Evaluating the EU: the influence of national institutional quality, media and interpersonal communication on EU democratic performance evaluations

Desmet, P.B.L.

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INTRODUCTION

Public support for the EU is at an all-time low. Especially citizens of the founding member states are less inclined to accept decisions of their own political leaders at the European level than before (Hix, 2008). For many decades, the idea of a “permissive consensus” (Moravcsik, 1991; Hooghe & Marks, 2008) allowed European elites to build this unique supranational organization at a remarkable speed. But while the European Union rapidly had become more powerful, the impact of public opinion increased as well. Concerns about the ‘democratic deficit’, initially expressed by pro- and anti-Europeans alike in the mid 1980s, are nowadays voiced throughout Europe (Hix, 2008). Ironically, further European integration more than ever depends on the support of EU citizens, who have become increasingly skeptical about the functioning of the EU (Hobolt, 2009). As a result, political elites are more than ever concerned about the way European citizens evaluate the democratic performance of the European Union. The nature of these EU evaluations will be central in this dissertation.

In this introduction, I will shortly situate the debate on the democratic deficit and the increased importance of EU evaluations in the recent history of the EU. Next, I will differentiate EU democratic performance evaluations from other dimensions of EU attitudes and introduce the three main antecedents of EU democratic performance evaluations. Then, the methodological approach will be explained. After discussing what this dissertation adds to the research field, I will conclude with a brief overview of the studies that embody the three main chapters of this dissertation.

How citizens’ evaluations of the EU became important

Since the early nineties, further European integration, widening or deepening, has to deal with firm protest and criticism. As early as in 1993, within the debate on the Maastricht treaty and the introduction of the Euro, Smith and Wanke (1993) predicted the expanding importance of public opinion on EU matters. “The growing importance of public opinion obviously comes at a crucial point in the integration process. Public support will be important if Europeans are to accept truly borderless trade and the economic dislocations that will come with the transition to economic and monetary union” (Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993, p. 508). The performance of European institutions is critically watched by those political groups who fight against the loss of national sovereignty that follows from further European integration. This shift in the relation between European elites and European citizens can be explained by two separate processes: a general transformation in the nature of politics in advanced Western European industrial societies (the post material value change), and a specific transformation in European politics (towards the EMU).

The post material value change theory, put forward by Inglehart (1977), explains the changes affecting the mass public in advanced industrial democracies, and has two premises: the scarcity hypothesis, and the socialization hypothesis. First, the public’s basic value priorities are determined by scarcity: greater value for scarce goods. Second, individual value priorities are formed early in life, and are as such determined by the socioeconomic conditions of that period. Given these two premises, Inglehart argues that due to the socioeconomic changes in Western industrial societies, the value priorities of its people are changing, causing gaps between generations. Post material goals such as self-expression, personal freedom and individualism have become more important than traditional
values, such as economic well-being, social security and religion.

Dalton (1996) linked this framework to political changes and democratization issues. The shift towards post material value orientations has redefined the nature of politics in advanced industrial societies. New ideas gave rise to new social movements, and as such new divisions in public and political groups. Furthermore, the style of democratic politics underwent some transformations. Dalton calls this post material trend in politics the “individualization of politics”, which “involves a shift away from electoral decision making based on social groups and/or party cues toward a more individualized and inwardly-oriented style of political choice” (Dalton, 1996, p. 11). Together with this political emancipation of the citizen, there has been a shift in the position of the voter/citizen, towards a role as consumer (Peng & Hackley, 2007). Concerns become more individual and more heterogeneous. Short-term considerations of policy preferences and performance evaluations are the new decision-making criteria for voting. Due to increasing levels of sophistication, citizens are more aware of inconsistencies and, maybe more important, are able to speak up for it. Political institutions anticipated on this shift and started confirming citizens in their role as consumers. Whereas politics used to be a matter of a small elite, now a large proportion of the society wants to be involved. As such, bridging the legitimacy gap is an important step in dealing with this new reality.

Besides this transformation, EU politics itself has transformed as well. The transition to the European Monetary Union (EMU) during the nineties changed the basis on which citizens evaluate the performance of the EU (Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007). “The contrast in the pre- and post-Maastricht periods indicates that as citizens became aware of the implications of EMU and the EU’s changing policy role, their calculus of support changed” (p. 43). According to Eichenberg and Dalton, European citizens did not necessarily reject the EMU, which is probably something that is neither interesting nor comprehensible to citizens (McNamara, 1998). Europeans feared the harmonizing or even integration of the social security, the ‘neofunctionalist nightmare’ (Eichenberg and Dalton, 2007, p. 43).

**Evaluating the democratic performance of the EU**

Attitudes towards European governance are structured along related but distinct dimensions (Rohrschneider, 2002; Scheuer, 2005). They can be directed towards different objects, and they can be of affective or utilitarian nature (Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas, & de Vreese, 2011). This distinction is partially based on Easton’s model of system support (1975). Easton differentiates between three different objects of political support: the community, the regime and the authorities; and two modes of support: specific and diffuse. Whereas specific support depends on the output of politics and policies, diffuse support varies between different objects of support. Lindberg and Scheingold (1970) differentiated between affective and utilitarian support for respectively vague ideals and policy interests. To fully capture the multi-dimensionality of EU attitudes, studies of public opinion about the EU should reflect on these different types of support. But how can we then distinguish between different facets of EU attitudes? In the literature, umbrella terms such as euroscepticism or EU support have been used interchangeably. This can be conceptually and empirically misleading (Duch & Taylor, 1997; Abts & Krouwel, 2007). Boomgaarden et al. (2011) distinguished five dimension of
EU attitudes. These dimensions are unique components of the overall notion of EU attitudes and the different dimensions overall only correlate moderately with one another.

Evaluations of the EU have been operationalized in a variety of ways. Some scholars used support for integration (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000; Janssen, 1991) to assess citizens’ attitudes towards the EU. Other scholars used satisfaction with (European) democracy as their variable of interest (Karp, Banducci, & Bowler, 2003; Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Aarts & Thomassen, 2008). Both beliefs concerning democracy in general and evaluations of political performance of specific governments are crucial for this item. However, as a single-item subjective indicator, satisfaction with democracy seems very similar to measures of subjective well-being. Canache, Mondak and Seligson (2001) describe four methodological concerns with treating satisfaction with democracy this way: its interpretation may vary across individuals, nations, points in time and context of the survey itself (Canache et al, 2001). Although satisfaction with democracy cannot function as a single-subjective indicator, it still has potential value within a larger ‘democratic performance’ scale. As Linde and Ekman (2003) suggested: “satisfaction with the way democracy works is not an indicator of system legitimacy per se. Rather, it is one indicator of support for the performance of a democratic regime” (p. 401). If we are to connect survey items to the concept of democratic legitimacy, we need multiple indicators to “assess the validity and reliability of a measurement of the popular belief in the legitimacy of democracy” (Linde & Ekman, 2003, p. 406).

In this project, I set out to study the EU democratic performance dimension, which concerns the evaluation of the actual functioning of a democratic political system. It contains judgments about the quality of European institutions and democratic procedures. Performance is an important factor in all types of political regimes: “a regime’s legitimacy is largely defined by its effectiveness to deliver goods to the public” (Linde & Ekman, 2003, p. 400). I define legitimacy, in line with Lipset (1981), as “the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society” (p. 64).

Antecedents of EU democratic performance evaluations: main research questions

I have established EU democratic performance evaluations as a specific dimension of broader EU attitudes. They deal with the evaluation of the actual functioning of the European democratic system. In this dissertation, I set out to explain the nature of these evaluations, which serve as building blocks for EU support. Several scholars reported fluctuation in EU support, both across countries and over time. Another important consideration here is the question whether these evaluations, these opinions about the EU democratic performance held by its citizens, are variable as well.
A first potential antecedent of EU evaluations is the national context. Some scholars argue that a true democracy cannot exist at the European level, due to the absence of a European demos (Martinotti & Stefanizzi, 1995; Przeworski, 1995). A demos is formed when a group of individuals agree to make collectively binding rules. If such rules are applied to individuals who do not see themselves as members of a societal group, it becomes an imposition. Many European citizens still feel attached to their nation states and are not prepared to accept decisions by majority rule at the supranational level. They do not comply with decisions that are imposed on them by a majority of citizens in other member states. The power of national attachment, however, does not depend only on feelings, history or culture. There is a certain economical rationale behind the (non-)existence of national identities. According to Sanchez-Cuenca (2000), European decision-making becomes attractive when benefits can be generated, or when the difference between the performance of national and European institutions is unfavorable for the nation-state. “It is the functioning of the European and national institutions that determines whether the citizens of the member states will accept the basic elements of a supranational democracy” (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000, p. 168). The interplay between the supranational and national institutions is crucial for the democratic performance of the European Union. Therefore, characteristics of national institutions should be incorporated to grasp the variation amongst countries in EU evaluations. The central research question in the first chapter will be: Does the level of national institutional quality affect democratic performance evaluations of the EU at the individual level?

Furthermore, I will explore the potential effect of political knowledge on this interplay between national and supranational institutional quality. As Anderson (1998) described, European citizens tend to base their EU evaluations on their opinions on national politics. They do so because they are not able to distinguish between national and European politics due to a lack of knowledge of the (complex) European policy level. The second research question in the first chapter will then be: Does political knowledge condition the effect of national institutional quality on democratic performance evaluations of the EU?

A second potential antecedent is news media exposure. In addition to internalized political predispositions, citizens use flows of information in forming and determining their political attitudes and opinions (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006a). Given the fact that citizens obtain their information about the EU mainly from the news media, it is important to study the content and the effect of
media messages on EU politics. Furthermore, some scholars argue that the EU suffers from a ‘communication deficit’ (Meyer, 1999) and point at the lack of public debate about European integration (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). Assessing whether media use has an impact on evaluations of EU democratic performance is therefore highly relevant. The direct persuasive effect of media content has been somewhat neglected in political communication research (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeld, 1998). In spite of the primary focus in the literature on the cognitive effects of news media, via agenda setting, priming and framing, few researchers have continued to explore the direct persuasive influence of media on political preferences (Lenart, 1994). However, scholars have provided empirical evidence of a direct relationship between newspaper endorsements and voting behavior (Robinson, 1974; Erikson, 1976; Coombs, 1981; Stempel & Windhauser, 1991; Dalton et al., 1998). Zaller (1996) has shown that media content can affect political evaluations. Similar claims have been made about the effect of television news on political attitudes and opinions (Robinson, 1976). In a more recent study, Hopmann, Vliegenthart, de Vreese and Albaek (2010) demonstrated the effect of visibility and tone on party choice. Does the tone of media messages, especially in an election campaign, have an impact on EU evaluations of European citizens as well?

A third potential antecedent of EU evaluations is interpersonal communication, which has consistently been viewed as an essential condition for a healthy functioning democracy (Scheufele, 2002; Schudson, 1997). Although most studies on political communication effects leave out interpersonal communication (Glynn, Herbst, O’Keefe, & Shapiro, 1999), it may have an important impact on public opinion. It is considered by some scholars as the most influential source of attitude change, in the absence of other sources of information (Mondak, 1995). People engage in interpersonal conversations far more often than they watch television news or read newspapers (Kirchler, 1989). Furthermore, as Eliasoph (1998, p. 41) noted, it is essential to make sense of the large amount of political information people have to deal with. The role of interpersonal communication has been studied mainly as a mediator for mass media effects. Since Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) introduced their ‘filter hypothesis’, maintaining that personal communication mediates the influence of mass communication on individual voters, many studies have repeated this logic when combining personal and mass communication in effect studies on election campaigns (for an overview, see Schmitt-Beck, 2003). However, both interpersonal and mass communication has changed fundamentally since the heydays of the two step-flow paradigm. “The combination of social isolation, communication channel fragmentation and message targeting technologies have produced a very different information recipient than the audience members of the Eisenhower era” (Bennett & Manheim, 2006, p. 215). Individuals nowadays have greater command of their own information environments, and the social interaction component of the two-step flow may have been replaced. Therefore, I will study the direct effect of the tone of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations.

But what to expect from the interaction between media and interpersonal communication? Several scholars have studied the effect of media and interpersonal communication simultaneously; however, no consensus has been reached on the nature of this combined effect (for an overview, see Lenart, 1994). Do both forms of communication reinforce one another? Or does interpersonal communication compete with media messages for influence over the public opinion? Or does this depend
on content features of both types of communication? And what is the role of disagreement within interpersonal communication? In Chapter 2 and 3, I aim to answer three research questions:

How does the content of mass media and interpersonal communication affect citizens’ evaluations of European democratic performance?

Is there a reinforcement effect of both forms of communication on EU democratic performance evaluations?

Does disagreement between discussants moderate the effect of interpersonal communication on EU democratic performance evaluations?

Data and methodological approach

To answer the research questions, I will investigate potential antecedents of EU democratic performance evaluations from three different angles: at the macro level, the influence of national institutional quality on EU evaluations; at the meso level, the influence of media messages on EU evaluations; and at the micro level, the influence of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations. This theoretical approach requires a multi-methodological design. I need cross-national data to allow a comparison across member states, both on their national institutional characteristics, and on individual EU evaluations. I need time series data as well, to measure the change in time. This dynamic dataset should encompass survey data on individual EU evaluations and media exposure, and content analysis data, to grasp the evaluative tone in the media messages. Ideally, this second dataset is representative for the European population. This dataset alone would not fully allow us to measure content related contingencies of interpersonal communication. Therefore, an experiment, where these content related contingencies can be manipulated, is a good instrument to capture the exact impact of interpersonal communication, in combination with media messages.

In Chapter 1, I will use survey data from 21 EU member states and combine them with country characteristics. This combined dataset will enable me to deploy a multilevel model, which is perfectly suited to grasp the variation between individuals and, on the second level, between EU member states. This will allow to measure the effect of national institutional quality on EU evaluations. Furthermore, potential moderators and mediators of this effect, such as political knowledge, can be accounted for within this multilevel model.

In Chapter 2, I want to measure the effect of media on EU evaluations. Media coverage of the EU is centered around EU events, such as the EU summits and the European Parliamentary (EP) elections (de Vreese, Lauf & Peter, 2007). At the same time, conversational timing is related to the conversation’s potential to impact the effect of campaign messages (Hardy & Scheufele, 2009). A conversation the day after or before a major debate/campaign event might be more likely to influence citizens who are less involved than conversations held at a random point in time, due to the imposed voting duty. The EP-elections are the most obvious incentive for people to think about their supranational institutions. Therefore, changes in EU evaluations are most likely to appear within the campaign period. For the second chapter, I combine data from a two-wave survey panel in 21 EU countries around the EP elections of 2009 (first wave three weeks before the election day, second wave around election day) with content analysis data from the same member states, gathered within the
three weeks preceding election day. By combining both datasets, I will be able to measure the effect of media tone and interpersonal communication on change in EU democratic performance evaluations.

A potential problem here is the lack of information I have on interpersonal conversations. Therefore, I will conduct an experiment for the third chapter, where the tone of both media message and interpersonal message can be manipulated. This will allow us to test the effect of evaluative media messages and interpersonal messages. Furthermore, I will be able to analyze the importance of tone congruence for the effect of both types of communication on EU evaluations.

What I (intend to) add to the research field

In this dissertation, I will study a particular dimension of attitudes towards the EU: democratic performance evaluations of the EU. No attempt has yet been done to study this particular facet of EU attitudes from different perspectives. First, I want to construct a valid indicator for EU democratic performance evaluations. A second contribution I intend to make is the construction of an objective indicator of national institutional quality. By incorporating specific institutional characteristics into one single indicator of national institutional quality, I hope to measure the impact of the national institutional context of citizens’ democratic performance evaluations of the EU. Third, I model political knowledge as a moderator for the interplay between the national and the supranational level for the very first time. Most studies have studied the direct effect of political knowledge on EU evaluations (Anderson, 1998; Karp et al., 2003). Fourth, I will study the effect of tone congruence on the effect of the interplay between media and interpersonal communication on EU evaluations. Most scholars studying the interplay between both forms of communication did not account for such content-related contingencies.

Outline of the dissertation

EU democratic performance evaluations are the central concept of this dissertation. I will study the main concept from three different perspectives. In the first chapter, I will adopt a macro perspective, where I will assess the impact of the national institutional context on EU evaluations. I will consider the impact of political knowledge in this process. In the second and third chapter, I will study the potential dynamic character of EU democratic performance evaluations. In Chapter 2, I will focus on the effects of the campaign for the EP elections. Do these evaluations change during an election campaign due to media and interpersonal messages? Do political information and evaluative tone have an impact on individual assessments of the EU? In the third chapter, an experimental design will be used to measure the effect of tone congruence between media and interpersonal communication. Furthermore, I will study the effect of disagreement between discussants in interpersonal communication. In the conclusion, I will discuss the main findings and the implications of those findings and I will suggest directions for future research.
Notes
1 “The conventional wisdom held that European citizens merely provided a ‘permissive consensus’ that enabled elites to pursue the European ideal unconstrained by pressure from the public” (Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993, p. 507).
2 According to Hix (2008), there is no single definition of the democratic deficit in the EU. I define the democratic deficit as “the growing perception that the EU is an undemocratic system and that something should be done about it” (Hix, 2008, p. 68).
3 EU evaluations and EU democratic performance evaluations will be used interchangeably.
4 All three chapters were originally written in the form of articles, and can be read as separate papers. Therefore, there might be some overlap between the three chapters.