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Assessing the depoliticization of European citizens in a more politicized Union*

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Abstract

Have European citizens become increasingly Eurosceptic over the last two decades, turning their backs on European integration? Though many journalists, politicians and academics argue that they have, this paper suggests that reactions to European integration cannot be reduced uniquely to a rise in Euroscepticism, but that indifference and ambivalence need also to be brought into the picture when studying EU legitimacy and its politicization. As the enhanced politicization of the European integration has marked the EU post-Maastricht development, this text aims at understanding how this politicization has impacted on the acceptance and the appropriation of the political order by lay citizens. This paper challenges the idea that a growing politicization leads necessarily to a polarization of citizens' attitudes towards the EU. I propose an alternative interpretation, which argues that the acceptance of a European political order stems from at least two rationales. On one hand, amongst the elites (understood in a broad sense as political or economic or even simply citizens interested in the political sphere) one observes indeed a polarization of opinion characterized by a decline in support and a reinforcement of opposition to the processes of European integration. This tendency is emphasized and explained by the model of "constraining dissensus". On the other hand, one observes the reinforcement of indifference and indecision amongst ordinary citizens not expert in political matters, faced with this same process. In the latter case, the politicization of the EU leads ordinary citizens at the same time to develop more ambivalent attitudes towards the integration process and to consider the EU as "normal politics". Through these two mechanisms, the enhanced politicization of the EU leads to indifference, in one case by ambivalence and in the other by defection. Drawing on evidence from survey data, and from 24 focus groups conducted in francophone Belgium, France and Great Britain in 2006, this paper explores the various faces of citizens' indifference, from fatalism, to detachment, via sheer indecision. It adopts a mixed-methods approach to analyzing the middle-of-the-road attitudes of ordinary citizens who consider themselves neither Europhiles nor Eurosceptics. Complementing existing quantitative and qualitative literature in the field, it opens up new perspectives on attitudes towards European integration.

*This paper contains elements that have already been published in my last book entitled *Integrating Indifference* (ECPR Press. Please refer to the book when quoting.

Introduction

The concept of legitimacy has attracted increasing attention over the past two decades in the context of reflections on democracy, governance and the ‘crisis’ of legitimacy at the European level. In this context, the social legitimacy of European integration is defined as ‘a broad societal (empirically determined) acceptance of the system’ (Weiler 1991: 416). Yet views on the democratic deficit of the EU and its search for legitimacy have changed dramatically in recent years. As a result, understanding what people think about European integration and why they develop such opinions is crucial. In a context of perceived political and economic crises, the focus of Europeanists – along with journalists, experts and politicians – has been on opposition to the EU among both political actors and citizens (Leconte 2012; Serricchio, Tsakatika, and Quaglia 2012; Wessels 2007). Today there is extensive recognition that Euroscepticism is a more significant phenomenon in the post Maastricht period than it was in the earlier decades of the European integration process (Vasilopoulou 2013).

In explaining this scepticism, most Europeanists tell a conventional tale that goes something like this. Once upon a time, on the European continent, there was a permissive consensus (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970); a consensus that meant European integration began amidst the general indifference of ordinary citizens. The permissive consensus referred to an enchanted land where most citizens of the members states were either generally supportive of their governments’ actions to promote further European integration, or not interested in or affected by it at all. This sentiment was said to have characterised the first decades of European integration, and have ended in the 1990s with the difficulties surrounding the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. From that moment on, the EU had to face a constraining dissensus (Hooghe and Marks 2008) which came to disrupt this enchanted land. This sleeping giant of dissensus was rapidly named by scholars and journalists: Euroscepticism. The EU was increasingly subject to public contention over European matters; citizens moved away from the European project; and polarization of their attitudes towards European integration increased. In other words, a cleavage between Europhiles and Eurosceptics emerged (Fligstein 2008). The European public was becoming increasingly sceptical of European integration and decisions could no longer be taken without popular consent. In the wake of these developments, the politicization of the European political order was more and more at the heart of many academic debates (Bartolini 2005; De Wilde 2011; De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hix and Bartolini 2006).

By the end of the 1990s, however, European studies had experienced a qualitative turn that told a very different tale, to those academics and commentators who were willing to listen. Contrary to the established understanding of the breakdown in the permissive consensus and the growing polarization of opinion (often reduced to rising Euroscepticism), qualitative studies converge in demonstrating the low salience of European integration for ordinary citizens (Duchesne, Frazer, Haegel, and Van Ingelgom 2013; Duchesne *et al.* 2010; Gaxie, Hubé, and Rowell 2011; Hurrelmann, Gora, and Wagner 2013; Meinhof 2004; White 2011 to name a few). The discrepancy observed between mainstream quantitative analyses and qualitative studies led to the approach taken in this paper: analysing the indifference and indecision of ordinary citizens using both quantitative and qualitative data and methods in a mixed methods perspective. As a complex political reality, the comprehension of the social legitimacy of European integration requires the concerted efforts of different disciplines and a combination of different types of data and methods. The task of this paper is thus twofold. On one hand it sought to improve understanding of the lack of salience of European issues for a growing part of the public and on the other to address the puzzle of the discrepancy between these two research traditions.

The aforementioned qualitative studies and the convergence of their results with those presented in this paper and in my previous researches (Van Ingelgom 2010, 2012, 2014), prompts us to reconsider the widely accepted premises of the conventional tale. I therefore suggest that the evolution of citizens’ reactions to the European integration process cannot be reduced to the alleged end of the permissive consensus and subsequent rise of Euroscepticism in the post-Maastricht period. Through its mixed-methods perspective, this paper demonstrates that an interpretation based on the binary of permissive consensus and Euroscepticism is empirically incomplete (if not erroneous) in many different ways. There is therefore a need for reconciliation of the findings of statistical analysis of Eurobarometer and similar surveys with the findings of recent interpretive analysis of interview and focus group data. In this text, I highlighted the uncertainty and indifference which characterised the

attitudes of European citizens in the post-Maastricht period. Following this, I propose to analyse the particular category of citizens who, when they are surveyed by Eurobarometer, say that they evaluate their country's membership of the EU as being 'neither a good thing nor a bad thing'. On average, they represent thirty per cent of the European population and thirty three out of the hundred thirty three participants in the focus groups. Focussing on this specific category is important in more than one respect. First, qualitative work has revealed that European issues are not prominent for ordinary citizens and has emphasised the difficulty, even impossibility, for ordinary citizens to appropriate, for themselves as it were, the EU. More recently such work has also highlighted the fact that attitudes towards Europe, often uncertain, are based on diverse evaluations and feelings of varied intensity. This leads to a rebuttal of the assertion that the European public is simply divided into two categories, one 'Europhile' and the other 'Eurosceptic' (Dakowska and Hubé 2011: 85-100; Van Ingelgom 2012).

The data presented here can make only a contribution to criticism of this binary interpretation. Thus, the discussion transcripts suggest strongly that the interpretation of Eurobarometer data is often rather hasty. The interpretive analysis reported in this text shows that this response should not be ignored or discounted, that it is, indeed, a specific reaction characterised by uncertainties regarding the European integration process, sometimes in the sense of ambivalence and sometimes of indifference, based on alienation or based on fatalism. I assume that I can examine the neither-nor category as through a microscope (Guiraudon 2006) in order to improve the understanding of the significance, the persistence and the increase in the uncertainty and indifference of ordinary citizens towards European integration in order to grasp the depoliticization at play. The analysis of 24 focus groups conducted in 2006 aims in the framework CITAE project specifically to analyse and try to understand the motivations at work in these respondents and to attempt to explain their position¹.

Initially, with a view to refuting a minimalist interpretation of this response category, I will show that these respondents do have cognitive frameworks that allow them to think about Europe. These frameworks are relatively homogenous among these interviewees, whatever their social class and national characteristics. Then my analyses will focus on the specific references to Europe made by them. Finally, I distinguish between three kinds of reaction: first ambivalence, then distance and exteriority and finally fatalism. Finally, these three kinds of reactions are scrutinised in order to assess whether they should be perceived as a tonic for or a poison of European democratic legitimacy. I also ask how they can be related to the hypothesis that questions of Europe are becoming increasingly politicised in political and public discourses.

1. The median European : neither Eurosceptic nor Europhile

So I wish to link my own operationalization firmly to those of mainstream quantitative studies². According to the Eurobarometer survey data (Table 1), from the time when the group interviews were convened in spring 2006, twenty eight per cent of European citizens (EU15) considered that their country's membership of the EU was 'neither a good nor a bad thing', while fifty five per cent considered it was 'a good thing' and thirteen per cent considered it 'a bad thing'. Researchers who analyse the Eurobarometer data have often labelled those who answer 'a good thing' Europhile and labelled those who answer 'a bad thing' Eurosceptic. At the same time, they have tended to ignore the 'neither-nors'. If one turns to the classic indicator of support for one's country belonging to the EU in 2006, the year the focus groups were conducted, and in 2011, the differences between the three countries under scrutiny here are clearly apparent and yet they present similar trends over time.

¹ The CITAE project, initiated by Sophie Duchesne and Florence Haegel, was conducted in close collaboration between Sciences Po Paris, The University of Oxford and the Catholic University of Louvain. The research team, coordinated by Sophie Duchesne, was made up of Florence Haegel, Guillaume Garcia, Elizabeth Frazer, André-Paul Frogner and myself. As a research assistant I was initially responsible for conducting the fieldwork in Brussels. I also helped in conducting the groups that took place in Oxford. Following this, I took part in the analyses and publications conducted by the research team as a whole (Duchesne, Frazer, Haegel, and Van Ingelgom 2013; Duchesne *et al.* 2010). The focus groups used in this paper were conducted as part of this research project. The entirety of the data produced is accessible on the BeQuali website: <http://www.bequali.fr/app/enquete/10/metadata/>. I am individually responsible for the arguments and analyses presented in the current text.

² As said, they frequently take responses to the question 'Do you think your country's membership of the EU is a good thing ...?' as indicating an individual's support for or rejection of the integration process.

The different levels of support in these three countries are indeed significant, as one can see in Table 1 Belgium is among the countries most favourable to European integration, which historically has also included the Benelux countries and Ireland, joined afterwards by Spain. In this first group of countries, in 2006, around 70 per cent of citizens declare that their country's membership of the Union is a good thing, and levels of rejection are very low (around 10 per cent in 2006). France is part of a second group of countries, including Germany, Denmark, Portugal, Greece and Italy, in which a short majority of citizens support membership of the EU. This second group is also characterised by a more marked opposition to the European project, with the negative category attracting between 12 and 19 per cent of respondents. The European mean is situated in this second group. Finally Great-Britain is part of a third group of countries in which one also finds Finland, Sweden and Austria. Citizens of this group prove to be both less inclined to support their country's membership of the EU (between 34 and 49 per cent) and much more likely to oppose it, with a quarter to a third of the population declaring membership is a 'bad thing'. These three different groups emerge regardless of the measurement instruments used and the period considered³; one of the cases studied here is found in each of them.

Table 1: Indicator of support for one's country belonging to the EU (EU-15) in 2006 and (in 2011)

Country	Good thing	Neither good nor bad	Bad thing	Don't know
Ireland	78% (↓63%)	12% (↑18%)	7% (↑12%)	3% (↑7%)
Luxembourg	74% (↓72%)	16% (↓13%)	9% (↑13%)	1% (↑2%)
The Netherlands	72% (↓68%)	15% (↑19%)	12% (=12%)	1% (=1%)
Belgium	69% (↓65%)	21% (↑23%)	10% (↑11%)	0% (↑1%)
Spain	62% (↓55%)	19% (↑22%)	9% (↑17%)	10% (↓6%)
Denmark	61% (↓55%)	24% (↑28%)	14% (↑16%)	2% (↓1%)
Germany	58% (↓54%)	26% (=26%)	14% (↑16%)	3% (↑4%)
Greece	57% (↓38%)	31% (↓28%)	12% (↑33%)	0% (↑1%)
Total UE	53% (↓47%)	27% (↑31%)	16% (↑18%)	4% (=4%)
Italy	52% (↓41%)	29% (↑36%)	14% (↑17%)	5% (↑6%)
Portugal	50% (↓39%)	28% (↑30%)	18% (↑26%)	4% (↑5%)
France	50% (↓46%)	30% (↑33%)	19% (=19%)	1% (↑2%)
Sweden	49% (↑56%)	25% (=25%)	26% (↓17%)	1% (↑2%)
Finland	39% (↑47%)	38% (↓33%)	23% (↓19%)	1% (=1%)
Austria	36% (↑37%)	37% (↓36%)	23% (↑25%)	5% (↓2%)
United-Kingdom	34% (↓26%)	28% (↑37%)	34% (↓32%)	7% (↓5%)

Source: Eurobarometer 66.1 (autumn 2006); Eurobarometer 75.1 (spring 2011)

Yet in spite of the notable differences one has just observed, the three cases show an evolution over this period that cannot be fully explained by the thesis of a polarisation of the European citizen space (De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2008). In the post-Maastricht period, in all three of these countries one has witnessed a reinforcement of indecision and indifference. One can see a linear evolution of the percentage of individuals in the indifferent and undecided position⁴. In France,

³ At the very most one can observe certain slippages over the long term. For example, Denmark was closer to the Eurosceptic group in the past, whereas the French were more favourable in the past than they are now (Belot and Cautrès 2006: 86).

⁴ In anticipation of longitudinal analyses, I have constructed an attitude index based on the two trend questions which are typically used to gauge the attitudes. These two questions are as follows:

'Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership of the European Community (Common Market) is ...? "A good thing", "a bad thing", "neither good nor bad".'

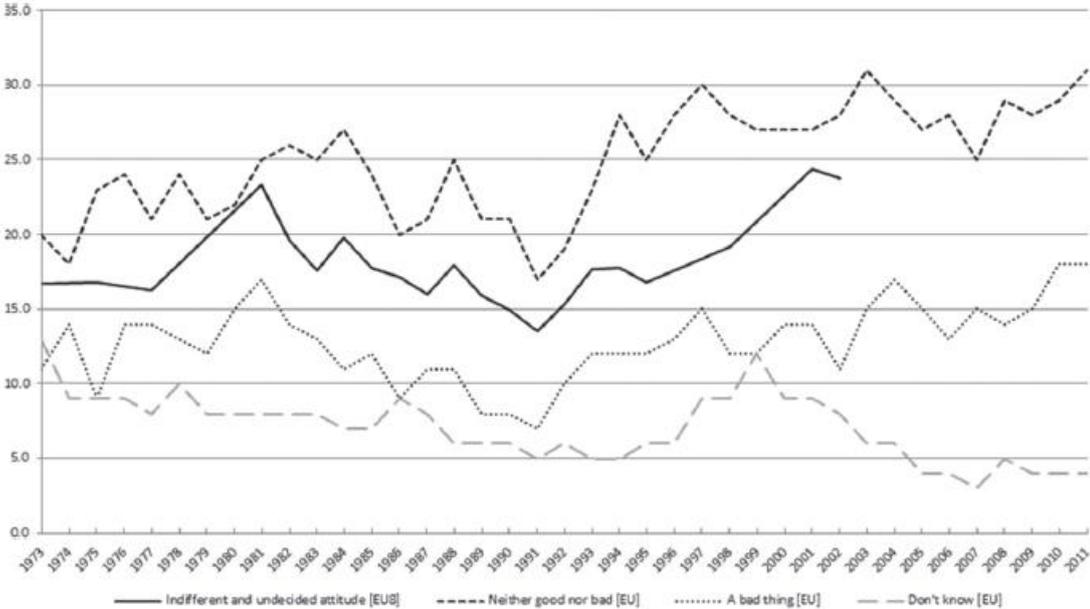
'If you were told tomorrow that the European Community (Common Market) - European Union - had been scrapped, would you be very sorry about it, indifferent or very relieved?'

The scale was constructed in order to conduct a systematic and longitudinal study of the evolution of the dispersal of citizens' attitudes towards European integration. The combination of these two questions seemed relevant for the examination of the

in Belgium and in the United-Kingdom, these percentages passed from 15.5 per cent, 16 per cent and 17.3 per cent respectively in 1991 to 28.7 per cent, 28.8 per cent and 27.2 per cent in 2002.

If one examines the curves for the evolution of the ‘neither/nor’ category one can see a similar evolution up until 2002, with a strong increase in this category, moving beyond the 30 per cent mark in all three countries in 2002. One can then observe that this category drops off in France and in Belgium in 2004. This year is preceding the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty and it was marked by the many debates surrounding it. In 2005, the ‘neither/nor’ category saw a new increase in France and Belgium before dropping off again in 2006. In the United-Kingdom there was also a slight decrease in this modality between 2004 and 2006. From 2007, one can see an increase in the median category in all three cases. In 2011, after more than three years of economic crisis, 23 per cent of Belgian respondents, 33 per cent of French respondents and 37 per cent of British respondents report that their country’s membership of the EU is neither a good nor a bad thing. These results cannot be explained by the thesis of the constraining dissensus and the increased politicisation of European integration such as it is currently formulated. The three countries selected for their similarities and their differences, present prime conditions for a rich international comparison and reflect a common evolution recorded in the eight older member states as illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 1: Public support for European integration, 1973-2011 (% , EU8 and EU)



Source: Author’s own data, Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File (1973-2002); European Union, 1973-2011.

Confirming the results presented for the three countries where focus groups have been realized, one can note that the percentage of undecided and indifferent citizens raised steadily from 15.3 per cent in 1992 to 23.8 per cent in 2002, whereas the categories of opposition (strong and moderate) rose from 16.7 per cent to 17.5 per cent for the same period. Although the percentages of respondents evaluating their country membership as ‘neither good nor bad’ are systematically higher than the percentages recorded for the undecided and indifferent attitude, they follow a similar trend. More importantly, they continue to increase slightly after 2002. Indeed, despite the fact that it decreased a little between 2006 and 2007, following the failed Constitutional Treaty ratification process, the ‘neither/nor’ category still represents 31 per cent of Europeans in 2011, the last available

absence of salience emphasized in recent qualitative studies. The response categories of the ‘membership’ and the ‘dissolution’ questions explicitly include a middle-of-the-road category expressing respectively indecision and indifference.

Eurobarometer data. Note that if the percentage answering ‘neither/nor’ lowers before major events of European integration with high amounts of media coverage, such as the Treaty of Maastricht in 1991, the introduction of the Euro in 2002, the ratification process of the TCE in 2005 and the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, it grows systematically up after each of these events of high politicization. This is also true when considering the evolution after the economic and financial crises of 2008. To this regard, because the curve of opposition towards the EU (‘bad thing’) – so to say the evolution of Euroscepticism – follows a very similar pattern, one can hypothesize that the grow in the neither/nor category – use as a proxy for indifference and indecision – is a side-effect of growing macro politicization.

In the questionnaire completed by all the 133 focus group applicants, we explicitly posed this classic question (See Duchesne *et al.* 2013; Duchesne *et al.* 2010). Recruitment procedures explicitly aimed to classify the participants on European questions – broadly pro and anti – so as to secure a balanced, and potentially antagonistic, discussion. But we had multiple recruitment criteria, including wanting groups to be diverse in age and ethnic heritage and homogeneous with regard to education and employment. So in the end we selected a number of participants whose attitudes regarding Europe were more uncertain. Of course, this is not surprising – given that they represent about thirty per cent of the population. We were also keen to recruit citizens who usually elude surveys, particularly those from the working classes, and it is notable that in these groups we had the highest recruitment of those who answered ‘neither-nor’ to this question. Table 1 presents the list of participants in this category.

Out of hundred thirty three participants, eighty two participants are categorised as favourable to their country’s membership (or Europhile), while eighteen are categorised as disapproving (or Eurosceptic), according to this measure. Here I focus on the positions in the discussion of European issues of the thirty three ‘neither-nors’. Representativeness in qualitative research is typological, not statistical, so the limited number of cases is not in itself a problem. I do want to maximise the understanding of the logic of these participants’ positions and, as far as possible, to understand their motivations. So, to put their words and positions into context, I here present interpretive analysis (produced using the software package Atlas.ti) of all twenty four of the focus groups. Two-thirds of the ‘neither-nor’ respondents are in the most working-class categories – of the thirty three, twenty belong either to the category workers or employees; sixteen individuals in the middle category are British, thirteen are French and only four are Belgian. The Brussels corpus here is particular – it does not include a single ‘neither-nor’ respondent from among the groups of managers and activists.

Table 2 Participants evaluating their country’s membership of the EU as ‘neither good nor bad’ (N = 33/133)

	Workers	Employees	Executives	Activists	Total
Brussels	Marco Farouk André	Fabien	-	-	4
Oxford	Mina Ron Mary Brenda Vicas Esther Ruth Bridget	Kylie	Alexander Derek Ian Bansuri Sanjay Rebecca	Bethany	16
Paris	Jean-Marie Cédric Zahoua Geoffrey Habiba	Magali Patrice	Michel Jean-Paul Louis	César Jules Pascal	13
Total	16	4	9	4	33

2. The (non-) explanation from ignorance

An obvious hypothetical explanation of this response might be that respondents are unaware, or unacquainted, and therefore are unable to react to or evaluate the fact of their country's membership, unlike their 'Europhile' and 'Eurosceptic' counterparts. This classic hypothesis is fully in line with the 'minimalist' interpretation. This implies that 'opinions' gathered from this category of respondents would be superficial, unstable and inconsistent – classifiable as 'pseudo-' or 'non-attitudes'. This kind of interpretation has for long justified limited interest in the opinions of European citizens within European studies (Belot 2010). My empirical response to this initial explanation leads me to examine to what extent the 'neither-nor' participants actually talked about Europe in the discussions. If respondents in the 'neither-nor' category really are either indifferent to their country's membership of the EU or ambivalent about it, as opposed to stating a position that is equivalent to 'don't know', then I need to demonstrate that they do have the cognitive resources to evaluate the process of European integration. It is important that I show that their response is not attributable to greater than normal ignorance of European matters. We know that talking about Europe was pretty difficult for all the participants, even including the activists (Duchesne *et al.* 2013; Van Ingelgom 2014). But were the 'neither-nor' participants less able to take part in discussion, less talkative, than the others?

Table 3 Distribution of occurrences of the words 'Euro-', 'Europe' and 'European' plus related codes, as a percentage of total words spoken

	Total words spoken	Discussions of Europe (Words)	Discussions of Europe (%)	Euro- (Words)	Euro- (%)
Neither nor	150998	34844	23.07	732	0.0048
Good / bad thing	672329	146723	21.82	3788	0.0056
Total	823327	181567	22.05	4520	0.0055

Source: Author's own data.

As Table 3 shows, the participants in the category 'neither-nor' do not stand out from their counterparts in the categories 'good thing' (Europhile) and 'bad thing' (Eurosceptic). In general they talked almost as much about Europe as the others did, using words including the prefix Euro- (European, Europe, etc.) only slightly less. The difference is not as marked as would be expected were the hypothesis of ignorance to be supported. As we know, Europe is a topic that our respondents frequently digressed from (*See* Chapter Four). Only a fifth to one quarter of total recorded discussion is specifically about European themes. The proportion of words uttered by the 'neither-nor' respondents that are specifically about Europe is no different from their pro- and anti-Europe interlocutors (23.07 per cent against 22.05 per cent). National and social differences are, however, more striking. The participants in the Brussels groups talk more about Europe (25.44 per cent) than those in the Paris (19.89 per cent) and Oxford (21.26 per cent) groups. The activist groups, as would be expected, are more focussed on Europe (26.80 per cent) than the groups of workers (17.65 per cent). With regard to the terms relating to Europe, the differences here are also relatively minor – a ratio of 0.0048 for the 'neither-nor' citizens compared with 0.0056 for participants in the 'good thing' and 'bad thing' categories. In sharp contrast, the ratio for the managers is 0.0071, while for the workers it is 0.0035. Notably, the Belgian average is 0.0069, compared to 0.0040 for the French corpus and 0.0064 for the British.

But are the 'neither-nor' participants less knowledgeable than the others? In order to answer this question, I have coded all explicit references to European institutions, to European policies and to its history. For example, every reference to the European Commission has been coded in this way, and also every reference to the Common Agricultural Policy, every mention of a European politician, Jean Monnet for example, and every reference to a treaty, like the Maastricht Treaty or the draft Constitution.

As Table 4 shows, overall the 'neither-nor' respondents are shown to be appreciably less knowledgeable in relation to the European matters, as indicated by the frequency of their specific mentions of European institutions or policies. However, again, social and national differences are

stronger. A difference of 3.46 references is found between the activist groups and the workers and a difference of 1.81 between the Belgian groups and the British. This gap is only of 1.54 between the category ‘neither a good nor a bad thing’ and the two other categories ‘good thing’ and ‘bad thing’. More detailed cross-referencing, together with my interpretive analysis of the transcripts (not shown in a table), allows me to report that although the ‘neither-nor’ participants are noticeably less knowledgeable at the aggregate level, this effect is above all due to the British participants, whose level of knowledge is lower, with a general average of one reference per individual. In particular, within the groups of managers conducted in Oxford, one counts seven individuals in the category ‘neither- nor’, and these are shown to be particularly less inclined to contribute explicit references to the EU and its institutions to the discussion – with an average per individual of only 0.85. In the same vein, I already underlined the absence of Belgian managers and activists in the sample. This also could explain the lower frequencies of explicit references in this specific category as one has showed that both activists and Belgian participants are the more inclined to mobilise explicit references when talking about Europe.

Table 4 Distribution of explicit references to Europe, its policies, history, institutions (*N* = 133)

	Explicit references	Number of respondents	Average
Neither nor	77	33	2.33
Good / Bad thing	387	100	3.87
Workers	72	33	2.18
Employees	80	32	2.51
Managers	117	34	3.44
Activists	191	34	5.61
Brussels	175	41	4.27
Oxford	106	43	2.46
Paris	183	49	3.73
Total	464	133	3.49

Source: Author’s own data.

It is important here to state that explicit references to the EU, its institutions and its policies do not, in any case, mean that participants feel themselves to be knowledgeable on European questions. On the contrary, and very frequently, a feeling of ignorance is explicitly expressed by participants. These results echo the observation that I made using the multinomial regression analysis underlying that subjective knowledge has a negative impact on opting for the ‘neither-nor’ category. Indeed, according to the results of the regression model, it seemed that individuals who feel more knowledgeable about the EU are less likely to adopt the uncertain attitude characterized by indifference and ambivalence. But, Europe is no less present for this group than for the other participants, even if in the end it is not very present. All these considerations, then, lead me to contradict the hypothesis by which the category of citizens opting for the response ‘neither-nor’ would be understood to consist of individuals less able to talk about Europe and less knowledgeable on European themes (even if they feel like less knowledgeable). To this regard, it was important that the research design and the focus group schedule do allow participants to avoid to talk about Europe, that is, to be uninvolved in discussion. So, this category of participants might have participated much less than the others. This is evidently not the case. The great majority of ‘neither-nor’ respondents, in particular those from the most privileged social categories, possess frameworks for perception and evaluation of European integration. So it remains to understand the logic behind their uncertain reactions.

3. Assessing depoliticization: between ambivalence and indifference

To better understand how meaning is constructed by the participants in the ‘neither-nor’ group, one must study their words. Following an interpretative analysis and using again the Atlas.ti software, I

was able to distinguish three distinct ideal types of reaction: ambivalence, distance and fatalism; even if most of time they are closely related.

3.1. Ambivalence

The 'neither-nor' participants canvass, rehearse and develop many and varied views with regard to European integration in the course of their discussions. Notably, they exhibit a strong fluctuation between positive and negative in their evaluations. I characterise this way of not clearly opting for either a positive or a negative evaluation as ambivalence. Respondents from the 'neither-nor' category are characterised in particular by a higher level of ambivalence than the others. Here is an as short as clear illustration of what is meant by ambivalence. Vicas belongs to the 'neither-nor' category.

Extract 1: Set 2, Oxford, workers.

Vicas: They are taking the profits out and taking it back to their country while they are in a different continent. They are profiting from Europe.

Anthony: Absolutely.

Vicas: But then we are profiting as well.

Here Vicas articulates a negative evaluation of capital outflow but follows this up with a positive evaluation of citizens' benefit from economic activity and trade. I can only code Vicas, and this sequence of discussion, as both positive in his evaluation of Europe and negative. Individuals in the category 'neither-nor' tended to propose arguments both in favour of and against the process of European integration. These participants have in mind many, and often contradictory, evaluations of the European integration process. This multiplicity of arguments, as well as their complexity, leads to ambivalence and prevents them from taking a definite position on European issues. I consider now various ways in which this ambivalence is managed by them.

Past, present and future

The ambivalence can be connected to considerations of time. First, from the point of view of the individual speaker, their own previous or past evaluation may give way dialectically to the opposite. Thus, seeds of doubt are sown in the mind of the arguing individual. This process was sometimes noted by the participants themselves during the discussion:

Extract 2: Set 2, Oxford, managers

Rebecca: Well, that's why I thought it was a good thing initially that we joined the EC but from what I read a lot of it, it seems that lots of ... that are meant to benefit everybody. I know I'm probably being very biased here but it seems to me from what I read that a lot of the European countries twist the laws very much to suit their own favours. I'm not sure how true it is. From what I read, we tend to follow laws strictly, to the letter, very religiously whereas the others have a much more flexible interpretation on a lot of things.

...

Rebecca: Of course in our papers we always hear you know about the Spanish fishing kind of stealing stuff in our waters and putting up an English flag and all that sort of thing. But we always hear, you tend to hear negative things don't we? Well often we do. [...]

Rebecca: I don't know. We don't know ... Don't we all know so little about ...? It's frightening. I mean, we are quite intelligent ...

Rebecca attributes a change in her position to her exposure to the British media, which, she says, promotes an almost exclusively negative picture of the integration process. In all the comments made by this participant, there is a strong sense of uncertainty about her evaluation of European integration. This is reinforced by her feeling of a lack of knowledge, which overtly upsets her.

Table 5 Distribution of the occurrences of the argument ‘benefit for future generations’ (N = 133)

	‘Benefit for future generations’	Number of respondents	Average
Neither nor	14	33	0.42
Good / Bad thing	14	100	0.14
Total	28	133	0.21

Source: Author’s own data.

A specific kind of ambivalence is centred on the idea of the future and is found in particular in the Belgian corpus. Table 5 details references to this theme by distinguishing the participants in the category ‘neither-nor’ from participants in the two other categories.

This framework of perception is characteristic of the Belgian participants. Of twenty eight occurrences of the future generations’ argument, seventeen are from the Belgian discussions. Even more interesting, of these twenty eight, fourteen relate to individuals in the ‘neither-nor’ category; this being true even if Belgian respondents are less present in the ‘neither-nor’ category (N=4). This argument, linked to the benefits that their children will derive from European integration, introduces a certain measure of ambivalence into the evaluation of the European political system. The contrast between the present and the future amounts to a contrast between a direct negative experience of the market’s effects now and a national frame which articulates an ideal for future generations. On the one hand, they themselves feel the harmful effects of the opening of borders and the single market; on the other hand they accept these, assuming that future generations, for their part, will benefit.

To illustrate this reaction tinged with ambivalence, I reproduce a short extract which presents Marco, one of the Brussels workers. At the time of the discussion, he was unemployed and was indeed concerned by questions of employment and, in particular, cheap labour. He denounces the harmful effects of this throughout the discussion. However, he often seems confused about his evaluation and finds it difficult to express an opinion which is clearly against Europe.

Extract 3: Set 1, Brussels, workers

Marco: To a certain extent I am following his project (*referring to Saïd’s previous discussion of the United States of Europe*), the project for the future, but it’s our grandchildren who will compensate for this future prospect because it’s they who will reap the rewards. In any case, we’re paying to some extent for the damage from the past. Rental charges have increased and then now there’s the freeze. There’s talk of indexation and then now there’s talk of planning wage increases. So I think that the problem with the Far East commercially and with labour, there should be compensation for this. Personally I think that it is our grandchildren who will enjoy the benefits of this.

Saïd: If there are any.

For some participants, this framework conflicts with their personal interpretation of the effect of European integration in the present. Marco expresses this clearly. The wider context of the transcript shows that Marco has learned this cognitive framework, although it does not correspond to his (Marco’s) personal experience of the current European reality. In some cases, these promises of a better future for future generations are reinforced by the ‘ordinary’ experience of European integration; in others, as is the case here for Marco, they reduce the credibility of these same promises and sow seeds of doubt. Torn between the political discourse which surrounds him and his own experience, Marco finds it really difficult to position himself in relation to European integration. On the contrary, Saïd is clearly sceptical about the benefits that future generations will derive from this.

Ideal and actual

This position in the Belgian discussions leads to consider the ambivalence which arises from the gap between an idealised representation, of European integration as a noble idea, and the actual experience. This kind of ambivalence is frequent in the discussions as illustrated in Extract 4.

Extract 4: Set 1, Paris, workers

Zahoua: The euro, for me, it helps businesses more.

Jean-Marie: Yes, well.

Zahoua: It doesn't help us at all. Not even with quality of life. (*Shakes her head*) On the contrary, we can do less at the financial level. Already, small savers are going to spend less. It helps large businesses more.

Later on in the discussion, as the advantages linked to mobility are set out, particularly in terms of employment, Zahoua again puts this positive aspect into a more negative perspective: 'it's not as easy as that to go and work abroad' – once again emphasising the gap between the idea and the actual reality. Jean-Marie, another participant in this Paris workers group, emphasises a further, intrinsically linked, aspect of ambivalence. On several occasions, while discussing some particular argument, most often a positive one, he immediately clarifies his comments by adding a caveat best summarised as 'in theory':

Extract 5: Set 1, Paris, workers

Jean-Marie: Being part of a group of markets to have a better life. At least so that all the inhabitants of the community ...

Moderator: Being part of a group, I'm sorry, I didn't understand.

Jean-Marie: Being part of a group of countries which improves the life of every country at the same time. In theory.

Margot: Yes (*laughs*). It's made for that in any case.

Jean-Marie: That was the aim at the beginning.

Cédric: Being interested in the European market, in everything that is economic. In other words the market.

Jean-Marie: Having better solidarity as well at the level of, in the world. To work for peace in the reunited world. At least I'm talking theoretically. (*Quick look at Margot, laughs*)

This exchange occurs after only a few minutes discussion and is already the opportunity for complicit laughs. Cédric, the third participant in the 'neither-nor' category in this Paris group, repeatedly agreed with Jean-Marie's remarks, notably by saying that 'there is in a way an enormous gap between the reality on the ground and Europe'. This gap between the 'good ideas' of Europe that the participants value and the reality on the ground is emphasised to a large extent. Zahoua's reasoning could be summarised as follows: 'Europe certainly benefits people, but not me directly'. Jean-Marie and Cédric reason that 'Europe is a good thing in theory, but in reality, it's difficult to be aware of this'. This kind of reasoning, torn between reality and experience, is largely to be found in the discourse of the 'neither-nor' participants, in particular those from the working classes.

It is interesting to note that one also finds this type of argument with ambivalent respondents from the upper class and activist groups, once they take on the discourse of 'ordinary' people. This is particularly the case with Jules, a French activist from the extreme Left, who also emphasises this gap between people's daily experience of Europe and the different benefits that are promoted by European integration, through the completion of the common market, in terms of mobility or of benefits for companies. Emmanuelle, a UMP activist who is in favour of France's membership of the EU, and who voted 'yes' in the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, had emphasised a few minutes before that the average French citizen doubtless did not have the opportunity to travel, and Jules was keen to come back to this point:

Extract 6: Set 2, Paris, activists

Jules: I think that Europe, if you want it to make progress, because most people were against liberalism, that's true, but they were also against this European technocracy. So many people, on a daily basis, people who live with Europe every day that meant nothing to them. Not because they don't have the opportunity to travel, because they see on a daily basis what Europe does not give them. Because on the news, it's Bolkenstein, it's VAT. Then every day, what does that mean? (*critical tone*) For them, not a lot, they don't notice.

Bertrand (*to Jules, smiling*): Thank you, that's what we said at the beginning: Europe is nothing, it's an illusion, really.

Jules: No, it's not an illusion because it exists.

Emmanuelle (to Bertrand): No, no, there is a reality.

Jules (to Bertrand): The economic reality, the entrepreneurs didn't expect us and there, with the Europe that is being built today, they are even happier.

Jules in this passage presents the criticism that is present in abundance within the French left, in particular with reference to the Constitutional Treaty. This can be roughly summarised as 'yes to Europe, but not to that kind of Europe'. Here the ambivalence is explicit and politically structured and is largely to be found in the comments made by the French activists belonging to the 'neither-nor' category. They think that taking a position on European integration in terms of for or against is complicated, insofar as they are 'for' the European integration plan and 'against' its realisation.

3.2. Indifference

So far, I have argued that what might look like 'uncertainty' is in many cases better interpreted as 'ambivalence'. And, in setting out these variations within the category ambivalence, I am emphasising heterogeneity in attitudes to Europe. Further, though, the participants' comments might also be attributable to a reaction of indifference. This mainly takes two forms in the discussions: indifference by distance (of which exteriority is a specific variant, associated with the British groups) and indifference by fatalism.

Distances

Distance between the EU and the citizen has several dimensions. It can be understood in physical terms: 'Brussels', to which is assimilated the power of Europe, appears to be a distant city (Berezin and Díez-Medrano 2008). But the feeling of distance that is mentioned is above all symbolic and refers more widely to distance in relation to politics. In the British case, this distance is expressed by a strong feeling of exteriority in relation to the process of European integration. Table 6 shows the distribution of the arguments which are linked to this theme.

Table 6 Distribution of occurrences of arguments related to distance (N = 133)

	Argument related to distance	Number of respondents	Average
Neither nor	10	33	0.30
Good / Bad thing	12	100	0.12
Total	22	133	0.17

Source: Author's own data.

In the discourse of the 'neither-nor' participants, there is a greater number of explicit signs of this distance. This distance is often cited and criticised but is difficult to analyse using statistical data. At the same time, the Commission is regularly concerned about 'bringing the Union closer to its citizens' (Schrag Sternberg 2013). The distance, and the indifference to which it leads, prevents the EU from enjoying the direct legitimacy which it seeks. This criticism of European institutions inevitably raises the question of the democratic governance of the EU; I discuss this further in the general conclusion. Interpretive analysis of the discussions does in fact allow to analyse this distance and to describe it.

Louis, a Parisian executive belonging to the 'neither-nor' category emphasises the fact that most French people would be unable to give the name of their MEP, as he or she appears to be quite distant from them. Later, he expresses his difficulty in linking with this Europe, precisely because of its distant and complex nature. Later still, he asks where the love story between the French citizen and Europe is.

Louis: No, but in fact, deep down, between each of us and France there is a kind of love story or a story of dislike: or I don't know what. Deep down we ask where is the love story between the French citizen (*he stresses the word French*) and Europe. Frankly, currently, this Europe, we want to love it but we don't really know.

Francois (*looking at Louis*): It's difficult.

Stanislas (*to Louis*): What form does it have? (*Sceptical*) Does it have forms?

Francois: It's difficult to look at this.

Louis expresses his inability to love a Europe which has a vague outline, sometimes described as a 'very remote thingamajig' sometimes as 'ectoplasm'. Here one can see how the distance which separates the citizen from European integration, implicitly compared to the nearer distance to the nation, involves an inability to love, indifference at the heart of Louis's lack of position. The distance produces indifference and a lack of interest in European issues, reinforced by the complex nature of the construction of Europe.

This clearly emphasises the role played by the relative distance between Europe and the citizen, especially when it is put into perspective with the national level. Above all it is clear that this is about a symbolic distance. The exercise of power in Europe is widely perceived to be the privilege of a closed world, where the decisions are taken far from the citizens. The following extract illustrates the relative and symbolic nature of this distance from Europe.

Extract 8: Set 1, Brussels, employees

David: But OK, if there had been a referendum in Belgium: that would have been, well, I don't know (*shrugs his shoulders*) there would have been a result, that's all (*shrugs his shoulders*) (*laughter*). Yes or no (*jokingly*).

Victor: Yes, there's a result, yes (*still jokingly*) (*makes as if to throw away some papers*)

Faissal: There you go, you want it or no, you don't want it.

Moderator: That would have changed things.

Faissal: Perhaps yes, I don't know. I don't know.

Fabien: I don't know. I prefer referenda on things that happen nearer to us.

The distance perceived by Fabien is not geographical or physical. As an inhabitant of Brussels, he is in close contact with the reality of the European institutions every day. Furthermore, he has very largely assimilated the European terminology and shows that he is able to argue in favour of and against the on-going process. But distance is always discernible in his words. What is happening in Europe is not happening 'near him'. Thus, there is indeed always a symbolic distance between the ordinary citizen and the EU.

Doubtless, the distance felt by Fabien can be more widely understood in relation to a general 'political-style' distance, which remains, the privilege of a closed world. Exclusion from politics affects a substantial proportion of citizens at the national level, functioning all the more fully at the European level as Europe becomes political. If the characteristics of the EU make it into a distant, non-identified object, its politicisation does not necessarily go together with any rapprochement. European institutions can become political objects, like others – from which a significant part of the population are excluded and exclude themselves.

In the groups held in Oxford, the question of distance assumes a different character. It combines a relatively greater ignorance of the process of integration, already highlighted, with a strong feeling of exteriority and otherness. As Table 7 illustrates, this is particularly the case in the comments made by the 'neither-nor' participants.

Table 7 Distribution of occurrences of arguments related to British otherness and exteriority (N = 133)

	Argument related to otherness and exteriority	Number of respondents	Average
Neither nor	17	33	0.51
Good / Bad thing	24	100	0.24
Total	41	133	0.31

Source: Author's own data.

In general my interpretive analysis tells me that the British 'neither-nor' respondents feel themselves to be outside Europe. It is notable that the score per person for the Oxford respondents (0.49) is very close to that per person for the 'neither-nor' group. Overall, the 'neither-nor' participants mention British distinctiveness 0.51 times per person, whereas the Europhile and Eurosceptic participants together mention it 0.24 times per person. The latter is much the same rate as one finds in the Belgian (0.19) and French groups (0.25) in general, who do mention that 'the English [*sic*] are not like the others'.

Foreignness implies that the British participants perceive the European system as very different from the British one, without this difference necessarily being evaluated negatively. Distance and alienation are here intrinsically linked to the question of sovereignty, the importance of which I highlighted in Chapter Four. Europe is foreign and different, and consequently it should not take decisions for Great Britain. This feeling of distance and alienation, based on the acknowledgement of differences between them and those on the continent, is apparent in the conversation of Sanjay and Rebecca, participants in one of the Oxford managers groups, when they address the question what being European means.

Extract 9: Set 2, Oxford, Managers

Rebecca: Of course we are farther away from it. Much easier to sort of go with the flow between France Belgium and you're just across a border you're in and out. Whereas we still, I know it's so much easier now to get across and fly across to other ..., we're still a little bit insular, isolated from ...

Sanjay: Yeah.

Rebecca: You know still tends to be geographically a bit more them and us than other countries.

William: I think so.

Sanjay: There is still a lot of resistance.

Moderator: Sorry what did you say?

Sanjay: I mean from the geographical point of view we're still an island (*murmurs of agreement*)

William: It's the island that's the important bit.

Rebecca: Yes it's like my friends in Lille they spend an afternoon in Belgium. They spend an afternoon somewhere else. They hop between borders and they buy their washing powder over the border there. They buy something else over the border there and they're just they go and pick around.

William: But when you're there, don't you find it exciting to say let's go and have lunch in Italy. We'll come back via Belgium.

Rebecca: No I'm saying they've got an advantage on us in that way in that you know they there's more flowing between them

This suggests clearly the extent to which the abolition of political borders does not have the same impact in Great Britain as it can for citizens who live on the continent. The physical and symbolic barrier of the Channel is still very much in existence. The process of European integration does not remove this border, still considered to be natural. The insular nature of Britain and the UK is therefore key in understanding the sense of distance in the British groups. Further, the feeling of exteriority described by Sanjay and Rebecca in particular is also related to distance with respect to identity. The differences between the British and continental cultures are emphasised. Indifference therefore appears to be the result in this case of this feeling of otherness, based on the perception of a marked distance between Britain and the continent. This distance, physical as well as relating to identity, leads these

British participants to develop a feeling of alienation about the construction of Europe; so evaluating Britain's membership no longer makes much sense because it is barely any part of it.

This framework of perception relating to European integration, based on the feeling of distance and alienation, is significant if one wants to understand those respondents who prefer not to take a position in relation to the EU. The distance which separates the citizen from Europe increases his/her feeling of individual powerlessness. In particular, the strong feeling of alienation that is clear in the British case allows once again putting into a new kind of context any appearance of uniformity between citizens' attitudes to European integration, or any common underpinning to their voicing an opinion. Once again, I assert the importance of the national variable, already highlighted in Chapter Four – in particular for this specific 'neither-nor' category of citizens.

Fatalism

The second variety of indifference is anchored in a feeling derived from fatalism. Among the comments gathered from the 'neither-nor' participants, expression of the feeling that it's a foregone conclusion is prominent. Europe is already a fact, there, for some, and it will be, sooner or later, for the others. No retreat seems possible. The inevitability of the process seems undeniable. To take a position concerning the integration process assumes not only that the European issues are known and that the European question is of interest in the eyes of 'ordinary' citizens but also that these citizens believe that decisions should and could be taken – in other words, that things could still change (White 2011). Many of the participants do have a propensity to try to understand European issues and to evaluate them positively or negatively. However, the 'neither-nor' participants are, in contrast, characterised by a profound feeling of fatalism. For them, evaluating European integration negatively or positively is not the point, since Europe exists, no matter what. The process of European integration and its inevitability leads them to disengage. Table 8 presents the distribution of arguments marked by a fatalistic logic, showing very clearly how the fatalist argument is particularly characteristic of the 'neither-nor' category (0.72 versus 0.09). These participants account for twenty four out of thirty three occurrences of this argument.

Table 8 Distribution of the occurrences of arguments related to fatalism (N = 133)

	Argument related to fatalism	Number of respondents	Average
Neither nor	24	33	0.72
Good / Bad thing	9	100	0.09
Total	33	133	0.25

Source: Author's own data.

The underlying feeling of an inability to have an influence on European decisions has several dimensions. First, the finger is pointed at the lack of information. Some participants in the groups denounce the lack of information and develop the idea that things are being done behind their backs:

Extract 10: Set 1, Paris, managers.

Michel: Not enough information.

Stanislas: Too much information.

Michel (to Stanislas): No, not enough information. Not enough, I insist.

Stanislas: I would say both.

Michel: Because when for example I look at information from another country, I notice that when there is an European project, they are informed about it. We aren't. They tell us at the last minute to make us swallow it.

Francois (Looking in front of him, as if he was thinking): Hm hm.

Louis: Oh that's true it is

Stanislas: Yes, it's true

Michel: It's deliberate. It's deliberate so that we don't react.

This idea of deliberate evasion of citizens' power is also found in the British groups. Kylie emphasises this aspect, while Emily addresses the subject of British citizens' general lack of understanding regarding the process of European integration and the deliberate fostering of this by authorities.

Extract 11: Set 2, Oxford, employees

Emily: Yeah but it's got a different ... It has a different meaning really doesn't it? Than the way we're expected to understand that we are European. I don't think that we do understand in this country (*Kylie agrees*), generally speaking, I don't think we've been informed sufficiently to know what's involved.

Kylie: I feel personally it's a bit deliberate. Actually I think they're deliberately not telling us quite what's going on. I think in about twenty years' time we'll probably ... they're probably kind of half hoping that we will class ourselves as European (*Stephanie agrees*).

The end of this extract underlines the fatalistic aspect of this position: 'they' hope that in 20 years' time citizens will feel themselves to be European. This aspect is highlighted by Mary, a participant in a British workers group, when she says concerning the adoption of the Euro that 'it's going to happen anyway I think'. Mary has said very little in the discussion, but when she does speak it is to emphasise this inevitability. In Extract 12, it's the turn of Bridget, who participated in a workers group, to stress that it is only a question of time.

Extract 12: Set 2, Oxford, workers

Bridget: But this is it perhaps because it's quite new and we're not everyone is quite adjusting quite as they should be and it's just something that's will eventually build up and adjust and it's probably just going to take a while and probably mo: probably all the countries feel as we feel you know it's probably we're all feeling a bit like this and: eventually it will come right and if you think about the market it would be absolutely fabulous if we could all pull together.

Anthony: Mmm absolutely yeah.

Ruth: Yeah I think so yeah.

Esther: Much better.

One sees then that the possibility of feeling European one day is envisaged by the 'neither-nor' participants, since Europe will happen, no matter what. The influence of a longer or shorter timeframe is here essential (Belot and Van Ingelgom 2012). Citizens are well aware of the process, and seem to consider that the elites have the necessary means to 'impose' this European reality on them. Europe is there or will be there, whether this is a good or a bad thing. In the words of the 'neither-nor' participants one perceives a certain kind of disaffection towards politics which largely transcends the European framework alone. Louis, a participant in one of the Paris managers groups, who had already emphasised the distance he felt regarding the EU, continues by denouncing the pointlessness of the French referendum.

Extract 13: Set 1, Paris, managers

Louis: So much so that at the present time, you really have the impression that France said no, well, I don't know any more how many 54 per cent of French people said no, but you really have the impression that they don't give a damn about the opinion of those who said no. If we read the press, we notice that little by little many European countries would be happy to do without France's opinion, France's decision. OK, France said no, we don't care. We'll continue to go forward.

...

Louis: If I remember correctly, Denmark voted no. They made them vote again a year after: yes. Where's the respect for the popular voice?

Jean-Paul: If they are asked the same thing, yes. In France, they wouldn't have asked the same thing.

Louis: It's rigged. It's rigged. You can't vote again a year after (*pulls a face*) otherwise ...

Jean-Paul: It's true.

Louis: (*smiling towards Jean-Paul*): In that case, they would re-run all the elections every year.

On several occasions, Louis denounces the lack of citizens' influence over the process of European integration, pursuing this line to the point where he denounces a deception. In the second extract, he meets with Jean-Paul's agreement – also a participant who has evaluated his country's membership as 'neither-nor'. The impression of impotence derived from fatalism is palpable. It is essential to emphasise this insofar as the efforts undertaken by the EU to get closer to its citizens, here through introducing a referendum, produce the opposite effect with a category of citizens who denounce the machinations of politics; the tendency of the EU of 'not taking no for an answer' (Rose 2013: 88-90). Louis denounces both citizens' impotence, but also more widely the loss of the autonomy of political power to the power of economic interests. The supremacy of the economy is widely denounced by our 'neither-nor' participants, as Extract 14 shows.

Extract 14: Set 1, Oxford, managers

Alexander: Do you think we've been forced to be European?

Derek: Yeah I think in a sense I am a bit suspicious. For example as they talk about there being a referendum at some point in the future and I always feel as if Tony Blair the government is trying to manipulate opinion and wait for the right time to get the right decision. Whereas if we had a genuine democracy, we could have an opinion at least an opinion on a referendum now to ask about different attitudes on Europe whether it's the Euro or European court and all these different actors: and have a referendum now and shape policy according to that to reflect what people actually want. Rather than trying to wait until the government feels the time is right to get the decision that they want. I mean why not ask us now and then shape policy? I think that that is I mean the fact that maybe the government is more interested in what big business wants in the future in Europe rather than what people want.

Derek's feeling of being manipulated by politicians is clear in this extract. But his words are more radically part of a discourse denouncing the supremacy of economics over politics. On the whole, this denunciation is the sign of certain fatalism, insofar as the participants in the category studied here only note this reality. They do not imagine that it can be any other way, both because they do not think they have access to elected representatives and/or also because the political representatives are perceived to be impotent, or worse, submissive, or even corrupted, by economic power. Thus, they doubt the possibility of changing the order of things, and besides, they think that Europe does not really offer a different alternative; consequently taking a position will not change any of this.

This tacit although very critical acceptance is particularly discernible in the fact that many of these citizens realise that one day, in the medium- or long-term, they could become European. One finds this to a large extent in the data, whatever may be the socio-economic category of the individual. Kylie, for example, remarks that politicians doubtless hoped that in about twenty years citizens would feel European; Sanjay emphasised that the fact of being European would be in conflict with his British identity, without explicitly rejecting the fact that one day he might feel European. Europe will happen, no matter what, with them or without them.

3.3. When ambivalence meets indifference

The ambivalence and the indifference that are illustrated in the previous section should not be considered to be inherent, or necessary, underpinnings of the expressed views of those survey respondents who say that their country's membership of the EU is 'neither good nor bad'. On the other hand, they are certainly not surprising. They are however important in order to qualify the change in the permissive consensus and more broadly to apprehend the democratic deficit both at the national and the European level.

First of all, I argue that this analysis suggests that ambivalence and indifference, fatalism and the variability in distance between citizens and the EU, must be considered by any analyst who wishes to understand citizenship and integration. This category of responses to the Eurobarometer question should be considered independently of the others, should not be attributed straightforwardly to lack of knowledge and cannot be assimilated to lack of support. Second, I wish to emphasise the tangle and overlapping of ambivalence and indifference which characterises the 'neither-nor' response. Ambivalence and indifference regarding integration can be combined and confounded in one

respondent. Here Extract 15 illustrates by itself this imbrication and reveals how for Bansuri ambivalence meets indifference.

Extract 15: Set 1, Oxford, managers

Bansuri: To me, it's like an ideology. Really, I still don't think in practice, it's really there. But it's a good idea.

Sundai: But I think it is. It's the only relevance depending on where you are on the social level. Whether you're affected by the system which encompasses all the countries of Europe or it does not affect you at all. So it depends on the level where you are. At a certain level you can't have weight talking about Europe. At a certain level, you can have weight talking about Europe. It all depends where you are.

Bansuri: I agree yeah.

Sundai: Whether it should be under Europe or under Britain.

Bansuri: Because some people have taken advantage of it, they've gone to Europe. They've taken advantage of the possibility to travel and work abroad. Yet it doesn't affect me at all. It's not even my world. It's outside the world that I sort of live in or operate in. But yes, I've heard that other people have taken advantage of it if you like and people coming here because of it.

Derek: But you said a moment ago you thought Europe was a good idea, what do you mean by that? *(Bansuri, Alexander and Ian smile)*

Bansuri: It's an ideal isn't it? All these countries working together towards a sort of same objective and yet they're not working together you know. Their sort of group is there. The framework is there but within that group of countries everyone is pursuing their own thing.

Here, Bansuri's ambivalence is so obvious that it is highlighted by Derek, who is also uncertain about his evaluation of Britain's involvement in European integration. Bansuri's ambivalence originates in the gap she perceives between the idea of Europe, which she evaluates positively, and the reality, which at best does not affect her. This emphasises a central aspect of ambivalence – the contrast between representation and direct experience that is clearly discernible in Bansuri's words that was also apparent with other members of the 'neither-nor' category. In the same way, the feeling of distance in relation to the European reality is also apparent. When she mentions the help for mobility and the benefits of the common market, particularly for businesses, Bansuri says almost automatically that this only affects her very slightly, that all that was irrelevant to her world (which consists of links between the Asian sub-continent and Britain). In such words, one finds signs of the distance between the EU and the lived diurnal world. Later, in the discussion of the question of the distribution of power in Europe, Bansuri explicitly expresses this idea of distance when she says: 'maybe that's because the European bargain is too far out there. Because there are things at home that you can do'. Clearly here ambivalence meets indifference; or the other way round. Thereafter I propose to use the 'neither/nor' category as a proxy for the indifferent *and* undecided attitudes. Indeed as Table 10 displays, the two questions are closely linked and the relationship between them is growing over time until 2002. This seems to suggest that ambivalence and indifference are more and more linked to each other. These analyses confirm the fact that the 'neither-nor' category can both refer to ambivalence and indifference.

Table 10: Pearson's correlations between the membership and regret questions

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1998	2001	2002
Pearson's correlations	.604**	.658**	.647**	.674**	.675**	.669**	.674**	.689**

Conclusion: Indifference, ambivalence and democratic deficit in time of crises and in more politicised Union

None of the reactions described in this text is incompatible with the thesis of increased visibility of European issues in the post-Maastricht era or with the essence of the post-functionalist model (Hooghe and Marks 2008). However, they invite to reconsider the impact of the process of European integration on the reactions of ordinary citizens. Indeed, making the EU more visible is also to complicate the issue, as European integration is a flexible reality. Informing oneself involves taking cognisance of existing arguments, which are both positive and negative. The growing politicisation of European issues has led to, or strengthened, ambivalence about the process of European integration, whether that process is implicit and administrative, or explicit and politically structured. My analyses indicate the need to consider the hypothesis that a greater visibility of European debates and issues, as well as a more direct experience of the EU, may itself lead to ambivalence, itself be a source of unpredictability and uncertainty. One should also consider that politicisation, defined this time as political normalisation of European integration, may transform support into indifference, rather than into informed or qualified opposition. In my reading, there are two distinct forms of indifference: distance and fatalism. Here, politicising European integration leads ordinary citizens to more generally assimilate this 'into politics'. The consequences for the democratic game are not the same, depending on whether one talks of ambivalence or of indifference. Ambivalence leads to a degree of unpredictability which European elites find difficult to adapt to, particularly those who are anxious to bring citizens closer to their EU in a democratic framework. Indifference produces apathetic behaviour. It is clear that the tangle of reactions of ambivalence and indifference renews the classic questions of the EU's democratic deficit. At best it strengthens apathy and produces extremely low electoral participation. At worst the ambivalent citizens go to the ballot boxes and the indifferent ones become politicised selectively, leading to instability and unpredictability in European political life.

Understanding the nature, scope and content of indifference and indecision has far-reaching implications for the analysis of the process of European integration and the state of democracy in Europe. The ambivalence and indifference that are illustrated in this text should not be considered to be inherent or necessary foundations of the view that membership of the EU is neither good nor bad. I use this category as a microscope to analyse a phenomenon that is as evident as it is difficult to grasp empirically: indifference and ambivalence towards the EU and more broadly towards politics in general.

The results presented in this volume are most likely unsurprising for scholars outside European studies interested in (de-)politicisation or alienation (Dalton 2004; Hay 2007, to name a few). I do not want to overstate the uniqueness of what I am saying, nor exaggerate the contrast with what has been long said outside European studies. Indeed, if we go back to the work of James D. Wright (1976), we can distinguish between three ideal-types of citizens. Firstly, the *consenters*, who intentionally adopt the rules of social and political life, consent in an active way because they are interested in political life and have some knowledge of it, and even feel competent to participate regardless of their political preferences. Secondly, the *dissenters*, who are conscious of the rules of social and political life but refuse them and who are, like the consenters, interested in political life. Finally, the *assenters*, whose approval is without any commitment, participation and/or interest in political activities, to some extent they can be seen as indifferent to 'politics'. Consenters and dissenters have been widely studied, in the form of Europhiles and Eurosceptics, but the assenters or 'Euro-indifferents' have been neglected by European studies so far. Wright's contrasting argument offers a middle ground between consent and dissent – something the author called *assent* or *pragmatic acquiescence* (Wright 1976). What I have argued here is that the attitudes of many Europeans today can be more accurately described as based on assent rather than consent or dissent.

These findings have important consequences for our democracies and the European democracy in particular. Indifference, defined as the lack of interest in 'political life' (and in this case in particular for European integration), is not a phenomenon that is either necessarily or profoundly negative towards the legitimacy of a political order, as long as it shows passive acceptance of the political system. The importance of belief must not be underestimated in this, however diffuse or unconscious

it may be. The excessive influence of dissidents or the presence of too many apathetic citizens, i.e. assenters, may pose a threat to the serenity of pluralist democracies however.

It seems clear that indecision and ambivalence do not have the same consequences for the democratic order because in a situation of sporadic politicisation by elites, this sentiment generally leads to unpredictability in ordinary citizens' behaviour – for example during a referendum (Franklin, Marsch, and McLaren 1994). Understanding middle ground attitudes towards European integration is therefore key to understanding the success of anti-EU parties and the dynamics of EU related referendums. Here I strongly agree with Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks when they stress that European integration has been slowed not because people have changed their minds, but because elites have become increasingly divided on the issue (Hooghe and Marks 2008: 13). If the game has changed, it is above all because it has become more complex and less readable for ordinary citizens. Far from being illogical or unstructured, their indecision and indifference can be read as a consequence of the growing politicisation of European issues.

European democrats – myself among them – will probably be disappointed by the empirical results of this text, and some may perhaps even be scathing. However for anyone who cares about the state of our democracies and more importantly about citizens, it is time to stop listening to our own fairy tale and begin listening more carefully to ordinary citizens. Of course when listening to citizens, European scholars will probably feel uneasy at some of the evidence on popular beliefs. Scholars who accept that legitimacy is the phenomenon by which people are willing to accept domination on normative grounds, regardless of the specific beliefs this acceptance is based on, will not be disturbed by this text. Those who focus on mobilisation and emphasise that eroding trust does not necessarily imply civic apathy, will also pass through this book and continue to ignore these passive citizens. Scholars who admit that fatalism and distance can lead to alienation at the individual level will be more concerned by the evolution demonstrated in this book. They will be particularly concerned if they share, as I do, the point of view that the so-called democratic deficit of the EU is only one symptom among others of an internal transformation in the history of democracy.

The consequences of this uncertain reaction to the democratic game are not the same depending on whether one talks of ambivalence or of indifference. Ambivalence leads to a degree of unpredictability which European elites find difficult to adapt to, particularly those who are anxious to bring citizens closer to the EU in a democratic framework. Indifference produces apathetic behaviour and potentially also blocks good reception of political information proposed by the political actors or the media. It is clear that the tangle of reactions to ambivalence and indifference renews the classic questions of the EU's democratic deficit. At worst it strengthens apathy and produces extremely low electoral participation. At best, the ambivalent citizens go to the ballot boxes and the indifferent ones become selectively politicised, leading to instability and unpredictability in European political life.

As democrats and European citizens, scholars are most likely concerned about witnessing this growth in indifference. The more pessimistic among them will probably agree with Antonio Gramsci, writing in 1917:

'Indifference is the deadweight of history. The indifference operates with great power on history. The indifference operates passively, but it operates. It is fate, that which cannot be counted on. It twists programs and ruins the best-conceived plans. It is the raw material that ruins intelligence.'

Those who are more optimistic will instead agree with Richard Rose, who argues, in the conclusion of his last book, that:

'Indifference or hesitancy about the EU is not a sign of principled opposition to further integration, but of an inclination to make pragmatic judgment on a proposal' (Rose 2013: 155).

Whatever the point of view adopted, agreeing with this last declaration means above all taking Europeans seriously when they make a pragmatic judgment. They have judged European democracy and economy harshly, and they were right to do so. Not taking 'no' for an answer and pushing forward the integration process have lead citizens to believe that European integration will go on regardless of what they do or who they vote for. Moreover, despite the four national referendums that were held on the European Constitution, 73 per cent of Europeans were not asked to give their direct consent to this

important EU evolution and the size of the excluded majority even reached 99 per cent for the Lisbon Treaty (Rose 2013: 93). In light of these figures, it is clear that the belief that citizens don't have a say in European integration is simply based on pragmatic observation.

Commentators, politicians and European scholars breathlessly repeat that it is not possible to continue European integration without further consent from the people. However, EU leaders repackaged almost all the substantive content of the draft Constitution, shorn of the symbols of statehood, into the Lisbon Treaty (Rose 2013: 40). The second time around governments in France and the Netherlands did not take the risk of consulting their citizens via referenda; and when Irish voters rejected the Lisbon Treaty, a second referendum was called and the Treaty came into effect in 2009. Given this record, it is difficult to argue that decisions can no longer be made without popular consent.

If we go back to the primary definition of the permissive consensus given by Valdimir Orlando Key, then 'the existence of a permissive opinion distribution may mean that if the indicated action is taken dissent will not be widespread' (1961: 32). The case of the Constitutional Treaty, followed by the Lisbon Treaty, makes it possible to cynically argue that the indicated action was taken. However it came at a price. The Community was primarily a creature of the elites (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970: 41) and for many Europeans this is still the case. Indeed, some European citizens believe that European politics is quite removed from the world they live in. Europe is a polity but they don't see themselves as part of it. Lots of European citizens strongly believe that they do not have any way of influencing the course of European integration. Others don't believe that politicians, either national or European, are able to influence it. The assenting part of the population are 'spectators to somebody else's game' as James C. Wright put it (1976). He writes:

'The chief distinguishing trait of assenters is that they go along with the system, not because they are "deeply attached to the regime as such", but because the system is pretty much beside the point of their lives and felt concerns' (Wright 1976: 268)

Most of the reactions towards European integration discussed in this volume seem to fit this description perfectly. From this point of view, studying the middle-of-the-road category of citizens has contributed to the understanding of the ways this new European political order is appropriated by its citizens. It raises questions as to a form of tacit acceptance which in many ways echoes the permissive consensus model, which hasn't completely disappeared in the post-Maastricht era (although it has been transformed), as this book has demonstrated. This tacit consent of the people, the mirror of an elite consensus, has been replaced by a passive acceptance, tainted with indifference and above all indecision in the face of increasing elite dissent. As we have seen throughout this book, citizens' reactions towards European integration are characterised by a fatalism regarding the declining belief that European integration offers any opportunity for defence against the deterioration of citizens' living conditions. Most citizens are indifferent towards the EU because they don't see it as the political level responsible for the problems that concern them, whether they are local, European, or global (Duchesne *et al.* 2013; White 2011). The EU lacks salience in the minds of Europeans: 'of the five most salient issues in most west European democracies – health care provision, education, law and order, pension and social security policy, and taxation – none is primarily an EU competence' (Moravcsik 2002: 15). To this extent, the EU is indeed 'outside the world' most citizens live in.

I have argued that indifference and indecision represent an overwhelming phenomenon which has to be taken into account when analysing empirical legitimacy. This text offers an alternative diagnosis for trends in citizens' support for European integration over the last forty years and explores the meaning of middle-of-the-road, uncommitted answers to survey questions related to support for the EU and European integration. It offers an empirical contribution to the literature on public opinion towards the EU, suggesting novel sources of (de-) legitimisation of a political construction widely seen as being in a kind of crisis over its 'democratic deficit'. It shows that the evolution of citizens' relations to the European integration process cannot be reduced to an alleged ending of the permissive consensus and subsequent rise in Euroscepticism.

This text and the book from which it is proceeding focuses on the middle-of-the-road attitudes of ordinary citizens towards the European integration process, characterised by indifference *and* indecision. This category has grown over time and cannot be assimilated either to Europhilia or to Euroscepticism. Furthermore, the qualitative exploration of the 'neither-nor' category confirms the

overlap of the logic of indifference and ambivalence. The findings suggest that the critical distinction between ambivalence and indifference is not as straightforward as suggested by recent studies on ambivalence (Stoeckel 2013)⁵. This link should clearly be further analysed and characterised both empirically and conceptually as these two reactions are not independent and do not have the same democratic consequences.

Further work on indifference and ambivalence should focus on performing comparative analyses identifying and explaining different patterns of these uncertainties both at the national and European levels. Having saying this, I am not implying here that the domestic and global levels can be readily distinguished from the European level by European citizens. On the contrary, we have argued elsewhere that citizens in Britain, France and Francophone Belgium are 'overlooking' Europe, ignoring it in favour of globalisation, economic flows, and crises of political corruption (Duchesne *et al.* 2013). The logic of fatalism that leads to indifference has reminded us of the need to consider the global sources of de-politicisation that are at play when considering both domestic de-politicisation and indifferent reactions towards the EU (Hay 2007). These uncertain reactions should be analysed for themselves but also because there can be used as a microscope to understand how our democracies are evolving. Thus, uncertainties do not simply raise the question of the extension of democracy to the European level. Rather, they impact on the future of the very life of modern democracy. To conclude, integrating these indifferent and uncertain citizens should be our primary concern as political analysts. As Colin Hay writes in his book, *Why we hate politics*:

'Political analysts surely have some responsibility towards their subject matter – particularly, one might reasonably surmise, when it comes to diagnosing and seeking solutions to clearly articulated political pathologies. The contemporary condition of disengagement and disenchantment with politics itself is as clear an instance as one could conceivably imagine of such situation. Yet it is a topic which has received less attention than this significance might lead one to expect' (Hay 2007: 4).

These reactions of indifference and ambivalence to European integration are consistent with existing national democratic realities. As political scientists we therefore have a responsibility to seek to understand them on their own terms and give them the scientific attention they deserve.

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⁵ Note that Florian Stoeckel does not define indifference and ambivalence in the same way I do in this book. He defines indifference in a very narrow way, close to the 'don't know' category, enclosing the less knowledgeable citizen. Part of the discrepancies observed between our results comes from this conceptual distinction.

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