

TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AND INCOME INEQUALITY IN THE EUROZONE: THE ROLE OF THE CRISIS

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Abstract

The paper investigates the role of income inequality as a determinant of trust in the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the European Parliament in the Eurozone countries from 1999 to 2013. To detect this effect, in addition to unemployment and inflation, widely recognized in the literature, the Gini coefficient is included among the dependent variables. Furthermore, in order to evaluate the impact of the macroeconomic turmoil occurring in Europe after the financial crisis, a binary dummy variable on the coefficients is considered in the analysis. The empirical results show two main findings. First, income inequality negatively affects trust in the European Commission and the European Parliament in normal times. In times of crisis this relation is strengthened and extended to the European Central Bank for one of the two indexes of trust considered. Second, inflation and unemployment are important in defining the wave of trust in a crisis.

JEL classification: E02, E31, E63, D63

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1. Introduction

Trust in institutions is a basic feature of modern democracies and plays a key role in guaranteeing social, economic and political stability. It creates a link between both citizens and political institutions and citizens and policy-makers. Institutions which enjoy a high degree of trust also enjoy a high degree of legitimacy. When trust declines, democracy is weakened and the whole economic system is undermined.

Due to its special features, the Eurozone represents a very particular field within which to analyze the trend and determinants of trust. At the beginning, it was formed as the outcome of convergent national interests sharing common economic and political institutions. However, following the recent economic crisis, the Eurozone was split into core and peripheral countries, revealing that it is difficult to find a convergence path between national interests and those of the whole currency union.

With the objective of creating an integrated and solid monetary union, the European Commission has been monitoring public opinion trends in its institutions within the Member States via the Eurobarometer¹. Essentially a biannual survey, the Eurobarometer covers a wide

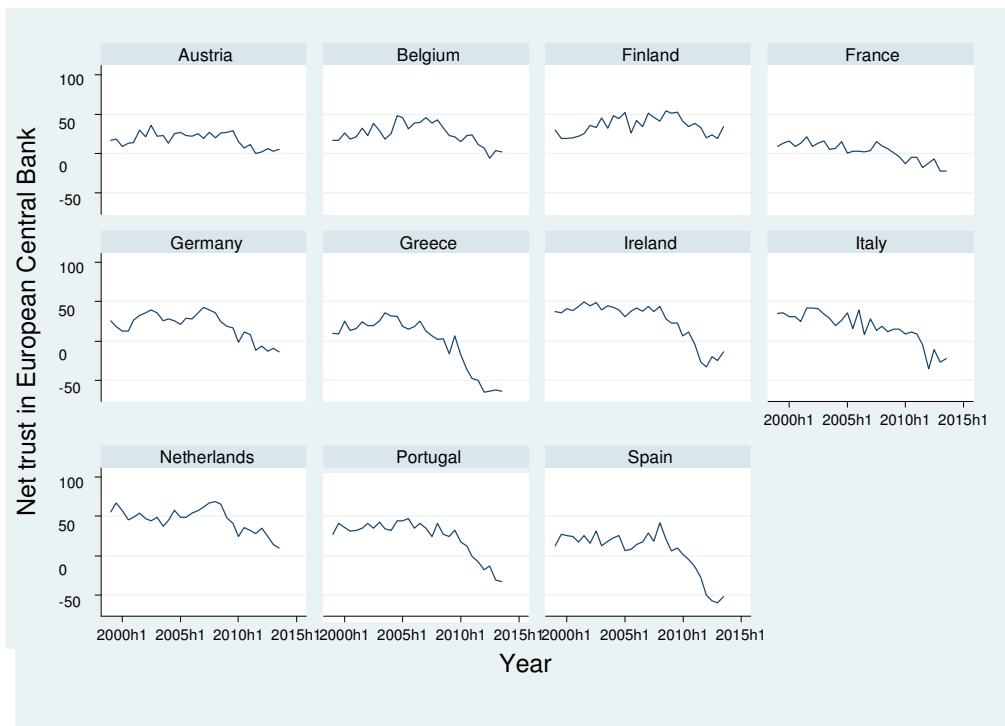
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¹ The standard Eurobarometer was established in 1973. Each survey consists in approximately 1000 face-to-face interviews per Member State (except Germany: 1500, Luxembourg: 500, United Kingdom 1300 including 300 in

range of topics, including questions ascertaining to what extent European citizens tend to trust in their main decision-making bodies, thus monitoring the process of integration and legitimacy. This degree of legitimacy, however, after an initial enthusiasm lasting more or less until 2008, seems to have declined in recent years. According to data collected in the whole European Union from the birth of the Eurozone to the present day (1999-2013), 43% of citizens were prepared to place their trust in the European Central Bank (ECB) in 1999 and 50% in 2008, declining to 34% at the end of 2013, while those who stated they distrusted the ECB increased from 29% in 1999 to 49% in 2013; those confident in the European Parliament (EP) decreased from 53% in 1999 to 39% in 2013, and those lacking confidence increased from 28% in 1999 to 48% in 2013. Finally, trust in the European Commission (EC) decreased from 50% to 35% while distrust increased from 29% to 47% in the same years (in all three cases the percentage of those who responded “I don’t know” decreased)².

Figure 1. Net Trust in the European Central Bank 1999-2013



Source: Own calculation on Eurobarometer dataset

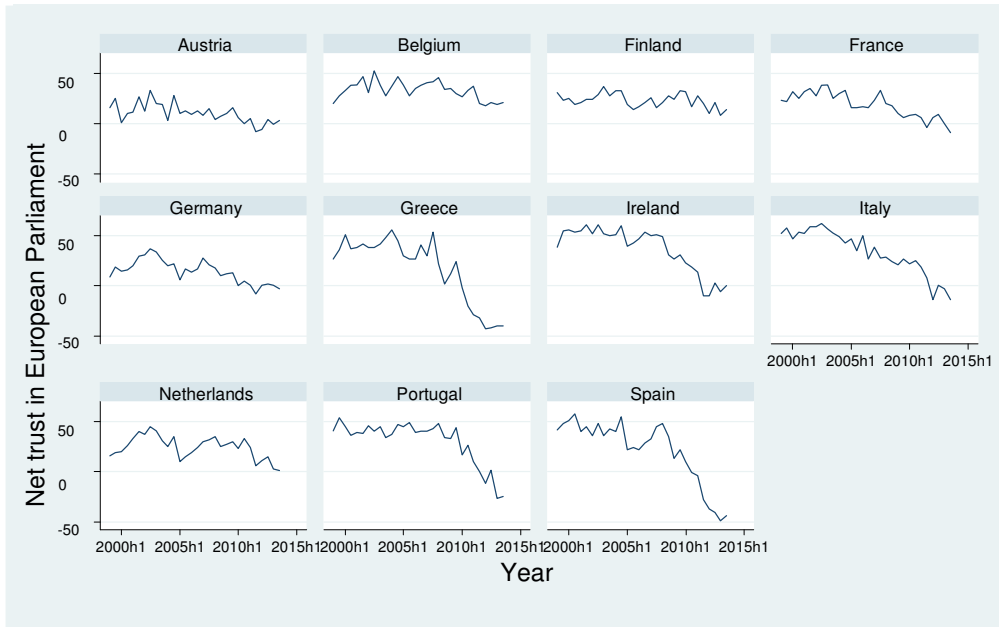
Considering selected Eurozone countries and using as a synthetic indicator the net trust, i.e. the simple difference between the percentage of those who trust minus the percentage of those who distrust, this process of decline has been much more marked especially since the crisis. In particular, looking at Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, net trust in the ECB, the EP, and the EC was positive following the introduction of the Euro. When the financial crisis hit Europe a general decline in net trust occurred. These trends are depicted in figures 1, 2 and 3 where it is shown that net trust in all three European Institutions in recent years declined and became negative not only in peripheral countries, namely Ireland, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, which were those suffering the most

Northern Ireland) and reports published twice yearly. The entire dataset is available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb81/eb81_en.htm

² Data are available through the interactive search system at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/index_en.cfm.

from the macroeconomic turmoil, but also in some of the core countries, such as Germany and France, in particular for the EC and EP³.

Figure 2. Net Trust in the European Parliament 1999-2013



Source: Own calculation on Eurobarometer dataset

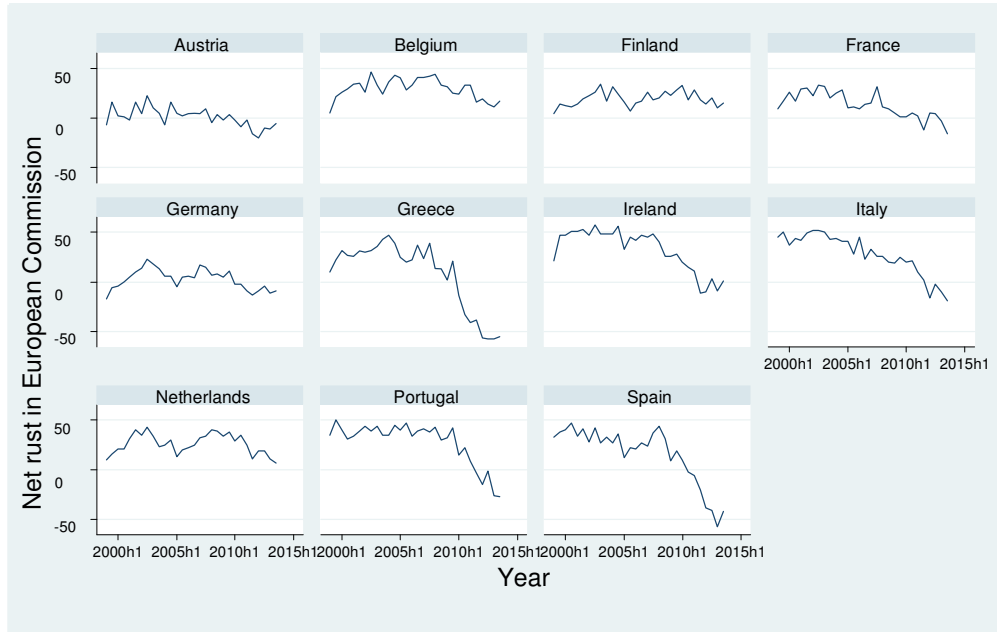
In the same period income inequality increased, with some exceptions, in most of the selected Eurozone countries considered, not only after the crisis, but even in the middle of the 2000s. Using as a measure of inequality the Gini coefficient, it may be observed that from 1999 to 2013 (figure 4) the income distribution became more unequal in some cases even before the crisis (Austria, Germany and Spain) and in others after the macroeconomic turmoil (France, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Portugal). In Belgium and Finland the Gini coefficient remained stable, while only in the Netherlands can a slight improvement be observed.

The aim of this paper is to investigate to what extent income inequality should be considered a determinant of trust in the ECB, EP and EC in eleven countries of the Eurozone, from 1999 to 2013, using country level data from the European Commission’s Eurobarometer survey⁴. The empirical analysis relies on the literature attributing to economic outcomes a central role in defining trust. Indeed, alongside unemployment and inflation, widely recognized as the main determinants among economic variables, it considers the Gini coefficient as a proxy for income inequality. Therefore, this paper aims to shed some light on the role played by income distribution in the consolidation of supranational institutions. The empirical analysis also controls for financial market shocks, including domestic bond yields and stock market returns.

³ Here the net trust is calculated as the simple difference between the percentages of those who trust minus those who do not trust available on the Eurobarometer website. In the pages below, further indexes with their relevant implications are considered.

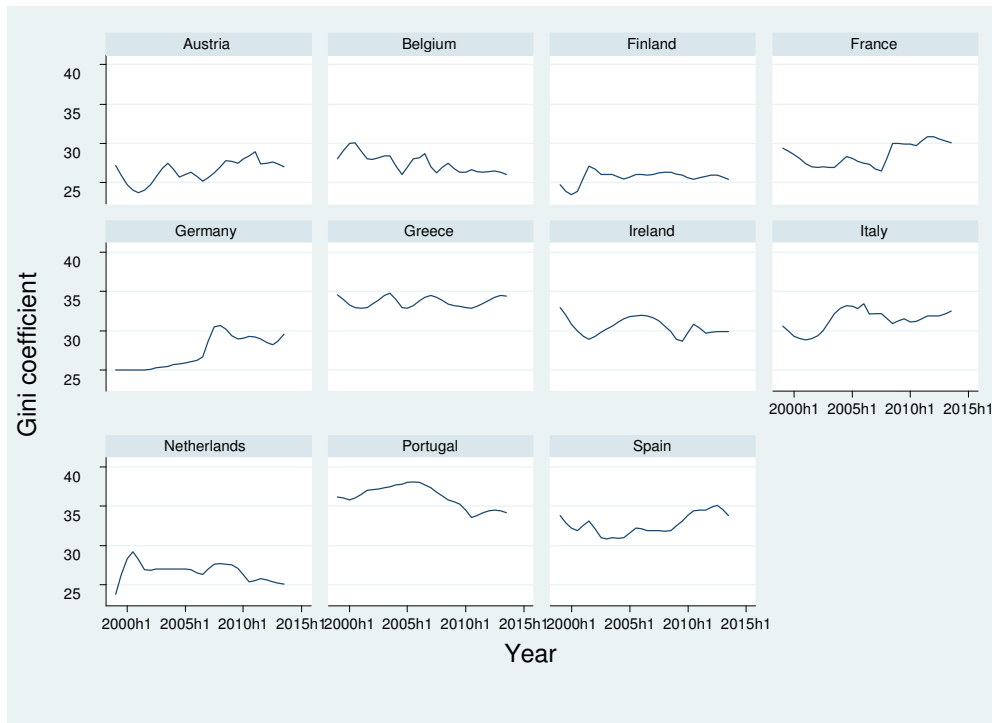
⁴ Following the literature on Eurozone Luxembourg is excluded from this analysis for its peculiar features. Among others see de Grauwe and Yuemei (2013)

Figure 3. Net Trust in the European Commission 1999-2013



Source: Own calculation on Eurobarometer dataset

Figure 4. The Gini coefficient 1999-2013



Source: Own calculation on IMF outlook database

The additional contribution is to model the pre and crisis dynamic, linking the explanatory variables by means of binary dummy variables. The advantage of such an approach is to consider the whole sample size available rather than splitting it into a pre and crisis period.

The main conclusions can be summarized as follows: a) an increase in income inequality negatively affects trust in the European Commission and the European Parliament in normal

times. In crisis times this relation is strengthened and extended to the European Central Bank for one of the two indexes of trust considered; b) inflation and unemployment, as suggested by the previous literature, significantly impact on trust in all European Institutions after the crisis. European citizens therefore seem to perceive supranational political institutions (EC and EP) as responsible, especially after the crisis, for greater income inequality, and as unable to respond to the population's needs.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly recalls the main literature concerning the economic determinants of trust, referring both to national and European institutions. The third section presents the data and the methodology in subsection 3.1, and the empirical results in section 3.2. Finally, the fourth section concludes.

2. Trust and economic performance

The literature on trust in institutions is vast and an exhaustive review of the theoretical and empirical contributions goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it may be helpful to outline the main findings elsewhere in order to contextualize the contribution of this analysis. The prevailing literature analyses trust through the "Vote and Popularity" (VP) function, according to which the soundness of an institution is examined on the basis of a set of both economic and political determinants. In the absence of survey interviews, voting is used as a proxy of trust since "political trust is a central indicator of the underlying public's feeling about its politics" (Newton and Norris, 2000)

Since the 1970s, the "rationality hypothesis" and the centrality of "economic man" shifted the attention mainly toward the economic side of the analysis. The uncontroversial result is that the two main variables considered to be relevant to trust are the so-called "big two" (Paldam, 2004), namely inflation and unemployment. Both these variables are believed to affect negatively the level of trust⁵.

However, the recent empirical literature, concentrating especially on trust in national governments and parliaments, has reached mixed results (for a complete review see Nannstad and Paldman, 1994). The results suggest that people: a) are mainly "sociotropic", i.e. are interested in the economic situation of the whole nation; b) are retrospective with static expectations; c) assign the greatest importance to the unemployment rate (Veiga and Veiga, 2004).

Conversely, Sanders (2000), using data for the United Kingdom, found that expectations about future economic performance play a key role in affecting the net trust in national governments. Kirchgässen (2009), examining the behavior of German voters, found that up to 1998, unemployment and inflation had opposite sign effects on trust. On the contrary, with the Schröder Government the results changed since unemployment became non-significant and the inflation rate switched to the opposite direction (the higher inflation rate increased the net trust in the government). Stevenson and Wolfers (2011) analyzed the decline of trust in the USA public institutions from 1972 to 2010 – also documented by National Election Studies by Arthur H. Miller (1974), Alford (2001) and Pew Research Center (2010) - over the business cycle and confirmed the pro-cyclical nature of trust.

The first study about the European Union as a whole using Eurobarometer surveys was that of Hudson (2006). Investigating several institutional aspects from a microeconomic perspective at national and supranational level, he finds, as the main result, that in 15 European countries the institutional performance affects individual happiness. The approach considering the economic outcomes of institutions has been privileged by subsequent studies. The main focus of the

⁵ For a detailed review of the literature on the VP function see Nannestad and Paldam (1994) and Paldam (1981).

analyses is the ECB because of its institutional arrangements relying on independence and accountability. However, since the birth of the Eurozone is relatively recent, empirical analysis starts in 1999 and applies panel data methodology with the aim of capturing the degree of strengthening of European institutions. Adopting a macroeconomic perspective, Fisher and Hahn (2008) concentrate on trust in the ECB using Eurobarometer data from 1999 to 2004. In the period preceding the financial crisis, the main issue defining trust in the ECB is the inflation rate (positive sign) although some real variables, namely GDP and unemployment, have to be taken into account. With the eruption of the financial crisis, the issue of trust and its link with the economic variables became increasingly important. Wälthi (2012) empirically shows that the decline of trust in the ECB appears to be significantly evident in countries which have experienced increasing sovereign bond yields and financial turbulence. This leads to the apparently counterintuitive result that country-specific variables affect trust in a supranational institution., Through a micro-founded empirical model and taking into account many factors influencing individual economic situations, Ehrmann et al. (2013) prove that the decline in trust in the ECB is due to the combination of the following three effects: i) the deterioration in economic conditions during the crisis; ii) the overall decline in public trust in the European project during the crisis, because citizens saw Europe as being unable to address issues related the global crisis and iii) the fact that the ECB was associated to the troubles of the financial sector. However, they conclude that the evolution of the macro-economy is sufficient to explain the decline of trust and that there was not sufficient change in the regularities of the coefficient between normal and crisis times. Berlemann (2013) finds that the recent decline of trust in the ECB is attributable to financial and sovereign debt crises, even controlling for national macro-economic factors. Focusing on the institutional commitments of the ECB, Kaltenthaler et al. (2010) conclude that the citizens' lack of trust in the ECB is due to i) the deterioration of the economic situation; ii) the decline in belief in the European project and iii) the association of the ECB with troubles in the financial sector (Kaltenthaler et al. 2010 p.10). The first two factors are also relevant to non-crisis times⁶.

Roth (2009) and Roth et al. (2011) analyze the determinants of trust for the three European Institutions, the ECB, EC and EP. They consider, as possible determinants, besides inflation and unemployment, a set of macroeconomic variables, such as debt and GDP growth. They conclude that unemployment and growth affect citizens' trust, whereas debt and inflation do not have any effect during periods of economic distress. In particular, Roth et al. (2014) detect a negative and significant relationship between unemployment and trust in the ECB in times of crisis using a panel data analysis on 12 Eurozone countries. They argue that the loss in trust is strongly driven by the significant increase in unemployment rates in the four peripheral countries Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain.

Income inequality has been considered as a possible determinant of trust in institutions, with the broad sense of democracy. As a matter of fact, many studies have investigated the relation between democracy and economic variables conditional on political systems for several countries worldwide. In his seminal paper, Lipset (1959) showed that a high degree of democracy was associated with a high level of growth, the emergence of a middle class and high political participation.

The more recent literature is most extensive and the most widely used index to measure inequality is the mean to median ratio. Among others, Acemoglu et al. (2001), Acemoglu and Robinson (2001 and 2006) and Rodrik and Wacziarg (2005) analyze the relation between

⁶ A study about the institutional commitments of a Central Bank may be found in Hayat et al. (2011), estimating the probability of removal of a central banker in 103 countries worldwide. The main conclusion is that "central bankers' removals are related to banking and currency crises, to elections and the change in the strength of democracy, and to inflation performance and globalization" (Hayat et al. 2011 p.17)

democracy and inequality inside the framework of game theory: it is the redistributive threat by part of the population that brings about a democratic equilibrium⁷. Jung and Sunde (2014) add to this literature an interesting result: non-democratic regimes emerge, not only when productive resources are distributed unequally, but also when institutions do not ensure political commitments. Inequality affects democracy through the reduction of the wage share (direct effect, Rodrik, 1999), the increase of socio-political instabilities (indirect effect, Alesina and Perotti, 1996), and per capita GDP growth (Barro 1998, confirming the path of the Kuznets curve).

The effect of income inequality (using the Gini coefficient) on trust in European institutions using the Eurobarometer dataset has never before been analyzed, nor the effect of the recent global crises on the causality dynamic between trust in institutions and their determinants. This is quite surprising as the literature on democracy and economics suggests that if inequality negatively affects trust, institutions are weakened and democracy is undermined. This paper aims to fill this gap in the literature.

3. Empirical analysis

This paper focuses on eleven Eurozone countries: Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain that joined the Euro from the beginning (Greece in 2001)⁸. Trust in the European Central Bank, in the European Commission and in the European Parliament are regarded as dependent variables; the Gini coefficient, inflation and unemployment are considered as the independent variables. Furthermore, in order to capture the effect of financial distress, bond yields and stock price index returns are included in the regression. The contribution of the paper is twofold: 1) the introduction of the Gini coefficient as a trust determinant, and 2) controlling for the recent global financial crisis. The sample period goes from the first semester in 1999 until the second semester in 2013 (t=30 and n=11, for a total of 330 observations).

3.1 Data and methodology

Data on trust in European Institutions were collected from the Standard Eurobarometer survey. The survey was established in 1973 and has been progressively refined in the course of the years. Each survey consists in approximately 1000 face-to-face interviews per Member State and reports are published twice yearly⁹. It is structured around a wide range of questions. The question this paper is concerned about is: "For each of the following European bodies, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it," (question 16). The possibility of responding "I don't know" is also given. In order to construct an index ranging from zero to one, two methods were considered. The first is calculated as the simple difference between the number of those who answered "tend to trust" minus those who answered "tend to not-trust" as a percentage of the total population interviewed, including those who answered "don't know". Hereafter the index is called NTP, from "Net Trust as a percentage of total population" including 'I don't know' (Roth 2009, Roth et al. 2011 and 2014). The second index is constructed as the ratio between the net trust and the sum of those who answered "tend to trust" plus those who answered "tend to not trust" without considering those who do not know (Wälti 2012). Hereafter the index is called NEDK, from "Net Trust as a percentage of total population excluding "I don't know".

The two indexes are quite different since the NTP index is calculated as a percentage of the total population interviewed, while the NEDK index is calculated as a percentage of those showing some

⁷ For a more detailed review of the literature and theoretical implications, see Savoia et al. (2010).

⁸ See note 4.

⁹ Germany is represented by 1500 individuals.

knowledge about European institutions. Both have advantages and drawbacks: the NTP index is not affected by the width of the sample, but includes in it even those who do not have enough information to express an opinion. The NEDK index overcomes this limit, although it does not control for variation in the number of those who know nothing about the institution across the different survey waves¹⁰. Each of these two indexes captures different feelings of the population interviewed, assigning a different meaning to the undecided respondents. In the case of the NTP index they are supposed to be included since they express a sense of disaffection toward the institution's performance; in the case of the NEDK index they are supposed to be excluded because they do not have enough instruments to express a judgment. An agnostic approach is taken and both are considered, in turn, as a proxy for trust in institutions.

Data about unemployment, inflation and the Gini coefficient were collected from the IMF outlook database, bond yields from Eurostat, and stock price returns from IFS (International Financial Statistics). Since the Eurobarometer Survey runs twice a year (April and October, or May and November, or June and December) the independent variables have to be transformed in order to make them consistent with the dependent variables. Therefore, similarly to Wälti (2012), inflation, unemployment, bond yields and share prices are calculated as the averages between the months before two consecutive surveys were run. For instance, when surveys were run in June and December, the explanatory variables were calculated as the monthly averages between May and November. In addition, data on inflation are calculated as the deviation from the ECB target value of 2% (see Wälti 2012). Since the Gini coefficient data are collected annually, the missing values were calculated using the linear interpolation method¹¹.

A Panel Data framework is adopted and the following equation is estimated:

$$Trust_{j,i,t} = \alpha + (\beta_1 + \beta_1^*) UN_{i,t} + (\beta_2 + \beta_2^*) INF_{i,t} + (\beta_3 + \beta_3^*) Gini_{i,t} + (\beta_4 + \beta_4^*) Z_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (1)$$

The Trust index is, in turn, the NTP index and the NEDK index. UN is unemployment, INF is inflation, Gini is the Gini coefficient, Z is the matrix of financial indicators used as control variables and $\varepsilon_{i,t}$ is the error term. The suffix t indicates the time period, i represents each country, j identifies the European institution considered. In equation (1), β_1 , β_2 , β_3 and β_4 are the coefficients of the independent variables for the whole period considered, while β_1^* , β_2^* , β_3^* and β_4^* are the dummies on the coefficient, such that the values of β^* assume the value of zero before the year 2009 and represent the estimated coefficients during the crisis. Therefore, the effect of the financial crisis is measured by the parameters $(\beta + \beta^*)$. This allows the sample not to be split into a pre- and post-crisis period, overcoming the well-known limitations of having to compare results from two separate samples, and gaining in terms of robustness of the parameter estimates. Furthermore, it allows us to investigate to what extent the crisis impacted on causality dynamics within the same framework. The exact date for the beginning of the crisis is still an open question. Bekaert et al. (2014) suggest September 2009 as the beginning of the debt crisis. Instead, Caporale et al. (2014) select September 2008, the day of the collapse of Lehman Brothers, as the beginning of the global crisis. A sequential dummy analysis running from mid-2007 to mid-2010 (not reported in the paper) was performed; it confirms that the parameter shifts took place in 2009.

¹⁰ The empirical literature on the subject sometimes uses the NTP index (Roth 2009, Roth et al. 2011, 2014), and sometimes the NEDK index (Wälti 2012). Ehrmann et al. (2013) use an index derived from a two-step method treating the number of "I don't know" as a measurement error. However, comparing results from the use of both indexes allows differences, if any, to be detected.

¹¹ Changes in the Gini coefficient occur slowly, such that the linear interpolation can be considered a good approximation to fill the missing data. For a detailed review of interpolation methods see Meijering (2002).

Furthermore, supposing the variance of the coefficient estimates could be inflated by the multicollinearity among some of the predictors (unemployment and inflation), the variance inflation factor and the correlation matrix were computed. They assume values consistent with the absence of multicollinearity and confirm, in this respect, the validity of the empirical model. Finally, following Driscoll and Kray (1998) the empirical analysis uses nonparametric covariance matrix estimators with random effects, producing heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation-consistent standard errors that are robust to general forms of spatial and temporal dependence¹².

3.2. Empirical results

As discussed in the previous section, two indexes were considered: the NTP Index and the NEDK Index. Table 1 presents Eq. (1) parameter estimates of the dependent variables considering trust in the three main European institutions being proxied by the NTP Index.

Table 1: Trust in ECB, EP AND EC: NTP Index

Independent Variables	ECB	EP	EC
Constant	48.595** (16.565)	66.275*** (9.975)	53.335*** (10.755)
β_1 (INF)	0.208 (0.578)	0.072 (0.884)	0.802 (0.904)
β_2 (UN)	1.271 (0.719)	-0.406 (0.551)	-0.765 (0.497)
β_3 (GINI)	-0.271 (0.445)	-0.800*** (0.243)	-0.524* (0.257)
β_4 (Bond Yields)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
β_4 (Stock Price Returns)	0.012 (0.019)	-0.062** (0.024)	-0.055* (0.028)
β_1^* (INF)	-4.247*** (1.335)	-4.699*** (0.900)	-5.418*** (1.244)
β_2^* (UN)	-1.533*** (0.580)	-2.654*** (0.497)	-2.173*** (0.452)
β_3^* (GINI)	-0.517 (0.385)	-0.695* (0.326)	-0.795*** (0.368)
β_4^* (Bond Yields)	-0.596 (0.529)	0.037 (0.342)	-0.229 (0.369)
β_4^* (Stock Price Returns)	0.935 (0.127)	0.258** (0.102)	0.302** (0.113)
Observations	330	330	330
Number of groups	11	11	11
R squared (within)	0.737	0.758	0.751
Driscoll-Kraay standard errors	yes	yes	yes

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. The NTP index is calculated as the difference of those who trust minus those who do not, expressed as a percentage of the total population interviewed. INF, UN, Bond Yields and Stock Price returns are calculated as the average of monthly data between the month before the fieldwork t and the first month after the fieldwork t-1. In addition, monthly INF data are calculated as the deviation from the 2% ECB target.

¹² The choice of random effect is confirmed by the result of the Breusch-Pagan (1980) Lagrange Multiplier (LM) Test for Random Effect. The presence of cross sectional dependence was tested for by means of the Freeman (1937), Frees (1995) and Pesaran (2004) tests.

Considering the whole sample, neither inflation nor unemployment affects trust in ECB, EP and EC with all coefficients being not statistically significant. The Gini coefficient does not appear to be relevant to trust in the ECB, whereas it has a negative and highly significant impact on trust in the European Parliament ($\beta_3=-0.800$) and the European Commission ($\beta_3=-0.524$). Bond yields are not relevant to trust in any of the three European institutions, while stock price returns appear to be relevant only to the European Parliament and European Commission, with very small negative values -0.0618 and -0.0551 respectively.

The absence of relevance of these two last indicators for the ECB could be considered the signal that country-specific economic variables – such as financial market fluctuations - do not affect trust in the conduct of monetary policy. On the contrary, some political responsibility is assigned. Looking at the post crisis effects on trust of unemployment and inflation, the “crisis dummy” successfully detects a shift in the causality dynamic, linking this set of explanatory variables with the trust index. The deviation from the inflation target and unemployment become highly significant and with the expected negative sign for all the three European institutions ($\beta_1^* = -4.247$ and $\beta_2^* = -1.533$ for ECB, $\beta_1^* = -4.699$ and $\beta_2^* = -2.65$ for EP and $\beta_1^* = -5.418$ and $\beta_2^* = -2.173$ for EC). These findings can be interpreted by the fact that citizens view all European institutions as responsible for the deterioration of macro fundamentals. As far as the main objective of the paper is concerned, the Gini coefficient pre-crisis relationship with trust is further strengthened ($\beta_3 + \beta_3^* = -1.495$ for EP and $\beta_3 + \beta_3^* = -1.319$ for EC). This reinforcement of the value of the coefficient of the Gini index is a clear signal of the importance of income distribution for trust in political institutions.

Table 2: Trust in ECB, EP AND EC: NEDK Index

Independent Variables	ECB	EP	EC
Constant	64.945** (20.575)	82.473*** (11.235)	81.965*** (13.365)
β_1 (INF)	0.317 (0.769)	0.327 (1.116)	1.232 (1.159)
β_2 (UN)	-1.763* (0.886)	-0.787 (0.659)	-1.094 (0.613)
β_3 (GINI)	-0.291 (0.570)	-0.930*** (0.268)	-0.608* (0.319)
β_4 (Bond Yields)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
β_4 (Stock Price Returns)	-0.041** (0.017)	-0.089** (0.032)	-0.082 (0.032)
β_1^* (INF)	-5.034*** (1.419)	-5.739*** (1.081)	-6.942*** (1.377)
β_2^* (UN)	-1.469* (0.697)	-2.856*** (0.611)	-2.518*** (0.575)
β_3^* (GINI)	-1.063** (0.458)	-0.967** (0.347)	-1.179*** (0.415)
β_4^* (Bond Yields)	-0.320 (0.619)	0.361 (0.376)	0.268 (0.418)
β_4^* (Stock Price Returns)	0.171 (0.144)	0.299** (0.109)	0.386** (0.130)
Observations	330	330	330
Number of groups	11	11	11
R squared (within)	0.737	0.758	0.751
Driscoll-Kraay standard errors	yes	yes	yes

Notes: See Notes Table 1. The NEDK index is calculated as the difference of those who trust minus those who do not trust expressed as a percentage of the population interviewed excluding those who don't know.

The results are qualitatively similar for unemployment, inflation and the Gini coefficient when the NEDK index is considered (Table2). The potential biases associated to the different indexes – despite some distinctions - do not seem to alter the overall patterns. Inflation and unemployment are not statistically different from zero in the pre-crisis period except for ECB ($\beta_2 = -1.763$). They become significant and rather high after the crisis for all three European institutions (for ECB, $\beta_1^* = -5.034$ and $\beta_2^* = -1.469$ for EP, $\beta_1^* = -5.739$ and $\beta_2^* = -2.856$ for EC, $\beta_1^* = -6.942$ and $\beta_2^* = -2.518$). The whole sample Gini coefficient parameter value for EP ($\beta_3 = -0.930$) and EC ($\beta_3 = -0.682$) indicates that citizens view the Eurozone political institutions as being responsible for income inequality. In the crisis period the responsibility is attributed – differently from the NTP index - to all three European institutions (for ECB $\beta_3^* = -1.063$; for EP $\beta_3^* = -0.967$ and for EC, $\beta_3^* = -1.179$). Finally, parameters associated to the control variables confirm the previous findings where the NTP index was considered.

4. Conclusions

Academics agree that economic outcomes affect trust in institutions. The institutional configuration of the Eurozone makes this link uncertain and raises the question whether European citizens hold supranational institutions responsible for their economic situation. This paper clarifies that this link is present at least in the 11 Eurozone countries examined and detects a major economic outcome affecting trust: income inequality. According to the results presented, citizens of the selected Euro area countries attribute to supranational political institutions – the European Parliament and the European Commission - some of the responsibility for the unequal distribution of income. This responsibility is found not only in generally declining macroeconomic conditions but also in normal times.

Furthermore, our results support the conclusion that citizens of the Eurozone countries considered hold supranational institutions responsible for the general macroeconomic performance of the national economy when declining conditions occur. In particular, the empirical results presented indicate that, besides income inequality, inflation and unemployment are major factors in defining the wave of trust in times of crisis.

This suggests that the European integration project requires greater political effort. The objective of creating a solid monetary union governed by reliable institutions cannot be achieved without taking due consideration of economic outcomes and especially income inequality.

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