How Europeans see Europe: structure and dynamics of European legitimacy beliefs

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Chapter 5

How Europeans see Europe

At the beginning of this book, we stated that our understanding of the genesis and development of European legitimacy has been hampered by two major shortcomings. One is the fuzziness of concepts and their linkage to empirical indicators commonly used in research on European attitudes and European legitimacy. The second is the problem of modelling dynamic relationships between different legitimacy beliefs in such a way that different theoretical propositions about the evolution of European legitimacy can be adequately tested (see Chapter 1).

We set out to contribute to solving these two problems by adopting a belief-system approach to European attitudes that allows conceptualising internal structure as well as internal dynamics. The analytical strategies developed for each of the two tasks were dealt with comparatively. We wanted to assess the extent to which structural characteristics of the European belief systems are comparable across countries. If such similarity can be demonstrated, we can subsequently use the different publics of the EU member states to investigate patterns of dynamics in European legitimacy (see Chapter 2).

The analysis of the internal configuration of the European belief systems revealed a high degree of structural similarity across the twelve member countries of 1994. Twelve cross-country robust scales of attitudes and four well-fitting models of (higher-order) European attitude dimensions evidenced this. For these twelve member states and their publics, these findings imply that a common European belief system exists in all of them, characterised by a single set of organising principles, while levels of support can differ across countries (see Chapter 3).1

Having demonstrated the existence of this pan-European belief system, we continued to construct comparative models of internal dynamics that are informative about the style by which people manage external stimuli impinging on (hence, causing change in) their legitimacy beliefs regarding the EU. We find major differences between countries in this respect, as evidenced by characteristic causal paths between the dimensions of the belief system, by the magnitudes

1 Obviously, comparisons of levels can only be sensibly made if the measuring instruments — reflected in the organising principles of the belief system — are everywhere the same.
of the effects transmitted through these causal paths, and by the degree of responsiveness to external stimuli. But most importantly, these models provide a means to test rivaling legitimacy theories (see Chapter 4). This concluding chapter reviews the most important findings and their implications for further research on European attitudes and European legitimacy.

5.1 A pan-European belief system ...

The most important result of our analyses is the discovery of a well-structured system of beliefs and attitudes concerning the European Union and European integration. This finding, and the concomitant description of the structure of this system and of its links to external variables, lends itself to being used in applied measurement in further research into European attitudes and legitimacy beliefs. It also provides a basis for further studies into measurement and operationalisation and into properties of belief systems. Finally, it provides the basis for new substantive insights into the determinants and dynamics of European attitudes and legitimacy beliefs.

Until recently, and even as of today, the conviction is widespread among social scientists that European attitudes are unstructured and thus unstable, i.e. that they represent non-attitudes rather than attitudes. Arguments to support this idea include, amongst others, the low level of factual knowledge among citizens about Europe, the remoteness of the European level of governance, the lack of transparency of the European political system, the limited degree of politicisation of European integration, the recency of the European level of government with its continuing change of scope and form, the under-development of a European public sphere with trans-European parties and political debates — to name just a few. However plausible all these reasons may sound, they are no more than explanations of an imagined phenomenon. Our research has demonstrated that beliefs of citizens in the member states of the EU are structured in ways that are incompatible with the notion of non-attitudes and of responses to surveys that are unanchored.

We demonstrated that citizens’ attitudes towards European integration and the EU form a well-structured belief system that is organised at several levels of abstraction (beliefs, attitudes, dimensions, belief system). Some European attitudes are inspired and shaped by other, pre-existing attitudes that pertain to national systems or to generic political orientations. This does not undermine our proposition that they are structured and anchored. And this derivative argument applies only to a small number of beliefs and cannot convincingly be made for many of the beliefs that we studied. Moreover, the structure
of the European belief system that we found is not country-specific, but shared across the populations of the member states. This demonstrates the existence — at least at the level of ‘what is associated with what’ — of a common structure of orientations on which a Europe-wide public political discourse could potentially develop. In this way, we can conceive of European attitudes as being structured by a pan-European belief system.

In order to avoid that our propositions about structure and robustness across countries give rise to misunderstandings, we also want to indicate what they do not imply. Our findings do not imply that ordinary citizens are highly sophisticated in terms of factual knowledge of the EU — but neither are they with respect to their national systems, while the existence of well-structured beliefs in that realm is rarely doubted. Our findings do not imply that every single answer of every single respondent in response to every single survey item is fully reasoned. On the contrary, the application of our models demonstrated that a considerable degree of the variance at the individual level seems to be random noise but this, too, is not different from what we find when we use sample surveys to investigate beliefs about national social and political affairs. With respect to cross-national robustness, we do not claim the absence of any kind of national variation within a common structure, but to the extent that those exist they are clearly of a secondary nature. And, obviously, a common structure does not imply that distributions of beliefs and attitudes are identical between countries or, for that matter, between population segments within countries. We do not emphasize all of this to hedge our claims with respect to structure and robustness, but rather to clearly rehearse the demarcations of our analyses and findings. One of the major implications of our findings concerning structure and robustness is that European attitudes can be sensibly compared across countries.

5.1.1 Measurement

Until the present, we find that a great deal of empirical research on European attitudes is based on ad-hoc measurement in which the analyst’s own interpretation of question wording is of paramount importance. Since analysts often disagree in this respect, findings from different studies appear to be contradictory, yet often cannot be properly compared because of differences in operationalisation and measurement. This is an impediment to the development of an accumulative body of research and tends to give rise to different ‘schools’, many of which are based on inadequate measurement, caused by lack of knowledge on the latent structure of European attitudes. The latent structure that we analysed and described in Chapter 3 should be of help to avoid such problems in the future. Our finding, for example, that the frequently used Eurobarometer
indicators (Unification, Membership, Benefit, Regret) measure a single latent trait should prevent analysts to assign different meanings to each of them, as has been done frequently (see Chapter 1 Section 1).

The relevance of our findings is not limited to secondary analysis, but extends also to primary research, i.e. the design of new survey studies. For assessing attitudes towards European integration, the Eurobarometer indicators are to be recommended. Including them in primary research yields valid and stable measures of people's attitudes that can fruitfully be compared over time (making use of the Eurobarometer time series of 30 years) and across studies and systems (as a consequence of the cross-national robustness of these measures). However, we found that these items do not capture people's attitudes towards political unification and the new political system of the EU. Citizens clearly distinguish between economic integration on the basis of inter-governmental agreement and political unification that engenders a shift of sovereignty and power from the national to the European level.

The standard Eurobarometer indicators by themselves thus provide an insufficient basis for studying the legitimacy of the unification aspects of the EU. Frequently asked indicators relate almost exclusively to the dimension of Affect for Integration. No well-established, time-independent measures of Affect for Unification have yet emerged. The attitude scales and the measurement model presented in Chapter 3 provide a platform for the further development of such indicators. However, the items included in the battery on future prospects of European unification on which our measurement model rests is over time continuously adapted to current debates. New items are included that raise intriguing questions, like how publics conceive the issue of the draft European Constitution and which dimensions are tapped by survey items concerning that issue. It has to be assessed empirically to which extent the new items are suitable for assessing Affect for unification. It would be desirable though to have time series of period-independent measures of the general adherence to the European idea.

2 Not only Unification, Membership, Regret, and Benefit but also European identification, hope or fear towards SEM, support for harmonising domestic policies, and support for the common currency. An indicator regularly asked as well is “Should European unification be pushed further, or has it already gone too far?” which also relates to Affect for Integration (see Scheuer & van der Brug forthcoming).

3 An example may illustrate this. From the nine items on which our measurement model for Affect for Unification rests, only three have been asked in Eurobarometer 61 in 2004 (There should be: a European Monetary Union, one common foreign policy, and a common defence and security policy). The six new items refer to current developments of the EU (There should be: the Enlargement of the EU to include 10 new countries, further enlargement of the EU to other countries, a constitution for the EU, commissioners for each member country, different speeds of building Europe, teaching of school children about EU).
Data scarcity also applies for evaluations of system performance. The often-used item on ‘Satisfaction with democracy’ turned out to be less than fully satisfactory in this respect. Very good indicators are the scales on Federal representation, Confederal representation, and Parliamentary control. The survey questions of the representation scales have been asked quite regularly between 1994 and 1999, but unfortunately not anymore since then. Since these indicators showed to be much closer to the heart of this attitude dimension, they should be included into surveys that aspire to measure this Evaluation dimension – and above all in the Eurobarometer.

Measures for the cognitive attitude dimension are more easily available. The survey questions of the Exposure scale and the single item about Subjective information have been asked in long time series. These should be continued into the future in order to provide reference points for knowledge questions about time-specific developments. This does unfortunately not apply to the Interest scale. The items Interest in politics and Interest in European politics have not been continued after EES 1994.

We showed that a full study of European legitimacy requires rich empirical data that allow the construction of complex and comparative models. Only on the basis of existing knowledge about the basic structure of the entire belief system, smaller segments can be investigated as well.

5.1.2 Concepts

The review of theories on European legitimacy reveals an intriguing variety of conceptualisations of legitimacy beliefs in general and more particular with respect to the European Union. While many scholars agree on distinctions based on attitude objects and modes, the specification of these objects and modes varies considerably. Virtually all of these distinctions so far were only based on the analyst’s own theoretical reasoning and suffered from the lack of empirical evidence about the actual relevance of their conceptual distinctions in the orientations of the citizens. Various typologies of attitude modes have been proposed (see Niedermayer & Westle 1995). Our analyses demonstrated that not all conceptual distinctions that have been dreamt up in the literature are warranted. Our results support the view that European legitimacy is a multidimensional construct that can actually be described in terms of objects and

4 Satisfaction with EU democracy belongs to the measurement model of Evaluation but displays comparatively low loading patterns (see Table 3-19). This is partly because the item also loads on the affective dimension. More details are outlined in the discussion of Chapter 3 Section 5.

5 Rely on Commission, Council, EP, national government, and national parliament regarding EU decisions.
modes. We found three attitude modes to be of relevance throughout our analyses: cognitive, evaluative, and affective. This appears to be the main distinction in citizens’ responses to the EU: being aware of it, judging its performance, and getting emotionally involved. With respect to attitude objects, it seems much less useful to develop sophisticated typologies (Niedermayer & Westle 1995; Norris 1999) than to simply distinguish concrete and abstract attitude objects. Regarding attitude objects, we find that the dominant distinction consists between concrete institutions and abstract ideas which translates into diffuse and specific attitudes.

Our modelling of the European belief systems demonstrates which distinctions do matter and which do not. This study uses empirical results to test the relevance of diverse theoretical and conceptual considerations in order to gain an empirically based conceptualisation of European legitimacy beliefs. This may help to remove one of the main obstacles for cumulative work in European legitimacy research so that future studies can proceed on the basis of more relevant conceptualisations of legitimacy beliefs. It cannot be stated from our research whether the same conceptual distinctions that we found to be empirically justified in our analyses of the European belief system will be relevant in legitimacy research regarding other political systems. This, however, constitutes an intriguing question for further research.

5.1.3 External factors

A persistent concern in previous research on European attitudes has been to identify their determinants, on the aggregate level as well as on the individual level. In the literature, a host of different approaches – each represented by its own set of independent variables – has been tested competitively with respect to their relative impact: cognitive mobilisation, value change, various kinds of economic, political or cultural factors, and the like. In the majority of such studies, the dependent variable is implicitly or explicitly defined in the singular: a unidimensional notion of EU support. As we demonstrated in this study, however, European attitudes are multifaceted and structured along several dimensions. This requires a new perspective on the question of their determinants.

Not all factors affect each of the European attitude dimensions in the same way. Some dimensions of the European belief system are influenced directly by specific external factors, others indirectly via other components of the belief system. We therefore sorted external factors according to the attitude dimension that is most directly affected by them. By doing so, it became apparent that some of the explanatory approaches in the literature are not at all rivaling, although they have often been regarded as such. The perspective of cogni-
tive mobilisation turns out to be most relevant for cognitions, while utilitarian explanations are particularly relevant as determinants of evaluations, and explanations focussing on values and value change relate to affects. Unfortunately, these distinctions were often overlooked in previous research. Most explanatory studies so far focused, deliberately or not, on Affect for Integration, represented by the classic set of Eurobarometer indicators. Further research should be more discriminate in linking dependent variables to hypothesised determinants. Utilitarian approaches, for example, focus on factors that are supposed to impact on evaluations, so that the dependent variable for testing such hypotheses should be part of the evaluative component of the European belief system, rather than from the affect or cognition components.

5.1.4 Comparative strategy

In addition to our substantive findings with respect to the structure of the European belief system, we feel that the analytic strategy that we developed for the analyses in Chapters 3 and 4 can be recommended to researchers who analyse systems of attitudes and beliefs in other substantive domains. The distinction between different levels of abstraction – manifest beliefs, latent attitudes, higher-order latent dimensions, and an overarching structure of all of these – proved to be a viable one that yields several desirable outcomes: substantive interpretations of the meanings of manifest indicators, models of relations between latent dimensions, and practical implications for the constructing of measurement instruments.

In addition, our strategy for constructing comparative measures by way of a semi-iterative alternation between pooled and country-specific analyses starting from a top-down approach can be recommended for other comparative studies (cross-national as well as cross-temporal ones). This approach proved useful because it prevented us getting bogged down in a quagmire of partially idiosyncratic country-specific results. Yet at the same time it prevents the imposition of a common structure without that having been properly tested at the level of countries. This procedure ensures that the findings of robustness and comparability are not artefacts. It does not guarantee that any comparable measures can be constructed, but to the extent that that is possible, this procedure assures that they can be found in a relatively easy fashion.
5.2 ...but different legitimation styles

How European legitimacy beliefs originate and evolve has since long been one of the central questions for all who study citizens’ orientations towards European integration. It has been a question that so far has more often generated speculation than empirical analysis. This is particularly caused by the absence of relevant data: individual-level longitudinal information covering a sufficiently long period of time. Theorising about the subject has mainly revolved around the Eastonian distinction between diffuse and specific support, and two different schools of thought have sprung about which of these two emerges first and which is dominant in their internal dynamics. In view of our findings with respect to the structure of the European belief system, much of this seems to lack of empirical relevance, as we found that the diffuse-specific distinction is not the only structuring principle of beliefs and attitudes concerning European integration. As the major distinction was established to be between cognitive, affective, and evaluative attitude modes, the conceptualisation of legitimacy dynamics most often found in the literature must be rephrased in terms of the empirically observed modes.

In this study, we also lack individual-level longitudinal data. Yet, we could approach the dynamics of European beliefs in an indirect manner by applying principles of the associative network perspective to the European belief system. These models are based on the assumption that present causal structures can be regarded as the observable residue of former dynamics. These present structures can be discovered by modelling the paths of causal influences that the dimensions of the European belief system exert on each other. By virtue of the comparative approach in the construction of measurement and structural models, we could address the question of internal dynamics in a comparative fashion, thus making it possible to find different patterns of dynamics in different publics. This is what actually happened: across fifteen publics, we found four general types of dynamics which we conceive as different styles of legitimation that each support different legitimacy theories.

Two of the four legitimisation styles (which we referred to as institution-oriented Idealists and performance-oriented Idealists) show dynamic patterns that are feed-forward models in which Affect for Unification is the dominant dimension on which no other dimension has any impact. These patterns support the integrationist view on the evolution of European legitimacy. The other legitimisation styles (which are labelled the responsive Idealist and the responsive Pragmatist) show patterns with feedback effects that include Affect for Unification so that this dimension is receptive to changes in other dimensions. They support the two variants inherent in the Eastonian view: the one in which diffuse support is the major driving force (the responsive Idealist), and the other
in which this is specific support (the responsive Pragmatist). The Eastonian patterns are more sensitive to any kind of external impact, and often the entire belief system is involved in the repercussions of such external influences. The integrationist patterns are more straightforward, because only change in Affect for Unification can change the belief system as a whole. Later impacts affect only the remaining causal paths, so that adherence to the European idea is only susceptible to changes from outside the belief system, namely in basic political values.

These insights are interesting for scholars and practitioners. They provide European legitimacy research with concepts, measures, and models for tackling questions of the evolution of European legitimacy beliefs. When other research will confirm our results, we can raise more demanding questions: whether the different legitimation styles are a specific characteristic of a country, or whether they constitute different stages that change with conditions. This would imply the task to explain which conditions lead to which legitimation style.

For the political practitioner, the interesting news lies in the fact that simple campaigning does not change European attitudes or European legitimacy because the individual value of the European idea has such a predominant role. Different publics have to be addressed each by the specific communications to which they are susceptible. In addition, changes in the perceived performance of the political system can, in two thirds of the publics, have considerable effects on the entire belief system. European legitimacy requires not only affectively supported values but also positive evaluations.

The most obvious limitation of this study is that its empirical basis consists of data that were collected in 1994, more than 10 years ago. One could reasonably wonder to what extent they are outdated. As always, no definitive answer to this question can be given without full replication of the analyses on more recent data. However, we do not know of more recent data sets that contain as many indicators of European beliefs as the study that we analysed. The EES 1994 was in this respect unique. It was exactly because of its abundance and breadth of empirical indicators that we geared our study to this particular data set in spite of the fact that it dates back to 1994. We were rewarded in terms of our findings of strongly organised and cross-nationally robust structures of beliefs and attitudes. But to what extent can our models of the European belief system still be expected to be relevant for more current periods?

Would we have focussed on distributions of beliefs and attitudes, the relevance of our findings for the present time would clearly be in doubt. More than a decade of political developments with respect to European integration cannot but have left its influence on people's beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, the passage of more than 10 years causes a tremendous change in the composition of
populations as older cohorts gradually die out and cohorts of new adults flow in. For these reasons, we would not trust as relevant propositions based on the proportions of people responding in one way or another to survey items. But that was not what this study was about. In much of social research, we find that structural relationships are more stable than univariate distributions are. Moreover, we feel that, in spite of all the profound changes that took place since 1994 in the real world, there are few reasons to suspect that our major findings about structures in beliefs have been undermined.

As stated above, our major findings are twofold: attitudes and belief concerning European integration are well-structured, and this structure is largely robust across the populations of the member states of the EU. The first of these findings is likely to be as relevant today as it was in 1994. European integration has not disappeared from public sight, on the contrary. Undoubtedly, the structure of European beliefs has become more complex in the course of the past decade, incorporating new developments such as the common currency and the draft constitution. But there can be no doubt about the existence of a strongly structured belief system; if anything, it is likely to be more strongly structured than it was in 1994, not less.

The second finding, cross-national robustness, is also not very likely to have lost its relevance, at least as far as the 12 countries are concerned that were EU members in 1994. Since then, 13 new countries acquired membership. We feel that it is quite plausible that our proposition of robustness extends to the three new members of 1995 (Austria, Sweden, and Finland), were it only because of their close historical and economic similarity with some of the earlier member states. The same applies for the two new Mediterranean countries (Cyprus and Malta). With respect to the eight new members of Central and Eastern Europe, we can be less certain, as most of their recent historical experiences and levels of economic development were quite different. Yet, in view of the evident relative autonomy of the domain of European attitudes, we would not be surprised to see a large degree of structural commonality in belief systems if we were to replicate our 1994 study today in all current EU countries.

The aspect of our structural findings that we feel is most tenuous when extrapolated to the current time is the component of Affect for European Unification. It is in this domain that the world has changed most strongly since 1994, with the gradual implementation of the treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam, and Nice, the new challenges to a common foreign policy, the introduction of the common currency in many of the member states, and the ratification of a European constitution. It is particularly in this area that new forms of politicisation took place that have the potential of restructuring beliefs and attitudes (see van der Eijk and Franklin 2004; van der Brug et al. forthcoming). Moreover, it is also in this area that countries may take different paths, as they
already did with respect to the Euro. This is not to say that we expect attitudes towards unification to have become less structured, but the 1994 structure of those beliefs and attitudes may have evolved in unknown ways, and possibly in different ways in different countries. It is particularly in this respect that we feel that there is an urgent need for new and fundamental research of the kind that was undertaken in the EES 1994.