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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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ENGLISH SUMMARY

Attitudes towards the EU are multi-dimensional, and can be directed towards different objects. In this project, I set out to explain the evaluation of the actual functioning of the democratic political system of the European Union. Since two decades, the European project gets more and more contested by the European population. The notion of a 'democratic deficit' has dominated the debates on the EU in the first decade of this century. People's evaluations of how the European Union functions seem to matter more and more. These evaluations of the European democratic performance are the central focus of this research project.

The aim of the first study was twofold: assessing the influence of the quality of institutions at the national level on democratic performance evaluations of the EU, and exploring the moderating effect of political knowledge on the influence of institutional quality on those evaluations. As Sanchez-Cuenca (2000) showed, evaluations of a supranational policy level depend on the interplay between national and supranational institutions. I combined survey data about citizens' perceptions of political performance with objective measures of national institutional quality from 21 EU member states. With these data, I constructed a multilevel model, which enabled us to examine the differential impact of national institutional quality on evaluations of the EU's democratic performance, and the role political knowledge plays with regard to this effect. I found support for both expectations. First, there is a negative relation between national institutional quality and democratic performance evaluation of the EU. Higher institutional quality at the national level has a negative effect on the evaluation of European governance. Second, I found a moderating effect of political knowledge on the effect of institutional quality on democratic performance evaluations of the EU. The more citizens know about their own national politics, the more they use this knowledge as a yardstick for evaluation at supranational level.

In the second study, I set out to explain the effect of media messages and disagreement within interpersonal communication on EU democratic performance evaluations. By combining a two-wave panel study with a content analysis, developed during the three final weeks of the EP-election campaign, I was able to link content and tone to exposure to media and interpersonal communication. The results showed that exposure to positive EU evaluations in the media has a positive effect on individual EU evaluations. The more citizens were exposed to positive EU evaluations through the news media, the more positive they became about the democratic performance of the EU and its institutions. I found similar results for interpersonal communication. Secondly, I expected disagreement within interpersonal communication to moderate the effect of interpersonal communication. The more disagreement one perceives, the less effect interpersonal communication has on EU evaluations.

In the third study, I wanted to test the effect of tone congruence between media messages and interpersonal communication on democratic performance evaluations, using an experimental 3x3 design. After reading an article (which was either EU positive, EU negative, or not about the EU), participants had to engage in an online conversation (with a discussant who was either EU positive, EU negative, or not talking about the EU). Thanks to the experimental setting, I was able to manipulate the tone of the media message and the interpersonal conversation. Consequently, I could test the effect of tone congruence between both sources of information. As expected, I found a reinforcement

effect of media and interpersonal communication when the tone of both was congruent. I also found confirmation for another result from Chapter 2 in this experimental setting: disagreement moderates the effect of interpersonal communication.