Chapter 1

The Nature of European Issues: Conceptual Clarifications and Some Empirical Evidence

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1. A European Public Sphere?

A lot of writing and research is being done on the European public sphere. The prevalent view is that if the European Union ever aspired to become a democratic political entity, it would certainly need a common public sphere (e.g. Scharpf 1999). Why should that be the case? Because the democratic quality of a political system (any political system) requires that every citizen who wants to participate in a political discourse, be it actively or passively, must be able to do so (Neidhardt 1994). If this cannot be assured, one may not call a political system democratic.

For people who like to address these questions in empirical terms this leads immediately, of course, to a follow-up question. What exactly does it mean to be able to participate in a political discourse, and how can this, in all likelihood relative, ability be measured? There are two broad dimensions that we think can be helpful in structuring an answer to this question as regards operationalisations. Both look at requirements, one at the systemic and the other at the individual level.

On the systemic side, one must decide whether one integrated public sphere is required, or whether a number of inter-connected public spheres could fulfill the same function. The traditional model, which draws its references from democracies organizing the political process within European nation-states, suggests that one (and only one) public sphere enables citizens to participate. However, as Neidhardt et al. (2000) and Fuchs (2000) have argued, there have always been exceptions to this rule. In modern European history, Belgium and Switzerland come to mind as democracies in which several public spheres or sub-spheres (language communities) exist. India, the world's largest democracy (1.2 billion citizens in 2005), is an even more striking example. In this federation of 28 states (plus seven union territories), 21 official languages are recognized. Separated by their inability to speak the language of (and thus communicate with) some or even most of their fellow citizens, public sub-spheres (language communities) in these countries are tied together at the elite level, where the members of the political class typically speak enough of the relevant languages (German and French in Switzerland, French and Dutch in Belgium, English and Hindu in India) to be able to communicate across the language-defined sub-spheres. Political communication in these political communities is probably best conceived of as being a two-level process, with citizens-elite communication at level one (in one's first language) and elite-elite communication at level two (in whatever language works best).

The functioning of these democratic political communities over decades (Belgium and India) and centuries (Switzerland) raises doubts about whether an all-embracing public sphere is a principal requirement in a democracy. Multi-level systems of governance (Hooghe & Marks 2001) are flourishing at the end of the second and the beginning of the third millennium, in Europe and beyond, and the attributes demanded from a 'model public sphere' probably need to be adapted accordingly. The same goes for the intermediaries between citizens and government, for political parties in particular, but also for the media and special interest groups. The

"nation-state frame" that has served as a role model for democratic governance during much of the 19th and 20th century is in need of replacement.

2. European Issues

The necessity of a European public sphere (of whatever sort) originates in the normative-democratic requirement that all EU citizens must be able to participate – actively or passively as they may wish – in the European political discourse (Dahl 1998). A public discourse is about issues, and it is arguable that European public discourses are about European issues. But what are European issues? Following up earlier work, we distinguish two domains of those European issues and two types of them, which involve different mechanisms to establish a link between issue preference and political behaviour (Schmitt 2001).

Two Domains of European Issues

There are two domains, or classes, of European issues. One of them is "normal issues", the other "constitutional issues". Normal issues are those that are dealt with at multiple levels of the European multi-level political system. There is nothing particularly "European" about them except that the institutions of the European Union are, or want to be, also involved in aspects of the political decision-making on those issues (in addition to institutions at the national and/or sub-national political arena in the various member-countries). Examples are the fight against unemployment, the protection of the environment, fighting crime and so on.

Constitutional issues are different. These issues are genuinely, but usually not exclusively "European" (in the sense that no other political arena would deal with them). The major projects of the Union over the past few decades may serve as examples here. The common currency is one of them,

the Eastern enlargement of 2004 is another, the process that may lead to the membership of Turkey is a third, and the Constitutional Treaty that was ratified by (almost) every member-country of the Union but two (it was turned down in referendums in France and the Netherlands) comes last but certainly not least.

Two Types of European Issue

In Europe as everywhere else, issues come in two types. One is called position issues, the other valence issues. This distinction was originally introduced by Donald Stokes (1966) in a critique of the "economic" theory of democracy as it was proposed by Anthony Downs (1957). *Position issues* are those that involve policy continuums, like more or less state impact on the economy, or pro-life vs. pro-choice in the abortion debate. People are more on one or the other side of the scale, and evaluate their political and electoral preferences according to the position of relevant choice options (that is: political parties and/or their candidates) relative to their own. The option that is perceived to be closest to one's own position or, alternatively, to represent one's own views most convincingly (Rabinowitz and McDonald 1989) is then the most preferred.

The other type of issues is called *valence issues*. Valence issues are not about positions, but about values and the perceived competence of political actors to realize those values. A valence issue is typically one that nobody likes to oppose. Examples are obvious. Who could legitimately be "against" the protection of a clean environment? Or who could be "for" unemployment? What matters for political behavior here is not the position that actors take on the issue, but the importance or salience that they attribute to it, and the competence to solve the problem that they attribute to political parties or alternative governments. In a way, valence issues are low cost issues. In order to determine their political preference, citizens need to have neither detailed policy positions of their own nor a knowledge of the positions of competing political actors on those policies. A general evaluation of the appropriateness

of political actors issue emphases and of their credibility to take action effectively on the most important ones is enough for an informed and "rational" preference formation.

If we cross-classify these distinctions, we arrive at a fourfold table of European issues (Table 1). The types of issues in the four cells of the table differ systematically with regard to the amount of information they require for citizens to become sensibly involved. These information requirements are a particularly relevant threshold for political participation with regard to the notoriously nontransparent policy making process at EU level, in which the council, as one of the main players, deliberates and decides in closed session, while the parliament lacks visibility and media attention as a result of the absence of the "normal" government-opposition-antagonism. Normal position issues (welfare policies are given as an example) are perhaps the most difficult and costly in terms of information requirements, and constitutional valence issues (with the general issue of European unification as an example) are arguable the easiest and least costly. Normal valence issues (protection of the environment is given as an example) and constitutional position issues (EU enlargement is given as an example) come somewhere in between.

Table 1: A cross-classification of two dimensions of European issues (with examples)

	normal	constitutional
position	(welfare)	(enlargement)
valence	(environment)	(unification)

Normal issues are by far the most numerous in the EU policy process, while constitutional issues – although typically of higher visibility – are dealt

with much less frequently (e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2001, Appendix 1). Overall, the policy reach of the European Union has grown exponentially over the past 5 decades (Figure 1). It seems that this did not visibly affect the evaluation of EU membership by the citizenry of the Union.

Figure 1: The Growing Policy Reach of the EU and Proportions of EU Citizens Evaluating Membership as a Good Thing
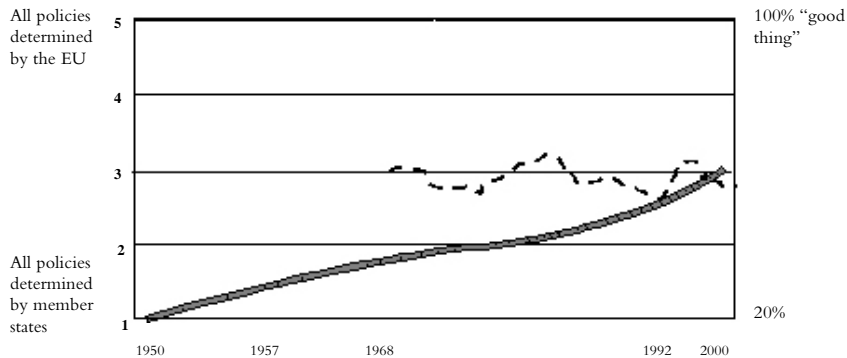
Note: The trend line indicates the average policy authority of the EU over 28 policy areas drawn from economic, foreign, legal and constitutional, and social policy. Individual authority rankings are based on expert judgements by Lindberg and Scheingold 1970; Schmitter 1994; and Hooghe and Marks 2001; the raw figures are taken from Hooghe and Marks 2001: 187-189. The membership "good thing" proportions are hand-copied from the Eurobarometers.

This seeming disconnection between the growing policy output of the European Union and public evaluations by its membership invites further thought. This aggregate finding could of course be an artifact of subsequent enlargement waves, in that the influx of new sceptical members would have blurred the real reaction (composition effect). Another tentative explanation of this somewhat irritating finding is the argument that EU citizens are probably not really aware of the growing policy reach of the Union and base their evaluations on different criteria (like the perceived benefit to their country from membership, domestic economic development, etc.). In any case, the level of aggregation in these two trend lines is very high and is

probably too high to arrive at convincing conclusions about micro-level processes. This is why we will address those questionswhich are at the micro level in the following section.

3. The EU as a political arena

In this third section of the paper, we will shed some light on the policy role that EU citizens ascribe to the European level of governance, and on the kind of issues that they entrust the EU with. The information is based on an open-ended agenda question that was asked as part of the European Election Study 1999, and on two follow-up questions establishing the perceived and preferred level of policy-making for the most important political problems cited. The purpose of this final step of analysis is to identify the 'issue associations' of the European Union.

It will be helpful to start this endeavor with a brief overview of the national political agendas – the political issues and problems that people felt were most important at the time of the survey – of EU member-countries (Table 2). The question was put openly, and the verbatim answers of respondents were recoded into six broad categories: issues and problems that originate in (a) the economy, (b) the political domain, (c) the welfare system, (d) the social domain, and (e) the environment. A small "other" category was also coded. EU-wide, the economy poses the greatest problems (a prominent example here is "unemployment"), followed by the political domain (e.g. "corruption"), and welfare (e.g. "health care") and social problems (e.g. "immigration"). The environment and "other" issues and problems occupy only minor ranks. These EU-wide averages, however, cannot tell us much about individual countries. Clearly, there is not a single political agenda in the European Union but rather several agendas. The economy can occupy as much as 84% (Finland) of all responses and as little as 27% (Denmark and Portugal), welfare as much as 55% (Portugal) and as little as 3% (Belgium), and so on. We note in passing that membership of the EU itself is nowhere seen

as a pressing problem (perhaps with the partial exception of Denmark and the UK).

Table 2: Citizens Political Agenda by EU Member–State and EU–wide (figures are percentages)

	B	DK	D	GR	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	P	UK	FIN	S	A	EU
All economic	26	27	71	51	69	73	31		36	19	27	35	84	68	58	58
All welfare	3	13	9	17	4	3	16		36	13	55	15	2	12	4	10
All political	26	35	11	22	12	12	33		9	27	6	31	10	10	29	17
of which: EU		18	0	1	0	2	3			1		10	4	4	5	3
All social	15	14	8	8	9	9	16		9	29	12	9	3	2	5	10
All environmental	25	11	1	3	2	2	1		9	8	0	2		7	3	3
Other	4	1		1	2	0	3			4	1	8	1	1	0	2
Weighted N	334	155	2915	385	1373	1928	122		10	467	355	1784	140	258	268	10494

Source: European Election Study 1999. *Note*: The original coding of the open-ended agenda question has been recoded in such a way that five categories of issue – economic, welfare, political, social, and environmental – can be distinguished. The data are weighted in such a way that the population sizes of the different member-countries as well as the EP election result 1999 (according to turnout and party strength) are adequately represented. The agenda information is not available in the Italian survey. Cramér's V=.25, p=.000.

We can determine citizens' views about the policy-making role of the European Union by comparing perceived and preferred competences for the most important political problems. Three political arenas are considered: the regional level of political decision-making, the national level, and the EU level. The most important political problem differs of course from one respondent to the next. What we compare in this first approach is the arena that is perceived to be responsible as compared to the arena that respondents would prefer to be responsible (Table 3).

Table 3: Most Important Problem: Perceived and Preferred Level of Government (figures are percentages)

Perceived level of problem solution	Preferred level of problem solution			
	Region	Nation	Europe	all
Region	10	7	6	23
Nation	10	28	12	50
EU	5	6	16	27
All	25	41	34	100

Source: *European Election Study 1999* post–election surveys. Data are weighted as described at the bottom of Table 1. Weighted N=10176.

If we only concentrate on the marginal figures, we see that for EU citizens the nation is somewhat mightier (i.e. in charge of more problems) than it should be (50% as compared to 41%), while Europe could well gain some additional policy competences (27% as compared to 34%). It is obvious that many respondents are guessing here rather than reporting their positive knowledge about the policy competences of different layers of the European multi–level system of governance. But this does not devalue the comparison between perceived and preferred levels of government authority. People are revealing preferences rather than reporting facts. And with regard to those preferences, there is a tendency for EU citizens on average to want to decrease the importance of the national political arena somewhat, and to increase the importance of the European political arena accordingly.

What this comparison does not reveal is the nature (or substance) of issues that citizens typically assign to the European political arena. nor does it show those that they want to reserve for the national political arena. We now turn to this.

Table 4: Most Important Problems and Preferred Level of Problem Solution (figures are percentages)

| Problem | Preferred level of government | | | Type of issue | Salience EU-wide |
	EU row %	nation row %	region row %		column %
Kosovo	**82**	14	4	political	1,7
Peace & war	**69**	27	4	political	1,5
Environment	**54**	31	15	environment	2,8
…					
€	35	**50**	15	economic	1,4
Other political	26	**51**	23	political	5,0
Other economic	33	**52**	15	economic	7,9
Taxes	15	**52**	33	economic	2,3
EU	31	**53**	16	political	2,6

Source: *European Election Study 1999* post-election surveys. Data are recoded and weighted as described at the bottom of Table 1. Absolute majorities of respondents preferring one level of government are printed in bold, relative majorities are printed in italics.

Table 4 displays the issues that absolute majorities of EU citizens wanted to assign to the European level in 1999 and those that they wanted to reserve for the national level of government. (An absolute majority is one where the proportion of validly expressed preferences equals or exceeds 50%). The story that emerges is simple enough. In the eyes of majorities among EU citizens, the European layer of government should be responsible for international security and for the environment. These are policy areas that clearly go beyond the problem solving capacity of single nations. The nation state, on the other hand, should maintain its decisive role in matters concerning the European Union including the common currency (which at the time of the survey was already established), in taxation, and in very specific ("other") political and economic issues.

4. Some Concluding Remarks

A European public sphere is an "area" in which all citizens who want to participate in political decision-making, be it actively or passively, are able

to do so. We might therefore think of it as a genuinely democratic property of a political system. How this area needs to be structured is a matter of continuing debate. We have tried to present some exemplary evidence that a two-level public sphere is functionally possible. At least this perspective does not *a priori* rule out further democratization at the European Union level of governance.

Political decisions are taken on issues or problems. In that sense, European issues are the "raw material" of a European public sphere. We have argued that different kinds of European issues have different information requirements. This is particularly relevant with regard to the institutional structure of the European Union, which is characterized by its remarkable lack of transparency. Easiest are "constitutional valence issues"; all that citizens need to know here is whether the whole course of European unification is to their liking. Constitutional valence issues were the foundation of what Lindberg and Scheingold (19xx) described as a "permissive consensus" of Europeans who gave their political elites a free hand with regard to the details of EU policy making. This happy state of affairs has long gone, not least due to the exponentially growing policy reach of the Union. More and more "normal position issues" have become part of the legislative activity of the EU, with accompanying conflicts of interest.

Despite the growing policy reach of the Union there is not a single European schedule but rather several. The political "to-do list" differs markedly from one member-country to the next. The role that EU citizens assign to the European level of governance against that background is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, people on average want "Europe" to play a larger role, and the nation-state to transfer some of its competences. On the other hand, however, people have a clear idea of what Europe should be responsible for, and what should remain under national control. Europe, in the eyes of many, should focus on international politics and security, and on the environment, while the nation-state should maintain its competences regarding the core of welfare politics, that is, among other things, taxation.

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