



Deeply contested yet taken for granted

The legitimation of the euro between the political and the everyday. An analysis through focus groups

Joris Melman

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Preface

The Post-Crisis Legitimacy of the European Union (PLATO) (2017-2020) was an Innovative Training Network (ITN) funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. 15 PhD researchers have studied the legitimacy of the EU's crisis responses in a number of different areas together with senior researchers in a consortium of nine university partners and eleven training partners, coordinated by ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo.

By investigating the legitimacy of the EU's responses to recent crises, PLATO has generated new understanding of where crises can also be legitimacy crises for the EU. It has used the example of the financial crisis to build and test theory of what would amount to a legitimacy crisis in the case of a multi-state, non-state political system such as the EU.

This report is part of a project series which publishes the doctoral theses written by PLATO's 15 Early Stage Researchers. In this thesis Joris Melman uses focus groups in France, Italy and the Netherlands to understand how citizens from different social groups perceived the euro after the financial crisis. On the whole citizens accept the euro as an everyday feature in their lives. They also largely expect member state democracies to take responsibility for adapting to the euro.

Chris Lord

PLATO Scientific Coordinator

Summary

As questions on the legitimation of the EU have become central in the literature of European studies, so has the role of public opinion. Yet, in studying public opinion on the EU, relatively little attention has been paid to how legitimation takes place 'on the ground': how citizens perceive, understand and evaluate European integration. While a large literature has emerged mapping attitudes like support or trust on the basis of surveys, it lacks a good understanding of how citizens perceive the presence of the EU in their daily lives, how this relates to the way they make sense of the political questions surrounding European integration, and how this subsequently results in their normative positioning on the EU.

Addressing this gap, this dissertation proposes a theoretical framework for studying 'legitimation on the ground'. In turn, it applies this framework by empirically studying a particular case: the euro. As a huge step in the process of European integration, the euro on the one hand entails a deep transformation in governance, raising important questions of democracy, autonomy and solidarity. On the other hand, the euro is also a tangible, daily life object through which the EU entered the everyday lives of citizens. And while the euro on the one hand has become strongly contested in the political debate – particularly since the euro crisis – it at the same time has continued to see high support from citizens. The euro thus presents us with a puzzle that is at the heart of understanding EU legitimation, bringing up very sharply the question how legitimacy balances between the everyday and the political. How can an object with such deeply political consequences lend itself so easily to normalization – seemingly at least? Can the huge political questions attached to it simply remain latent? Or could it be that the euro's sustainability is in fact jeopardized because of people's opinions on underlying questions like solidarity and national autonomy? To put it in one phrase, how do citizens *legitimate* the euro?

Using a series of focus groups conducted in Italy, France and the Netherlands, this study employs a 'close reading' of public opinion on the euro. It investigates how citizens perceive and evaluate the euro, and whether the political implications of the currency union are compatible with the normative stances of its public. The focus group results show the importance of everyday life conceptions of the euro, in which the euro is

perceived as a practical object having in the first place a utilitarian and symbolic meaning, and is seen in a relatively a-political light – even if relevant differences along national and social lines emerge as well. To the extent that people do talk about the euro in a more political way, their political understanding is often rather diffuse. As a consequence of this generally a-political perception of the euro, evaluations of the euro are likely to be based more on either practical considerations of convenience and daily life utility, or on more generic attitudes towards European integration in general – or even politics at large –, rather than on evaluations of the euro's specific consequences, meaning opinions are *embedded* in larger societal or political perceptions. Indeed, rather than being consciously evaluated, the euro itself is mostly taken for granted, and met with what we could call a banal acceptance. Focus group participants do rarely question it, or affectively praise it for that matter, as they do not see the euro as a topic subject to political agency.

Stances towards the politics of the euro are more ambiguous however. On itself, the types of opinions expressed in the focus groups are not directly problematic for the euro, as most are in line with what the euro demands in terms of solidarity and autonomy. At least, focus group participants rarely reject the euro because of its effects in terms of such items. At the same time, this is also because these questions are seen as complex, and people have difficulty in connecting them to the euro, and in making sense of them in the first place. As a consequence, stances here are often characterized by ambivalence and indeterminacy, and appear susceptible to mobilization. And in that sense, such opinions are more feeble than appears on the surface. This is particularly because people hardly see the euro as a matter of common European concern, and primarily see questions related to the euro through strongly national lenses. Lacking a sense of community, the normative underpinnings of the euro are fragile.

Thus, this study shows how in understanding the legitimacy of the euro, it is crucial to understand the role of its everyday character, as well as the perceived complexity of its politics. In terms of support, the euro is currently 'protected' by its practical, 'banal' appearance, which shields it from public contestation. As long as people continue to see the euro as a relatively a-political entity and its political consequences as diffuse, even negative opinions on the euro's politics do not need to manifest themselves as active problems for the euro. At the same time, this is no guarantee for its stability, and the single currency's banality is no

assurance for its continued legitimacy. Fundamentally, the euro requires some more fundamental predispositions from its public in order to make it normatively and functionally tenable, and the findings of this research suggest that these are fragile. This hints at a *potential* legitimacy deficit, in which mobilization by political elites plays a crucial role. Even if it might be difficult to lift the euro out of the banal, everyday light it is seen in now, opposition to its politics can still translate into functional problems. In the case push comes to shove in one way or another, the banal acceptance of the euro then also has another side: it means there also is little diffuse support protecting it. In that sense, the stability of the euro depends on its politics maintaining low salience.

Finally, the relevance of these results also goes beyond the euro itself, as they have implications for the way we understand the role of public opinion in the EU as well. By underscoring how opinions on European affairs can often be seen as a derivative of more general political opinions, and are thus characterized by a kind of diffuseness, they add to our understanding of the politicization of the EU. For in this way, they suggest that the constraining dissensus that is said to have emerged should not be seen so much as fueled by strong politicization of the EU at the citizen level, but rather as driven by a more general political discontent which creates a more fertile ground for mobilization against the EU by political challengers.

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Writing a doctoral dissertation is an experience of extremes. Moments of inspiration are interspersed with many hours of muddling through. It is an enormous luxury to be able to dedicate yourself to studying a topic of your own interest, yet a PhD is far from a luxurious experience. And most of all, it is a solitary trajectory, but one that at the same time is full of wonderful encounters. Indeed, there are many I should thank for helping me along the path to completing this monograph.

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Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Contested yet supported – The puzzle of the euro’s legitimacy	11
2.1. Dimensions of the euro.....	13
2.2. Making sense of the euro’s legitimacy	26
2.3. The euro and the public	34
Chapter 3: Studying legitimacy between the everyday and the political.....	45
3.1. Background: what the diffuse character of public opinion means for the EU’s legitimacy	46
3.2. Studying public opinion in the context of legitimacy.....	55
3.3. Way ahead: studying the legitimation of the euro	66
Chapter 4: Methods	69
4.1. The choice for focus groups	70
4.2. Focus group design and set-up	74
4.3. Analysis	96
Chapter 5: Citizen perceptions of the euro	101
5.1. Making sense of the euro.....	102
5.2. Linking the euro with interests and actors.....	112
5.3. Consequences of the euro	119
5.4. Conclusion	125
Chapter 6: Evaluations of the politics of the euro.....	129
6.1. Solidarity	131
6.2. Autonomy	145
6.3. Interdependence and external interventions	158
6.4. Notions of community: a European ‘we’?.....	166
6.5. Conclusion	179
Chapter 7: Normative positioning on the euro.....	184
7.1. Mapping attitudes and evaluations	185
7.2. Grounds for opinions	192
7.3. The embeddedness of opinions on the euro.....	197
7.4. Salience.....	206
7.5. Conclusion.....	218
Chapter 8: Conclusion	221
8.1. Research findings	223
8.2. Interpreting the results: legitimation of the euro	227
8.3. Implications beyond the euro	231
8.4. Theoretical implications	236
8.5. Policy implications	237
8.6. Discussion: limitations and future research.....	240
Bibliography	244
Appendices	269

List of figures and tables

Figures

Figure 2.1: Support for the euro compared to the EU and the national government. Source: Eurobarometer.....	38
Figure 3.1: Indicators of system support (author's own adaptation, based on Norris, 2011: 24) ..	60
Figure 4.1: Support for the euro in the Netherlands, France and Italy compared. Source: Eurobarometer.....	79
Figure 4.2: Political attitudes in the Netherlands, France and Italy compared.....	80
Figure 4.3: Citizens associating the EU with the euro per country	81
Figure 4.4: Effect of euro on EU identity (2019)	81
Figure 4.5: Characteristics of focus group participants.....	92
Figure 5.1: Topics discussed during Q1	103
Figure 5.2: Categories discussed during Q1 per group	108
Figure 5.3: Reasons for the introduction of the euro.....	112
Figure 5.4: Reasons for the euro's introduction per group	114
Figure 5.5: Type of actors mentioned as affected by the euro per group	120
Figure 5.6: Types of actors mentioned as affected by the euro (class averages)	122
Figure 6.1: Discussions of statement on solidarity in the Eurozone	133
Figure 6.2: Arguments used on solidarity.	135
Figure 6.3: Discussions of statement on autonomy and the euro	147
Figure 6.4: Discussions of obliging countries in the Eurozone to cut public spending	159
Figure 6.5: Meaning of 'we' in Q4-6.	170
Figure 7.1: Number of attitudes towards and evaluations of the euro by focus group.....	188
Figure 7.2: Attitudes towards and evaluations of the euro by question	189
Figure 7.3: Occurrence of words 'euro', 'Europe(an)' and 'EU per political interest level	207
Figure 7.4: References to euro+EU by question	209
Figure 7.5: References to euro+EU by group.....	209

Tables

Table 3.1: Relation between legitimacy and politicization	57
Table 3.2: Schematization of the legitimation of the euro in relation with its politics	67
Table 4.1: Characteristics of focus group participants	93
Table 5.1: Summary of observations made in chapter 5	126
Table 6.1: Times focus group participants mention the words 'autonomy', 'sovereign' and 'independence' per group.....	152
Table 6.2: Occurrence of the terms 'we', 'us' and 'our' in the focus groups.	168
Table 6.3: Meaning of 'we' in Q4. The numbers are colored by the relative value of a number within the focus group.....	169
Table 6.4: Summary of observations made in chapter 6	181
Table 7.1: Total amount of positive, negative and ambivalent attitudes and evaluations coded .	187
Table 7.2: Grounds for attitudes towards the euro	193
Table 7.3: Grounds for evaluations of the euro.....	193
Table 7.4: Mentions of country names by group.....	198
Table 7.5: Occurrence of themes related to discontent by focus group (in number of words coded on each theme).....	203

Chapter 1

Introduction

There is a paradox in the way academics understand the relation between the European Union and the public. On the one hand, the literature is full of the increasingly critical role that citizens play in the process of European integration. While European affairs largely used to be an elite affair with public opinion being quiescent (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970), this appears to have gradually changed over the last decades. Especially since the euro crisis and the cascade of ensuing crises, such as the migration crisis, Brexit, the Covid-19 crisis, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it seems that the stakes of European integration have become ever more visible to the public, with this public in response making itself heard. The rise of Eurosceptic parties, the increasingly heated public debate on European affairs, the growing impact of electoral pressure on national governments' positioning in European negotiations, and the outcomes of several referendums on the EU have all contributed to the perception that it is now the public that is decisive in European integration. With all this in mind, who could disagree with the claim that the EU 'hinges more than ever upon public support'? (Hobolt and Wratil, 2015: 238).

However convincing it may be, this representation of the public as a decisive force in European politics is in stark contrast to another image of the public. For at the same time, it is well known that the relation between citizens and European integration is also characterized by a certain distance. Especially a more qualitative line of research has found that rather than European integration being politicized among the public, citizens' attitudes towards the EU are better characterized as ambiguous and indifferent (e.g. Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016; Duchesne et al., 2013; van Ingelgom, 2014; White, 2011). This literature shows that many citizens

lack knowledge on and interest in European politics, and often find it difficult to formulate a concrete, stable opinion. While the EU observer might see increasing public contestation, peoples' actual opinions might be more diffuse than this image suggests.

This paradox evidently has important bearings on our understanding of public opinion on European integration and the legitimacy of the EU. Empirically, it raises questions on how these two conceptions can be reconciled. Should we see them as complementary, or do the findings coming from one perspective necessitate a correction of the other? More theoretically, it raises the question to what extent the EU indeed 'hinges' on the public, and to what extent public opinion challenges EU legitimacy. While politicization of the EU combined with increasing disaffection potentially jeopardises its legitimacy, a diagnosis of indifference on the other hand might rather lead to an assessment closer to the old permissive consensus thesis which downplays the role of citizens.

The tension between these perspectives appears to be rooted in two different ways of looking at public opinion. On the one hand, there is a more functional, top-down perspective that asks to what degree public opinion impacts political outcomes, and to what extent there is a support base for the direction European integration is taking. With such questions in mind, an enormous literature has emerged measuring a wide range of public attitudes, varying from support for European integration to trust in EU institutions, and identifications with communities to attitudes towards policies and issues ranging from migration policies to European solidarity. But while this approach is dominant in EU studies, there also is another perspective that focuses more on how citizens actually experience European integration in their day-to-day lives (e.g. Duchesne et al. 2010; Favell and Guiraudon, 2009, Recchi et al., 2019). Rather than mapping attitudes, it looks at how citizens make sense of European integration, and talk about EU affairs in their own words. As such, this perspective looks more at the experiences, perceptions and normative conceptions that underlie the opinions measured in attitudinal research, and has more attention for notions of salience and the intensity with which attitudes may be held. As such, this perspective is crucial for understanding what the meaning of their opinions might be.

In understanding the legitimacy of the EU then, a central challenge is to relate these different perspectives. On the one hand, our interest in the legitimacy and stability of the EU polity means we need to ask how citizens think about those political issues experts have identified as important. Do citizens trust European institutions, and what are their opinions on important themes like European solidarity and national autonomy? In this sense, understanding the public legitimacy of the EU involves an interpretation of public beliefs: to what extent do people's stances and normative orientations match with what political institutions 'objectively' demand? On the other hand, if we are to take serious citizens' opinions and want to understand how citizens themselves think and feel about the EU, we need to be sensitive to how they understand and reproduce the EU's political reality, and how their opinions are embedded in the subjective reality of their everyday lives. How do they understand and talk about European issues themselves, and how important are these to them? After all, making claims about the importance of citizen involvement can only be genuine if it involves taking seriously citizens' actual perspective, rather than making claims on their behalf.

Put differently, understanding the EU's legitimacy requires a balancing act between the political and the everyday, the objective and the subjective, the manifest and the tacit; to put citizens' actual perceptions central while keeping an eye for fundamental political challenges behind, and study manifest public beliefs while interpreting these in a more objective way. Since Weber, scholars have debated whether legitimacy resides in beliefs of the public or normative standards. But fundamentally, both beliefs and standards are indispensable parts of a the concept of legitimacy - as will be discussed more thoroughly later. It is the balancing between both that forms the background to this study.

If there is any particular element of European integration that asks us how fundamental political questions interact with daily life realities, it is the euro. Europe's single currency is arguably 'the most ambitious step ever undertaken in the direction of deepening European integration' (Piana, 2013: 98), "the boldest expression of a nascent federal power at the European level" (Jabko, 2010: 319), having fundamental implications for monetary and fiscal policymaking. Yet, it is also a plain, daily life object. While this does not decrease its political importance - on the contrary - it

does bring up the question how this banal, daily life side coexists and interacts with its political side, and what this means for legitimacy.

Seen from the perspective of the public, the euro's main relevance might lie in that it made the normally so distant process of European integration into a tangible reality. With the euro, the complex political entity that is the EU became something that you can carry in your pocket, that allows you to cross borders without changing money, and that you use in everyday interactions. As such, it can be seen as a way of normalizing EU governance by making it into an ordinary, banal part of daily life (e.g. McNamara, 2015).

On the other hand, the euro has consequences that are anything but banal. In the end, monetary policy is a core state power (e.g. Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2016), and raises huge questions of authority, democracy, autonomy and identity. Institutionally, the euro entailed transferring authority to the newly established ECB. More fundamentally, it meant subscribing to a rule based regime with implications for how to run the national economy, the extent of which only became fully clear with the euro crisis – where Eurozone membership became associated with constrained national decision-making as well as with decreased control of domestic electorates. In addition, it increased interdependence between member states, and as such made demands on inter-state solidarity, which – together with its symbolic importance – made the euro unsettling for existing national identities. And then there are the euro's economic consequences: while the discussion is still open to what extent it has been beneficial for European economies in general, there is little doubt that the euro increased divergence between member states, meaning that it has been contested in terms of its output legitimacy as well.

These dimensions have also become highly visible in the public debate. While the euro was initially mostly depoliticized in the years before and after its introduction (e.g. Schmidt, 2013), it became strongly contested during the euro crisis. What became clear was precisely how the euro is not a mere technical object with only practical, neutral consequences, but instead is a deeply political project. As such, it became a topic of dispute between political leaders, heatedly contested in public debates, and indeed became an object of citizen protests in some countries. Analysts pointed at the euro's legitimacy problems, argued that the euro was the

main culprit of the crisis and would hamper economic growth in the years to come, and many assumed that awareness of this spread to citizens too. Along these lines, some commentators were certain that “public willingness to support the Eurozone financially will diminish” (Mody, 2018: 424).

Despite such predictions however, support for the euro has remained high. While decreasing a bit after the euro crisis, Eurobarometer data shows that support always stayed above 50% at the EU-level and above 60% in the euro area – very high numbers compared to other European institutions (and to national ones for that matter). At the moment of writing support is even at an all-time high of 72% EU-wide and 80% in the euro area (Eurobarometer, 2022), despite the Covid-19 crisis leading to another round of criticism on the euro in the public debate. Apparently, the political consequences of the euro that have been salient in the political and media debate do not weigh so heavily on most citizens’ evaluations. Which is remarkable on itself, but even more because almost all other political attitudes did deteriorate dramatically during the euro crisis. Trust in the EU for example almost halved (going from 57% in 2007 to 31% in 2012), and average trust in national governments went as low as 23%. Yet somehow, this did not translate into an en masse rejection of the euro.

The euro thus presents us with a puzzle that is at the heart of understanding EU legitimation, bringing up very sharply the question how legitimacy balances between the everyday and the political. If we are to better understand the contrast between an increasing politicization of the EU and a more ambivalent or even indifferent public, the euro therefore offers a way of studying this contrast. On the one hand it entails a deep transformation in governance, on the other it is an everyday, banal object. On the one hand it has been highly contested, on the other it appears to be largely supported. How can an object with such deeply political consequences lend itself so easily to normalization – seemingly at least? Can the huge political questions attached to it simply remain latent? Or could it be that the euro’s sustainability is in fact jeopardized because of people’s opinions on underlying questions like solidarity and national autonomy? To put it in one phrase, we want to understand better the legitimation of the euro. Being interested particularly in the perspective of citizens the research question driving this thesis is the following: how do

citizens understand and evaluate the euro and its politics, and what does this mean for its legitimacy?

Addressing the euro's legitimation however is not a straightforward exercise, as there seem to be different ways of doing so. Most obviously, there is the question whether the euro has sufficient support. The euro depends on public support for its sustainability, and support can be seen as the 'glue' holding the monetary union together (e.g. Jonung, 2002; Roth et al., 2019). Besides direct support however, the euro's legitimacy depends on how citizens deal with its underlying political consequences. For example, it requires sufficient EU-wide allegiances to support the solidarity necessary for the euro's survival, just as it requires citizens to accept the transfer of authority the euro entails, and its effect on political decision-making. Ultimately, these items are just as important for the euro's legitimacy. Yet, it is not is not a given how, because it is not certain how concrete euro support is related to public stances towards the politics of the euro. For example, what would it mean if citizens support the euro itself, but at the same time reject the policies needed for its sustenance? And even if such questions can currently remain latent because they are not sufficiently politicized, what happens when push does come to shove and electorates are faced with hard choices?

In other words, we want to have a better understanding of the meaning of public opinion on the euro. And for doing so, we need to understand in more detail how opinions on the single currency and its politics are shaped: we want to know what perceptions of the euro underlie people's stances; how people link the euro with its political consequences; and, how people's underlying values and normative considerations match with the euro. Currently, little is known on these questions, despite the centrality of the euro to European integration. On questions of support, a relatively substantial research has emerged over the past years. Particularly on support for the euro (e.g. Clements et al., 2014; Hobolt and Wratil, 2015; Jurado, 2020; Roth et al., 2016, 2019, to mention only the studies published after the euro crisis), but also on items like support for financial solidarity (Bechtel et al., 2014; Kleider and Stoeckel, 2018; Stoeckel and Kuhn, 2018; Verhaegen, 2017), and European economic governance (Kuhn and Stoeckel, 2014). Yet, this research has less to say on how these items are linked. More importantly, being almost exclusively

based on survey research, it offers limited insight into the perceptions and considerations underlying the measured attitudes, and neither into the intensity and stability of such attitudes.

This thesis therefore suggests an approach that complements existing attitudinal approaches: an approach that has more attention for the 'everyday' side of the euro, while at the same time keeping an eye on the political questions underlying the euro. On the one hand, it puts the everyday side of the euro central by focusing peoples' understanding and lived experience of the euro, as well as the strength of their opinions. On the other hand, it goes beyond this by also investigating how this relates to the political questions underlying it: how do lifeworld perceptions of the euro relate to stances towards its politics, and what does this in turn mean for its legitimacy? In doing so, this approach also provides insight into the legitimacy of the euro beyond banal acceptance. What happens when push comes to shove? Will a banal acceptance of the euro then be enough to sustain the deep transformation in governance the euro entails?

While this study thus offers a conceptual as well as an empirical contribution to studying the legitimation of the EU, it also aims to make a methodological contribution. For doing so, this study uses focus groups in order to zoom in on public discourse about the euro and 'dissect' it. While this method is still seen as relatively innovative in EU studies, earlier research using it has shown how focus groups are particularly useful in functioning as a 'microscope' that help us to better understand how public opinion is formed on the ground. Indeed, this study holds focus groups to be a particularly useful method for studying people's perceptions of the euro, and how they discuss the euro and its politics in their own words. Rather than studying attitudes as pre-existing properties of individuals, focus groups help us understand how opinions are formed in processes of collective sense making. More precisely then, this thesis presents the results from focus groups organized in three countries with rather different euro-experiences: France, Italy and the Netherlands. In all three countries, focus groups were organized with three different social groups: financial professionals, hairdressers, and unemployed citizens.

Evidently, there are also limitations to what focus group results can say about the questions raised in this introduction. Most importantly, there is the issue of external validity: due to their small N, we should be cautious

in generalizing these results to national populations. At the same time, both careful sampling aimed at ensuring the highest possible typological representativeness, as well as interpreting focus group findings in conjunction with the findings of existing survey research, can help in partially overcoming this problem. What is more, rather than grasping the entire distribution of political preferences, the main purpose of the focus groups is to increase our *typological* understanding of public opinion on the euro by inductively studying how people make sense of it, in order to subsequently contribute to addressing the larger theoretical questions that are raised in this introduction.

There are six chapters to the work that follows. Chapter 2 firstly give a more detailed account of the puzzle of the euro. As it is a more multidimensional, complex political entity than its everyday appearance may give away, this chapter outlines the euro's different political, economic and cultural dimensions, and on this basis makes clear how we can make sense of its legitimacy and what questions this brings up. It then describes what existing research tells us on these questions, and what questions currently remain unanswered.

Chapter 3 provides a theoretical framework for studying legitimacy. Since the aim of this thesis is to study the euro's legitimacy by looking at the interaction between the euro's daily and political side, how do we do this? The chapter first provides a background by giving an account for how EU legitimacy has been studied in the literature. Against this background, it lays out the particular approach of this research, making clear how we conceptually give weight to things like perceptions, support, and the strength and stability of opinions, thus providing a conceptual apparatus.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach. It justifies and explains the use of focus groups, and describes the choices made in their set-up. It also describes the way the resulting focus group data are analyzed, particularly because relatively little standards are available in political science in this respect (e.g. Cyr, 2016). Along the way, this chapter also makes clear what epistemological position this study takes, while also reflecting upon its research ethics.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 then are the empirical chapters. Step-by-step, they present the focus group data in order to address the overarching question

of the euro's legitimation. Chapter 5 firstly concerns the question how citizens 'naturally' perceive and understand the euro. What kind of object is the euro to focus group participants? What associations do they have with it? Do they see it in economic, cultural or political terms? How do they understand its consequences?

Chapter 6 zooms in on the political side of the euro. How do people evaluate the 'harder' questions underlying the monetary union, questions concerning community, autonomy and democracy? By bringing these questions explicitly to the attention of participants, this chapter focuses more on the 'objective' side of the euro's legitimacy.

Chapter 7 finally focuses on a question that is at the core of this research: how should we understand normative positioning towards the euro? On the basis of the previous two chapters, we already have some insights into both perceptions of the euro as well as evaluations of its politics. Yet, how do these two interact, and together feed into actual evaluations of the euro? To get a clearer grasp of this, this chapter takes a narrow, deep focus on moments in which the euro is explicitly evaluated.

The focus groups were conducted in 2019. This is a time in which the turmoil of the euro crisis had been over for a while, but its consequences were still being felt – particularly in Southern Europe – and indeed the crisis was still fresh in the memory of most people. What we did not know then was that it would not take long before Europe would enter its next crisis with the entry of Covid-19 in Europe, followed two years later by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this light the 'polycrisis' of 2007-2017 (Zeitlin et al., 2019) might perhaps only be a foreshadowing of an even more fundamental crisis in which Covid-19 and the situation in Ukraine interact with other issues such as inflation, energy shortages, sovereign debt problems, or the climate crisis (e.g. Tooze, 2022) in a way that leads to more fundamental political and economic reconfigurations. On the one hand, this means that the world looks different now, and that the public sentiments on which this study focuses might have evolved. The more we move from the era of 'post-politics' to one of 'hyper-politics' (Jäger, 2021), the more odd it might seem to look at notions of indifference. And indeed, it is possible that this study describes a pre-2020 state of affairs and the findings presented here are not accurate for describing current public sentiments.

However, this does not decrease the relevance of the results presented here – on the contrary. Indeed, the issues central in this study, such as questions of the public’s attitude towards questions of solidarity, European authority, and – indeed – the euro’s legitimacy in particular have only gained in importance. While the revolutionary NextGenerationEU fund might have been set up relatively smoothly compared to the upheaval that surrounded the European response to the euro crisis, it is certain that the last word has not been said about these issues, as high inflation could lead to increasing politicization of ECB policies and perhaps even the euro itself. It is therefore only more important to understand the types of opinions the public has on these issues, and even if these have evolved over the past three years, it is still rather useful to understand on what basis this evaluation takes place. This study hopes to offer insights that are also of value in understanding how these debates unfold in the future.

Chapter 2

Contested yet supported – The puzzle of the euro's legitimacy

It is hard to think of an object whose reality is as treacherous as that of money. In its every day-usage, money takes on the appearance of a plain, objective reality. When I think about the euro, I might think about the wrinkled paper notes I carry in my wallet, which I might use to buy certain goods or services, and which are simply a part of my everyday life. And yet, money could not exist without a whole array of institutions and social relationships. Without these, a currency cannot be trusted to reliably represent any kind of value – money is only money because we believe and agree it is money. Indeed, money has historically always been strongly connected to notions of sovereignty and authority, as its value could only be guaranteed by political power (although the emergence of cryptocurrencies might challenge this link). At the same time, the relation worked in the other direction as well: modern political authority has also used the issuing of money as a tool of legitimizing its authority, with money symbolically representing the issuing authority. Indeed, this relation can also be formulated in more general terms: with its symbolism, as well as with the regulatory and institutional framework money necessarily entails, it also has a profound effect on the society in which it is used.

While this 'Janus-faced' nature (Dyson, 1994: 3) might be part of all money, it shines through particularly clearly in the case of the euro. Given its role in the highly political project of European integration, the single currency's political character is exceptionally pronounced, something its inventors have been clear about from the beginning. At its ceremonial introduction, ECB president Duisenberg hailed it as 'much more than just

a currency, but the symbol of European integration in every sense in the word' (2001). Yet, while it might be a clearly political invention, it is also a rather complex one. Operating in so many different national contexts, essentially functioning as 'a currency without a state' in absence of a federal state and budget backing it (Padoa-Schioppa, 2004: 36), it has fittingly been characterized as 'one of the greatest monetary experiments of all time' (Schelkle, 2018: 335).

As such, it is a rather multidimensional, complex entity. One only needs to consider the multiple ways in which one can explain the reasons for its creation. In folk theory, its emergence is perhaps most often explained in economic terms, with the euro being introduced to smoothen Europe's single market. And indeed, such economic motives have been important drivers of the introduction of the euro, particularly the desire to find an answer to the currency fluctuations that were part of the European Monetary System (EMS). At the same time, questions of political power-balance were at least as important here, most importantly the 'Deutsche Frage' that followed the German unification and the supremacy of its D-Mark (e.g. Sandbu, 2015). Likewise, external geo-political considerations were also relevant, as the desire to free Europe from US monetary hegemony is another important background to the euro (Henning, 1998; Marsh, 2009). And while European countries had a shared interest here, every participating country also had its own specific interests in setting up the euro, ranging from lowering interest rates to gaining political power, and from having access to a larger internal market to the prestige coming with being a member of the Eurozone. Still, such differing national interests were accompanied by distinctly supranational ones, as the euro can be seen as part of a strategy legitimizing European governance (e.g. McNamara, 2013). And then there were also the interests of non-governmental actors, such as organized corporate interests - notably that of the financial industry (e.g. Mügge, 2010).

The point then is that there are so many ways to make sense of the euro. The euro is a political entity and an economic one. A cultural symbol and a tangible object. Driven by shared supranational as well as competing national interests, by different institutional as well as non-governmental interests. It is a highly visible part of European integration, yet its politics are rather complex and abstract. While being part of an effort to legitimate

EU governance, it also requires support itself. Altogether, this means that it is not self-evident how to make sense of the legitimacy of the euro. What type of demands does the euro make on its public? What form of public involvement and acceptance does it need? And most importantly, how legitimate is the euro then in light of the public's stances towards it?

In order to come to a clear understanding of this puzzle, this chapter will provide an account of the euro's legitimacy. In doing so, it will start by describing the euro as consisting of different dimensions – an economic, a political and a cultural one. On this basis, it will then delineate what questions of legitimacy precisely the euro brings up. Finally, it will describe what existing empirical research tells us on these questions, outlining the literature on support for the euro as well as on public attitudes towards its politics. Together, these three sections provide a basis for the remainder of this thesis by making clear what questions the euro brings up.

2.1. Dimensions of the euro

As is the case with most categorizations, there is some arbitrariness in deciding what distinguishes one category from another. This is no different when we say that the euro consists of an economic, a political and a cultural dimension. The euro's macro-economic effects for example are likely to have political implications as well, just like the euro's effect on a shared European identity has political as much as cultural relevance. And indeed, other authors have come to slightly different categorizations (see for example Mazzuca and Ranucci, 2013). Still, I believe this categorization is most useful for the purpose of this study. To consider the euro's economics effects firstly seems self-evident, given the euro's important effect on economic items such as price levels, economic growth paths and intra-EU trade. Even though not all authors have distinguished this as a separate dimension¹, I believe it is central to understanding the euro's impact. Indeed, in the scholarly literature on the single currency, it are debates on the euros macro-economic and financial dynamics that are dominant, rather than debates on its democratic or cultural implications –

¹See for example the distinction of Mazzuca and Ranucci (2013), who – having a particular focus on questions of citizenship – distinguish only an 'everyday life economy' dimension.

even after the euro crisis (Höing and Kunstein, 2018). The political dimension secondly concerns the euro's effect on political power balances and institutional configurations. While the euro's impact on economic and cultural matters of course also has political implications, this section will have a more narrow focus. Finally, the section on the euro's cultural dimension basically groups together what Mazzuci and Ranucci (2013) see as three separate dimensions – cultural, social and everyday life economy dimensions. This section will describe how the euro is linked to questions of identity, group formation and the way people make sense of the social world in general.

Altogether, this section by no means intends to be comprehensive in describing the euro, or be entirely uncontroversial in doing so. Neither does it pretend to give a definite account – with the fieldwork being conducted in 2019, it is the situation of that time that shapes the political reality that is empirically studied in this thesis. What this section aims to do then is to give a sense of the *scope* of the euro's consequences, and the ways in which its legitimacy can and has been challenged in practice, thus helping us to get a better grasp of the matter that is central in the next chapters.

2.1.1. The economic dimension of the euro

For the general public, the most obvious way to make sense of the euro is probably as an economic entity. After all, it is first and foremost an object used in economic interactions. Facilitating trade between member states and smoothening financial transactions between citizens of different member states, the euro is often seen as a centerpiece in the establishment of a European single market (e.g. Trichet, 2001). For citizens, it might well be such daily economic aspects that have been the most visible elements of the euro. It is telling that in the first period following its introduction, the main discussions among the public have been about the euro's effect on price levels (e.g. European Commission, 2002; Ranyard et al., 2005). For many citizens, the perception was that the conversion to the euro was accompanied by a strong increase in prices, even though inflation measures did not confirm this perception (European Commission, 2006; Mastrobuoni, 2004).

Yet, the economic consequences of the euro of course go far beyond its effect on price levels and the facilitation of trade. Becoming a member of the EMU, arguably, also entailed to subscribe to a particular economic regime (e.g. Marques et al., 2013). The euro also affected interest rates, countries' ability to borrow, their labor costs, competitiveness, employment rates and productivity growth. In the first years after its introduction, the predominant perception was that the euro's effect on such macro-economic items was generally positive. In what can be seen as the euro's 'honeymoon period' (Andor, 2018), Eurozone economies grew steadily, member states seemed to converge, and trade volumes increased. Delivering stable inflation and low interest rates, it seemed unproblematic to have a 'one size fits all' monetary policy for different types of economies. In 2008, ECB president Trichet could still state that "we have lived up to our responsibility and delivered what we promised to deliver: a stable currency as credible and confidence inspiring as the best previous national currencies. The euro has contributed to a further integration of Europe's economies and it protects our economies more effectively from external shocks than ever before" (ECB, 2008). Indeed, it was attractive enough for seven new countries to join the EMU between 2007 and 2015.

All this changed with the euro crisis. Contrary to the initial impression of convergence between Eurozone economies, the perception now became that significant imbalances had built up in the meantime. While the euro suited northern export interests, its high exchange rate hurt southern economies, while depriving southern governments from the possibility to devaluate (e.g. Baccaro and D'Antoni, 2020). In line with this, the Eurozone saw a divergence in trade balances, particularly between north and south. While Germany went from breakeven in 2000 to a surplus of 7% of GDP in 2007, Greece saw an opposite trend of a growing trade deficit rising to 14,5% of GDP in 2008.

And while this 'great divergence' in hindsight already took place before the euro crisis, the crisis worsened it. When creditors started to doubt the creditworthiness of southern countries (as well as Ireland), not only did it make their debt more expensive and financing debt with new borrowing more difficult, it also led to capital flight from these countries (e.g. Higgins and Klitgaard, 2014) from which north benefited (followed by a flight of trained workers when the crisis' consequences hit). And while northern

countries could limit the economic damage of the crisis, the politics of the euro crisis forced southern member states to severe austerity and wage moderation, resulting in poor economic conditions and huge unemployment. On this basis, scholars argued that “the Eurozone’s Northern countries gained at the expense of the Southern ones” (Matthijs, 2016: 393).

An important question however is how far these problems can really be attributed to the euro itself. Is there a problem in the nature of the euro, is it rather in its current, incomplete design, or is the euro fine but is it the ad hoc decision making of political leaders that is to blame? In the first category, some have argued that the EMU is by definition too uniform to be compatible with the diversity of European economies that are themselves administered by sovereign member states (Kawalec et al., 2020; Mody, 2018). In the words of Claus Offe, “instead of ‘one size fits all’ we are left with a situation where ‘one size fits none’” (2015: 26). On the other side of the debate however, others have claimed that the problem is not the euro itself, but rather the decisions taken by political leaders, with the euro rather being a useful ‘scapegoat for the blunders of politicians’ (Sandbu, 2014, 2015). Even Jeroen Dijsselbloem, president of the Eurogroup during the euro crisis, argued that in the euro crisis ‘the euro was not the problem. Bad policy was the cause of the crisis’ (in De Waard, 2020). In between these positions finally, many analysts have argued that the euro crisis and its economic problems mostly had its source in the incomplete design of the euro (e.g. De Grauwe, 2013; Feldstein, 2012; Frieden and Walter 2017; Jones et al., 2016; Matthijs, 2014; Stiglitz, 2016). According to this argument, the euro is not by its nature doomed to fail, but it are the flaws in its institutional architecture that led to and worsened the problems we have seen since the euro crisis.

While no final consensus has formed in this debate, it seems at least safe to say that the euro was ‘complicit’ in the euro crisis (Olsen, 2014: 955), having had effects that contributed to both the emergence of the crisis as well as its severity. Firstly, the euro’s one-size-fits-all interest rates seem to have contributed to the credit bubble that started the crisis, with low interests for southern member states leading to overheating. Secondly, it removed policy tools national governments used to have at their disposal to deal with economic adversity, like the ability to adjust exchange rates.

Likewise, it deprived states of the assurance of a lender of last resort. A reason interest rates in periphery countries went up and capital flight followed was that the ECB, contrary to national central banks, could not act as a lender of last resort in the government bond markets – at least until 2012 – therefore instigating the fear that debtor countries might go bankrupt. It is for such reasons that scholars have argued that monetary integration without fiscal integration is unstable (e.g. De Grauwe, 2013), and therefore that the architecture of the euro in its current form is incomplete (e.g. Jones et al., 2016; Minenna, 2016).

2.1.2. The political dimension of the euro

At this point, it is already difficult to distinguish the euro's economic from its political dimension. Coming with an institutional framework, creating winners and losers, and as such strongly affecting processes of decision-making, it will be clear that the euro also has deeply political consequences.

Even without understanding its economics, it is not too difficult to see that the euro has a political character. After all, it is central part of the highly political project of European integration. As mentioned before, issuing currency has always been connected to state building, and the euro is no exception. It symbolizes Europe as a political entity, and communicates the message to citizens that they are living in a European community, thus legitimizing the EU by contributing to a “process by which the EU has to become a taken-for-granted political entity” (McNamara, 2015: 117).

Even more than legitimating (or delegitimizing) European governance to citizens however, the euro has also always been intended to unify European countries. Already in 1949, French economist Rueff remarked that “Europe will be unified by currency, or it will not be unified” (see Gauron, 2000). In the decades after, and particularly since the 1980's, the efforts for monetary unification were led by consecutive French presidents, aiming to counter the dominance Germany had in setting interest rates under the EMS (e.g. Kirchgassner and Wolters, 1993), as well as being driven by the desire to be more independent from US monetary hegemony (Jabko, 2010). These efforts found fertile ground in Germany when the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification threatened to enhance the German power position even more, which in turn urged

Helmut Kohl to show that Germans did not desire a dominant position (e.g. Mody, 2018) – although others have argued that a reason for Germany to support the euro was also precisely to maintain some form of hegemony (Jabko, 2010). By permanently linking the fates of Germany and France then, the common currency would function as a ‘guarantee for peace’. Thus, the aim of European unification has always been an explicit part of monetary integration all the way. As ex-European Commissioner László Andor remarked, the euro was seen as “a tool to ensure that European integration would be truly irreversible” (2018: 215). Particularly given the difficulty of an exit from the Eurozone, member states locking themselves into a system of interdependence meant that monetary integration was likely to be followed by more political integration.

Such political motives then have continued to be central in explaining the evaluation of the EMU. Greece’s admission into the EMU into 2001 for example can only be explained on political arguments, as the economic grounds for its entry make little sense (e.g. Risse, 2013). And when the euro was at risk during the euro crisis, political leaders used political rather than economic arguments to defend it. “We will never abandon the euro. Never! Euro spells Europe, Euro is Europe” were the words Sarkozy (2011) used to uphold the common currency at the midst of the crisis, while Merkel (2010) spoke of the EMU as a ‘community of fate’ (Schicksalsgemeinschaft). And as recent as 2020, president of the European Council Charles Michel made clear how the euro is still bound up with (geo)political aims. Speaking of the euro as ‘the monetary expression of our shared destiny’, he argued that ‘if we want to lead on the big issues of the 21st century, we need a global currency that matches our global ambitions’.

Yet, while being driven by political motives, it also had fundamental consequences for policymaking. Consequences that perhaps were not always foreseen with its introduction. In the words of Paul de Grauwe, the “decision to create a monetary union completely disregarded the economics of a monetary union, as it was motivated by political objectives” (2013: 168). Yet, the EMU of course embodies a framework that as such also entails a choice for a particular way of running the economy. As Chris Bickerton puts it, ‘the Eurozone is not just a currency union but also a collective framework for coordinated macro-economic policy-

making to which all belong and which in multiple ways is constitutive of their identities and interests as member states' (2016: 148). This, we could say, became only fully clear with the euro crisis, at least in four ways.

Firstly, and perhaps most prominently, the Eurozone's institutional framework limited the economic policy options available to national governments. Most notably, there is the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), which prescribes a set of rules (most importantly it puts limits on government deficit (3% of GDP) and debt (60%)) meant to ensure the 'soundness' of member states' public finances and to coordinate their fiscal policies. And whereas the enforcement of the SGP was not strict, the framework that was introduced after the crisis led to steeply increasing budgetary surveillance on the one hand and decreased policy discretion on the other. Indeed, the introduction of – amongst others – the six-pack and the two-pack (Ioannou et al., 2015) and the fiscal compact (Baratta, 2013; Fabbrini, 2013) can be said to have decreased national policymaking autonomy by limiting available policy options.

Secondly, the euro entailed a shift in the level of decision-making. It arguably increased the power of the European Commission (Bauer and Becker, 2014), and – more importantly – entailed a massive transfer of authority with the establishment of the ECB. Especially because contrary to all other single currencies – which are normally accompanied with key levers of governance (such as financial regulation, banking supervision, taxing, and government spending and borrowing) accompanying the central bank at the same level of government – these remain at the national level in the case of the EMU, leaving the ECB sitting alone at the European level. It was with the euro crisis however that it became clear how powerful an institution the ECB could be. With its role in the Trojka, the unprecedented monetary policies it has been using in an attempt to keep the Eurozone's economy going, it has grown to be 'the most powerful supranational institution of our times' (Curtin, 2017: 28). It is telling that its presidents have been featuring higher in rankings of the world's most powerful people than any other European leader apart from Angela Merkel (e.g. Forbes, 2012, 2014; Fortune, 2015; Newsweek, 2008). And while the crisis on the one hand showed the immense power of the ECB, it at the same time "destroyed the notion that central banks and monetary policy are apolitical in nature" (McNamara, 2012: 147). Thus, this element

of the euro's institutional framework meant that highly political decision-making was displaced to supranational institutions less answerable to voters and driven more by technocratic reason.

Thirdly, national governments also lost decision-making power against financial markets. As a start, the single currency has from the beginning been in the financial industries' interests and lobbied by them (e.g. Mügge, 2010: 107). And indeed, the introduction of the euro (together with the liberalisation of financial markets) led to rapid growth in European financial and credit markets (e.g. Laffan, 2014). At the same time, it was of course failure of financial markets that gave rise to the financial crisis, while the ensuing euro crisis itself in turn was a consequence of these same financial markets losing trust in government debt. And when the crisis then unfolded, the EMU structure helped those financial markets in pursuing their interests at the expense of national governments. After all, the EMU stripped Eurozone countries of the ability to act as lender of last resort, or force their national bank to buy up government securities when its ability to repay debts is questioned. And as de Grauwe put it, they can therefore be confronted with a liquidity crisis when capital inflows suddenly stop. Therefore, "in a monetary union, financial markets acquire tremendous power and can force any member country to its knees" (2011: 3), leading some to the conclusion that 'countries in the Eurozone are no longer entirely "sovereign"' (Strassel, 2013: XXII). What is more, while not solely responsible for it, banks used their power to help push through bail-out packages needed for the payment of debts, as well as harsh austerity conditions that came with those packages. Indeed, some have argued that the bailouts were never meant as solidarity with receiving countries, but instead had the main purpose of rescuing private banks mostly based in creditor countries (e.g. Bantekas and Vivien, 2016).

Fourthly, and perhaps most visibly, the euro increased interdependence between member states, resulting in the need for risk sharing and, many scholars argue, fiscal integration (De Grauwe, 2020; Copelovitch et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2016). In this way, domestic problems like the economic trouble of the Greeks could turn into a EU-wide crisis. In the north, this has been explained as a need for solidarity. In the south, rather as the need to accept impediments on democratic abilities in exchange for financial support. While founders of the euro like Jacques Delors hoped that

monetary union would foster solidarity, one could also say that the EMU made a demand for solidarity without being sure whether sufficient public support for it exists. This is precisely what came to be contested with the euro crisis, as massive bailouts were necessary to save indebted countries. While some scholars made the argument that the euro came with an obligation for solidarity for northern countries as they strongly benefited from it (e.g. Eriksen, 2017; Viehoff, 2018), the perception in northern countries was rather that the economic failures of southern countries forced them to financial transfers (e.g. Tsoukala, 2013; Vaara, 2014). However, what was sold as being in solidarity with the south in northern countries could be experienced as domination (either by northern countries or EU institutions) in the south. After all, bailouts came with the obligation of strong budgetary austerity (even though seen as the wrong cure by many economists), and the economic suffering accompanying this was experienced as externally imposed by many in the south.

Altogether, all these four developments have something in common. For no matter whether it is responsibilities to other Eurozone countries, the interests of financial markets, the limitations coming with a regulatory framework, or the increasing power of supranational institutions, all meant that those institutions directly elected by citizens lost power. As Strassel puts it forcefully, “the euro is thus the expression of a vision of political power that is tightly controlled by legal regulations and in which the essential decisions for social cohesion are made by authorities not answerable to voters” (2013: XXV). This then was exacerbated by the euro crisis’ bailout politics, where the aim of preventing further economic damage outweighed democratic procedures. As the financial state of debtor countries meant they were in effect unable to refuse the bailout packages which were accompanied by austerity demands, one could say that citizens simply had to accept “technocratic solutions to which, TINA, ‘there is no alternative’” (Schmidt, 2013a: 164).

There are fair objections to such a vision of the euro as an undemocratic straitjacket that robs countries of their autonomy. One might argue that the constrained policy space of national governments is a consequence of the democratically legitimated choice to step into a monetary union, which is accompanied by certain responsibilities. Indeed, the choice to ‘tie

their hands' was a deliberate one for many – especially southern – countries, as they sought to deal with credibility problems. What is more, one might argue that the euro in some ways also increased autonomy. As Adam Tooze argues, “it was precisely to gain at least some control over their monetary destiny that countries like France pushed for the introduction of the euro. (...) Even through the opaque governance structures of the ECB they have had more influence than they did over the German-dominated EMS” (2014: 55). This argument in turn applies to the fact that the euro to some extent helped all EMU countries to become more independent from US monetary hegemony. In the same vein, monetary integration also restricted the power of markets in the sense that national currencies could not be traded against one another anymore, meaning that it decreased the power of markets to act as a judge on the soundness of national policies. This can be said to have particularly helped smaller countries in gaining power vis-a-vis financial markets, such as the Baltic states. And to the extent that EMU countries were constrained in their policy options, one could ask to what extent these are a part of the euro per se, or a consequence of the decisions of political elites. Yet, what might be a fairly uncontroversial conclusion is that the euro in effect did constrain governments in their choice of policies, at least in some ways. Placing “further limits on the freedom of governments to respond to their electorates” (Laffan, 2014: 274), the euro seems to have “exacerbated the EU’s ‘policy without politics’” (Schmidt, 2013a: 164).

2.1.3. The cultural dimension of the euro

Finally, the effect of the euro's role in European polity building is not restricted to institutional configurations. The euro also strongly conveys an image of community, and as such is linked to notions of identity and culture. After all, with the common currency, Europe entered citizens' daily life. Instead of the abstract entity that it usually is experienced as, happening far away from people's everyday routine, people could now “carry Europe in their pocket” (Moro, 2013a: 11). As a ‘symbolic claim to European statehood’ (Shore, 2012), the euro can thus be seen as an important step in the construction of Europe as an imagined community (Risse, 2003), making European governance feel more natural and legitimate. Indeed, there is nothing hidden about this. “Thanks to the euro, our pockets will soon hold solid evidence of a European identity. We need to build on this, and make the euro more than a currency and Europe more

than a territory” said French finance minister Laurent Fabius in 2000. More in particular, this chapter distinguishes five basic mechanisms in which the euro is linked to notions of culture and identity.

Firstly, there is the imagery of the euro, the symbolism that performs a similar function as a flag or an anthem. For as money has always done, the euro’s coins and banknotes disseminate ideas about the political community citizens live in by reproducing certain visual images of this community. Before its introduction, a whole range of social scientists was employed by the European Commission to think about the right design for the euro bills (the coins – or at least one side of them – were designed by the member states themselves), resulting in the relatively abstract imagery of bridges, doors and windows, all embodying ideal-typical examples of European architectural styles (e.g. Hymans, 2004). These images, according to the ECB’s official communication, symbolize ‘the European spirit of openness and cooperation’ as well as ‘the close cooperation and communication between Europe and the rest of the world’ (ECB, 2019). Academics have described them as symbols visualizing the ongoing nature of Europe’s construction (Sassatelli, 2017), and their abstractness as fitting to a European identity that is complementary to, rather than replacing national identity, leading some to speak of a ‘deracinated’ imagery (McNamara, 2015). This iconography confronts citizens every day with the fact that they are not just living in a national, but also in a European community. Something that might usually not be noted consciously by citizens, but can nevertheless affect citizens as an example of what Billig (1995) has called ‘banal nationalism’: mundane, low-level engagement with identitarian symbols “which nevertheless remind citizens of their involvement in the larger EU system” (Cram, 2009: 105).

Secondly, monetary unification has also led to a unified area in which citizens can move. Indeed, to citizens this is one of the most obvious effects the introduction of the euro has had: to facilitate travelling. While exchanging one’s national currency for another currency used to be a routine practice that was part of traveling abroad, the euro did away with this routine. Just as the euro did away with the need to compare prices in other member states with prices in one’s own country. The euro thus “gave rise to an environment materialized in a territory” (Moro, 2013a:

14), in this way establishing a territorial community – the Eurozone – that is different from that of the EU or the Schengen area. On the one hand, this might have increased the feeling of belonging to a European community in which one can travel more freely, although on the other, the pre-euro exchanging practices around travelling might also be surrounded by some form of nostalgia. While this change might seem relatively mundane for those who study the euro in terms of its economic and political effects, it might well be one of the most significant differences the euro has made in the eyes of citizens.

Thirdly, the euro also plays a role in unifying the language that citizens use to make sense of their world. While citizens do not need to be conscious of it, money also functions as a tool of communication, a code used to describe the market value of goods and services, a language that citizens use for entering into predictable and reliable relations with others. Indeed, sociologists have referred to money as ‘the main thing according to which things receive their meaning’ in modern society (Simmel, 1907: 128). And if that is so, it is not insignificant that it now is the symbol system of the euro according to which people do so. Contributing to the unification the language of citizens of the Eurozone, the euro has been referred to as ‘Esperanto money’ (Engelmann et al., 1997: 122). Indeed, in a way, adjusting to the euro as a new currency can be seen as having been somewhat akin to learning a language – people needed practice before being able to ‘think’ in the new currency. After all, the euro changed citizens’ ‘mental benchmark’ for their expenses from their old, national currency’s unit of measurement into that of the euro, thus obliging its users “to adjust the mental representations of their economic preferences and consequently of their economic choices” (Piana, 2013: 102),

Fourthly, there is the identitarian significance of the institutional framework the euro comes with. For by sharing the same institutions for monetary policy making, citizens not only become tied together in a monetary community, but they also administer it together. Here, one could for example point to the effect of having a shared central bank in the form of the ECB. As Sørensen put it for example, “through the existence of a national bank, people are not only bound together in an imagined community with a shared economic destiny, they also inherit the promise of actually controlling this destiny” (2016: 179). What is more, in this way

central banks can also perform a certain representational function. Even though central bankers are of course not literally representatives of a constituency in the sense that they are elected by citizens, they can symbolize a particular political community and as such be experienced as acting in name of this electorate, thus serving as an external point that makes the community itself visible as such. Especially given the high salience of central banking during the euro crisis, with Mario Draghi turning into a 'superstar technocrat' (e.g. Sørensen, 2014) either celebrated as a hero or dismissed as a technocrat without legitimacy, central banking might perform such a function.

Fifth, and related to this, sharing a currency comes with shared experiences. As Helleiner argues, "by experiencing monetary phenomena together, (...) citizens using the same money might have a feeling of being a member of the kind of a 'shared community of fate'" (2002: 14). The experiences of exchange rate adjustments or inflation are shared collectively, and might therefore produce a feeling of being in the same 'monetary boat' together, thus binding them together in a 'shared monetary fate'. However, the euro crisis is an ambiguous test case in that sense. It certainly was a monetary experience of a dramatic nature, one that indeed was shared by all people living in the Eurozone. The question however to what extent it was indeed experienced collectively. At least at the citizen level, it seems rather questionable whether the experience was one in which everybody is in the same boat. On the contrary, instead of fostering allegiances, it might just as well have contributed to increasing withdrawal in national narratives.

Indeed, having these five mechanisms in place, we might ask questions about both the strength and the directionality of the relation between the euro and identity. The mechanisms outlined here all explain how monetary integration *might* contribute to the creation of a shared identity, and thus to the legitimacy of the issuing authority. And while there are plenty of observations to be made that suggest it indeed does in the case of the euro, aren't the effects of the euro rather subtle at the same time? For example, now that transactions have become increasingly digital, what remains of the euro's symbolism? And do countries not also have their own, distinct euro-experiences, rather than only shared experiences? Even more importantly, does the relation between the euro and identity

only go one way? Indeed, we might note how a currency also *requires* a certain level of shared identity in order to function. For example, we might assume that support for the euro also requires a certain level of identification with the European community, and as the euro might be unsettling for existing national identities it can also be challenged on these very grounds.

The question then is what and how much exactly is required of such an identity. Before the euro crisis, it was still possible to see the euro as a technical object, meaning that a relatively thin notion of identity would be sufficient for its sustenance. In the words of Kaelberer, “identity does not necessarily have to rest on deep affective feelings of belonging in order to support a modern relationship of trust. Diffuse identity, supported by utilitarian or contractual factors, is sufficient. Market participants simply need to believe that there are advantages to using a particular currency and that this money is built on a credible institutional structure” (2004: 162). This changed however with the euro crisis. It then became clear that the monetary union instead required European allegiances strong enough that it would make citizens to accept either large constraints on their democratic abilities, or financial transfers to other member states. Scholars argued that the euro needs a thicker kind of identity, with ‘a public feeling it is one actor’ and citizens feeling about the euro as something ‘they have in common’ and which ‘constitutively creates their us’ (e.g. Piana, 2013: 108). And what came in question was precisely whether this was sufficiently present. Indeed, the use of national frames (the south being lazy, the north being rule fetishists) played a crucial part in (de-)legitimation strategies of national actors (e.g. De Grauwe, 2011; Muller et al., 2018; Tsoukala, 2013; Vaara, 2014).

2.2. Making sense of the euro’s legitimacy

2.2.1. Theorizing the euro’s legitimacy

All of this makes clear that the euro and its legitimacy cannot be understood unidimensionally. If we are to fully understand the legitimacy of the euro, it is necessary to consider not only its economic impact, but also how it affects – and is affected by – people’s sense of belonging. To consider not only how it entails a mode of governance requiring the exercise of considerable political authority, but also is a plain material

object, a closely felt part of everyday lives. And to make things even more complicated, to consider how its legitimacy does not stand on itself, but is also fundamentally intertwined with the legitimacy of the larger integration project it is a part of – the EU. How can we understand the euro's legitimacy in a way that does justice to all its facets?

While the concept of legitimacy itself will be discussed more extensively in the next chapter, it for now is relevant to note that a common strategy in European studies is to analyze questions of legitimacy by distinguishing between different types of legitimacy. Scharpf (1999) famously divided democratic legitimation into input and output legitimacy, to which Schmidt (2013b) added a third category of throughput legitimacy. These categories refer respectively to authorities' responsiveness to citizens' preferences, to governments' ability to provide the common good through policy outputs, and to the quality of the governance process in terms of items like efficacy, accountability and transparency. Underlying this distinction is the suggestion that there is a trade-off between input and output legitimacy in which more of the one can make up for less of the other, while there is not such trade-off for throughput legitimacy. When applied to the euro, this strategy indeed helps us to make sense of the different ways in which it can be (de)legitimated. In terms of output legitimacy, it is mainly the euro's economic functioning that is important, together with other utilitarian outputs (such as the convenience the euro offers). Throughput legitimacy then applies to the quality of the policy-making processes of institutions like the ECB, the Eurogroup and other institutions having a role in the governance of the EMU. And input legitimacy concerns the extent to which such institutions are responsive to citizens' concerns. Cultural questions such as whether citizens' sense of belonging allows them to accept the euro, and whether there is sufficient EU-wide identity to support the solidarity needed for the survival of the euro also largely belong to the latter category.

These are also the lines along which normative scholars have analyzed the legitimacy of the euro. Prior to the euro crisis, the euro's legitimacy was seen as largely founded on its policy output (Schmidt, 2013a), with the single currency being particularly dependent on its perceived economic benefits (Verdun and Christiansen, 2000: 178). With the euro's output

generally being evaluated positively in this period, the lack of input channels (for example with the ECB's independence) was seen as legitimate. With the euro crisis however, the quality of outputs came to be questioned, while at the same time the scope of the effect of Eurozone membership became clearer and the impact of EMU policy making came to be felt more directly. As a consequence, scholars started to doubt the input legitimacy of Eurozone governance, as well as of the EMU as a whole. Scharpf (2012, 2013) for example points at how citizens were directly confronted with the impact of European (i.e. non-democratic, supranational) policies, without the possibility of 'legitimacy intermediation' via national states. Other scholars have remarked that the EMU has continued to rely on an understanding of EMU legitimacy based on output, even though the crisis revealed this to be untenable (Crum and Merlo, 2020).

More fundamentally, and echoing some of the points made in the previous section, the euro came to be criticized for entailing a technocratic mode of governance that decreases the power of national electorates as a consequence of, among others, the move of authority to a relatively unaccountable ECB (e.g. McNamara, 2012; Schmidt, 2016), and the excessive deficit rules of the SGP. And this was seen as particularly problematic, especially on the left, because the EMU silently embodies a choice for a particular economic regime. As Dyson put it, one that embodies "a paradigm of 'sound' money and finance, the consequent privileging of neoliberal reform strategies, retrenchment of welfare state provision, and difficulties of sustaining non-inflationary national wage bargaining regimes" (2002: 649). The setup of the EMU with an independent ECB fits to a particular view of money, one in which monetary policy is best conducted at a distance from the popular vote, placed 'on a shelf too high for the common citizen too reach' (e.g. Tooze, 2021). This 'iron cage of the Eurozone' (Ryner, 2015) thus depoliticizes choices that such scholars think should be subject to political debate, leading to a criticism on how the euro is a neoliberal project favoring market interests at the expense of electorates (e.g. Offe, 2015; Streeck, 2012, 2017).

This was then seen as particularly problematic because of the both the unchosen character as well as the irreversible nature of the EMU. While

citizens in most member states had little say in the introduction of the euro, it did entail a fundamental step in the process of European integration which in turn was difficult to reverse once taken. After all, as Barry Eichengreen has put it, a member state exiting the euro “would trigger the mother of all financial crises” (2007). Putting it more starkly, critical scholars have therefore remarked that the common currency “once instituted will, at the penalty of severe economic losses, force European countries to advance towards political, that is, economic, fiscal and social policy union, and to democratic union to boot, even if their citizens object to it” (Streeck, 2016: 249), with others saying that “the euro is a mistake the undoing of which would be an even greater mistake” (Offe, 2015: 55).

Besides a focus on the input, output and throughput side of the EMU, others have considered the question of the euro’s legitimacy in terms of relations between member state democracies. An often used standard here is that of non-domination, meaning states should not arbitrarily interfere in each other’s affairs. Viehoff for example has formulated a principle of ‘robust non-exploitability’ that any just monetary union should respect, meaning its arrangements must not “foreseeably create conditions of vulnerability likely to engender exploitation by other agents”, such as states, creditors or banks (Viehoff, 2018: 389). This standard then appeared to be jeopardized during the euro crisis, as some argued that euro crisis policies entailed Eurozone’s more powerful countries imposing their interests on others – particularly Germany (e.g. Bulmer, 2014). What happened according to critics was that the needs of those same northern countries that benefitted outweighed the democratic desires of the already disadvantaged peripheral countries. Inter-member state bargaining and discussion between different types of expertise was replaced by power politics and domination of a particular understanding of the economy (e.g. Matthijs and McNamara, 2015). According to some, the response to the euro crisis therefore entailed a form of intergovernmental dominance, thus “bringing humiliation back in” (Eriksen. 2014: 118).

On the right side of the political spectrum (particularly in northern member states), the moral implications of the interdependence coming with monetary union were explained differently – even if this argument was more prominent in the public than in the academic debate. Here, the focus was rather on the responsibility of member states to have their

finances in order so as not to burden other member states. In this reading, the legitimacy problems of the EMU are located in the fact that it binds incompatible economies together while it at the same time entailing risk sharing between these member states, thus creating a moral hazard problem as the risk sharing reduces the incentives for member states to reduce their fiscal risks themselves. The euro crisis then was explained as an instance of southern member states forcing more affluent northern member states to financial transfers with fiscally irresponsible behaviour.

2.2.2. The empirical side of the euro's legitimacy

The problem of analyzing the euro's legitimacy in such theoretical ways however is that it is not sure whether these questions are understood in the same way by citizens. Clearly, such accounts of the euro's legitimacy are hugely useful in providing a theoretical orientation, making clear what is at stake in a normative sense. Yet, at the empirical level, it is not sure what importance citizens attach to these items, or whether and how they relate the euro with particular political-economic consequences in the first place. For public acceptance, such items might not necessarily play a role. Citizens might support euro without paying attention to its democratic consequences, or despite being negative about the consequences of the euro crisis politics. Or to use a reverse (hypothetic) example, normative scholars might conclude that the euro is legitimate because it disposes of sufficient input and output legitimacy, while citizens still dislike it. Therefore, such accounts of legitimacy provide little insight into how the euro is legitimate with citizens. If our purpose is to understand the euro's legitimacy in an empirical sense, we should ask what type of attitudes and engagement the euro demands from citizens.

Most generally, scholars look at levels of support to study the euro's empirical legitimacy. And indeed, this is a crucial item. In a functional sense, citizens can be seen as the 'glue' holding the monetary union together (e.g. Jonung, 2002). Public support is needed in order to sustain the euro, particularly in order to be able to deal with incidents and changing conditions. Indeed, after the euro crisis some worried that because of its focus on fiscal consolidation, the EMU's post-crisis framework "may well be undone when it comes into contact with the electoral cycles of the euro area states" (Laffan, 2014: 280). The need for public support is not just a functional necessity however. Legitimacy after

all is about normative justifications, and support also conveys a certain normative approval of EMU (e.g. Deroose et al., 2007; Verdun and Christiansen 2000), even if it is not sure to what extent and how normative justifications are part of the evaluations on which they base their support.

Yet, the relation between levels of support and legitimacy is not as straightforward as it may seem, and we should be careful not to equate support with legitimacy. While a particular level of support seems necessary for euro to be sustained, high levels of support alone seem to be insufficient for the euro to be legitimate. After all, it might be possible that people currently support the euro, but their underlying normative beliefs clash with what the euro demands. The euro seems difficult to sustain if citizens from northern countries actively refuse solidarity with southern states, for example, just like a refusal from southern states to comply with the conditions of euro crisis bailouts would likely have entailed these countries' exit from the Eurozone. Such a mismatch between the euro's requirements and public convictions in the first place a normative problem, but could in turn become a functional problem when such mismatches are brought to the surface by political entrepreneurs mobilizing them.

One way to deal with this is to say that beyond support for the euro itself, what is also needed is support for those policies needed for its sustenance, something we could refer to as the *politics of the euro*. On the basis of the work of normative scholars we can identify a couple of items that are necessary for the euro's legitimacy in both a normative and functional sense, such as acceptance of its institutional framework and democratic consequences, as well as a basic level of a European identity that allows for acceptance of the solidarity necessitated by the interdependence the euro entails. Yet, it is not sure what *exactly* the euro needs here, as what the euro demands is not a *given*. After all, our answer to the question what the euro needs is not entirely predetermined by the nature of the EMU, but also depends on actual, sometimes contingent developments within the Eurozone, and is thus not stable either. For example, the extent to which EMU membership impacts national autonomy also depends on which stances other member states and institutions decide to take. And in the same vein, it is far from sure that what is sufficient now will provide to be sufficient in the future. At the moment of writing, the stabilizing

effect of the NextGenerationEU rescue package is still there, but rising interest rates again threaten to make national debt unsustainable. Likewise, it is not unlikely that the currently temporary structure of debt mutualization will be made permanent, de facto turning Eurozone into a transfer zone. If such a situation brings up questions of interdependence and related questions of solidarity and autonomy up with renewed force, how will citizens react?

Therefore, the multidimensional, continuously evolving nature of the EMU means that the euro's legitimacy is not only about immanent levels of support for monetary union or the politics of the euro. To some extent, the euro might – in a functional sense – even get by without much active support for its politics, for example because items like solidarity and autonomy are not made politically salient, and can thus remain latent. But on the other hand, it might fundamentally need considerably more than conscious support of the currency itself. In case consequences of the euro *are* politicized, it requires acceptance of these consequences. In a more maximalist perspective, for the euro to be legitimate would require that such support is grounded in normative convictions in a way that makes public desires compatible with the 'potentialities' of the euro.

2.2.3. The euro's legitimation between the daily and the political

A consequence of all this is that we have to balance two paradoxical considerations when studying the euro's legitimacy. On the one hand, we should pay careful attention to citizens' attitudes towards it, and see not only how they support it but also in what considerations such support is grounded. In this sense, there is a demand to closely study their subjective understandings of it, how they make sense of it, without predetermining what is important about the euro. On the other hand, the euro's key legitimacy questions are grounded in underlying consequences that might not necessarily currently be politicized, but are still essential part of its legitimation. This in turn requires making some assumptions about what is needed for the euro to be functionally viable as well as normatively justified, independently of what happens to be currently in the mind of the public.

On itself, this is not specific to the euro, as such a distinction is a part of understanding the legitimacy of any political order (as will be discussed

more thoroughly in the next chapter). Yet, what makes the euro such a peculiar case is that it combines fundamental political consequences with a very practical, daily life appearance. Therefore, the distance between both is potentially larger. Its appearance as a daily life object makes it prone to a practical perception, and hence possibly to a 'banal' acceptance in which people disregard its more fundamental political implications. Yet, under the veneer of this banality, such implications are still there, and ultimately, for both normative and functional reasons, these need to fit with public stances as well. As McNamara captured this contrast nicely, while the euro might "allow for a certain banal acceptance, the repercussions of the EU's transfer of authority in the economic realm cannot be papered over with only a thin sense of community" (2015: 134).

Therefore, understanding the euro's legitimacy crucially is also about understanding this relation between the euro's everyday appearance and its political consequences. And this thesis holds that how we should understand the relation between these two sides is an open empirical question, rather than something we can analyze in an a-priori fashion. For example, one possible way in which we could think about the relation between the euro's everyday and political side could be that a deficit in support for the euro's politics renders a banal acceptance of the currency itself insufficient – in line with McNamara's argument above. Or on the other hand, it might be that the euro's everyday life character allows for a banal acceptance that helps legitimate its political consequences, decreasing their political salience in a way that keeps these consequences functionally tenable. The question which of these assessments is more suiting however is an empirical one about the public's perceptions of these both sides. Of course, as we have noted above, the euro entails consequences that are there regardless of whether the public is aware of them, and in studying public beliefs, we should therefore also pay attention to the public's normative positioning to these consequences – even if this means studying latent dispositions more than currently existing attitudes. Still, if we are to understand the euro's empirical legitimation, it is the public's concretely held beliefs we should focus on, rather than on using normative arguments to theorize about what would be required from the public in order to make the euro justifiable. To what extent do citizens themselves see the euro as daily or political? How do they see the link between the euro and its politics? And regardless of the

extent to which they make a connection between both themselves, how do their normative stances relate to the actual political consequences the euro entails?

In other words, understanding the legitimacy of the euro requires a thorough empirical understanding of public perceptions of the euro. While the next chapter will go into this more in detail, and will provide a conceptual framework that helps us give weight to different indicators, it is already clear that we need insight into a range of different empirical elements, ranging from support for the euro to how the public perceives it in the first place, and from attitudes towards its politics to the salience this topic has to citizens. Therefore, before delving into which specific elements this study will focus on, let us consider the existing research about the public's reception of the euro in order to identify more clearly what is already known as well as open questions.

2.3. The euro and the public

2.3.1. Contestation of the euro

In order to understand the public's reception of the euro, a first question is how the euro has been contested in practice, and how it has been discussed in the public debate. If we do so, it is striking that there initially was surprisingly little contestation of the euro. If the euro was questioned after its creation and in the first years after its introduction, this happened mostly at the fringes of political spectrum, by politicians such as Jean-Marie le Pen and Jörg Haider, but hardly by mainstream parties. Indeed, even most parties at the extreme right tended to ignore the single currency (e.g. Messina, 2006). Some countries form an exception to this, most notably the UK and Denmark with their opt-out from joining the euro under the Maastricht Treaty (which in Denmark was followed by the defeated referendum on joining the euro in 2000), as well as Sweden, where the euro was rejected in the 2003 referendum. In France and Ireland too, citizens had the chance to vote in referendums on the Maastricht Treaty. But in the large majority of member states, the euro was accepted without widespread parliamentary and societal contestation, despite the massive transfer of authority to the EU that it entailed. As Castiglione put it, the euro was "hardly discussed during the constitutional phase that never was" (Castiglione, 2013: 226).

An important explanation for the relatively low salience of the euro's introduction is the framing of the euro as a functionalist necessity. The euro was presented as a technical solution to practical challenges, while its political implications were deemphasized. For example, the Commission's central policy document outlining the case for the euro (*One Market, One Money*, 1990) framed the euro as a requirement for the effective functioning of the single market, rather than presenting it in terms of the effects it had on decision making power (see McNamara, 2015: 125). This contributed to the low salience of the euro. What also helped for this was that the euro was mostly a project of elites (e.g. Feldstein, 1997), and both on monetary and European issues elites arguably play a large role in shaping public views. These elites then had relatively little interest in widespread contestation of the euro, particularly because most of them were pro-euro (e.g. Aarts and Van der Kolk, 2006). As a consequence, the euro was seemingly accepted without too much public resistance. Indeed, even at the start of the euro crisis in 2008, the euro was not in question (Schmidt, 2013a: 156).

All this of course changed when the euro crisis took serious form, and the crisis of the Eurozone 'brought the whole European Union on the brink of collapse' (Szymanowski, 2020: 601). From a depoliticized technocratic object, the euro now became the center of widespread contestation. In both northern and southern member states, the policies meant to save the euro were hugely politicized. Challenger parties and politicians mobilizing against the euro gained enormously in several countries, exemplified by parties such as Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands, the far right in Slovakia, the True Finns in Finland, and Marine le Pen's National Rally in France. For the German AfD, a rejection of the euro was even at the root of its foundation. Likewise, the crisis was characterized by enormous public outrage. As Matthijs put it, the euro "became synonymous with general strikes, mass protests, violence, riots, and tear gas in the streets of Athens, Madrid, Lisbon, and Rome" (Matthijs, 2014: 102). And indeed, research shows that the debate following the euro crisis was 'exceptionally salient' (Kriesi and Grande, 2016).

Importantly, contestation came from both sides of the political spectrum. On the left, the argument against the euro was that it served as an instrument imposing neo- or ordoliberal economic policies, being skewed

in favor of austerity measures rather than expansionary monetary and fiscal policies. Likewise, it came to be seen as a symbol of market dominance, with financial markets benefitting at the expense of common citizens. At the right, the euro became associated with a loss of national sovereignty and identity caused by European integration going too far, with European idealism leading to economically unsustainable currency union. In northern members states in particular, the need for solidarity became a bone of contention. What both left- and rightwing criticism shared however is a resistance against the loss of political agency.

With contestation of the euro being so widespread and the political consequences of the euro crisis being so extensive, findings about the salience of the euro crisis were accompanied by assumptions about how criticism of the euro resonated at the level of the public. As some stated, “the deep economic and political interdependence in Europe, created especially but not exclusively by the single currency, became vividly clear even to the least aware citizens” (De Vries, 2018: 34). Having “contributed to the increased visibility of Europe” (Kriesi and Grande, 2016: 242), others noted how the crisis ‘united citizens in their Euroscepticism’ (Habermas, 2015: 98), and led to “political resignation, alienation and cynicism, combined with growing hostility against “Frankfurt” and “Brussels” (Scharpf, 2011: 195). Likewise, some scholars assumed that such negative attitudes would be linked with the single currency in particular. “The euro is undoubtedly associated with negative aspects of the EU construction, that is to say, to the loss of national sovereignties and for many with the dilution of national identities” (Vissol 2013: 37), just as some saw it as “almost certain” that “public willingness to support the Eurozone financially will diminish” (Mody, 2018: 424). Putting it more starkly, a commentator noted that ‘the fundamental incompatibility of democracy and the currency union will lead to an electoral bloodbath’ (Engelen, 2018: 9).

Yet, while there might indeed be reason to believe that a Eurosceptic positioning was connected to the electoral success of challenger parties in the wake of the euro crisis (e.g. Hobolt and Tilley, 2014), this does not mean specific criticism of the EU was as important to citizens – it might as well have been a more general anti-establishment criticism that appealed to citizens. And more importantly, it is even less sure to what extent the

euro itself was important to citizens. Judging from the course of Eurosceptic parties after the most heated years of the euro crisis were over, it is at least noteworthy that Eurosceptic parties had little success with keeping an exit of the euro on the agenda. Germany's AfD for example was founded specifically in opposition to the politics of the Eurozone crisis, advocating the abolition of the euro, but dropped this as their core issue after 2015 as it began to focus on immigration, refugees, and Islam as its new core issue (e.g. Arzheimer and Berning, 2019). Likewise, parties such as the Dutch PVV and FvD, Marine le Pen's Rassemblement National or Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia followed similar trajectories in which opposition against the Eurozone became less prominent over the years, or was dropped entirely. And even when the euro became a potential topic of contention again with the Covid-19 crisis, the euro itself did not acquire a prominent position in the public debate – likely aided by the fact that the narrative now revolved around a health crisis. In countries outside the Eurozone, the euro also continued to be seen as attractive enough to join, to which the upcoming introduction of the euro in Croatia and Bulgaria attest. Altogether, this brings up the question what empirical research shows about the extent to which these concerns are shared by citizens, and how to understand citizens' attitudes towards the euro in general.

2.3.2. Public support for the euro and its politics

In research studying public opinion on the euro, the most used data are Eurobarometer data mapping public support for the euro. In understanding the findings of existing literature then, it is instructive to start with taking a look at these data. When we do so, a couple of points stand out. Firstly, support in general is high (as we have seen), particularly in those countries that are already a member of the Eurozone (see Figure 2.1). Average support has consistently remained above 50%, and even above 60% in Eurozone countries. What is more, secondly, it has *remained* remarkably high during the euro crisis. As noted in the introduction, this is striking on itself, but even more because almost all other political attitudes *did* deteriorate dramatically during the euro crisis. Trust in the EU for example almost halved (going from 57% in 2007 to 31% in 2012), and average trust in national governments went as low as 23%. Yet somehow, support for the euro was less affected, and in addition bounced back up quite quickly after the euro crisis. Indeed, it at the moment of writing is close to an all-time high of 72% (and even 80% in the Eurozone;

European Commission, 2022). Thirdly, it is noteworthy that there is gap in support between Eurozone and non-Eurozone countries, and that this gap has widened since the euro crisis. While the gap between average support in the Eurozone and outside the Eurozone was less than 5% in 2008, this gap had grown to 14% in 2019. Indeed, comparing individual member states, finally, produces some remarkable observations. In Greece for example, often seen as the country with the worst experience during the Euro crisis, a steep decrease in overall support for the EU was accompanied by an *increase* of support for the euro (e.g. Clements et al., 2014).

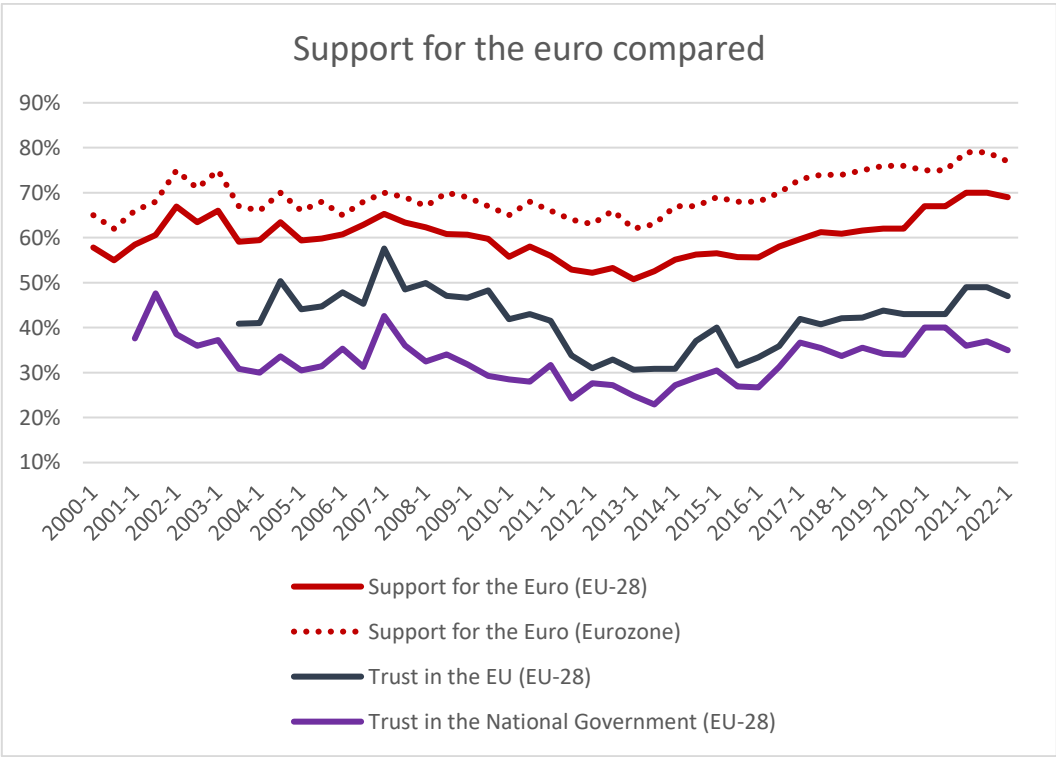


Figure 2.1: Support for the euro compared to the EU and the national government. Source: Eurobarometer

How to make sense of these findings? Since the 1990's, a literature has emerged attempting to explain support for the euro. This literature has been characterized by a debate between utilitarian and identitarian explanations of support. On the one side of the debate, research has found identification with the European community to be positively related with support for the euro, while stronger attachment to national identities decreases support, both at the EU-level (Müller-Peters, 1998), as well as within national contexts (Gabel and Hix, 2005; Hobolt and Leblond, 2009;

Jupille and Leblang, 2007). On the other side, the literature has found support for economic cost-benefit reasoning explaining support. For example, citizens in countries benefitting economically (Banducci et al., 2003; Kalthenthaler and Anderson, 2001) and citizens working in sectors benefitting more from single currency (Gabel and Hix, 2005) have been found to be more positive towards the Euro, although others have made the nuance that perceptions of economic performance are more important than actual economic performance (Deroose et al., 2007). In addition, scholars have found evidence of the effect of inflation (Banducci et al., 2009), and that of the exchange rate (Hobolt and Leblond, 2009) on support for the euro.

The euro crisis however brought up new questions. How to make sense of the fact that the euro continued to see relatively high support? And do the same explanations for euro support still hold up? In research covering the post-crisis period, it appears economic determinants became more important, with unemployment and perceptions of inflation being related with a decrease in euro support during the crisis (Roth et al., 2016), and economic recovery being linked with an increase in support (Roth et al., 2019). Fitting with this line of reasoning, Hobolt and Wratil (2015) explain the stable euro support during the crisis as a consequence of an increasingly utilitarian logic: as it became more clear that the euro has economic consequences, citizens were encouraged to shape their preference more on the basis of cost-benefit reasoning. This then led to higher numbers of support, as the economic consequences of a break-up of the euro were generally explained as detrimental. In other words, a sort of 'hostage logic' might be at play according to which citizens might not love the euro, but fear the consequences of a breakup of the euro even more. Fitting with this, Jurado et al. (2020) find that in the case of Greece, it is particularly the uncertainty associated with a euro exit that explains the continued support of the euro during the euro crisis, while support would decline when uncertainty decreases and the trade-offs of euro membership becomes more pronounced.

A related branch of research has studied attitudes towards what I called 'the politics of the euro'. On the one hand, a literature has emerged examining support for financial solidarity and the bailouts in particular. Contrary to support for the euro, it is notions of identity that are central

here. Studying support for solidarity (the idea of financial transfers to countries when they are in economic need), Verhaegen (2017) finds feelings of identity to be a considerably stronger predictor than economic self-interest. Looking at bailout support in the German context, Bechtel et al. (2014) report similar findings: while adding that social dispositions such as altruism and cosmopolitanism are strong predictors as well, they converge on the finding of the limited effect of citizens' economic standings. A study of Kleider and Stoeckel (2018) on support for transfers in times of crisis confirms this explanatory importance of social dispositions, while adding that citizens' economic left-right orientation is of crucial importance too, which conflicts with Verhaegen's (2017) findings. Finally, Stoeckel and Kuhn (2018) take a more 'meta' kind of approach, and look at how citizen attitudes respond to party cues, finding that citizens follow party cues rather than having ideologically congruent positions – with cues especially having effect on more politically sophisticated citizens.

While saying little on how attitudes towards solidarity are related with support for the euro itself, these findings together do strongly suggest that stances towards solidarity follow a different logic than those towards the euro. Indeed, they seem to follow a logic comparable to a logic found to explain attitudes more general questions of European solidarity (such as support for European social insurance, e.g. Kuhn et al., 2020; Nicoli et al., 2020), and also towards European economic governance during the euro crisis (Kuhn and Stoeckel, 2014) and fiscal integration during Covid-19 crisis (Bremer et al., 2021). Rather than utilitarian self-interest or economic ideology, it appears to be peoples' identification with the European community as well as their level of general European support that explains stances here.

On the other side, there are attitudes towards the austerity on which the bailouts were conditional. Here, the research of Baccaro et al. (2021) is particularly useful, because it (contrary to the abovementioned research on solidarity) explicitly looks at the link with the euro. Studying the case of Italy using a survey experiment, they find that the need for austerity would turn the Italian electorate from an otherwise pro-euro majority into a majority favoring an exit of the euro. Following from this, an important question is to what extent it is the imposed nature of the austerity that

affects citizens' stances. It is well known that the euro crisis went together with a decrease in political trust and an increase in Euroscepticism, but to what extent is this related to the (un)democratic character of the euro crisis politics? Some research argues that it is indeed the particular technocratic construction of the EMU that results in citizen detachment – that is, their detachment from national governments, not the euro itself (e.g. (Armingeon et al., 2016; Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso, 2017). Reviewing this thesis a few years later however, Schraff and Schimmelfennig (2019) find that in the end it was the austerity itself that caused dissatisfaction, more than the fact that the austerity was externally exposed and technocratically monitored.

In relation to the euro itself however, there is relatively little attention for the role of democratic and institutional considerations, despite the centrality of questions of democracy in normative accounts of the euro and empirical analysis of the euro crisis. Studies with support for the euro at the center of the research design generally focus more on the distinction between identity and utility rather than considerations concerning democracy. Research focusing on the effect of the democratic nature of the euro crisis on the other hand looks more at attitudes towards national governments or the EU as a whole. While considerable research exists on attitudes towards other elements of the euro's institutional structure, such as attitudes towards the ECB (Ehrmann et al., 2013; Horvath and Katuscakova, 2016; Kalthenthaler et al., 2010; Roth et al., 2014; Wälti, 2012), such research again has little attention for evaluations of the democratic quality of the ECB – and indeed, of citizens' understanding of the ECB in the first place. The little research that is available on this suggests that citizens' knowledge of and interest in the ECB is low (Van der Cruysen et al., 2010).

2.3.2. Perceptions of the euro

Altogether then, this body of research provides important explanations for variations in support for the euro and the euro's politics, chronologically as well as in terms of inter-country and inter-class differences. At the same time, it gives only partial answers to other questions, while leaving some still open. For example, why is support for the euro so high compared to other European institutions, despite the fact that it was the euro in particular that was so central and so strongly

contested during the euro crisis? Secondly, how do people link the different elements of the euro with each other, and how do they feel questions of solidarity and autonomy relate to the single currency? Thirdly, how salient is the euro to citizens, how meaningful is it to them as a political topic?

A fundamental problem here is that we have limited insight into peoples' *perceptions* of the euro. Little empirical research is available on whether citizens blame the euro for euro crisis for example, or how they perceive euro in the first place. Do they see it as an object with economic implications, or as a symbol of European governance? As a political project with important implications for policymaking and power configurations, or perhaps only as a daily object with daily life convenience? And how do they perceive the relation between the euro and the EU?

On these questions, only a few studies can provide us with some information. On the question of the relation between the EU and the euro for example, Eurobarometer data do tell us that that the euro is perceived as a strong symbol of the EU. On the question 'What does the EU mean to you personally', 'the euro' has consistently been the second most given answer, only after the freedom to travel and work, but before peace, economic prosperity, or other symbols like the European flag (and also before more negative items like 'waste of money' or 'bureaucracy' for that matter). Also, we know that a majority of citizens feel that the euro has made a difference in their lives, with a majority finding that the euro made traveling easier (around 50%), that it made doing business easier (around 80%), and that it led to price rises (European Commission, 2006).

Likewise, research has been done on the effect of the euro on the emergence of a European identity. In contrast to the apparent symbolic value of the euro however, findings suggest that this effect has been limited at best. Buscha et al. (2017) find no significant effect, while Negri et al. (2021) find that the euro has had a small negative effect (3%) on the share of people exclusively identifying with their nation. This seems to more or less fit to Eurobarometer data showing that a majority of people says they do not feel that the euro has made them feel more European, although this has gradually changed from 22% saying the euro had such an effect to 28% in 2019. However, it might of course also be that the euro

affected processes of identification in different or more subtle ways. The changing course of appreciation of the euro inside and outside the Eurozone for example (the abovementioned increasing gap between Eurozone and non-Eurozone EU countries in terms of support for the euro) might be seen as an indication of how the euro does 'grow' on people.

Still, such survey data only tell a limited story. They do not tell us what perceptions constitute citizens' overall understanding of the euro; how such perceptions play a role in people's support for the euro; and how this is linked their attitudes towards the politics of the euro. It does not help in that sense that qualitative research on the euro hardly exists (the only exception being research that was conducted just after the transition to the euro, which had a more narrow focus on the currency change; see European Commission, 2002; Ranyard et al., 2005). Research being almost exclusively based on survey research, it is difficult to interpret the meaning of findings, and sometimes also the validity of research results².

A consequence of this lacuna is that our understanding of the legitimacy of the euro is not complete. As outlined in the previous section, a more complete understanding requires not only empirical explanations of levels of support, but also insight into the perceptions underlying people's opinions. What is more, in order to gauge the *meaning* of opinions, we also need insight into the *type* of opinions people hold – do people have strong affective attitudes, or are their opinions rather banal. And to the extent that the latter is the case, how stable are such attitudes in light of the potential ways in which the euro can be politicized? Is there then sufficient acceptance of the identitarian and political requirements the euro makes?

² For example, there is Hobolt and Leblond's (2009) finding (also highlighted by Jones, 2009) that over-time fluctuations of the exchange rate of Sweden and Denmark's currencies towards the euro form a strong predictor for euro-support in these countries. However, as it is well known that citizens usually have a very weak knowledge of such economic indicators (e.g. Blendon et al., 1997), can such a finding really be valid? Or another example, how should we read the finding of Bechtel et al. (2014) that Germans were generally negative about the euro crisis bailouts, while they come out as amongst the most positive towards EU transfers in the EES (see Kleider and Stoeckel, 2018)? Are these simply inconsistent wishes? Or do they express meaningful preferences? Without having insight in peoples' perceptions of such questions, this remains difficult to say.

Deeply contested yet taken for granted

It are these questions that will be addressed in the remainder of this thesis. And in order to do so, the next chapter will provide a more general, conceptual account of how such questions can be studied.

Chapter 3

Studying legitimacy between the everyday and the political

We enter precarious terrain when we ask questions about legitimacy. Legitimacy, some argue, is “not merely an important topic, but the central issue in social and political theory” (Beetham, 2013: 41), “the master question of politics” (Crick, 1959, 150). Yet despite its importance, or perhaps precisely because of it, it is loaded with conceptual controversies and ambiguities. Looking at the many different ways in which scholars have used the concept, it is a concept the empirical application of which is far from straightforward. As some say, “the importance of political legitimacy, however, is matched by its elusiveness” (Abulof, 2016: 373). When using the term it is therefore important to be careful, and to be precise about how the concept is understood and operationalized.

This chapter will therefore set out a conceptual framework of legitimacy with the dual purpose of providing tools to empirically study the euro’s legitimacy and justifying this particular approach by grounding it theoretically³. In making sense of the legitimation of the euro, a particular difficulty that has come up is how to balance notions of daily life experiences and citizen subjectivities with the need to have normative criteria to assess legitimacy against. While this issue to some extent is part of all efforts to come to terms with legitimacy, it does urge us to be precise about the meaning and weight of different indicators. How should we conceptually weigh items such as support, perceptions and normative considerations, and what is the meaning of the strength and stability of opinions? The existing literature does provide us with plenty of answers

³ An earlier, shorter version of this framework was published in an edited volume (Melman, 2022).

to such questions, but the types of answers it gives differ. For our purposes then, we need an operationalization that is equipped to deal with the particular interests of this study.

This chapter will proceed to define legitimacy as a social relation, paying particular attention to the role of everyday perceptions and the more 'mundane' side of public opinion. It is far from the first study to do so, but this still is a particular way of looking at legitimacy that in some respects is relatively innovative – also in relation methodological questions. In addition, the chapter will pay attention to how this framework applies to the euro in particular. After all, as the euro fundamentally is a part of a larger political project, its legitimacy cannot be understood independently of the EU. It is therefore necessary to also have an understanding of how EU legitimacy and the relation between the EU and the public has been made sense of in the literature, as this will provide a background necessary to interpret our findings on the euro.

Therefore, this chapter will start by providing a background to the questions central in this dissertation by giving an account of how legitimacy has been studied empirically in the EU context. In particular, it will focus on the 'diffuseness' of EU public opinion and the questions this bring up for understanding EU legitimacy. This section will be followed by a more general account of legitimacy that aims to make clear the meaning of different indicators of legitimacy so that we have a conceptual apparatus in place that can be used for studying the euro's legitimacy. A final section will explain how this framework will be applied in rest of the dissertation.

3.1. Background: what the diffuse character of public opinion means for the EU's legitimacy

3.1.1. From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus?

Studying public attitudes has not always been at the center of EU studies. From the 1950s until the early 1990s, academics as well as politicians themselves mostly saw European integration as an elite-driven process to which public opinion was largely irrelevant. As Jean Monnet famously put it, "I thought it wrong to consult the peoples of Europe about the structure of a Community of which they had no practical experience"

(2015 [1978]: 557). Such a position was echoed by the academic literature: as one of the prominent scholars of European integration stated, “it is as impracticable as it is unnecessary to have recourse to general public opinion and attitude surveys” (Haas, 1958: 17). These were the years of the permissive consensus (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970), in which a combination of low public interest in and general support for European integration meant it could largely remain an elite affair. Following Hooghe and Marks (2009), this permissive consensus thesis can be seen as resting on three assumptions: that public attitudes are superficial and unstructured; that European integration is a low salience issue for the general public; and that EU issues are *sui generis*, and therefore do not fit into the basic conflicts that structure political competition.

How different do things look now. Writing in 2022, it is almost difficult to find literature on European integration that does not make a reference to public opinion – either in the form of election results, public opinion polls, protests, or general supposed public sentiments. As electorates appear to have become increasingly critical of European integration and policy makers now seem forced to take public opinion into account, a constraining dissensus is said to have replaced a permissive consensus (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). This constraining dissensus first manifested itself with the debates on the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and after years of slowly increasing importance seemed to have reached a new phase since the euro crisis. As European integration became politicized, elite decision making gave way to contestation of the EU among mass publics, and the three assumptions underlying the permissive consensus do not seem valid anymore. Indeed, it seems rather uncontroversial to say that “the Union is more reliant on public support for its continued legitimacy than ever before” (De Vries, 2018: 4)

Such an understanding of the public seems to be grounded in a set of different observations. Firstly, there is the public’s electoral behavior. Indeed, the public’s voting on Eurosceptic ‘challenger parties’, as well as their negative votes in referendums such as the Dutch and French constitutional referendums in 2005 and most prominently the Brexit referendum, are the most clear indicators of the functional importance that the public has come to have. Secondly, this is coupled to the idea of an increasingly discontented public. In a context in which discontent seems

to have become a general phenomenon in Western democracies, citizens are assumed to be particularly disaffected with the EU, either for not delivering desired outputs, for its democratic deficit, or for being at odds with citizens' feelings of identity. Indeed, levels of trust in, and support for, the EU decreased substantially during the Euro crisis (e.g. Armingeon and Ceka, 2014; Braun and Tausendpfund, 2014). Thirdly, and most importantly perhaps, such an understanding seems to be fed by the increasing politicization of the EU at other levels, such as the party and media level (Grande and Hutter, 2016a and 2016b; Statham and Trenz, 2015), which leads to assumptions about similar levels of politicization occurring at the citizen level.

3.1.2. EU public opinion as diffuse and embedded

Yet, while it may be undeniable that the public has increasingly come to affect EU affairs, it is less clear what exactly this means in terms of legitimacy. Public opinion may constrain the process of European integration, but does that mean it challenges the legitimacy of the EU? More in particular, the question here is how to understand the *meaning* of public opinion. Not that there is a lack of research into public sentiments. The emergence of a constraining dissensus has coincided with a surge in research studying public attitudes towards European integration, in which indicators like levels of trust and support are generally used to capture the EU's legitimacy. Yet, it is not always clear what these attitudes actually entail. After all, public opinion is not only a product of the supply side of politics, and we cannot just assume that what happens at the institutional and policy making level is reproduced in the same way at the citizen level – just like voting behavior in itself does not tell us much on which considerations this behavior is based. In the end, public opinion only comes into being 'on the ground', by citizens interpreting and giving meaning to political reality. As such, attitudes may be held with varying intensity, with doubt and inconsistency, and be derivatives of more general perception of politics rather than evaluation of concrete issue at stake. Put simply, they may be more *diffuse* than often assumed in survey research, and as a consequence, it is not always clear what they entail.

The idea of a generally indifferent and unknowledgeable public is as old as the discipline of political science itself, and runs from Lippmann (1925) to American minimalism (e.g. Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960;

Converse, 1964), to current arguments about the poor political awareness of voters (e.g. Achen and Bartels, 2017). And while a recent rise of political protest globally might be read as a sign of increasing politicization, one could also argue that decades-long processes of depoliticization, globalization and medialization have even increased the distance between citizens and politics. As a consequence of these processes, it is increasingly difficult for citizens to recognize and make sense of the political structures constituting society, perhaps leading to democratic disaffection on the one hand (e.g. Melman, 2015), but simultaneously leading to disinterest and withdrawal from politics. As Peter Mair argued, ‘the sense of hostility which some citizens clearly felt towards their political leaders is less important than the indifference with which many others viewed the political world more generally’ (2013: 3). As this era of increasing discontent and politicization has now endured so long that some argue that we have moved from the era of ‘post-politics’ to one of ‘hyper-politics’ (Jäger, 2021), it is still not sure if this also describes the sentiment of the majority of the public.

And if there is any political entity this indifference applies to, it is likely to be the EU. As its multilevel structure makes it complex, distant and abstract, citizens might have particular difficulty with formulating opinions on it, and perceive the EU as only one element of a larger, and hardly perceivable sphere of politics. Indeed, it has repeatedly been noted how average attitudes are rather characterized by indifference and ambiguity. Notably, this observation features more in qualitative (see for instance Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016; Duchesne et al., 2013; van Ingelgom, 2014; White, 2011) than in quantitative research – although there are some exceptions (e.g. De Vries, 2013; Stoeckel, 2013). In the words of Duchesne and colleagues, “European integration is seen not only as a process partly disconnected from their [citizens] daily life experiences shaped by national frames but also as a one-way street – largely ineluctable in so far as it can hardly be reversed” (Duchesne et al., 2013: 28).

If this is true, to what extent can we really expect citizens to have opinions about the EU, and to what degree are attitudes expressed in surveys indicative of strongly held stances based on actual evaluations of the EU? Might it not be that such attitudes are often a derivative of more general

political opinions, and are in that sense unrelated to the EU itself? For example, it has been well documented how national context plays a central role in attitude formation (e.g. De Vries, 2018; Diez Medrano, 2003). And while this might also be explained in rational terms – citizens from different member states have different interests in European integration – the evidence also suggests that attitudes towards the EU might be mere extrapolations of attitudes towards national institutions (Armingeon and Ceka, 2015; Harteveld et al., 2013; Torcal and Christmann, 2019). As Chris Bickerton put it, “Europe’s crisis of representation is primarily a national one. Often, protesters and critics have little interest in Europe at all. It is their national elites they are angry about” (2016: 141).

In that sense, we might see opinions on the EU as *embedded* in more general opinions towards politics and society. Rather than consciously evaluating the EU’s policy output or institutional functioning, people form opinions towards political elites and structures in a more general sense, and the EU then is simply seen as another part of these larger structures. As people have difficulty in distinguishing the EU from other processes of globalization, as well as in separating domestic policy making from what happens at the European level (e.g. Duchesne et al., 2010), it is simply perceived and judged as part of a larger system. Just like social scientists have found that political discontent rarely stands on itself, but is “likely to be tied up with other issues as well as an underlying generalized discontent with society as a whole” (Van der Bles, 2017: 163; see also Steenvoorden, 2015), so is disaffection with the EU often part of a general disaffection with politics. In this case, there are two sides to the distance between the EU and citizens. On the one hand, it is an explanation for discontent with the EU, as citizens experience that it steers political outcomes without them having a say in it, thus being a part of a ‘TINA’ type of politics⁴. Indeed, it is this loss of governmental autonomy that people are assumed to respond to when they vote for political challengers promising to reclaim political agency (‘take back control’), and that is indeed central in explaining the success of the populist movement (e.g.

⁴ Short for There is no alternative, the Thatcherian slogan repeatedly used by politicians to explain that their responsibility to global institutions limited their ability to be responsive to the demands of voters, which among academics has become a shorthand for a type of politics without choice.

Mudde, 2016). On the other hand, it might lead to feelings of fatalism and indifference. It is for this reason that some scholars have argued that greater politicization of the EU might in fact also lead to *greater* ambivalence and indifference, as it might transform support into indifference, rather than opposition (e.g. Van Ingelgom, 2013: 122-123).

This emphasis on the diffuse character of EU public opinion is not shared by all scholarly literature. Some research shows how citizens do differentiate between different levels of government, and attribute responsibilities differently to European and national institutions (Harteveld et al., 2018; Proszowska et al., 2021; Wilson & Hobolt, 2015). In the same vein, researchers have found EU public opinion to respond to particular media reporting such as that on malpractice affairs in the European Commission, suggesting that attitudes like trust do indeed also have an evaluative nature (van Elsas et al., 2020). Others have reported how knowledge on the EU grew during the euro crisis (Ruiz-Rufino & Alonso, 2017), while again others suggest that the EU issue has a powerful potential to shape voters' electoral behavior (Hobolt and Rodon, 2020). Altogether, it should therefore be clear that attitudes towards the EU are not *only* extrapolations of more general political attitudes, and that they are to some extent structured.

Yet, the fact that EU public opinion is not entirely random does not do away with questions about the meaning of attitudes in terms of legitimacy. To what extent do attitudes represent particular wishes and desires that serve as basis for legitimacy claims? Are attitudes not largely formed by media and political parties? After all, with the EU rarely being visible in people's day-to-day lives, we can question how far people can form their opinions on European integration from their daily experience. (As the introduction already noted, recent developments – such as the EU's response to the Covid-19 crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine might produce a new situation in this regard, but so far still is still uncertain.) As such, EU public opinion is particularly susceptible to construction through mechanisms like priming, framing and cueing (e.g. Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Torcal et al., 2018), which is indeed confirmed by a large literature studying the effect of such mechanisms (see Hobolt and de Vries, 2016: 422 for an overview). Combined with qualitative findings on the low salience of European issues and the high degrees of

uncertainty and disinterest surrounding them, diffuseness remains an important factor to take into account when interpreting EU public opinion.

3.1.3. Consequences for EU legitimacy

This realization has a couple of consequences. Firstly, it has an impact on our theorizing about the relation between the public and the EU. If the nature of EU public opinion is indeed diffuse and constructed, what does this make of the constraining dissensus thesis? Can we really speak of the emergence of a politicized citizenry whose stances on the EU affect their electoral behavior, thus being decisive for European integration? Or could it be that while the functional effect of the public on EU affairs has increased, this is more an effect of politicization at the level of political parties and media than of the importance the EU has to citizens? Of course, such politicization at the level of elites could only persist if it resonates in some way with a wider audience, but this does not necessarily mean that this audience indeed has a widely shared interest in European matters. It could also be driven by a more general politicization, in which a discontent with politics tout court translates into a rejection of 'elite' projects like the EU.

Indeed, secondly, notions of diffuseness and embeddedness also draw our attention to the systemic nature of EU legitimacy. To the extent that this analysis is true, the situation the EU finds itself in could be a consequence of a more structural issue in which attitudes of deference and trust in political representatives have made way for more critical attitudes. As Chris Bickerton argued, "hostility towards the EU today is part of a much wider crisis in European politics which does not arise from the EU as such. (...). As political debate is structured around a conflict between 'us' and 'them', the EU is pulled into the camp of 'them' without having to do anything at all (...) The EU may one day find that the ground it thought it was resting on has simply disappeared, and the EU with it" (Bickerton, 2016: 139, 144). To the extent that the EU is challenged by public opinion, it might be not so much because of its own doing, but because of its place in the system it is a part of. And if this is so, to what extent is it the legitimacy of the EU itself that is at stake?

Indeed, the central point flowing from a diffuseness of public opinion is that it affects our understanding of EU legitimacy. In the first image, that of an increasingly critical public that is less supportive of the EU and skeptical about further European integration, the perception is one in which the legitimacy of the EU is at risk. The consequence of taking the apparent diffuseness of public opinion seriously however is that this perception is challenged. Taking this to its extreme, one might wonder how different the current situation actually is from the permissive consensus – indeed, some have raised this issue before (Hurrelmann, 2007). In a more nuanced fashion, we could acknowledge that the role and structure of EU public opinion has changed, but that rather than an actively challenging public this is due to a more diffuse unease: a combination of a more general, not-EU related discontent on the one hand, and a distance to European affairs translating indifference and ambivalence on the other, means public opinion is more volatile and provides a less stable basis for the EU to rely on, and is more easily mobilized against the EU. In this context, some speak of diffuse Euroscepticism (De Wilde et al., 2014).

If we are to more fully appreciate and understand the diffuseness of EU public opinion however, this also has consequences for how EU public opinion should be studied. Despite the fact that the study of public opinion has acquired a much more prominent place in EU studies over the past decades, the understanding of the public in European integration still is fairly a-prioristic, based on expert presumptions. Predominantly relying on survey research, people's attitudes have often been studied with expert presumptions about the importance of the EU for the public, leading to a 'top-down' perspective on public opinion. The risk of such a perspective however is that it shapes an image of the public that fits its own understanding of the EU, and that conforms its own biases by pre-determining the kinds of answers citizens can give. Missing the context in which public opinion is shaped 'on the ground', it might "rather inflate the EU's significance for respondents" (White, 2011: X). Just as much as an issue of methodology, this is an issue of perspective. Put plainly, we must not only look at citizens through the prism of the EU, but also at the EU through the prism of citizens. In the words of Schrag Sternberg, "if citizens are to be consulted, [...] this needs to be done in a way that does not pre-determine the kind of answer that alone would be heard" (2013: 228).

This is far from the first study to make such observations. Indeed, since the early 2000s, a ‘qualitative turn’ has emerged in European studies having more attention for how citizens reproduce political reality. Diez Medrano (2003), Meinhof (2004) and Bruter (2005) were the pioneers in using qualitative methods to study attitudes towards European integration, while Gaxie et al. (2011), White (2011) and Duchesne et al. (2013) further developed this methodology by focusing more on the salience European affairs have to citizens. Rather than asking whether people are in favor of or against the EU, these studies focus on the intensity of attitudes, as well as the question to what extent people are able to talk about Europe at all. Fitting with this, Favell and Guiraudon influentially called for more sociological analysis in European studies, stating that “the same way policy cannot be understood without politics, politics cannot be understood without society” (2009: 552). Arguing that the European studies literature so far focused too much on the visible, institutional side of European integration, their criticism is that it has missed how this has been accompanied by changes in European society, ironically meaning this literature “mirrors the very structure of the ‘democratic deficit’ charge” (558). Along the same lines, Adler-Nissen (2016) has described a ‘practice turn’ in European studies, calling on scholars to ‘leave the armchair and study the people and artefacts that make the EU on an everyday level, (...) exploring the EU from the point of view of the people actually producing it ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ (2016: 87, 88).

Yet, while these developments have indeed enriched the literature and produced important insights, these should still be seen as first steps of a development that is still taking place. In the first place, most of this qualitative research (or at least its fieldwork) dates from before the euro crisis (although there are some exceptions, such as Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016; Beaudonnet et al., 2022; Delmotte et al., 2017), meaning little is known on the impact of the crisis on questions of salience and politicization at the citizen level. Secondly, this research still is only a small part of the literature on EU public opinion and EU legitimacy. As a consequence, it so far also covers only small range of phenomena, and has not been applied yet to more specific elements of European integration such as the euro. Finally, as is the purpose of this study, there is space to focus more explicitly on the link between daily life perceptions and

political evaluations, and thus to integrate attitudinal and daily life approaches to legitimacy. How are citizens' perceptions of the EU as they emerge in their daily life realities linked with their attitudes towards the EU, and how in turn do we interpret this in terms of legitimacy, given the 'objective' characteristics of European politics?

3.2. Studying public opinion in the context of legitimacy

This account of the empirical literature on EU legitimacy once again emphasizes the need to do justice to citizens' subjective understandings as they emerge in their daily life surroundings. The challenge laying ahead us then is how to weave in these notions in a conceptualization of legitimacy, while at the same time doing justice to the objective characteristics of the polity whose legitimacy we are interested in. And subsequently, to develop a framework that gives us tools for empirically studying legitimation. To this end, this section formulates a more general conceptual account of legitimacy, on this basis operationalizes the concept, and finally describes how it can be applied to the euro, given its entanglement with the EU at large.

3.2.1. A conceptual account of legitimacy

In its essence, legitimacy refers to the rightfulness of political rule. As such – and as is well known – legitimacy has an empirical and a normative dimension. Empirical because it is a concept that ought to explain the preservation (or rejection) of a power relation in empirical reality (e.g. Beetham, 2013: 25-37), and because citizens' actual evaluations of political rule can function as the basis of legitimacy claims, either as a normative standard or as an empirical explanation for their compliance with a power relation. Normative because it concerns rightfulness, the justifications of authority. Indeed, legitimacy as a concept is narrower than other concepts explaining the preservation of a power relation, such as compliance or obedience, as it only concerns explanations having to do with the power relation's rightfulness, and thus its normative character, rather than non-normative considerations such as compliance out of habit, coercion, fear of punishment, or considerations exclusively based on personal interest (although some disagree on the latter, e.g. Dellmuth and Schlipphak, 2020).

The question how to balance both components in the conceptualization of legitimacy has long been a topic of debate. To some extent, this has resulted in a division of labour between normative theorists and social scientists, with the first interested in evaluating a power relation according to general moral criteria, and the second more interested in the empirical consequences the legitimacy of a power relation has for its character and maintenance. However, even when we stick to the social scientific study of legitimacy, this distinction between legitimacy's normative and empirical character leads to important questions, particularly about the precise role of citizens' awareness and evaluations in the legitimacy of a power relation.

Following the classic Weberian conceptualisation of legitimacy, citizens' beliefs about a power relation determine its legitimacy. Over the years however, this conceptualisation has come to be criticised, most importantly because it leaves out the normative character of this power relation as it accepts any type of belief citizens have as valid (e.g. Grafstein, 1981). In response to this, Beetham has influentially tried to transcend the dichotomy between norms and empirics by proposing an understanding of legitimacy as an assessment of the extent to which a power relation can be justified in terms of people's beliefs (Beetham, 2013: 11). However, a consequence of such a conceptualisation is that, ontologically speaking, it is the external observer that makes the claim in whose judgement legitimacy resides, rather than in social reality. In these terms, legitimacy is about a social scientist "making a judgement, not delivering a report about people's belief in legitimacy" (Beetham, 2013: 13). The risk of such a conception of legitimacy is that there can be a mismatch between empirical reality and a researcher's claim, robbing legitimacy of its empirical explanatory power. For example, what if a researcher studies the norms of citizens, and concludes that these norms make the political system they live in legitimate, but citizens themselves subsequently reject it? (Perhaps, Brexit might be a case in point.)

If we are to treat legitimacy as a social reality, rather than as existing in a researcher's judgement, we need to see it as a social relation between those in power and their subordinates. Researchers can attempt to make claims about it using a particular set of norms (either derived from political theory or citizens' own beliefs), but they are not the 'authors' of legitimacy

itself. The social relation of legitimacy itself then is not empirically observable, in the same sense as the concept of God is not a possible study object for social scientists (e.g. Barker, 2001: 26). What is empirically observable are the processes of *legitimation*: the processes where legitimacy is established, on the hand being claimed ‘from above’ by those in power through the use of arguments, acts and symbols, on the other being affirmed or withdrawn ‘on the ground’ by their constituencies, both through the use of arguments, symbols or acts. Legitimacy as a social relation is never definite, rather, it is constantly negotiated (Denitch, 1979: 110). On the basis of empirical studies of legitimation processes, researchers can make claims about legitimacy, but their claims do not constitute the legitimacy of the relation itself.

If legitimacy is to have explanatory value in empirical reality then, it can only do so if those involved in a power relation have some conception of it, as well as if they evaluate it in normative terms. In other words, it is not only citizens’ norms – as Beetham proposes – but also their actual perceptions that constitute both the normative and empirical (or functional) grounds for legitimacy. A researcher might evaluate a power relation as a legitimacy deficit because it does not align with the norms of those who are subject to it. Yet that will not necessarily have any empirical consequences if citizens make no evaluation of that power relation. If, for example, political systems are withdrawn from public perception, their justifiability will not be evaluated at all. They may, then, be neither legitimate or illegitimate, but be simply ‘a-legitimate’ (Steffek, 2007: 190). Instead, before legitimacy becomes a relevant category, a power relation needs to be perceived, firstly, and have become politically salient, secondly. Hence, “a social object (institution, norm, etc.) can only be legitimate or illegitimate once it has been politicised” (Hurrelmann, 2017: 66), meaning it has moved into the sphere of collectively binding decision-making as it has become politically salient and polarised (e.g. Zürn, 2016). In a very elementary sketch, a conceptualisation might look like this:

Table 3.1: Relation between legitimacy and politicization

		Relation of citizens’ norms with power relation	
		Matching	Clashing
Degree of politicisation	High	Legitimate	Illegitimate
	Low	A-legitimate	A-legitimate (legitimacy deficit)

The *result* of legitimacy – or more precisely, of legitimation – is citizens' acceptance of political rule, translating into obedience as support for the political system. More particularly, it results in a form of support that is particularly reliable because it is rooted in moral justification, and as such is less affected by day-to-day issues. This idea builds in particular on the framework developed by Easton (1965, 1975), who distinguished between specific and diffuse support. In this seminal framework, specific support refers to citizens' evaluations of actual governmental outputs, whereas diffuse support is a more durable kind of attitude towards the political system in general. The latter accumulates through processes of socialization and can function as a sort of 'reservoir' in times when specific support is lower. As a result, states with lower diffuse support are more vulnerable to a regime crisis triggered by a lack in specific support than states with higher diffuse support. These two types of support are not isolated from each other, but interact. However, while specific support consists of more concrete, conscious judgements and can more easily be revised on the basis of new developments, diffuse support is more stable and persistent.

3.2.2. Operationalizing legitimacy

What does such a theoretical understanding of legitimacy mean for its operationalization in the empirical study of public opinion? After all, there is a rather broad range of indicators available that could tell us something about legitimacy and legitimation. For example, besides support for a political entity, studies look at indicators ranging from trust in public institutions to approval of incumbent office holders, and from satisfaction with democracy to identification with the political community. How then can we give meaning to such different indicators in terms of legitimacy? And, important for this study in particular, how should we give weight to things like daily life legitimation, as well as notions about the 'diffuseness' or 'embeddedness' of public opinion?

As a start, we can identify a couple of core points that research interested in legitimation should focus on. Firstly, we are studying the claims made by social actors that concern a particular political entity. After all, we are studying legitimation rather than legitimacy per se, and without actors making claims, there is no legitimation. Secondly, we are studying a particular type of claim, namely moral claims concerning the justification

of political rule. Thirdly, legitimation fundamentally concerns claims of an evaluative nature, as claims lacking an evaluative component do not on themselves make clear whether a polity is considered legitimate. However, while such core points help us in drawing us towards the types of utterances we are interested in when studying legitimation, an important question is how tight we should cast the net in this respect. For example, does a focus on 'evaluations' mean we should only focus on claims based on reasoning rather than claims with an affective basis? And should our investigation focus only on claims concerning the fundamentals of a political system, or can claims concerning particular institutions be relevant as well?

Regarding the latter, some argue for a more narrow focus. Hurrelmann (2019) for example argues that while less fundamental notions such as everyday political discussions might be related to political justification, empirical legitimation analysis should concern only those claims that concern the polity itself. And indeed, it is fair to say that claims concerning more fundamental levels have more *weight*, as legitimacy in essence concerns fundamentals of political rule. Yet, I hold that such less fundamental items are still a useful in the study of legitimation. For in practice, such items do interact with more fundamental notions, and are essential if we are to understand how the most fundamental stances towards a polity come about. In other words, more specific types of evaluations concern the 'flesh' of more diffuse support. Using the Eastonian framework, a better way to think about this is perhaps as pointing to a hierarchical difference: attitudes towards more general levels have a more fundamental meaning in terms of legitimacy. Building on Easton, Norris (2011) for example distinguishes five levels of support fitting to different levels of the polity, hierarchically ordered from diffuse to specific. In this conceptualization, citizens' identification are seen as most fundamental, followed by approval of core regime principles, evaluations of regime performance, confidence in institutions, and finally approval of incumbent office holders on the most specific side (see Figure 3.1).

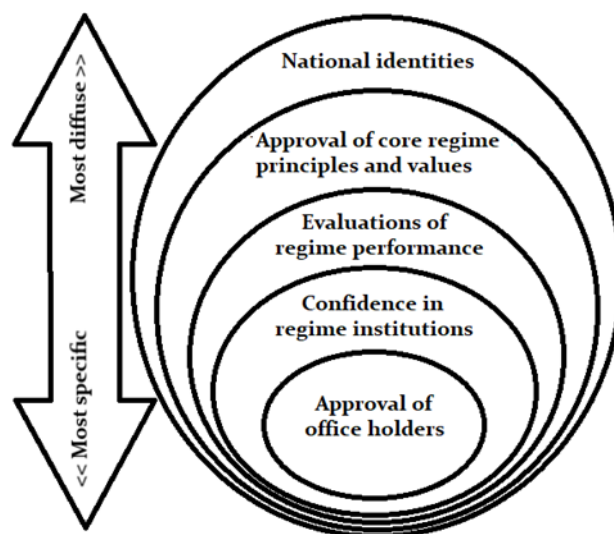


Figure 3.2: Indicators of system support (author's own adaptation, based on Norris, 2011: 24)

Importantly, all these five indicators can have both an affective and an evaluative basis. Indeed, particularly more diffuse indicators such as identification with the political community are likely to be more affective and less 'reasoned' in nature than more specific ones. This is important to note, as some argue for a focus that is more restricted to reasoned evaluations. Abulof (2016) for example coined the concept of 'public political thought' as a way to empirically investigate legitimation in a normatively grounded way. Referring to the public's 'principled moral reasoning of politics' this concept is defined as 'social actor's reasoned conversations on legitimizing values' (Abulof 2016: 374). Yet, the risk of restricting ourselves in this way is that it reduces citizens' orientations towards politics to the factors the researcher is interested in, while neglecting other elements that are important to citizens themselves. For example, someone might have a strong aversion to the EU based on diffuse feeling of unease, but he or she might lack reasoned arguments to sustain this. However, if such an aversion thus still comes down to a principled rejection of the EU, such an opinion would still be meaningful in terms of legitimacy, as it would indicate a latent legitimacy problem.

It is along the same lines that notions of 'the everyday' side of politics play a role. With this I refer not only to day-to-day controversies about politicians or policies, but also to citizens' daily, 'mundane' experiences with political institutions and symbols. Given the status of legitimacy as a fundamental concept, 'the master question of politics', it is not

immediately obvious how such experiences are fundamental enough to contribute to legitimacy. Yet, while such claims do not themselves concern people's final judgement about the legitimacy of a polity, they can be an important ingredient of legitimation, also because they can be an important ingredient of the socialization that is important for creating more diffuse levels of support – particularly for a new type of polity like the EU. Indeed, as we have seen some have argued precisely that the establishment of the EU's legitimacy rests on people's day-to-day experiences with the EU and its 'social facts' (McNamara, 2015). In the end, such day-to-day experiences are also *part* of justifications, ingredients on which the acceptance of European political authority it is built. Therefore, such notions of the daily too are a useful place of analysis – to the extent that these are *related* to fundamentals of EU rule, that is.

Finally, an item that we need to take into account is the 'strength' of public opinion, related to the concept of 'attitudinal strength' (Luttrell and Sawicki, 2020; Petty and Krosnick, 1995), which captures notions such as the salience and importance of political topics to citizens, as well as the certainty and stability with which they hold their opinions. After all, as noted in the previous section, items like indifference or ambivalence also have an effect on the meaning and weight of opinions in terms of legitimacy. At the same time, their effect on the legitimacy of a political authority is not straightforward. In cases of ambivalence for example (referring to citizens simultaneously approving of some elements of a regime while rejecting other elements, e.g. Lavine, 2001; Steenbergen and Brewer, 2004), citizens' attitudes are likely to be less stable over time (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 2000; Zaller and Feldman, 1992) and more vulnerable to persuasion (Bassili, 1996), meaning they provide a less stable basis for legitimacy. At the same time, it may lead people to adopt more moderate positions (Meffert et al. 2004). In case of indifference, referring to a political disinterest in which citizens do not dispose of any clearly held attitude towards a regime altogether, the basis it provides is even shallower: in a first instance, it would lead to a diagnosis of a-legitimacy, meaning a political system can 'get by' without a justification for its power. When it becomes politicized however, it would find itself in need of justification, which can be problematic given that there is little diffuse support to rely on, and a political disinterest translates into carelessness.

“Public indifference to political institutions implies fragility of support for those institutions”, as Down and Wilson put it (2017: 201).

Altogether then, the point is to emphasize the importance of looking at concrete, currently existing beliefs in all their aspects. While proper weight must be given to different indicators, it is important to not restrict ourselves only to a narrow type of indicators when studying legitimation. The widely used measure of levels of support for example is important, but not enough. The more mundane type of discussions in which citizens make sense of politics, and the everyday experiences citizens have with political institutions and symbols are not ‘irrelevant noise’ that researchers need to disregard in order to unveil the norms of citizens, but are objects of investigation in themselves. The same applies to the intensity with which attitudes are held. Evidently, it remains important to consider that most of these notions are conceptually not at the core of legitimacy as they do not concern normative evaluations of fundamentals of political rule themselves. Yet, because they are in practice so bound up with such evaluations, and particularly in the case of the EU appear to play such an important role, they are relevant to consider.

3.2.3. Legitimacy criteria in the European context

This however is not to say that studying legitimation is *only* a matter of mapping public opinion in all its facets. For no matter how thoroughly we study public sentiments, making claims on this basis remains a matter of interpretation. In that sense, Beetham is right: even when we understand legitimacy as a social reality, any *assessment* of researchers about legitimacy is always an interpretation of that reality. And that means we also need an interpretative framework that allows us to give meaning to the opinions mapped. As Hurrelmann has put it, the analytical distinction between normative and empirical approaches “should not obscure the interconnections between both perspectives. (...) An empirical analysis of legitimacy presupposes an understanding of plausible moral arguments that can be used to affirm or dispute legitimacy. In this kind of analysis, other scholars’ normative legitimacy evaluations may constitute parts of the empirical material that is examined” (2019: 3).

This is particularly so because of the diffuse and dynamic nature of public opinion. As mentioned, legitimacy is constantly renegotiated, and

different elements of a political system can be politicized or depoliticized. If in the case of the EU the apparently relatively undetermined character of public opinion means it can be shaped by political elites such as media outlets and political parties, what can be politicized still depends not only on the public imagination, but also on the characteristics of the political system to be legitimated. Given these characteristics, some items are more likely to be politicized than others. In the end, researching legitimation therefore requires to go back and forth between citizens' beliefs and a more 'objective' understanding of the actual political system. We can only interpret findings about citizens' subjective realities when having an understanding of the characteristics of power relation. Distinguishing normative categories which can serve as standards to assess a political system against – for example on the basis of the work of normative scholars, who can help us in making sense of what demands a particular political system makes – helps us think what potential the current, immanent beliefs might have more fundamentally in terms of their ultimate consequences.

The difficulty with the EU then is that its particular nature means that different views exist among scholars about how the EU ought to be legitimated. After all, the EU is an 'unidentified political object', a political entity about the definition of which there is no agreement. As a consequence, scholars have formulated different models in order to understand the type of polity the EU is, and likewise have proposed different criteria of legitimacy which might be applicable to it. Some authors have conceived of it as a regulatory agency to which the only more minimal criteria concerning policy outcomes apply (Majone, 1998), while others have emphasized how the intergovernmental nature of European governance means that the EU needs to be legitimate in the first place with member states (Moravscik, 2002; Scharpf, 2009). A third group of authors argues that the EU should rather be seen as a constitutional democracy that needs to be more legitimate with citizens (Habermas, 2001; Hix, 2008), while a fourth group argues that different criteria might apply at the same time (Lord and Magette, 2004).

However, what makes things easier for us is that what is at stake here are not substantive normative criteria for evaluating the legitimacy of the EU, but criteria that help us interpret the meaning of public stances. Put

differently, what we are looking for is not to find criteria that predetermine the types of arguments citizens use, but to describe fundamental principles of EU integration that citizens need to approve of if European integration is to be functionally sustainable and normatively justifiable in the long run. Along these lines, scholars have formulated certain 'objective' criteria that can be used to assess public attitudes against. De Wilde et al. (2014) for example draw upon Morgan (2005) to conceptualize three different dimensions that are to be evaluated in order to provide an account of EU legitimacy (more or less fitting the Eastonian framework, although they do not mention it): 1) do citizens agree with the principle of transnational integration? 2) how do they evaluate the current institutional arrangement? 3) the presence of ideational/material support: are there shared goals driving the integration process – more in particular, future oriented goals? Along similar lines, but putting the concept of identity more central, Sindic et al. (2019) distinguish three 'spheres of integration', each with their own principle of legitimacy. 1) As integration is about sharing wealth, sufficient common identity needs to exist for the legitimation of redistribution of wealth (meaning redistribution must be perceived as solidarity, rather than as charity). 2) Integration is about shared decision making. In order for decision making to be perceived as legitimate, it needs to be based on the existence of a psychologically bound community. 3) Integration is about 'collective self-realization'. In order for people to perceive the EU as legitimate, it needs to contribute to collective goals one strives towards.

How and to what extent do such criteria then apply to the euro? After all, the euro's legitimacy is deeply intertwined with that of the EU, but it also has its own characteristics. The euro's legitimacy clearly depends on and is to a large extent derived from its place in the larger political system. And on the other side of this coin, we might also note that the euro at the same time *affects* the legitimacy of the EU. After all, the euro might contribute to the EU's overall legitimacy by fostering a shared identity, by contributing to output legitimacy of EU, or by normalizing its governance. Or alternatively, it might hurt the EU's legitimacy as negative consequences of the euro might also feed into the EU as a whole. Still, while this intertwinedness of the euro and the EU on the one hand would suggest that criteria that are applicable to the EU are also relevant to the euro, the fact that the euro only is one part of a larger political system

makes us wonder whether we can even speak of legitimacy as a property of the euro in the first place, given that legitimacy as a concept applies to the fundamentals of political rule.

Yet, such ‘intertwinedness’ itself does not disqualify the euro from being the object of legitimation research. Firstly, it is important to realize that the EU is not an entity whose legitimacy can be understood autonomously either, as the EU’s legitimacy is part of a larger system of governance too, and operates in a broader multilevel system (e.g. Benz, 2015). More importantly, the euro also is a power relation on itself, as it comes with consequences in terms of authority that are not part of the EU per se, and it needs justified support for its own output – no matter whether based on economic outcomes, identity, or political consequences. The introduction of the euro transformed the European polity in a fundamental way as it entailed the transfer of a core state power. While the euro might not on itself embody ‘the fundamentals of political rule’ in its entirety, it is fair to say that to live in the Eurozone means to live in a political regime of its own. As Moro put it, “it is a matter of fact that people living in the Eurozone (whether it be a lucky or unlucky condition) are citizens of the EU in a way that is different from that of their fellow citizens of noneuro EU countries” (2013b: 233). And as a consequence, the euro needs to be accepted and justified itself to persist, and it makes sense to speak of the justification of the power relation that the euro is.

In that sense, studying the legitimation of the euro means to simultaneously study the legitimacy of the euro itself and that of the EU. On the one hand, we are studying the justification and public acceptance of the euro as such, and in that sense, this chapter’s account of EU legitimacy can be seen as a background that might help us in understanding the euro itself. On the other hand, findings on the legitimation of the euro will undeniably also provide insights into question on the legitimation of the EU as a whole. Particularly because of its high symbolic value as it represents the EU as a value, it also functions as a *pars pro toto* for European integration – in that sense, the question of the autonomy of the euro in relation to the EU is also an empirical question of how citizens see this relation themselves. With the specific way it brings up particular questions, most notably the tension between everyday life

and the political, it can help us improve our understanding of phenomena that are also important for the EU in general.

3.3. Way ahead: studying the legitimation of the euro

The approach taken here differs from the way the concept is generally used in the empirical literature by moving away from notions of support, and emphasizing the need to look at daily-life perceptions, while at the same time interpreting these subjective realities in terms of the more 'objective' characteristics of the power relation under consideration. And in doing so, it does direct our attention in a particular direction and helps us interpret the meaning of public opinion.

An implication of this conceptualization is that there is a need to study public beliefs in a broader sense. While the measure of current levels of support is a useful indicator, support in itself is a *consequence* of successful legitimation, rather than representing legitimacy itself, and in order to understand its meaning, we must both look closer and gaze further. We must look closer, because we need to understand how support comes about, and on what perceptions it is based. But we also must gaze further, because we want to have insight into the normative stances of citizens towards the underlying politics – regardless of whether citizens currently make this link themselves – because we want to know whether citizens' normative stances are compatible with what the power relation demands.

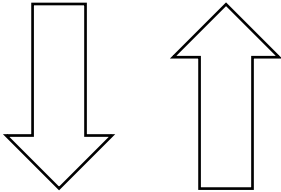
How can this framework be applied to the euro? To pick up where section 2.2 left off then, we noted already that the euro is an institution where the distinction between daily life perceptions and political consequences comes to the fore particularly strongly, and it is therefore crucial to study closely the public's actual perceptions of the euro, while at the same keeping an eye on its underlying politics. How both sides relate however is also an open empirical question, as different configurations are possible: different types of perceptions of the euro can go together with different sorts of positioning towards the euro's politics. On the one hand, we want to know to what extent the euro is seen as either banal or political. If support for the euro (which we know on the basis of survey research is relatively high) is based on active approval of the political project that the euro is, we would be tempted to say that the euro is simply legitimate. However, if the euro is perceived mainly as an everyday entity, we might

instead move closer to a diagnosis of a-legitimacy, as this would mean the euro is hardly in need of any justification beyond functioning reliably in people’s everyday life interactions. At the same time, this is not the whole story, as we also need to take into account the political consequences of the euro. If people support the political demands the euro makes there of course is no problem, but resistance against the euro’s politics would entail a legitimacy deficit, with the question whether this can translate into actual legitimation problems for the euro itself depending on the extent to which this deficit can be mobilized (i.e. made politically salient), and in turn linked to the euro.

Table 3.2: Schematization of the legitimation of the euro in relation with its politics

		Support for euro	
		High	Low
Perception of the euro	Political	Legitimate	Illegitimate
	Banal	A-legitimate	Potential legitimation problem

A more everyday, less political perception of the euro can help decrease the effect of negative opinions on the euro’s politics. While a more political perception of the euro increases the urgency of legitimation of its politics



Legitimacy problems in the euro’s politics can translate into legitimation problems for the euro if these are mobilized and linked to the euro

		Relation of citizens’ norms with euro’s politics	
		Matching	Clashing
Potential for politicisation of euro’s politics	High	Legitimate	Urgent legitimation problem
	Low	A-legitimate	Latent legitimation problem

This points us to items we can study empirically to understand better the legitimation of the euro. Of course, in empirical reality, things do not need to be as black and white. For example, it might also be that people do not actively resist the politics of the euro (for instance because they have no strong opinions on these matters), but that their normative positions are not compatible with the demands the euro makes. And likewise, the extent to which euro is seen as political or everyday is not a dichotomous matter, as a banal understanding of the euro in everyday life could also

co-exist with certain political associations. However, rather than providing us with a clear-cut scheme of how things can be, the purpose of this framework is to make clear which elements are particularly relevant in studying the euro's legitimation.

This study on this basis distinguishes three core elements of particular interest. Firstly, it is interested in citizens' perceptions and understanding of the euro: how they make sense of it, with what actors and which consequences do they link it, and to what extent do they see it as political? Secondly, it focuses on citizens' evaluations of the *politics* of the euro: do they accept these, do they link them to the euro in the first place, and regardless of this, are their norms compatible with what the euro demands? In other words, we are looking at both actually held opinions and more 'latent' dispositions here, which we assess against an a-priori understanding of what political consequences the euro really entails. Thirdly, it looks at how both these sides come together in citizens overall evaluations of the single currency, including the salience the topic has to them. Rather than looking at frequencies of pro- or contra stances, we are interested here in the *types* of opinions people have on the euro, as well as how such opinions fit into their broader view on politics.

By putting these three items central in the empirical part of this thesis, this study aims to step by step 'dissect' public opinion on the euro. Each of these three elements has a chapter dedicated to it with its own subquestion, as described in the introduction. Rather than using formal hypotheses, the questions are studied inductively, and in this way this dissertation aims to make an empirical contribution. It sets out to do so through the use of a series of focus groups conducted in three European countries. The next chapter will outline the methodological set-up of this study, as the approach to public opinion developed here inevitably will also have consequences for the methods that are appropriate.

Chapter 4

Methods

The study of public opinion may be central to political science as well as the field of European studies, it is far from straightforward how to measure it and gauge its meaning. What makes public opinion such a difficult item is that it in some way is always constructed by the very act of measuring it, and as such is not fixed entity with a predetermined substance, but always needs to be 'grasped' while being subject to change. As some say, public opinion is a "nebulous item", "difficult to comprehend, always evolving, always somehow elusive", and as such, "the meaning of public opinion is often dictated by the tools we have on hand to measure it" (Herbst, 2001: 454, 451). What is more, the challenge in this dissertation is not to measure public opinion per se, but do so in a way that allows us to say something about processes of legitimation. In light of the challenge this entails, it is crucial to make very clear how public opinion is understood and what methodological approach is used for studying it.

This chapter will therefore outline the methodological choices made in this study. First, it will explain its choice for the focus group method and describe what theoretical and epistemological implications this choice entails. Second, it will make clear how these focus groups have been set up in terms of the sampling, as well as how the focus groups have been designed in terms of their content. Subsequently, this section will describe in detail how the focus groups have been conducted by delineating the different steps taken and practical choices made in conducting the focus groups, reporting about the recruitment, the moderation of the focus groups as well as the ethical considerations taken into account. Finally, it will outline the approach taken towards the analysis of the data resulting from the focus groups.

4.1. The choice for focus groups

In selecting an appropriate methodology, the most central consideration is that it must fit to the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter. In European studies, the dominant approach taken towards studying public opinion is the attitudinal approach building on data collection through surveys. Like in political science in general, this method has acquired a “hegemonic status as the tool for measuring the will of the people” (Sturgis and Smith, 2010: 66). More in particular, the sources relied on are predominantly the European Commission’s Eurobarometer as well as the European Social Survey. With regards to measuring legitimacy (particularly using the Eastonian framework), studies have analyzed indicators such as trust (e.g. Ares et al., 2017; Hartevelde et al., 2013), citizens’ evaluations of their country’s EU membership (e.g. McLaren, 2006), their evaluations of the EU as a whole (e.g. Braun and Tausendpfund, 2014), support for specific institutions (e.g. Gabel, 2003), as well as satisfaction with European democracy (e.g.; Hobolt, 2012), or a combination of such indicators (e.g. Boomgaarden et al., 2011).

Such research has been hugely useful and has produced many important insights. However, the quantitative focus of this methodology brings with it certain limitations in the light of the previous conceptualization of legitimacy, as it provides less insight into certain elements that are important to this study. Firstly, answers to a survey question do not tell us much about citizens’ perception of the power relation in question, in this case the EU. They do not provide insight into which elements of European integration respondents perceive, how they make sense of these elements, or what logic underlies their evaluations. Secondly, levels of trust, approval or support do not necessarily say anything about the presence of normative justifications, which after all is a prerequisite before we can make claims about legitimacy. Thirdly, it is difficult to tell from survey data what salience the topic of Europe has to citizens. Therefore, it follows clearly from this chapter’s argument that the existing literature is in need of a complementary approach if questions of legitimacy are to be addressed in their full complexity. This is not to say that the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter predetermines only one methodological approach as useful. Indeed, applications of survey research can still be relevant – the use of survey experiments for example

can be rather useful to look at notions of stability. However, in light of the particular emphasis of this research, as well as the imbalance in the existing literature, this study takes a particular approach that comes with certain epistemological assumptions which are different from the ones survey research relies on.

Survey research generally works on the basis of an epistemology of methodological individualism, with attitudes being attributes of individuals. The responses given to surveys then are understood as indicating meaningful preferences of citizens, and are usually seen as pre-existing the survey, only to be measured passively by the questionnaire. However, there is a long-standing literature showing how respondents do often not possess opinions at the level of specificity of survey questions (Zajonc, 1980; Zaller and Feldman, 1992), which then is particularly the case with complex, distant political questions like those of the EU. Thus, surveys like Eurobarometer risk being disconnected from respondents' lifeworld perceptions and experiences (e.g. Eder, 2011), *producing* public opinion more than passively measuring something that was already there. Indeed, some have argued that with the creation of Eurobarometer, the European Commission "created European public opinion as an institutional fact, which (strictly speaking) did not exist before 1973" (Van Middelaar, 2013: 271). On itself, the fact that public opinion to some extent is constructed by the very act of measuring it is not a problem – if it applies to surveys, it applies to other, qualitative techniques as well. However, it is important to take this constructed nature into account, and the nature of survey research makes it easy to lose sight of this. Echoing a point made in earlier chapters, 'the evident danger here is that one forces opinions to be expressed on highly abstract matters which respondents have rarely engaged with, and infers attitudes and beliefs which have barely formed' (White, 2009: 699).

In contrast to such a conception of public opinion, this study has an understanding that is more in line with the 'qualitative turn' that emerged in European studies. More in particular, this study takes a view of public opinion as something that is constructed collectively. Rather than following the methodological individualism of survey research, it sees public opinion as something emerging in communicative interaction and discursive practices. Following this, it regards publics as collectives, rather

than as collections of individuals (Perrin and McFarland, 2011). In addition, this study is sympathetic to the 'practice approach' towards the EU as outlined by Adler-Nissen (2016), which underlines the importance of studying everyday practices that shape European integration 'on the ground'. While being related to constructivism (e.g. Risse, 2004), it differs in its emphasis on the importance of notions such as the implicit and the tacit. In line with this, this study rather than focusing only on rational, manifest attitudes and utterances, also wants to have attention for the tacit understandings underlying such utterances, such as those convictions and stances that are collectively taken for granted and are thus visible when having attention for what is implicit. It does not want to dismiss the idea of attitudes, but underlines that public opinion is a 'fabric' in which many elements can be distinguished, such as perceptions and norms, which in turn can result in evaluations.

In light of all this, this research uses group interviews, or focus groups as a method. In this research technique, data are collected through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher (Morgan, 1996). The advantage of this approach is that it offers the possibility to study how citizens themselves speak about social and political phenomena in their own words, and to put central their own experiences and stories. It also allows for a focus on salience and the strength of opinions, as it gives an impression of which topics participants are eager to talk about, and which they are hesitant or silent about. In other words, the focus group method perfectly suits this study's emphasis on perceptions, sense making and the strength of opinions.

In recent years, focus groups have enjoyed an increasing popularity. They have been around for some time in social research (Merton and Kendall, 1946), and have become increasingly popular since the late 1980s and 1990s in the social sciences (Kitzinger 1995; Morgan 1996) and political science in particular (Gamson 1992; Perrin 2005; Walsh 2004). Now being applied in a broad range of social disciplines (e.g. Barbour and Morgan, 2017) as well as outside academia (the work of Brexit campaigner Dominic Cummings is a prominent example), the method has 'undeniably entered the mainstream' (Barbour, 2017: 1). In the field of European studies too, the qualitative work mentioned earlier (e.g. Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016; Dekker and Den Ridder, 2019; Duchesne et al., 2013; Hurrelmann et

al., 2015; Van den Hoogen et al., 2022; Van Ingelgom, 2014; White, 2011) exemplifies how the method has increased in popularity – even if it still comprises only a rather small part of the literature.

Focus groups suit an understanding of public opinion as emerging in communicative interactions. They function as a scaled down version of what happens in real public life, thus offering a sort of ‘microscope’ (e.g. Van Ingelgom, 2014) zooming in on particular elements of public opinion and showing what lies below the surface. The data produced by focus groups should not be seen as ‘natural’. They are still artificially created in the sense that they are derived staged gatherings, asking citizens to talk about topics they might not normally speak about. They do however offer a view on a type of communication that is much closer to real life than other survey or interview-based methods. While being constructed, they offer ‘an observational site where one can examine, in a particularly concentrated and vivid form, the nature and diversity of repertoires which actors have available to them” (White, 2011: 51). Having to ‘talk politics’ in a group, citizens have the possibility to interpret and then rephrase the questions asked into their own parlance. Indeed, even though the researcher asks questions, participants can in responding to these questions only draw on vocabulary and ways of speaking that are available to them. Thus, being driven by interaction between citizens rather than an interviewer asking questions, the dominance of the interviewer can be decreased, and the richness of citizens’ communication can be put central.

In addition, participants can help each other to access ideas that they would find difficult to get to individually by providing their fellow participants with facts and arguments that they would not think of themselves. Or, the other way around, they might push each other to justify their claims and arguments, thus helping in making clear what underlies these thoughts. In this way, they offer the ‘opportunity to observe the process of collective sense making’ (Wilkinson, 1998: 188), and show how citizens understand a political object, deal with its implications, negotiate about it with others, and potentially change their views on it. As such, they do not only help us to say something about the legitimacy of this political object, but also about its politicization. Directly confronting citizens with politics, something they might not do in everyday life (or

indeed, they rather avoid, e.g. Cramer Walsh, 2004), focus groups thus provide a 'test of politicization' (e.g. Duchesne, 2017). The extent to which citizens are interested enough to talk about it, and how they talk about it, is not only indicative of a current degree of politicization, but also of the potential for politicization.

Despite all its advantages however, there is one important disadvantage to the focus group method compared to quantitative methods: its low external validity. After all, their sample size can never be sufficient to be representative of larger populations in a statistical sense, and their setup means that it is difficult to reproduce results. Therefore, it is important to understand well the aims and use of focus group research. Its purpose is not to provide hard evidence that serves to prove or disprove certain claims, or to show that populations at large hold certain beliefs. Instead, it is to probe a small amount of data in considerable depth in order to understand better how certain concepts work in practice, and in doing so to contribute to our theoretical understanding of such phenomena. Rather than reproducibility, the aim it is to maximize *typological* representation. Contrary to the 'width' quantitative research provides, focus groups look for depth, functioning as a microscope rather than as a helicopter.

In order to deal with the shortcomings of focus groups, the reflexivity of researchers, as well as the systematicity of the implementation of their research design are the crucial validation criteria (Duchesne et al., 2013: 195). It is essential for the researcher to report extensively about the steps taken in setting up the focus group, such as about recruitment, but also specific steps such as the location where the focus groups were conducted and the arrangements in which they were held. Likewise, it is important to be reflective in presenting data, and be clear about the type of analysis that led to certain results. In this way, the reliability of the data as well as the validity of the results can be improved. To this end, the next three sections will describe in more detail the design of the focus groups, their set-up, as well as this study's approach to the data analysis, for every step making clear as much as possible which decisions were made and why.

4.2. Focus group design and set-up

A vast amount of literature has confirmed that there are two main criteria of differentiation that are most central in explaining variations in citizens'

attitudes towards European integration: a national and a social one. Therefore, these are also the main criteria informing the sampling of participants in this study, and the two most important decisions here concern the selection of countries and the selection of social groups. The next two subsections will outline the choices made here, after which a third subsection will describe how the focus groups were set up in terms of content, meaning how and which questions participants were asked to discuss in the focus groups. A fourth subsection describes the choices made in the recruitment process. A fifth subsection then explains how the actual focus groups were conducted in terms of their location and the setup of the venue, as well as the moderation techniques used. A final subsection makes clear what ethical considerations have been taken into account.

4.2.1. Country selection

In light of this study's interest, the most important criterion in selecting countries is that it should be countries with diverging experiences of the consequences of the euro. Evidently, a country's experience with the euro is determined by many factors, and countries all have their own history with euro. In some countries – like the Baltic states, but also countries like Spain – becoming part of the euro area went together with a sense of prestige. In others – such as Germany, where the symbolic power of its D-Mark was so strong that it has been described by some as 'Deutschmark nationalism' (Habermas, 1992; Kaelberer, 2005) – some might have perceived the transition to the euro rather as a loss of national pride. Likewise, elite discourses and debates in national public spheres are likely to have affected national experiences as well, just as countries' more general experiences with European integration. Therefore, every country to some extent has its own unique experience, and likewise, there are many variations that would be interesting to look at – one might for example also think about the difference between EU countries within and outside the Eurozone.

However, the criterion I deem most important here – especially in relation to the euro's legitimacy – is the way countries experienced the euro crisis and its aftermath. Clearly, the crisis has created a divide between creditor and debtor countries. And what is *political* about the euro has by far been most pronounced during this crisis. It is these experiences that are central

here. At the same time, if the aim is to look at the role of the euro crisis experience, we also want to make sure that it is precisely *these* experiences that have made the biggest differences, rather than general experiences with European integration or national political contexts. Therefore, this study opts for a most different design in terms of experience with the euro, but a most similar design in other respects.

Given these considerations, this study focuses on France, the Netherlands and Italy. Three countries that are relatively similar, for example since they are all part of the Inner Six, the founding members of the EU. Three countries, in addition, that played a prominent role in the euro crisis. At the same time, countries with rather different euro experiences. Both in terms of their position in the original foundation of the EMU and in terms of their experiences since the euro crisis, these countries have a rather different history.

France firstly is generally seen as the country that was the strongest driver of monetary union. This has not always been the case. From 1950s to the 1980s, the position of France was much more ambiguous, particularly because of how it valued notions of national sovereignty. As Tsoukalis put it, “from the French point of view, monetary integration used to be desirable only as a means of promoting EEC unity in external relations. In this respect, French politicians were torn between the objective of having a common external monetary policy and their fear of loss of national sovereignty’ (Tsoukalis 1977: 80). Yet, when the pegged exchange rate system of the ESM resulted in de facto dominance of the Bundesbank, France increasingly came to resent German dominance of the system, thus leading the country to take up a leading position pushing for euro’s creation (e.g. Jabko, 2010). The country has remained a proponent of the euro ever since, although not entirely unequivocally so, particularly because of the euro’s perceived effect on national sovereignty. When the Maastricht Treaty was to be ratified in the 1992 referendum for example, right-wing politicians such as Philippe Séguin, Charles Pasqua and Philippe de Villiers campaigned against it precisely because of its presumed consequences for French monetary and political independence (Alexandre & Jardin, 1997).

In the same way, the relation of the Netherlands with the euro has generally been positive, but not free of reservations. On the one hand, the

Netherlands has been supporting monetary integration for a long time. As an open economy that is highly dependent on trade, it favored exchange-rate stability, while its dependence on the economies of other countries mean it favored economic coordination that would provide stability and keep inflation low (Maes and Verdun, 2005). In line with this, the Netherlands was one of the countries most strongly emphasizing the need for convergence criteria for countries joining the EMU, as it found it particularly important that fiscally responsible behavior of participants states was guaranteed, a position that put the Netherlands close to Germany. At the same time, this means the Netherlands was wary of monetary integration without such guarantees. So, while the Netherlands on the one hand took an active role in the monetary integration process with Dutch financial-economic and monetary technocrats being leading figures in setting up monetary union, the role it took was mostly one of the 'gatekeeper' (Maes and Verdun, 2005: 331). This reserved attitude has persisted over the years, and it is in that light that some have remarked that the EMU "would never become a Dutch favourite" (Segers, 2020: 257).

Of all three countries, initial enthusiasm for the euro was probably highest in Italy. Like in France, part of the background to Italy's interest in joining the euro is that, "Italian political leaders increasingly resented Germany's dominance of the [European monetary] system" (Jabko, 2010: 323). In addition however, negotiators saw the Maastricht Treaty as a golden opportunity to liberalize the Italian economy (Baccaro & d'Antoni, 2020). Indeed, part of the thinking was that the regulatory framework of EMU could facilitate modernization of the country, as it would push policy makers to adopt policies they would not adopt without such external constraints: 'tying the country's hands' was intended as a "beneficial constraint" (Streeck, 1997. See also Baccaro, 2018). In hindsight, this appears to be a rather controversial claim, but in the 1990's, the belief in the euro as contributing to economic success was high. Combined with the then high degree of support for European integration in general amongst the Italian public, the euro led to little political controversy.

More than 20 years after the introduction of the euro however, these countries' perceptions of the euro have changed substantially, and we might now see their respective experiences as being located on different sides of the spectrum. While the euro appeared to work well for northern

countries like the Netherlands, the regulatory framework of the EMU has increasingly come to be seen as disadvantageous for the Italian economy (e.g. Baccaro & d'Antoni, 2020), and to a lesser extent for France, where competitiveness declined and some decried the loss of the ability to devalue (e.g. Bloomberg, 2018). In the euro crisis itself in addition, the hardship experienced in Italy was much more severe than that experienced in the north, with (youth) unemployment skyrocketing, GDP declining, and trained workers leaving the country en masse when the crisis' consequences hit. While the Netherlands and France also faced economic adversity, their situation was never as severe as that of Italy. In addition, not only did the euro affect these countries' economies in rather different ways, but their experiences with the 'democratic' effects of the euro were also substantially different, as the available policy options of southern countries like Italy were clearly more impeded from the outside than those of others. While all countries experienced some austerity measures, a clear difference between creditor countries like France and the Netherlands and debtor countries like Italy is that austerity was not only harsher and clearly failing to produce results among the latter, but also imposed by European institutions. Indeed, Eurozone membership also had a more direct on domestic politics, as it was directly related to the constellation of governments, with Eurosceptic ministers being seen as a risk to Italy's financial stability. As some have put it, "the unwritten rule of Italian democracy was clear: voters could pick their government so long as it did not threaten the euro" (Tooze, 2022).

These diverging experiences show in survey data on euro support (see Figure 4.1). In the years around the introduction of the euro, support was close to the Eurozone average in France and the Netherlands (between 65% and 70%) while being very high in Italy (above 80%). In the years following the euro's introduction, this changed around: support increased steadily in France and particularly the Netherlands, while it decreased rapidly in Italy (between 2002 and 2004, support decreased more than 20% to below 65%). It is interesting to note that this decrease in Italy largely took place already before the euro crisis, and has remained relatively stable since then. Indeed, comparing 2008 with 2019 (the year the focus groups were conducted) numbers for example, it is striking that euro support in Italy has slightly increased (with 3%), while having slightly decreased in France and the Netherlands (with 3% and 4% respectively) -

Matthijs and Merler (2020) speak of ‘foul weather Europeans’ vs ‘fair weather Europeans’ in this regard.

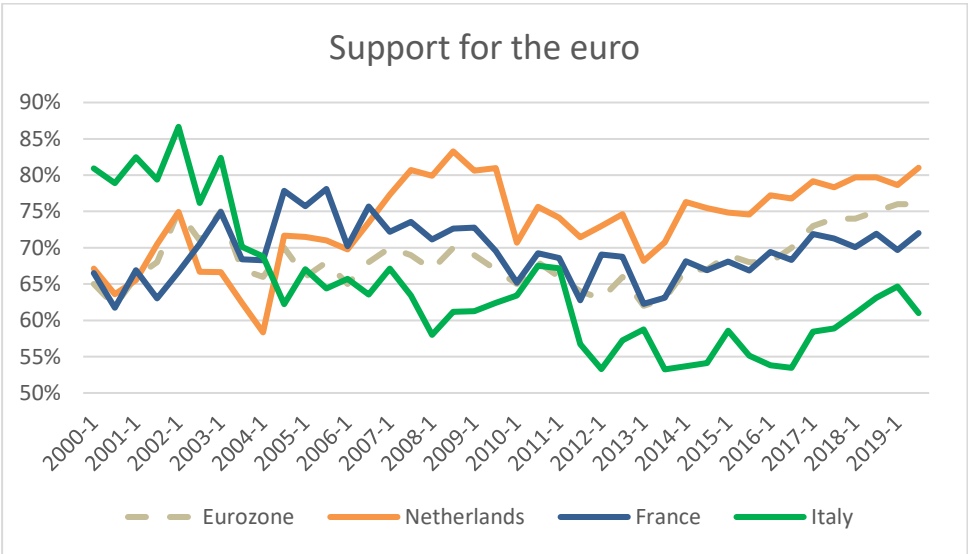


Figure 4.3: Support for the euro in the Netherlands, France and Italy compared. Source: Eurobarometer

To place this in context, it is important to note that these developments are not exclusive to the euro. Similar patterns are visible when looking at trust in national governments or the EU in general (see Figure 4.2). In the Netherlands, trust decreased following the euro crisis, but still remained at comparatively high levels, particularly trust in the national government. In Italy, trust in the EU and the national government decreased more strongly, while the latter was already at a relatively low level before the crisis. Interesting is that France has come closer to Italy in this regard as trust decreased substantially, while being at relatively low levels already before the euro crisis. This suggests an increasing political discontent, but one that was projected less on the euro than in Italy. Altogether, these data on trust highlight two things: on the one hand, they are indicative of the diverging effects of the euro crisis, and make clear that attitudes towards the euro are related to other political attitudes. On the other hand, they show how euro support remained relatively stable compared to other indicators.

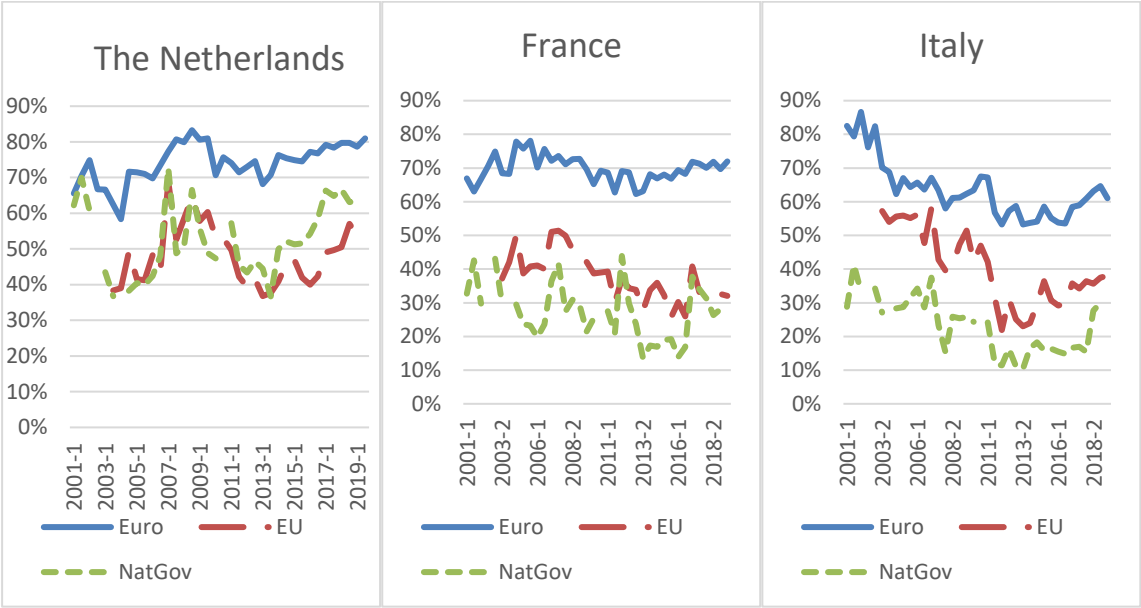


Figure 4.4: Political attitudes in the Netherlands, France and Italy compared.

Source: Eurobarometer

Finally, some Eurobarometer data on the symbolic importance of the euro also help us in understanding the empirical findings of the next chapters, and are therefore relevant to present here. As mentioned in chapter 2, Eurobarometer has been asking the question ‘What does the EU mean to you personally?’, to which ‘the euro’ has consistently been the second most given answer. Between the three countries under analysis here however, there is quite some variation. Italy is generally close to the EU average (which also includes non-euro EU countries), while numbers are higher in France, and far above the EU average in the Netherlands (see Figure 4.3). This suggests the euro is perceived as carrying more symbolic weight in the Netherlands, and less in Italy. At the same time, we should be careful in making such interpretations, for this also depends on the wording of the questions. On the question ‘has the euro made you feel more European?’, results appear rather opposite: in 2019, 33% of Italians answered ‘yes’ to this question, while only 23% and 22% did so in respectively the Netherlands and France. In other words, it does not straightforwardly emerge from these survey data how to understand country differences. This underlines the need for sensitivity and carefulness when interpreting such survey results.



Figure 4.5: Citizens associating the EU with the euro per country

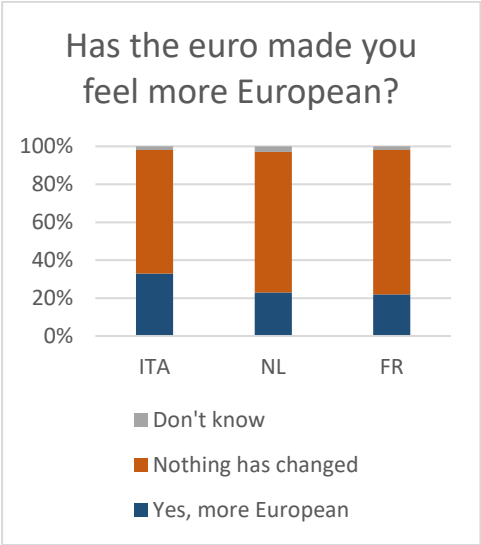


Figure 4.6: Effect of euro on EU identity (2019)

Indeed, such paradoxical patterns also appear in data on these countries' stances towards European integration in general. For example, as indicated in Figure 4.2 trust in the EU in general has as mentioned been higher in the Netherlands (never going below 50% in last two decades), while being substantially lower in France (hitting 25% in 2015) and Italy (going as low as 22% in 2012). At the same time, this cannot straightforwardly be read as a sign of higher Euroscepticism in the latter two countries. It is striking that according to a survey by EUpinions (2021),

Italy is actually the country with most people saying Europe needs *more* integration (with around 70% of respondents saying so), while France and the Netherlands are among the countries with the *least* people agreeing with this statement (around 40%). Thus, low trust in Italy might not signify the presence of a Euroscepticism aimed at an exit from the EU, but rather that Italians are EU disappointed with the EU because they expect more of it. In the Netherlands on the other hand, the high level of trust does not necessarily indicate all-encompassing pro-Europeanness, and can well go together with reservations about European integration.

As a final note, the actual comparison concerns three *cities*, as the focus groups convened in the metropolitan areas of Amsterdam, Paris and Rome. Not only is it easier to recruit a diverse set of people in cities, but also does it facilitate the 'most similar' design to look at urban regions that are relatively comparable in socio-economic terms. While the risk of this strategy is of course to miss differences between different regions, other research shows that national frames are generally similar from one city to another (e.g. Diez Medrano, 2003), meaning that potential regional differences are not so substantial that they invalidate the national comparison.

4.2.2. Social background

The selection of social groups too is guided by two contrasting criteria: political heterogeneity and social homogeneity. The first is not only related to the wish to get a good insight into the range of opinions about the euro, but also to generate a discussion that can be sufficiently polarized. Contrary to what normally is the aim of deliberative experiments in a more Habermassian fashion, the goal of the focus groups here is to encourage discussion and disagreement. For only by facilitating disagreement can we get a view on the diversity of opinions, can we see how salient the topic is to participants, and are citizens stimulated to go more in depth because others push them to justify their views. And only by having participants with different political backgrounds can such diversity be ensured.

At the same time, another aim is for participants feel comfortable to share their views and speak out. If social backgrounds are too different, there is a high risk of participants shying away, as well as of dominance by some

individuals (generally the higher educated). Therefore, it is essential to have some shared understanding among participants as well as a compatible vocabulary. The criterion of social homogeneity therefore entails that participants should normally form groups with people from similar levels of education. Following this logic, research in the context of European integration has usually worked with categories of lower, middle and higher class in terms of education and/or income.

I follow this categorization in a general sense, but with the distinction that I made the choice to organize focus groups with three more specific professional groups: unemployed citizens, hairdressers, and financial professionals. While these groups generally follow the more common selection criteria of class or education, the assumption underlying this choice is that these particular groups are likely to have an even more outspoken or at least distinguishing profile in terms of their experiences with the euro, thus representing a marked variety of perspectives on the euro. In addition, using professional groups is assumed to facilitate discussion between participants, as it fosters some familiarity by creating a setting in which participants have something in common, even if they do not know each other. Finally, selecting focus group participants on the basis of their occupation can be fruitful in the sense that it creates relatively comparable groups. While working with particular professional groups is not a widely shared practice, it is also not entirely novel, with examples including White's (2011) book based solely on interviews with taxi drivers, and to a lesser extent Favell's *Eurostars and Eurocities* (2008) which focuses on citizens whose profession allows for high international mobility.

There is a rationale behind the choice for these three groups. Financial professionals (by which I refer more specifically to professionals working in the financial industry) are not only highly educated (a group that on average is more pro-European), but because of their background are more knowledgeable than average about economic affairs like the euro. In addition, they have also particularly benefitted from the single currency from a professional perspective (monetary integration being in the particular interest of the financial industry, e.g. Mügge, 2010). Unemployed citizens (I more specifically focus on structurally unemployed citizens, rather than people 'in between jobs') on the other

hand are likely to have had a different experience with the euro. Their financial position might have made them more sensitive for the daily economic effects of the euro, while they are more likely to be affected by the economic hardship caused by the euro crisis. In addition, being on average more distrusting of politics and less politically involved (e.g. Lim and Sander, 2013; Marx and Nguyen, 2016), they are likely to on average experience politics as more distant, feeding into a different type of perception of European integration. Hairdressers finally form the middle category in terms of class. Their profession does not come with very particular political interests, but what makes this group interesting is that they speak to a wide variety of people as part of their working lives. Some have compared the importance of hairdressing salons to coffeehouse in terms of the discussion of political topics (Herzog, 1996), and we might thus assume hairdressers to be relatively sensitive to the opinion of the ordinary public, being representative of a 'common sense'.

In each country, three focus groups were organized, each with participants from only one professional group as mixing different groups entails the risk of dominance of higher educated participants. Within each group however, the aim was to maximize diversity. Most importantly, in terms of political preferences (both in terms of stances towards European integration as well as left-right orientation), but also in terms of age, gender and ethnicity (in that particular order).

However carefully composed the groups are, it is not self-evident that focus groups allow for meaningful comparisons. After all, while country comparisons are hard in general, the context-specific character of focus groups makes them particularly difficult to use for such comparisons (Hollander 2004). In order to make sure then that the focus groups provide data that go beyond self-contained instances of political reasoning, it is therefore important to standardize the design of the focus groups across the three countries so that the variation between groups can be interpreted as resulting from social and cultural differences. As Van Bezouw and colleagues note, "standardization of the research design allows for interpreting differences in focus group discussions between countries as stemming from differences in attitudes, the political culture, the social context, and other influences than the research design itself" (Van Bezouw et al., 2019: 2721).

4.2.3. Content of the focus groups

In each focus group, participants were asked to discuss six questions at length (10-30 minutes per question). These six questions can be divided into two parts, in line with this study's interest in the balance between the daily and the political side of the euro. A first part of three questions focused on participants' perceptions and understanding of the euro. The purpose of this part is to capture the 'natural' reasoning of citizens: how they perceive, understand and speak about the euro without receiving external information or cues, apart from a brief video that was used to start the conversation. This video – a (nationally adjusted) video fragment from 2002 showcasing the transition to the euro – was used before asking the first question, as a secondary aim of this first question specifically was that it would help to open up a conversation to which all participants feel comfortable contributing (and trial focus groups showed doing this with a video indeed proved useful. In some ways a more open start of the focus groups would have been preferable, but these trials showed the video to have a 'comforting' effect, leading to more fruitful discussions overall). The second and third questions continued to focus on other elements of participants' understanding of the euro, particularly in terms of its consequences. Like the first questions, these questions were formulated in an open way. Also, it should be noted that the formulation of the questions, the effects of the video vignettes, and the dynamics created by the moderation technique were first tested extensively in three trial focus groups conducted in Amsterdam.

After a break, a second part of three questions focused on the politics of the euro. The purpose of this section is to draw participants to the normative questions underlying the euro, regardless of whether participants connected these items to the euro themselves in the first part. More in particular, these questions focused on solidarity, autonomy and inter-member state dominance. This was done through the use of video vignettes (the use of which will be discussed more extensively below). After watching a video, participants first had the opportunity to respond to the video as they pleased, after which the moderator would introduce a statement which the participants were asked to discuss.

More specifically then, the questions asked were the following:

1. What are the first words or thoughts that come into mind when thinking about the euro?
[This question was preceded by a ±25 second video showing the transition from the previous national currency to the euro (adjusted to the national context). After the video, a picture showing the euro on the one hand and the previous currency on the other was displayed]
2. What in your experience have been the most important reasons for the introduction of the euro?
3. Who do you feel have benefited from the Euro, and who have been disadvantaged?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

4. Being in a currency union together means that euro countries should have solidarity with each other.
[Preceded by a video clip briefly explaining the difficulty of sharing one currency with different economies, bringing up questions on compatibility of economies, interdependence of member states and the need for solidarity]
5. [own country] loses too much autonomy due to the euro.
[Preceded by a video clip explaining that a currency union might require a sort of European minister of finance who checks national budgets, thus having implications for national autonomy]
6. Eurozone countries with economic problems should be obliged to cut public spending if they otherwise endanger the Eurozone as a whole.
[Preceded by a video clip explaining the Greek situation in 2015 from a democratic point of view, with Yannis Varoufakis and Wolfgang Streeck arguing the Greek bailouts to be an undemocratic, northern imposition]

The use of video clips to stimulate discussion is important to consider, as it plays a central role in the focus groups, and its use in focus groups is relatively innovative. While other social scientific research using video vignettes in a focus group context exists (e.g. Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006; Weisz and Black, 2008), this applies less to political science research. In the case of European studies, some research has used visual stimuli (e.g. Dobbler, forthcoming; Duchesne et al., 2013; White, 2011), but videos have not been used so far. In this study, their usage serves several purposes:

- Firstly, they help facilitate discussion and bring participants' attention to the euro's politics and the normative questions underlying monetary union, even if they do not 'naturally' connect such items to the euro. In light of the complex, abstract nature of the euro's politics, it is possible that participants have difficulty in formulating opinions on the statements, resulting in hesitant, short discussions. By making clearer what type of issues precisely are at stake, the stimuli are meant to make it easier for participants to come to a meaningful discussion
- More than facilitating discussions, secondly, the videos are meant to stimulate debate and enable conflict by provoking reactions. The three videos on the politics of the euro can be seen as slightly provocative, because they bring out particular views on the legitimacy of the euro crisis politics. While not being extreme, they do entail statements that solicit reactions. Together with the statements, which are deliberately formulated in an open way so that participants have freedom in how to respond to them, the aim is to stimulate animated discussions that would allow for signs of politicization to come through
- Thirdly, the usage of videos allows us to better understand the stability of opinions: how 'malleable' are they by new information and particular frames? Or to put it in a more nuanced fashion, they help in mapping the gap between uninformed and informed positions. How much difference can receiving new information or frames make in terms of both salience and the stances citizens take?

On the other side, the usage of video vignettes also comes with risks. Firstly, there is the risk that they prime participants into particular opinions. However, this is not likely to be a problem in this research design, as it is part of what this study is interested in. The very purpose of these questions is to have citizens discuss topics they might not necessarily discuss in this way themselves. The fact that the videos only enter in the second part of the focus groups then allows us to better see to what extent participants make the link to these topics themselves, and to what extent they are influenced by the videos. As a second risk, there is the question to what extent the effects of the video vignettes in different countries are comparable. While using the same video in different countries might distort the validity of the comparison if the video uses language or a

particular perspective that fits particularly to one country, using different videos would decrease comparability.

In this study then, the first video has its own version in each country. As it shows footage bringing into memory the transition to the euro in 2002 with the explicit purpose of facilitating discussion by relating the discussion to participants' own memory, it was important to do so in a way that indeed fits participants' memories, and thus that it was actually broadcasted material. This made the usage of national video material, and therefore some differences between the video shown in the three countries, inevitable. In the French groups, a news item was used that showed the festivities around the euro's introduction on January 1 2002; in the Netherlands, a news item was shown in which then-finance minister Zalm took the first printed euros from an ATM; in Italy, the video was a government announcement that optimistically introduced the euro. While thus differing in some aspects, they all are short (± 25 second) videos that showcase not only the transition to the euro, but also a certain optimism that surrounded it, while bringing back memories from the time of the introduction with the purpose of making it easier for participants to start discussing the euro, without too strongly evoking a particular conception of the euro (either economic, political or cultural).

The three videos used in the second part of the focus groups however were the same in every country, as it was central for making a useful comparison to have participants understand the normative issues in the same way. All are 1.30-2.30 minute long videos derived from a Dutch documentary series, but since the spoken language is predominantly English, and none of the interviewed people are Dutch (apart from ex-Eurogroup-president Jeroen Dijsselbloem, who however is presented in his capacity as a European official rather than as a national politician), the videos have no particular Dutch bias or angle – something that was checked beforehand with research assistants and nationals from the three countries under analysis. In cooperation with research assistants, subtitles for each country were made. In ideological terms, it is more difficult to find a neutral perspective on the euro – and indeed the videos do not pretend to be so. While in the video preceding Q4 an Austrian banker speaks representing a fairly neoliberal perspective, the video preceding Q6 brings the left-wing perspective of Wolfgang Streeck and Yannis

Varoufakis⁵. This is a deliberate part of the design of the focus groups: after all, the perspectives voiced in the videos have been very prominent in the debate about the Eurozone, and the purpose of the video vignettes is precisely to provoke participants to respond to such perspectives.

4.2.4. Recruitment

In deciding on the amount of participants to be recruited per focus group, there are a number of considerations that need to be balanced. The challenge is to make sure a sufficiently large range of opinions is present, while also allowing all participants to have enough speaking time; to have a group that is large enough to have a dynamic discussion, while being small enough for all participants feeling comfortable to speak. With these considerations in mind, I used a range of four to seven participants per group: ideally, focus groups were intended to have five to six participants, with four still being an acceptable number in case of no-show, and seven (caused by over-recruiting to avoid no-shows) being considered a maximum if all participants were to have enough opportunity to substantially contribute to the discussions. Indeed, such sizing is common in focus group research, where the lower and upper limits will usually be in between four and eight participants (e.g. Lobe, 2017), even though these limits are occasionally stretched to two and twenty-five (Morgan, 2017).

In recruiting participants, a balance was sought in the familiarity participants had with each other. In principle, both selecting participants unfamiliar with each other and using participants already acquainted with each other are common strategies in focus group research. The latter has the advantage that participants might be comfortable talking to each other and that their discussions would be closer to 'real life' discussion. The former is more ideal in the sense that it forces participants to explicate their ideas and arguments – people familiar with each other might speak in a 'taken for granted' way containing many tacit assumptions that makes it more difficult for the researcher to interpret discussions – and that participants do not need to take into account the future of their personal relations when entering into discussions. In light of these considerations, this study chose to select participants that did in principle not know each

⁵ Note that the content of these three videos will be described more extensively in chapter six.

other. At the same time, occasional familiarity would not be a problem as long as participants would not be so close that it might lead them to collectively position themselves in relation to the rest of the group. Having the purpose to come as close as possible to 'real life' discussions of politics, the idea was to bring together people that could because of their social background hypothetically have conversations with each other in real life, but would not be constrained in discussing politics because of the sensitivities of their personal relations. It can in this sense be seen as a success that some participants turned out to have connections with each other, without this being known beforehand.

In practical terms, recruitment was done by the researcher and research assistants. It is not uncommon in the recruitment of focus group participants to work with agencies who draw from their panels, but this comes with the disadvantage that panel members are generally more used to the dynamics of focus groups, and are in that sense not lay people (in addition, the use of agencies requires substantially more funding). Instead, the purpose here was to also recruit participants who would not normally be very inclined to take part in survey or focus group research. In doing so, the aim was thus to avoid self-selection of participants who are more interested in discussing politics than average. Therefore, the discussion topic of the euro was not mentioned in recruiting. Instead, participants were told they would discuss 'societal' topics. In addition, a financial incentive of €50 was given to all participants. Finally, the focus on professional groups came in helpful in this respect, as it made a more targeted recruitment possible. Having a particular audience in mind allowed for a focus on participants who would normally be more hesitant to participate, and who would not themselves sign up for a group discussion on the basis of an anonymous leaflet or advertisement. Going to hairdresser shops for example, it is possible to talk directly to possible participants and thus make the barrier for participation lower, while unemployed people for example could be contacted more directly through social institutions.

Indeed, the practical recruitment of participants differed per professional group. Unemployed firstly were recruited through social institutions and agencies providing services to unemployed people. These locations were visited physically in order to have the possibility to face-to-face ask people to participate, while leaflets were spread as well. Hairdressers secondly were recruited by physically going to hairdressing salons, as initial attempts to recruit through organizations and trade unions showed to be unproductive. This still proved to be rather challenging, particularly in Paris and Amsterdam where over a hundred salons were visited before receiving a satisfactory amount applications (a first focus group with hairdressers in Amsterdam even needed to be cancelled because of a shortage of participants, and a second one was organized three months later in Haarlem). The recruitment of financial professionals finally was difficult because this group is less sensitive for the financial incentive, while most financial companies are rather reluctant in actively asking their employees to discuss societal and political matters. Therefore, while some participants were recruited through companies, most were recruited through the personal networks of the researcher and research assistants, as well as by placing advertisements in specific groups on social media.

With all people who applied to participate, a brief survey was conducted asking about demographics like age, gender and level of education, as well as about political items like left-right placement, attitude towards European integration, identification with the nation, media consumption and political interest. On this basis, a selection was made that would ensure diversity of participants as much as possible. Figure 4.5 and Table 4.1 show some of the main characteristics of the resulting groups.

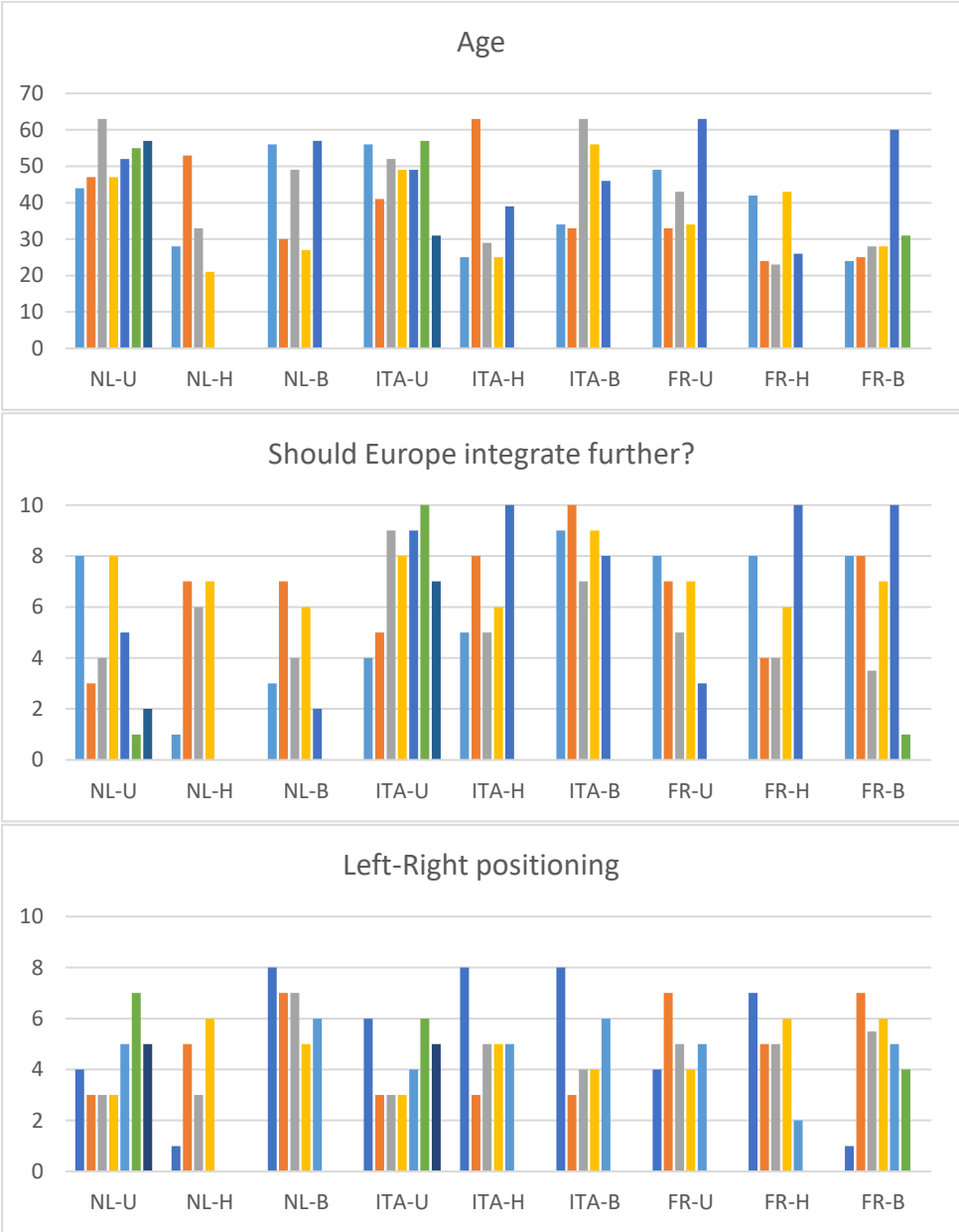


Figure 4.7: Characteristics of focus group participants

As the figures show, the groups show a substantial variance in the most important characteristics, fitting to what is desirable. They are not perfect in the sense that characteristics are entirely evenly distributed. For example, some groups are on average older than others, while some consist of more men and others of more women. More substantially, Italian groups are relatively positive about European integration, while the Dutch are comparatively negative. At the same time, this is not too far off country averages. When EUopinions asked a similar question (‘do we need more integration in Europe’) in a survey in 2019 (the year these focus

groups were recruited), country averages were 39% for the Netherlands, 70% for Italy, and 41% for France. In the focus groups, they are (on a 1-10 scale) 4,7 for the Netherlands, 7,6 for Italy and 6,2 for France. What is more, focus groups are rarely perfect in this sense, as there are many characteristics that need to be balanced (next to left-right placement, age and EU stance there are the other indicators like gender, level of education and political interest), and it is next to impossible to recruit groups that show perfect variation on all these items. In addition, there is only a limited amount of applicants that can be selected from, while the selected people subsequently need to be able to come together on a particular time on one particular date, complicating the selection process even more. In the end, recruiting for focus groups simply will always come with practical issues, which means that it in practice will always “require some degree of flexibility between methodological rigor and pragmatism”, as Van Bezouw et al. note (2019: 2725). More importantly, focus groups do not *need* to be perfect in this sense, as it is typological representativeness that is important rather than absolute representativeness. Indeed, the variance in these focus groups is of a similar level as in other research projects in the EU context, even if their scale is much larger in terms of funding and participating researchers (e.g. Duchesne et al., 2013).

Table 4.3: Characteristics of focus group participants

		NL	ITA	FR
Gender	Male	5	10	10
	Female	11	7	6
Age	18-30	4	3	7
	31-50	5	8	7
	50+	7	6	2
	<i>Average</i>	43	43	36
Left-Right placement (avg. of 1-10 scale)		4,9	4,8	4,9
EU Stance (avg. of 1-10 scale)		4,7	7,6	6,2
Interest in politics (avg. of 1-5 scale)		3,3	3,3	3,9

4.2.5. Focus group setting and moderation

The focus groups met between May and October 2019 in the metropolitan areas of Rome, Amsterdam and Paris. In Rome, participants met in a rented room in a cultural centre in the commune of Genzano di Roma. In

Amsterdam, they met in a room of the University of Amsterdam, located in the Amsterdam-Centrum borough. The hairdresser group however met in a rented meeting room in Haarlem – also located in the metropolitan area of Amsterdam – because a first round organized in Amsterdam could not take place due to a lack of participants. In Paris finally, focus groups were organized in two rented meeting rooms in 2nd and 8th arrondissement.

In research as sensitive to the context in which it is conducted as that of focus groups, every choice in set-up and design matters. In choosing and setting up the venues then, the aim was to create an atmosphere that was accessible and neutral, allowing participants to feel at ease. In order to allow for undistorted video recording of the discussions, and to ensure the privacy of participants, public locations were ruled out, even if they might have created an even more accessible, ‘natural’ setting. In setting up the chosen locations however, it was made sure that the setting would not be too clinical. After having been welcomed by the moderator, participants were offered drinks and food if they had not eaten yet, and given time to get used to the room and get acquainted with each other. Chairs were arranged in either a V-shape or a semi-circle, so that participants would be able to face each other when discussing, while at the same time not making the dynamics too confrontational by putting participants directly opposite to each other. The moderator was placed at some distance from the participants and not directly in the centre of participants’ field of vision, so as to stimulate participants to discuss with each other and create a dynamic of their own, rather than to respond to the moderator. In this setting, focus group participants discussed the six questions outlined in the previous section, discussions lasting between 80-120 minutes (excluding introduction and a break).

The moderation technique finally was designed to keep the discussions as ‘open’ as possible and allowing the discussion to follow its own course. Thus, the aim was for the moderator to intervene as little as possible, and only step in to introduce new questions, to stimulate equal involvement of all participants, and to bring participants back to the original question if they diverted to topics unrelated to the euro for too long. Even brief digressions from the topic of the euro and politics more broadly were allowed, and moderators would only intervene if a discussion would for

too long go on about a topic not at all connected to European politics. Likewise, moderators aimed to stay away from involvement with the discussions, so would try to avoid answering questions of participants directed at the moderator (although in some occasions the conversational dynamics might necessitate this).

In all nine focus groups, the moderation would be done by a research assistant, while I would observe the focus groups from the back. While this entails a risk because different moderators might have a different style of moderating, trial focus groups showed this to be the best strategy because it allowed me to observe the focus groups more carefully. In the French and Italian focus groups furthermore, language abilities made moderation by the research assistants indispensable. In order to ensure moderators would work in the most similar way as possible, they were actively prepared and trained, and focus groups were rehearsed beforehand.

4.2.6. Research ethics

Like every scientific study, this research project needed to carefully consider a set of ethical issues. Most importantly, the focus group method used in this study comes with the need to consider participants' privacy as well as security. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary, based on an explanation of what the focus groups would entail - even if this explanation mentioned the topic of the discussion only in more general terms ('societal issues'). After participants were selected from the applicants, and before the start of the focus groups, participants received a participation information sheet and signed a form indicating their consent to participate, as required by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH, 2019). In addition, the focus groups all started with an introduction explaining the purpose and proceedings of the focus group in order to make clear that participants could participate in the way they wanted, and would not feel pressured to speak about things they would rather not. This introduction was also intended to make sure the dynamics of the focus group would not become unpleasant for any of the participants. After the focus groups finally, the data were anonymized and stored in line with the guidelines of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), which approved the data collection of this study. The data collection and storage

in this way also complies with the checklist of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR; European Union, 2016) and with the guidelines of the NESH.

A second relevant consideration is that this dissertation is part of a European research project funded under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions called PLATO. This network consists of nine European universities, bringing together fifteen PhD researchers, thirty supervisors, and eleven participating training partners. In order for the project to be fruitful, it was necessary to collaborate in an open and constructive fashion (NESH 2019, guidelines 29 and 31). This meant was that it was important to find a balance between sharing data with colleagues with maintaining the privacy of focus group participants and the confidentiality of the data. As a last point, it is important to note that this project was funded by the European Commission, but that the Commission (nor the project members) influenced the substance of this thesis. All parts of this research have been conducted in an independent fashion.

4.3. Analysis

While decisions regarding the type of data analysis are crucial, it is far from self-evident how to go about the analysis of focus group data. Despite its increasing popularity as a method, there is little standardization in the analysis and presentation of focus group data in political science (Cyr, 2016). This applies to European studies in particular. In most of the earlier mentioned work based on focus groups, there is little description of the type of analysis used (although there certainly are exceptions, such as Duchesne et al. (2013), van Ingelgom (2014) as well as that of Dekker and Den Ridder, 2019). Instead, many studies rely on quoting passages from the focus groups that serve to underline particular points considered important. While this can be a legitimate strategy, for example if the aims are mostly political theoretical (as is the case in for example White, 2011), a clear explanation of the type of analysis used as well as applying this in a systematic and rigorous way can certainly improve the reliability of focus group findings. After all, when quotes from the focus groups are used without making clear how they emerged from a coding scheme, such analysis risks a bias towards presenting

particular sections, usually those that are more in line with hypotheses. The other way around, focus group analysis that relies solely on quantitative reporting risks missing the richness of the data, while in addition the frequencies of certain codes occurring can to some extent be deceiving, especially when the coding itself relies on interpretation as well.

In my analysis, I combine both qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques. The first part of the analysis is interpretive. During the focus group, my role as observer rather than moderator allowed me to take detailed notes of the focus groups. The next day, these notes would be discussed extensively with the research assistant moderating the focus group, who would be asked about his or her perceptions and to what extent the observations made by me matched his or her experiences. This step was particularly important in the non-Dutch focus groups given that my linguistic abilities only allowed for a partial understanding of what was said here. On this basis, I constructed an account of the group discussions and things that happened around it. Subsequently, after having conducted all three focus groups in one country, I would write a comparative summary of the results in that country, which would subsequently serve as the basis for a first general comparison. After every focus group was transcribed a few months later (which I also did myself in case of the Dutch groups, and was done by the research assistants for the other groups), a second analysis was made using the initial reports, the transcripts as well as a re-watching of the videotapes.

This step in the analysis, in itself leading to a first type of results, subsequently served as the basis for the second step of the analysis: the coding. Coding helps the systemic processing of the data, and thus to link the different parts of the corpus to each other and make comparisons between them. As such, it can also help to fight one's own biases, and avoid cherry picking. While coding often leads to quantitative presentations of the data, the coding itself can both be done in a quantitative and qualitative way: in the first case, software is used to look for the occurrence of particular words or phrases, while in the latter case it is the researcher who produces the codes on the basis of his or her own analysis. In this research, the latter path was followed. As a start, a first, preliminary code book was developed on the basis of the first interpretive

analysis, which was then substantially adjusted and extended by going through the transcripts, and was refined by coding several shorter passages in the transcripts. Subsequently, the codebook was applied to all transcripts (with me doing the coding myself). This coding was done through the use of the CAQDAS (computer aided qualitative data analysis) software of NVivo. The resulting codebook was therefore developed partly inductively, but also partly deductively. In the latter category, the focus of my research requires attention to certain themes, and thus strongly affected the development of the codebook – even if this happened partly unconsciously. Also, some questions asked in the focus groups simply make a particular type of coding sensible because they assume particular types of answers to be given (for example, the statements participants were asked to respond to make it a priori logical to distinguish a ‘pro’, ‘anti’ and in between ‘ambivalent’ category). At the same time, using an interpretive analysis as a basis for the coding, as well the fact that the code book was developed further on the basis of reading the transcripts, means that it also was explicitly designed to pick up themes that emerged as relevant in an inductive fashion (for example because they occurred a couple of times, or because they seemed to link to one of the research interests).

This way of developing the codebook led me to distinguish and use two types of codes. On the one hand, there are question-specific codes that capture the particular ways in which specific questions are discussed (‘pro’, ‘anti’ and ‘ambivalent’ codes such as the one above being an example). On the other hand, there are general codes referring to items that can occur throughout the transcript. One example of this are expressions of pro or anti-euro stances, another are cases indicative of indifference, ambivalence or strongly held opinions. These two types of codes are not exclusive, and passages can be part of several codes simultaneously. What is more, sometimes passages can even be part of two categories within one code (an example would be a case in which someone simultaneously expresses a particular stance, such as saying ‘I think my country should show solidarity’, while at the same time showcasing clear doubt and indeterminacy on this item). Finally, it is important to note that the coding occurred on both the level of individual sentences as well as longer passages consisting of discussions between participants. In focus groups, group and individual are in the end

inseparable units of analysis (Morgan, 1996), as it is the intersubjectivity that in the end is the primary unit of analysis (e.g. Stanley, 2016).

The presentation of the data follows this combination of interpretative and quantitative analysis. On the one hand, the empirical chapters will report the quantitative occurrence of relevant codes. On the other, it will present excerpts from the focus groups. Quantitative reports are useful firstly because they provide an overview of what has been said. By reporting the amount of coding on a particular item (for example, what % of utterances was positive and what % was negative about solidarity, or which associations with the euro occurred how often), the reader gets a better grasp of what happened during the focus groups. Secondly, quantitative coding in this way forces the researcher to be systematic, and avoid cherry picking with presenting loose quotes.

At the same time, one should remain careful in reading such quantitative reports. Evidently, they in no way allow making general claims about people's opinions in the ways surveys do, the small N of focus groups clearly meaning they lack statistical representativeness. Importantly however, it also means that differences between codes occurring can be the result of an 'outlier' or of a dominant participant bringing up an opinion a couple of times – particularly if a code only occurs only a limited amount of times in the corpus. Indeed, the frequencies reported are also highly sensitive to choices the researcher makes. Using the NVivo software for example, one can choose to either display the counted frequency of a code, but also for the percentage of the corpus that is covered by the code. This can lead to quite different results because the length of codes can strongly vary.⁶ This is not to say that one way of presenting the quantities is better, because both frequencies and

⁶ Imagine a passage of 10 sentences: if all 10 sentences are about being pro-euro, the whole passage will be coded as 'pro-euro', meaning the frequency of 'pro-euro' is 1, and the percentage covered 100%. If only 3 sentences of this passage are about being pro-euro however, and they occur at different places, separated by other arguments, this will result in 3 separate codes, meaning the frequency will be 3, with the percentage covered being around 30% (assuming equal length of the sentences). Thus, 2 different metrics can lead to rather different results. In this case, the fact that the actual amount of words spent on the pro-euro argument is smaller makes that 'percentage covered' seems a more sensible metric here, but this does not necessarily need to be so in any case.

percentages can be relevant, and there is no 'neutral' way of presenting the data. Indeed, both types of presenting quantities will be used in the following chapters. What it does mean however is that it is important to be sensitive to such choices made. Altogether, the more general point is that it is important to understand such quantitative reporting as what it is: a tool to '*read*' the focus group data with, rather than evidence of a distribution of attitudes.

Ideally, such quantitative reporting is therefore to be combined with extensive quoting of passages from the transcripts. These excerpts are what give focus group their richness, and allow us to make sense of what the quantitative reports actually entail, thus giving more depth to our understanding of it. This is so particularly when they are not merely presented, but are linked to their social and structural context. In other words, when they are interpreted through the theoretical framework that is developed beforehand. As the marketing guru David Ogilvy once noted about consumers: they "don't think how they feel. They don't say what they think and they don't do what they say". The same is true for political publics, both in surveys and in focus groups, meaning we should not take at face value what people say. Yet, the advantage of focus groups is that they allow us, to some extent, to move beyond manifest utterances. Not only can we see such utterances in more structural contexts, but also do focus groups allow for a focus on the language people themselves decide to use, thus also providing insight into aspects of language and reasoning that go unquestioned by participants themselves, such as assumptions shared by participants as 'common sense'. By systematically analyzing such utterances on the one hand, and placing them in their structural context on the other, we can still try to understand the meaning of what people say.

Chapter 5

Citizen perceptions of the euro

How do citizens make sense of the euro? On this question, surprisingly little research is available. There are a couple of things we *do* know. As chapter 3 made clear, we know that there is a strong association between the euro and the EU at large. Also, we know that people associated it with price rises in the years directly after its introduction (Ranyard et al., 2005), while the introduction itself was witnessed with a mix of 'curiosity' and 'prudence' (European Commission, 2002). Occasional 'flash' Eurobarometer data tell us how people respond to statements about the euro, such as whether it has made travelling and doing business easier, how easy they find it to distinguish coins, and whether they think more or less economic policy coordination is necessary in the euro area (European Commission, 2019). Yet, all this research tells us little about how people themselves understand the euro. What associations do they have with it? Do they see it in economic, cultural or political terms? How do they understand its consequences? And how meaningful is the euro to them?

These questions are crucial if we are to understand the legitimation of the euro, as well as better comprehend what is measured when surveys measure support for it. The question central to this chapter is therefore: how do citizens perceive and understand the euro? It will look at the language focus group participants themselves choose to use in expressing their views on the euro. As the purpose here is to look at how people 'naturally' make sense of the euro, the results presented in this chapter will largely come from the first half of the focus groups, in which participants were less 'conditioned' and the questions asked focused on more general perceptions of the euro. To reiterate, in the first half, three questions were asked in each focus group:

1. What are the first words or thoughts that come to mind when thinking about the euro?
[This question was preceded by a ±25 second video showing the transition from the previous national currency to the euro (adjusted to the national context). After the video, a picture showing the euro on the one hand and the previous currency on the other was displayed]
2. What in your experience have been the most important reasons for the introduction of the euro?
3. Who do you feel has benefited from the euro, and who has been disadvantaged?

In this chapter, the sequence of these questions will be followed to map step-by-step how focus group participants perceive and understand the euro. Hence, the chapter will consist of three separate sections focussing on the themes brought up in these three questions, before a final section will conclude. The first section will zoom in on perceptions of the euro by going into people's 'plain' perceptions of it, particularly as expressed following question 1. Then, the next section will describe how focus group participants understand the euro's origin, and to what actors and interests they link it. Finally, the third section will map how people see the consequences of the euro by presenting the results of question 3. In doing so, it will combine both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the focus group transcripts, using quantitative presentations of data to give an overview of the discussions while complementing this with extracts of the transcripts to illustrate.

5.1. Making sense of the euro

A useful starting point for this analysis is the topics the focus group participants chose to discuss following the first question. This, after all, shows what initial associations participants have with the euro, and is thus indicative of the way they see it. The openness of the question allowed for all sorts of associations to be expressed, and the ones brought up are apparently the most prevalent in participants' minds, or at least they are seen as the most suitable to discuss in a group setting.⁷ Inductive

⁷ The use of the brief video before the question was asked does potentially have a priming effect, as it draws participants to the transition to the euro and their personal experience of it. Indeed, this was also the purpose of the video, as it was also intended to ease participants into the discussion. Yet, the open character of the question did

analysis of the transcripts led to a list of categories participants spoke about, which was translated into a codebook that was used to code the transcripts with. Figure 5.1 presents the relative occurrence of these categories.⁸

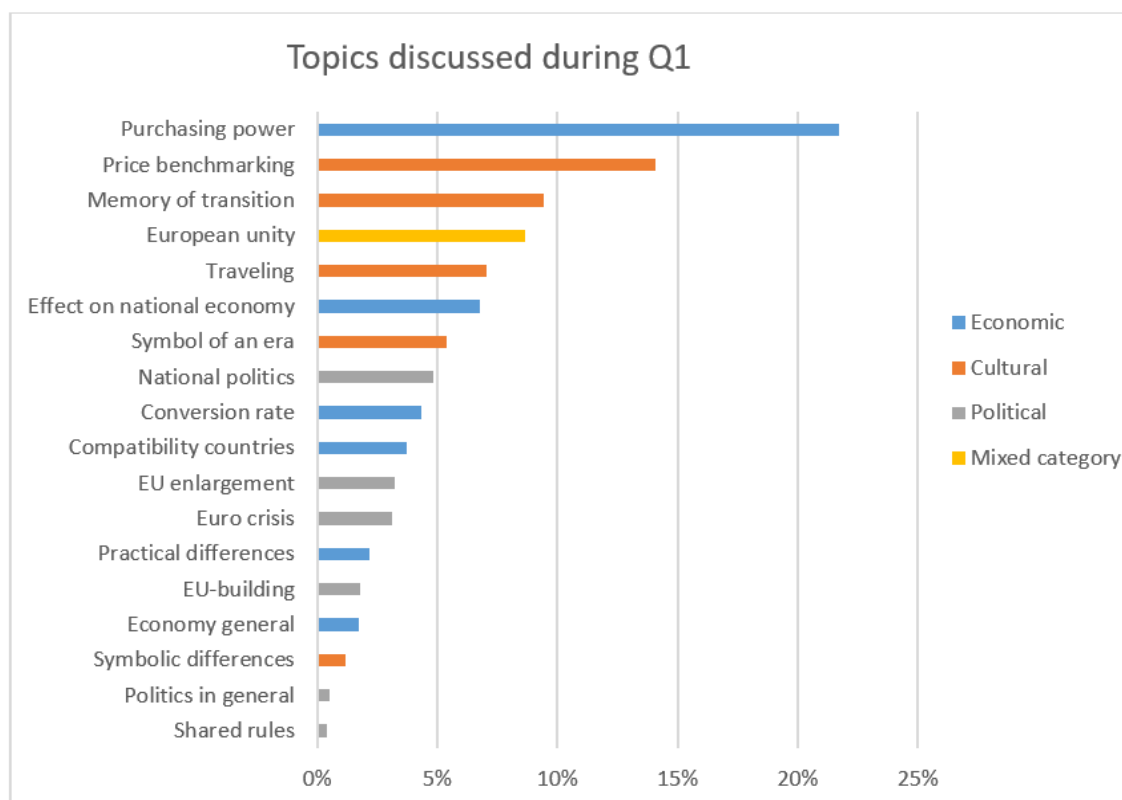


Figure 5.8: Topics discussed during Q1

A first observation is that a large majority of the discussions concerns 'everyday life' elements of the euro. The most discussed items are the euro's effect on prices (usually how it made things more expensive), the need to compare expenses in the old currency with those in euros (benchmarking), and people's memories of the transition to the euro

allow participants to bring up any type of thought about the euro, and they were not asked to respond to the video itself. In addition, the priming effect of the video is also decreased by the fact that participants discuss the question at length and respond to what others bring up rather than only to the video and question itself.

⁸ The numbers presented here are calculated as follows: for each focus group, the relative occurrence of the different codes is calculated (meaning the number of words coded on a code relative to the total amount of words coded under Q1 for this focus group). Subsequently, the averages of the nine focus groups were taken in order to account for differences in the duration of discussions.

(which is likely to be stimulated by the video clips used). No matter whether the topics discussed are cultural, economic, or political, it is striking how they are predominantly related to people's daily life experiences. It is not that there is no awareness at all of more abstract items, such as the euro's politics or its effect on macroeconomic developments – as the figure shows, topics such as the euro's effect on the economy and the euro crisis are discussed as well. Yet, such topics are discussed much less frequently, and, as will be discussed later, in a more diffuse way. In that sense, while the euro generally appears to be understood as a mixture of cultural symbolism, economic developments and political questions – topics participants indeed easily switch between – it in the first place appears to have relevance for people as an everyday object, as something that has increased prices, brought convenience, and made a symbolic difference. To get a sense of this, a typical start for the focus groups could be like this one from Dutch unemployed group.

Extract 5.1 Dutch unemployed

Moderator: So after seeing this video, what are the first things coming to mind when you think about the euro?

Truus: Inflation. Yes. And, the guilders were more beautiful.

Bianca: Yes, I immediately thought like phew, good old days. [Jamesha nods]

Truus: Yes, nicer bank notes.

Bianca: Everything's been halved.

Truus: What you buy now in euros, you used to buy in guilders.

Bianca: Yes.

Jamesha: Just when he [in the video] said 75 euros I thought about guilders, that you could withdraw 5 guilders. Hey, now it starts at 10 euros. [Truus and Bianca nod]

Naomi: I immediately thought of the old days, I was always converting. But now I am no longer doing that, all that converting.

Bianca: O yes I am, I thought about it right away.

Jamesha: I do it too.

Truus: Me too. I know exactly, it's 2.20371. I still make that calculation every now and then.

To some extent, this choice of topics can be related to the conversational context. When speaking to others, it can be easier and less confrontational to talk about memories and shared daily life experiences than to talk in more abstract terms, or bring up potentially polarizing political opinions. Yet, the fact that these are things people are most comfortable discussing is in itself telling, as it makes clear what people perceive as topics that

make sense to discuss collectively. Indeed, the focus groups do suggest that this is also simply how people make sense of the euro, and the way in which the euro is a meaningful object to them. Besides the frequency with which people bring up the euro's everyday aspects, this is also apparent from the ease and naturalness with which they discuss these aspects – in contrast to the more abstract, political elements of the euro. An example of this is the references to the symbolic importance of the transition to the euro. Participants, particularly from the older generations, often describe their memories of the transition in vivid detail, for instance referring to the 'euro starter kits' they received to familiarize themselves with the euro. The following two extracts provide an example of that.

Extract 5.2 Italian hairdressers

Gianni: Well, I remember that before [the introduction of the euro] if I was going to spend a weekend out with a friends and I had 1 million lire with me, it felt like I had a lot of money, which is different from having 1.000 euros today.

Bruno: Yes of course. [nods]

Gianni: But maybe also these 1.000 euros today will have more value in 20 years compared to today [laughs]. It's a change that is linked to other aspects as well, not only to the change lira-euro. 20 years have passed, so times have changed.

Pasquale: Yes, that's true.

Bruno: The more you advance the more prices increase. Inflation always goes up. We also earn more money, but before it was easier to save money. Now you manage to save money as well, but you spend it more easily, you cannot keep it! [Pasquale, Simona, Giulia laugh]

Giulia: I only think that this change has been wrongly managed, wrongly managed by...

Gianni: Mm, unfortunately I don't think I have much knowledge to judge this.

Giulia: I think so, because if it was managed in the proper way, the situation would be a lot better now.

Pasquale: You mean managed by us or by...? [he raises his hand to indicate those people on the top]

Giulia: Both us and those who govern. I don't only blame those who govern, it's also us who don't manage this situation in the correct way. But I remember what my grandparents used to say and, as he was saying [pointing to Gianni]: We grew up with this idea that times were a lot better before... Everyone says so.

Extract 5.3 Dutch unemployed

- Truus: It is such an enormous operation, to switch to a new currency with a whole continent, you can't really imagine it. It's so gigantic. [Naomi nods]. I remember the trucks driving through the country [to deliver the new money], and thinking, 'what is happening here?' And that the next morning you held those first euro's in your hands.
- Naomi: You can remember all that?
- Truus: Yes, I remember where I took the first money, of course that atm has been blown up now. *[all laugh]*
- Bram: I cannot remember all this.
- Truus: Well, one remembers such things. These are milestones, you know. In itself that's nice. And nobody really knew then, well, what could happen.
- Bram: I do remember that...
- Kimberly: But everyone also found it exciting of course.
- Truus: We cannot turn it back. It was how it was, and one had to adapt to that, and these were... My mother passed away in late 2001, and just before that she still received – she was very old then – she received one of these kits with a few euro coins. Well, she loved that.
- Kimberly: But I think everyone then felt like, it's so exciting, we're going to have a currency. But I think that no one then really understood, well, what the consequences...

In the first place, these extracts highlight how the euro has a symbolic meaning to some participants, both in the sense that the transition itself was a meaningful moment (although the extent to which this is the case differs strongly per person) and in the sense that the transition marks the passage from one era to another (from 'the good old days' to the current reality). Simultaneously, however, they also highlight the contrast between the experienced part of the euro and its political side. The actual experiences are discussed in detail. Whether people share these experiences or not, people easily understand each other here. Nevertheless, as soon as the euro's impact on society and its political meaning is discussed, discussions turn more diffuse. The transition is 'something gigantic one can't really imagine', something 'no one really understood' but simply 'had to adapt to'; something that might have been 'wrongly managed', but people feel they 'lack the knowledge' to really judge this. This emerges as an important explanation for the finding that the euro's everyday side is much more prominent in peoples' discussions of it.

These first observations describe a general image, but evidently there are differences between the groups. Aggregating the discussion topics in more general categories, namely cultural, economic, political, and the mixed category of European unity⁹ (which topic belongs to which category is already made clear in Figure 5.1) provides us with a first impression of this – after all, simply listing the occurrence of different topics in all groups would lead to a rather large and cluttered display. When looking at the frequency of categories being discussed (see Figure 5.2), it becomes clear that discussions are predominantly about economic and cultural matters. Discussions focus much less on political items. When people do discuss politics, this most often concerns national politics, or more general EU politics such as EU enlargement and the building of an EU polity (see Figure 5.1). The euro crisis is only touched upon by four groups in the discussions following the first question (Dutch and French financial professionals, and more briefly by Dutch and French unemployed) while institutions such as the ECB are barely mentioned.

When comparing the focus groups in national terms, no clear pattern emerges hinting at structural differences between countries. The results do show that discussions in the Dutch groups on average focus more on cultural topics, while those in the Italian and French groups focus more on economic ones. However, these variations do not appear to be directly related to structural differences. In practice, (economic) discussions about price differences are not that different from (cultural) discussions about price benchmarking, for example, and the fact that some focus groups focus more on the former and others on the latter does not appear as

⁹ Of course, such a distinction is always to some extent arbitrary and some topics are related to several categories – price benchmarking, for example, has both an economic and a cultural component. The categorization here labels as economic those topics related to utilitarian interests, whereas cultural topics cover the discussions that refer to the euro as something through which people make sense of their world, and political topics the discussions about institutions and decision making, fitting into the description in chapter 2. A topic like price benchmarking therefore counts as cultural, as it is more about how people make sense of their world than their material interests, while a topic like purchasing power is economic. The fourth category of European unity however is treated as a separate category. In capturing moments where people talk about unity between EU countries and the idea of a shared bond with other Europeans, it combines a political and cultural side so strongly that labeling it under only one category would be too one-sided.

directly meaningful. In fact, it is perhaps rather the similarity between countries that stands out. In all countries, people mention similar topics, such as the perception of price changes, the memories people have of the euro kits, the meaningfulness of the transition moment, and the way in which the euro made travelling easier. In this sense, the national comparison points at the way in which the introduction of the euro has brought shared euro-experiences.

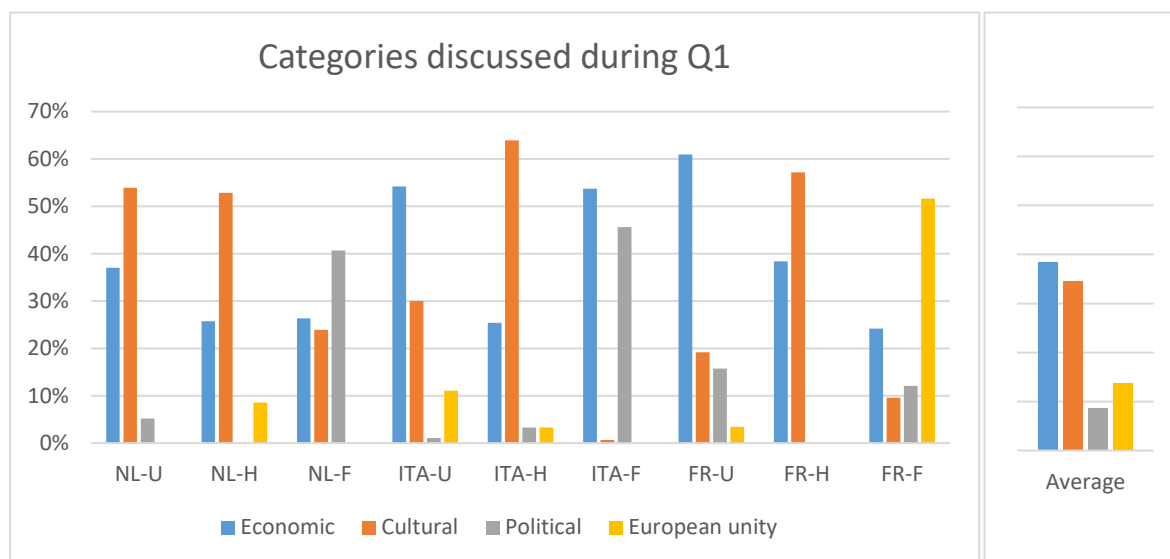


Figure 5.9: Categories discussed during Q1 per group

More substantial differences appear when comparing social classes. The most striking difference here is the extent to which the euro is discussed as a political object. As Figure 5.2 shows, the only groups where political elements of the euro take a significant part of the discussion are the groups of financial professionals, as well as to a lesser extent the French unemployed group (do note that the French group of financial professionals talked particularly about 'European unity', discussing how the euro forged European unity and to what extent this makes Europe comparable with the US. While not being exclusively political, the political charge of this should be clear). Indeed, there is a substantial difference between the financial professional groups and the other groups in *how* they discuss the euro. Contrary to the non-financial groups, the financial professionals *do* discuss the euro in more abstract terms, and they do so with more confidence. While the other groups sometimes hint at certain political associations they have with the euro, for example, how it 'made things worse', this generally happens in a vague fashion. In the groups of

financial professionals, however, the euro's political and macro-economic sides are discussed with more ease, and more as important parts of the euro. The contrast between the following two Italian extracts is illustrative:

Extract 5.4 Italian financial professionals

Moderator: What are your first thoughts after watching this video?

Lucia: It brought me back to 10 years ago all of a sudden (laughing).

Flavio: This change was wrong for Italy. It has been too penalizing for the Italian economic structure.

Lucia: Because we weren't ready.

Flavio: It's not because we were not ready. Our economy was based on devaluation and basically we used to export under devaluation, so we had very high fixed costs which didn't allow us to be ready when the euro came. So entering the euro for us has been very critical because we lacked a proper scientific economic and financial strategy. We entered because we had to. Instead, it would have been better – although not politically feasible – to wait to join the euro.

Carlo: You have already answered yourself. There was an urgent political problem so we had to catch that train – although in the wagon – otherwise we would have missed it forever. Ad posteriori, maybe the change has been wrong but that's what we did in those conditions.

Flavio: Yes Carlo but we started with a huge problem. Since 1991 there has been devaluation under the monetary snake so we already had 10 years to program our entrance into the euro. We didn't do it.

Carlo: As Italians...

Lucia: As Italians, we never did.

Extract 5.5 Italian unemployed

Moderator: When you think about the euro, which are the first things that come to your mind?

Paolo: 20 years ago seems like yesterday, When we were young... I remember it as a crazy nostalgia.

Giovanni: I remember the moment very well because there was this expectation: "The arrival of the euro" and everyone was talking about what seemed like the epoch-making change. So I saw the video and I remembered all these commercials they showed on the TV to "educate" citizens about the introduction of the coins, the change... And I even remember that they gave you the kit and the converter. I also remember many elderly people having difficulties converting from lira to euro. It was an absurd turning back.

Beatrice: I remember the converter. The first thing that comes to mind is this, to make the change and the calculations. And anyway I don't remember

- if it was 1.932, but the older people doubled to simplify it, and therefore they were all frightened, especially the elderly people all said it would double costs.
- Adriana: For the children who started school not knowing the lira, everything was easier.
- Giovanni: In fact, there is a generation that does not know the lira at all. [everyone agrees]
- Olivia: When the euro was introduced I was a young girl. My children do not know the lira so I saw the changeover to the euro in that video.
- Silvia: In fact, sometimes when you make the comparison with the lira, these boys are stunned because for them the word lira is something unknown... ()
- Giovanni: "I don't have a lira", we still say it! While "I don't have a euro" sounds bad.

The difference between these two extracts exemplifies the type of difference between the financial professionals and the other groups. Both groups begin by mentioning the historic, nostalgic dimension of thinking back about the transition to the euro. Directly after noting this however, the group of Italian financial professionals moves on to discuss what the euro has meant for the Italian economy, and how the transition has been managed politically. The other group instead talked about everyday aspects of the euro like the euro kit, the conversion rate, price benchmarking, and the euro's effect on price levels. It should be noted that this difference is illustrative rather than absolute – the French group of financial professionals for example does begin its discussion by mentioning some everyday elements of the euro (although only briefly), while the French group of unemployed starts its discussion in a more political fashion (even if in a more diffuse way). Still, this difference between the financial and non-financial groups here is significant and fits into a larger pattern (indeed, it will also come back in later parts of the analysis). As it appears to be rooted in participants' levels of knowledge and interest, as well as in ways in which people make sense of the social world more generally, it is plausible to see it as a structural rather than coincidental difference.

Finally, these extracts touch upon a third important comparative difference: that between generations. Extract 5.5 shows a couple of (relatively older) participants describing how they find it odd that young people do not even know the previous currency, while extract 5.2 already

quoted a younger person (Giulia) referring to older people who always 'say that times were better' before the euro. And indeed, this difference comes to the fore in almost every group. Generally, the transition to the euro is seen as more meaningful by older people. They speak about their memories of it in more detail and describe the differences it made as more impactful than younger participants. Some of them really see the transition as a milestone, and see the need to adjust mental benchmarks and using a currency with a different iconography as meaningful changes in their lives. Young people, on the contrary, more often mention that they lack strong memories of the transition and describe converting euro prices to old prices as something their parents might do, but they would not do themselves.

Extract 5.6 French financial professionals

Loïc: For me, the comparison Franc-Euro is worth nothing [Paul approves, others laugh]

Paul: Now it's clear.

Loïc: I even don't have franc memories anymore.

Sophie: Well yes. Me, I never converted in franc what I spent in euro.

Extract 5.7 Dutch financial professionals

Milan: I was ten when the euro was introduced, so for me it is the same story that the guilder, well... I remember holding it. I still am of the generation that knows what a quarter [0,25 guilder coin] is. While my little sister for example, she wouldn't know that. But for me it's the most normal thing in the world that... I can easily transfer money to many friends who live in other European countries, so that... Actually it's a normal thing that I don't always think about.

In itself, this contrast between generational experiences with the euro might be quite obvious. Yet, it is crucial not to overlook, as it does have significant implications for our understanding of the legitimation of the euro. Existing research in fact pays little attention to the role of age in attitudes towards the euro, generally using it only as a control variable, and in the few cases in which research reports the effect of age in the first place, the findings differ (e.g. Banducci et al., 2009; Roth et al., 2019). Importantly then, the generational differences coming to the fore in this study do not only apply to the weight people give to the transition itself. As the extracts above show, it also translates into people's general perception of the euro. People who have a weaker (or no) memory of using

another currency are more likely not to see the euro as an item that requires much consideration: the whole idea of having the euro appears less important to them, as it is simply something that is there. This again hints at the importance of everyday perceptions in the way people make sense of and give weight to the euro. It suggests how participants who do not notice the everyday implications of the euro are also less likely to attach importance to the euro in general.

5.2. Linking the euro with interests and actors

After leaving how people could discuss the euro in the first question entirely open, the second question asked participants to talk about the euro in a more specific way by asking them what they think have been the most important reasons for the introduction of the euro. The underlying rationale of this question is not only to further deepen insights into people's understanding of the euro – do they see it in a more economic, cultural or political light? – but also to see with which actors and interests they connect it. In this way, it tells us more about people's understanding of the political character of the euro, in contrast to its everyday appearance. Given that this question made the focus groups move towards knowledge-based discussions rather than discussions about personal experiences, which could make participants with less interest in the euro uncomfortable, participants were first given a few minutes to pre-discuss this question in pairs before discussing it in plenary.

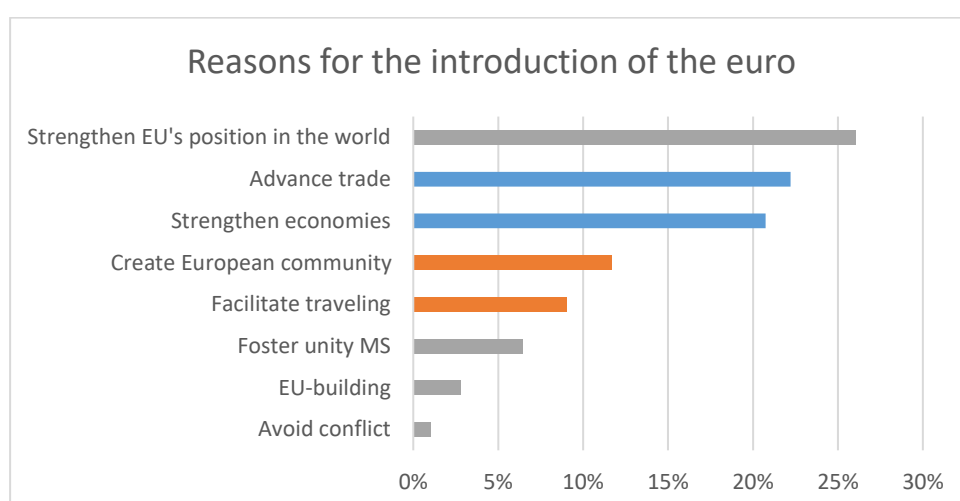


Figure 5.10: Reasons for the introduction of the euro

In the same inductive fashion as in section 5.1, a codebook was developed to capture the topics discussed here. Figure 5.3 presents the frequency with which these topics were discussed.

What is striking here is that political categories are much more prominent than in the discussions following question 1, whereas cultural categories decrease in prominence. Taken together, economic reasons are still most prominent, with all groups mentioning the euro's anticipated positive effect on trading between Eurozone member states as well as the economy in more general terms. Political reasons are almost mentioned as often however, and – perhaps surprisingly – the most mentioned political reason for the euro's introduction is the aim to strengthen Europe's positioning in the world. In all focus groups, participants mention how they feel the euro was initiated to create an alternative to the hegemony of the dollar and establish a European (trading) block through which European countries together would gain power at the world stage. For some, this was done in light of the emergence of other powers like China and Brazil as much as a response to US hegemony, of which the following is a (relatively sophisticated) example.

Extract 5.8 Italian financial professionals

Moderator: What do you think have been the main reasons for the introduction of the euro?

[Brief pre-discussion in pairs]

Clemente: Historically since the end of WWII, the US has always hegemonized the world. Don't forget that all world transactions were done through gold and the dollar. So they have monetary supremacy and still today they don't want to lose it. They have always spied on everyone, including the allies. Do you remember the Merkel-Sarkozy scandal? So it was necessary to create one united economic bloc capable of contrasting the US and when someone – Iran - dared to say "I start to pay the gas in euro", it ended badly. This is because the US doesn't want to lose their hegemony at all.

Carlo: Yes but let me say that it wasn't only the US, since the US was allied with Europe, but also China began to grow.

Clemente: Yes China as well, of course.

Flavio: Well China has been the promoter of the Asian Development Bank.

Carlo: Indeed! It was not just to create a bloc to contrast the US but also to deal with the ever-growing East.

Gugliemo: You had to create a united bloc to make your decisions count at the global level otherwise you would have been squeezed as a pot between two poles.

Before going into this further and interpreting what the meaning of the occurrence of these topics can be, it is useful to first make a brief comparison between the different groups. Again, the most useful way of doing so is by grouping the different types of topics together in larger categories – despite the degree of arbitrariness that is always a part of such categorizations.¹⁰

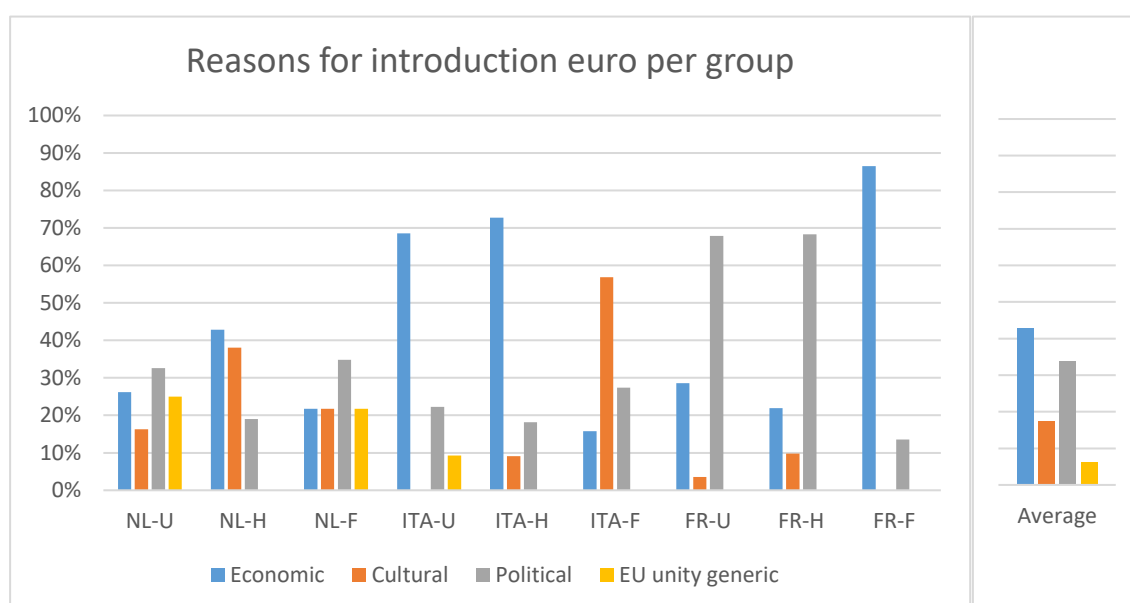


Figure 5.11: Reasons for the euro's introduction per group

Interestingly, national differences appear more telling here than social differences. While there is no clear pattern in the differences between social groups in how they discuss the reasons for the euro's introduction, the variance between national groups does seem to hint at some more structural differences. In the Italian groups for example, the introduction is discussed in relatively economic terms, with participants talking about how the euro affected trade between EU member states and impacted the economy. In France on the other hand, participants more often mention the political side of the euro, particularly bringing up the idea that the euro

¹⁰ In this case, the purpose of facilitating travelling for example could technically have both an economic and cultural meaning, while people's mentioning of economic purposes ('strengthening the economy') sometimes goes hand in hand with mentioning political purposes ('strengthening Europe's positioning in the world').

was also aimed to strengthen Europe's position in the world. This finding is the more interesting because it fits to the discussions following the first question, where the French groups also saw the euro in a more political light than the other groups. It also fits the country's more general relation towards the euro, as described in chapter 4, which has always been more (geo)political than that of other countries.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, even if the euro itself is in the first place seen as an everyday object, it is not understood as purely a-political either. Of course, the fact that this question asked participants about the reasons for the euro's introduction does drive them towards more political answers, but it is nevertheless relevant to note. It shows that when asked to reflect more deeply on the euro, focus group participants do clearly see the euro's creation as linked with political as well as macro-economic objectives. Likewise, it is not exclusively the euro's everyday appearance that shapes peoples' understanding of it, for the national differences do suggest that it is also affected by (national) public debates.

At the same time, it is important to note the vagaries surrounding the link between the euro and its political background. Firstly, it is striking that people rarely make clear with which actors and interests precisely they connect the euro. Judging from the answers people give, people seem to tend towards a more trans- or supranational perception of the euro. Participants almost always speak of the euro as being (or not being) a shared interest (no matter whether these are shared economic and geo-political interests, or more clearly supranational interests such as fostering the emergence of a European community or the strengthening of the EU in general) and rarely mention specific national interests. Yet, they always speak in generalities, and almost never refer to specific institutions or other actors. Occasionally, participants refer to national politicians, but more in terms of selling the project than initiating it. In general, the euro rather seems to be the project of a diffuse 'they'.

Extract 5.9 Dutch financial professionals

Moderator: What do you think have been the main reasons for the introduction of the euro?

Henk: Yes...

Steven: That's the thing, we don't know! [all laugh]

Tom: No...

- Steven: Yes.. Well, I think about the argument we just used, that we thought that when you start something new, that there are many people who want to join. And that this means you have made a good decision.
- Tom: How did you experience it at the time? You [Milan] indicated that it was hard to judge.
- Milan: Yes, it was just there, indeed...
- Tom: But how was the story told? The way of...
- Steven: Well that is the point that eh... I once went to a seminar with Zalm [ex-finance minister of the Netherlands], and it was all hallelujah and it would come with huge benefits. Because we would get a stronger currency in the world and that was a huge advantage. It could only be explained positively. I don't even remember exactly why, but it would be. The emotion I got from that was well, nice, we're gonna do this.
- Henk: People said the euro could become stronger than the dollar.

Extract 5.10 French unemployed

- Nadia: When they brought these 26 countries together to form the European Community, it meant we had to switch to the euro. And my great regret is that it went at the expense of the purchasing power.
- Michael: But when we say 'they', it's politicians, or...?
- Nadia: Yes, yes. All those who passed... It is, what president did we have...
- Michael: How does that suit them, I mean I'm trying to understand. For example, a minister who put that through, does he find it convenient in his daily life?

These passages are indicative of the difficulty participants have with this question. It is telling that this applies even to the highly educated and financially literate group of Dutch financial professionals. In several groups, people mention they are not sure of their answers, and people also regularly divert from the question, starting to talk about whether the introduction of the euro was a good idea or not, or about the consequences of the euro's introduction. The question is perceived as relatively 'factual', and even though the discussions following the question are generally still meaningful, people are not always sure what the 'right' answer is. It is in that sense also telling that the discussion following this question is shorter than average (in terms of transcript length, discussions following question 2 account for around 11% of the total amount of words, lower than the 16,67% average for the six questions).

The difficulty participants have in connecting the euro with actors is worth considering further. The way participants perceive the distinction between the euro and the EU in general is particularly important, because

it says much about the way in which people make sense of the euro. Two things are noteworthy here. Firstly, when speaking about the euro-EU distinction explicitly, participants generally express a view in which the euro is seen as relatively apolitical and inconsequential. It is the EU that is political and that can be seen as responsible for bringing up questions of authority and solidarity, not the euro itself. If the euro has a political character, this is because it is part of this larger EU project. Illustrative of this are the following extracts from the group of French hairdressers, as well as of one participant in the group of Dutch unemployed who on several instances emphasizes the difference she perceived between the euro and the EU (it is noteworthy that the other focus group participants did not engage with these remarks very much, and appear to just accept them as valid).

Extract 5.11 French Hairdressers

Lorraine: I don't have the impression that the European authorities have real power. While there is a political power, yes, but since we are really talking about the euro, so a purely financial power, I don't have the impression that there is any impact... Or that there is a loss of autonomy against Germany, for example.

Extract 5.12 Dutch unemployed

Truus: Of course there are two things: there is the introduction of the euro, and there is the euro crisis with the southern countries, that is... But you are right, a lot of euros went there. So if you call this the euro crisis, then that is, eh... But that has more to do with the EU you know, than with...

[...]

Truus: Well, but I don't know if it relates to the discussion here, because in principle, we are talking about the euro here, the currency. But you quickly enter into the political discussion of the EU as a political union, but in fact this is an entirely different discussion.

The second noteworthy aspect of this discussion is that, while participants might see a difference between the EU and the euro in terms of their political character, the boundary between both is, at the same time, thin. This becomes clear particularly in the implicit ways in which people discuss the questions. Not only do focus group participants easily move on to discuss general EU topics rather than euro specific topics, they also sometimes mix up the euro and the EU and speak about both as if they are interchangeable. For example, participants describe the euro as being

responsible for the increased movement from (non-Eurozone) Eastern member states to Western member states, or argue that the agricultural sector is disadvantaged by the euro because of Brussels determining production quota. Sometimes, other participants do correct this, but it serves to demonstrate the conflation between both. This on the one hand is suggestive of the strong symbolic character of the euro, with the euro being treated as a *pars pro toto* for the EU, but on the other hand might be interpreted as a sign of the difficulty participants have with associating specific political consequences with the euro itself.

Extract 5.13 French financial professionals

Charles: The ordinary citizen for example who is in Greece or Bulgaria, in all these countries there... It [the euro] allowed him to come to work in countries like France, like Germany, more easily. Because there at the time, he was European and he could, without having administrative complications, (...) could come to work in countries that allowed him to...

Loïc: But that's it's thanks to Europe [everyone nods], the euro is more commercial.

Extract 5.14 Dutch hairdressers

Moderator: Wow do you think the euro has affected autonomy?

Ria: Well I'm sure that the people in livestock farming are very limited by what people in Brussels say, that they can only keep so many cows and produce so much milk. That is determined in Brussels. And with many food items, it is decided from the outside what they are allowed to produce here. I find this a limitation coming from Brussels, in this case.

Altogether, the findings presented here suggest that the euro is seen as political to the extent that it is part of a larger political project. After the previous section, this is a relevant observation, for while people in the first instance mainly see the euro in an everyday light, they do have an awareness of the political grounds of the euro. At the same time, this political character of the euro is rather diffuse. People have difficulty in specifying the reasons for the euro's introduction and easily conflate it with the EU in general. The euro itself in that sense is still seen as relatively a-political: it might be driven by political desires, but in itself is mostly a practical tool with certain economic consequences, as well as perhaps symbolic meaning. This unavoidably has consequences for how people

evaluate the euro and form attitudes towards it, as discussed further in chapter 7.

5.3. Consequences of the euro

The third question of the focus groups switches from the origins to the perceived consequences of the euro. Who, and which *type* of actors do they see as affected? In this way, we can understand better how people see the euro in relation to, as well as a source of, political conflict. More specifically, this question asked who people think have benefited from the euro. Importantly, it left entirely open how people could answer this question. Participants were simply asked to individually write down their answers on post-it papers, which were subsequently pasted on a board in front of them, functioning as a basis for the group discussion. They were thus free in choosing which categories they would use, and could answer in terms of countries as well as other economic, political or societal actors. Before reviewing specific answers, it is instructive to first look at the categories people used in their answers, as these differed substantially both nationally and socially. Figure 5.5 shows which categories¹¹ were discussed in the respective groups¹² (making no distinction between benefitting and disadvantaged actors).

¹¹ Again, it is important to be sensitive to the sometimes thin line between the categories. For example, participants might speak about consumers or about 'common citizens', and might in practice use these actors in an almost interchangeable way. Yet, the first one is treated as an economic actor here, while the second one is a societal actor. Such differences in choices of wording are seen as telling here however – even though they are subtle – because they are still related to the way in which people make sense of the euro's consequences. Note to Chris: do I mention this too often? I feel a need to make this clear, but also mention something along the same lines in two similar cases before this

¹² Do note that the graph is based on the coded transcripts of the focus group discussions, rather than the answers people wrote on post-its. After all, it is the discussions rather than plain answers that are central in this research, and the actual discussions in the focus groups give a better indication of the salience of particular views, and the extent to which views on such actors are shared.

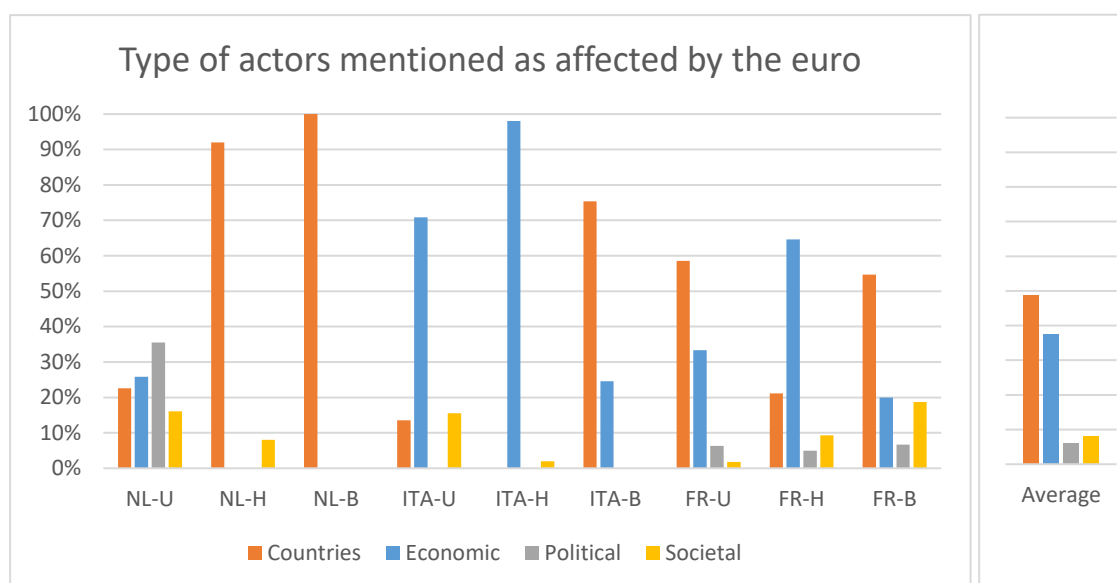


Figure 5.12: Type of actors mentioned as affected by the euro per group

In terms of national differences, it is perhaps not surprising that countries differ in their perceptions of which countries have benefitted. The Italian groups bring up southern countries – Greece, Spain, and notably Italy itself – as disadvantaged by the euro. In contrast, in the Netherlands the question is discussed more through the lens of the euro crisis, with the general perception being that this led to transfers from northern to southern member states, meaning southern countries are repeatedly described as benefitting at the expense of northern countries – although some participants do also say they feel ‘rich countries’ have benefited, and therefore the Netherlands too. French participants finally take a more in between position in the sense that the euro crisis is also brought up as a source of divergence between countries, but there is more attention paid to other actors. Germany is particularly seen as benefitting as an individual member, while southern countries were more likely to be seen as disadvantaged. These are fairly concrete conceptions of the euro’s consequences, and this might have been expected in the sense that they are in line with how media narratives differ between member states (e.g. Joris et al., 2018; Müller et al., 2018).

Extract 5.15 Dutch financial professionals

Steven: I make a distinction between Northern European and Southern European countries. Eh, well... The yellow one [refers to post-it] is negative because Southern European countries have benefitted much

more than Northern European countries. Because we have had to pay much more to save things, in Greece for example.

Extract 5.16 French financial professionals

Loïc: And Southern Europe [was disadvantaged] because most of the countries of Southern Europe experienced a crisis in 2008, finally they were well shaken. Again I don't know if it's because of the euro or not, it's hard to say every time, but it's still nested in this European market, so here they are the ones who have suffered the most.

Extract 5.17 Italian financial professionals

Stefano: In my opinion, who benefited from the euro were the ones who had a strong fiscal system. In Italy, with the corruption and the tax evasion we could never have profited from all of this.

What is more surprising here however is that the groups also differ in the *types* of actors they see as benefitting or losing out. There are some differences between the three countries here – in the Italian groups economic actors are often more discussed than countries. More interestingly, however, and more straightforwardly linked to structural differences between the groups, are the differences between social groups. As Figure 5.6 shows, the main difference here exists (again) between financial professionals and the other two groups, which are more similar. As illustrated by the three extracts above, financial professionals on the one hand predominantly discuss the effect of the euro in terms of how it had diverging consequences for different countries – although their perceptions of which countries benefited differ along national lines, as discussed above. If they discuss other categories, this is largely in terms of sectoral differences, with the export or tourist industry mentioned as benefitting, or the import sector as disadvantaged.

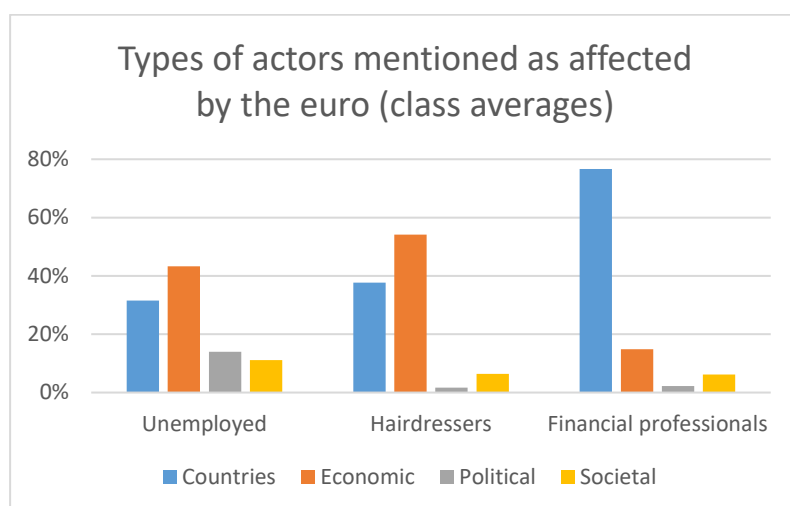


Figure 5.13: Types of actors mentioned as affected by the euro (class averages)

The other two social groups however more often use entirely different categories to discuss the euro's consequences. Rather than predominantly discussing effects on countries, they talk more about the euro's effect on economic and political actors. In addition, they also discuss these actors in a different way. Economically, they do not just discuss the differences between different sectors, but also see a divide between big companies and small companies, and between business (multinational companies, as well as investors, the stock exchange and so on) and consumers. Politically, a recurring theme is that the political class (politicians, the EU, the government, 'politics' in general) is seen as benefitting while citizens are seen as disadvantaged. There is a constant here: the ones that are seen as benefitting are 'the powers that be', those actors that are already prosperous and powerful. Indeed, participants in these groups often talk about companies and governments in the same vein, as 'the big ones', operating at a distance from their everyday lives. The ones on the losing end are citizens like them, 'the common man'.

Extract 5.18 Italian hairdressers

Pasquale: I think it's a similar situation with multinational firms - that is what I wrote. I believe multinational firms, within the EU, profited a lot.

Bruno: Yes I agree.

Pasquale: Like, also big entrepreneurs are the ones who profited the most.

Bruno: Yes the ones who associated and grouped together.

Pasquale: Yes because altogether, by associating themselves, they found a way to deal with this situation. In contrast to us, who were looking at the small things, like the 1 or 2 cents... For them on the contrary it was a

booming condition because they had the opportunity to exchange and to make money circulate with the same currency.

Bruno: Like airline companies. It's the same situation... they all agreed not to go below a certain price.

Pasquale: The big ones are the ones who always earn the most out of these situations. *[laughs]*

Extract 5.19 French hairdressers

Eric: I think when it was set up, it was beneficial to the European Union, I don't know why, but if they set it up it was that there was something to be won. And then, over time, we realize that, finally, the link means that consumers lose and merchants win. Quite simply because I remember too much of my grandparents saying, finally what you buy, what was 75 francs is sold for 75 euros... But finally the salaries, they did not increase according to or decrease according to all that.

[...]

Lorraine: The winners will always be the strongest and those who will have power like the CAC40 [French stock market index] companies, multinationals, where the power of money comes into play. Because it is true that we, at our level, it comes into play if the salary does not increase in the same way... Well, it does not develop in the same way as price, for example... Therefore it will inevitably reduce purchasing power. It's mathematical, but there's also all this competition, and once again there's a balance of power between currencies, different countries, and different clans too.

Extract 5.20 Dutch unemployed

Kimberly: Well, who hasn't benefited is the common man. The hardworking people. And who has benefited... The government, business, and the stock market.

[...]

Moderator: *Why do you feel that the rich countries have benefited more than the poor countries?*

Bianca: Eh... Well... One comes back to the common man again. When you're rich you can invest and make everything bigger, when you're poor you can't go along with that. I don't know... Maybe...

[...]

Truus: You know, it is quite complicated. I also wrote down banks, companies and the government [as benefiting; points to the post-its]. I just have the feeling that the government has more control with the euro and so on. And this is a feeling, not a fact.

This provides an important addition to the question of how far people see the euro as political. For the frequent recurrence of this theme does

indicate it is an important context in which citizens see the euro, and European politics in general. While the question to some extent artificially triggers a conflictual view of the euro – something they might not have done themselves – the way in which people do so is instructive. It shows that, even if people primarily see the euro as a relatively inconsequential everyday object, they might at the same time feel that as a political project, it fits into a larger pattern. A pattern in which the powerful entities gain, and the common man loses. How exactly this mechanism functions they generally find difficult to explicate, particularly in the case of the euro itself (indeed, some participants indicate they have difficulty with this question – although they discuss it with less hesitation than in question 2). As the extracts above illustrate, they often refer to a more general pattern they feel also fits to the euro, even if this is only a diffuse feeling. However, these people have a lingering feeling that the euro in the end benefited elites more than themselves. While they feel life became more expensive for them, and some refer to more general feelings of decline (life being better before, politics having grown more distant), companies saw their profits grow and governmental institutions increased their power. For these people, this is the context the euro is part of. This does not necessarily mean that they do not also see positive effects of the euro, and people expressing such sentiments might still support the euro itself in the end. Yet, this link with more general political and societal developments is important to understanding people's perceptions of the euro – as will be discussed more extensively in chapter 7.

It is important to note that this is not a sentiment shared by all individual participants in the non-financial professional focus groups. In most groups, there were people who argued the euro *did* benefit the common citizen too, just as many participants simply saw other types of actors as mainly affected by the euro. Yet, the fact that this type of reasoning about the euro occurred throughout all the (non-financial professional) groups, as well as the way it fits with other signs of the diffuse political character of the euro, together indicate that this provides an important context for understanding the way people make sense of the euro. A context that clearly divided the groups of financial professionals – where it appears not at all relevant – from the other groups. And one that shows that, even if the euro itself is largely appreciated as a useful utensil, it is at the same time embedded in more general perceptions of society and politics.

5.4. Conclusion

Putting the pieces together, a more or less layered image appears of how people perceive and understand the euro. What the findings (summarized in Table 5.1) show is how the everyday and the political both have a place in the way people make sense of the single currency. Judging from the first associations that focus group participants have with the euro, it is firstly seen as an everyday life object. When asked to discuss the euro in their own way, it is predominantly everyday life notions – either economic or cultural – that are brought up. These are topics people find more or less natural to discuss, and to which they easily relate. Explicitly political items, such as topics concerning political decision making and contestation, are hardly part of participants' top-of-mind associations with the euro, and in the few cases when references to the political side of the euro are made, this is a more general, diffuse type of politics. It is therefore the euro's daily life side that emerges as having the most significance. This significance is especially pronounced with participants from older generations, who generally discuss the coming into being of the euro as a more meaningful transition than younger generations – hinting at the role of generational differences in how people make sense of it.

At the same time, the findings show that the euro is not seen as *unrelated* to politics either. It is not that participants do not have any political or macro-economic connotations with it at all, and when asked about the reasons for its introduction, people do link the euro to political motives as well. Yet, these motives are generally vague. Indeed, compared to the conversations on the everyday aspects of the euro, discussions turn more hesitant, and people often find it difficult to explicate themselves. Likewise, rather than linking the euro to particular actors and interests, it is mostly associated with a diffuse 'they'. For this reason, this political side of the euro appears as secondary in the sense that it is a context of the euro rather than central to people's understanding of it.

Table 5.4: Summary of observations made in chapter 5

	General observations	Group differences
Perceptions of euro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Euro's everyday side is central - Euro's political and economic side appears secondary, and is more diffuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Few signs of structural national differences - Social: financial groups have a substantially more political understanding of the euro than other groups - Generational: (transition to) euro more meaningful to older participants
Actors and interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Euro linked to both economic (trade) and political grounds (strengthening EU) - However, link is vague. Actors are generally a diffuse 'they' - Euro is political to the extent that it is part of a larger political project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some signs of country differences, not of social differences - Italian groups see the euro more as economic. French groups more as political
Consequences of euro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Euro seen as having affected countries differently - More surprisingly, euro also seen as having affected social groups differently - Sign of how euro is linked to social conflict more broadly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National differences: most see their own country as disadvantaged, other MS as advantaged - Social differences: strong contrast between financial groups (focus on country differences) and other groups (discuss euro as part of a larger social conflict)

This finding is developed further by the discussion on the consequences of the euro. Participants do see the euro as affecting different actors differently – even if the question artificially triggers them to do so – and in that sense do understand how the euro can be linked to political conflict. Particularly revealing here are differences between the groups. On the one hand, there are national differences. Perhaps predictably, people in the Dutch groups feel that the Southern European countries benefited at the expense of the North, while people in the Italian as well as in the French groups on the contrary feel that the euro was penalizing for southern countries while northern countries benefitted. This underlines the role of national frames and experiences, fitting with earlier findings on how in the context of the EU, ‘the nation-state plays a primordial role in the formation of the individual’s frames of perception’ (Van Ingelgom, 2014: 150; see als Diez Medrano, 2003).

On the other hand however, and perhaps more surprisingly, there are important differences along social lines. While academic discussion and media debates often discuss the euro's effects primarily in terms of country differences, citizens also place the euro into a societal conflict in which 'elites' (political as well as financial) win, and the common man stays behind. And while the euro is not seen as responsible for this divide on its own, and it remains relatively vague how exactly the euro is linked to this divide, this association still plays a significant role. In other words, this class-difference in perceptions of the euro is not only explained by the actual economic effect the euro had on different classes, but also appears to be related to variations in how different classes see politics more generally. In this way, euro-perceptions are embedded in more general perceptions of politics, which are specific to particular social groups. Even if diffuse, such perceptions can still form the grounds for politically meaningful evaluations of the euro.

In this way, these findings help us understand how the everyday side and the political side of the euro go together. They underline the relevance of the daily in the way people make sense of the euro, something that conventional survey research has generally paid less attention to. The everyday character of the first associations that people have with the euro suggests that these are central to their perceptions of it, while the difficulty that participants have with linking the euro to concrete political consequences suggests that there are obstructions to move the euro out of the realm of daily concerns. Given the diffuseness of political understandings of the euro, the specific and actual effects the euro has on political arrangements get lost in between both extremes. In this way, this finding fits with the idea that the 'banal' character of the euro can be an explanation for the high levels of support the euro has seen.

Still, these observations also raise subsequent questions. Firstly, while they show how people perceive and understand the euro, they tell us less about how people actually *evaluate* the euro. For what reasons do they themselves say they support, or do not support, the euro? And are these active stances, or merely matters of indifferent acceptance, perhaps even non-attitudes (to speak with Converse, 1964)? These questions will be addressed further in chapter seven. Before that however, there is the question to what extent the euro is sustainable in terms of its actual

Deeply contested yet taken for granted

consequences. Even if people do not easily question the euro itself, how do they make sense of the political questions that come with it regardless of whether people are aware of it? The next chapter will look further into evaluations of such 'politics of the euro.'

Chapter 6

Evaluations of the politics of the euro

Even if the public perception of the euro's political character can be described as diffuse, the euro does come with concrete political consequences that are fundamental to the euro's legitimacy in a normative sense. As outlined in chapter two, the currency union entails a transfer of political authority, requires an amount of inter-country solidarity, and constrains member states in the possibilities they have for running their economy. Therefore, understanding the euro's legitimacy also requires to take into account how citizens deal with such notions. Are their views compatible with the demands the euro makes in terms of items like solidarity and autonomy? And do they link such items to the euro themselves in the first place?

Therefore, this chapter studies how focus group participants discuss the euro's relation with solidarity, autonomy and democracy in the face of member state interdependence. More concisely, the question central in this chapter is: how do citizens evaluate the politics of the euro? 'Politics of the euro' here refers to the euro's consequences for political decision making and institutional configurations, as described in chapter two. In presenting the focus group results, this chapter does not aim to give an exhaustive account of public stances towards the specific items under analysis, i.e. European solidarity and autonomy. Instead, it wants to understand the *type* of reasoning used to evaluate such items, and, more in particular, how the euro fits into this reasoning. After all, this study's interest is in the normative tenability of the euro, more than questions about solidarity, autonomy or democracy per se.

In addressing this question, this chapter will focus on the second half of the focus groups, the part that explicitly focused on such normative

questions. To recall, participants were asked to discuss three different statements, each preceded by a video clip that was shown in order to facilitate and provoke discussion:

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

- Being in a currency union together means that euro countries should have solidarity with each other.

[Preceded by a video clip briefly explaining the difficulty of sharing one currency with different economies, bringing up questions on compatibility of economies, interdependence of member states and the need for solidarity]

- [own country] loses too much autonomy due to the euro.

[Preceded by a video clip explaining that a currency union might require a sort of European minister of finance who checks national budgets, thus having implications for national autonomy]

- Eurozone countries with economic problems should be obliged to cut public spending if they otherwise endanger the Eurozone as a whole.

[Preceded by a video clip explaining the Greek situation in 2015 from a democratic point of view, with Yannis Varoufakis and Wolfgang Streeck arguing the Greek bailouts to be an undemocratic, northern imposition]

Clearly, by asking such specific questions and introducing them with a video clip, participants' responses should be seen as triggered rather than 'natural'. It is possible that such items do not play a role in their opinions on the euro, and participants would hardly make a link between both if they were not stimulated to think about these items. But rather than mapping existing beliefs, our focus on questions that are central for the euro's legitimacy in a more normative sense means it is more about justifications here. In other words, the purpose here is especially to see how focus group participants *make sense* of these questions, what *type* of arguments they mobilize, and thus which ingredients their legitimacy beliefs consist of. In this way, this analysis can help us in understanding to what extent the euro can be justified *in terms of* people's beliefs, along the lines of Beetham's suggestion for studying legitimacy (as described in section 3.2). In addition, the question how and to what extent they relate such normative questions to the euro themselves can still be part of this analysis

As in the previous chapter, the sequence of the questions will largely be followed to structure the analysis. So, a first section will focus on solidarity, a second section on autonomy, and a third section on democracy in the light of European interdependence. A fourth section will be spent on an additional item, one that is more tacit: the meaning of ‘we’ in the focus groups. In this section, I look at how participants see the collectives relevant in European matters, and whether there is evidence of a sense of European community. In presenting its findings, this chapter will use the same combination of qualitative analysis and basic descriptive statistics as the previous chapter.

6.1. Solidarity

Solidarity has been central in the debate about the euro and its legitimacy. As one author put it, “when the members of a group are not a perfect match, when being together requires an effort, then solidarity is key. The members of the euro area are not a perfect match” (Borger, 2013: 7). Given the differences between the economies of the euro zone, the euro thus demands participating countries to sometimes subordinate (direct) national interests in order to support others. This became particularly clear during the euro crisis, during which solidarity between northern and southern member states became the central bone of contention (e.g. Wallascheck, 2020). While some form of solidarity¹³ was needed for euro to survive, several political parties in the North gained success precisely by mobilizing against it. As such, the question became whether sufficient solidarity existed to sustain the currency union, and it emerged as a central issue for the euro’s legitimacy. And in light of the response to the Covid-19 crisis as well as the inflation fears stirred up by the war in Ukraine, it still is today.

¹³ How solidarity should be defined is a topic of debate. For example, there is the question whether helping others because of perceived self-interest can be seen as solidarity, with some arguing against this (Archer, 2013) and others seeing self-interest and solidarity as mutually constitutive (e.g. Karlsrud and Osland, 2016). However, the purpose here is in the first place to study how citizens understand it themselves. As a baseline, Zürn’s definition might be used, who defines solidarity as “the willingness of individuals to give up things they value for the sake of the collectivity” (Zürn 2000: 199), in which the acceptance of redistributive policies at least serves as a good indicator for the presence of solidarity.

In the focus groups, the topic was introduced to participants by showcasing a video clip which in particular emphasizes the diversity of EMU economies, asking whether member states are economically compatible, and therefore a uniform monetary system is desirable. In an interview, an Austrian banker¹⁴ underlines how he feels the economies of northern and southern countries are different, painting a picture of Southern European countries that some would see as provocative, with a country like Greece being more 'relaxed' than northern countries. He then goes on to argue that such diversity should perhaps be allowed to persist ('do we want Greece to be filled up with industry and hard working people? No!'), and that countries should continue to have their own type of economy and pace of life, but then also should bear the financial consequences of doing so ('if you're not as efficient as Northern Europe, you can't make as much money'). As such, the video functions as a starting point for a discussion about how people see differences between member states, how they see the consequences of integrating such different economies, and what the normative implications for member states are. In other words, what 'price' people are willing to pay for monetary integration – and to what extent they see monetary integration as coming with a price. Participants were first allowed to respond to the video directly, and were subsequently asked to discuss the statement.

In making sense of the discussions that followed, a useful starting point is the extent to which people discuss the statement in positive and negative terms. Not with the purpose of having a survey-like representation of stances – something focus groups after all are not suited for – but because it gives an overview of the discussions, an impression of the dominant arguments in the focus groups. The arguments do not need to be representing deeply held convictions, as participants can also merely entertain thoughts, or for example play the devil's advocate, but they do show which arguments are prevalent. This then serves as a basis that can subsequently be deepened by zooming in on the arguments used, so we can better understand the grounds of views on solidarity, as well as how people see the relation with the euro, and how these items differ per group.

¹⁴ Andreas Treichl, CEO of Erste Bank at the time of the interview (2014).

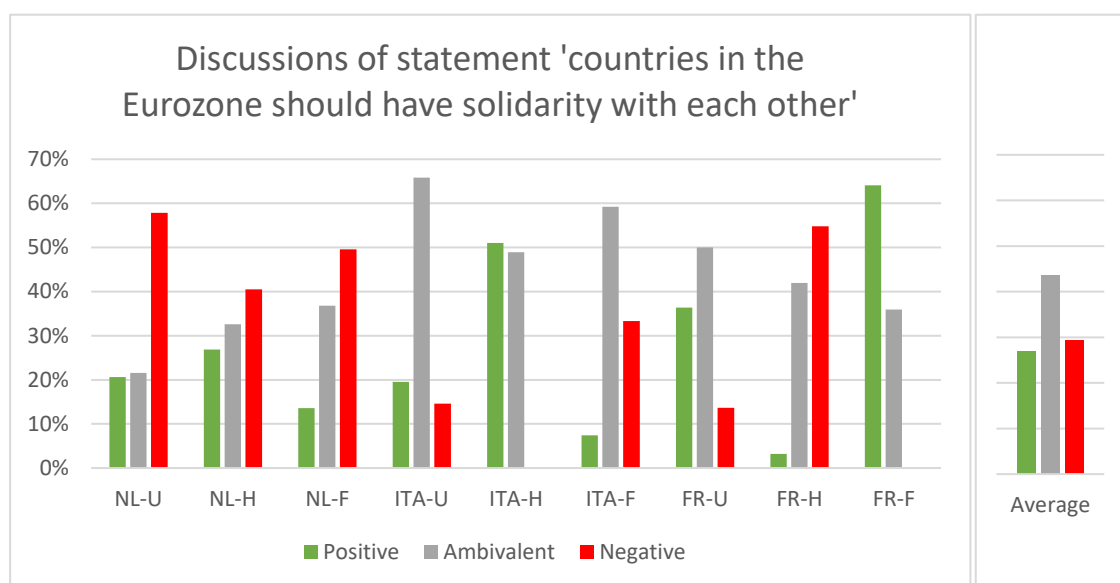


Figure 6.14: Discussions of statement on solidarity in the Eurozone

A first observation to make from Figure 6.1 is that on average, positive and negative arguments are in balance, with about 30% of the arguments made on the solidarity statement concerning arguments in favor of European solidarity, and 30% being against it. What stands out however is the amount of answers coded as ambivalent, which is the most frequently occurring category, covering over 40% of the discussions. This was used as a relatively broad category that does not only include arguments characterized by strong doubt or uncertainty, but also captures cases of conflicting statements about solidarity in which people do not take a singular stance on the statement, but simultaneously present arguments in favor as well as against it. Indeed, the argument occurring most often in this category is people saying the solidarity should be conditional on deserving it, that 'it depends' (see Figure 6.2). While arguments often endorse solidarity as a value in general, the question whether solidarity is justified depends on the circumstances of the particular case. In the same vein, participants frequently make 'realistic' arguments on solidarity, in which they appreciate solidarity as a value that might be 'nice if it was there', but in reality it is not always how things work.

Extract 6.1 Italian unemployed, Q4

Tommaso: I don't know how right the fact is that a country must necessarily be helped because if its own bad actions. So I would be a little careful to this statement.

Giovanni: Let's say that it is right to help, but then also verify...

Tommaso: You must deserve it!

Giovanni: Exactly, you must deserve it. So, not to rest on your laurels and show me that you are able to grow.

Tommaso: To help the poor because they are poor is ok. But to help those who spend all of their money playing slot machines or at the disco clubs, then I don't really care to help you.

Extract 6.2 French hairdressers, Q4

Karim: So I would say about that, yes, it's an idea like that I in principal, I totally agree with. But the problem is to be in solidarity... I'll just give you an example. I think that someone who drowns, we jump to save him. But if we see that he tries to take us away with him, what do we do? The first reaction: it is better that there is only one that drowns than 2. I think today, I think solidarity is good, but we're not going to take away one person's coverage to cover another person [laughs].

Extract 6.3 Dutch financial professionals, Q4

Henk: Well for me it is not so much about solidarity or charity. You know, I would be happy to help other countries to grow, but in the end you do not want to be worse of yourself. In the family too, I do want to help my family, for example my son, but at some point he has to take control himself.

Such arguments, simultaneously weighing the pros and cons of solidarity rather than picking a side, occur frequently. While not necessarily being indicative of doubt, they do show that participants do not exclusively hold straightforward preferences that can be captured as 'in favor' or 'against'. They are also indicative of the fact that people simply need to orient themselves on the concept of solidarity in general – indeed, it is striking that participants often go beyond European solidarity as a narrow concept and speak about solidarity in general (as they do in these extracts). In order to come to an opinion on the more specific case of European solidarity, participants first come to terms with the concept of solidarity itself.

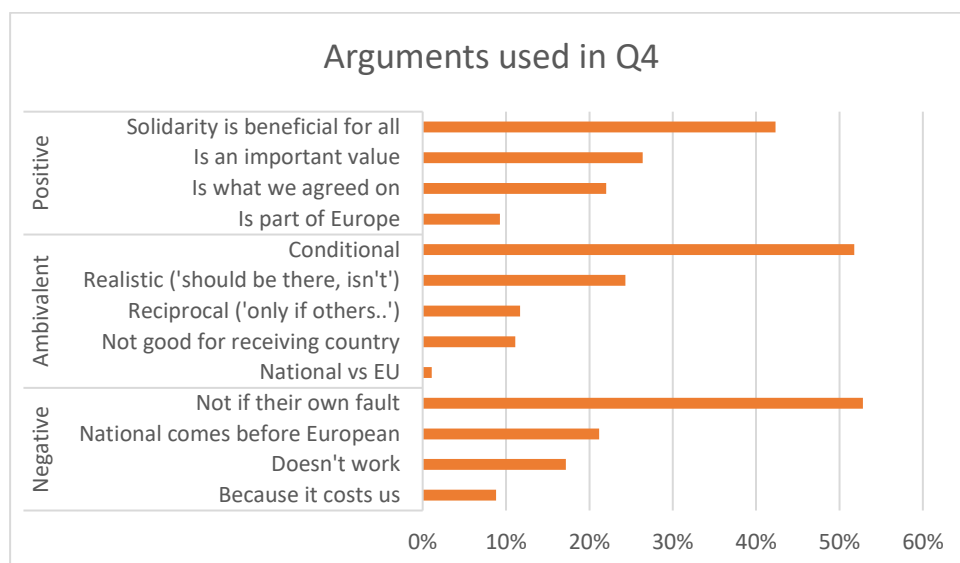


Figure 6.15: Arguments used on solidarity.

Percentages indicate occurrence of argument within category (positive, ambivalent and negative).

At the same time, clearer arguments in favor of or against the statement are also made. On the positive side, the most frequently occurring argument is that solidarity in the end is good for everyone, and makes all member of the European community stronger. Also, participants argue that solidarity is justified because it was part of what was agreed on when European countries decided to cooperate, and endorse the value of solidarity in general. On the negative side on the other hand, the predominant argument is that countries are responsible for themselves, and if they face problems which they inflicted on themselves, others should not be forced to help.

To understand better how these arguments have been used however, we should focus on how they have been put forward in the different groups. Comparing social differences firstly, one might expect differences based on utilitarian reasoning. People who perceive their position to be more precarious might be expected to have less support for investing in other member states, as this might come at the expense of welfare spending in their own country. The literature provides some basis for this expectation, finding economic standing does affect support for European economic governance (Kuhn and Stoeckel 2014) and monetary integration (Hobolt and Wratil, 2015), suggesting that those who might perceive their economic situation as threatened are less likely to support helping other

countries. At the same time, in the specific case of solidarity, the literature provides less basis for this claim (Bechtel et al., 2014; Verhaegen, 2017). And indeed, in the focus groups no clear pattern emerges when comparing social classes. Some financial professionals are in favor of European solidarity because they find it a part of member states agreeing to European or monetary integration, particularly in France, while others argue against it because they point at countries' own responsibilities, most notably in the Dutch group of financial professionals. However, such arguments occur in the groups of hairdressers and unemployed as well. Sometimes, there is a hint of people reasoning out of economic self-interest, such as in the case of unemployed arguing that they find solidarity with other European countries unwarranted given that there are plenty of things in their own country they think should receive more funding, also referring to their own economic predicament. Apart from a few of such remarks however, there is no strongly recurring pattern in differences between social classes.

Differences between countries however stand out more clearly, and are particularly interesting because they appear to be grounded in structural characteristics. Comparing the groups on a national level, negative arguments on European solidarity are prevalent in the Dutch groups, in which on average around 50% of discussions concerns arguments against solidarity, and only 20% concerns arguments in favor of solidarity. In Italy on the other hand, it is ambivalence that dominates, with other 60% of the discussions being coded as such. It is particularly the 'conditional' argument that is predominant here, more notably that 'it depends'. In the French groups finally, the image is more mixed, with hairdressers predominantly discussing the statement in a negative fashion, while financial professionals are strongly in favor. Even though these data are not meant to proportionally represent stances of participants, it should be noted that this image roughly fits to what surveys have found on country differences in support for solidarity, with countries perceiving themselves as net-contributors to the EU, such as the Netherlands, being more opposed to solidarity than countries perceiving themselves as net-recipients, such as Italy (Genschel et al., 2021).

But what then explains these differences? There are a couple of factors that emerge as helpful in making sense of them. Firstly, there is the way people

see their own country and its relation to the EU. In the Dutch groups, there generally is much confidence in the abilities of their own country and its government. Accordingly, European cooperation is seen as something that might be useful, but also has the risk of being costly because it binds the Netherlands together with less affluent countries. Financial support to other member states then is seen as charity as much as solidarity, because participants do not expect reciprocity. As such, participants on several occasions do endorse the value of solidarity, but argue there should be a limit to it, because they feel solidarity in the end comes down to charity of northern countries to southern countries. The following extract is illustrative for this sentiment, and similar perceptions of European solidarity occur frequently throughout all three Dutch groups.

Extract 6.4 Dutch hairdressers, Q4

- Yagmur: Actually I think you benefit as much as you make of it yourself. And I think the Netherlands is a good example, they want to make something of it. And Italy for example does not really have the mentality for it.
- Ria: They're just tagging along.
- Yagmur: Yes, they're just fine with how things are.
- Ria: Yes, maybe also because these are poorer countries. They are fine with the situation now, they had such a weak currency before the euro came.
- Yagmur: Yes, they improved while for the Netherlands costs only increase.
- Ria: I definitely think that Spain, Italy and Greece are piggybacking on the wealthier economies of Europe.
- Yagmur: Maybe that will change. They're piggybacking now but will be carrying the Netherlands later.
- Ria: No that's not going to happen.
- Yagmur: Why not?
- Ria: Then a civil war must break out in the Netherlands, no, that eh.. It has always been like this.

In Italy on the contrary, participants express much less confidence in their national government. In line with this, the EU is rather than as costly or as invasive more likely to be seen as an institution that might help stabilize their own government, and solidarity is seen as a generally positive value of European integration. At the same time, this view is balanced with remarks that solidarity should be deserved and is therefore conditional upon the receiving part of solidarity to do its best. Participants frequently compare European solidarity here with the relation between Northern

and Southern Italy, as well as using metaphors referring to hard-working and lazy people. The Italian self-perception appears ambiguous here. Even though one might expect Italians to see themselves as being on the receiving side of the solidarity question with Italy being a debtor country in the euro crisis, that view is not often made explicit. On the one hand, when participants talk about the South that needs help, it in the first instance is Greece they refer to, a country they feel Italy is not comparable to. At the same time, while not often referring to Italy itself as being in need of solidarity, participants do see themselves as part of the economically weaker Southern European countries, and have a negative self-perception in terms of their governments ability and the state of its economy. This also explains the high frequency of 'ambivalent' arguments: solidarity is a nice European value and something that might be in the Italian interest, but there is understanding for northern hesitance to show solidarity.

Extract 6.5 Italian unemployed

Giovanni: To me it's right that countries help those most in need, of course this doesn't mean... How to say...?

Olivia: To rest on your laurels.

Giovanni: Exactly, to rest on your laurels. Because sometimes it happens that countries think there's always someone ready to help and this may lead their economies to slow down. However if there's crisis - as it happened for Greece but also for us - a minimum help is right. Europe is needed also for this, to help everyone.

Paolo: Yes but at this point we would need a German [smiles] to answer to this question. I obviously agree with the statement, or there is solidarity or there is not. A German though could object...

(...)

Tommaso: If I am a state that has worked well, governed well and it has been able to provide services and work without public debt without wrong investments, then why if there's Greece I must help it and say "oh poor Greeks"? Honestly, one could get mad to this. It's like the south of Italy that for many years has been waiting for the Fund to the South and for other public funding.

Taking the Dutch and Italian cases as two extremes of a spectrum, the French focus groups finally appear to be in between these two extremes. While participants express a more negative perception of their own country compared to the Netherlands, they are less fatalist about their government's capabilities than in the Italian groups, and do not see

themselves as dependent on the EU as Italian participants do. Likewise, solidarity is not discussed as much in terms of self-interest. While the Dutch groups mention the costs that solidarity has for themselves or other creditor countries, and the Italian groups see themselves as closer to the receiving side of solidarity, the French do not often mention their own country's position. In that sense, they speak in a slightly more European perspective. While arguments in favor of or against European solidarity can still be the same as those used in the other groups ('solidarity is an important European value' or 'solidarity is beneficial for all' in favor, or 'countries who are responsible for their own economic problems should not expect too much help' against it), the different self-perception does make a difference in the general stance towards solidarity.

Extract 6.6 French financial professionals, Q4

Cecilia: If we accept the Eurozone and want to benefit from all the tricks of the Eurozone, then we can't let down a country or use clichés [Sophie approves] whether they are founded or not just to say...

Paul: There is no debate about that. I agree with that. But there is still a reality.

Cecilia: But we agreed to be in the same area. I think that in this case [if we don't want to show solidarity] we should not have accepted in advance that they enter the Eurozone.

Charles: That's right, as long as we accepted, we still have to...

Paul: When they entered, we knew very well that they were not going to be up to a level. I think it is a choice that's perfectly conscious.

This also relates to a second factor explaining national differences: people's perception of *other* European countries, more in particular those countries solidarity is aimed towards. As mentioned, the video clip that was shown before introducing the statement included a fairly provocative portrayal of Southern Europeans, particularly Greece. When participants were asked to respond to the video (before introducing the statement), this topic was touched upon in most focus groups. In the Netherlands, virtually all times it was brought up people made clear they agreed with this portrayal, and happily reinforced it (apart from a single time a participant commented that 'we shouldn't overgeneralize'). More surprisingly, this image was also met with little resistance in Italy (and maybe partly explained by the fact that the portrayal concerned Greece more than Italy itself), although it was also not affirmed as eagerly as in the Netherlands. The French groups finally showed a bit more resistance

against this image, particularly the group of French financial professionals, where some participants were critical of the ‘stereotypes’ used to portray Greece. Altogether, this indicates the resonance of national media frames with the public (e.g. Joris et al., 2018; Müller et al., 2018), and it also clearly provides a frame to think about the extent to which people think solidarity is justified. If member states need financial aid because of their own doing rather than because of being disadvantaged by a shared monetary framework, this leads to a different assessment of whether these are entitled to support from others.

Extract 6.7 Dutch financial professionals

Steven: See, when I hear for example that they [in Greece] only tax houses that are finished, and people therefore choose not to repair their roof. Well... That’s an example. And that you don’t need to pay taxes then, that says something about their morals. And we simply have different morals than those people. And that’s also the case with other countries. No one who confronts France with being below the norms for years. And no one acts on it.

Henk: Yes, so that didn’t work with the euro. We haven’t managed to change the culture. And that’s not going to happen either.

Tom: But that’s also quite utopian, to think that a currency can bring that about. I do agree with what you say. You see, the euro has not brought equality. So in Southern European EU countries such as Greece, France and Italy, they don’t care about many rules that we agreed upon, and we have to suffer for that.

[...]

Steven: If you do something that is now allowed by the rules, especially when they have financial consequences... You understand such things when you’re Dutch. You have worked enough, or saved enough. But apparently they [the Greek] don’t understand it because they are only crying about having to cut their budgets. Then you have nothing left, but well, you did spend that money. And then we are consistent, but those Germans...

Extract 6.8 Italian financial professionals

Clemente: It is very hard for German politicians to explain to their taxpayers that the tax they pay is directed to help those lazy countries. So I think we need to find a convergence among our different habits, between those of the Spanish, Greeks, Italians and Portuguese and those of Germany, France, Nordic countries, the Netherlands and so on. And then if you

think about it, the things Europe asks to us Italians are not abstract things. It asks us: fight against tax evasion, reduction of public debt, reduction of corruption...

Lucia: Which are all things that we need!

Both of these factors underline one thing: the crucial role of the national lens in the way citizens position themselves on questions about European solidarity. It is not so much the frequency of pro and contra arguments that makes this clear, but the way people reason about solidarity, and the type of understanding they have of European cooperation. Countries differ in their perceptions of what European solidarity entails, and therefore also to what extent sharing wealth is justified, which in turn has important implications for the justification of the solidarity that the euro requires. As Sindic et al. (2016) argue, a crucial question for assessing the legitimacy of sharing wealth in a community is the extent to which people see solidarity as an obligation flowing from being in a community, rather than a case of altruism or charity. In their wording, the difference is that “charity is the ‘nice’ thing to do, whereas solidarity is the ‘normal’ thing to do. In more technical terms, as a norm, solidarity carries a dimension of obligation, as opposed to being merely desirable” (Sindic et al., 2019: 4). In other words, the question is to what extent people discuss solidarity as something that is part of the EU and the euro in particular, and follows as an obligation from deciding to share institutions; or whether they discuss it as something that is based on benevolence.

The findings then indicate that people’s perception of support for other European countries is closer to the latter, particularly in the Netherlands. In Italy and France, there are at least a couple of instances in which participants discuss solidarity as something that is part of being a European community. To be clear, it can be doubted how substantial this view really is, and to what extent it holds when perceived national interests are at stake (which will be discussed in more detail in section 6.4). Also, such discussions usually go together with remarks that countries should still need to deserve other’s solidarity, and can be met with others arguing against too much solidarity, for example when member states have caused their own troubles. Still, at least some notion exists of solidarity as a European matter – even if it is only a fragile one. In the Netherlands however, there is little mentioning of such a perspective. Even in the few instances in which people do bring up solidarity as a

European ideal, this is followed by an argument that this does not work in practice because there is no reciprocity, and it is always the North that has to pay for the South. Indeed, as made clear above, supporting others is discussed as a nice gesture to help those in need, but at the same time is likely to be at expenses of the finances of its own government. Being perceived as not likely to be returned, support is seen as a form of redistribution rather than a mutual insurance. It is telling in this sense that European solidarity is repeatedly discussed in the same breath with development aid. The contrast between the following extracts illustrates this.

Extract 6.9 French unemployed

Jean: In any case, the currency is there, as long as the currency is there and Europe is there, everything must be up to standard, and the countries that can help others must help others. Or back off, and here is the break-up of Europe.

[...]

Michael: But here all the areas, all the countries, are so intertwined and interdependent that if 1 goes, 2 goes, 3 goes, and if 5, 6, 7, 10 countries collapse it's the whole area that goes... We can save 1 country, 2 countries, 3, but now all our economies are linked so that it's a deck of cards... [Nadia approves] That's why it's better to be in solidarity I think.

Jean: Anyway, if it falls, it falls for everyone. It's like in the United States, if it falls, it falls for everyone.

Marika: It is better to be in solidarity then.

Jean: That's right, it's a chain.

Extract 6.10 Italian hairdressers

Pasquale: Being part of a group of united nations should not only bring economic advantages but it should give a different kind of security, meaning that I don't feel an odd duck. If I have a problem I know there's a group of people to whom I can ask "will you help me"? Because since I give a certain amount I would like to receive the same. So in my opinion, the statement is entirely correct, why shouldn't it be?

Gianni: Yes it should give a major stimulus [Bruno nods]. The help nations can give to each other in my opinion is when producing furniture decides to install a wood plantation in another state so that this one can cultivate and then transfer wood to the producing state getting profits on both sides. So this means that it's not fair if I grow wood, I build furniture and then I give you money even though you did nothing.

Pasquale, Giulia: No, no way!

Bruno: The fact that everybody becomes more productive is convenient for everybody but unfortunately it's not like that and it's always the same old story. As in Italy, in the north they work more than the south. Even if, seen from a different point of view, northern industries have been built by workers from the south. But what you say it's true, if I give you a hand then you need to work yourself as well. And if they roll up their sleeves, it eventually works out fine.

Extract 6.11 Dutch unemployed

Kimberly: It seems as if it always has to come from the Netherlands. I never hear something about...

Jamesha: Italy also pays.

Kimberly: Germany has paid for... It is always the Netherlands. The Netherlands really is the best boy in class.

Jamesha: But maybe that is because we live in the Netherlands and hear about what the Netherlands does. If you would live in Italy...

Kimberly: But you're supposed to be a European community, right, so then it would make sense if you also hear it from other countries.

Bram: Well Germany also pays.

Kimberly: Well yes that may be the case, but Belgium, the Benelux... It is difficult if the rich countries always have to take the blows for Europe.

Jamesha: And what do you get in return? Nothing.

Kimberly: It's in a never-ending story in that sense.

[...]

Kimberly: I mean I can also start about development aid, I do really find it great that people do that, because everyone is entitled to a dignified life, to a more or less normal life. But I do find that when you put so many billions in that, ehm... Why don't first do something for your own country? It might sound a bit egocentric and maybe a bit contradictory, but I find that when you look at the elderly people in nursing homes [in the Netherlands]. Ehhh... Schools, we mentioned it already, about students getting into debt while they haven't even started yet. Then I do think, like, this is nonsense.

In assessing what this means for the euro's legitimacy, an important question is to what extent people link the question of European solidarity to the euro itself – especially given that solidarity has been central in scholarly accounts of the euro's legitimacy. It is interesting then that the focus group participants mainly discuss the idea of European solidarity more broadly – and in coming to terms with the question of solidarity, the idea of solidarity in general. Indeed, the link to the euro is rarely made explicit. Participants do generally discuss the question of solidarity in

terms of the debt politics of the euro crisis, but in several instances also move on to talk about forms of solidarity that are not directly related to monetary union, such as solidarity in the migration crisis and solidarity in terms of military assistance, and discuss notions of solidarity in general, spending time on making sense of the concept. Indeed, some participants explicitly mention they do not understand why it is the euro in particular that brings up the question of solidarity.

Extract 6.12 Dutch unemployed

Truus: I find this question [question 4, regarding the euro and solidarity] a bit of a strange question. Because two things are put next to each other that are not related. Because European solidarity in principle has nothing to do with the euro, it has to do with the European Union. These things are continuously being mixed up here, and it annoys me a little.

The image appearing then is that people have difficulty in connecting the question of solidarity with the euro *itself*. People are aware that the question of solidarity was raised during the euro crisis, but rather than linking this to the currency union instead see it as a question that simply is part of European integration, despite the heated contestation of the euro during the euro crisis. Evidently, this fits the a-political understanding of the euro noted in the previous chapter. The euro itself first and foremost being perceived as a daily item, political questions like solidarity belong to a different category. This does not mean that peoples' evaluations of European solidarity are not important for the euro's legitimacy – on the contrary. As explained earlier, the question itself can still be mobilized, and a lack of support for solidarity can still jeopardize the euro. Yet, it does suggest that the question of solidarity currently plays a limited role in people's support for the euro, and decreases the likeliness of people themselves rejecting the euro because of the claims it makes on solidarity.

Altogether, these findings have two sides. On the one hand, the focus groups do not give an indication of a fundamental rejection of European solidarity as a part of being in the euro. Indeed, in general the notion of European solidarity does not receive overly much resistance. In the Italian and French groups, while arguments against solidarity do occur, such arguments rarely come down to participants themselves objecting to solidarity. Rather, they are a matter of participants expressing

understanding for others who might be against solidarity. In the Dutch groups, arguments against solidarity are more frequent and are made in a stronger fashion. At the same time, in the Netherlands too, such arguments do not necessarily mean people take a principled position against it, but rather that solidarity should not go too far. Moreover, arguing against solidarity does not automatically lead participants to a rejection for the euro. Indeed, this applies to all groups: because participants generally have difficulty in making the link between solidarity and the euro, even a possible lack of solidarity is no immediate danger to public support for the euro.

On the other hand however, the basis that exists for European solidarity is thin. More in particular, the lack of a feeling of community is a problem. This section has shown how national perspectives are central to discussing solidarity. There are important national differences in the types of arguments that are used and in how people see their own country, its relation with the EU, and how they see other countries. The type of understandings participants have and the frames they use fit to what one might expect on the basis of media narratives, with the Dutch having a self-perception of a creditor-country supporting financially troubled southern countries, Italians seeing themselves more as a creditor country – although the degree of understanding for the position of northern countries might be surprising – and French participants taking a more in-between position. More importantly, the question of solidarity is generally discussed in terms of perceived national interests. The problem then is that if solidarity extends in the first place to the national community, and help to people outside this community is seen as charity rather than solidarity, the basis for European solidarity is thin. Even if the question of political community will be addressed more substantially in 6.4, this suggests that the basis for real sacrifices is limited. And in that sense, so is the normative basis for the type of solidarity the euro fundamentally demands.

6.2. Autonomy

The euro brings up questions of autonomy because it affects the policy options of national governments. As outlined in chapter two, by subscribing to the institutional framework of the EMU, countries

committed themselves to a particular economic regime – one some would describe as one of ‘sound’ finance (Dyson, 2000: 649) – and as such ‘imitated Ulysses’ strategy of tying himself to the mast’ (Pérez-Díaz, 2013: 192). This became particularly clear during the euro crisis, when the bailouts to Southern European countries were dependent on acceptance of externally imposed austerity in the South, and were thus widely seen as an impediment of national autonomy, and for some, of national democracy (e.g. Streeck, 2012). In the case of the euro crisis, national autonomy was not challenged so much because of the rules of the Eurozone framework, but because of the ad-hoc policymaking pushed for by creditor countries, which was still enabled by the interdependence that the Eurozone entailed. In another fashion finally, one way in which people might link the euro to notions of autonomy and sovereignty has to do with the symbolic nature of the euro. Because of its symbolism, it can be perceived as representing European authority which enters into peoples’ private lives. Even if this is perhaps a less ‘rational’ way to make sense of the euro’s impact on national autonomy, the focus here of course is on how participants themselves discuss the link between both.

In the video clip shown preceding the discussion, it is European control of national budgeting that is emphasized. It explains that the euro might require something close to ‘a European minister of finance’, and then introduces Olli Rehn (European Commissioner for economic and monetary affairs and the euro when the video was recorded in 2014) as someone who has a role that comes close to such a position. This subsequently was followed by an interviewer posing the question whether this system does not go at expense of national sovereignty to Jeroen Dijsselbloem (then President of Eurogroup and Dutch finance minister), who argues in favor of having shared European budgetary rules and controlling role for European institutions. As such, it stimulates participants to think about the tension between the euro and national autonomy.

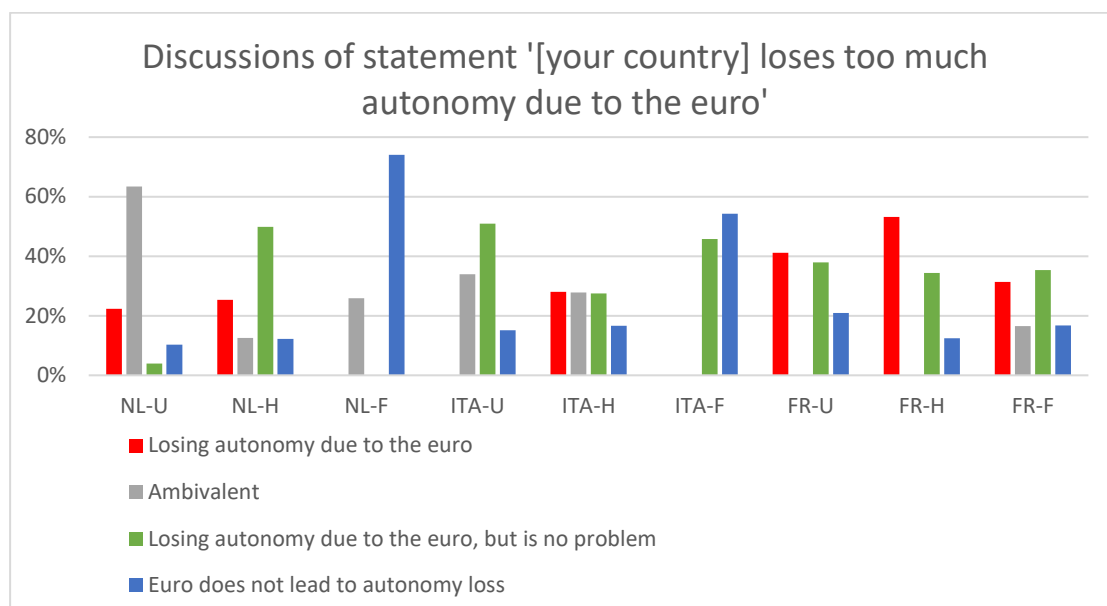


Figure 6.16: Discussions of statement on autonomy and the euro

In coding the focus group discussions, four broad categories of arguments emerged: people arguing that their country lost autonomy due to the euro (either too much or not¹⁵); people agreeing with this but arguing that this loss of autonomy is not a problem; people who argue that the euro does not lead to a loss of autonomy, and ambivalent arguments. Even more than with other codes, assigning the arguments to one of these categories is quite sensitive to interpretation, as the degree to which people find the loss of autonomy problematic or not is not always made entirely explicit, and some participants might agree about the effect of the euro on policy options but not on whether this should be called a loss of autonomy. Still, the results showing the occurrence of these categories in the focus groups (Figure 6.3) do provide a useful starting point for the analysis. Looking at the general overview, it is striking that on average, focus group discussions treat the euro as relatively unproblematic in terms of autonomy. Overall, only around 20% of arguments made is supportive of the claim that the euro costs too much autonomy, while almost 60% is either not or is combined with an argument on how this is not problematic.

¹⁵Note that participants claiming the euro led to a loss of national autonomy were in principle categorized in the first category ('Losing autonomy due to the euro'), also when they did not state to find this problematic, unless they explicitly mentioned that they felt this was *not* a problem. Likewise, statements in which people discussed the loss of autonomy due to European integration in general rather than the euro itself were still categorized here.

Indeed, even in the cases in which participants argue that the euro has led to autonomy loss, this is not necessarily a strongly held conviction that it was the euro in particular that is to blame. In many instances, it comes down more to a sense that in general, some national autonomy has been lost, and that the euro and the EU in general might be one of the reasons that this has happened.

Extract 6.13 Italian hairdressers

Pasquale: Economy is fundamental. Too much dependence leads to collapse. You need to have a little independence.

Bruno: I know, but our economic situation hasn't been caused just by those who govern now. It's a matter of debts that have been increasing and increasing over time.

Pasquale: But when we were independent our economy used to function.

Bruno: We have always had debts which are have increased and increased over time.

Pasquale: No wait, I am talking about of the period before Europe.

Bruno: We already had debts in Italy also before Europe.

Extract 6.14 French unemployed

Jean: Today France is not reforming, France is not governed [Michael: it's been like this for 30 years], for 30 years France has not been governed, it is governed by companies, those who do what they want in France today are the French CAC 40 companies.

[...]

Nadia: France is losing too much autonomy because of the euro. I mean, why didn't we have that in the days of the Francs, why didn't we have that speech? [referring to Jean]

Michael: Because we had de Gaulle.

Jean: Because we had people like...

Nadia: So I, for me, France is losing too much of its economy because of the euro

These exchanges are among the strongest examples of participants arguing that one's country has lost too much autonomy due to the euro. Still, it even here is notable that the link with the euro is not made very clear. There rather is a vague sense that 'things used to be better thirty years ago' – a view that is not always shared by the other participants. Much more often however people do not see the euro as problematic in terms of autonomy. Either they do not see why exactly the euro would lead to a loss of autonomy, or do they not see why this would be unjustified. In case of the former, even though several participants do

argue they feel their country has lost autonomy, this is rather because of the EU in general, or because of other processes that have decreased political agency such as the increasing power of corporates, or the policies one's own government has pursued. Not the euro itself.

Extract 6.15 Italian unemployed

Giovanni: We don't lose autonomy because of the euro but we lose because of a bad management of our money.

Silvia: Because of wrong investments.

Adriana: Yes but it's always with the euro.

Silvia: The euro has nothing to do with it.

Olivia: It's mainly due to the bad management of capital.

Giovanni: As he was saying, if there's one country that always worked well and there's another country that, although it is being helped, continues to overspend, then the first one could impose some rules to avoid a deterioration of the situation. But it's not due to the euro.

Silvia: It's not due to the euro.

Extract 6.16 Dutch unemployed

Truus: I think that autonomy, well... I don't think that you lose your independence as a country... Well it of course is a bit of an odd word in this context. If you would say the Netherlands is losing too much sovereignty due to the EU, I would have said yes. But this sentence doesn't make sense.

Extract 6.17 French unemployed

Michael: But I don't think it has anything to do with the euro.

Jean: Yes for me it has nothing to do with it, I'm telling you, it's not a thing related to the euro, France doesn't lose autonomy because of the Euro. It loses autonomy because of its own policy.

Other participants do see an explicit link between the euro and national autonomy – most often because of the budgetary rules of the EMU or because of a more general sense that 'being together with many other countries by definition will limit autonomy in some ways' – but do not see this as problematic. These participants do not see the EMU's framework as an unjustified limitation of national sovereignty because member states have agreed to these rules themselves, or because these rules are not enforced anyway, or because the rules do not concern the substance of public policies but only concern general limits to budgets.

Extract 6.18 French financial professionals

Sophie: Losing autonomy yes, it has to be, well, it makes sense... But *too much* autonomy...

Charles: Really, do you think we have lost autonomy?

Loïc: It's like a person getting married, you're not going to behave the way you do when you're single.

Sophie: Yes, but after that, is it something good or bad, that's the question.

Loïc: You have another way of working when you are with 27, although in the Eurozone we are less than that.

Charles: I feel like we lost some...

Loïc: When you are married you lose autonomy but you have more ability to...

Jean-François: I wouldn't say that it's too much that we've lost.

Extract 6.19 Italian financial professionals

Clemente: When someone says "Europe forces us" I always answer 'no one actually forced Italy, with a gun on its head, to sign those agreements'. They have been freely signed by all 27 EU member states.

Carlo: [nods]

Flavio: They have been accepted.

It is telling that participants hardly discuss the euro's effect on autonomy beyond these budgetary rules. Participants could potentially also bring up other items, such as the institutional transfer of authority the euro entails or the politics of the euro crisis. Such connections however are hardly made. The ECB is not mentioned at all (although two Italian groups do mention Draghi), and other institutions or decision makers are not central in the discussions either. This to some extent might be explained by this theme also being central in the video clip. At the same time, the video also explicitly brought up the role of Commissioner Olli Rehn and the idea of a 'European minister of finance'. The fact that such themes nevertheless were not discussed much, as well as the difficulty participants generally had in connecting the euro to the question of autonomy, fits into the a-political perception of euro. Indeed, discussing autonomy, participants on several occasions end up talking about European integration in general rather than the euro, and also deviated from talking about the euro itself to talk about how the agricultural sector is affected by rules made in Brussels, or how they would mind the loss of their national culture.

Extract 6.20 Dutch unemployed

Kimberly: But what I'm wondering about: who makes those rules? I mean, I'm not politically oriented at all...

Bram: Well these rules have been made by the heads of government in the European parliament.

Naomi: All together right?

[...]

Kimberly: But who is checking on him then? I'm sorry, but who is rapping him on the knuckles? This Olli uh... What I mean is, he makes those... Because from the Netherlands and Belgium and all these countries he receives all these [budget] lists, and he says this one is good, this one is good, but who is checking on him?

Naomi: There always has to be someone on top right.

Bram: He's still in the European Parliament.

Kimberly: Yes okay, but well, the Netherlands does have to pay the money to the one who is in charge, the big banker.

This then is a general picture of how focus group participants see the relation between the euro and autonomy. Still, there are relevant differences between groups as well. The quantitative representation of the coded data in Figure 6.3 already gives an indication of these patterns. In terms of class differences, it suggests the euro's effect on autonomy is seen as less problematic in groups of financial professionals. And indeed, these appears to be grounded in financial professionals generally being more understanding or appreciative of the EMU's budgetary rules. The discussions displayed in extracts 6.19, 6.20 are illustrative of that (just as extract 6.27 below fits into this pattern as well). Again however, it are particularly the national differences that appear relevant. As Table 6.1 shows - confirming what Figure 6.3 already suggested - it is especially in the French groups that people feel autonomy is being lost due to the euro.

Table 6.5: Times focus group participants mention the words ‘autonomy’, ‘sovereign’ and ‘independence’ per group¹⁶

	Autonomy	Sovereignty	Independence	Sum
NL-U	0	4	13	17
NL-H	0	0	8	8
NL-F	0	7	1	8
ITA-U	11	1	0	12
ITA-H	8	0	3	11
ITA-F	3	2	0	5
FR-U	23	0	0	23
FR-H	37	6	3	46
FR-F	10	3	1	14

In the French groups, it is striking that the value of autonomy appears to be seen as more important than in the other groups. Besides the higher occurrence of arguments that the euro has led to a loss of autonomy, this also appears from the fact that the issue of autonomy is also simply discussed more in the French groups. As Table 6.1 shows, the words autonomy, sovereignty and national independence are mentioned most in the French groups, which indicates the salience of the topic. Indeed, the topic is also brought up *outside* question 5 – the question in which it was explicitly mentioned – suggesting that it has a relevance to French participants that makes them talk about it without being explicitly asked to do so. This appears to have to do more with French participants caring about the value of autonomy than with their views on the euro in particular – indeed, participants generally still argue that the loss of autonomy is not the fault so much of the euro itself. Often, the feeling of a loss of autonomy is coupled to sense of French ‘declinism’: a feeling that France is declining in terms of its standing in the world, the quality of its institutions and the quality of life in general. This decline is attributed to more general processes, such as the increasing power of corporations, globalization, and the emergence of a political elite that does not care about the common citizens need – the types of processes one might refer to as ‘TINA politics’. For some, the euro is part of these processes (as will be further discussed in the next chapter), and therefore also has contributed to France’s loss of autonomy. Extract 6.15 was already illustrative of this feeling, and so is extract 6.21. Extract 6.22 shows one of

¹⁶ Absolute number of mentions. Variations on the words (‘autonomous’, ‘sovereign’ and ‘independent’) are also included.

the instances in which French participants do still attempt to make a more explicit connection between European integration and the loss of autonomy – although the argument still concerns the EU in general more than the euro specifically.

Extract 6.21 French unemployed

- Jean: We don't realize it but France is very impoverished. France is over-indebted. And the system...
- Michael: Then you will agree with me, it's true that 10 years ago we said it already, 15 years ago we said it already, except...
- Jean: It's getting worse and worse.
- Nadia: It's getting worse and worse, so autonomy is getting worse and worse, France is losing, France is losing.
- Jean: For me it's losing autonomy in one way. And our social system, we're losing it. And we're pulling, we're pulling...
- Michael: But I think if there was no euro it would be the same.

Extract 6.22 French hairdressers

- Tristan: Sorry, but France is losing her autonomy, it's clear, it's forced, it's the sum of being together, of being in a community.
- Lorraine: At the same time, European power, at least the universal power, the communitarian power, I have the impression that it is a pipe dream, that it doesn't really exist. In any case there are supranational powers on a global scale, there is a lot of counter-power, the huge CAC40 companies, et cetera, which have more power than some states.
- Tristan: Clearly, the thing is that Europe is about controllers from other countries. Technocratic Europe, and indeed it is the law of the market, it is the market that makes Europe work.
- Lorraine: But finally beyond the simple control of "you stay, you go out, you come in and we want you more" I don't have the impression that the European authorities have real power. While there is a political power, yes, but since we are really talking about the euro, so a purely financial power, I don't have the impression that there is any impact... or that there is a loss of autonomy against Germany, for example.

In the Italian focus groups in contrast, the value of national of autonomy has much less importance. On the contrary, several participants even argue that a loss of autonomy caused by EU interventions should be seen as a good thing for the country, because it would force its government to act in a more responsible way. In other words, the pattern detected in section 6.1 continues here: a perception of the low abilities of its national government supports a perception that European cooperation in principle

is useful rather than invasive. This pattern recurs very clearly in all Italian groups. These findings should not be read as indicating that Italians do not care about national autonomy at all. For example, focus group participants still express a certain pride about the ‘Italian way’ of doing things (indeed, there are a few instances of participants being afraid of losing too much autonomy to the euro as well, see for example extract 6.14). Moreover, it should be reminded that earlier research (based on a survey experiment) has found that Italian support for the euro does decrease in the hypothetical situation that staying in the euro is dependent on accepting externally imposed austerity, demanding a set of (serious) policy changes¹⁷ (Baccaro et al., 2021). However, more than showing that Italians do not care about national sovereignty at all, or that they would accept *any* type of European policy intervention, the relevance of this finding is that it shows how the national context impacts understandings of autonomy: lower ‘self-esteem’ leads to a more welcoming view of policy making at the European level. And for this finding, there are enough reasons to think it plausible that it fits to a broader Italian pattern. For example, earlier research too has found that lower trust in national governments increases support for European integration (e.g. Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000), just as this observation fits to the paradoxical survey finding brought up in chapter four that even though trust in the EU is relatively low in Italy, the question ‘does Europe need more integration?’ is answered rather positively (EUpinions, 2021). The following exchanges

¹⁷ In this light, it might of course be possible that given the non-representative nature of focus groups, autonomy is valued less in these groups than in Italy on average. However, there are also other explanations possible that make that focus group results could be consistent with the results of Baccaro and colleagues (2021). One is that those who do change their opinion on the euro in the survey experiment are part of a group that in the focus groups is represented by those that *do* see some problem in the euro’s effect on autonomy. Moreover, the question central in the focus groups (whether the Eurozone framework in its *current* form leads to too much loss of national autonomy) is rather different from the question asked in this survey experiment (which asks about euro support in the hypothetical situation that staying in Eurozone requires rather serious policy changes – the treatment used in the survey talks about ‘making it easier for companies to fire employees, cutting public expenditures (e.g., pension cuts, health care cuts, etc.), increasing taxes (both income taxes and value-added taxes), privatizing state assets, and introducing a haircut on savings in troubled banks’ (online appendix, p. 3)).

(just as earlier extract 6.16) illustrate this link between the Italian self-perception and the evaluation of questions of autonomy.

Extract 6.23 Italian financial professionals

- Lucia: I think Italy has even too much autonomy.
Carlo: Absolutely not [referring to the statement].
Stefano: Seen the recent years, I think definitely not [referring to the statement].
Clemente: I think, but maybe I am wrong, that no European country has ever opposed any policy addresses to reduction of public debt, improvement of fiscal behavior and so on. Basically, in my opinion, what Europe demands us, is just to take a serious commitment that goes in one precise direction.
Stefano, Lucia, Carlo: [nod]
Carlo: A commitment that has to be respected.

Extract 6.24 Italian unemployed

- Tommaso: No because if you say: "Italy loses autonomy" I say: "yes"! And I also think it's a positive thing. But if you say "Italy loses too much autonomy" then I say: "no"! because I don't think it loses too much autonomy, on the contrary more it loses better it is.
Giovanni: If that's the situation... [laughs]
Olivia: If that's the situation it's better to take any autonomy away (laughs)
Tommaso: Then if we talk about how we spend money, until the 70s and 80s the ministry of postal services and communication was the most desirable one since there was direct hiring. So when the minister from Abruzzo, for example, was elected as minister of communication, he hired half Abruzzo and he gained electoral approval. Today this means that if a person receives the citizenship income - which in general it would be right to have a subsidy if I am unemployed - he or she receives the money and so he or she votes for that person [who made the citizenship income possible] even if this is going be paid for by the state services or by the next generation. People don't care! Unfortunately it goes like this: 'I voted for him, I get the money and then someone is going pay for me...'
Giovanni: This is something that we have has since ages...
Tommaso: If this is autonomy, it's suicide, it's better to lose it!
Giovanni: With such autonomy we do nothing...

In the Netherlands finally, the value of national autonomy clashes with the importance participants attach to shared rules. In the discussions, it is the latter that dominates. The perception is that the Eurozone's budgetary rules are voluntarily agreed to by all member states, and moreover are justified because they are sensible (without these rules, markets would

demand corrections anyway) and do not concern policy choices. This emphasis on rules might be part of the Dutch cultural repertoire as a country whose economic thinking is shaped by a protestant ethic (e.g. Staveren, 2007), as well as fitting to the perceived self-interest. After all, a perception shared by most Dutch participants is that the Netherlands is the 'best pupil' in the class that is always carefully following rules, while others are not which forces the Netherlands to support these other countries. This does not mean the Dutch participants do not care about national autonomy. Fitting to their positive self-perception, they do – although the value is not as central as in France. Indeed, some participants mention that they would find more substantial policy recommendations coming from Brussels problematic, while others mention they fear the loss of their national identity. However, in this particular case, they generally do not see how complying with mutually agreed on rules limits national autonomy, and in particular do not see how the Netherlands itself would be hurt by this.

Extract 6.25 Dutch hairdressers

Stephanie: Well, so I find this a really difficult question. I do not know what the Netherlands would want to invest in and in what aspects the Netherlands is being limited. So I don't really notice anything in terms of limitations, so therefore I don't have an answer.

[...]

Sofia: In my view our autonomy is not being restricted.

Moderator: And why not?

Sofia: Well, why would it be? The Netherlands just continues to do its thing. For the rest I have no idea, but we're doing quite fine. That is how I experience it.

Extract 6.26 Dutch financial professionals

Tom: I think you should see it like this, that there is a certain uniformity of rules. You stick to that 3%, and how you get to this 3% is up to yourself. And when you cross it...

Steven: Yes, that what he says. You do not surrender sovereignty, you have to make choices.

Henk: Exactly, you're not surrendering as long as you satisfy the EU's conditions.

Steven: Exactly.

Henk: So within these 3% you can spend whatever you want, as long as you don't spend more than this 3% [...] These rules have been agreed on of course and if everyone sticks to them than no one has anything to

do with a European minister of finance. He is a sort of referee who tells you to keep with the norms so that's fine. But I think that a European minister of finance who gains more power over local cash flows, that's something no one wants.

Altogether then, this section provides little evidence of the euro being seen as problematic in terms of autonomy. It is important to note that there are substantial differences, mostly clustered along national lines, in how people discuss the issue of autonomy. In the French focus groups, the value of autonomy carries more weight – even if more than to the euro itself, participants connect it to more general processes of globalization and national decline. In Italy, national autonomy is not discussed as a very important value, notably because of the negative perception Italians have of their national government, and therefore the euro's possible effect on national autonomy is not seen as particularly problematic. Dutch participants care more about autonomy, but also about having a strong regulatory framework in place, and the latter weighs heavier in the discussions. At the same time however, something participants from all countries share is that it is reasonable to have certain rules in place. Likewise, the groups are similar in the sense that participants have difficulty in connecting the euro with issues of autonomy in the first place. Not only because budgetary rules are seen as reasonable, but also because participants hardly make a connection between the euro and a regulatory framework themselves in the first place. Even when informed that the euro does come with such a framework then, this framework is not understood as substantially affecting national autonomy.

Therefore, the reasoning here is largely compatible with what the euro demands. The focus groups provide little reason why people would reject the euro on grounds of its effect on national autonomy. Importantly however, this is also because the only connection participants make between the euro is that of rules – the topic the video clip provided them with. The link with more substantial consequences, such as the austerity imposed during the euro crisis, is rarely made. Therefore, the question does remain whether people's view on the euro and autonomy is tenable under any circumstance? Especially the French and Dutch groups show a sensitivity to national autonomy that could test where people see the euro's consequences as justifiable. The next section pursues this further.

6.3. Interdependence and external interventions

The purpose of this third section is to put these questions in a broader perspective, and probe them more into depth. With the introductory video clip preceding it, the sixth question turned to the democratic character of the euro crisis politics, emphasizing the perspective of Southern Europe. It features Yannis Varoufakis (ex-Greek Minister of Finance) explaining why he sees the EU's response to the euro crisis as 'a major affront to European democracy' as it imposed the economic policy of austerity on Greece, followed by Wolfgang Streeck criticizing the role of countries like the Netherlands and Germany, which he describes as a case of northern countries dominating the South by forcing them to reform. After the video, participants were asked to discuss the statement ('Eurozone countries with economic problems should be obliged to cut public spending if they otherwise endanger the Eurozone as a whole').

As such, the sixth question stimulates participants to discuss the question of national autonomy and the consequences of interdependence from a different perspective. On the one hand, it makes the question more concrete by explicating how Eurozone membership sometimes entails tradeoffs between autonomy, mutual responsibility and European interference. On the other hand, it problematizes the notion of autonomy further by bringing in the perspective of Greece, rather than of participants' own country. While notions of autonomy and solidarity were brought up in a more neutral fashion in the previous questions, this question brings up a stronger normative perspective that emphasizes how some member states can see their democratic sovereignty compromised by membership of the Eurozone. In this way, it provides us with better insight into public perceptions of questions of autonomy, as well the stability of people's evaluations.

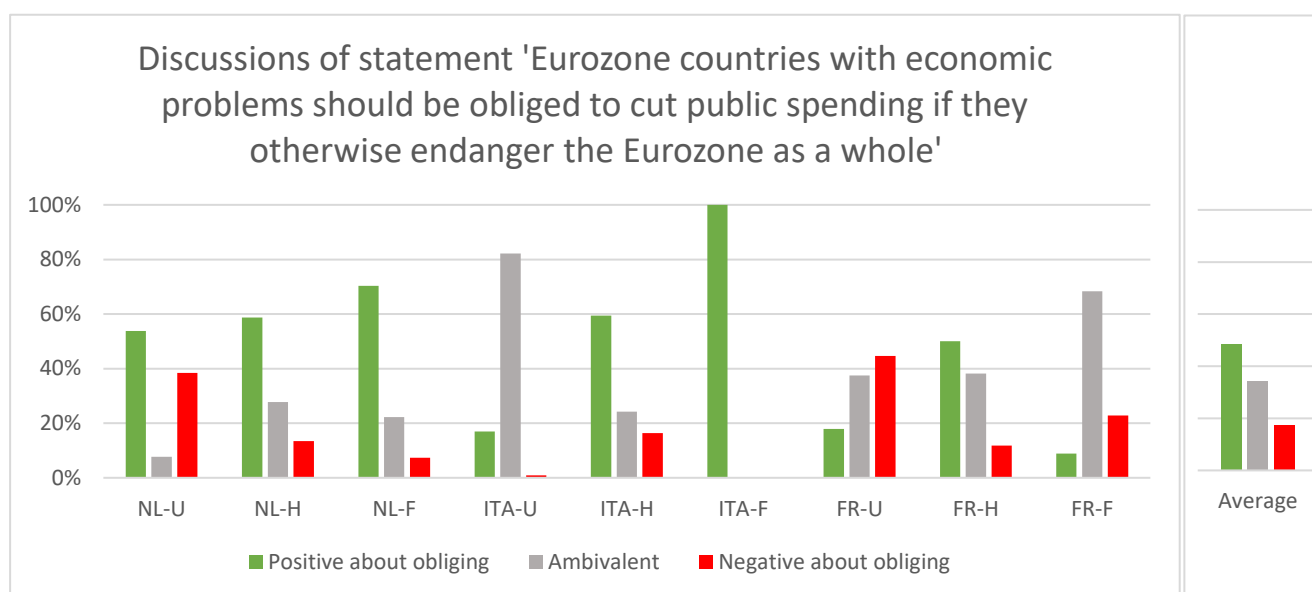


Figure 6.17: Discussions of obliging countries in the Eurozone to cut public spending

Comparing the discussions on this statement to the previous one on autonomy, the positions taken in the different groups are generally consistent. Figure 6.4 shows that in those groups that did not see the euro as problematic in terms of autonomy (the Dutch hairdressers and financial professionals, the Italian unemployed and financial professionals), participants are also less likely to see a problem in obliging member states to cut their public spending in case their economic problems endanger the Eurozone. Likewise, those groups that did discuss the euro more as coming at the expense of national autonomy (notably the French groups) are also less positive about a European enforcement of national budget cuts (the only exception to this being the French group of hairdressers). Looking at the occurrence of pro and contra arguments in general, discussions here also mirror those on question five in the sense that arguments in favor of the statement occur more frequently than those against it (48% against 17%), fitting sentiments about the euro's effect on autonomy in the previous question.

Likewise, among the arguments participants use to justify their positions, several are similar to those in the previous question. People who agree with the statement argue that budget cuts are justified because it is part of what member states agreed to when entering into a currency union with each other, that it can simply be necessary to cut public spending when

countries' financial positions are at risk, and some argue that such external constraints can be in the interest of indebted countries too.

Extract 6.27 Italian unemployed

Giovanni: I think that when you reach such a level, that is to say when you endanger the entire Eurozone, then it means you didn't understand how it works.

Beatrice: Or you didn't want to understand...

Giovanni: Greece has had its bad governments so it's right that at some point someone spoke and said "stop, now you need to cut public spending". Of course without cutting essential services, but still, if you have 300 state employees and you need 150 you cut half.

Extract 6.28 Italian financial professionals

Clemente: I do not agree on the term used in the video as "punishing measures". They are not punishing measures, it's just a call to respect the rules.

Flavio: It's just wrong communication.

Those arguing against the statement on the other side either do so by emphasizing the autonomy of those countries that are forced to cut public spending, or by criticizing the way such policies are imposed by other countries. What is interesting about this latter argument is that it often is not so much the European framework of rules that is criticized, but rather northern dominance. Indeed, people argue that demands to cut public spending should be based on a clear European framework, and not on the arbitrary preferences of individual countries – thus responding to the narrative laid out in the video clip.

Extract 6.29 French hairdressers

Lorraine: But then it's very violent. What he said about Germany going to Greece and imposing its own model, which is once again cultural. And I think it's just colonizing behavior.

Tristan: Economically colonist.

Lorraine: Yes, it's colonizing behavior, to come and use your power in this way.

Karim: We come back to logic. You know that in the whole world, when we give you something, we don't give it to you without getting into management, or to influence either politically or... There's nothing for free.

Extract 6.30 Dutch hairdressers

Yagmur: I do not think countries should be able to oblige each other to cut public spending, I think that the EU should be doing that. And not that countries can do it, just like that.

Stephanie: Yes, countries cannot boss each, because that is exactly the thing, right... Everyone is equal. Otherwise you don't feel equal, like eh, yeah... [...] Yes, then the EU as a whole can impose something I think. But not one country to the other.

The category of ambivalence finally is not only indicative of a form of doubt or hesitance, but – as in section 6.1 – also shows how large parts of the discussions concern sense making, and are about giving meaning to the relevant concepts, and also refer to instances in which people argue that 'it depends'. As the question left several important concepts open for interpretation – what exactly does 'endangering' mean, what type of budget cuts exactly are demanded? – participants discussed their understanding of these concepts. In doing so, participants for example argued that demanded cuts in public spending 'are acceptable as long as they focus on the waste of money', but not when they concern important things like health care. In the same vein, people discuss what level of 'endangering' is sufficient for obliging other countries – not always leading to clear conclusions. Also, participants bring up that demanding cuts in public spending is only acceptable when it happens in the 'right way', when the actor is justified (i.e. it is the EU rather than individual countries), and when it is 'in everyone's interest', rather than just that of a few dominant countries.

Extract 6.31 Italian hairdressers

Pasquale: It depends on where you start and where you want to go, because we all have different situations. So, in my opinion this statement is a little too general because it's too easy to say to a country "now you change everything, and you do as I want". If a country is in trouble, what do you do? You cut on health? Education? How they live?

Bruno: Waste of money should be cut.

Giulia: They should cut the redundancies.

Bruno: They should cut the waste of money absolutely.

Pasquale: Yes I understand, but it does mean to shake up too many things.

Giulia: Yes but they receive help... So they should do it.

Pasquale: But it's not easy to do

Extract 6.32 Dutch unemployed

Naomi: They can address each other about such things, I think, what we just saw... But obliging is a heavy word I think. [The rest agrees]

Truus: But these obligations to cut public spending did not come from countries, right, didn't they come from the European bank? It is the

bank who says you have to cut spending, you have received money from us.

Bram: Well, also from countries. But here it explicitly says that countries can address each other.

Bianca: I find it a really difficult issue. Because in fact this is how all of life goes. Exactly everything goes like this.

Finally, the country differences too fit into the pattern of the previous questions. In the Dutch groups, the idea dominates that the South is responsible for its own troubles. As the Netherlands is perceived as trying to stick to the Eurozone's rules, it is fair to ask other countries for sacrifices if they do not and in doing so endanger the Eurozone. What adds to this is that Dutch participants generally have a quite benevolent perception of what budget cuts entail, often seeing them as necessary anyway, meaning urging countries to make them is a matter of good advice. While several participants do express understanding for the position in which Greece finds itself, and some do mention that external interventions would not be appreciated in the Netherlands either, the argument that demanding cuts in public spending is justified dominates. In the Italian groups, European interventions are discussed as in principle unproblematic. More than taking a stance against them, or discussing northern dominance as a problem, the Italian groups discuss what type of cuts in public spending are justified (those focusing on the waste of money) and in which circumstances they are justified (when the policies of the country in question is irresponsible). In the French groups finally, participants have slightly more problems with the statement. As can be observed in Figure 6.4, this translates particularly into ambivalent arguments. On the one hand, participants feel that cuts in public spending might sometimes be necessary, but on the other hand, they express a feeling that Greece was treated in an unjustified manner, and the European response was a matter of dominance. In addition, what is striking in the French groups is that the topic of austerity leads to more general discussions about what has gone wrong with public governance, bringing participants to discussions about more general sentiment of political discontent and national decline.

Extract 6.33 French unemployed

Michael: Even cutting public spending would not be enough. I think that's what is also being asked of France, France has managed for I don't know how long to do without it, but France is exploding. The 3% rigor is exceeded every year.

- Rachida: Sometimes I ask myself a silly question, why are we here? Is it because politicians have stolen too much money from the coffers? Or is it us?
- Jean: No, it's because they haven't done their job, they have to make reforms...
- Rachida: Or because we, citizens of the French people.
- Michael: But we have a lot of things here, school is free for everyone, the...

Jean: We in France still work with the civil code, which Napoleon wrote 200 years ago, I mean that we here in... France is a system that is very, very heavy with people who have not adapted. All countries have adapted, except us.

Rather than only confirming the results from the previous section however, what makes the discussions on this statement particularly interesting is that they also show alterations, and as such deepen the earlier findings. This is particularly so because, as mentioned, a substantial part of the discussions here is about making sense of the topic rather than giving pre-existing opinions about it. In other words, participants do not discuss pre-existing attitudes, but rather try to come to terms with the statement on the spot, generally by mentioning the different sides there are to the issue, and suggesting how these could be balanced. In line with this, participants frequently rely on metaphors in order to find a way to deal with normative issue at stake, and to come to terms with the question.

Such instances of sense making then are interesting particularly because they suggest there is a certain instability to participants' opinions, and because they indicate what considerations interact with each other to explain this instability. One item that is interesting, since it suggests an ambivalence in normative positioning, is participants expressing the feeling that it should be a European authority that determines what rules apply and when particular demands for cuts in public spending are legitimate. In earlier instances, participants generally were wary of European authority – even if most did not connect it to the euro itself (for example, the earlier extracts 6.16 and 6.20 give a hint of this), particularly when it concerned European interventions inside their own countries. However, once the issue of interdependence is raised together with criticism of dominance of individual member states, these same participants promptly argue for a particular form of European authority. Extract 6.34 is illustrative of this, just as was the previous extract 6.30. Of course, it remains to be seen if participants would be as accepting of European authority when it would

concern European interventions in their own country. Still, the change in opinions because of the change of perspective is notable.

Extract 6.34 French unemployed

Bertrand: One thing that bothers me is when they say the Eurozone would have to. Right away it makes me think of someone else's interference [Nadia: being forced], and it bothers me, and I tell myself that I'm stupid to think like that because the Eurozone are not foreigners, it's a common project, they're not there to harm people in a country. The method of setting the same bar for everyone, I think it sucks, but to say it's the Eurozone... In the video they said the Dutch and the Germans come to annoy the Greeks. Which Dutch and which Germans? And why them? Why are the Dutch and Germans better? It is the people of the European government who must bother them.

Jean: Yes, you're right. It's the European community because they don't have enough power. The problem of the European assembly is that they have no power. So today they are working on little things like agriculture, 2, 3 little laws, they are trying to put back, but they have no power... They don't have the power to go and see a country.

Another, more direct example of the unstable character of opinions can be found in Dutch participants reconsidering their view on the Greek case after having seen the video clip. For several participants, seeing the video appears to have the effect of making them realize another perspective exists as well – as extract 6.35 and 6.36 indicate – and perhaps earlier opinions were not fully informed after all. In the focus groups, this realization does not directly lead to an actual attitudinal turnaround in the sense that participants now take a stance against the EMU framework. Yet, it does make several participants question their previous arguments, and in this way hints at an instability of opinions.

Extract 6.35 Dutch unemployed

Naomi: I'm thinking, I do find it quite hard to see how they [the Greek] have to adapt while... They just want to maintain their own authenticity, I do find that hard. They are talking about independence, they lose it entirely, precisely because of these rules.

[Truus, Naomi and Bianca talk at the same time]

Naomi: That it is so imposed... And what he says, that Germany and the Netherlands say 'you must become like us'.

Truus: Yes, but you can't simply...

Naomi: No but that is precisely what the Netherlands doesn't want.

Truus: Yes and everybody here then says 'this and that has become more expensive...' But imagine you live in Greece and you experience this times a thousand. That's how they have experienced it.

[...]

Bram: Well I do find it quite something that you, like the Netherlands, eh... Well that you're so strict towards another country.

Naomi: Maybe what the previous man said, you actually want Greece to stay like Greece and the Netherlands to stay like the Netherlands. And that there is a large Europe and no distinction between countries does sound a bit scary.

Extract 6.36 Dutch financial professionals

Henk: Yes, well, it is true that it is like he says, the Germans and the Dutch who just go and tell them that they have to behave like we do. That's what it comes down to and that doesn't feel right for the Greeks.

Tom: This doesn't only go for the Greeks, but fits to a broader pattern. Just go to Iraq and Afghanistan and say 'you become a democracy now.' Because we think this is good for you.

Henk: Yes.

What then does this tell us? The first part of this section confirmed the results of the previous section: focus group participants are generally not strongly opposing the EMU framework – at least not in a more abstract sense – and do not think it makes unjustified claims on national autonomy. At the same time, the results here show how such stances are susceptible to the use of particular frames, and are highly dependent on perceptions of what is at stake. While other methods (such as survey experiments) would be needed to generalize such findings, and to quantify to what extent particular frames can lead to actual attitudinal change, this highlights that people's positioning towards the politics of the euro is far from set in stone. While being shaped along national and to a lesser extent social lines, understandings of what is at stake are malleable, and therefore stances are too. Evidently, this can go both ways. While the video clip used here has the effect of making participants – in this case the Dutch ones – more understanding of Greece, other frames can have an opposite effect as well. The point however remains that opinions are not predetermined.

And this latter point potentially has important implications for the first. Even if peoples' normative reasoning in principle is in line with what the euro demands, this is no guarantee that this will remain so, because their reasoning is so dependent on the particular understanding they have of

the situation. Again, a particularly crucial question is what happens if it is people's own national government that is asked to make cuts in its public spending, and the public debate makes clear how this affects the everyday lives of citizens. This specific question was not asked during the focus groups, and while some discussions do hint that this would be substantially more problematic, more research into this question is needed. But the focus group data do allow us to probe the notion of community that underlies people's reasoning, which is a crucial basis for understanding the potential of public stances.

6.4. Notions of community: a European 'we'?

So far, this chapter concerns responses to explicit statements. Are people in favor of solidarity or not, do they find that the euro costs too much autonomy? While these discussions provide several useful insights, a particularly beneficial aspect of focus groups is that they allow us to also move beyond the particular stances taken, and enable us to look at the tacit assumptions underlying such stances, thus helping us understand better the structural grounds underlying such answers. For while specific arguments can be made up on the spot and are often influenced by contingent factors such as the group dynamics, there are more enduring grounds that underlie such arguments, and that are arguably at least as consequential in terms of legitimacy as particular pro- or contra stances.

One of the most important dimensions in this respect is the dimension of feelings of community. After all, all legitimacy issues touched upon here are related to the question how people perceive the collective linked to the project of the euro. A sense of community is central for solidarity, as engaging in redistributive policy requires a sense of allegiance and loyalty (e.g. Risse 2014), meaning a feeling of community is required for this redistribution to be perceived as democratically legitimate (Scharpf, 2013). Likewise, accepting limitations on autonomy requires – as a minimum – that people have the perception of sharing problems with citizens from other member states that require political addressing beyond the nation state (e.g. White, 2011). The type of community needed for the politics of the euro to be legitimate can be debated (as briefly touched upon in 2.1.3), and the purpose here is not to delve into that debate. But in line with argument made in chapter two, it seems fairly uncontroversial to say that

for the euro to be legitimate, there should be enough allegiance to accept the interdependence it entails and the ensuing consequences in terms of policy making. As some have argued, people also need to see the euro as a shared enterprise: the euro needs to be “presented and debated as a common European project” (Risse, 2013: 119), and the issues it gives rise to need to be seen as ‘a matter of common European concern’ (ibid.).

What this section therefore looks at is the extent to which people see the euro as a common European project and relate the Eurozone to a ‘we’, rather than exclusively perceiving debates around the euro’s politics in terms of a national ‘we’ versus other national ‘theys’. Is there any evidence of a sense of a European community here? What makes focus groups useful in this regard is that they, rather than only looking at which categories people *say* to prefer, also allow us to look at more implicit utterings revealing (taken for granted) perceptions of community. In the words of White, it might be fruitful to not just look for “‘identity’ in the supposed mental attributes of individuals”, but look “instead at that which is collectively and observably taken for granted” (2009: 700). This then is something that focus groups enable us to do. As Cramer Walsh put it, “when people talk about political issues, they are relating to each other with the aid of social identities. Thus, they are neither interacting entirely as individuals nor as members of the community as a whole. Instead, through their interaction, they are collectively defining who constitute ‘one of us’” (2004: 52).

And indeed, this is what focus group participants continuously do, even if they often do so in implicit and subtle ways. A particularly revealing way in which this happens are moments when participants use words like ‘we’ and ‘us’, as well as ‘they’ and ‘them’. While the meaning of these words is often left implicit, it is precisely because of this that they show which taken for granted perceptions of community underlie participants’ reasoning. This section therefore maps the occurrence of these terms in the focus groups, and looks at which groups they refer to.

Table 6.6: Occurrence of the terms ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ in the focus groups.

	Q1		Q2		Q3		Q4		Q5		Q6		Total	
NL-U	5	0,27%	2	0,47%	8	0,39%	37	1,45%	24	1,37%	17	0,90%	93	0,81%
NL-H	0	0,00%	3	1,20%	4	0,66%	26	1,06%	12	1,26%	12	0,77%	57	0,83%
NL-F	11	0,58%	12	0,79%	29	1,79%	24	1,40%	18	1,23%	42	2,59%	136	1,40%
ITA-U	16	0,92%	5	0,88%	56	1,63%	6	0,57%	36	3,06%	18	1,18%	137	1,37%
ITA-H	27	2,20%	23	1,35%	6	0,67%	3	0,28%	57	2,62%	8	0,57%	124	1,28%
ITA-F	50	3,96%	48	2,94%	23	1,52%	28	3,01%	36	2,14%	13	2,05%	198	2,60%
FR-U	53	2,07%	34	2,05%	96	2,10%	55	1,82%	71	2,27%	42	1,83%	351	2,02%
FR-H	30	2,53%	17	1,73%	66	1,43%	53	3,69%	45	2,11%	74	3,06%	285	2,43%
FR-F	36	2,00%	30	1,27%	59	1,63%	66	2,59%	21	2,09%	44	2,59%	256	2,03%
Sum	228	1,61%	174	1,41%	347	1,31%	298	1,76%	320	2,02%	270	1,73%		

Left in the columns the absolute count, right this count as a percentage of the total amount of words spoken during the question. The total percentages are colored by value (darker is higher). The total amount of occurrences is 1637 (95 ‘our’, 154 ‘us’, 1388 ‘we’).

As a start, it is useful to have an overview of the usage of these words. Table 6.2 provides such an overview, showing all utterances of the words ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ in the focus groups. As the table shows, participants use these words relatively more in the discussions on normative items (question 4-6), suggesting that in normative discussions on topics like solidarity and autonomy, the demarcation of communities becomes more relevant for participants, and that group reasoning has a more important role in people’s reasoning about such issues. In addition, the table shows how these words occur more in the French groups and a bit less in the Dutch groups. To a considerable extent, this can be explained by characteristics of the different language¹⁸, but it is still relevant to note.

Having such a background in place, we can move on to the empirical question central in this section: to which collective do these words refer? Is there evidence of any form of a European ‘we’ that shows that the euro is also perceived as a common European project? In order to address this question, the occurrences of ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ were inductively coded as referring to a particular group. To be more specific, only the occurrences under discussions following question 4 to 6 were coded, as participants

¹⁸ Notably because of the French usage of the word ‘on’, which is generally translated as a first person plural in the transcripts even though other languages might use a third person singular in similar case, for example ‘we have’ instead of ‘there is’, and ‘we now see that’ instead of ‘one sees that’.

here more often used the words to refer to politically relevant groups (national, societal or European) and less to generic collectives (the focus group participants, people in general, etc.), and the nature of the discussions indeed meant that discussions more often focused on perceptions of communities related to the euro's politics. Evidently, this is a highly interpretive exercise, since people generally do not make explicit what groups they refer to when using words like 'we' and 'us'. This is directly related to the tacit nature in which people define who is 'one of us', and is precisely what makes this exercise interesting. At the same time, it also means we should look at the results presented here with caution. Not only can interpretations of what 'we' refers to in a particular case differ, but also do references to a group not necessarily mean that people identify with this group – it for example can also simply be a manner of speaking. Therefore, this analysis will try to carefully make clear what usages of 'we' the codes refer to. Altogether however, these results still help us in analyzing more structurally how focus group participants see the collectives related to the Eurozone.

Table 6.7: Meaning of 'we' in Q4. The numbers are colored by the relative value of a number within the focus group

	Own country	Border EU-national	European	Common citizen	FG	Unclear, general	Sum
NL-U	48	4	5	4	7	11	79
NL-H	32	5	8	0	1	2	48
NL-F	44	26	3	0	5	6	84
ITA-U	32	1	0	6	14	8	61
ITA-H	43	4	2	2	7	10	68
ITA-F	56	0	3	0	3	10	72
FR-U	83	10	10	9	13	46	171
FR-H	33	16	6	22	35	63	175
FR-F	24	35	13	0	29	34	135
Sum	395	101	50	43	114	190	

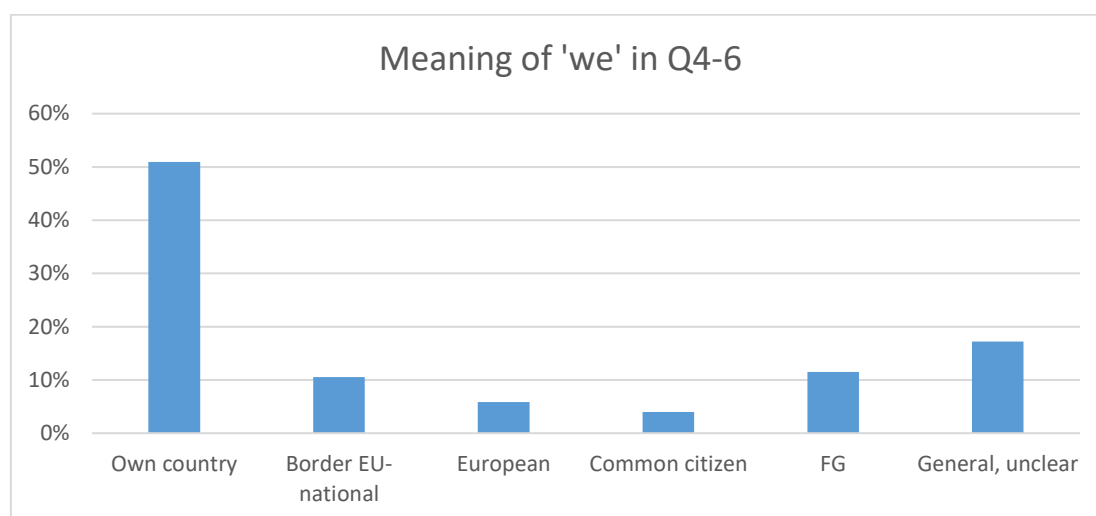


Figure 6.18: Meaning of 'we' in Q4-6.

Note that these percentages are not the total percentages, but (in order to correct for the length of different focus groups) the averages of the group percentages.

Table 6.3 and Figure 6.5 present the outcomes of this coding exercise. As they show, six categories were distinguished, four of which can be seen as politically relevant. Most straightforwardly relevant for our purposes here are cases in which 'we' refers to the national community on the one hand, and cases in which it refers to a sense of European community on the other. Between these two categories, there is an in-between category in which 'we' can logically refer to the national as well as the European community, and it is not sure which community the participant has in mind. Fourthly, there is a 'common citizen' category indicating cases in which 'we' refers to the people or the common man, often used in opposition to (political) elites. Finally, there are two categories with less political relevance, namely cases in which 'we' refers to the focus group participants themselves, and a residual category in which the antecedent is not clear, or saying 'we' is just a generic way of speaking. In this latter category, 'we' can for example refer to a general unspecified public ('as we have seen in the last years'), be another way to say 'there is' ('on the one hand, we have ...'), or it is simply not clear to which collective exactly 'we' refers. To understand them better, let us briefly look at these categories one by one.

As a start, there are the references to the national community, which – perhaps unsurprisingly – are dominant. Out of the 893 mentions of 'we', 'us' and 'our' in Q4-6, 395 are coded as referring to the national

community, meaning 44% (or 51% when taking the average of the percentages per group in order to correct for the length of the different groups). Especially when we subtract the references to politically irrelevant collectives (those to the focus group participants and the generic/unclear category), this is a large majority. It is important to note that there is substantial variety in the *way* in which participants refer to the national community, as there is with the other categories as well (as we will see). Sometimes they hint at a participants' clear identification with the community, sometimes less so. Generally however, this category is indeed indicative of a primary identification with the national community in questions related to the politics of the euro. Let us consider a few examples.

Extract 6.37 French hairdressers

Tristan: What is serious is that in France **we** are still in a monarchy. A monarchy that is elected, that changes with each election, but it is in fact a monarchy.

Extract 6.38 Italian hairdressers

Pasquale: When **we** were independent **our** economy used to function.

Bruno: **We** have always had debts which are have increased and increased over time...

Pasquale: No wait, I am talking about of the period before Europe.

Bruno: **We** already had debts in Italy also before Europe...

Pasquale: I don't know if **we** were better or worse off earlier... Because earlier **we** used to manage all by ourselves. I mean that **us** as a nation **we** used to make it in a less dangerous way. Do you get what I am saying? **We** used to roll up our sleeves...

Extract 6.39 Dutch unemployed

Kimberly: I think, you see, that everyone is entitled to a good life, no matter whether you live in Greece or Holland or I don't know where. But I do think **we're** rather casual about, ehm, helping other countries, while there are plenty of things in the Netherlands that are not going well. I mean, look at these elderly people, look at the hospitals, let's first put some money there.

Jamesha: I think it's outrageous that hospitals need to close down because they're bankrupt, while the Netherlands is giving money to other countries.

In extract 6.37, 'we' clearly refers to France. However, it is not used so much in opposition to other countries, but rather to speak about the

situation in which France finds itself. Therefore, while such a usage of 'we' signifies identification with the French community, it says less about the question whether there is sense of a European community, and thus has less weight for addressing the question raised in this section. Extract 6.38 then is an example in which the national meaning of 'we' is opposed more directly to the EU. While it does not make clear how participants see the role of other countries in their construction of 'us' and 'them', it does signify the importance of the national community for participants. Extract 6.39 finally is an even stronger example, as here the national 'we' is used in direct contrast with 'other countries'. Participants explicitly mention that they see the national community as the 'natural' unit to which solidarity extends, and help to other countries should only be considered if the needs of the national community are satisfied.

Secondly, there is the in-between category in which 'we' can logically refer to the national as well as the European community, labeled as 'border EU-national', capturing cases in which the context does not give a conclusive reason to see 'we' as referring to one of the two levels of community. Extract 6.40 provides an example of this category. While the latter two usages of 'we' in this extract more clearly refer to France, the antecedent of the first two usages is more ambiguous. Judging from the latter two, one might postulate that the first two usages too refer to the national level, but this is not certain – after all, people can (and indeed repeatedly do) refer to different collectives even in the same sentence. This category thus helps us to capture such cases, and refrain from too much interpretation. It appears particularly frequently in cases in which people discuss choices that have or should be made in European politics, such as 'we should have ...', and it is notable that it occurs relatively much in the French groups, as well as in the group of Dutch financial professionals, while occurring less in the Italian groups. There is some ambiguity in how we should interpret the meaning of this category. In some instances, it might indeed refer to a European collective, and in some others it might be seen as suggesting that people to some extent see an *overlap* between a national 'we' and a European 'we' (again, extract 6.40 can be seen as illustrative of this). At the same time, it in a substantial amount of cases it is likely that people still have their own country in mind, or that it rather is a more general way of speaking. While this could at least suggest that participants feel that their country has some agency in European affairs, it can

altogether not be seen as evidence of a sense of a European collective connected to the euro – at best it is a subtle hint, an indication of a *potential*.

Extract 6.40 French unemployed

Bertrand: If you have policies that say ‘well there are Eastern European countries that have a weak health system’, **we** will help them, or **we** will make a policy like the CAP for France. **We** have benefited a lot and **we** have not talked about that, but the French have stuffed themselves on it.

Thirdly, there are the cases in which ‘we’ *does* logically refer to the European level. This at least is a more than negligible amounts of cases – 50, or just under 6% - and is at least suggestive of *some* sort of perception of a European we. At the same time, it is important to note that in many instances, it is does not necessarily indicate a strong identification with Europe. What is more, it in these instances does not appear to indicate a very substantial understanding of a European collective, but is rather a way of speaking. Extract 6.41 illustrates this (note that the second part of the quote occurs at a different place in the discussion).

Extract 6.41 Dutch hairdressers

Ria: Well, it’s difficult. All these refugees for example. If there is an earthquake or something like that, of course Europe should help then – not just the Netherlands. **We** are with a group, **we** have an agreement with all of **us**, so **we** should do something about it with all of **us**.

[...]

Ria: When there is a culture of people who don’t work so much in **our** perspective – of course this is **our** perspective... To then just keep sending money, then I’m thinking... **We** can’t continue to send money, at some point the money is finished here [in the Netherlands] too. There are also things on which the Netherlands could spend money, and which isn’t always working right now.

In the first part of the abstract, ‘we’ clearly refers to the European level. Indeed, it even does so in a way that explicitly emphasizes the importance of doing things together. However, it in this case appears to be used more to make the argument that the Netherlands is not solely responsible for helping other EU countries, rather than that it is an expression of a conviction that European cooperation is important in general. What contributes to this is that in Ria’s other contributions, there hardly is an expression of sentiments of a European community. Instead, Ria expresses a rather national perspective in which the national ‘we’ is opposed to the

'them's' of other countries (of which the second part of the abstract is an example). Therefore, in such cases the European 'we' appears to be more of a manner of speaking than an actual expression of a sense of Europeanness – even if it does indicate a potential to see things in a more European light.

Having said this, the opposite exists as well: a lack of references to a European 'we' does not by definition mean that people do not identify with the European project at all. In the group of Italian unemployed for example, zero usages of the term 'we' are coded as referring to a European collective. However, other remarks, such as the one in extract 6.42, do indicate some enthusiasm about the European project, also in terms of belonging, showing an appreciation of a certain form of European community. Yet, this turns out to be something different than seeing the European level as the relevant level of community in discussing the politics of the euro. When normative issues are discussed, this generic enthusiasm for the European project does not materialize in a sense of a European 'we'.

Extract 6.42 Italian unemployed

Giovanni: I took it [the change to the euro] very positively because for those who travel today it's much easier and you don't need to have all different coins for every country you go to.

Tommaso: From a cultural and mental point of view it was very important for me. Passing borders without controls, without passports... It has been a very important emotional change. You really feel like passing a region, not a state.

Giovanni: You feel at home!

At last, among the fifty references to European collective, there also are a few cases in which this reference appears to be indicative of a more productive sense of European community –extract 6.43 is one of the strongest examples of this. These are only a handful of cases, and even here, references to a European collective are not necessarily equal to strong affective feelings for Europe. Yet, they do hint at a perception of the euro as a shared project. In such cases, a potential of a European perspective emerges which would make that normative stances towards its politics are more in line with what the euro demands.

Extract 6.43 French financial professionals

Charles: I think there should be a zone, a supervision, when **we** lend money, when Europeans lend to other European countries, **we** should have surveillance... A little like **we** do when the IMF lends money, that the money is not used to 'go on holiday'.

[...]

We must not forget one thing, **we** have indeed lent money to Greece, but **we** Europeans in slightly richer countries [makes quotation marks with hands] are very happy that Greece is European and in the euro zone because **we** sell **them** a lot of products.

As a fourth category, finally, there are cases in which 'we' refers to the common man – generally in opposition to 'them's' of political elites. This category is less relevant for the purposes of this section, as it tells us less about the existence of a sense of European community, but more about an elite-society divide. In that sense, it does connect nicely to the findings of section 5.3, showing the relevance of perceptions of this larger elite-society divide also for people's reasoning about the euro's politics. What adds to this is that this perception occurs in none of the groups of financial professionals, and in almost all other groups. However, this is something that will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Taken together then, what do these findings tell us? As a start, we might note the dominance of references to national collectives. On itself, this numerical majority is not all-important. Firstly, because absolute numbers do not tell the whole story (after all, the usage of 'we' strongly depends on the context in which it is used, and some references carry more weight than others). Indeed, it might well be that the phrasing of the questions stimulated participants to reason more in national terms (particularly that on question 5, which asked participants to discuss the euro's effect on national autonomy¹⁹). Secondly, as has long been noted, people can hold multiple identities, which do not exclude each other but can also exist next each other or even reinforce each other (e.g. Diez Medrano and Gutierrez, 2001; Risse, 2003). Yet, having taken this into account, the dominance of national references is still striking, not only in quantitative but also in substantive terms. After all, it is not only that such national references

¹⁹ Indeed, it is noteworthy that the percentage of references to a national 'we' was higher (over 60%) during question 5 than in the discussions following question 4 and 6 (around 35%).

occur more frequently, but also that when discussions touch upon the 'natural' communities to which their sense of political collectiveness extends in Eurozone matters, it almost exclusively is the national community.

Indeed, when we ask whether the focus groups provide any evidence of perceptions of the Eurozone as a shared project, this evidence is rather thin. Not only because perceptions of the national level as the relevant unit of community are much more prevalent in the discussions, but also because there are very little cases of participants showing a sense of seeing the Eurozone as a shared project – something that already appeared from the discussions on solidarity in section 6.1. Out of the 893 uses of 'we', 'us' and 'our', only 50 are 'logically' referring to European, and only a handful of these appear to be more than a manner of speaking, but hint at a genuine perception of Eurozone countries as a collective having something in common, or being a relevant political level to address shared problems at. This perception is found particularly on levels where it might be expected (most notably in the group of the French financial professionals). This is not to say that other cases in which 'we' refers to the European level are entirely irrelevant or meaningless, as it does hint at a certain potential. Yet, it is a rather shallow basis for cases in which the euro's politics lead to legitimacy problems. If substantial interests are at stake, these are likely to be perceived through the national lens, and there is little sense of European community to correct for perceptions that the national self-interest is hurt.

In that sense, these findings are in line with earlier survey findings on the effect of the euro on the emergence of a European identity (e.g. Buscha et al., 2017; Negri et al., 2021): it seems to be limited, and to predominantly play out on a more subtle level. On the one hand, people do refer to certain shared experiences that are connected to the euro, such as the event of its introduction, as well as the experience to travel around more freely, making the Eurozone into an area in which one feels more 'at home', as 6.42 illustrated. These are meaningful experiences, and indeed shared European experiences, the significance of which is not to be dismissed. At the same time, the effect of the euro in other areas appears to be more limited. Some have argued that the euro has other derivative effects, for example arguing that "when people refer to the "European economy" as

a bounded and politically relevant entity, it naturalizes the European project in practice” (McNamara, 2015: 16). However, focus group participants hardly refer to a European economy as such. And more importantly for our purposes here, the more subtle, symbolic effects of the euro do not translate into more substantial feelings of community in the sense that people perceive Eurozone affairs in a collective light. Even if participants occasionally express how they think member states made certain commitments as a result of joining the euro, there is hardly accompanied by a sense of a shared Eurozone predicament.

This does not mean that there are acute dangers for the euro’s legitimacy, but rather that the basis on which the euro’s legitimacy relies is thin. It is not so much that there is a legitimacy deficit, as people’s sense of community is not fixed or demarcated, and it thus is not a given how it relates to the politics of the euro. Rather, it depends on how this sense of community is mobilized in relation to the euro, and in that sense it is more appropriate to speak of a *potential* deficit. For indeed, it is important to note that perceptions of identity are of an ever-changing nature. Rather than a set of fixed attributes, identity is a ‘constantly shifting process of positioning’ (Hall, 2017: 16) – and if identity is, perceptions of politically relevant collectives are even more.

Finally, let us therefore consider signs of where perceptions of community might change. Most notably then, there is the effect that external developments might have, rather than the euro itself. For what is striking is that in almost all focus groups, participants refer to events like Brexit, or developments such as the increasing rivalry with the USA (note that the focus groups were conducted in 2019), Russia and China. This is particularly noteworthy because none of these items were explicitly asked about in the focus groups, nor were they hinted on in the video clips. Of course, such items have been covered in the media extensively, and it therefore is not huge surprise that they end up in people’s speech. But the fact that this resonates with people to the extent that many of them bring it up in an unsolicited fashion is still telling. Moreover, the way in which participants speak about such events is indicative of it having an effect on their understanding of European community, as the following extracts illustrate.

Extract 6.44 Dutch unemployed

Naomi: So then you need to adapt [in order to continue to be part of the Eurozone]. Then it's a question how nice it is to be part of such a big Europe.

Truus: In that sense things became worse for Greece rather than better.

Bianca: But you have no choice because you must also cooperate with these countries against America, Russia.

Naomi: You're not going to be able to do so alone. So then it's nice that you're a part of that, but you do lose your own identity.

Extract 6.45 Italian financial professionals

Flavio: If the UK, as Boris Johnson declared today, exits the EU, there will be some heavy or not heavy costs which could lead either to shredding or to a strengthening [of the EU]. So, I am reasoning in very concrete and political terms, I am not making hypotheses here.

Carlo: I would be very much in favor of the strengthening.

Extract 6.46 Dutch financial professionals

Steven: Then you have a deterrent example. Just look at Brexit, nobody wants to experience something like that. So I do think this is a good means to convince countries that are thinking about exiting.

To some extent, these extracts hint at a sense of a shared European predicament, or at least of a sense that external threats are a justification for European governance. Particularly extract 6.44 is interesting in this regard: Naomi first brings up that she finds it a disadvantage of being a part of a 'big Europe' that a country needs to adapt. Subsequently however, she accepts that this might be necessitated by the rivalry with other big powers - showing how such perceptions might have the potential to change opinions in this direction. While more research needs to be done to study such effects on themselves (although some research on the effect of external threats and developments on the developments of a European identity does exist, e.g. Gehring, 2022, Minkus et al., 2019), they are relevant to bring up here because they say something about the relation between the euro and identity. For what they show is how the euro should not just be seen as a tool in the unification of Europe, but how it is also dependent on a sense of collective that is created by circumstances external to itself. Especially because besides unifying, the euro can also have a divisive effect by increasing a feeling of 'we versus them', thus contributing to more animosity between member states. In that sense, if there is to be a sufficient sense of community for the euro to remain

legitimate, and to compensate for the strength of national sentiments that can be mobilized, it thus might also have to be created by developments external to the single currency itself.

6.5. Conclusion

This chapter aimed to better understand to what extent the euro can be justified in terms of people's beliefs. Rather than looking at opinions on the euro itself, it focused on the political consequences underlying the euro, asking whether these are in line with public preferences, and whether and how people themselves make a link between these consequences and the euro in the first place.

On the surface, the findings of this chapter (summarized in Table 6.4) do not suggest insurmountable problems for the euro in this respect, as focus group participants rarely reject the euro for reasons of European solidarity and national autonomy. The latter topic in particular is discussed as relatively unproblematic in relation to the euro, mostly because people do not see the euro as compromising autonomy – why would a framework of mutually agreed upon rules go at the expense of national sovereignty? In line with this, focus group participants also have relatively little difficulty – at least in principle – with the idea that the Eurozone comes with a framework of shared rules, and that this sometimes means that countries in financial difficulties are forced to cut public spending. While some do emphasize the importance of a fair rule making process and others make clear that they see the particular policy response of the euro crisis as a matter of northern dominance, discussions are predominantly positive on the statement.

Of the topics discussed, solidarity emerges as the most problematic one. Particularly because of views prevalent in the Dutch groups – where participants are more negative about solidarity because they see the economic problems of southern countries as self-inflicted and Dutch affluence as a consequence of adequate Dutch governance and the Dutch economic culture more in general – but also because of the way participants perceive European solidarity in general. For the focus groups show how financial support to other countries is generally seen as charity rather than a duty of solidarity that is accepted as a consequence of sharing a political project, and therefore not so much as a matter of

solidarity. At the same time, most arguments against solidarity concern arguments against solidarity going too far, rather than a principled rejection of European solidarity – even in the Netherlands. In all groups, there is at least some acceptance of the need for financial transfers between Eurozone countries.

But does this mean that the euro has no legitimacy problems? Taken together, how to read these findings? On themselves, they do not seem to provide evidence for urgent problems. Even if there might be some resistance to European solidarity, opinions favorable to the euro's politics outweigh the negative ones in the focus groups. And because participants have problems in connecting political questions to the euro in the first place, there is a hurdle to be taken if this is to mobilize people against the euro. Even in the case that people are negative about certain EMU policies, this does not need to translate into resistance against the single currency. In that sense, the euro's politics appear to have a stable enough basis in public opinion.

Under the surface however, this basis might not be as strong as it appears. What should be noted is that participants are not so much indifferent to the issues of autonomy and European solidarity, but rather that they do not connect them to the euro because of the a-political fashion in which they see the single currency. Reasoning about the politics of the euro is characterized by substantial ambivalence, which is related to the fact that these topics are often perceived as difficult, and participants repeatedly have trouble in getting a clear grasp on them – also precisely because they find it difficult to clearly link these normative items to particular political arrangements. At the same time, the topics do resonate, with solidarity being a particularly important topic in the Dutch groups and autonomy in the French. And given that the euro is not immune to resistance against these issues, even if people do not connect them to the euro itself (as explained in chapter 2), the mobilization against such topics could still cause problems for the euro.

Table 6.8: Summary of observations made in chapter 6

	General	Group differences
Solidarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arguments pro and contra solidarity are in balance; but little substantial rejection of solidarity - High degree of ambivalence, particularly 'it depends on...' - Solidarity perceived more as charity than as part of sharing political project - Little connection between solidarity and euro 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Few signs of structural social differences - Substantial country differences, rooted in perception of own country as well as of other countries - Most negative views in NL. France and Italy more positive
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generally seen as unproblematic in relation to euro, either because no perception of autonomy loss, or because loss is not seen as problem - Hardly any connection with euro 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Differences mostly along country lines - Link between national self-perception and value of autonomy - Particularly important value in France, not in Italy
Interdependence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some EU intervention generally seen as acceptable, consistent with above - Discussions show instability of stances. Shows in views on role of EU authority, and in particular in views of justice in euro crisis (Greek situation) - Stances susceptible to circumstances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Same 'north-south' country differences as above
Notions of collective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dominance of national lens (in perceptions of interests, but also as benchmark for evaluating euro) - Little sense of euro as a shared project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No striking structural differences

In this light, the normative framework underlying peoples' reasoning hints at potential problems. For what stands out in the discussions is the dominance of the national lens. People principally discuss normative issues surrounding the euro in terms of 'national interests', and in terms of contrasts between countries, while there is little evidence of a more European perspective. Indeed, in line with this, it is striking that while differences in perceptions of the euro itself were primarily related to social class, the politics of the euro are evaluated particularly along national lines. The national lens thus functions as an important heuristic, and the

particular way in which it does so is interesting, because rather than national political institutions simply functioning as a proxy for European governance, the national context often functions as a *benchmark* for forming opinions on European issues. This fits to earlier observations by, amongst others, Sanchez-Cuenca (2000), Rohrschneider (2002) and de Vries (2018), who argue that the national context provides a sort of contrasting lens producing an inverse perception of national and European institutions. In other words, in countries where satisfaction with national political institutions and economic performance is lower, stances towards European integration will be more benevolent because the perceived benefits are higher (and vice versa)²⁰. Fitting with this, the focus groups show clearly how participants with more negative perceptions of their own government (generally the Italian participants) are less afraid to lose national autonomy – and indeed sometimes see EU interventions as desirable corrections to their governments’ perceived deficiencies – while the opposite applies to participants with more positive perceptions of their government’s capabilities (more in particular the Netherlands).

What makes this centrality of the national lens problematic for the euro’s politics then is that people have difficulty in going beyond the nation as the natural unit of community. The euro is rarely debated as a matter of common European concern, just as there hardly is a perception of a European common bond. People do sometimes bring up the *idea* of European community, and are positive about things like traveling and enjoying each other’s cultures, but this thin perception of community appears too shallow to suffice for when substantial sacrifices need to be made to the perceived self-interest. On the basis of such a notion of community then, the normative underpinnings for the euro’s politics and the type of demands it makes appear weak. Of course, feelings of identity are not set in stone, and ongoing developments (such as geo-political

²⁰ The paradoxical consequence of this being that countries benefitting the most from the EU might have higher levels of ‘exit scepticism’ than countries that benefit less, because electorates in more affluent countries generally have a higher trust in the capabilities of their governments, thus making them confident that they can survive outside the EU, while less affluent countries might feel they need the EU in order to survive.

events and changing media narratives) can lead to changes, but the findings here do hint at a fragility.

Altogether, these findings are not enough to speak of manifest legitimacy problems for the euro, or even its politics. Yet, they do suggest that there are deficits that can be mobilized. Particularly because of the ambivalence and uncertainty reported, opinions appear malleable, and there is space for mobilization. Of course, such mobilization requires a cause, such as a next crisis. But in such a crisis, sentiments can be mobilized in different ways, and the fragile normative underpinnings of the euro can translate into functional problems. In that sense, the stability of the euro depends on its politics maintaining low salience.

Chapter 7

Normative positioning on the euro

In a way, the preceding two chapters have been circling around the core question of public opinion on the euro. On the one hand, they have examined how people understand and make sense of the euro, highlighting the importance of the everyday life character of the euro, and the relatively a-political way in which they understand it. On the other hand, they provide insight into how people reason about the political questions that the euro brings up, showing the ambivalent way in which people relate to these questions, and moreover, how people have difficulty in connecting them to the euro. But in between these two observations lies a third question: how should we understand actual *opinions* on the euro? What are the grounds for their evaluations, and to what extent do political motivations and daily life considerations inform their stances? And in line with this, what is the *meaning* of these stances? Clearly, the previous chapters already provide a basis for addressing these questions, but this chapter will focus explicitly on moments in which people take normative stances on the euro.

An important focus in doing so will be on the *type* of attitudes and evaluations people hold. Of course, focus groups are not useful for looking at the distribution of attitudes throughout society like surveys are, and the question here therefore is not so much whether people are in favor or against the euro, or with what frequency particular positions are taken. Instead, the purpose here is to better understand normative positioning in a typological way by looking at how people themselves decide to phrase their views on the euro. What argument they use for them, how these relate to their more general political views, and what the strength of their stances is. In other words, rather than looking at the distribution of attitudes, this chapter asks *how to understand* people's views on the euro.

It is important to note that the question of whether people are in favor of the euro was not asked explicitly during the focus groups, meaning it was only at moments when participants themselves decided to bring up their opinions that such attitudes came to the fore. Nevertheless, the advantage of this is that it allows us to study how people themselves decide to phrase their opinions, as well as how far they feel it is relevant to express their opinions at all.

The chapter will consist of four sections. First, in order to get a grasp of the opinions brought to the fore in the focus groups, it starts by mapping the sorts of opinions occurring during the discussions. It will identify different types of opinions and subsequently map the occurrence of these opinions throughout the different groups (how many attitudes and evaluations are coded as such, how many are positive, negative and ambivalent, and in which groups and following which questions do they occur most). This allows us to get a sense of the material under analysis. With this basis in place, the second section goes more into depth and attempts to understand the grounds for participants' opinions. Going through the different attitudes and evaluations, are they based on utilitarian arguments, identitarian considerations or more political reasoning? A third section focuses on something that emerges as especially relevant during the discussions: how far evaluations of the euro are embedded in a larger political context. Finally, a fourth section will look at the salience the euro has to participants.

7.1. Mapping attitudes and evaluations

Throughout the focus groups, participants express all sorts of opinions. Some make clear whether they are pro or contra the euro, some concern only one element of the euro (without this necessarily reflecting their ultimate attitude towards the euro), while others are not explicitly about the euro itself but do concern the context the euro is embedded in. The first is clearly most directly relevant for the focus of this chapter, but all such opinions are considered important for our purposes here, for all tell us something about how we should understand opinion formation towards the euro. Indeed, all three of these categories were coded in the transcripts. The first is labeled as 'attitudes towards the euro' (following common definitions of political attitudes, such as "a relatively enduring

organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner", Rokeach, 1968: 112²¹). The second is referred to as 'evaluations of the euro': these are not final stances in favor or against the euro, but assessments of different elements of the euro (for example, 'the euro was bad for our purchasing power'). The third is labeled 'evaluations related to the euro', and will be analyzed in section 3 below. To be clear on the meaning of the categories, let us consider two examples.

Extract 7.1 Italian unemployed

Giovanni: Fortunately Italy is part of the euro! If we had stayed with the lira it would have been much worse...

Beatrice, Olivia: Noo, la lira, no.

Extract 7.2 Dutch hairdressers

Ria: Well, I indeed thought that – what you [referring to other participant] said – that everything got very expensive. Because suddenly you had 1 euro, and it used to be 2.5 gulden and then you think well, phew... Everything got rather expensive. But it was also positive that you did not have to go to the bank every time when you went travelling. All this exchanging of money was quite inconvenient. So this was the positive aspect of it.

The first one is coded as an attitude on the euro, as it concerns a statement in which a participant makes clear his stance towards the euro itself. The second on the other hand is coded as an evaluation of the euro: the remark does not so much concern Ria's final attitude on the euro itself, but rather the weighing of the euro's different consequences.

In order to get a sense of when and how such opinions are expressed throughout the focus groups, it is useful as a start to see how often and where these categories occur.²² Starting with the frequencies, Table 7.1

²¹ Also note that the word 'opinions' is used here as a more overarching concept capturing normative positions in general, so attitudes as well as evaluations. Rather than referring to them as stable, deeply ingrained attitudes pre-existing the focus groups, it here refers to any type of normative stance that participants express towards politics.

²² The coding of evaluations does not concern evaluations that are already coded as part of the normative discussions analyzed in chapter 6 – unless they were directly related to normative positioning on the euro itself. While these are also normative positions relevant to the euro, I wanted to prevent overlap for reasons of clarity.

shows that more positive attitudes are expressed on the euro than negative ones. For evaluations however, more negative evaluations are expressed than positive ones. Thirdly, one might note that the relative number of remarks coded as ambivalent is comparatively high as well. Again, these frequencies do not need to reflect the exact distribution of normative positions in the focus groups, but instead simply give us an impression of which normative positions are expressed in the focus groups and how often. In this sense, what might also be noted is that the number of attitudes and evaluations expressed is relatively low, with on average only 4 attitudes and 7 evaluations being expressed per group. Indeed, several participants are not coded as expressing any normative orientation towards the euro at all, which is relevant to keep in mind for understanding the salience of the euro.

Table 7.9: Total amount of positive, negative and ambivalent attitudes and evaluations coded

	Positive	Ambivalent	Negative	Sum
Attitudes towards the euro	19	9	10	38
Evaluations of the euro	20	11	34	65

Secondly, how are these opinions divided over the different groups? As Figure 7.1 shows, frequencies differ substantially between the respective groups. For example, attitudes and evaluations occur only a handful of times in the groups of financial professionals, and substantially more in the French group of unemployed and the Italian group of hairdressers. It is not straightforward how to interpret such differences. It seems it cannot straightforwardly be attributed to the salience of the topic to participants, but is also simply dependent on the relatively contingent factor of whether a vocal participant brings up the question of how people evaluate the euro. Rather than interpreting such items now, they are an important background to later qualitatively zoom in on normative positions.

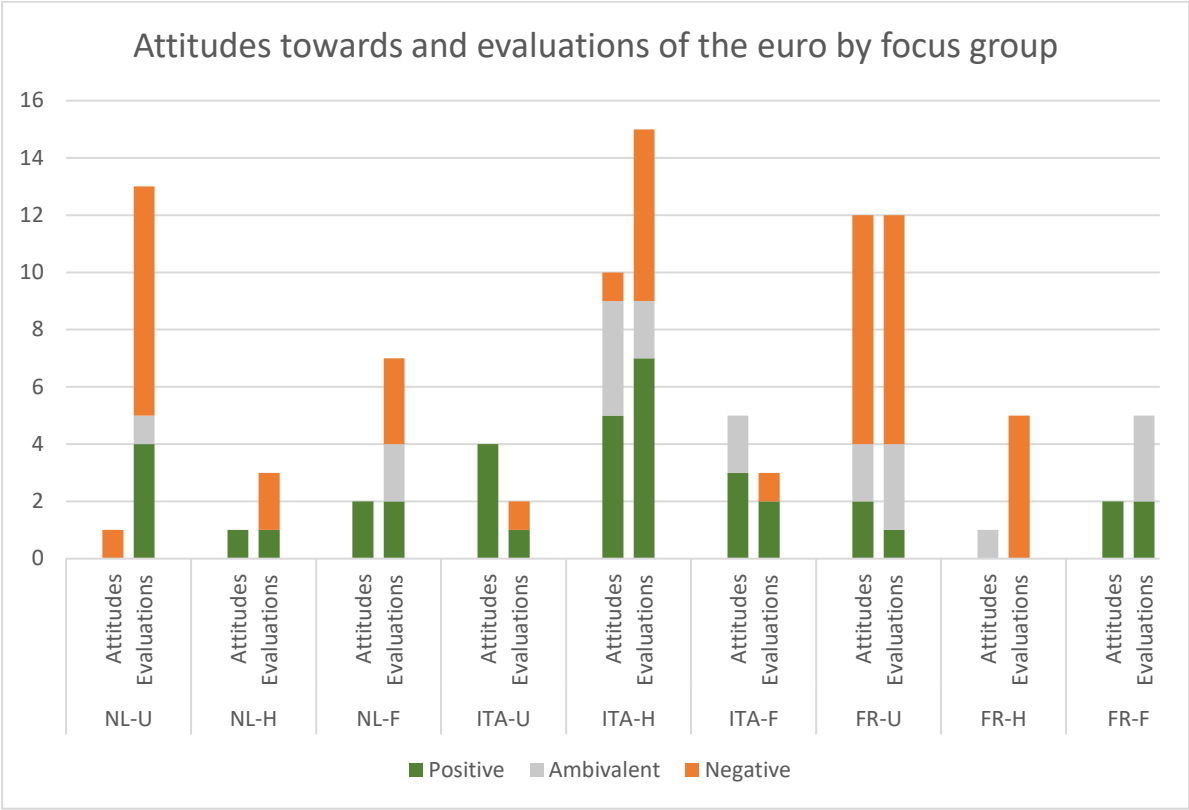


Figure 7.19: Number of attitudes towards and evaluations of the euro by focus group

Thirdly, where in the focus groups do these opinions occur? Figure 7.2 shows that the coded attitudes and evaluations are expressed particularly in the first half of the focus groups, more notably in the discussions following the first question. In other words, opinions are often expressed soon after people are asked to talk about their first thoughts about the euro. Perhaps, this should not surprise us, just as the fact that the euro itself is discussed less when people are asked to discuss particular normative themes in the second part of the focus groups. At the same time, it does fit with the earlier observation that such normative items are for many participants not directly related to the euro, also because opinions are still expressed in question 2 and 3 and hardly at all during the discussions on the normative items.

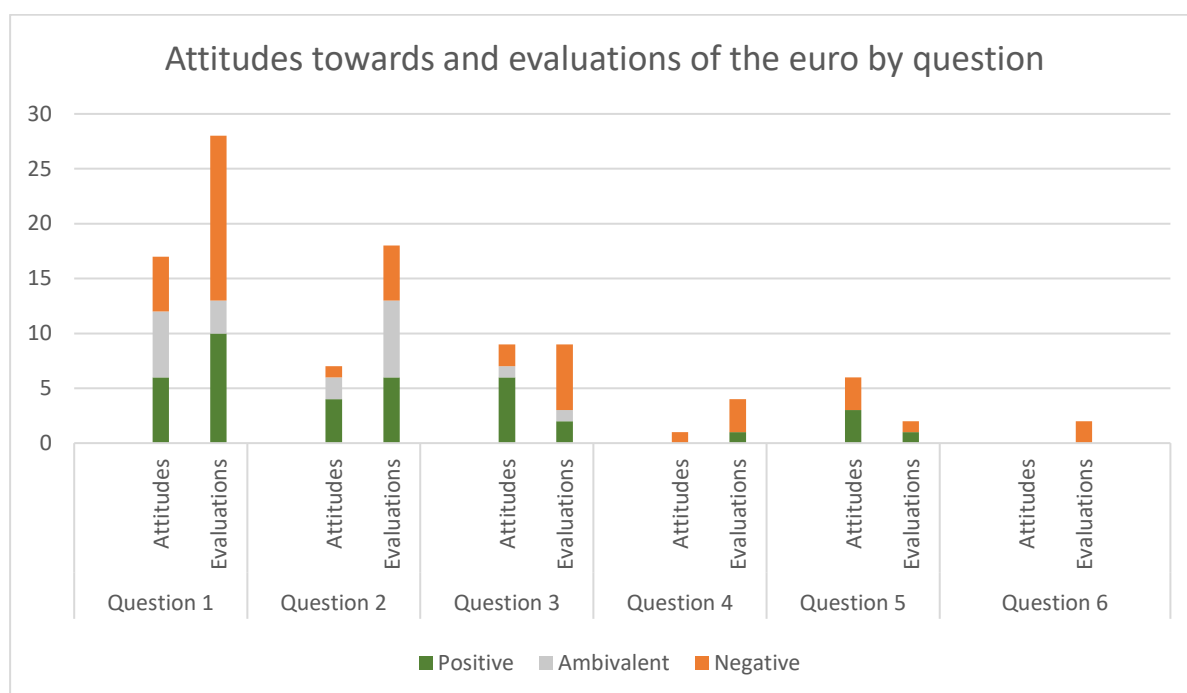


Figure 7.20: Attitudes towards and evaluations of the euro by question

Having such an overview in place, let us zoom in on the discussions underlying these numbers. On the one hand, there are cases in which participants make it plainly clear whether they support the euro or not, such as in extract 7.1. However, not all expressions of opinions are as straightforward. In the first place, there are quite a few cases in which participants are more ambivalent, either simultaneously expressing pro and contra arguments, or a sense of doubt.

Extract 7.3 Italian hairdressers

Pasquale: I think that maybe it would have been better to keep our currency – as other countries did – than to... I don't know.

But besides the presence of ambivalence, another interesting observation is that many expressions of opinions are characterized by a certain distance. In these cases, it is not so much that participants are uncertain of their stance on the euro, but the way they phrase their stances is somewhat passive. Rather than expressing their active support for the euro, or a vigorous desire to get rid of it, they more often reflect on the historical decision to adopt the euro. To make this clearer, let us consider some extracts.

Extract 7.4 French unemployed

Nadia: At the age I am today, I would have been against the euro.

Extract 7.5 Dutch hairdressers

Yagmur: Well, I think I was too young for the gulden. But when I see things now I think it [the euro] is great. It is a means of unification and when you go to Germany or another country you don't need to exchange.

Extract 7.6 French financial professionals

Charles: Anyway today, finally, I don't see how one could say that the euro... [Sophie: was a bad thing] Finally, to go back it would be a suicide, for us Europeans it would be a real suicide [everyone nods]

Extract 7.7 Dutch financial professionals

Henk: With the creation of the euro, we have made such an enormous mistake, that getting out has become impossible. This is more where the problem lies.

What these extracts show is how participants talk more about the euro as a historical decision that we now have to live with rather than something we have agency over now, and are thus more backward than forward looking. Even those who feel that the euro made things worse, such as Nadia, express their sentiments more in terms of 'something we should not have started with' than 'something we should abandon'. Indeed, throughout the focus groups, there is not one argument of someone actively arguing for a departure from the Eurozone. This implies that participants experience the euro as something that is there to stay and is simply a part of our daily lives now. In that sense, it is surrounded by a sense of fatalism rather than a sense of agency. As the extract coming from the group of French financial professionals expresses – the group perhaps showcasing the most knowledge on the euro and the strongest 'grasp' of European politics – there is a sense that there simply is no way back from the euro.

One way to explain these sentiments is that people feel that an exit from the euro is not feasible – as conveyed in extract 7.6 and 7.7. Some scholars have indeed argued that such a fear of a euro exit is an important explanation of the high levels of euro support, such as Jurado et al. (2020) who argue that it has been central to the relative stability of euro support in Greece. Yet, in the focus groups, there are only a handful of such mentions, notably in the groups of financial professionals. For most other participants, it appears that they do not necessarily fear a euro exit, but rather that the thought of leaving the euro does not cross their mind in the

first place. The euro is simply not so much of a political item; it is an object either too distant or too banal to consider challenging.

Extract 7.8 Dutch unemployed

Naomi: Back in the day I always used to convert, but I'm not doing that at all anymore, this converting.

[...]

Now we are how many years further on? [Several participants chuckle] 17 years further. I would think that after so many years most people would be used to the euro?

[...]

Truus: It is impossible to turn back. It's just the way it is, so you have to adapt to that.

This extract illustrates how this might work. Naomi describes the euro as a matter of getting used to. With its introduction, it led to some everyday life changes, but now that it has been with us for so many years, do we still need to consider it? Instead, would it not be better to accept it as an established part of our daily lives? Admittedly, her argument concerns converting prices more than the euro as a whole, and theoretically this could go together with other, more political evaluations of the euro. However, for this participant, as for others, this is hardly the case, and the euro is largely equated with its everyday life impact: and given that it has been there for a long time now, is there really a need to consider it? Indeed, this line of thinking is also confirmed in the focus group a bit later by Truus, who emphasizes how she sees the euro as irreversible (and one might just as well look at extract 7.6 and 7.7). This observation then fits with the findings of earlier chapters, such as those concerning the difficulty people have in linking the euro with its political consequences, as well as the participants saying the euro is not so much of an item for them, as briefly discussed in section 5.1. This latter observation applied particularly to younger generations who have no active sense of an alternative to the euro in the first place, but to a lesser extent also to older participants in the sense that most do not really see the euro as a topic of debate.

In this way, the euro is seen by many as a *fait accompli*, and this has implications for the types of opinions they have on it. For those who support the euro, it means the euro is met with tacit acceptance rather than active (or affective) appreciation. For those who dislike the euro, it means

that rather than actively rejecting it and arguing for an exit, they feel that looking back it would be better not to have started with it. In that sense, the euro is not something people have very pronounced opinions on. Again, the generally low occurrence of attitudes and evaluations (as noted in the beginning of this section) can also be read as a sign of this. Of course, this low occurrence is also explained by participants not explicitly being asked to give their opinions, but the fact that this also means that few participants do so is nonetheless telling. Indeed, even relative to other political evaluations not directly concerning the euro (as section 7.3 will discuss), the number of opinions expressed on the euro itself is low.

7.2. Grounds for opinions

In the literature on public attitudes towards the euro, a crucial question has been what grounds underlie such attitudes, a central debate being that between identitarian and utilitarian explanations of euro support. While this study is more about helping us understand public opinion on the euro in a typological way rather than explaining attitudes in a causal sense, the methodology of focus groups does allow us to look at the arguments focus group participants themselves give for their positions, and in this way can help us improve our understanding of the grounds underlying opinions on the euro. Therefore, the attitudes and evaluations presented above were all inductively coded on the basis of the arguments they relied on. Tables 7.2 and 7.3 present the results of this coding exercise.²³²⁴

²³ Note that overlap in coding was possible, meaning some passages were coded in two categories simultaneously (this happened for 7 attitudes and 15 evaluations).

²⁴ As the tables show, the resulting categorization is similar to the categorization presented in chapter 5, a slight difference being that 'convenience' is now treated as a separate category (being at the border between a cultural argument concerning travelling and a functional argument concerning utility, it would not be fitting to assign it to only one of these categories). In addition, the category of 'no clear reason' was added since participants frequently expressed stances on the euro without giving an explicit or even implicit reason for this.

Table 7.10: Grounds for attitudes towards the euro

	Positive	Ambivalent	Negative	Total
Economic	6	3	5	14
Cultural	2	3	1	6
Political	2	2	2	6
Convenience (travelling)	4	1	0	5
Pro-EU general	2	0	0	2
No clear or explicit reason	6	3	3	12

Table 7.11: Grounds for evaluations of the euro

	Positive	Ambivalent	Negative	Total
Economic	6	8	21	35
Cultural	5	1	3	9
Political	4	5	15	24
Convenience (travelling)	7	0	1	8
Pro-EU general	0	0	0	0
No clear or explicit reason	0	0	4	4

To understand these categories better, let us briefly zoom in on the type of arguments underlying them. The economic category firstly can be divided into three different types of arguments: the euro's effect on the economy in general (for example, its effect on trade or economic growth), the euro's economic effect on one's own country in particular, and its effect on purchasing power. Arguments on purchasing power are consistently negative (linked to the perception of the transition to the euro having caused inflation), while the other two economic arguments are used in both a negative and positive sense.

The cultural category secondly refers to the euro's effect on European unification, and the symbolic change that the transition from the previous currency to the euro entailed (for example, 'our previous currency was more beautiful'), and is used in both a positive and negative way.

Extract 7.9 Italian hairdressers

Gianni: In fact what you mentioned before was a disadvantage for us, especially for those social classes not interested in the economics, the change lira-euro resulted in the fear to, for example, disappoint a client or to make mistakes with clients when converting prices.

Extract 7.10 Dutch unemployed

Truus: My mother passed away in late 2001, and just before that she still received – she was very old then – she received one of these kits with a few euro coins. Well, she loved that.

Extract 7.11 Italian unemployed

Giovanni: Yes, however, the introduction of the euro felt like a positive thing. I remember there was this great expectation... I remember when you had to go to Paris or Barcelona and you had to change and you had all these problems. But then when it happened to me again to go abroad after the euro, it was easier because you no longer had to go to the bank and ask for money. On the contrary, before when you went abroad you had the problem of converting money and I never had enough because I used to do the calculations badly [laughing]. So when the euro came I really believed in it, it's a currency that you use everywhere – or at least in this part of Europe.

In both the economic and cultural category, some of the frequently occurring arguments are thus related to the everyday life experiences of citizens. This goes for arguments on purchasing power, for arguments on the symbolic change the euro entailed, and also for all arguments related to the euro's convenience. The extracts above illustrate this (just as extract 7.2 can be seen as an example). Such arguments do fit the idea that people evaluate the euro in the first place as a practical object in daily life. And in that sense, the (quantitative) prominence of economic arguments as grounds for both attitudes towards and evaluations of the euro fits into the observations made in chapter five.

At the same time, when we move from attitudes towards the euro to evaluations of the euro, the image slightly changes. While economic arguments are still most prominent, participants much more frequently make arguments concerning the euro's political side – arguments that are less likely to be related to daily life experiences. In addition, it is notable that these arguments are generally more negative. Therefore, this category of political arguments is interesting to consider a bit more in detail. Firstly, because it does not fit easily into the cultural-economic dichotomy that characterizes most of the existing survey research, and secondly because it gives a sense of how the euro corresponds with people's more general perceptions of politics. This category captures reasoning concerning the euro's effect on national politics (such as the abilities of the national

government, or the political state of the country more in general), how it was managed by national governments, and how the euro is a project of elites. Let us consider an extract illustrating how such arguments are used.

Extract 7.12 French unemployed

Nadia: We come back to everything I have said since the beginning about purchasing power, it has been a disaster since we switched to the euro, as I told you, in 2001 [Jean: and politicians] and it benefits them more than us. Yes, it's quite simple, it benefits them more than it does us. They had their own interests. Which is okay, however. I don't denigrate that we were able to bring these 26 countries together – because I think there are 26 of us?

In this extract, Nadia presents us with a mixture of arguments. She starts with a clearly economic argument concerning purchasing power – which is also coded as such. Nevertheless, she subsequently links this point to a political argument: the feeling that the euro is a project of elites that benefited elites – who these elites are is not specified in detail – more than the ‘common man’. While the common man faced rising prices and generally worsening living conditions, the euro helped the interests of those who introduced it, either in political terms (unifying Europe) or in financial terms (a bit later in this discussion, participants explain the benefit for ‘those who introduced the euro’ in terms of politicians grabbing money). This means that there is an element to this discussions that cannot be reduced to pure economic interests. Instead, the economic argument is intertwined with a more general perception of politics, one in which elites are opposed to the common man. To the extent that this argument means that Nadia is negative about the euro, it appears that this is just as much because she sees the euro as a project of elites, as it is because of the euro’s actual effect on purchasing power (another indication of this is that, after this passage, the discussion will increasingly address general political issues of which decreased purchasing power is just one symptom – as will be discussed more in detail in the next section).

In this way, this extract is an example of how different types of arguments are frequently bound together. In itself, it is not very surprising that participants simultaneously use economic as well as cultural and political arguments. However, zooming in on how these arguments relate, we also see how it can be difficult to demarcate particular arguments as belonging to separate categories. This was already shown in chapter five, where it

was noted that categorizing arguments as either cultural or economic can be arbitrary. However, what this focus on euro evaluations demonstrates is how such arguments are often *interwoven*. It is not only that cultural and economic arguments can exist next to each other (which is the case when one for example argues that ‘economically unifying countries does not work because their cultures are too different’, which has both a utilitarian and a cultural element), but also that identity and interest can constitute each other. And in that sense, different explanations of euro support might in fact not be as distinguishable as the literature sometimes presupposes, as the border between them is not as clear as it seems.

Something that particularly comes to the fore in the focus groups is how notions of (economic) interest and (cultural) community are linked. Frequently, participants frame their interests as interests of ‘people like me’ or ‘our group’, meaning that economic losses can well hurt in an identitarian manner. For example, when people say that the euro has increased prices, it is not necessarily the actual deterioration of their finances they care about, but just as well the perception that ‘people like me’ are disadvantaged – as extract 7.12 illustrated. Similarly, arguments on how ‘the euro has been good/bad for our country’ or ‘the south costs us money’ (which as we have seen occur rather frequently, particularly in the Dutch groups) can be seen as economic and identitarian, respectively identitarian and political at the same time. This emphasizes how economic interests for example are not a given, but need to be constructed by people themselves, which in turn often depends on people’s perception of their place in the community.

In this way, the focus group results urge us to think critically about the distinction between different explanations for euro support. Of course, participants do also make arguments of a clearly economic or cultural nature, as we have seen. But in many cases, such arguments are more intertwined than the dichotomy itself suggests. In this sense, these findings fit to an emerging strand of research emphasizing how cultural and economic factors are increasingly enmeshed in explaining electoral cleavages and political conflict more generally (e.g. Bornschieer et al., 2021), and it is also worthwhile for EU scholars to consider, because it clearly has implications for the debate between utilitarian and identitarian explanations of euro support. The focus groups show strongly how the

euro is often evaluated not so much in terms of its own specific consequences, but in terms of the place people feel it has in the larger political debate – the ‘us’ versus ‘them’. This embeddedness of opinions on the euro is further discussed in the next section.

7.3. The embeddedness of opinions on the euro

The possibility that opinions on European politics might be seen as embedded in more general opinions towards politics and society was already hinted at in chapter 3, the idea being that rather than consciously evaluating the EU’s policy output or institutional functioning, people form opinions towards political elites and structures in a more general sense, with the EU simply being seen as another part of these larger structures. Indeed, this is a notion coming to the fore rather strongly in the focus groups, applying in this case to the euro rather than the EU as a whole. In several ways, they show how the formation of opinions on the euro is linked to participants’ more general perceptions of politics. This does not mean that participants do not evaluate the euro on its own merits at all, or that the euro’s broader political context alone is decisive for people’s stances on the single currency, but it does emerge as an important factor in understanding public sentiments towards the euro.

To understand how, a couple of observations are relevant. Firstly, we might look at associations that participants have with the euro. Indeed, it should be noted that their discussions on the euro frequently lead participants to discuss more general political issues, such as national politics or societal developments, without being asked to do so. This is not necessarily surprising – participants were asked to discuss a political topic after all, so one might expect people to also start talking about issues that they associate with this topic. Still, the way in which they do so is interesting precisely because it reveals which implicit associations they have with the topic of the euro. Regarding such more general political discussions then, a few particular themes come up in the focus groups. As an example, let us consider the following extract, consisting of different passages.

Extract 7.13 French unemployed

Jean: It's a disaster. Today when I catch a Parisian, he wants to leave. Nine out of ten want to leave Paris.

- Michael: Because it's Paris.
- Jean: No it's because they live in France. I mean they have the same problems today in Bordeaux, in Lyon, they have the same problems in all the big cities of France.
- [...]
- Rachida: We no longer have any French products.
- Bertrand: Maybe the Americans are buying expensive stuff here, except that the rest of the year they work there and they work with a very good salary. While we do not work with a good salary anymore.
- [...]
- Rachida: We consume almost everything made in China. Everything is made... anything, Zara made in China, H&M made in China... you don't buy French. So what did the euro do for us? If it's to buy in a country that has a different currency than ours?
- [...]
- Rachida: But when you hear people, they say, but what a load of crap to have switched to the euro. It's in everyone's mouth.
- Jean: Yes because it's true that we made a better living, it was easier to earn money, salaries... An example: pensions haven't increased in 30 years and life expenses increased with 300%.
- Nadia: That's what I was getting at.

Table 7.12: Mentions of country names by group

	France	Italy	NL
NL-U	1	6	44
NL-H	2	3	26
NL-F	10	18	13
ITA-U	4	31	1
ITA-H	1	18	1
ITA-F	7	21	1
FR-U	113	3	5
FR-H	46	4	0
FR-F	25	2	1

The French groups, and notably that of the unemployed, spend a considerable amount of time discussing national politics and the state of their country (as also suggested by Table 7.4, which showcases the mentions of different country names in the respective focus groups²⁵). A recurring sentiment is French 'declinism', as hinted at in section 6.2: things

²⁵ One might also note the differences between social classes here, with the unemployed having the highest number of references to their own country in each of the three countries, and financial professionals having the lowest number.

have gotten worse over the past years and decades, in an economic as well as a political and societal sense. Extract 7.13 illustrates this (these are only a few of the many different examples in this discussion). While these are about different topics, all concern negative perceptions of the state of their country. The euro's role in this is not always made clear. In some cases, such as in the case of Rachida, participants explicitly mention that they attribute them to the arrival of the euro. In other cases, the connection to the euro is not made explicit, or even denied by other participants. Yet, they are still discussed as belonging to the same set of issues that the euro gave rise to. Thus, even though such topics might sometimes come up more as a matter of association, participants explicitly see them as caused by the euro, the fact that it comes up still has significance. Apparently, there is an association. And while this is only one example, such associations are present in several groups.

To understand this better, it is interesting to zoom in on moments when participants explicitly discuss the question to what extent a particular phenomenon or process is caused by the euro. For indeed, it is striking that the question 'is this because of the euro or not' is a theme recurring throughout the focus groups (the topic occurs at least a couple of times in every focus group). We have already seen how participants often have difficulty in distinguishing between the consequences of the euro with that of European integration as a whole, but here it concerns a more general discussion. Such discussions usually start with someone discussing a political or societal development, or more generally mentioning that times were better before the euro - implicating that this is also because of the euro. Other participants do not always challenge these implicit assumptions, but when they do, a discussion emerges on the extent to which such changes are, or are not, caused by the euro. In most cases, it is then the argument that it is *not* the euro itself that has caused these issues that prevails. In the end, participants implying that a certain development is related to the euro find it hard to substantiate the exact link between both. Yet, despite finding it difficult to explicate this argument, the *sense* that both are related is still there. In many of these cases, the euro is treated as part of an era, and is apparently seen as a symbol of the 'new' era in which things are different from the previous era (of course, the generational differences already noted in section 5.1 apply here, but as extract 7.14 below shows, some younger participants

even bring up stories of older family members to still make this point). The following extracts are an illustration of this.

Extract 7.14 Italian hairdressers

Giulia: I am 25 years old, so I haven't really experienced that moment very well but I do remember my grandparents saying that times were a lot better before the euro.

[...]

Gianni: I believe that those who haven't experienced the passage to the euro have this idea that times were better before. But I have been working for 25 years, I have been working since I was 15 and I work today as a 40 year old. So talking with older people being 70 years old it feels like they always say that times were better before and it's the same when my generation talks with 15 year old kids. We tend to say that we were better off before... I don't know why.

Bruno: Of course, something has changed from an economical point of view but I am not sure whether we can attribute this to the euro.

Extract 7.15 Italian unemployed

Giovanni: Let's say that today many blame the euro... But in reality it is not so. It was the fault of this great crisis that took everyone, from the Americans to us and created very poor families. For example, I have friends who had to sell their homes, and they have been forced to go back to their parents' houses.

Adriana: Because they couldn't pay the mortgage.

Paolo: For example, my sister and my brother-in-law with a mortgage, they both worked - but it wasn't the fault of the euro but of the economic crisis - they both lost their jobs and then found themselves managing a totally different family situation. Then there are those who are more resistant, and those who have no help and support and therefore think about the extreme gesture that is to kill themselves. The thing that bothers me is that - obviously these things should not happen - but the responsibility is always given to the euro.

Adriana: Yes to the euro... [nods]

Olivia: The fact is that the economic crisis has coincided with the euro...

Extract 7.16 French financial professionals

Loïc: The farmers, I don't know if it's specifically because of the euro, but since I was born I have seen their situation deteriorate and I think that maybe there is a link... That it may not have helped them anyway, so they seem to be losing.

This underlines the symbolic power the euro has for participants. In this context, the euro is treated as a *pars pro toto*, both for the EU as well as for

a different era. Regarding the former, participants repeatedly have difficulty in demarcating the consequences of the euro in particular from the EU as a whole – the earlier extracts 5.12-5.14, 6.12 and 6.16 can be seen as an example of this. Moreover, regarding the latter more importantly, participants – especially the older ones – also discuss the transition from national currencies to the euro as marking the beginning of a new era (for example, recall the participant responding to the video about the transition to the euro with ‘I immediately thought like phew, good old days’ in extract 5.1). For these participants, the euro is to some extent enmeshed with its context, being either a larger political structure or an epoch.

What is striking then is that in the large majority of such cases, the context with which the euro is associated is a negative one. Things have worsened over the past years, and the euro is part of that development. Indeed, the ‘embeddedness’ of opinions on the euro comes to the fore particularly in negative evaluations of it. This emerges as a class-related phenomenon: it is noteworthy that there is in this respect a strong contrast between the groups of financial professionals on the one hand, and the remaining groups on the other. While discussions of negative developments in society at large are virtually absent in the groups of financial professionals, they are rather present in the other professional groups. Given that it is well established that such feelings of political and societal discontent are class related (e.g. Steenvoorden, 2015), this is also suggestive of how euro evaluations are embedded in wider societal perceptions. To understand better the type of discontent, and how it is related to the euro, let us consider another extract.

Extract 7.17 Dutch unemployed

Kimberly: Ever since the euro came, so many things have gone backwards. Just take the health insurance fund.

Truus: Yes, they went bankrupt.

Kimberly: I mean, you know, the Dutch business... Just look at V&D [a Dutch department store] that suddenly went bankrupt. Uhm, Blokker [a Dutch retail chain] that’s not going well. And the list goes on...

On the one hand, this extract again illustrates the way in which the euro is perceived as enmeshed with its context. Even though it would be difficult to argue why the euro itself led to problems for these two Dutch

firms (which were a source of a certain national pride for many people), the fact that their decline happens in the era of the euro is enough for Kimberley to see a link. Kimberley does not explicate how exactly she sees this link, and it indeed appears difficult to substantiate such an argument. The sentiment however seems to be something like this: that things are going the wrong way, and the reasons why this is happening are diffuse. It has to do with decisions that are made in the distant sphere of political and economic decision making, which is complex. The euro however is seen as a part of this sphere, and might therefore be related to such developments as well. Indeed, this is the second element relevant here: the extent to which the euro is seen as part of a larger political sphere that participants experience as distant, something they feel they cannot control.

The larger context in which some participants see the euro is thus one that is related to political discontent. In most cases however, this appears to be a particular type of discontent, related to a sense of lacking political choice and agency. In this respect, we might refer to this content as a 'TINA' discontent, related to the politics without alternatives as described in chapter 3. As a consequence of processes like globalization, the increasing power of corporations, and elites being out of touch with the common man, people feel their voice does not matter and they lack agency in political affairs. Such sentiments are expressed in different forms, but their frequent appearance throughout the groups suggests that they have an important role in people's evaluations of the euro. Indeed, we have already seen such TINA themes coming up before, such as in the discussions on who benefits from the euro and who does not in section 5.3, where 'the powers that be' were seen as benefitting at the expense of the common man. Given their importance, variations on the 'TINA argument' were coded and categorized inductively to identify their structural role in discussions of the euro. Table 7.5 shows the resulting codes and their occurrence throughout the focus groups.²⁶

²⁶ Note that double coding was possible, and some passages were coded under two categories simultaneously. This happened with around 30% of the passages coded, and particularly in the groups of French unemployed and hairdressers, which increases the prominence of the code in these groups.

Table 7.13: Occurrence of themes related to discontent by focus group (in number of words coded on each theme)

	NL-U	NL-H	NL-F	ITA-U	ITA-H	ITA-F	FR-U	FR-H	FR-F
Times getting worse	141	0	0	0	155	0	1529	186	0
Cynical of politics in general	0	0	0	0	123	0	458	967	0
Offshoring, globalization	0	0	0	31	0	0	386	1127	0
Elites untrustworthy	195	0	75	78	67	0	471	416	0
Money, power always wins	104	0	0	0	140	0	101	779	0
Common citizen always loses	236	0	0	0	67	0	60	521	0
Politics as distant	161	45	0	0	22	0	148	382	0
Fatalism, no choice	0	0	43	0	59	46	428	0	59

Looking at the occurrence of the different categories, it is striking how discussions of discontent are brought up particularly often in the French groups of unemployed and hairdressers. Yet, while the number of such discussions coded in these two groups is exceptionally high, these themes are quite present in the Dutch group of unemployed and the Italian group of hairdressers as well. Furthermore, even in groups where these codes occur less, a similar sentiment is sometimes still present – while at the same time, the fact that the themes also occasionally occur in the groups of financial professionals does not hint at a similar sentiment. In these cases, they were not so much expressions of a larger political discontent, a genuine ‘TINA sentiment’, rather certain passages still fit the categories developed and were therefore coded as such. To understand this difference between the different groups, let us consider some extracts.

Extract 7.18 Italian financial professionals

Carlo: But sorry, when the euro came, what could not being a part of it have led to? Either I stay out or I accept rules. Of course we [Italy] chose the lesser of two evils: being part of it with the hope to improve.

Extract 7.19 Italian unemployed

Olivia: Multinationals, for example, have shifted production abroad because there is the lowest labor costs. So we go back to the previous discussion, they get stronger while in Italy there’s unemployment.

Extract 7.20 French hairdressers

Eloise: I think that, generally speaking, at the top the euro has been beneficial. On the ground, on a human scale, on our scale it hasn't been, not directly let’s say. Maybe indirectly, because I'm not informed enough to discuss it indirectly.

In the first case, we see financial professional Carlo make the argument that the euro had to be accepted because there was no choice: while it might not have worked well for Italy, staying out would have been even worse. As this clearly is a TINA theme, it had to be coded as such. Yet, it does not go together with a more general sense of discontent in this focus group. Participants do not showcase a cynical attitude towards politics, and do not talk about a divide between elites and the common man. In extract 7.19 on the other hand, there is the complaint that multinationals benefited from the transition to the euro while in Italy it led to unemployment, meaning that those with money benefited at the expense of the common men. And while this group saw relatively little other explicit TINA arguments in the rest of the discussion, the relation participants felt to politics was clearly different here from the groups of financial professionals. In extract 7.20 finally, the sentiment that those at the top win because of the euro while normal people (those 'on the ground') lose is made even more explicit, simultaneously making clear how this sentiment is also somewhat diffuse as Eloise also mentions that she does not 'feel informed enough'. Indeed, this is a sentiment recurring throughout the focus group, which is clearly colored by TINA sentiments. The next extract is another illustration of this.

Extract 7.21 French hairdressers

Eloise: And the question arises what we, ordinary citizens, have to say about all this. Because in the end, as she said earlier, you mentioned the idea of reducing public spending, but what public spending, and who would be affected? And we citizens do not have control over anything, we entrust the economy – because here we are talking about the euro – we entrust the economy of our country. The country is like a company, we entrust it to superior people as in a small company, it is the boss, and the problem...

Lorraine: I'm having a little trouble with this company metaphor.

Eloise: Yes I understand. So: what's the boss going to do in the end? He didn't know how to do his job because it's a job to be an entrepreneur, but he's not the one who pays the consequences, it's the worker he's going to fire. And so in the country it's a little bit the same. Upstairs we... we don't have control, like a worker doesn't have control over what his boss does, we don't have control over anything. And it is the ordinary citizen who will pay the consequences first. And that's the real problem.

This is a clear example of the lack of control some participants feel they have over politics. Indeed, with the usage of the term 'upstairs' Eloise's expression of the distance she experiences towards the political level strongly resembles the way in which some analysts have characterized TINA politics.²⁷ Thus, together with the negative perception of the state of society, this negative perception of the ability of politics to deal with this state can be seen as the central components of the TINA context people associate with the euro. The euro then may not be itself the main culprit of the decreasing control of politics, it in some diffuse way is still a part of it.

What is the meaning of this context for the euro? Firstly, it should be noted that the association between political discontent and the euro is not necessarily a reason to reject the euro – particularly to the extent that the euro itself is in the first place seen as a practical object, meaning it is hardly in need of evaluation beyond its daily life effect. Although some do use feelings of such general discontent as a reason to argue against the euro, for others it is more a topic to discuss next to the euro without necessarily determining their view on the euro itself, while still other focus group participants who showcase such sentiments also simply do not express a clear attitude on the euro at all. In the first place therefore, this 'embedded' TINA perception of politics can be seen as a more diffuse context to the euro, rather than a direct determinant of euro support.

Nevertheless, while thus not directly threatening the sustainability of the euro, this diffuse context does have important implications for the legitimacy of the euro. On the one hand, we might read it as suggesting there is a potential danger for the euro's legitimation in the way people connect it with a type of politics they dislike. Even if this has not materialized in sustained opposition against the euro so far, it is a risk factor for when contestation of the euro increases. On the other, it indicates how the euro's legitimacy is bound up with the larger political context it

²⁷ The Belgian journalist Van Reybrouck (2018), for example, described it by comparing individual countries to townhouses. While there used to be direct contact between political leaders 'residing in the attic', globalization – especially in the form of Europeanization – lifted the roof from the house, meaning that decision making now takes place 'somewhere in the stratosphere', a place too far from citizens to have direct interaction with.

is a part of, and we can only fully understand its legitimacy by seeing how it is part of a larger political constellation. It shows how the euro is also seen as the extension of an – often disliked – pattern. And in this way, it emphasizes not only how the euro's legitimation is sensitive to developments partly external to it, but also how the other way around, the euro and the politics it is associated with could potentially contribute to this more general diffuse type of discontent. Even while not hurting euro support because of the a-political perceptions of the euro itself, a discontent partially created by the euro can still express itself on a more fundamental level. Therefore, we must consider that the lack of a basis for a politics of the euro, or a discontent with parts of the euro's setup, may also express itself in a more general political discontent, entailing more systemic risks.

7.4. Saliency

A final element this chapter is interested in is the notion of saliency. As outlined in section 3.2, the meaning of public opinion also depends on what we might call its strength (e.g. Luttrell and Sawicki, 2020). The extent to which citizens' opinions can be seen as making particular demands and have implications in terms of legitimacy also depends on their impact (to what extent does it shape one's thinking and guide one's behavior?) and their durability (how stable is it over time and can it withstand attack?). Even if people's norms seem to clash with particular policies or institutions, there is no manifest legitimation problem if people are hardly aware of it, or do not care about it – we might only speak of a legitimacy deficit. While a high level of saliency on the other hand increases the chance of 'activating' public opinion, and strongly held disagreements are much more likely to create serious legitimation problems. Thus, besides the content of opinions, we also have to understand with what intensity they are held. We therefore want to know how salient the euro is as a topic to participants, with saliency being understood as the importance people attach to the topic of the euro (e.g. Berelson et al., 1954; Wlezien, 2005).

The preceding parts have already mentioned several points related to saliency. For example, we have seen that the euro is met with a certain tacit acceptance, that participants often have difficulty in linking the euro with political issues and demarcating what consequences it has had, and that

they find its politics quite complex to understand in general. This section will examine such findings a more structured way. More than previous chapters, this section will rely mostly on interpretive analysis. After all, the salience of a topic manifests itself particularly in more subtle items, such as the tone of a discussion, non-verbal expressions, and even things that happen outside the discussion in the focus group itself. Still, it will begin with a few quantitative indicators in order to have a more structural basis in place.

What could be a quantitative indicator of the salience of a topic in group discussions? The most straightforward answer is the frequency with which people *mention* this topic. Indeed, this is an indicator used in other focus group research on EU perceptions as well (e.g. Van Ingelgom, 2014). To test the reliability of this indicator, it comes in handy that the brief survey used in the recruitment of focus group participants also asked about people's interest in politics (or to be more precise, the frequency with which they discuss politics in their daily lives). This allows us to see if people who say they are more interested in discussing politics also refer to the euro or EU more frequently. Figure 7.3 shows how often people mentioned these themes per interest group.

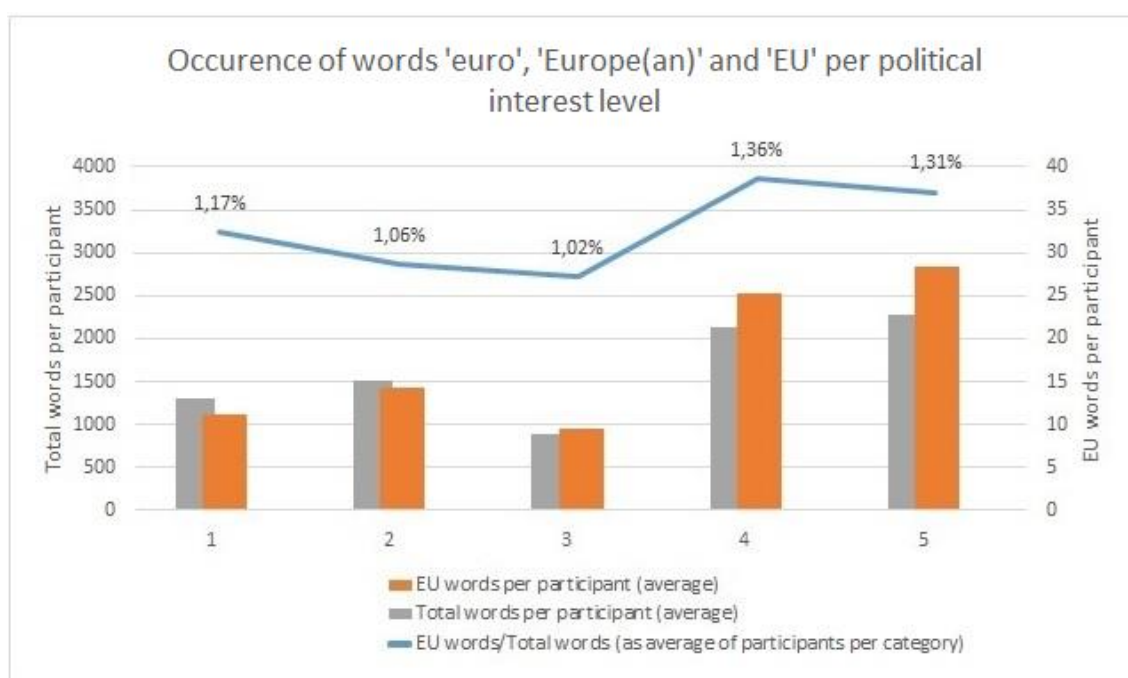


Figure 7.21: Occurrence of words 'euro', 'Europe(an)' and 'EU' per political interest level

As Figure 7.3 shows, higher interest in politics does indeed correspond with mentioning the euro or Europe more often. However, it also corresponds with speaking more in general. Perhaps this is not surprising, as we might expect people with a higher interest in politics to also speak more in discussions like the ones in these focus groups. But it makes us wonder whether this higher frequency then is a sign of a salience of politics in general, or of the euro in particular. Looking at the amount of times people refer to European themes *relative* to the total amount of words spoken by a participant then, we see that the relation weakens, but the relative frequency is still higher for participants with a higher interest in politics²⁸. As it is difficult to argue a priori which of these indicators (absolute mentions or relative mentions) captures the salience of the euro better, it therefore makes sense to use as indicators of salience both the absolute and relative mentions.

This then allows us to make comparisons between and within the different groups. When doing so, one observation that stands out is how such references occur much more frequently in the first part of the focus groups than in the second (see Figure 7.4). This surely is related to the fact that these first three questions focused more specifically on the euro itself, rather than the normative and political considerations associated with it. However, it can also be read as another sign of the difficulty participants have with connecting the euro to politics themes. As the previous chapter already suggested, participants are often at pains to understand how exactly the euro is related to themes like solidarity and autonomy. What adds to this is the observation that it is particularly references to the euro itself that decrease in the second part of the focus groups, more than

²⁸ Although this does depend on how we calculate this metric. It is important to note that in Figure 7.3, the relative frequency of EU words is calculated as the average of relative frequencies per participant within an interest-category, rather than by simply dividing the total mentions of EU words in an interest-category by the total amount of words spoken in this category. If we would opt for the latter, the correspondence between relative frequencies and interest level would be even stronger (with a relative frequency of 0,86% for interest level 1, 0,95% for interest level 2, 1,06% for interest level 3, 1,18% for interest level 4 and 1,25% for interest level 5). This would make the indicator seem even more useful for determining salience. However, to give the same weight to each participant, the calculation used for Figure 7.3 is more suiting. This also points at the sensitivity of this metric, meaning we should still be careful in relying on it.

references to Europe in general. This can be interpreted as a sign of participants associating the euro less with political questions, and it perhaps is its everyday side that has more salience – something that will be discussed more in detail below.

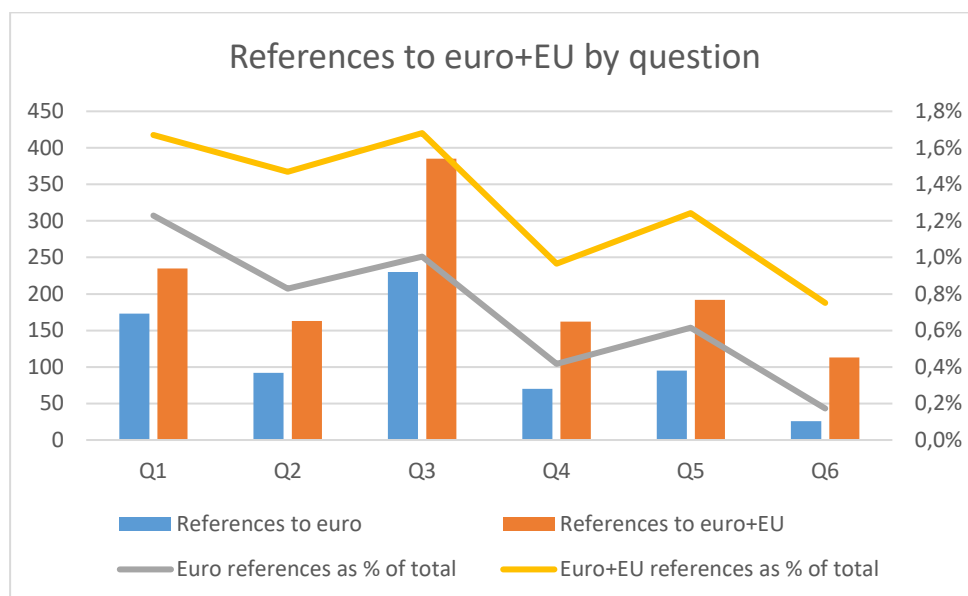


Figure 7.22: References to euro+EU by question

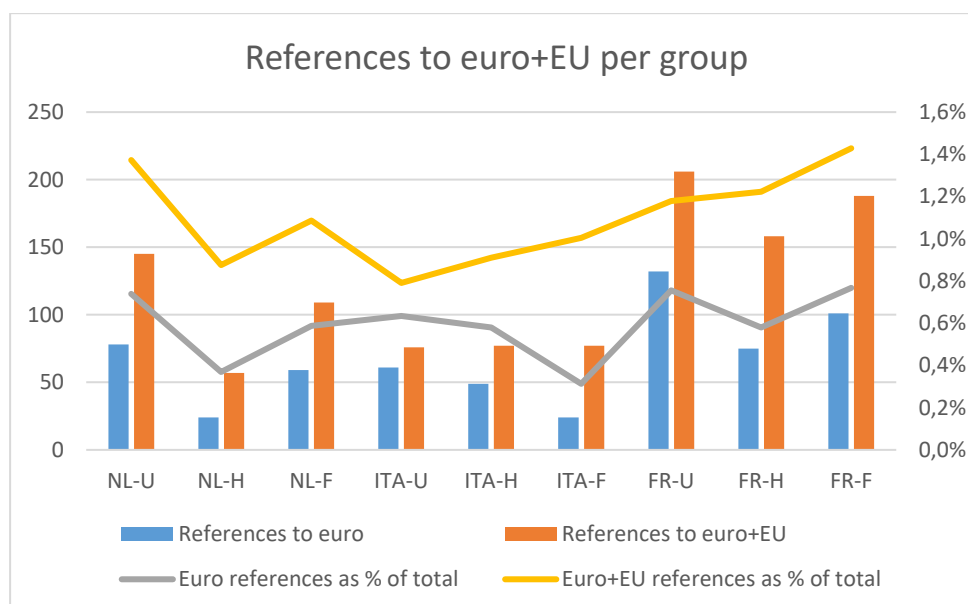


Figure 7.23: References to euro+EU by group

Finally, looking at the group differences (Figure 7.5), it is striking that the euro and Europe are brought up more frequently in the French groups as well as in that of the Dutch unemployed. To some extent, this is again related to the fact that these groups simply went on for longer, and hence

simply spoke more. However, in relative terms too, the euro was mentioned slightly more in these groups than in other groups. In that sense, these data suggest that the euro had more salience in these groups than in others.

Together, these figures give as some basis for understanding the salience of the euro and the relative difference between and within the groups. However, they tell us little about general salience. After all, it is difficult to make comparisons and assess how these frequencies relate to the salience of other topics. And even if we would try to make comparisons with other research²⁹, the different setup of other focus groups makes it is hard to give meaning to such comparisons. Therefore, this section will from here focus more on qualitative indicators of salience.

Doing so with the theme of indifference in the back of our minds, we might be surprised to find several signs indicating that participants have a certain interest in discussing the euro. In general, there are few participants for whom the euro appears as an abnormal topic discuss. Indeed, in most focus groups the discussion takes on a form that is comparable to the dynamics of a typical discussion in a 'natural' setting, with participants appearing to forget the artificial setting of the discussion and losing themselves in their arguments. People frequently recognize their own experiences and opinions in remarks by others, showing that these are things that 'make sense' to them. This applies in particular to discussions concerning memories of the transition to the euro, but sometimes also to normative arguments about topics like solidarity or – more frequently – national politics. In other cases, there are participants who showcase relatively sophisticated knowledge, who disagree with other participants to the point of talking over each other, or take issue with the way a question was posed – all suggesting a certain strength of opinions.

7.22 Italian financial professionals

[After being shown the video accompanying question 6]

²⁹ Where, we might note, frequencies are of a similar magnitude. In the CITAE project for example, which consisted of 24 (generally longer) focus groups on the EU (Duchesne et al., 2013; Van Ingelgom, 2014: 119), there were 4520 mentions of European themes, compared to 1008 mentions in the 9 focus groups of this study.

Clemente: There's a little mistake in the video because note that the economic crisis started with the bank crisis in 2007 in UK with the Northern Bank. Do you remember the queue at the bank desks? So what happened there? The English Central Bank intervened, otherwise English would have collapsed. This, in part, also happened in Europe. Spanish banks have indeed been saved by European money. We had, at that time instead, a ministry who said that our banking system was solid and didn't ask for help. Then, what happened instead? Merkel said "after we saved Spanish banks, it will never happen again that we save other banks with our money".

7.23 French hairdressers

Tristan: But the Greek crisis forced us to think, to think, to think about: what are we doing? Do we drop it so it will sink, so we don't all sink together? Or do we let them go. And it had serious consequences. Because it meant that Europe was useless. It wasn't used to save the poorest people who couldn't make it. Regardless of the fact that they had cheated and that they [Europe] had every reason not to be helping.

Eloise: It's a bit of a survival parachute for them to be in Europe. Because they knew very well that they weren't going to be let go. There is cohesion, there is union. So is it the euro... it's not a monetary union but there is a basic union.

Karim: But I'm sorry, but who paid instead of the Greeks? Nobody, not the French, not me personally, I am convinced nobody, only they have paid.

Eloise: But the question is...

Karim: Because when they find themselves with a pension of 800 euros, it goes to 250 euros, but I'm sorry it's not in France that we did that, it was in Greece.

7.24 French financial professionals

Jean-François: But solidarity doesn't mean paternalistic. So for me, being in solidarity means reaching out, but it doesn't mean that you're adopting my way of life now [everyone agrees except Paul]. What he was saying, do we want all Greeks to be Dutch. No. It also involves respecting certain things...

Paul: No, but we're not in a world of teddy bears.

Jean-François: No, it's not the teddy bears.

Paul: Yes, it's the teddy bears you're saying.

Jean-François: No, it's a political choice. Imposing on someone a world of life they don't want...

Paul: Well, if they applied to come back, it wasn't us who went to get them to adopt the euro.

- Jean-François: But when they applied, they didn't say: I want to be told the economic agenda for the next 15 years and the consequences for the next 50.
- Charles: You mustn't...
- Paul: Wait! You benefit... You enter the euro, it comes with some form of commitment. You make up your accounts you...
- Jean-François: Absolutely, but...
- Paul: I'm sorry, but we finance them and give them ten of a billion euros.
- Loïc: But that's because of a few men, but it's not the whole country.

These extracts show relatively exceptional cases of high salience – even if it is difficult to convey this in written extracts – which are certainly not present in all discussions (as will be discussed further below). Still, they are signs of a salience the euro has for some participants. And indeed, there are more signs of an interest in the topic in other groups as well. For example, the French groups generally wanted to continue discussions even after the moderator had said it was time to move on to another topic or to end the discussion. In the group of French financial professionals, participants took some of the questions so serious that before starting the discussions they drafted lists of arguments. Also telling is that some participants (notably in the groups of Dutch unemployed and French unemployed) afterwards mentioned how much they enjoyed the discussion. This was particularly striking in the Dutch group of unemployed, as this remark came from a participant who before the discussion had indicated she had little interest in politics, and thought she probably had very little to add to the discussion. Finally, in one case the discussion even led to a participant becoming emotional, apparently because the topic discussed reminded her of an experience in her personal life. While the emotion thus did not concern the euro per se, the fact that the discussion on the euro's politics apparently did trigger thoughts about such personal experiences does suggest a relatively close association between both.

7.25 Dutch unemployed

- Truus: Solidarity is a beautiful word until it starts to cost you money.
- Kimberly: Yes, but I think that when push comes to shove, everybody will think about his own wallet
- Truus: Yes, nobody wants that. You know, when I was doing well I always used to give something to the guy standing at the Albert Heijn [Dutch supermarket]. More for your own conscience than for him, it wasn't that useful to him, but I would feel so good! Now I can't afford that anymore, so I don't do it anymore. But when I would be a homeless

person standing at Albert Heijn, I would like it when people would give me some change. You're on the other side then. And I've got to say, I always used to have a job, and now I'm at the other side of the coin. And I must say, now you see how many steps it actually is to the abyss, and it isn't much...

[starts to cry]

[...]

I hadn't counted on this, I'm sorry

On themselves, these examples of salience are anecdotal more than structural. However, they fit larger findings about discussion dynamics and ways in which participants find the euro an interesting relevant and to some extent familiar topic to discussions. At least, for most participants, it is not a flat-out *non-topic*.

At the same time, this does not mean that it is a highly salient topic either. Indeed, there on the other hand are also several signs of the limitations of the euro's salience – some of which we have already seen in previous chapters. For example, we have encountered many examples of where participants find it difficult to understand the euro and its politics. There are several cases of participants expressing they find the euro and European politics in general complex topics, and that they lack knowledge to give sound judgements on certain questions (some examples of this include extracts 5.2, 5.3, 5.19, 5.20, 6.20, 6.25, and 7.20), just as there are many cases of participants making statements that are incorrect or flawed. This suggests that, even if participants have some interest in discussing the euro, they simultaneously experience a distance to it as well as to the context of European politics it is embedded in.

7.26 French unemployed

Michael: For us European citizens, it always remains very, very vague. Now we see that they are holding elections because they have changed the European government, each country must send an emissary, now we have refused a French woman, it is still not very concrete for us.

Jean: When you look at the far right today in our house, I can tell you it's a mess. They have I don't know how many seats, it means that we can't even show what France really means because right now...

Michael: But during the European elections you understood everything? People didn't even know why they were voting. I had a lot of people around me who said: I vote because I was told to vote, but I don't understand all the stakes of these European elections.

Jean: It's true that we're not informed.
Michael: But it's technical, who does what? Where? How? Where? The Parliament

Jean: It's complicated because it's not well explained to us.

7.27 Italian hairdressers

Moderator: How do you respond to the statement: being in a currency union together means that Euro countries should be solidary with each other?

Bruno: This a point of view which I never thought about to be honest.

7.28 Dutch financial professionals

Henk: I used to work for this department [of a bank], and I then made this sticker, for SMEs that needed to know the conversion rates of the markets, of... And I must say, this is an element I've never really understood. How they got to this conversion rate, and I think that the average Dutch consumer, well... Did we come into this euro expensive or cheap, I just can't judge it.

Milan: Later this Wellink [ex-president of Dutch Cenral Bank] or someone else, some person, said it was cheap for us.

Henk: Yes...

Milan: So I think this is where some of the pain is.

Henk: I know this discussion took place then too, but I just can't really judge it for the rest, and I think 90% of the Netherlands can't.

7.29 French unemployed

[After the moderator asked about the consequences of the euro)

Rachida: The European Central Bank, she took a hit too.

Bertrand: What do you mean?

Rachida: Well, the euro didn't give them...

Michael: Having only one currency.

Rachida: Yes, I think they had a drop.

Michael: And the big groups, so I guess for them...

Rachida: We don't talk about the European bank, but I guess it [the euro] wasn't positive for them either. They didn't collapse, but...

These are some examples of the types of difficulties participants have with understanding the euro. As the latter extract illustrates in particular, it is especially the link with the euro and its political consequences, as well as with its institutional architecture that participants find difficult. While the ECB of course only came into being because of the creation of the euro, this is not so straightforward for many participants, some of which who feel that on the contrary, the ECB faced adverse effects because of the euro.

This difficulty participants have in understanding the euro's political character already came up before (with section 5.1 already hinting at the limited importance of the ECB in particular), but is important to emphasize again, as it also has relevance for understanding the euro's salience. For what it shows is how, while people generally have little difficulty in relating to the symbolic difference the euro has made, or in discussing its impact on prices, anything that goes beyond such everyday life associations is quickly seen as difficult. Even if participants see the euro as a meaningful topic, the euro is in a political sense often seen as a relatively inconsequential item.

7.30 French unemployed

Nadia: Yes, finally since we switched to the euro, what has changed?

Jean: The borders.

Nadia: That's all.

Michael: The purchasing power has decreased anyway.

Rachida: There I was looking for my words, it's the purchasing power.

Jean: I don't think it's because of the euro.

Michael: It's general inflation.

[...]

Rachida: I didn't know much about the franc, how long ago was that?

Michael: It was 2002.

Jean and Nadia: In 2001.

Michael: But we quickly forget.

Such inconsequentiality decreases the euro's *political* salience. As we have seen before, people find it difficult to understand what difference the euro really made (one might think of extracts 7.14-7.17, as well as extracts 6.14-6.17 on the relation between the euro and autonomy), even if there is a paradox here. For on the one hand, people do attribute many things to the transition to the euro, especially larger societal developments of which it is difficult to see how they might actually be related to the single currency (think of the 'everything has gone backwards since the euro' type of remarks in extracts 7.14-7.17). Yet on the other, these are vague associations for participants more than concrete consequences, and when discussing the euro more in detail such views are not sustained. In such more concrete discussions, it is the view of the euro as inconsequential that dominates. This translates into participants – particularly the younger ones – wondering to what extent the euro really is an item in need of much

consideration in this first place (as we have already seen in extracts 5.5-5.7, as well as 7.8).

7.31 Dutch financial professionals

Tom: Well, I was quite young when it happened, 14 years or so. So well, what do you really get from it. It's more that you simply take notice, accept it as a fact, I think.

A similar dynamic applies to the way participants discuss the politics of the euro. Issues like solidarity and autonomy could in principle have a different type of salience than the euro itself, which in turn could still affect the legitimation of the euro. And indeed, these issues in some cases achieve more *political* salience than the euro. In these cases, disagreement turns more ideological, and some discussions, people talk about them as themes they find important (such solidarity in the Dutch groups and autonomy the French groups – one might also think of extract 7.24). People generally are aware of the tensions between different member states, and sometimes express critical attitudes towards the policies designed to address them. At the same time, these are not critical opinions in the sense that participants actively profess them. Besides being accompanied by a certain fatalism, many people simply find these normative questions as well as the concrete policy issues at stake difficult. Rather than expressing deeply held convictions pre-existing the focus groups, discussions more take the form of a sense making exercise. In that sense, the importance of these items is a diffuse one. In line with this, we have seen that normative stances appear relatively malleable and susceptible to cueing and prompting. Thus, the salience of these items is in this sense comparable to 'embedded' political perception have of the euro: even to the extent that such issues are salient to participants, this is a diffuse salience.

For the euro itself then, this translates into tacit acceptance, as we saw in beginning of this chapter. Few participants express strong opinions on euro itself, and there are little signs of strong contestation. The euro being seen in the first place as an everyday object, it is *taken for granted* as a fact of daily life. Even if the euro is interesting enough to discuss, this is an everyday interest more than a political salience. As soon as the euro does get more political, it also becomes more diffuse, a part of a larger political context. Such diffuse political issues in turn are also seen as relevant to discuss by participants, and in that sense as more *politically* salient, but this

salience does not so much concern the euro itself. Thus, this diffuseness decreases the chance of the euro becoming a politically salient entity itself – it stays in the realm of banal acceptance.

It should be noted that this is a general image, and there are important group differences. Figure 7.5 already suggested that there are some national differences – most importantly that the euro appeared to be discussed as a more salient topic in France – but it is particularly the social differences that are important here. While the image applies quite accurately to the groups of unemployed and hairdressers, the groups of financial professionals can be seen as outliers – even if many observations made above do still apply to these groups too. For the groups of financial professionals, the political side of the euro generally does have more salience. As noted before, these groups discuss the euro more often in political-economic terms, while at the same time diffuse political associations ('TINA context') are not as present. What is more, this political-economic side of the euro is discussed with a relatively high level of knowledge – particularly in the French and Italian groups of financial professionals – and such topics are discussed as meaningful, important topics to form opinions about. This also translates into the discussion dynamics. These are not necessarily more energetic – on the contrary – but they are more reflective, and more importance is attached to finding the 'right' answers to questions.

At the same time, despite the relatively high level of knowledge and interest, even in these groups the topic is seen as difficult, and there are still several signs of ambivalence as well as limitations to people's understanding of the euro (extracts 5.9, 5.13, and 7.28 can be taken as examples). Likewise, discussion dynamics are more about testing arguments against others than about substantial disagreements between pre-existing opinions. This means that even if the political salience of the euro is higher in these groups, this is still not a salience that leads to contestation of the euro. Taking into account that these groups of financial professionals were selected precisely because they are likely to show exceptionally high levels of interest in and knowledge about the euro, they in this sense function as an exception that proves the rule, and confirm the validity of the diagnosis of the euro's limited *political* salience.

Altogether, structuring relevant findings of previous chapters and complementing these with new observations, this section confirms the relevance of the distinction between the everyday and the political side of the euro. On the one hand, there is a relatively high interest in the euro, which – more than to its political side – is related to participants' daily life experience with the euro and the symbolic importance of the transition to it. These are things participants recognize, and that some participants experience as meaningful. In addition, this interest in the discussions does also appear to be related to the more diffuse political associations they have with the euro. Despite the lack of a concrete link with the euro, these related topics are still seen as important, and as such form a meaningful background to euro. Yet, this is more an explanation for participants' interest in the discussion than an indication of the salience of the euro itself. Moreover, the salience of its more diffuse context is unlikely to lead to the politicization of euro in particular. The euro itself not being perceived as politically consequential, it is rather perceived as a taken for granted aspect of daily life with rather limited, or at best diffuse political salience.

7.5. Conclusion

The findings of this chapter consistently show how there are two sides different sides to normative positioning on the euro. On the one hand, the euro is evaluated as an everyday life object. Participants frequently refer to the euro's effect on purchasing power, the convenience it offers, or the everyday symbolic difference it made. On the other hand however, there still is a political context that has a meaningful role in people's positioning towards the euro. For many participants, while the practical reality of the euro makes it into a daily life item, its symbolic side – its connection with a larger political project – makes it into an entity that is associated with more general political issues.

This two-sidedness of opinion formation on the euro does not just confirm the findings in chapter 5 on the relation between the everyday side of the euro and its political side. It also deepens our understanding of both by demonstrating how each is important to how people make sense of the euro and take normative positions on it. On the one hand, it shows how the euro's everyday side translates into a certain taken-for-grantedness.

This is made clear particularly by the *types* of opinions participants express on the euro. For rather than being the object of strongly held attitudes, the euro seems to be met with tacit acceptance. For many participants, the euro is a part of our daily lives that is there to stay, and as such an a-political object is either too distant or too banal to consider challenging – for which the low amount of normative stances expressed can be seen as an indication. Even those who oppose the euro speak more about regretting the choice to start with the euro than an active desire to abandon it.

On the other hand however, there still is the political context with which participants associate the euro. And for most of these participants, this association is a negative one. To the extent that the euro is a *pars pro toto* for something larger, it is another part of a political-economic sphere that is distant and complex, and about which ‘the common man’ does not have much to say. This perception then goes together with a certain discontent regarding the state of politics, a ‘TINA discontent’ linked to a feeling that ‘times have been getting worse’, to a cynicism about politics and elites or to a perception that the interests of the powerful always go at the expense of the common man. This is a diffuse context, and rather than an explicit link there is an implicit association with the euro. Still, this association plays an important role in several discussions, and emphasizes how the euro is embedded in more general perceptions of politics. In other words, how people’s positioning on the euro is strongly colored by their outlook on politics more broadly.

What then are the implications of these findings? Firstly, they challenge the distinction between identitarian and utilitarian explanations of euro support. It emphasizes how perceptions of (economic) interest and cultural identity interact, and these two categories seem to be more intertwined than often presupposed in the literature – particularly in the context of diffuse, embedded arguments. When people for example feel that their community (‘the common man’) loses because of the euro, there is a clear interaction between interest and community construction.

More importantly, the findings on the two sidedness of opinion formation on the euro have significant implications for our understanding of the euro’s legitimacy. On the one hand, to the extent that the euro is met with banal acceptance, the diagnosis would be close to a-legitimacy, as the euro

is hardly in need of any justification beyond functioning reliably in people's everyday life interactions. On the other hand, a diffuse context of discontent entails a potential legitimacy deficit. It does not directly threaten support for the euro, as it can well go together with banal acceptance. As long as the euro itself is in the first place seen as a practical object, a diffuse association of discontent will not make people reconsider the euro. Indeed, in this sense, the euro's taken-for-grantedness *decreases* the chance of people challenging it. However, when a development or event breaks through the euro's everyday veneer, such a diffuse association can be powerful enough to help shaping attitudes – particularly when people lack strong pre-existing attitudes.

Finally, the relevance of these results also goes beyond the euro itself, as they have implications for the way we understand the role of public opinion in the EU as well. By underlining how opinions on European affairs can often be seen as embedded in more general political opinions, and are thus characterized by a kind of diffuseness, they add to our understanding of the politicization of the EU. For in this way, they challenge the idea that it is citizens' increasingly critical stances towards the EU that fuel the constraining dissensus that is said to have emerged. Instead of being driven by strong politicization of the EU at the citizen level, we can perhaps better understand it as driven by a more general political discontent which creates a more fertile ground for mobilization against the EU by political elites. The conclusion will elaborate on this.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

When the euro crisis struck, political attitudes all over Europe rapidly deteriorated. Trust in the EU almost halved³⁰, support for EU membership declined substantially³¹, and average trust in national governments went as low as 23%³². In all this turmoil, however, support for the euro remained comfortably above 60% in the Eurozone – a level of support unmatched by any other European institution. Now a few years later, it in fact is at an all-time high of 80%, and this despite the fact that the euro might not only be seen as a powerful symbol of the European mode of governance of which citizens appear to have become so critical, but also played a rather central role in the euro crisis – one might underline that it gave it its very name. Indeed, regarding it as the main culprit of the crisis, Eurosceptic parties all over Europe did *try* to mobilize electorates against it. In line with this, observing that support for the policies needed for its survival appeared lacking, and seeing substantial legitimacy flaws in its architecture, many analysts were pessimistic about the euro's chances of survival, leading some to speak of a 'near-death experience' which 'brought the whole European Union on the brink of collapse (Szymanowski, 2020: 601). And yet, the single currency has continued to be the most widely supported institution of European integration.

This is only one way to highlight the puzzling nature of the euro's legitimation. Just as we might observe how the euro simultaneously is severely challenged and widely supported, so we might note how the euro is a deeply political construction with fundamental implications for the

³⁰ From 57% in 2007 to 31% in 2012 (European Commission: 2022).

³¹ To 47% in 2011 (ibid.)

³² In 2013 (ibid.)

organization of the economy, while at the same time being a daily life reality that everybody can carry in their pockets. Or how it is simultaneously a political as well as economic and cultural entity, a product of a shared supranational as well as competing national interests. Embodying such paradoxes, it invites us to ask not only how public opinion towards it is constructed, but also how we should understand the meaning of such public opinion. Does a high level of public support mean that the euro is also sustainable in the long run, given that beyond support for the single currency itself it also requires support for the policies that are necessary to sustain it?

In raising this question, the single currency also draws attention to bigger questions concerning the relation between the EU and the public. In the field of EU studies, there is the broadly shared idea that the increasing politicization of the EU has developed concomitantly with a more important role for the public. At the same time, however, research paying greater attention to how the EU is perceived 'on the ground' has reported that citizens still see it as a complex, distant entity about which they find it difficult to formulate clear, stable opinions, meaning their attitudes are often characterized by indifference and ambivalence. If this leads us to the question of how to understand the relation between the public and the EU, the euro presents us with a very interesting case of this paradox. As an important symbol of the EU with far-reaching political consequences that at the same time functions as a practical object in the daily lives of citizens, it offers us a way of better understanding how the everyday life perceptions of citizens relate to political decision making that shapes their living conditions. And indeed, while not the primary focus of this study, it is with this interest in the background that this thesis studies public perceptions of the euro.

In doing so, this study has more specifically asked *how citizens understand and evaluate the euro and its politics, and what that means for its legitimacy*. In addressing this question, chapter two has first given an account of the euro's legitimacy, underlining the multiple character of the euro: a political entity as well as an economic and a cultural one, a core state power as well as a daily life reality. This chapter argued that as a consequence of this, the euro's legitimation not only revolves around immanent levels of support, but that such support to some extent also

needs to be grounded in the normative convictions of the public in a way that makes public desires compatible with the 'potentialities' of the euro.

Chapter three subsequently aimed to develop a particular approach to studying legitimation, underlining the need to balance subjective citizen perceptions with normative criteria. In particular, it aimed to make clear the role of the 'diffuseness' of EU public opinion, such as indifference and ambivalence, in understanding the legitimation of the EU. This leads to an approach that, on the one hand, focuses on citizens' lived experience of the euro, while, on the other hand, going beyond studying this 'banal' side of the euro by interpreting these subjective realities in terms of the euro's characteristics. Are the political implications of the currency union compatible with the normative stances of its public? As such, it rather than mapping support employs a close reading of public opinion. Using focus groups as a relatively innovative methodology that offers the possibility to gain the emerging bottom-up perceptions of citizens, as laid out in chapter four, it tries to 'dissect' public opinion as if under a microscope. In particular, this study relies on a series of focus groups conducted in three countries that each had their own specific experience of the euro crisis – France, Italy and the Netherlands. What does such a close reading of citizens' talking about the euro tell us about the euro's legitimation?

8.1. Research findings

Through three empirical chapters, each with its own subquestion, this thesis has sought to address this question. Chapter five firstly asked how citizens perceive and understand the euro. Most importantly, the findings here emphasize the importance of the everyday life side of the euro. For most focus group participants, the euro is in the first place an everyday object having primarily a utilitarian and symbolic meaning. Above all, the euro is something that affected prices, influenced everyday practices, and facilitated activities like travelling. This does not mean that political considerations are not part of people's understanding of the euro at all. The euro does have a symbolic meaning that transcends the everyday, and focus group participants do connect it to notions of Europeanization and more general political issues. However, this connection is generally diffuse. Participants' political understanding of the euro is often based on vague associations of the euro with larger EU questions as well as more

general political developments, of which the euro then is a symbol. Political or macro-economic consequences of the euro are virtually absent from the associations with the euro that participants bring up, just like aspects of its institutional framework (like the ECB) are hardly touched upon at all.

A similar 'diffuse', or rather 'embedded', perception of the euro's political side also shows in perceptions of the consequences of the euro. On the one hand, participants see member states as affected differently by the euro, a perception that differs between countries: people in the Dutch groups feel that the Southern European countries benefited at the expense of the North, while people in the Italian as well as in the French groups, on the contrary, feel that the euro was penalizing for southern countries, whereas northern countries benefitted. These are fairly concrete conceptions of the euro's consequences, which might have been expected in the sense that they are in line with how media narratives differ between member states. And indeed, they are also perceptions in which the euro is linked to some form of political conflict. More surprisingly however, many participants place the euro in a societal conflict in which 'elites' (political as well as financial) win at the expense of the 'common man'. Tellingly, this is a divide that does not come to the fore in the groups with financial professionals, but is brought up in the majority of others. While the exact way in which the euro produces such differences generally remains vague, it is telling in that it shows how perceptions of the euro are related to and indeed embedded in more general understandings of politics.

Chapter six subsequently asked how citizens evaluate the politics of the euro. Rather than focusing on the currency itself, this chapter focused on people's positioning regarding questions concerning items like solidarity and autonomy. In itself, the type of opinions expressed on these items in the focus groups are not directly problematic for the euro. Most opinions are in line with what the euro demands: the majority of arguments expressed have no problem with the solidarity the euro requires, just as most are understanding of having a framework of shared rules as a consequence of the interdependence the euro entails. It should be noted however that there are still cross-country differences in such opinions, and that particular views in certain countries are potentially slightly more problematic for the euro. The Dutch hesitance to agree with European

solidarity is most relevant here, while the value that many French participants attach to national autonomy can lead to potential tensions. Nevertheless, at the same time, there is a high degree of ambivalence in the discussions on these questions, indicating a flexibility and indeterminacy that decreases the chance of publics actively challenging the euro's politics. What is more, participants have difficulty in connecting issues like solidarity and autonomy to the euro in the first place, a consequence being that negative opinions about EMU policies do not need to translate into resistance against the single currency. Thus, the findings of this chapter do not seem to provide evidence for pressing legitimization problems.

Going beyond manifest opinions however, and zooming in on the tacit assumptions and convictions underlying opinions, some cracks in the basis for the euro's politics appear. Firstly, it is clear that opinions are fragmented strongly along national lines. Not only do participants perceive the questions around the euro's politics through national lenses and narratives, they also view them in terms of their national interests. Indeed, secondly, participants rarely seem to see questions around solidarity and autonomy as a matter of common European concern. Financial support to other countries, for example, is seen as charity more than as the accepted consequence of sharing a political project. Indeed, the focus groups hardly provide evidence of the perception of a European commonality in the first place. In light of this, some limitations on one's direct national interest are acceptable, but only as long as the net result is beneficial for one's country. Therefore, this way of reasoning about the euro's politics is likely to be particularly problematic for the euro in countries that see themselves as a net contributor to the EU (such as the Netherlands), while participants from countries with a lower self-perception (such as Italy) will be more inclined to see themselves as being dependent on the EU, and are therefore more likely to ultimately accept constraints. This fits with de Vries' (2018) 'benchmark' theory of public opinion towards the EU, which posits that in countries where satisfaction with national political institutions and economic performance is lower, stances towards European integration will be more benevolent because the perceived benefits are higher. In that sense, there are deficits that can be mobilized, and the normative underpinnings of the euro are fragile in

the sense that the mobilization of these deficits can translate into functional problems.

The third empirical chapter focused specifically on people's normative positioning on the euro, looking at how actual opinions of the euro sit between the everyday perception of the euro and its political consequences. On the one hand, the findings emphasize the centrality of utilitarian reasoning, which on the surface is dominant. More than revealing an economic perception of the euro, this appears to fit particularly into an 'everyday' understanding of the euro, as it concerns arguments regarding convenience (in the form of travelling) and 'everyday purchasing power' more than structural economic effects. On the other hand, there still is a *political* context that has a meaningful role in people's positioning towards the euro. More than the euro's concrete consequences, it is the way in which it has a place in people's political orientation more generally that is relevant here. For when participants do talk about the euro in a more political way, their understanding of the euro (as mentioned) is generally based on vague associations of the euro with larger EU questions as well as more general political developments, of which the euro then is a symbol. Yet, even if this is a diffuse perception of the euro's politics, this does not mean it is not consequential. Strikingly, such an understanding of the euro is particularly related to more negative perceptions of the euro, with participants referring to a vague perception that things have simply become worse after the introduction of the euro, and relating it to other developments that have increased the distance between politics and the common citizen – something we might refer to as 'TINA discontent'. To the extent that the euro is political, it becomes part of a bigger political sphere, a sphere that is perceived as distant and difficult to oversee, and that is therefore perceived negatively.

Perhaps even more than highlighting the grounds of euro evaluations however, this chapter underlines the *types* of opinions people have on the euro. Rather than being consciously evaluated, the euro itself is mostly taken for granted, and met with what we could call a banal acceptance. This applies particularly to participants from younger generations, who because of a weaker (or no) memory of using another currency are also more likely to simply not see the euro as an item that requires much consideration at all. Indeed, it is striking how the focus groups show that

there is generational difference in perceptions of the euro, which – despite the fact that it perhaps is not very surprising – is a relevant addition to existing literature, which has generally paid less attention to the role of age. Still, this taken-for-grantedness also applies to older generations, even though they perceive the transition to the euro as more of a milestone than do younger generations (which also suggests how the taken-for-grantedness of the euro might increase the more the transition to the euro is something of the past). It is not that the euro itself is not a relevant topic for participants to discuss at all, but it has little political salience. As a consequence, participants rarely question it, or affectively praise it for that matter, either because it is a taken for granted aspect of daily life, or because it is seen as a *fait accompli* that is not subject to political agency. It is just something that is there, and that is there to stay. Therefore, even participants who evaluate the euro negatively frequently express a fatalist sentiment that it would be better not to have started with it, rather than actively support its abandonment. Altogether, this underlines how the everyday life character of the euro facilitated its adoption by allowing for a banal acceptance – even if it is also surrounded by a diffuse type of discontent.

8.2. Interpreting the results: legitimization of the euro

These findings have several implications for the questions raised in this study. Firstly, they speak to the empirical literature on public opinion on the euro. Relatively little research has directly addressed the question why exactly, in the midst of rising Euroscepticism and decreasing trust in EU institutions, the euro has remained one of the most supported elements of European integration. With much of the literature on euro support being dedicated to the question of whether utilitarian or identitarian considerations drive support, some have suggested that as the risks surrounding the euro project have increased, the public has increasingly started to use a utilitarian logic in evaluating it (Hobolt and Wratil, 2015), and the electorate has come to see an exit from the euro as risky and costly (also see Jurado et al., 2020).

The findings of this study do not necessarily contradict this hypothesis, although it should be noted that fears of an exit were rarely raised in the focus groups. However, the findings do bring up another explanation that

has generally been overlooked by survey research: the euro's banality. They indicate that it is because of the euro's taken-for-grantedness that the legitimacy problems some analysts have identified have not materialized in the sense that it has led citizens to reject it. People simply do not blame the euro so much for political or economic issues, but instead often appreciate its practical convenience. It might still be true that citizens generally see exiting the euro as risky and costly, but it is important to consider a second possibility: that many hardly consider this as an option in the first place, either because they do not feel it is an option that is on the table, or because they do not think about it at all. Much more frequently than discussing the possibility of an exit, focus group participants express a perception of the euro as an irreversible part of their daily lives that is simply there to stay.

The findings of this study in this way also speak to the debate between utilitarian and identitarian explanations of euro support. Rather than showing that one of these explanations carries more weight, they suggest that identity and economy are not so easy to distinguish as the literature often suggests. After all, economic interests are not a given but depend on how people construct these themselves, which in turn often depends on peoples' perception of their place in the community. Indeed, what becomes clear in the focus groups is how people often frame their interests as interests of 'people like me', meaning that economic losses can well hurt in an identitarian manner. For example, arguments on how 'the south costs us money', or 'we the normal people are always disadvantaged while those with money always win' clearly mix utilitarian and identitarian considerations. This is of course not to say that economic and identitarian considerations do not matter, but rather that it is difficult to distinguish them as clearly as survey results appear to allow. It underlines how in the context of a larger universalism-particularism cleavage that increasingly shapes how people think about where they stand in society (e.g. Bornschieer et al., 2021), the literature on euro support - and that on EU public opinion in general - must also consider how economics and culture coincide.

Moving to the core question of this study, what then do these empirical findings mean for our understanding of the euro's legitimation? If our diagnosis is one of a broadly shared tacit acceptance of the euro, it appears

best not to speak of legitimacy or illegitimacy but of *a-legitimacy*, as the euro is hardly in need of any justification beyond functioning reliably in people's everyday life interactions. Hence, it is justified to say that the euro is currently 'protected' by its banality. Its meaningfulness lying precisely in its impact on daily life practices, its effect on everyday economics, and the symbolism surrounding the transition to it, it is shielded from contestation. This, besides its banality, is also helped by the diffuseness of its politics. The euro's political side being perceived as abstract and technical, and people having difficulty linking the euro with political questions (such as solidarity or autonomy, or an institutional framework such as the ECB) has a limiting effect on active consideration and challenging of the euro. The high level of support for the euro, despite populist attempts at mobilizing people against it, is a clear indication of this. Indeed, the euro's daily life nature can in that sense even be seen as legitimating the euro's potentially contentious politics. While people might not be in favor of European solidarity, the idea that this might lead to giving up the euro even helps in making more people accept it.

But is banal acceptance enough for the euro? A-legitimacy is not the same as legitimacy. As McNamara argued, while the euro's everyday appearance might "allow for a certain banal acceptance, the repercussions of the EU's transfer of authority in the economic realm cannot be papered over with only a thin sense of community" (2015: 134). For the euro to be justified in a normative sense, as well as to remain sustainable in the long run, the question is also to what extent public beliefs are compatible with the underlying consequences of the euro.

The findings of this research then suggest that in this sense, the basis for the euro is fragile. Most importantly because the euro lacks a sense of commonality, and in that sense faces a potential legitimacy deficit that can materialize when push comes to shove. When a country is faced with a situation in which it has to make painful decisions concerning how to deal with the consequences of the euro – for example, if a member state has to choose between substantial impediments to autonomy in the form of externally forced reforms or a euro exit, or if a member state seems forced into heavy solidarity in order to save insolvent other member states – and this situation becomes politicized in the political arena and salient in the public debate, there are clear anti-sentiments that can be mobilized. The

results suggest there is fertile ground for consistent discourse arguing against European solidarity in northern countries – even if the precise link with the euro is unclear for the electorate. The same applies to discourse that argues against austerity and anti-dominance in Southern Europe, although the focus groups do indicate how countries with lower trust in the capabilities of their national governments are likely to be more lenient in accepting European impediments to their perceived interests, which thus weakens genuine wishes to exit the currency union in a country like Italy.

A consequence of this then is that the sustainability of the euro to a large extent depends on the potential for mobilization. To assess the euro's legitimacy in such a way might be unsatisfying, but is a consequence of the undetermined nature of public opinion on the euro. If we say that the euro's legitimacy is substantially related to the extent to which public beliefs are compatible with the underlying consequences of the euro, this study highlights how neither 'the consequences of the euro' nor 'public beliefs' are a stable given. The euro's consequences are also dependent on continuing developments in the real world, while public perceptions of these are hugely dependent on how elites decide to frame them. In the same way, public beliefs too are shaped and mobilized by the unfolding public debate. Therefore, to the extent that we see a tension between the euro's consequences and opinions, we can only speak of a *potential* legitimacy deficit. A legitimacy deficit would be when "an institution's reality does not fit social norms, when 'what is' is not aligned with 'what ought to be'" (Godet, 2022: 22). However, in the absence of pre-formed opinions, and in the context of ambivalence, 'what is ought' is not a given, as the norms that the euro's constituency – the public – sees as fitting to the euro are to a large extent undetermined. It is only in cases of high politicization, when this public is pushed to take a stance, that this diffuse set of norms will crystalize into clearly identifiable normative positions.

While speaking about the possibilities of such politicization in the future is a matter of speculation, the results of this thesis can help us think about what effects such politicization might have under which condition. As a starting point, the findings of this study make clear how the crux of this mobilization lies in the possibility of lifting the euro out of the banal, everyday light in which it is seen now: to connect it with the political

issues related to the euro, while providing frames to think about the euro's politics in order to make them less distant and abstract. The results of this study then show that there are two sides to this. On the one hand, they suggest that there are substantial obstacles to making this happen, as the combination of the taken for granted nature of the euro and the complex, diffuse character of its politics is deeply engrained – the fact that even the euro crisis could not change this is telling. To put it differently, it will be difficult to get to a stage where push comes to shove anyway. On the other hand, the ambivalent nature of public opinion means there is space for mobilization in the sense that elites have a substantial role in shaping public views on issues like solidarity and autonomy. This is suggested by this study's findings, and fits with other recent research (e.g. Bauhr and Charron, 2022). This does not need to directly threaten the euro so long as such issues keep low salience. Yet, if a situation arises in which member states are forced to more structurally address the question how much European interdependence they find acceptable (for example, because of a new euro crisis triggered by the sovereign debt problems of a large member state), this fragile basis means that there are fundamental risks for the euro's stability. In such a case, the banal acceptance of the euro also has another side: it means there also is little diffuse support protecting it. In absence of such diffuse support, the euro is seen more as transactional, and only worthwhile as long as it delivers direct utilitarian benefits. If contestation increases the perception that this is not the case, support is likely to be shallow.

8.3. Implications beyond the euro

For a more encompassing understanding of the legitimation of the euro however, it is not enough to only consider whether the single currency itself can be sustained. The euro is part of a larger system of governance, meaning that the legitimacy of the euro largely depends on the legitimacy of the system in which it is embedded. Just as the other way around, the euro's consequences can affect the legitimacy of this system – by contributing to it as well as jeopardizing it. One might bring up that this interwovenness is already engrained in the definition of legitimacy, as fundamentally legitimacy concerns the justification of a political system as a whole, but what is interesting is how the focus group results do

indeed emphasize this. Therefore, what do this study's findings tell us about how the euro's legitimacy relates to the larger project of the EU?

What is striking in the empirical results then is how the euro is frequently treated as related to, or even a symbol of something else, namely the EU as a whole, which might be relatively obvious, but also of a more general political constellation. Frequently, the euro is treated as part of a different era, a symbol of a type of politics that is more difficult to control by citizens. It is particularly this latter association that is normatively loaded. After all, in this diffuse link between the euro with a more general types of politics, the euro is often a symbol of a distant, 'TINA' type of politics, and for participants is another example of the globalized (and, for some, neo-liberalized) world that has emerged over recent decades. Times have grown worse since the introduction of the euro, and politics has become more of an elite driven process that is both difficult to comprehend and influence for common citizens, not least because of the enormous increase in the scale of where politics takes place. Of course, this connotation is not present for all participants (most notably, it does not occur at all in groups of financial professionals), but it is still a substantial part of the discussions, even for those who in the end are positive about the euro.

In understanding this relation between the euro and its broader context, one might reason that such negative associations hurt the legitimation of the euro, as developments partly external to the single currency itself impact stances on the single currency. However, it is the other direction that appears more significant. After all, such negative diffuse perceptions of the euro have not substantially damaged support for it. At the same time, the euro and the politics it is associated with (one might think of the TINA-character of the euro crisis policies, and of the way the EMU-architecture disguises political decisions as technocratic decision making) do have the potential to contribute to this more general diffuse type of discontent. Even while not hurting euro support because of the a-political perceptions of the euro itself, a discontent partially created by the euro can still express itself on a more fundamental level. As several observers have noted, a main sentiment driving Euroscepticism as well as populist support is a more general dissatisfaction with politics, caused by the feeling that politics is something happening far away, difficult to grasp let alone influence by the common man. Issues like the interdependence

between Eurozone countries demanding particular policies without citizens seeming to have a say in them will also feed a more general discontent. Therefore, we must consider that rather than posing a risk for the euro itself, the lack of a basis for a politics of the euro may also express itself more strongly in a more general political discontent, entailing more systemic risks.

The euro can of course also positively contribute to the EU's legitimacy. For example, one might expect the euro to have increased identification with Europe, either because of its strong symbolic power, because of the way in which it fostered interactions between Europeans, or because of the more subtle effects it has, such as the potentially collectivizing effect of experiencing shared monetary policymaking (e.g. Helleiner, 2002). And while existing quantitative research suggests that such effects are limited at best (e.g. Buscha et al., 2017; Negri et al., 2021), there are also other ways in which the euro might have affected European allegiances – for as some have argued, the collective bond needed for European integration does not need to be restricted to affective identification, but can also be sought in the extent to which people see the EU as an appropriate level on which to address collective problems (e.g. White, 2011). Fitting with this line of thinking, scholars focusing on the daily life side of European integration have argued that the euro contributes to the legitimation of the EU by normalizing the idea of European governance (McNamara, 2015). In that sense, it might increase the taken-for-grantedness of Europe as the level on which to address shared problems.

The type of insight that the focus groups add then is not so much the magnitude of a particular effect, as this is not what the method is suitable for; rather, they give an indication of the *type* of effect the euro has had. In very concrete terms, then, the focus groups show a couple of mechanisms related to identification and legitimation. First, they show how the euro has created tangible, visible benefits of European integration – daily life conveniences that citizens largely appreciate. As noted, it is not that people affectively cherish the euro for this; rather, it creates a feeling that the euro is a practicality worth having. Likewise, the focus groups show how the euro has to some extent come with a 'shared European experience' (particularly the transition to the euro). Evidence for this are the references to the experience of the transition to the euro as

symbolically meaningful. Thirdly, the euro in practical terms fostered interaction between EU citizens (making intra-EU traveling easier and facilitating trade), which is confirmed by frequent mentions of the euro's positive effect on travel and the personal anecdotes of how the euro impacted peoples' traveling experiences.

Nevertheless, the presence of such mechanisms says little about the actual effect the euro ultimately has. Indeed, the extent to which they have led to increased affective identification might be difficult to assess through this study's chosen method. Thus, the focus groups provide little evidence that contradicts the results of the existing qualitative studies. In fact, contrary to those who speak about the collectivizing potential of experiencing shared monetary policy making, the focus groups show how this also can have the opposite effect: to the extent that people consciously noted actual monetary policymaking – which appears limited – these have just as much been divisive experiences. The feeling of involuntarily having one's fate connected to those of others is met with resistance more than with an appreciation of European unification, and this has also resulted in the usage of national stereotypes. Focus groups indicate that these stereotypes have also trickled through to the public – particularly in the Netherlands – with a risk of turning people against each other, rather than unifying them.

However, more than for looking at affective identification, the focus groups are better suited to identifying more minimalist conceptions of a European commonality, such as how far people see the European level as appropriate for addressing collective problems. How far does the EMU fit public perceptions of shared problems that require being addressed through shared policies or institutions? The implications that come out of the focus groups are two-sided. On the one hand, there is the already noted lack of a notion of a 'European common bond' in relation to the euro. For macro-economic policy-making, participants (especially in the Netherlands) rarely have a perception of sharing problems that require addressing. In that sense, they do not see the EMU as a mechanism that can help deal with collective problems. To the extent that the euro is only seen as a practical benefit, a convenience, the notion of community with which it is connected is not resistant against substantial conflicts of interests between member states.

Still, the fact that people do see a practical advantage in the euro – either because of the convenience it offers or its beneficial effect on inter-member state trade – is not meaningless. It does mean that they understand that there is an advantage in arranging matters at the European level, while the conveniences the euro offers are hard to let go of once present. From this perspective, we might say that the euro is an institution people feel makes sense to share with other EU members – as long as they do not feel it comes with overly substantial sacrifices. This fits a perception of Europe as a logical level on which to arrange certain practical matters – as opposed to political matters involving more substantial conflicts of interest. Also, acquainting people with the presence of Europe in everyday life in this way, rather than boosting affective identification with Europe, it has had an ‘anchoring’ effect by creating something that people do not easily want to reverse once it is there (think of how support for the euro is indeed much more stable in Eurozone countries than in EU member states where the euro has not been introduced). This is a rather thin, banal type of allegiance, but it still is consequential.

For both normative and functional reasons however, the euro may need more substantial grounding than such a banal type of allegiance. And it appears that this grounding cannot be brought forth by the euro itself. Rather, it needs to be produced by factors external to it. It is noteworthy that the findings do hint at the potential role of a particular factor, namely that of an external threat. For the focus groups do suggest there is a growing sense among citizens of the increasing importance of European politics, which is related to the changing relation of the EU with its external environment and the geo-political insecurity that goes with it. Instigated by processes and events like Brexit, the perceived threat brought about by the rise of China and the increasing instability of its relation with the US, participants express a feeling of an increased relevance of the EU. To some extent, this reinforces a perception of a shared European predicament, which legitimates the idea of making policies at the European level. Even if it is far from clear whether such effects will indeed materialise and will be substantial enough, it is the effect of such threats external to the euro (a category that Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine belong to as well) that form an important ingredient of its future legitimation.

8.4. Theoretical implications

On the theoretical level, these analyses invite us to question the relation between the public and European integration more generally. Evidently, findings on an important, yet distinct, aspect of European integration, the euro, cannot be automatically translated to the EU at large. Yet, there are strong similarities between public opinion on the euro and European integration in general. This is underlined by how, as noted above, participants often have difficulty in distinguishing between the euro and the EU in terms of their setup and consequences. Likewise, the euro and the EU are both seen as a distant entity: difficult to understand as they are 'drowned' in more general processes of globalization. In addition to this, participants' stances on items like solidarity and autonomy are as relevant for the EU as they are for the euro. Therefore, it is reasonable to see the findings of this research as also having implications for our theoretical understanding of the EU.

As a start, the results speak to our understanding of the politicization of the EU. This thesis started by setting out a paradox of an increasing politicization of the EU at the elite level and a public that is often ambivalent and indifferent – which seems particularly puzzling given a 'heating up' of politics accompanied by the rise of populist challenger parties – some even speak of an era of 'hyper-politics' which has replaced the 'post-politics' of the 1990s (Jäger, 2021). The findings presented here suggest that an answer might be sought in making two distinctions: that between different arenas, where a politicization at the institutional or media level does not need to go together with politicization at the citizen level; and a distinction between a generic politicization (increasing salience and polarization of societal conflict fuelled by increasing discontent, of which anti-system sentiments are an example) and the politicization of specific institutions and policies.

Regarding the latter distinction, we might consider that even if Euroscepticism is an element of popular discontent and populist discourse, this does not mean that citizens' discontent is primarily focused on the EU itself. It can also derive from a more general political discontent with the increased distance of political decision making from citizens. This discontent can then also be directed towards the EU, as this is seen as a symbol of the types of politics that are disliked, but this only happens as

a side effect of a more fundamental disaffection. As Chris Bickerton put it, “hostility towards the EU today is part of a much wider crisis in European politics which does not arise from the EU as such. It is really a crisis of politics tout court. (...) Often, protesters and critics have little interest in Europe at all. It is their national elites they are angry about” (2016: 139, 141). It is not the EU’s concrete policies or decision making, or the integration process as a whole that citizens have strong feelings about. On the contrary, opinions on the EU are malleable precisely because citizens lack such strong feelings, and this may be part of the reason that challengers have been successful in mobilizing some part of the electorate against the EU. In that sense, at the citizen level we might speak of a more diffuse politicization of which the EU is only an element because of the way it is associated with the sources of discontent.

This in turn also relates to the former distinction, as it implies that the politicization of the euro and EU politics in general might be seen more as an elite process with political challengers successfully mobilizing a more generic political discontent towards the politics of the EU, even though citizens themselves are not necessarily that interested in the EU. This then has implications for our understanding of the constraining dissensus that is said to have emerged. Central to this thesis is, of course, the increasing impact of public opinion on the process of European integration. And that force has indeed increased over the last three decades – as discussed further below. Yet, this is not necessarily caused by (nor does it necessarily result in) contestation of EU policies by citizens themselves, for this appears rather limited. Instead, the increasing pressure of public opinion can be seen as more a result of a politicization in the public debate, with governments as a consequence experiencing more public pressure and electoral choices having more impact. In that sense, the process that the constraining dissensus thesis describes may in essence be more driven by elites than by the public.

8.5. Policy implications

Such a view of EU public opinion also has relevance for policymaking. The results suggest that, even though the public plays a more important role in European integration than it used to, there is no need for national governments to be led by a fear of the public (also see Melman, 2020). In

line with the emergence of a public that is more critical of European integration, policy makers increasingly anticipate public opinion (e.g. Franchino et al., 2022), with national governments more and more 'looking over their shoulder' when negotiating EU policies. Indeed, Eurozone issues are strong examples, where political parties with Eurosceptic tendencies in their electorates try to appeal to their audience by taking a tough stance. One example is the negotiations concerning the NextGenerationEU recovery package in 2020. These negotiations were dominated by the 'frugal four' (Austria, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands), whose leaders' strategy seemed aimed at appealing to electorates critical of the EU. Rather than explaining to the public why and how solidarity was needed, they emphasized how European cooperation was now demanding too much solidarity, and positioned themselves as tough as possible in protecting the national interest. While apparently appreciated by the public – in the Netherlands for example over 70% supported the governments' stance (I&O research, 2020) – the side effect of such discourse was that both the short- and long-term willingness of the domestic public to show solidarity decreased, and it fed into a narrative of the EU as an external force imposing costs.

We might think of national governments as facing diverging incentives here. Given that, on average, governments are substantially more positive towards European integration than the public (Müller et al., 2012; Raines et al., 2017), national governments on the one hand have the incentive to create support for the policies they deem necessary. This entails explaining what is at stake, why European cooperation on these items could be beneficial, and how the nature of intergovernmental negotiations creates the need for compromises that limit the short-term maximization of direct national interest. On the other hand, governments have the incentive to satisfy domestic electorates, which is usually portrayed as contrasting with the former incentive. After all, it appears much more attractive for governments' own popularity – especially in cases where public support seems lacking – to portray the EU as imposing particular policies, with national representatives doing everything they can to protect the national interest. But while this might appear to work as a legitimating strategy for governments themselves, it decreases support for the policies at stake, as well as the long-term support for the integration project as a whole.

However, to some extent, such strategies appear to overestimate the strength of the opinions held by the public. Generally, in taking the opinions expressed in such surveys and polls at face value, politicians are increasingly likely to act according to the desires expressed in such polls, fearing that not doing so would lead to a backlash. Yet, what this study's findings emphasize is how people are generally far from having strong, pronounced opinions. Therefore, rather than as firmly held attitudes, public opinion should be seen as sensitive to elite discourse (which is also confirmed by other recent studies, such as Bauhr and Charron, 2022). While the functional importance of the public might increase, this does not mean that the public actively demands its representatives to take particular positions and actions. It is still mostly a passive actor, responding – often ambiguously – to processes taking place at the elite level.

This suggests that governments should not be overly afraid of public opinion in negotiating European issues. Instead of behaving as only following the demands of the public, it does more justice to the relation between public and government to recognize and acknowledge that governments' own stories play an important role in shaping how the public thinks about the EU in the first place. This emphasizes the responsibility that comes with shaping the public discourse. Rather than being afraid of the public and telling it what they believe it wants to hear, it might therefore be more fruitful show leadership and make clear what exactly is at stake.

Of course, there are caveats here. It is difficult for single actors (politicians or parties) to singularly shape the public discourse. There is always the risk of counter-narratives, for example by Eurosceptic parties and media. Also, this is not to deny that politicians have the right to do what is electorally profitable, or what helps them in negotiations – they evidently do. But in making the calculation of their self-interest, it is crucial to assign the right weight to public opinion. Even to the extent that telling the public stories in which Europe is portrayed in an overly dominant fashion is electorally profitable, such stories can squeeze the European negotiation space, as the public polls will turn towards stances that focus on protecting national interests against European dominance. Subsequently, it will hurt the governments' credibility when having to settle for European

compromises at a later stage. Therefore, it is unnecessary if this happens on the basis of overestimating the strength of public opinions.

Indeed, from a normative standpoint one might finally point at the informational role of governments in euro matters. Given that the euro on the one hand has such substantial consequences for the living conditions of citizens, but at the same time is seen as complex and technical, better communication about it could contribute to decreasing the distance citizens experience from the decision making that shapes their lives. As Ha-Joon Chang recently put it, “in a capitalist economy, democracy is meaningless if people cannot understand the language of power that is economics” (2022). If part of the public then suffers from the feeling that politics increasingly takes place in a ‘stratosphere’ of political and financial decision making that is beyond the reach of citizens, and the euro is an important example of this displacement of politics, fostering an understanding of what is at stake could help decrease this perceived distance. Of course, such a normative standpoint easily clashes with other incentives that governments face, while governments are of course not the only relevant actor here. Nevertheless, this study’s results do underline the discrepancy between the importance of the euro and the public’s understanding of it, as well as the potentially important role of governments in shaping this understanding.

8.6. Discussion: limitations and future research

Despite the potential of focus group evidence to contribute to addressing important questions in European studies, the method also has its limitations, and it is important to reflect on how this impacts the findings of this research. Most importantly, the small N of the focus groups means we should be careful in generalizing these results to national populations. While careful sampling aimed to ensure the highest possible typological representativeness, focus groups can by definition not guarantee to grasp the entire distribution of political preferences, demographics and political interests present in societies at large. This does not disqualify the focus group results, but it means that they give us a typological understanding of public opinion that needs to be solidified by further research. Some of the things we would want to know include to what extent the results of this study are valid for member state populations at large; to what extent the

results found in the three member states covered here are also valid in other member states; and to what extent these results remain valid now that developments in European integration follow each other in such quick succession – after all, the fieldwork for this study was conducted in 2019.

But those limitations also point to future research that can be done to further corroborate or challenge some of its findings. Firstly, it is particularly through quantitative research that the generalizability of some of the findings of this research can be tested – although some insights are by definition more difficult to produce for survey research. Notably, cross-national survey research could study perceptions of the euro, for example by looking at associations people have with it. The usage of open survey questions next to closed questions would be advantageous here. In addition, a particularly useful strategy would be to use survey experiments that focus more on the stability of opinions. Such research could help us to better understand the extent to which normative positions on the euro are susceptible to change, and to what extent it is possible to increase political perceptions of the euro. In addition, beyond changes in the substance of opinions, such research could also look at the effect of messaging by particular actors, through particular frames (such as narratives on other countries) and about particular situations (for example emphasizing the need of austerity or solidarity, or the consequences of a euro-exit). Recent work by Baccaro et al. (2021), as well as Jurado et al. (2020) can serve as an example here, as it shows how survey experiments can be used to look at the effects of particular frames as well as that of changing conditions (such as the need for austerity). Research that studies the relation the other way around would be welcome too: rather than looking at the effect of solidarity or austerity on attitudes towards the euro, one might also study the effect of frames emphasizing the euro's practical convenience and the detrimental effects of a euro-exit on support for solidarity or austerity.

Secondly, our understanding of public perceptions of the euro would be helped by extending the focus to countries other than those featured in this study. One case, whose relevance should be obvious, is Greece. After all, the Greek government-debt crisis represents a case in which push did in fact come to shove for the euro, as it became very clear that membership

of the Eurozone was more than a banal affair and came with strong political and economic consequences. Indeed, an exit from the Eurozone was explicitly on the table. Therefore, it represents a particularly fruitful case for seeing how everyday, political and utilitarian factors work together when the euro becomes politicized. Another interesting path would be to compare Eurozone-countries with EU countries outside of the Eurozone, or countries that adopted the euro at a later stage (such as Slovakia and the Baltic countries). This would provide insight into the socialization effects of being a member of the Eurozone, as well as helping to address the question why a gap in support between Eurozone and non-Eurozone countries has widened over the years. Given the fact that currently little research exploring this question exists, qualitative methodology would be fruitful to explore these questions in a more inductive fashion. Quantitative research might be useful as well however, for example to see how euro support in such countries differs between social classes, or to look at the different role of economic considerations in Eurozone countries versus non-Eurozone countries.

Thirdly, this conclusion has already brought up the question to what extent perceptions of external threats affect notions of a European identity. This is relevant for the sense of community that might be needed for the sustainability of the euro, but of course also beyond the single currency. In light of the frequent mentions of Brexit, China and the US in the focus groups, it appears that such perceptions of external threats make people more accepting of the need for European governance. However, can it also contribute to the emergence of a European 'we'? The focus groups show that such a European 'we' hardly exists in divisive situations like the euro crisis. Yet, if developments are more external to the euro, this might change. The EU's current predicament (concerning the polycrisis in which the Russian invasion in Ukraine and the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis interact with a plethora of other economic and societal problems) can in that sense work in two ways. The economic problems it entails have a divisive potential. At the same time, to the extent that this situation is perceived as caused by external factors, as well as the extent to which it produces a geo-political anxiety that leads EU citizens to see themselves as 'being in the same boat', this could have more 'collectivizing' potentials, as they could increase the perception of a European 'we', and could help the EU to be seen as a more legitimate institutional actor (see for example

the research of Aksoy et al., 2021 and Daniele et al., 2020 on Covid 19, and that of Gehring, 2022 and Handler, 2022 on the Russian invasion of Ukraine). Future research can use both qualitative methods and experimental research to study how external threats and geo-political developments can result in different perceptions of a European we. As the troubles of the Eurozone can increasingly be explained by external events, a path is open for a stronger perception of the euro as a shared European project.

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Appendices

Appendix I - List of participants in the study

Below is a list of all participants in the study (names are pseudonyms):

Dutch unemployed

Naomi
Bianca
Mirjam
Bram
Kimberly
Truus
Jamesha

Italian unemployed

Adriana
Giovanni
Paolo
Beatrice
Tommaso
Silvia
Olivia

French unemployed

Jean
Bertrand
Rachida
Michael
Nadia

Dutch hairdressers

Sofia
Ria
Merle
Yagmur

Italian hairdressers

Simona
Bruno
Pasquale
Giulia
Gianni

French hairdressers

Tristan
Eric
Eloise
Karim
Lorraine

Dutch financial professionals

Steven
Tom
Sara
Milan
Henk

Italian financial professionals

Lucia
Stefano
Carlo
Clemente
Flavio

French financial professionals

Cecilia
Sophie
Paul
Jean-Francois
Charles
Loïc

Appendix II - Interview guide

This interview guide was shared with the research assistants moderating the focus groups as a way to standardize the moderation and to provide guidance to the assistants. While this guide was adhered to in general terms, the moderators were left free to use their own parlance.

Intro

(Beforehand, make participants sign consent form. Mention that compensation is paid afterwards)

Welcome and good evening, amazing you all had time to come. I am [...], the moderator. Sitting here is Joris, the researcher, and you don't need to pay attention to him, but he will be here to listen.

The objective of this gathering is to discuss a societal topic, so that we can learn from you how you think about those topics. So what we are going to do for the next 1,5/2 hours: I am going to ask you a couple of questions, which you will be invited to discuss. What we are interested in is your own thoughts. So the idea is that you discuss the questions in your own words. There are no right or wrong answers, it is not about who knows best. We only want to hear your thinking.

We assume that you will have different opinions and stances, so do feel free to share your own opinion, even if that differs from what others have said. So when you disagree with others, please feel free to make this clear, as long as you are respectful towards others.

The idea then is that you do the work. I only sit here to ask a question every now and then, and I might sometimes interfere, but for the most I

will be quietly listening to you discussing. In doing so, it is important that everybody has the opportunity to voice his or her opinion. Therefore, if you're someone that often speaks a lot, do try to sometimes contain yourself and allow others to speak as well. Also, make sure only one person speaks at a time, so if someone else is talking, wait for him/her to finish

Question 1: I will show you a brief video, and then ask you to just respond.

[show video]

What are the first thoughts and words that come to mind after seeing this?

Make sure all participants say something (possibly have people answer 'in line'). If the discussion is really brief here, ask further questions. 'Why do you say so?', 'Could you explain further?', 'Can you give us an example', 'Do the others agree?', etc

Question 2: What do you feel have been the most important reasons for the introduction of the Euro?

For this question, people first deliberate in pairs of two for a minute or so

Question 3: According to you, who have benefitted most from the introduction of the Euro, and who have been disadvantaged most?

With this question, people first write their answers on post it's - those who benefitted on one color, disadvantaged on another color. Make sure people write readable, 1 term per post-it. After sticking the post it's on a board, they explain their answers and discuss it

Then we move on to some video clips, which will be followed by a question or statement to respond to.

Video clip 1: now we will see a video about 5 years old, where first a researcher and then a banker speak about the consequences of the Euro. More in particular, they discuss the difficulties of sharing one currency with different economies.

[show video]

Question: first, what is your first response?

Then, after a few minutes: in the video, it is explained that sharing one currency with different economies comes with some difficulties. Either countries should attempt to build up more uniform economies. Or they could be allowed to stay relatively different, but then differences in wealth could either persist, or should be compensated by transfers from richer to poorer countries. How do you think about this? How do you respond to the statement: being in a currency union together means that euro countries should be solidary with each other?

Video clip 2: now we'll see a video clip of a few years ago about how a shared currency also has political consequences. In the clip we'll see Olli Rehn, a man who at the time of the video was a Euro commissioner, and as such was a sort of 'European minister of finance', and Jeroen Dijsselbloem, who then was the president of the Euro group and the Dutch minister of finance.

[show video]

Question: in this video, it is emphasized that sharing a currency also means that countries enter into certain agreements with each other, and therefore also have to deal with certain budgetary rules. At the same time, this also means that countries are restricted in their policy choices, and therefore might lose some autonomy. Therefore, do you agree or disagree with the following statement: [own country] loses too much autonomy due to the euro

Video clip 3: the next video clip will be about the euro crisis. Maybe you remember that about 5 years ago, European countries needed to transfer money to Greece in order to save the economy. In order to receive that money however, Greece had to promise to stick to very strict conditions, and cut their budget very substantially, leading to high unemployment. Protesting against this, a new government was elected. In this video clip, one of the ministers of that government explains what this meant according to him.

[show video]

Deeply contested yet taken for granted

Question: how do you think about this? To what extent should Eurozone countries be obliged to cut public spending if it otherwise endangers the Eurozone as a whole?

End, thanks for participation. If people have questions, they can ask them then.

Appendix III - Interview materials: video footage

The video footage used in the focus groups can be retrieved online.

- For question 1, a ± 25 second video was used showing the transition from the previous national currency to the euro (adjusted to the national context). The videos can be retrieved here:
- For the Netherlands: https://www.vpro.nl/speel~VPWON_1200821~weeffouten-in-de-euro-slag-om-europa~.html [19.05-19.30]
- For Italy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tumQ0wjrUKQ>
- For France: the video clip (using TF1 footage from 2002) is not available online anymore, but is present in the archive of the researcher

Question 4 was preceded by a video clip briefly explaining the difficulty of sharing one currency with different economies, bringing up questions on compatibility of economies, interdependence of member states and the need for solidarity. This video clip merged two fragments coming from different broadcasts. The first part can be retrieved here: <https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2015-2016/volk--macht-en-varoufakis.html> [17.10-17.40; 19.05-19.10]. The second here: https://www.npostart.nl/de-slag-om-europa/04-08-2014/VPWON_1220451 [20.20-21.40]

Question 5 was preceded by a video clip explaining that a currency union might require a sort of European minister of finance who checks national budgets, thus having implications for national autonomy]. The video can be retrieved here:

Deeply contested yet taken for granted

https://www.vpro.nl/speel~VPWON_1200821~weeffouten-in-de-euro-slag-om-europa~.html [20.30-22.30]

Question 6 was preceded by a video clip explaining the Greek situation in 2015 from a democratic point of view, with Yannis Varoufakis and Wolfgang Streeck arguing the Greek bailouts to be an undemocratic, northern imposition. It can be retrieved here: <https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/tegenlicht/kijk/afleveringen/2015-2016/volk--macht-en-varoufakis.html> [36.00-36.20; 19.50-22.00]

Appendix IV - Questionnaire pre-focus group (taken by telephone)

Good morning/afternoon/evening

You've indicated your willingness to participate in our group discussions. Are there any questions you would like to ask about it?

Before we invite you to participate, we'd like to ask you a few questions about your work and your life, and to get your opinions about some matters.

Do you have ten minutes now? Is it OK with you for us to do this?

If yes, date and time:

If not, when can I call you back?

In this research, we guarantee participants' anonymity. People can be called by pseudonyms throughout the process. Would you like to choose a name to call yourself?

Pseudonym:

I will now ask you some questions about yourself:

- Are you male/female?
- What is your age?
- What is your highest level of education?
- In politics, people talk about left and right. Where would you put yourself, on a scale which goes from 1 to 10, where 1 is the most to the left, and 10 the most to the right?

- Did you vote in the 2018 parliamentary elections?
- If yes, for which party?
- How often do you discuss politics with friends, family and colleagues?
 - Often
 - Frequently
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- When you have an opinion about something that you feel strongly about, do you typically try to convince you friends, colleagues or family to adopt your opinion?
 - Strongly
 - Slightly
 - Not so much
- Which newspapers or magazines do you read?
- How proud are you to be [nationality]?
 - Very proud
 - Quite proud
 - Not very proud
 - Not at all proud
- Do you think [own country's] membership of the European Union is
 - A good thing
 - A bad thing
 - Neutral
 - Don't know
- On a 1-10 scale, do you think Europe should integrate further (10) or that integration has gone too far (0)?
- How optimistic are you about the economy?

Thank you!

Appendix V - Note on the transcripts

The focus groups were transcribed partly by me and partly by a research assistant in case of the Dutch focus groups, and by research assistants in case the Italian and French groups. Translations to English are also their work. Extracts from the interview transcripts have been presented using a simple notation style. Abridgements of the text are marked by '[...]'. In a small number of cases, the transcripts contained linguistic errors or substandard translations, which have been corrected in extracts. The anonymized transcripts will be archived and made publically available in the NSD's database.

Appendix VI - Participant information sheet



Informed consent form

I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet and understand the objective of this study sufficiently to take part Yes No

I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time Yes No

If I decide to withdraw from the study, I agree that the information collected about me up to the point when I withdraw may continue to be processed Yes No

I understand that my participation in this study is confidential and that no material, which could identify me personally, will be used in any reports on this study Yes No

I wish to receive a summary of the results from the study Yes No

Declaration by participant

I hereby consent to take part in this study.

Participant's name:

Signature:

Date:

Deeply contested yet taken for granted



Participation information sheet

Participation in research 'Citizens and politics'

You are invited to take part in a study on the political attitudes of citizens. Please take time to read the following information carefully and to decide on that basis whether or not you wish to take part.

Purpose of the study

This study investigates the political attitudes of citizens in different European countries. By asking citizens to discuss a set of questions together it aims to get insight into their opinions and the arguments that drive these opinions.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign the Consent Form on the last page of this document. You will be given a copy of the Consent Form to keep.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

Participants have been recruited on the basis of their fit with the profile this study looks for in terms of their profession, socio-demographic characteristics and political attitudes. Similar interviews are held in other European countries to allow for cross-national comparisons.

People will wonder why they in particular are asked to take part, so you should define your sample, if only briefly as I suggest here.

Do I have to take part?

The participation in this study is voluntary. You don't have to give a reason if you don't want to take part. If you do want to take part now, but change your mind later, you can pull out of the study at any time without experiencing any disadvantage.

How will data be collected?

The data will be collected during a single focus group that takes place in Paris in October 2019. In addition participants have been asked to fill in a survey. In the focus groups participants will be asked to voice their opinions on the basis of 3 open questions and 3 video clips that will be shown, and to subsequently discuss their opinions amongst each other. This discussion will take about 2 hours. Participants decide for themselves which opinions and what information they wish to share. The focus groups will be moderated with the purpose of allowing participants to voice their opinions in an equal manner, and so that they do not experience pressure to do so.



Recording and storage of the data

During the group discussions video recording and written notes will be made. These recordings will later be transcribed in order to allow data analysis. Other researchers could potentially have access to these transcripts, as they could potentially be stored in a database with focus group data from earlier studies. In these transcripts, participants will be pseudonymized in order to guarantee their anonymity – only the research leader will be able to identify who said what. In line with the EU GDPR guidelines, the video-files will be stored on the secured network of the University of Oslo (UJO), and will only be accessible by the research leader. After transcription, these video files will be deleted.

What are my rights?

You have the right to withdraw your consent at any time. You have the right to request access to and rectification or erasure of information about yourself obtained via this study. You will not own any intellectual property that may arise from any future research. When the data have been anonymized and it is no longer possible to identify you in the data material, these rights no longer apply.

What will happen with the results of the research project?

The results will be presented in scientific publications, in the first place on an aggregate level. Possibly, excerpts from the discussion will be presented as well, but only in a pseudonymized and thus irreducible manner.

Who pays for the study?

The data is collected as part of a PhD project of the international research project The Post-Crisis Legitimacy of the European Union (PLATO), which has received funding from the European Union's Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Horizon 2020, under the Marie Sklodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 722581 (2017-2020).

Who do I contact for more information or concerns?

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