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Sport as vehicle for a postnational identity? Attitudes of EU-citizens towards a more interventional role for the EU in the context of sport.

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ABSTRACT

The European Union, often perceived as a complex elite-project, is for the ordinary citizen not more than a ‘far from my bed’-show, and as a result generally receives little public legitimacy. The aim of many Member States is to bring EU decision-making closer to the people and to create a common postnational identity. In countries all over the world, sport is used in numerous ways to help form and bolster a collective national identity. EU policy-makers conceive sport therefore also as a great tool in the process of European identity-formation. A common European sports policy may -by the creation of a postnational, European identity- reduce the democratic deficit and increase public support for ‘European integration’. This article seeks to analyze the attitudes of EU-citizens towards an increased role of the European Union in the field of sport. Using Eurobarometer-data from 2004, the multilevel analyses show that the mechanisms underlying overall support for the EU do not hold for the sports context. We conclude by offering some guidelines for future research.

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Sport and European identity

"If I want to talk to Europe, who do I phone?"
(Henry Kissinger, 1970's)

Europe is much more than a classical international organization, and at the same time much less than a 'real' sovereign state. That *sui generis* character is the major cause of the fact that the average person is not committed to the European Union. The project of European integration was for a long time reserved to the political and economic elites of the various Member States. From the ordinary citizen not more than permissive consensus was expected (Eichenberg & Dalton 1993). Throughout the years however, one is starting to realise that the European integration-project could not succeed without the support and legitimation of the public. To put a stop to the democratic deficit, the elite-character of the European Union had to disappear (Scharpf 1997). A 'Europe for the people' had to be pursued and European decision-making had to be brought closer to the citizens. This way, feelings of a common identity could be developed. There however lies the problematic character of Europe, since one is wondering if such a 'European consciousness' exists and moreover, how it can be created? This question does not only worry us today. Even in the early '70s Henry Kissinger was wondering *"If I want to talk to Europe, who do I phone?"* Europeans have no common history, no common language, etc. which results in a Europe that does not evoke any emotional feelings (e.g. Smith 1992; Obradovic 1996; Hansen & Williams, 1999; Laffan, 1996). Europe is not mere than an intellectual idea missing a sense of shared collective identity. The question is thus what Europeans do have in common? Perhaps the key for a collective European identity lies in the passion European citizens share with one another: sports. The European Commission even describes Europe as 'the powerhouse of world sport' (Europese Commissie November 1998). European nations dominate elite sports, Europe has been host of more than half of the Olympic Games, and World Cups Football attract millions of (television) spectators. At the end of the Athens Olympics, Europe collectively won 286 medals, which is more than all those of China, Russia and the United States combined (Van Bottenburg, Rijnen & Sterkenburg 2005). Moreover leisure, culture and sports have traditionally played a major role in the development of national and local identities, so we may also expect them to play a significant role in the attempt to construct and strengthen a common European identity. Although not everyone agrees with what has been stated above. For example Roche (2001, 88) states that *"compared with the long-standing use of representative international sport to promote*

national identities, the multi-national and trans-national European Union has not really attempted to cultivate sport in any comparable way as a vehicle for the development and popularization of a 'European' identity". Nevertheless Europe is aware of the power of sport. The Adonnino-report of 1985 already mentioned that sport should be used "to assist the creation of a European cultural identity" (Addonino, 1985). For the European Union sport is more than "an important economic factor and appropriate instrument of public relations" (European Commission 1991). The increasing professionalization and commercialization of sport throughout the past decades has led to the fact that sport has fallen within the realm of EU general regulations, just like any other economic sector. In addition to this market-oriented logic¹ the EU also acknowledged the social significance of sport, "in particular its role in forging identity and bringing people together" (European Commission 1997). The interest and willingness to integrate different communities and to cross national boundaries is more noticeable in sport than in many other areas of society. In this way "sport has often been several steps ahead of political co-operation in the course of the European integration process." (Tokarski, Steinbach, Petry et al. 2004, 50). Certain sports have an immense effect on uniting nations and Europe. A good example of sport as unifying force is soccer, an overall popular sport crossing age, gender and nationality-barriers. The UEFA Champions League is Europe's most prestigious club competition and major European soccer teams have fans from all over Europe. Moreover, European professional footballers are able to work without restrictions in all Member States, and the incorporation of national clubs in supranational leagues with teams from other nations is helping to promote the concept and realization of a united Europe. Viviane Reding, EU-commissioner for Education and Culture and patron of the European Year of Education through sport 2004, summarizes it in the following way: "Across all borders sport is a symbol of universality, as it brings together nationalities, politics and cultures. Sport motivates to achieve common goals and allows a collective experience of all participants. For all these reasons, sport is a great tool to construct a European identity. Therefore we should fully make use of this tool to promote pan-European unity. In short: sport can be considered a vehicle for Europeanization."

This paper does not provide any proof of how sport is used to promote a common postnational identity. Rather, we give a first empirical impetus by examining the opinion of ordinary citizens towards a more interventional role of the European Union in sports. Explanatory models usually applied to overall support for Europe and European integration

¹ The most well-known example of this is the Bosman ruling, where in 1995 the European Court of Justice ruled that the transfer system in European club football contravened Article 48 of the European Treaty by prohibiting the free movement of football players of labour in the European Union. This resulted in the removal of nationality restrictions, the fully opening of the European transfer market and the encouraging of player-movement across Europe (Simmons 1997).

are the guiding principles. These include levels of cognitive mobilization (e.g. Inglehart, 1970), utilitarian appraisals (e.g. Gabel & Palmer, 1995), satisfaction with government (e.g. Franklin, van der Eijk & Marsh, 1995; Ray, 2003) as well as social-demographic characteristics and political ideological preferences (e.g. Gabel, 1998). We review each of these explanations in understanding attitudes towards a more interventional role of the European Union in sports. Since sport is one of the sub-areas where Europe carries active as well as passive responsibility, we assume that the same mechanisms underlying overall EU-intervention hold for intervention in sports. Below we briefly introduce the different explanations before applying them to the sphere of sports. After the methodological elaboration, we discuss the statistical results and end by giving some guidelines for future research.

Theoretical framework

Cognitive mobilization

Inglehart (1970) was the first to demonstrate the positive relationship between higher levels of political involvement and support for European integration. High levels of political awareness and well-developed skills in political communication enable citizens to identify with a supranational political community. This ‘to know it is to love it’-argument is based on two assumptions. First, well-developed cognitive skills are necessary for understanding the often very abstract information about European integration. Second, the influence of cognitive mobilization is message-independent; all types of information are positive for European support (Inglehart, Rabier & Reif 1991; Janssen 1991). Thus, the highest the cognitive mobilization of a citizen, the more he or she is familiar with and the less threatened by the topic of European integration (Gabel, 1998). Inglehart et al. (1991) proved this idea by means of bivariate analyses of Eurobarometer surveys from 1973-86. Janssen (1991) found evidence as well, even after controlling for political value orientations. However, these studies did not control for other potentially confounding factors, such as education. Later analyses provided only limited evidence for the idea, either by limiting the analyses to original Member States only (Anderson & Reichert 1996), or by controlling for a number of the explanations outlined below (Gabel 1998).

This model can also be applied to the sphere of European sports. Citizens with high cognitive mobilization are more at ease with a supranational entity and see mainly positive effects of greater EU-responsibility. This line of reasoning holds as well in the context of sports. People with well-developed cognitive skills will be of the opinion that greater EU-sports involvement is positive for the Member States. As a result we hypothesize the following:

“Higher levels of political sophistication are related to higher support for EU-intervention in sports”.

Utilitarian appraisals

The second group of studies posits that *“EU citizens from different socio-economic situations experience different costs and benefits from integrative policy”* (Gabel 1998, 336). Differences in economic welfare shape the attitudes towards European integration. Citizen’s support for integration is positively related to the welfare gains they expect from European policy. Gabel & Palmer (1995) argued that EU market liberalization provides differential benefits for EU citizens depending on their capital resources, both human and financial. The authors state that the liberalization of the EU labor markets affects citizens differently according to their level of education and occupational skills. Human capital is a strong predictor of the ability to adapt to occupational competition introduced by a liberalized EU labor market. Therefore they predict that a citizen’s support for integration will be positively related to the level of education and occupational skills. Second, Gabel & Palmer (1995) posit that wealthy EU citizens are more likely to benefit from capital liberalization since they can exploit the greater investment opportunities provided by open financial markets (Gabel 1998). In addition, low-income citizens are more dependent upon social welfare spending, which is constrained by capital mobility and the European Monetary System (EMS). Support for integration is thus explained in terms of income, education and occupational skills (Gabel & Palmer 1995; Anderson & Reichert 1996).

Concerning sports we assume as well that differences in economic welfare have an influence on attitudes towards more EU-intervention. People who would benefit from more EU-regulation in sports are more likely to support EU-sports involvement while those whose livelihood would not or would be adversely affected are less supportive. Following the above model, we assume that citizens with a high level of education, high income and high occupational skills will expect more benefits from sports regulation on a higher, postnational level than citizens with a low level of education, low income and low occupational skills. As a result we hypothesize the following: *“Higher levels of education, income and occupational skills are related to higher support for EU-intervention in sports”.*

Political orientation

Many studies of public attitudes towards European integration have investigated how citizen’s political orientation relates to their support for integration (e.g. Franklin, Marsh & Wlezien 1994; Franklin, Marsh & McLaren 1994; Franklin, Van der Eijk & Marsh 1995; Inglehart et al. 1991). Central to this model is the role a political party plays on influencing the opinions of citizens regarding integration. The theory argues that an individual will support

the attitude towards integration that is promoted by the political party he or she identifies with, independent of his or her personal characteristics. Generally, parties on the political Left have been historically less supportive of EU-integration as it is viewed as a manifestation of capitalist forces (Gabel 1998). In Eurobarometer surveys conducted by Inglehart et al. (1991) between 1973 and 1989, the hypothesis that respondents who expressed support for Left parties would hold less favourable views of the integration process proved accurate. Also Gabel's (1998) research provided support for this theory. Respondents who identified with a left party were less supportive of integration than respondents who identified with a right party, even after controlling for other possible explanatory factors.

Summarized, this theory states that people who describe themselves as politically right are traditionally more advocate of regulation on a supranational level than those with a rather left orientation. Again we can extend this to the sports context, assuming that people on the right are more likely to support sports involvement on a European level than people on the left. As a result we hypothesize the following: *“Ideological right preferences are related to higher support for EU-intervention in sports”*.

Satisfaction with the government

Several studies by Franklin and other scholars (1994; 1994; 1995) have argued that citizens will project their level of support for the government of their nation-state onto the idea of European integration. Citizens will view the integration process as a function performed by the current government. Consequently, if a person supports the ruling government, he or she is also more likely to support the European integration process (Anderson 1998). This theory also found support in Gabel's (1998) research, where respondents who indicated electoral support for the prime minister expressed on average greater support for European integration than respondents who did not intend to vote for the government.

Since this theory states that support for the government leads to support for the European Union, we can conclude that national-level regulation is not necessarily contradictory to European-level regulation. Hence when we expand this to the context of sports, we can assume that support for the government leads to support for more EU sports regulation as well. As a result we hypothesize the following: *“Positive evaluations of the government are related to higher support for EU-intervention in sports”*.

Measurement and Methodology

We test the validity of these hypotheses drawing on data from Eurobarometer 62.0: 'Standard European Trend Questions and Sport' (Soufflot de Magny 2004). In October and November of 2004, approximately 1000 interviews were conducted in each of the 25 Member

States of the European Union. The sample was representative of the population of citizens resident in each of the Member States and aged 15 and over.

The dependent variable, 'EU sports involvement', is an index of support for EU-intervention in sports measured by 6 items tapping opinions about more EU-responsibility in the sports context². The 6 statements, with a score of 1 if the respondent agreed and 0 otherwise, used to construct the index are (1) "The European Union should be able to intervene more in European sport issues", (2) "The European Union should co-operate more with national sports organizations and national governments", (3) "The promotion of ethical and social values of sport should be a priority for the European Union", (4) "The European Union should be more active in the fight against doping", (5) "The European Union must intervene in order to strengthen the co-operation between the worlds of education and sport as it was emphasized by the European year of education through sport 2004", (6) "It is useful that sport is included in the project of the European Constitution". The scores of these six items were then added up³ to construct a scale of 'support for EU-intervention in sports' (Cronbach's alpha = .83). Member States' scores on the six separate items are shown in Appendix A.

To test the *Cognitive mobilization theory*, we use an index of political interest as well as of (self defined) political knowledge. Political interest was measured by means of the following question: "When you get together with friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?" Two dummy-variables were created with 'occasionally' as reference category. Political knowledge was measured by means of the question "How much do you feel you know about the European Union, its policies, its institutions?" which ranges from 0 to 10, with higher scores representing more knowledge. The *Support for government theory* is operationalized by means of two questions: (1) "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in your country?" and (2) "Would you say you are very proud, fairly proud, not very proud, not at all proud to be citizen of your country?" Both are dichotomised with '0' meaning not satisfied/not proud and '1' meaning satisfied/proud. To measure the *Political orientation theory* a 10-point scale of left-right orientation was used. For the *Utilitarian appraisals theory* the following variables were included: occupational status (4 dummy variables with non-working as reference category), education (in years), and the question "What are your expectations for the next twelve months: will the next twelve months be better, worse or the

² See Appendix A for the Member States' scores on the 6 items.

³ A factor analysis (PCA without rotation) confirmed the one-dimensional nature with all items loading strongly on one factor, with an Eigenvalue of 3,275, explaining 55 percent of the variance.

same, when it comes to the financial situation of your household?” Therefore 2 dummy variables were constructed with ‘the same’ as reference category.

We also include three variables designed to control for other potentially confounding factors. These variables are: age (in years), sex (a dummy variable coded 1 for female and 0 for male), and sports participation (a dummy variable code 1 for sports participants and 0 for non-participants). Although the effects of these control variables on EU-support for sport may be interesting in their own right, our focus will explicitly lie on the explanatory variables.

The Eurobarometer-surveys consist of the same individual-level survey data across countries, and thus have a nested structure. We expect people to show greater similarity with individuals from their own country than with individuals from other countries. Often these similarities within level-2 contexts produce positive error correlations among these individuals, causing estimated standard errors to be too low and false rejection of the null hypothesis (Goldstein 2003, 24). By failing to model the individual similarities within countries and the differences across countries that we expect, we end up with incorrect inferences. There are many common methods to account for these problems. A first solution is adding a dummy variable for each country to control for unobserved similarities among these observations. This method estimates a separate constant parameter for each country. A second possibility is estimating separate models for each country. But both of these methods have several problems. Therefore *hierarchical linear models*, also known as *multilevel models*, *random coefficient models*, or *random effects models*, are a more proper way to account and test for level-1 differences across level-2 units. Instead of including dummy variables for each level-2 unit in an attempt to treat parameter estimates as fixed, one estimates differences across level-2 units as function of a random disturbance term. We accomplish the modelling by using the statistical software HLM6.0 (Raudenbush, Bryk & Congdon 2000).

Statistical results

We start our analysis with an *unconditional means model*. This model is referred to as a one-way random effect ANOVA and is the simplest possible random effect linear model. The motivation for this model is the question on ‘how much countries vary in their mean scores on EU sports involvement’. From the variance components of the random effects⁴ we can calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient ($ICC = 0.55193 / (0.55193 + 2.94605) = 0.158$). From that we can conclude that the proportion of the total variance that exists between

⁴ VC intercept = 0.55193, VC level-1 = 2.94605.

countries is 15,8% en that between individuals 84,2%⁵. The following step in our statistical analysis is presented in Table 1. The *full model* containing both the control and the explanatory variables is referred to as a *random-coefficients model* by Raudenbush et al. (2000). This type of model derives its name from the fact that it contains random terms in the level-2 equations used to predict the level-1 coefficients. It is used in situations where there are no level-2 variables, but there is variation between the level-2 units and therefore, a single regression equation is not appropriate. Since in general models with the smallest number of parameters are preferred as each parameter introduced into the model adds some uncertainty to it, the second column in Table 1 represents the most *parsimonious model*. A following step is the analysis of the *intercept-as-outcome model*, where we examine if there is a mean difference in support for EU-sports involvement between types of Member State. We expect that the national context of EU membership may influence citizen's perceptions of more EU sports involvement (see e.g. Anderson & Reichert 1996; Eichenberg & Dalton 1993; Gabel 1998). Citizens from Member States who joined the EU in 2004 may evaluate and perceive European responsibility in sports in fundamentally different terms than citizens of the old Member States (joined the EU before 2004). Therefore in this model only a Level-2 dummy variable is included, (with '1' meaning 'Old Member State' and '2' 'New Member State'). This analysis proves that new Member States score higher on 'EU sports involvement' than old Member States. Since it might be possible that this is a function of the independent variables, we subsequently examined a *slopes-as-outcome model* questioning whether the relationship between the independent variables and support for EU-sports involvement is the same across new and old Member States. None of the coefficients for the Level-1 slopes is however statistically significant. In a final step, we then only added the Level-2 dummy variable for type of Member State to the intercept (see third column in Table 1).

⁵ Note that the calculated explained variance is reported mere out of convention and is largely irrelevant to this analysis since this study is not designed to explain all variation in support for 'EU sports involvement', but to estimate relationships between explanatory variables and the dependent variable.

Table 1: Models of support for 'EU sports involvement'

	Full model	Parsimonious model	Model with Level-2 dummy
Fixed effects (level-1)			
Constant	4.184*** (.191)	4.214*** (.172)	3.554*** (.289)
Age	.007*** (.001)	.006*** (.001)	.006*** (.001)
Sex	.035 (.028)		.036 (.028)
Sports participation	.161** (.045)	.145** (.050)	.162** (.044)
Political orientation	-.011 (.011)		-.011 (.011)
Political knowledge	-.021* (.010)		-.021* (.010)
Discuss politics: frequently	-.083** (.033)	-.105** (.037)	-.081* (.033)
Discuss politics: never	.023 (.062)		.026 (.063)
Satisfaction with democracy	-.050 (.039)		-.049 (.039)
Proud to be citizen of country	.425*** (.069)	.459*** (.071)	.428*** (.069)
Education	-.021** (.006)	-.023*** (.005)	-.021** (.006)
Financial expectations: better	.061 (.033)		.063 (.033)
Financial expectations: worse	-.059 (.041)		-.059 (.042)
Self-employed	.165* (.071)		.174* (.071)
White-collar	.039 (.048)		.040 (.048)
Blue-collar	.171** (.057)	.142* .051	.169** (.057)
Management	.027 (.063)		.036 (.063)
Fixed effects (level-2)			
Type of Member State			.445** (.151)

Note: results of multilevel analyses: gamma coefficients; standard errors in parentheses
 * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001

The baseline respondent in the full model has the following characteristics: average age, male, non-sports participant, centered political orientation, average political knowledge, 'occasionally' discusses political matters with friends, is not satisfied with the way democracy works in his/her country, is not proud to be citizen of his/her country, has an

average age at stopping education, expects the financial situation of the household to be the same within the next twelve months, and is not-working.

The results from *the full model* offer no support for the *Political orientation theory*. Respondents who situate themselves on the left side of the political orientation scale offer not significantly less support for 'EU sports involvement' than those who situate themselves on the right. With regard to the *Cognitive mobilization theory*, the analysis offers opposite results than those expected. Respondents who frequently discuss politics expressed less support for 'EU sports involvement' than those occasionally discussing politics. Moreover, the more people think they know about European politics, the less support they express for more EU-responsibility in the field of sports. The *Support for government theory* on the other hand is confirmed. Although satisfaction with democracy has no significant effect on our dependent variable, respondents who are proud to be citizen expressed significantly greater support for 'EU sports involvement' than respondents who are not or less proud. Finally, the results offer limited support for the *Utilitarian appraisals theory*. First, in contrast with what we expected high-educated respondents are on average less supportive of a more interventional role of the EU in sports than less-educated people. Second, respondents who feel that the financial situation of their household will improve in the next twelve months expressed only slightly significant more support for 'EU sports involvement' than those who expect no change for their situation. Third, self-employed and blue-collar respondents were more supportive of 'EU sports involvement' than non-working respondents. Regarding the control variables, sex has no effect, but *age* and *sports participation* have a positive significant effect on 'EU sports involvement', meaning that older respondents and sports participants are more likely to support a greater interventional role of the European Union in sport issues than younger citizens and not-participants.

From the results of the *model with the dummy-variable* in the intercept (third column in Table 1), we can conclude that old Member States have an average score on the scale of 'EU sports involvement' of 3.554 and that new Member States who entered the European Union in 2004 score 0.445 points higher. As already mentioned, this result is not a function of the explanatory individual-level variables.

Discussion

The European Union, profiling itself as a young and democratic political community, plays a significant role on the world stage. It has a lot of authority and consequently exercises great influence on national authorities⁶. The bigger the impact of the European Union however, the more important becomes the link between the European political system and the ordinary

⁶ In Belgium today more than half of the laws are based on European agreements (Huyse & Van Dael 2000).

citizens. For a good functioning of the European order, interaction between these two poles is an essential condition (Huysse & Van Dael 2000). One of the possible paths is that which has already served as means of identity-construction on the national level, namely sports. However, the question is whether sports could indeed, as the European Union states, serve as “vehicle for Europeanization”. Can the EU use sports to bring Europe closer to the people? As already mentioned this paper gives no fruitful answer to these questions. As initial impetus we examined the determinants for ‘support for a more interventional role of the European Union in sports’. From the discussion of the statistical results, we can conclude that the mechanisms underlying overall European support are different from those underlying support for more EU-responsibility in sports. Apparently other processes are responsible. When we withhold the theoretical models and only examine the significant coefficients, we roughly notice the following individual characteristics leading to support for more EU-responsibility in the field of sports: being old, being a sports participant, having a lower education, having less self-defined political knowledge, not discussing politics frequently, being proud to be citizen of the country you live in, and being self-employed or blue-collar (instead of being white-collar or management; all four in comparison with the non-working). Those individual characteristics seem intuitively rather determinants of ‘sports lovers’ or ‘sports fans’ than of people who explicitly favor more EU-intervention in sports. The fact that people with the above characteristics are in favor of more EU-responsibility in sports is probably the result of attitudes they have towards sports in general, and is consequently no proof of ‘real’ EU-support. This line of reasoning could be an explanation of why the theories of overall EU-support do not hold for the field of sports. However, the fact that precisely people with the above characteristics are in favor of more EU-involvement in sports, could be an indication that sport can indeed serve as ‘vehicle to promote Europeanization’. To state this with certainty, additional research should and will be done. Thereby we will examine the effect of the above mentioned background characteristics on attitudes people adopt towards sports in general as well as on attitudes they adopt towards the European Union. Here Bourdieu’s notion of habitus comes into play. Habitus is defined as “*systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations*” (Bourdieu 1990: 53), or more simply as the dispositions that internalize our social location and orient our actions. If, as we expect, the underlying mechanisms behind attitudes towards sports in general and attitudes towards the European Union are different, or if in other words the individual characteristics determining sports-lovers are not the same as those for EU-lovers, we could state that different ‘habituesses’ are at work. Moreover, if the attitudes people adopt towards sports in general and support for more EU-intervention in the field of sports are positively related, this would be an indication of the fact that sport is indeed a possible

path for the promotion of a postnational, European identity. An empirical confirmation of all this would signify that the love people have for sports in general can be used to narrow the gap between them and that postnational entity, the European Union.

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Appendix A: Member States' scores on the six items measuring support for EU-sports involvement





