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Influential but Indifferent? Assessing the Role of the Public in European Politics

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JORIS MELMAN, NOV 24 2020

There seems to be some irony in the devoted way in which many Europeans followed the US elections. While many Europeans breathlessly watched how CNN's John King reported the incoming results of yet another US county, some observed the striking contrast with their own continent's elections. Of course, the Twittersphere was quick to capture this in a witty way (below). It is difficult to decide if we should read this as funny, or mostly as a statement of something true. Apart from bringing about so much political energy among European populations, the US elections simultaneously highlighted something else: the lack of interest most Europeans have in the politics steering the future of their own continent, even though the effect of it on their daily lives is a hundred times bigger.

European people: if Biden can keep Nebraska's Second Congressional District he can reach the 270 votes even if the suburbs in Philadelphia has a lower turnout than predicted, as long as Milwaukee votes keep Wisconsin blue.

Also European people: what's the difference between the European Commission and the European Parliament?'

There is nothing new about this observation. It has long been known that citizens experience the EU as a distant entity, and have difficulty in understanding its institutions and its policy making. Some have argued that this is fine, because the EU is mostly concerned with regulation rather than more political redistribution. Hence, it can do without popular contestation. Most others have decried this, and argue that an involved public is crucial if the EU is to be a truly democratic polity.

Yet, there is something paradoxical about this observation of the public's distance towards the EU. Even though most Europeans seem to lack interest in or at least knowledge of European policymaking, there is a consensus among academics that the role of public opinion for European integration is bigger than ever. One only has to think of Brexit, or the hugely heated public debate following this summer's negotiations on a European coronavirus recovery fund, where rowdy disagreement between national governments seemed to be caused by their anticipation on domestic electorates' responses.

The importance of the public's role is only set to increase as European integration is taking big steps in the formation of a polity. One such step is the EU's agreement to joint borrowing as a response to the Covid-19 crisis, which has been hailed as a 'Hamiltonian moment' – referring to a 1790 agreement between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson which helped to turn the United States into a genuine political federation. Likewise, the buzzword in the European debate these days is 'strategic autonomy.' Now that the EU can no longer rely on the US, whilst global economic competition is increasing, many think the time has come for the EU to become more independent in areas like defense and industrial policy. Such steps, however, seem crucially dependent on public support in order to sustain them. Without support, there is a high chance of a backlash. If integration goes faster than citizens can keep up with, they are likely to turn their backs against it.

Yet, the question remains how this fundamental impact of public opinion can be reconciled with the citizens' apparent disinterest in the EU. Or to put it differently: how should we understand the role of public opinion in the EU? Is it the

centerpiece of the integration process, or should we rather think of it as an indifferent mass that allows elites to take the decisions? And in turn, what does this mean for the future prospects for citizens' involvement in European politics?

Between Indifference and Politicization

Let's start by placing the role of the public in some historical context. In the first decades of the post-war period, European integration was an elite process, with political and technical elites making the decisions bringing about the creation and initial development of the European Community. As citizens generally trusted their representatives, and public attention for it was limited, the public was hardly a meaningful actor in the integration process. Academics speak of a 'permissive consensus' to describe the role of the public in this period.

This changed as the salience of European integration grew. Following the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the EU became more widely discussed in the media, polarization between political parties increased, and citizens appeared to become more critical. As the EU became 'politicized', the influence of citizens on the integration process grew. This became particularly clear in the 2005 constitutional referenda that failed in France and the Netherlands.

As a consequence, political scientists now speak of a 'constraining dissensus' that has replaced the permissive consensus. Political leaders now have to look over their shoulders when negotiating at the European level, as outcomes might easily be contested in the domestic arena. The fierce protests in especially Southern European countries during the euro crisis, Brexit, and most recently this summer's hugely salient debates the EU recovery fund are examples of this phenomenon.

Still, this view of the public is one-sided if we do not distinguish between the functional importance of public opinion for European decision making, and citizens' actual perception and evaluation of European politics. The fact that citizens' preferences increasingly affect political decision-making does not necessarily mean that citizens themselves have come to have stronger opinions on EU affairs – it is still possible that many do not care, or do not know.

Most research tends to pay insufficient attention to his distinction. This might be related to the bias of EU experts, as those who participate in heated EU debates on a daily basis might easily overlook the indifference most citizens have towards the EU or even politics in general. But it is equally important to consider the methods used in measuring public opinion. Polls asking how people think about specific questions easily convey the impression that citizens hold meaningful opinions on these items ('x% of the public trusts the European Commission', 'x% of EU citizens supports solidarity with other EU countries'). However, it might of course well be that survey-respondents tick a box without actually really having a clear or stable opinion. To understand questions of citizens' interest and involvement, it therefore is important to use a wider variety of methods, including qualitative research that studies the convictions and perceptions underlying citizens' plain pro- and anti-preferences.

The research that does use such methods consistently finds how, even in the constraining dissensus-period, public opinion on the EU is mostly characterized by the distance citizens experience towards it (e.g. Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016; Duchesne et al., 2013; van Ingelgom, 2014; White, 2011). Rather than being outspoken, most citizens find it difficult to express a clear opinion on European politics because of its complexity, the limited amount of information they receive, and the little connection it seems to have to their daily life concerns.

Admittedly, most of this research was conducted in the previous decade. In the heated passed 10 years, the public might have become more animated. Indeed, in research that I'm currently conducting myself, some findings hint at such a development. In this research, I organized focus groups in 3 European countries (Italy, France and the Netherlands) to study public opinion on the Euro. Despite Europe's single currency being narrower as a topic than the EU in general, discussions showed a sense of the increasing importance of European politics. Instigated by Brexit, the perceived threat brought about by the rise of China and a more hostile US, as well as the general political instability associated with the rise of populism, people seem to feel that important things are happening, and the EU has to play a role– although these findings should be taken as very preliminary.

Yet, even if this is true and the public's interest in European politics grows, it is important to note that this development still takes place in the context of a more general distance most people feel towards the EU, if not politics in general. People might have some awareness of particular developments, but they are still perceived as far away. They are still complex, unconnected to their daily lives, and happening in an arena that is far away from their influence. As a consequence, even those who have a growing sense of the EU's importance might find it difficult to form an opinion on it.

Public Opinion as Embedded, Diffuse, and Moldable

It is crucial to appreciate this, and grasp the consequences it has for understanding public opinion. What it particularly draws our attention to is not to the *content* of people's opinions – are they in favor of or against the EU? Do they like its policies? – but rather to the *form* of their opinions, the *type* of opinions they have. When looking at opinion in this way, a couple observations are particularly relevant.

Firstly, how is public opinion on the EU often e*mbedded?* That is to say, how attitudes towards the EU are absorbed in more general political considerations. Because the EU is seen as too distant and complex to form a clear opinion on, it is likely that opinions on it are a derivative of more general orientations. In other words, opinions on the EU are not necessarily opinions that are actually based on the EU. Even people who express negative attitudes towards the EU – people we might normally frame as 'Eurosceptic' – might actually not be that interested in the EU, but express a more general anger towards their national elites, or frustration with the state of society in general.

In turn, we should realize how much of public opinion on the EU is *diffuse*. Most people do not have clearly demarcated opinions on the EU, based on conscious reflection on the pros and cons of integration. Instead, their attitude towards the EU can better be seen as a vague orientation.

The consequence of this diffuse, wavering public opinion is that it is highly *moldable*. While people might have general orientations towards project of European integration, their actual opinions are very sensitive to what they hear from elites: politicians, political parties they sympathize with, media they trust. It is not unlikely that it is precisely this 'moldability' that, more than strong opinions about Europe, made events such as Brexit possible. People such as Brexit campaigner Dominic Cummings, known for his obsessive use of focus groups he uses to base policy on, know this better than anyone. If we find out which frames resonate with people, public opinion can be steered accordingly.

This should not lead us to relativism about public opinion. Of course, it should not be read as implying that public opinion is meaningless, or that it can be steered in any direction. There are still structural grounds for the formation of opinion, and there still are preferences and values underlying it. The most important one is probably the national lens, which filters people's understanding of European politics, determines how people perceive their interests, and can function as a benchmark to evaluate membership of the EU against. Yet, it is important to appreciate what the form of public opinion implies for its role.

Weighing the Role of Public Opinion

What this shows us in in the first place that the EU's current politicization is still in the first place an elite process. Yes, there is more public attention for it, and the debate on it is more polarized and heated than before. As a consequence of this, the role of the public is increasing, as politicians closely follow the polls and respond to them. Still, this does not mean that the public takes an active role. It is still only a passive actor, ambiguously responding to processes at the elite level.

This also means we should not overestimate the role of the public. For example, governments should not be overly afraid for public opinion in negotiating European issues. Instead of behaving as if they are only following what the public demands of them, they should acknowledge that it is their own stories that determine how the public thinks in the first place. Rather than being afraid of the public and telling it what they believe it wants to hear, politicians should show leadership and make clear what exactly is at stake.

Last summer's negotiations on the coronavirus recovery fund serve as an example. As these negotiations were dominated by the 'frugal four' (Austria, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands), these frugal countries' leaders mostly seemed to speak only to please their citizens. The Netherlands for example rather than explaining to the public why and how solidarity was needed, the main message Prime Minister Rutte communicated was that European cooperation was now demanding too much solidarity, and that he would be as tough as possible in the negotiations to protect the Dutch interest. While appreciated by the public (over 70% supported the governments' stance), the side effect of such discourse is that both the short and long term willingness of the Dutch public to show solidarity decreases, even when this is hugely important and would be entirely in its self-interest. In this way, politicians' tendency to act out of a fear for public opinion makes in increasingly difficult to manage the EU.

Germany's example makes clear that such fear for public opinion is indeed. In general, the German public is seen as very critical of European solidarity. In the euro crisis, it seemed to favor a hard stance against Greece, indicated not only by the polls but also the fact that 12,000 ordinary citizens took to the Constitutional Court to complain about the rescue fund (ESM) that was established to weather the crisis. However, Merkel managed to change things around during this summer's negotiations, seemingly without problems. In an impressive speech, she argued that Germany could only thrive if Europe did. The result was a remarkably high support for this position which serves as an illustration of how moldable public opinion is, and how leadership can serve the shared European interest.

Again, the fact that public opinion can easily be molded should not be seen as making it unimportant. On the contrary, it is also precisely *because* it is moldable that it can easily turn into a threat for the integration project. One only needs to think of Brexit. As the EU lacks the 'naturalness' that nation states can rely on, there is little protecting it from volatile public opinion. While most people might fear the consequences of an exit from the EU, there is no strong attachment to it either.

Therefore public opinion should not be neglected. Not only because such a strategy would backfire as citizens sense that a highly important political body is being created without them having a say, but also because creating such a body needs the involvement of citizens for its legitimacy. Thus public opinion should be taken more *seriously.* But this does not mean to treat public opinion as a way for clearly demanding politicians to take particular actions. Instead, it means to reflect on what public opinion actually entails, and to realize that because of its undetermined character, elites have a responsibility in the shaping of public opinion. Their task is therefore to make a bigger effort in educating citizens in what is at stake, rather than telling them what they like to hear, and what seems to be electorally profitable.

Future Prospects

However, to what extend this is possible, is a difficult discussion. On itself, it is not overly revolutionary to say that it would be desirable to have an educated European public that understands what is at stake in the European debate, and has the resources to hold policy makers accountable. But the question is how to get here, and if this is possible in the first place.

It is undeniable that there are important hurdles to be overcome. The most obvious one is citizens' general disinterest and difficulty to make sense of European politics. As long as citizens do not feel there is something at stake that is relevant to their daily lives, and as long as they do not feel having an opinion on such matters would make a difference, it will be difficult to convince citizens that they should think about the EU in a particular way.

Another one is the dominance of national perspectives. As long as citizens view European discussions purely in terms of their national interest, there is a fertile soil for Eurosceptic politicians to portray the EU as a threat from which they will try to protect their citizens. What contributes to this is that there is little that European institutions can do themselves in this regard, as the legitimation of the EU runs through national institutions. It is national governments and national media that are spinning the narrative about Europe.

Yet, it is possible to point at some paths for overcoming these hurdles. Firstly, there might be some potential here for supranational initiatives. An example is the euro, through which European integration entered the daily lives of citizens, and as such might normalize the idea of European governance for citizens. Another one is the Conference

on the Future of Europe, an initiative through which the EU hopes to involve citizens in the European project. At the same time, the question is if such initiatives on themselves will have enough force. In the case of the euro for example, the actual evidence of its effect is limited, even if this is a huge step in European integration. While it does seem that citizens accept the euro as a social fact that is there to stay, there is little evidence that it has created a European identity. And likewise, the question with initiatives focusing on citizens' participation is if these will really be experienced as meaningful by citizens themselves. As long as they have little understanding of what is at stake, such initiatives are likely to be experienced as artificial.

In that sense, the emergence of more trans-European media could have a much more important effect. This would not only make information more accessible and breach the dominance of purely national frames, but would also do an important job in giving citizens a sense of what is at stake. Think of what having an EU commissioner held accountable for their policies in a talk show could do. Yet, while there are some first signs of this happening – think of the success of a medium like Politico, or of how this summer's negotiations suddenly led to a surge of politicians giving interviews in media outside their own country – the question remains whether the market for such reporting is big enough.

For now, the most direct impact is probably to be expected from the crises Europe is now living through. This fits to the essence of the EU. "Europe will be forged in crises," said Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, "and will be the sum of the solutions." And indeed, Europe's current situation might have the effect of fostering a shared identity. Now that most of us are locked up in our houses because of a pandemic, and at the same time we are faced with external challenges such as the rise of China, Brexit, and a more hostile US, the sense that we are in the same boat is likely to increase resulting in a more legitimate European governance. Later, the climate crisis – of which the current Covid-19 crisis can be seen as a test case – might have the same effect. Admittedly, the effect of both the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate crisis can also go the opposite direction, and can just as well have a divisive effect, depending on how they are handled. Even in this turn of events, however, the crises would still have the effect of drawing the public closer towards European politics.

In any scenario, the prospect of Europeans staying up at night to watch the European elections is still far away. And looking at the current state of affairs in the US, staying away from *such* a level of politicization also seems desirable. What we should hope for though is that European politics will finally be infused with at least a pinch of this perception of importance. A perception among citizens that European politics is not just something vague happening far away, but that it concerns important decision-making that affects their lives in a fundamental manner. In turn, such a perception should be accompanied by the feeling that having a position on these decisions actually can make a difference. Admittedly, this development is still in its infancy. But it does appear that it has started. And now that the genie is out of the bottle, putting it back seems impossible. The question is now how political elites will deal with it.

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