# Why is examining public EU attitudes such a complex task?

https://www.e-ir.info/2010/05/10/why-is-examining-public-eu-attitudes-such-a-complex-task-in-what-way-do-the-french-and-dutch-%e2%80%98no-votes%e2%80%99-in-eu-constitution-referenda-illustrate-this-point/

AMBER-JAYNE DANIELS, MAY 10 2010

Examining public EU attitudes is so complex because of the diverse sources of the EU public opinion and the incomplete structure of the EU itself. There are many elements to these complexities, and this paper will address but a few, however the primary theme amongst them is the inherent diversity of public attitudes, as they are shaped by internal and external factors. The primacy of the public opinion in EU policy-making influences policy-making, and political salience reciprocally affects the examination of public opinion and the theoretical framework of the EU. The analysis of public sentiment is complicated by the varied conceptions of identity inform varying attitudes towards the European Union and European integration by the contending perceptions of the European peoples (as a community) on a regional, national or European level. Understanding the diverse political identities of the public is also an integral part of understanding public sentiment toward the EU. Credible public sentiment toward the EU must be suitably informed. 'Cognitive mobilisation' (Inglehart 1970: 47) in integral areas such as the political and social motivations of the EU are muted by public ambivalence towards European-level politics and the lack of a dedicated European-level media. The French and Dutch 'No' votes in referenda regarding the Constitution of the European Union illustrate these elements in the perceived threat that further integration would cause to the identities of the French and Dutch publics; their loyalty to the states that insulate those identities; and the consequences of an inarticulate dialogue between the EU and its mass public.

The primacy of public opinion in EU policy making is a symptom of the widening and deepening of the European Union. As the sovereignty of member-states has been increasingly pooled, resulting in Union-wide harmonization of economic and (some) social policy, the public have become consequently more affected on a personal level than at a time when EU policy was primarily focused on limited, high political issues, such as geopolitical security and regional economic stability (Parsons 2002: 54). The attentiveness of the public in EU policy-making reflects the demise of the permissive consensus afforded the European project, in that citizens no longer hold neutral opinions regarding the actions of national governments and the EU (McLaren 2007, 376). Public interest and permissiveness appear to be coefficients that, over time, influence the salience of European-level issues in the public domain (Franklin & Wlezien 1997: 348). Likewise, (informed or misinformed) public attitudes influence the output of EU policy by means of political salience, thereby creating a paradigm of input/output legitimacy and the spectre of a democratic deficit. In order to address that deficit, referenda are held in the member-states of the EU at critical junctures in the integration process, such as Constitutional referenda, in order to legitimize the process (Taggart 2006: 12). The difficulty in assessing public attitudes, in fore- or hind-sight, is determining the perspective from which they are concluded. That is, there is no common denominator as to the basis of political preferences on a European scale: preferences for policy differ amongst individuals (Franklin & Wlezien 1997: 348) according to regional, national and European contexts and cognitive mobilisation.

The traditional nationalist (and intergovernmental) approach to political identity classifies individuals as citizens of a "territorially sovereign, culturally homogenous nation-state" that seeks to maintain the harmony between politics and culture within a nation-state model, and critically, that sees integration as an intergovernmental alliance, rather than as culturally integrative, federalised state-building (Csergo & Goldgeier 2004: 24-25). National citizens share a "group consciousness", in that they feel their social network creates a polity so separate and distinctive from any

# Why is examining public EU attitudes such a complex task?

Written by Amber-Jayne Daniels

other as to be self-contained and self-enforcing, and thus owe their loyalty to the nation that would protect that sovereignty (de Beus 2000: 292). European integration, from this perspective, has the potential to erode the traditions, values and sovereignty of a nation-state – all of which are culturally symbolic and influential to public opinion (Carey 2002: 390-391; Hooghe & Marks 2006: 247). Conversely, integration may be seen as an instrument of reinforcing national diversity and preservation in providing smaller states with a larger voice in the Union, preserving the economic stability of the nation, or even serving to renew a nation's *grandeur* (Schmidt 2004: 992) – contributing factors to the confusion regarding rejection of the EU Constitutional Treaty that was intended to further strengthen the position of member-states vis-à-vis one another and the supranational body itself (Zemanek *et al* 2005:414).

The only direct expression of public opinion towards the EU is through the European Parliament (EP) elections. However, most research has found that the majority of the polity is unaware of the institutional or normative frameworks of the European Union (Anderson 1998: 575; Scully 2007, 184-185). It is precisely because of this lack of cognitive mobilisation (discussed in further detail below) that the public tends to vote with regards to the more developed domestic notions and political culture of their nation-state (Anderson 1998: 575). The prevalence of nationhood as a conceptual framework simultaneously influences the public to align their opinions with those of national parties, and stymies loyalty to the European Union (Carey 2002: 388). As a result, the election of national representatives to the European Parliament can be the product of "party cue" and "political constraint" (Hooghe & Marks 2005: 425-426). Here the electoral majority simply follow a national party's EU sentiment (or cue), or it is otherwise constrained by divisions between political ideology, national parties and elites in European Parliament elections. The electorate treats EP elections as "second-order national elections", which are focused more on salient national issues, resulting in national confidence or protest votes, rather than engaging in European-level mobilisation (Scully 2007, 183; Norris 1997: 275). This interferes with the critical examination of public attitudes towards the EU by confounding the political agenda with ultimately nationalist rhetoric. Because of this phenomenon, national identity vis-à-vis European identity is a crucial element in analyzing public opinion (Vössing 2005:460).

The interplay between regional, national and European identities also integral to the examination of public preferences and attitudes, especially as citizens are noted to identify more closely with their national or regional identities than to the European Union (Carey 2002: 408; Neunreither 1994: 313). Stepping outside of the state-centric, intergovernmental framework; on a regional level, communities can assume a political identity that is not dependent upon a territorially sovereign nation or even upon the concept of nation itself. Moreover, the friction between regional governments and national governments is often the impetus for weaker, regional institutions to seek representation on a European level in order to gain political influence in both national and supranational fora that are otherwise dominated by actors who command significant institutional power (Marks *et al* 1996: 169; Koopmans 2007: 194 Bellamy & Castiglione 2003: 20). This fits the neofunctionalist theory that regional blocs would become bridges towards universal peace as "islands of cooperation" (Haas 1961 cited in Rosamond 2000, 69), while preserving and empowering "small scale identities" (Jachtenfuchs 1997: 10; Jeffery 2000: 7). Significantly, it is not only trans-national communities that are seeking representation in the European Union, but corporate and economic interest groups as well, whose political influence can be manifested in preventing EU policy-making according to their interests (Page & Dimitrakopolous 1997: 381-2). The difficulty lies in distinguishing regional or group-level interests from attitudes towards the European Union, and determining if that expression is supportive of the EU, or is exploiting its incompleteness – the lack of policy pertinent to interest groups in this case.

The polarity of intergovernmental and supranational debate is central to the complexities of understanding public attitudes towards the EU if those attitudes are influenced by national  and regional identities, and especially if those theories guide and justify political action (Jachtenfuchs 1997: 2). These concerns taken into consideration, the implausibility of the European Union being based on a single ethnicity or homogeneity (the characteristics of a nation-state) (Dell'olio 2005, 76) has given rise to the concept of a political identity and polity that is necessarily multi-level and pluralistic (Closa Montero 2001: 360; Bader 1999: 154). A European political identity is therefore conceived as a 'dynamic multi-level system' (Jachtenfuchs & Kohler-Koch 1996 cited in Jachtenfuchs 1997: 2) that preserves the domestic political cultures that make up the would-be European polity, in a community based on "equal dignity and solidarity" (de Beus 2000: 293).

# Why is examining public EU attitudes such a complex task?

Written by Amber-Jayne Daniels

The significance of the formation of a European polity is purely a traditional one: "since every large national polity was to a large extent built on a national identity, the European polity must depend on a European identity" (van Kersbergen 2000: 8). The notion of European citizenship is considered essential to create some semblance of European identity that would provide a common value system as a basis for further integration (Dell'olio 2005, 15, 114). Indeed, EU citizenship is a constitutional institution, as per the Maastricht Treaty that was ratified successfully after a marginal victory in the 1992 referenda (Bellamy & Castigilione 2003: 10). However, the introduction of an EU flag, anthem and other participatory inducing paraphernalia have not persuaded the vast majority of Europeans to identify themselves in terms of more than national or regional stock (Carey 2002: 388) or to shift their loyalties from the framework of the nation-state (van Kersbergen 2000: 9). A collective European identity, the "*sine qua non* for the expression of political will" (Schmidt 2004: 983), is as yet unrealised. The lack of a European-level polity makes examining public attitudes complex, because there is no common values system with which to compare them.

The formation of a collective European identity is hampered by a lack of communication: the European public has little sense as to what it is to be an EU citizen because there are no political actors informing them as to what the EU is, or what it is doing (Schmidt 2004: 991). Further, the absence of European-level and Europe-wide media coverage means that the information that is passed down to the public is from national sources, as noted above, that are subject to the sentiments of national politicians and domestic propaganda (Ross 2008: 396; Schmidt 2004: 991). The public reacts to "media-shaped facts, whose moral significance [changes] with respect to public prejudices, economic interest or the driving power of lobbies", subjecting attitudes to the "reign of ambivalence" (Strasser 1999: 235) towards the EU because of the apparent lack of political salience. This is not a fault of the European public, but rather a symptom of the information deficit that plagues the EU – as noted above, the public feel a stronger connection to their region or nation than they do the European Union, and therefore base their conclusions on their domestic political experiences (Anderson 1998: 575). The majority of the European public has been relegated into a state of cognitive immobilization.

Cognitive mobilisation "increases the individual's capacity to receive and interpret messages relating to political community" (Inglehart 1970: 47), and thus, those who frequently discuss and educate themselves about politics are cognitively mobilised. It is well documented that only a small minority of European citizens are cognitively mobilised, and that this affects their preferences towards the European integration (McLaren 2007, 380). As Inglehart suggested, *rising levels of exposure to formal education and mass communications tend to favor integration at the European, as well as the national, level* (1970: 46, original emphasis). Indeed, any communication between elites (as the most mobilised and the driving force of European integration) and the mass public has verily been a case of elites "talking over their heads" (Zemanek *et al* 2005: 426), "[acting] first and [convincing] public opinion afterwards" (Holmes 1996 cited in Dell'olio 2005, 16).A large portion of the problem lies in the linguistic barriers that prevent a genuine, European level public discourse (Jachtenfuchs 1997: 6), but another problem is the media itself, which ultimately decides which events and discourses will go to air or print: underrepresentation or overrepresentation is "entirely a matter of editorial choice" (Koopmans 2007: 203). Public discourse is not distinctly national (de Steeg 2006: 612), but without European-wide, European-level media coverage and communication, the European public is effectively experiencing Union citizenship through the preferences and prejudices of nationalist and regionalist institutions. Not only is European non-politicisation exploited by national party extremes that seek to further their own causes in the vacuum (Schmidt 2004: 990), but executives shift and blame credit onto and away from the EU by manipulating public perception to increase national favour in member-states (Moravcsik 1994: 13).

On the 29th of May 2005, the referendum on the ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE) resulted in 54.7% of French voters rejecting it (Brouard & Tiberj 2006:261). France's support for integration has always been a way for leaders to further its interests (Elgie 2007, 26). As such, it was perfectly legal under the French Constitution to ratify the TCE without public referenda, however, the public recognition of the political salience of the TCE convinced then President Jacques Chirac to hold put the ratification to a public vote (Hainsworth 2006: 99). The 'No' vote is deemed to have several causal factors, including a threat to the French model (Elgie 2007, 27) and opposition to the executive government (McLaren 2007, 376). A key reason to the rejection of the TCE was that French identity, economy and ideology was threatened by the direction that the European Union was taking at the time (Elgie 2007, 28; Brouard & Tiberj 2006: 262). The prevalence of 'Anglo-Saxon' values in the TCE such as free-market rhetoric did not coincide with the French social values, highlighting the group consciousness of the French

# Why is examining public EU attitudes such a complex task?
Written by Amber-Jayne Daniels

polity, and its reluctance to break with political culture for a body that did not present itself to be common or beneficial to that culture (Taggart 2006: 16). Notably, the French rejection was not a symptom of cognitive immobilization, as the debate prior to the referendum was "intense" (Milner 2005: 257), however, the lingering rhetoric, of both the media and national parties, regarding Turkish accession to the European Union (an event unrelated to the TCE) did persuade and mobilise some amongst those aligned to the right to reject the TCE, because of the prospect that Turkish accession would "dilute core values of France and the identity of the French people" (Elgie 2007, 28). Indeed, the referendum was seen by others as a chance to vote retrospectively, against the very process of integration that the 1992 Maastricht Treaty had propelled (Ivaldi 2006: 49). In other ways, the French rejection was merely a 'second-order' election: public discontent with the unpopular policies was by means of the 'No 'vote in order to express a need for 'fresh impetus' in national politics (Ivaldi 2006: 48).

In the Netherlands on the 1st of June 2005, the Dutch rejected the TEC by a vote of 61.5% (Nijeboer 2005: 393). EU support was a (Dutch) polity-wide phenomenon: not confined to the elite, staunchly supported by non-governmental interest groups and nearly three quarters of the public (Aarts & van der Kolk 2006: 243). The factors affecting the negative response to the TEC included the lack of public debate on European integration – the yearly debate of which is "usually so boring that no newspaper or television station bothers to cover it" (Nijeboer 2005: 393), sovereign identity and political influence. Unlike the intensity of the debate surrounding the Constitutional referenda in France, the debate in the Netherlands was effectively non-existent: half of all Dutch citizens that abstained from voting in the referendum claimed that they "were not sufficiently informed on the Constitution to vote" (Flash Eurobarometer 2005: 5). The lack of mobilisation is for the large part contributed to the foreign concept of referenda in the Netherlands: the TEC was their first, and the differences of its processes to the Dutch political system went unrecognised by political elites (Harmsen 2005 cited in Taggart 2006: 17). Characteristic of usual public debates regarding integration, the referendum campaign was sluggish as both the media and politicians "struggled to find ways to frame the debate" (McLaren 2007, 377). As described earlier, the information deficit between the EU and the public forced Dutch citizens to rely on domestic politics in order to express their preferences, specifically opposition to the government and established political parties (McLaren 2007, 377). In addition, like the French, many Dutch voters feared further and deeper political integration would erode Dutch identity and values, but most importantly the loss of political influence that further integration was likely to cause (Aarts & van der Kolk 2006: 245). In particular, fears of Turkey's accession were the greatest: because the TEC offered more voting rights to larger populations, the size of Turkey and its incongruence with Dutch values meant that not only would free movement between peoples erode national culture and values, but would affect the Netherlands' political influence on the European level, as well (Aarts & van der Kolk 2006: 244-245).

In the French and Dutch cases, examining public attitudes is a heavily involved task of looking at the comparisons of identity and culture between the French and Dutch polities and the ideal European polity; calculating the effects of the media on highly salient issues regardless of their relevance to the issues at stake; and acknowledging the potential for European politics to be devolved into national confidence or protest votes. Particularly in the Dutch case, the lack of public discourse and thus a lack of cognitive mobilisation led to many voters unsure of what they were voting for.

Evidently, the cause of complexity in examining public attitudes towards the EU is the lack of a comprehensive, definitive framework to which to compare those opinions and respond to them. The EU is an entity whose direction, breadth and depth is not yet determined. There is no European polity, no holistic conception of what it means to be a European citizen, no European-level social culture, no pan-European political parties, especially no adequate media-based fora with which to politicise European issues (Neunreither 1994: 312-313; Jachtenfuchs 1997: 6). Moreover, the theoretical divisions of the intergovernmental and supranational antipodes dominate the debate as to how any of these structures and institutions could or should be established (Rohrschneider & Whitefield 2006: 145). Examining public opinion towards an entity that itself is so incomplete and contested is an inherently complex task because of the competing discourses and sources that persuade public opinion. As the French and Dutch case showed, national and regional identity matters, as does cognitive mobilisation and the effects of the media in both informing public opinion and distorting it with issues that, while salient, are mostly irrelevant to the task at hand. The absence of a common European social culture, identity and polity and the evolving nature of the European Union mean that public opinion will always be diverse, and must be assessed from myriad perspectives in order to build a European political order that is both "responsive and responsible" (Jachtenfuchs 1997: 3).

**Why is examining public EU attitudes such a complex task?**
Written by Amber-Jayne Daniels

**Bibliography**

Aarts, K. and H. van der Kolk. 2006. 'Understanding the Dutch "No": The Euro, the East and the Elite.'*PS. Political Science & Politics* 39(2):243-246.

Anderson, C. 1998. 'When in Doubt, Use Proxies: Attitudes toward Domestic Politics and Support for European Integration.' *Comparative Political Studies* 31(5):569-601.

Bader, V.M. 1999. 'Citizenship of the European Union. Human Rights, Rights of Citizens of the Union and of Member States.' *Ratio Juris* 12(2):153-181.

Bellamy, R. and D. Castiglione. 2003. 'Legitimizing the Euro-'polity' and its 'Regime': The Normative Turn in EU Studies.' *European Journal of Political Theory* 2(1):7-34.

Brouard, S. and V. Tiberj. 2006. 'The French Referendum: The Not So Simple Act of Saying Nay.'*PS. Political Science & Politics* 38(2):261-268.

Carey, S. 2002. 'Undivided Loyalties: Is National Identity an Obstacle to European Integration.'*European Union Politics* 3(4):387-413.

Closa Montero, C. 2001. 'Between EU Constitution and Individual's Self: European Citizenship.' *Law and Philosophy* 20(3):543-371.

Csergo, Z. and J.M. Goldgeier. 2004. 'Nationalist Strategies and European Integration.' *Perspectives on Politics* 2(1).

de Beus, J. 2000. 'Quasi-National European Identity and European Democracy.' *Law and Philosophy* 20(3):283-311.

de Steeg, M. 2006. 'Does a public sphere exist in the European Union? An analysis of the content of the debate on the Haider case.' *European Journal of Political Research* 45(4):609-634.

Dell'olio, F. 2005. *The Europeanization of Citizenship: Between the Ideology of Nationality, Immigration and European Identity.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Elgie, R. 2007. 'France'. In *European Politics*, eds C. Hay and A. Menon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Flash Eurobarometer. 2005. 'The European Constitution: post-referendum survey in The Netherlands.' Brussels: European Commission. URL: <http://www.uspceu.com/CNTRGF/RGF_europa_1413.pdf>. Accessed 11 May 2008.

Franklin, M.N. and C. Wlezien. 1997. 'The Responsive Public: Issue Salience, Policy Change, and Preferences for European Unification.' *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 9(3):347-363.

Hooghe, L. and G. Marks. 2005. 'Calculation, Community and Cues: Public Opinion on European Integration.' *European Union Politics* 6(4):419-443.

Hooghe, L. and G. Marks. 2006. 'Europe's Blues: Theoretical Soul-Searching after the Rejection of the European Constitution.' *PS. Political Science & Politics* 39(2):247-250.

Inglehart, R. 1970. 'Cognitive Mobilisation and European Identity.' *Comparative Politics* 3(1):45-70.

Ivaldi, G. 2006. 'Beyond France's 2005 referendum on the European constitutional treaty: Second-order model, anti-establishment attitudes and the end of the alternative European utopia.' *West European Politics* 29(1):47-69.

# Why is examining public EU attitudes such a complex task?
Written by Amber-Jayne Daniels

Jachtenfuchs, M. 1997. 'Democracy and Governance in the European Union.' European Integration online Papers (EIoP) 1(2). URL: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=302660 >. Accessed 23 April 2008.

Jeffery, C. 2000. 'Sub-National Moblization and European Integration: Does it Make Any Difference?' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 38(1):1-23.

Koopmans, R. 2007. 'Who inhabits the European public sphere? Winners and losers, supporters and opponents in Europeanised political debates.' *European Journal of Political Research* 46(2):183-210.

Marks, G. et al. 1996. 'Competencies, Cracks and Conflicts: Regional Mobilization in the European Union.' *Comparative Political Studies* 29(2):164-192.

McLaren, L.M. 2007. 'Public Opinion and the EU'. In *European Union Politics*, ed. M. Cini. 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Milner, H. 2006. '"YES to the Europe I want; NO to this one." Some Reflections on France's Rejection of the EU Constitution.' *PS. Political Science & Politics* 39(2):257-260.

Moravcsik, A. 1994. 'Why the European Community Strengthens the state: domestic politics and international cooperation.' *Harvard University Working Paper Series* 52.

Neunreither, K. 1994. 'The Democratic Deficit of the European Union: Towards Closwer Cooperation between the European Parliament and the National Parliaments.' *Government and Opposition* 29(3):299-314.

Nijeboer, A. 2005. 'The Dutch Referendum.' *European Constitutional Law Review* 1:393-405.

Norris, P. 1997. 'Representation and the Democratic Deficit.' *European Journal of Political Research* 32(2):273-282.

Page, E.C. and D. Dimitrakopoulos. 1997. 'The Dynamics of EU Growth.' *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 9(3):365-387.

Parsons, C. 2002. 'Origins of the European Union.' *International Organization* 56(1) Winter:47-84.

Rachman, G. 2006. 'The Death of Enlargement.' *The Washington Quarterly* 29(3):51-56.

Rohrschneider, R. and S. Whitefield. 2006. 'Political Parties, Public Opinion and European Integration in Post-Communist Countries: The State of the Art.' *European Union Politics* 7(1):141-160.

Rosamond, B. 2000. *Theories of European Integration.* The European Union Series. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Ross, G. 2008. 'What do 'Europeans' Think? Analyses of the European Union's Current Crisis by European Elites.' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 46(2):389-412.

Scully, R. 2007. 'The European Parliament'. In *European Union Politics*, ed. M. Cini. 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schmidt, V.A. 2004. 'The European Union: Democratic Legitimacy in a Regional State?' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 42(5):975-997.

Strasser, P. 1999. 'Constructing "Those".' *Ratio Juris* 12(2) June 1999:226-237.

Taggart, P. 2006. 'Questions of Europe – The Domestic Politics of the 2005 French and Dutch Referendums and their Challenge for the Study of European Integration.' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 44(s1):7-25.

## Why is examining public EU attitudes such a complex task?
Written by Amber-Jayne Daniels

van Kersbergen, K. 2000. 'Political allegiance and European integration.' *European Journal of Political Research* 37(1):1-17.

Vössing, K. 2005. 'Nationality and the Preferences of the European Public toward EU Policy-Making.'*European Union Politics* 6(4):445-467.

Zemanek, J. et al. 2005. 'Rethinking EU Scholarship.' *European Constitutional Law Review* 1:412-428.

—

*Written by*: **Amber-Jayne Daniels**
*Written for:* **Frank Mols**
*Written at:* **University of Queensland, Brisbane**
*Date Written:* **May 2008**