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

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CONCLUSION

When I started this project back in 2009, I did not expect the European Union to be such a ‘hot’ news item in 2012. Attention to the European Union used to be concentrated around big events, such as the European Council and the EP elections (Peter, 2003; Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, de Vreese, & Schuck, 2010). EU news seems to be part of the daily news menu nowadays, although this is partly driven by the increase in the amount of ‘big EU events’. The Greek crisis might be primarily a Eurozone crisis, but I learned during the experiments conducted in Chapter 3 that people do not really make the distinction between the EU and the Eurozone. Furthermore, a crisis within the Eurozone logically has its repercussions for the whole European Union. As a consequence, opinions on the EU are more outspoken than ever. Europe was a prominent theme in the French presidential elections. During the Dutch parliamentary elections of 2012, right-wing populist Geert Wilders declared “Europe, Europe and Europe” as the three most important election themes. Similarly, in the recent Greek and Hungarian elections, the relation between the nation state and the EU played a central role in the campaign. One might expect the next European Parliamentary elections in 2014 to be about Europe itself. Anno 2012, the evaluation of the EU democratic performance seems to be more relevant than ever.

In this conclusion, I will shortly recapture the main findings, the methods used and the added value they bring to the research field. Next, I will suggest some directions for future research, based on the findings. I conclude by discussing the implication of these results for “the real world”: what lessons could be learned?

Main findings

In the first chapter, I set out to explain differences in EU democratic performance evaluations at the macro level. A first analysis showed remarkable differences in EU democratic performance evaluations between the EU member states. The European Union is a remarkable case, as it is the only supranational institution where decision-making is split between two levels: the national and the supranational. As Sanchez-Cuenca (2000) showed, evaluations of a supranational policy level depend on the interplay between national and supranational institutions.

A first finding here is the negative relation between national institutional quality and democratic performance evaluations of the EU. Citizens of countries with high-quality institutions are less satisfied with the democratic functioning of the EU than citizens of countries where institutional quality is low. This effect is moderated by political knowledge. The more one knows about domestic politics, the more high institutional quality correlates with lower EU evaluations.

If political knowledge affects democratic performance evaluations of the EU, then where do people get this political knowledge from? Research has shown that news media are the primary sources of information about political matters (Beck et al., 2002). The evaluative tone of media messages has a persuasive effect on people’s opinions about the EU (Norris, 2000; Banducci, Karp, & Lauf, 2001; Peter, 2003). As hypothesized in Chapter 2, exposure to positive EU messages from the media has a positive effect on people’s evaluations of EU democratic performance. Similarly, people receive politically-relevant information through interpersonal conversations. Frequently engaging in EU posi-

tive interpersonal conversations also has a positive effect on EU evaluations. I did not find conclusive evidence for a moderation effect of interpersonal communication on the effect of media on EU evaluations. However, the effect of interpersonal communication itself is weakened when discussants perceive disagreement within the conversation. Thus, disagreement moderates the effect of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations. The more one disagrees within the conversation, the weaker the effect of interpersonal communication will be on EU evaluations.

The results of Chapter 2 were based on two-wave panel data complemented with data from a media content analysis, gathered in 21 member states within the three weeks preceding the EP elections of 2009. This dataset did not provide specific information on the contents of interpersonal communication. In Chapter 3, I conducted an experiment, to further analyze whether the combined effect of media and interpersonal messages on EU evaluations depends on tone congruence between both types of communication. The experimental setting allowed me to manipulate the messages. Participants were exposed to a media message which was either EU positive, EU negative, or EU neutral. Then, they had to engage in a chat conversation with a discussant who was either EU positive, EU negative, or EU neutral. With this experimental dataset, I tested the same hypotheses as in Chapter 2. First, I found confirmation for the findings from Chapter 2: both evaluative media and interpersonal messages had an effect on EU democratic performance evaluations. Second, this manipulation allowed us to measure the effect of tone congruence (and incongruence) between media and interpersonal messages in a better way. I found conclusive evidence for a reinforcement effect of EU positive interpersonal communication on EU positive media messages. Due to the tone congruence between both, the positive effect on EU evaluations increases. I did not find evidence for the negative condition. Finally, I tested the moderating effect of disagreement within interpersonal communication. The more one perceives disagreement within interpersonal communication, the more the initial effect of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations diminishes.

In the experiment in Chapter 3, I found very similar answers to the research questions as in Chapter 2, where I tested the same expectations in a real-world setting. The main effects of both evaluative media and interpersonal communication were confirmed. Similarly, I found confirmation for the diminishing effect of disagreement on the main effect of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations. No conclusive evidence was found for the reinforcement hypothesis about the role of tone congruence between media and interpersonal messages, and its effect on EU evaluations, in Chapter 2. The fact that I found (partial) results for this hypothesis in Chapter 3 (which contradicts my expectations) can be assigned to the improved measurement of the content of interpersonal communication.

What I did add to the research field

Evaluations of the democratic performance of the EU was the central concept in this dissertation. I primarily wanted to differentiate this dimension from other dimensions of EU attitudes, and define its most important antecedents. I chose to study the effect of national institutional context, media, and interpersonal communication. This differentiated and multi-methodological focus on EU democratic performance evaluations made this dissertation unique, and elevated what we know about EU democratic performance evaluations in several ways.

First, there is the multilevel approach towards the effect of national institutional quality on EU evaluations, which allowed me to test the moderating effect of an individual-level characteristic (political knowledge) on the effect of an aggregate-level variable (national institutional quality) on EU evaluations. I was able to demonstrate that domestic political knowledge moderates the effect of national institutional quality on EU democratic performance evaluations, a new and unique finding. Furthermore, I constructed a measure of national institutional quality, beyond corruption (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000) and subjective measures of national institutional quality (Rohrschneider, 2002).

Second, I gathered evidence from both a real-world and an experimental setting for the influence of evaluative media and interpersonal communication content on EU evaluations. This focus on evaluative content is not unique, but the different methods I used to demonstrate these effects can inspire other scholars to assess the evaluative content of both media and interpersonal messages more precisely. I answered the urge from several scholars to focus more on these content-related contingencies in order to take the study of interpersonal communication effects to a higher level (Southwell & Yzer, 2009). Furthermore, I demonstrated the importance of combining media and interpersonal communication in public opinion effects studies. Third, the results demonstrated the importance of disagreement as a moderator of interpersonal communication effects. Both in the real-world (Chapter 2) and the experimental (Chapter 3) setting, I found conclusive evidence for the mitigating effect of disagreement on the effect of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations. Based on these results, I strongly recommend the inclusion of disagreement in interpersonal communication effect studies.

Limitations of this dissertation

Naturally, this dissertation has its shortcomings as well. I was not able to measure the impact of specific knowledge about European politics in the multilevel model from Chapter 1. The differential impact of domestic versus EU specific political knowledge would have been a nice addition to the model. However, the measurement of EU political knowledge in the survey was insufficient for far-reaching conclusions. Furthermore, in the second and third chapter, I did not find conclusive evidence for the reinforcement effect I expected. On the contrary, the only significant result I found for this hypothesis (in the positive condition from Chapter 3) contradicted my expectation: EU positive tone congruence between media and interpersonal communication did not have a reinforcement effect on EU evaluations. Finally, it is important to put the results in the right perspective. The media effects I found in Chapter 2 were significant, but very small. Despite the large number of data (N=19,826), the models did not change greatly when the media variable was added to the analysis. This could be explained by the rather small number of EU evaluative messages in the news media during the election campaign. Despite these limitations, I am confident that this dissertation has got an added value to the research field. I believe that future research could benefit from the theoretical and methodological progress that was made.

Directions for future research

The national context. The national context does matter. Member states differ from one another in several ways, and these differences affect the relation with the supranational level. In this dissertation, I limited myself to the effect of differences in national institutional quality. While I sug-

gest other scholars to use institutional characteristics as well, I also would advocate the use of other potential factors. First, I would suggest the use of economic parameters. The survey data suggest that European citizens still consider the EU mainly as an economic institution. Expectations towards the division of policy responsibility on economic matters could have an impact on perceptions of European performance. Another factor that appeared to matter is the media context. In this dissertation, I was not able to address the potential macro effects of the media context. I did show the short-term impact of media effects on individuals, but I did not account for long-term public opinion changes at the national-level as previous scholars did (e.g. Vliegthart, Schuck, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2008). However, future research could benefit from adding both individual- and macro-level media variables when investigating the dynamics of EU evaluations.

Combining media and interpersonal communication. For a long time, most scholars have treated mass and interpersonal communication as unrelated channels of information. Several scholars suggested to further the understanding of the intersection between media and conversation, and as such reframe political communication in the broader context of domestic communication (Reardon & Rogers, 1988; Morley, 1990; Southwell & Yzer, 2009). Those scholars who investigated the combined effects of mass and interpersonal communication, did not reach consensus on the nature of this effect. Some believe in a competitive relation between both types of communication, with substantively disjunctive main effects that compete for influence over the individual (Lenart, 1994). Others believe that media effects are reinforced by those interpersonal conversations which tend to revolve around media-generated content (Scheufele, 2002). I believe that reinforcement and competition could be two sides of the same coin. Depending on the context, the dependent variable, and some content-related characteristics, interpersonal communication can either reinforce or neutralize the effects of media messages. In line with Schmitt-Beck (2003), I investigated the effects of tone congruence. Similarly, I followed scholars such as Feldman and Price (2008) and Lee (2012) by adding disagreement within interpersonal communication to the model. When investigating the role of media and interpersonal communication, I suggest to take those specific characteristics into account, such as disagreement and tone congruence, which theoretically might explain a difference between reinforcement and competition.

Furthermore, as Boomgaarden (2012) argues, the emergence of online forms of political communication and its impact on political attitudes and behavior, trigger a renewed interest in the integration of mass media and interpersonal communication in effect studies. “Online political communication blurs the division line between IPPC [interpersonal political communication] and MMPC [mass mediated political communication]” (p. 19).

(How to) Focus on the content. Most studies, including the one in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, rely on self-reported measures for the measurement of interpersonal communication. Although satisfactory for some research questions, this approach is not ideally suited for theoretical advancements of interpersonal communication (McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1991). Although I did use a two-wave dataset, I was not able to gather information about the actual content of the interpersonal discussions that were reported by the respondents. The experimental approach was an attempt to tackle this issue. By manipulating the tone of the discussant, I acquired some insights on the effect of tone

congruence between media and interpersonal communication. Of course, experimental research has its limitations as well. Combining multiple waves of data collection with an intensive content analysis of (preferably online) discussions offers more possibilities.

Discussion

A Europe of nation states

National institutional quality matters, and the strength of this effect depends on peoples knowledge on domestic political matters. The quality of national institutions is partially a result of the political past (traditions, institutions) and partially a result of the context in which these institutions have to function. Along with the development of democratic traditions, institutions and policies, people's expectations evolve. Despite many similarities, the current democratic regimes in the different EU member states are the result of very specific historical and contextual characteristics. Political culture differs from country to country. Therefore, the expectations towards a democratic regime are very different and very specific per country. If people are to evaluate democratic institutions, they use a yardstick, something familiar, as a starting point: their national institutions. The better these national institutions function, the harder it is for European institutions to be as adequate. And the more people are aware of this national quality, the more critical they will be about the supranational institutions.

According to Sanchez-Cuenca (2000), it is exactly this differentiated interplay between national and supranational institutions that explains the lack of coherent belief in the European Union. One could conclude then that the most efficient way to gather more support among European citizens for the European Union, is a further harmonization of national institutions across the EU. The introduction of the Euro could be a model for this harmonization effort. Before a country could introduce the Euro, several conditions had to be met. The Eurocrisis demonstrates, though, that when strict conditions are set, countries also should be controlled in how far they have met those conditions. Further harmonization is a crucial step for further integration. Especially with 27 countries.

To know it is to love it?

The effect of political knowledge on EU evaluations has been debated in the literature. Anderson (1998) argues that, due to a lack of knowledge and confused by the complexity of the European policy level, people are not able to distinguish between national and European politics, and therefore base their EU evaluations on their opinions on national politics. According to Karp et al. (2003), more knowledge on EU matters does not necessarily enhance the probability of evaluating the EU more positively. In their study, they investigated Inglehart's (1970) claim that more knowledgeable people tend to like the EU more than less knowledgeable citizens: the more people know about the European Union, the more they are familiar with it, and the more they appreciate its performance. Karp et al. (2003) argued that people are capable of distinguishing between national and supranational institutions. Furthermore, they demonstrated that politically aware citizens tend to be more skeptical, certainly on legitimacy issues.

In this study, I modeled political knowledge as a moderator of the effect of national institutional quality. The more citizens know about their own national politics, the more they use this knowledge as a yardstick for evaluation at supranational level. The fact that political knowledge strengthens the national institutional effect on EU evaluations gives a more complex image. First, one can find confirmation for both theories in the results. The correlation between satisfaction with national democracy and European democracy is high (Anderson, 1998: When in doubt, use proxies). There is also a positive correlation between education level and EU evaluations (Inglehart, 1970: Cognitive mobilization and European Identity). These effects, however, depend on the national context. In countries with high institutional quality (such as Denmark and the Netherlands), people tend to “love Europe less” when acquiring more political knowledge. These people actually do evaluate the EU institutions and are more critical about them (Karp et al., 2003: To know it is to love it?). In countries with less institutional quality (such as Bulgaria and Poland) acquiring more political knowledge leads to more positive EU evaluations. The positive effect of acquiring political knowledge appears to have a ceiling, depending on the national institutional quality of one’s country.

Flows of information

The fact that political knowledge matters for EU evaluations is a first indication of the dynamic nature of these evaluations. One-sided news flows can make a difference. And since news media and interpersonal communication are the primary sources of information about the EU, they are crucial antecedents for EU evaluations. I found confirmation for this logic in Chapter 2 and 3. Evaluative media messages do matter, and so does interpersonal talk, even in a “second-order” campaign. The amount of evaluative messages in the media I found throughout the whole European dataset might explain why the significant effects I found, were still small. What are we to expect when EP elections are actually about the EU and its democratic performance? A tsunami of opinion change?

There is reason to expect a different campaign in 2014. The EP-elections might actually be about the EU. First, in recent national elections in France, Greece, Hungary and the Netherlands, Europe was a prominent theme. Political parties, even small, one-issue parties, have to express their position on EU policy. Furthermore, the European Parliament has more legislative power since the adaptation of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. The European policy level is more visible than ever, with the “European President” and the “Secretary of Foreign Affairs”. Third, European politics were never covered as much as during the first part of this legislation. One can expect an increase of campaign coverage during the 2014 EP elections. One might expect an increase of evaluative messages about the EU as well, and subsequently, following the logic of Chapter 2 and 3, more fluctuation in EU evaluations.

An all-inclusive media strategy

The results in Chapter 2 and 3 confirm the impact of media and interpersonal communication on public opinion. Both within a real-world and an experimental setting, media messages and interpersonal communication directly and indirectly affect peoples’ opinions on the European Union. According to Meyer (1999), the EU suffers from a ‘communication deficit’. The ratification crisis (2004-2009) was at least partially attributed to the lack of public debate about European integra-

tion (Baun, 1996). The results confirm that an all-inclusive media strategy is essential for the EU to 'win back its citizens'. By engaging actively with the media, the EU might benefit from positive media attention. Especially around big events, such as EU council meetings and EP-elections. A well-organized PR strategy might enable the EU to influence the tone of media coverage, and therefore the evaluations of the citizens. Interpersonal communication appears to fulfill several functions: acquisition of new information, interpretation of new information (acquired from news media), and reconfirmation of predispositions. Investing in social media could be another effective way for the EU to reach its citizens. The existing youth organizations in the EU could play a crucial role in this social media strategy. It might be the most cost-effective way to communicate with a certain proportion of the EU population, and enhance the image of the EU through this interpersonal contact. Furthermore, online social networks are increasingly influential on the bits of news people consume through recommendation by others in their network. "[Online] social networks are probably a bigger influence now than ever before on the type of news of which people are exposed, and this influence is likely to become even stronger in the future" (Mutz & Young, 2011, p. 1036).

To agree or not to agree

Disagreement appears to undermine the effect (positive or negative) of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations. When a discussant perceives a lack of agreement with the discussion partner, he or she is less inclined to accept (let alone adopt) the point of view of the other. This result can also be interpreted as a confirmation of the differentiation Lee (2012) made between position- and non position-taking forms of participation with respect to the effect of disagreement in interpersonal communication. Nonetheless, in the specific context of EU politics, this raises some questions. People's knowledge of and interest in EU matters is in general lower than their knowledge of and interest in national politics. European citizens do not report to have regular conversations about the EU. And in the few conversations they do have, they seem to be discouraged by the exposure to a countervailing opinion. One could argue that people would be more inclined to adopt different views on a policy level that they perceive as unknown and abstract. The perception of agreement between discussants appears to be a determining factor for the influence of interpersonal communication on EU evaluations.

Take away message

In this dissertation, we learned that EU democratic performance evaluations are variable across countries and dynamic over time. National institutional quality is used as a yardstick to evaluate the democratic performance of the EU, especially by people who are knowledgeable about domestic politics. Evaluative media messages and interpersonal communication about the EU do have an effect on EU evaluations. Over the course of an election campaign, media do reach European citizens with evaluative messages. Similarly, and even to a greater extent, interpersonal communication helps people to form and change their opinions on the democratic performance of the EU. However, the influence of interpersonal communication depends on the level of mutual agreement discussants perceive.