy. The individual-level differences

between population groups are significant, but not very large, which may be due to effects not being uniform across EU member states. We hypothesised that in poor member states support for free movement is high among citizens with low levels of human capital and with strong attachment to the nation-state compared to the same individuals living in richer EU member states (H4–H5). To test this indirect effect of the national economy, we introduce in separate models interaction terms between GDP per capita and three individual-level explanatory variables, i.e., occupation, educational level and national identity.

The results, shown in [Figure 2](#) below and in Models 1, 2 and 3 in Appendix 2, reveal that citizens' personal motivations influence views on mobility rights differently depending on the affluence of a country that they live in. In nations with low and median levels of wealth, attitudes towards movement rights are not associated with utilitarian or affective considerations. Average marginal effects largely fall on the zero-line, indicating that the effects of the three individual-level determinants are not statistically significant ([Figure 2](#)). In richer countries, in turn, opinions are clearly linked with individual-level factors: support for free movement varies across population groups, being highest among students, high-educated citizens and those with strong European identity. The substantive importance of the results is emphasised by predicted probabilities. In the wealthiest country, the probability to favour free movement ranges from 58 to 91 per cent depending on respondents' sense of attachment with Europe. In the country with the lowest GDP per capita, however, the chances of approving freedom of movement remain between 90 and 97 per cent, irrespective of personal affective considerations. In other words, approval of freedom of movement varies considerably in rich countries but is not influenced by identity concerns in less affluent countries. The findings are not as sharp for socioeconomic status but point in the same direction: in poor member states, support for EU freedom of movement is homogenously high, even among groups that are typically considered the most Eurosceptic, such as blue-collar workers and unemployed. These results are not evident for general EU support where patterns of individual-level effects appear much more similar across countries (Appendix 3).

In sum, our findings demonstrate that discrepancies exist for similar population segments between member states in the extent to which they support EU freedom of movement. The attitudes vary significantly in poor and wealthy nations among people with similar backgrounds, demonstrating that human capital and identity fail to explain preferences for freedom of movement in countries that do not fare well economically but diversify public opinion in richer countries. This suggests that if we ignore contextual conditionality, we miss important empirical insights into how support for or opposition to freedom of movement is structured.



**Figure 2.** Individual-level effects on support for EU freedom of movement by GDP categories. Source: Eurobarometer 84.3 (November 2015), 85.2 (May 2016), 86.2 (November 2016) and 87.3 (May 2017).

Notes: Average marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals. Reference categories: unemployed; education < 15 y; feels European only.



## Discussion

This article has examined European citizens' attitudes towards free movement of persons across the EU, focusing on the utilitarian and affective approaches in the EU and anti-immigration attitudes literature. Our findings show that both explanations are significant, but not in themselves substantive in explaining the formation of public opinion on freedom of movement. One explanation for the limited application of the human capital hypothesis is data availability. Eurobarometer surveys do not collect information on variables, such as employment sector, typically emphasised in the political economy literature (Walter 2010). Future research should aim to include a sectoral measure of whether the job of the respondent is likely to be substituted by EU migrants. It should also distinguish whether the structure of these attitudes differs depending on EU migrants' level of skills and country of origin. Finally we still do not know whether and in what ways attitudes towards intra-EU migration compare to attitudes towards a country 'exporting' its own EU nationals to another EU member state

We show that support for EU freedom of movement is strongly determined by country affluence. On average, support for freedom of movement is high, but there is a great degree of cross-national variation. Citizens in richer countries that tend to receive more EU migrants and where the question of EU mobility is more salient seem to be more prone to perceiving EU freedom of movement as a threat. Crucially, we have theorised and empirically substantiated that country economic performance also yields strong moderating effects on individual-level explanations on preferences towards freedom of movement. In poorer member states personal dispositions have no effect on attitudes towards EU freedom of movement. Support is evenly high among different population groups, even among those who are typically thought to be Eurosceptic. In wealthier countries, however, attitudes are more dependent on individual-level characteristics. In those member states, people with strong feelings of national identity and those who are more vulnerable to economic fluctuations are significantly more opposed to freedom of movement than their peers in countries that are economically worse off. Furthermore, we have demonstrated that the structure of attitudes towards EU freedom of movement does not fully mirror that of general attitudes towards European integration, which do not reveal similar cross-country patterns.

Our findings point to the importance of examining public preferences not only on the general direction of European integration, but also explaining public opinion on specific EU-related issues that are likely to create different patterns of support and opposition. Despite the fact that EU freedom of movement primarily relates to policy-making and implementation – in particular access to European labour markets, employment and welfare –

it can stir up conflict over constitutive issues of the EU polity, including EU membership, EU competencies, and the extent to which labour mobility should be one of the cornerstones of European integration. It may also place a strain on European solidarity. Our findings have significant implications with regard to the politicisation of EU freedom of movement in richer Western EU member states. Far right EU issue entrepreneurs in these countries have a ready reservoir of negative opinion towards freedom of movement to draw upon during electoral campaigns.

## Notes

1. Lancee and Sarrasin (2015) question the underlying mechanism between education and support for immigration, arguing that although there are differences between educational groups, these disappear when examining changes within individuals.
2. See Krings (2009) on trade unions' different interpretations of the impact of EU enlargement on labour markets.
3. We discuss these two contrasting viewpoints as perceptions rather than objective measures of the effect of EU freedom of movement on the labour market. EU migrants are less likely to be registered with public employment services and less likely to receive unemployment benefits (European Commission 2014a); see Dustmann and Frattini (2014) on the fiscal contributions of EU migrants in the UK; Nickell and Saleheen (2015) record a negative impact within the semi/unskilled occupational group.
4. These concerns may not necessarily be supported by objective evidence (Giulletti 2014).
5. Eurobarometer datasets were retrieved from the GESIS Data Archive. <https://www.gesis.org/en/home/>.
6. The question was not asked in November 2015. We ran the models using three survey waves.
7. Political economy approaches differentiate between occupational skills and employment sector (Walter 2010), but Eurobarometer surveys do not collect information on the latter.

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