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“Is anybody listening?”

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Is anybody listening?

An analysis of government responsiveness to public opinion in European politics

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0 Introduction

In the early years of European integration, national governments had a relatively free hand in setting European policy. The assumption of an ill-informed and disinterested public was prevalent not only among politicians, but also political scientists.¹ Lindberg and Scheingold's² oft-quoted concept of a "permissive consensus" was built on the belief that voters tacitly approve the elite-driven integration project. Latest since the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, however, the permissive consensus has been called into question.³ The Maastricht Treaty was rejected by the Danish people in a first referendum on June 2, 1992, and very close to failure in the French referendum on September 20, 1992.⁴

Referenda are held on few questions of European integration and in only some of the member states. In times or countries without referenda, public discontent with European issues is generally less visible but might nevertheless exist. In Germany, for instance, public opinion was for many years strongly hostile towards the creation of a single European currency. In spite of that, the German government actively promoted the creation of a European Monetary Union (EMU). National referenda are not intended by the German Basic Law. But how else could the Germans make themselves heard?

Beside the direct democratic instrument of referendum, there are in principle two channels for political representation in Europe. According to the EU's hybrid decision-making structure, people can influence the course of European integration by elections to the European parliament (supranational channel) and elections of national governments (intergovernmental channel). Much research has been done on the supranational level of representation. Given the fact that the EU is a political entity sui generis while all member states are well established representative democracies, the supranational level is generally presumed to be the more interesting one.⁵ With respect to the political weight of the European Council and the Council of the European Union, however, the intergovernmental channel of representation equally merits scholarly attention.

¹ Cf. Schimmelfennig 2005: 342.

² Cf. Leon N. Lindberg & Stuart Scheingold 1970.

³ Cf. Laumen & Maurer 2006: 6.

⁴ Only 51.04% of the French voted yes, 48.96% voted no.

⁵ Cf. Schmitt & Thomassen 1999: 7–8.

Using the example of Germany and the European Monetary Union (EMU), this paper seeks to explain how national governments react to hostile public opinion in European politics. The analysis is divided into three sections: The first section establishes a theoretical framework on government responsiveness. It asks why governments should listen at all to public opinion. This question is addressed first from a normative and then from a rational choice point of view. The rational choice perspective is constitutive for the following empirical analysis: It is argued that politicians won't act in a responsive manner unless they are urged to do so by risk of losing elections. The second section defines and operationalizes three key concepts, namely "responsiveness", "public opinion", and "electoral competition". These concepts are fundamental for the subsequent empirical study: The third section analyses in detail the role of electoral competition for government responsiveness in the case of Germany and the creation of a unique European currency. Scope and limits of the results are discussed in a concluding chapter.

1 Analytical framework for explaining government responsiveness

The concept of responsiveness is not only relevant for European integration studies. As it describes how the representatives react to the wishes of the represented, it lies at the very heart of any study on representation. The paper assumes that some basic conditions of responsiveness hold true for all policy fields. This section draws on general responsiveness theories which are rarely taken into account by European integration researchers so far. In doing so, the paper seeks to establish a fruitful link between responsiveness theory and European integration studies.

1.1 Normative representation theory

Why should national governments listen to public opinion? From the angle of normative representation theory, one answer would be: Governments are supposed to represent the people and consequently, there should be no major long-lasting discrepancy between public opinion and governmental actions. Most theorists agree, however, that governments can represent the people without being constantly in line

with public opinion. Responsiveness is only a part of the broader concept of representation, which contains also the idea of leadership. Government might choose to deviate from public opinion when this is deemed to be in the people's best interest. Hanna Pitkin stated in her seminal work "The Concept of Representation":

"The representative's obligation is to the constituent's interest, but the constituent's wishes are relevant to that interest. Consequently, the representative also has an obligation to be responsive to those wishes. He need not always obey them, but he must consider them, particularly when they conflict with what he sees as the constituent's interest, because a reason for the discrepancy must be found."⁶

Pitkin claims that despite the resulting potential for conflict between representatives and represented, this conflict must not normally occur, or at least be justifiable. The normative discussion does not end here but just begins: How to define terms like "interest" or "justifiable"? Pitkin admits that "there can be lifelong, profound disagreement among men as to what their interest is."⁷ Who knows best the "interest of the people" – the people itself or the representatives who might be better informed and better educated?⁸ To what extent can information and education help to objectively define the people's interest, given that most political decisions imply values? And last but not least: How to define the interest of "the people" in view of the fact that different population groups might have conflicting interests?⁹ Formal criteria of political representation, such as regular and free elections, can be assessed rather clearly.¹⁰ The substance of political representation, however, rests always subject to philosophical considerations.¹¹

This paper does not have enough space to develop the normative discussion further. It deduces two premises from what has been said: First and foremost, responsiveness is a component part, not an equivalent of representation. The quality of representation cannot be measured one-to-one by the degree of responsiveness as this would neglect the leadership component of representation. Using "responsiveness" and

⁶ Pitkin 1972: 162.

⁷ Pitkin 1972: 213.

⁸ On the debate whether the representatives should correspond to "delegates" or "trustees", cf. Eulau et al. 1959.

⁹ Cf. Thomassen 1991: 271.

¹⁰ Further formal criteria are: freedom of action of the representatives, free press and freedom of opinion. Cf. Manin 1996.

¹¹ Cf. Manin, Przeworski & Stokes 1999: 2–3.

“representation” as synonyms, like some researchers do,¹² weakens analytical clarity. Second, it seems nearly impossible to objectively define “the interest of the people”. As this paper seeks not to evaluate good or bad representation, but to empirically analyze government responsiveness, it won’t discuss the question if EMU was in the interest of the Germans and alike.

1.2 Rational choice theory

Why should national governments listen to public opinion? One answer from rational choice theory would be: Because they want to get re-elected.¹³ That does not necessarily imply that politicians are pure vote-maximizers. Normally, they do not seek exclusively the maximization of vote shares *or* the continuance in office *or* the implementation of certain policies.¹⁴ It is reasonable to assume that politicians want to pursue all of these goals simultaneously. Even if their most fundamental ambition is the realization of a certain policy, for instance, they need to be elected in order to implement it. The goal of staying in office is at least an instrumental one. At the same time, governments usually try to keep a certain room for manoeuvre to be able to realize policies that are unpopular but nevertheless considered important. In sum, it is assumed that governments seek to get re-elected and, at the same time, to keep a certain scope of action.¹⁵ There is no need to answer the much discussed question whether policy, office or the maximization of vote shares is the most important aim in case of goal conflict¹⁶ in order to deduce the following: Governments won’t adjust their actions to public opinion unless they risk losing elections. Otherwise they would unnecessarily narrow their scope of action.

Under what circumstances do governments fear to get deselected? First, voters always decide on bundles of issues when it comes to elections. Only salient will influence the voting decision in the end. Accordingly, politicians won’t act in a responsive manner to public opinion unless they consider the issue at stake being important to the voter.¹⁷ A second condition is presumed to be necessary for

¹² See for instance Stimson, MacKuen & Erikson 1995.

¹³ Cf. Manin 1996: 228–229.

¹⁴ Cf. Strom 1990.

¹⁵ Cf. Maravall 1999 and Putnam 1988.

¹⁶ Cf. Müller & Strom 1999.

¹⁷ This has been confirmed manifold by responsiveness studies. See for instance Monroe 1998 and Wlezien 2004.

government responsiveness: The existence of an electoral competition.¹⁸ The paper argues that governments only risk losing elections over an issue if the voter is given an electoral alternative. In case of a broad elite consensus, when all relevant parties support the same policy position, the government's risk to be voted out of office over that issue is minimized. If there is an intense electoral competition, by contrast, voters can effectively express their eventual resentment and choose another party that corresponds better to their preferences. To say it in the words of E.E. Schattschneider: "It is conflict that involves the people in politics."¹⁹

1.3 Purpose of the empirical analysis

From theory, we can conclude the following so far:

- Governments won't act in a responsive manner to public opinion unless they are urged to do so by the risk of losing elections.
- Governments worry about re-election only if the policy at stake is salient and if it causes an electoral competition.

⇒ Thus follows: *Governments won't act in a responsive manner to public opinion unless the issue at stake is salient and causing an electoral competition.*

Both conditions for responsive government behaviour (issue salience and electoral competition) happen to be rather seldom in Germany with regard to European politics. People rarely get passionate about European issues, and there is traditionally a strong consensus on Europe between the established political parties. The salience of European issues, however, generally tends to increase.²⁰ The paper argues that it is rather the second condition that hinders responsiveness: *Even if a European policy question reaches the masses, it is the absence of electoral competition that renders responsiveness on European issues so unlikely in Germany.*

The Deutsche Mark was of great sentimental value for the Germans and therefore, the creation of a single European currency was one of these issues that affected a wider public.²¹ By means of the German case study, the paper focuses on the second condition

¹⁸ Cf. Bartolini 1995: 36 and Bartolini 1999.

¹⁹ Schattschneider 1975: 129.

²⁰ Cf. Gabel 2001.

²¹ EMU never was *the* most important question to the Germans. Almost always, voters consider domestic issues, namely unemployment, as most relevant problems. Nevertheless: In order to motivate

hypothesized to be necessary for government responsiveness: electoral competition. Based on only one case study, the paper aims at checking the plausibility of this hypothesis rather than formally “testing” it. If it turns out to be solid, further research would be necessary.

2 Discussion of key concepts

Some key concepts arising from the theoretical framework need to be discussed in greater detail before they can be subjected to empirical analysis. This section defines and operationalizes the notions of “responsiveness”, “public opinion”, and “electoral competition”.

2.1 Responsiveness

Earlier studies used to conceptualize responsiveness as the correlation of public opinion and governmental action. This conception has been widely criticised as it overlooked that correlation does not necessarily indicate a causal relation, and even less the direction of a causal relation:²² Governmental action and public opinion might be consonant because the government behaved in a responsive manner or, by contrast, because it succeeded in convincing the public of the virtue of its actions.²³ In the first case it is public opinion that influences governmental action, in the latter it is governmental action that influences public opinion. The first case only can count as responsiveness.

To solve this problem, some authors suggested using dynamic rather than static research designs. They focus attention on *changes* in public opinion and governmental action in order to identify the causal direction of influence: It is public opinion that influences governmental action, they argue, when public opinion changes *before* a change of governmental action occurs.²⁴ The dynamic research design is without a

governments to be responsive, an issue need not necessarily being the most important one but simply important enough to potentially influence the voting decision. Cf. Eckstein & Pappi 1999.

²² Cf. Page & Shapiro 1983 and Gerstlé 2003.

²³ The problem of causal direction does not seem relevant for rational choice theories that assume public preferences to be exogenously given and stable. This paper argues, however, that the assumption of stable preferences is not realistic. A concise discussion on this question can be found in Bartolini 1999.

²⁴ Cf. Brettschneider 1995.

doubt an important improvement to the static correlation analysis, but still does not allow a causal relation to be identified with certainty: A change in public opinion could be caused, for instance, by a governmental information campaign that was launched *ex ante* to prepare the people for certain measures. In this case, public opinion would change before a change of governmental actions occurred and nevertheless, one could hardly speak of a responsive government. Furthermore, the changes both in public opinion and in governmental actions could be due to a third variable and we could not count this as responsiveness either. Last but not least, a government might decide to adjust its behaviour to a public opinion that has always been hostile towards the issue at stake. In this case, responsiveness occurs without a precedent change in public opinion.

Most of the described problems are due to the fact that research on responsiveness has been almost exclusively conducted with quantitative methods. In order to run statistical analysis, complex causal configurations necessarily have to be simplified and standardized. The existing quantitative studies on responsiveness have contributed much to the generation of hypotheses and of generalizable results. It seems fruitful, however, to complement them with qualitative case studies in order to define the more subtle interactions between public opinion and governmental action.

One further simplification that usually comes along with quantitative analysis is the binary coding of governmental action in responsive/not responsive. The way *how* governments adjust their behaviour to public opinion is rarely under scrutiny. Governments can be responsive by actions on the international as well as on the national scene, by decisions of fundamental relevance as well as by rhetorical actions in questions of secondary importance.²⁵ Here again, a qualitative case study allows a more detailed analysis.

To finish with, there is one last weakness that is true for most responsiveness studies on European politics. Usually, responsiveness is measured by two classical questions of the Eurobarometer surveys: „In general, are you for or against efforts being made to unify Western Europe?“ and „Generally speaking, do you think that membership in the European Union is: a good thing; neither good nor bad; a bad thing?“²⁶ The actual discussion on Europe, however, is less on the questions “pro/contra

²⁵ Cf. Hobolt & Klemmensen 2008: 310. Concerning “symbolic responsiveness” see also Eulau & Karps 1977.

²⁶ Cf. Schmitt & Thomassen 1999, Schmitt & Thomassen 2000 and Marks, Wilson & Ray 2002.

European integration” but rather “What kind of Europe do we want?” A recent example was the debate on the constitutional treaty: Many Frenchmen declared to have voted against the constitutional treaty precisely because they are in favour of European integration – but another kind of European integration than outlined in the constitutional treaty.²⁷ The binary dimension “pro/contra European integration” does no justice to these very complex attitudes.²⁸

This paper defines responsiveness as the adjustment of governmental action to public opinion. In order to avoid the above-mentioned problems, the paper analyzes the interplay of public opinion and governmental actions by means of an in-depth case study. It focuses on one specific question of European integration (EMU) rather than attitudes towards European integration in general, and it asks not only when governments behave responsive, but also how.

2.2 Public opinion

Another important question to consider is: To whom are governments responsive?²⁹ What exactly is this “public opinion”, which functions as a reference point to political leaders? Walter Lippmann called public opinion a “phantom”³⁰ and V.O. Key named it a “holy ghost”³¹. The understanding of public opinion is socially constructed³² and culturally bound.³³ Even though the concept has been known since ancient times,³⁴ the scientific community could not agree on a common definition as of yet.³⁵ Widely accepted is the vague idea of public opinion as “dominant opinion”.³⁶ Heavily contested, by contrast, is the way to operationalize and measure public opinion. Most studies can be assigned either implicitly or explicitly to two main approaches: The first measures public opinion by means of surveys, the second uses media analyses.

The survey opinion approach is dominant most notably in the Anglo-Saxon

²⁷ Cf. Brouard & Tiberj 2006.

²⁸ Cf. Belot & Cautrès 2006: 90.

²⁹ Cf. Hobolt & Klemmensen 2008: 312.

³⁰ Lippmann 1993.

³¹ Key 1966.

³² Cf. Herbst 1998.

³³ Cf. Sarcinelli 2005: 55.

³⁴ On the conceptual history cf. Noelle-Neumann 2002: 81–84, Blondiaux 1998 and Champagne 1994: 41–86.

³⁵ Cf. Scherer 2002, Sarcinelli 2005: 53 and Herbst 1998: 1–2.

³⁶ Cf. Noelle-Neumann 2002 and Neidhardt 1994.

region.³⁷ Its proponents hold the view that measurement of public opinion must be based on unweighted individual attitudes. Surveys, just as democratic elections, count every voice in an equal manner, they argue.³⁸

Critics point out that surveys measure not only attitudes but also “non-attitudes.”³⁹ On many political subjects, people simply don’t have any opinion. When asked by a pollster, they generate rather random answers. As James B. Lemert puts it, “you can respond to opinion questions without knowing – or caring – anything about the issue asked.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, it has been shown that technical details like question order or wording significantly influence the answers.⁴¹ Opponents of survey research conclude that seemingly objective results are mere artefacts. Most survey researchers don’t deny these methodical problems, but argue that single measurement errors are not of decisive consequence for the aggregated results.⁴²

Aside from methodical questions, criticism has been passed also on the conceptual implications of the survey approach: Opinions measured by polls have been expressed anonymously and in privacy. The majority opinion measured by surveys might be a “silent” majority. Critics argue that survey opinion lacks a public dimension and thus could hardly be named “public opinion”.⁴³

The second approach understands public opinion as “published opinion”, measured by media analyses.⁴⁴ The public dimension is definitely given here, but there are other reasons that make the media opinion approach subject to criticism:

Media opinion does not necessarily mirror the attitudes of the masses. It is selective and rather elitist. This becomes evident in situations where surveys and media analyses show contradicting results. The relationship between the media and “the people” is a complex one: On the one hand, the media have a mouthpiece role by rendering private opinions public. On the other hand, the media actively form opinion.⁴⁵ Mass media play a large part in determining public opinion, understood in the above mentioned sense of “dominant opinion”. They can dramatically impact an individual’s perception about

³⁷ What is described here as “survey opinion” largely corresponds to what Entman and Herbst have labelled “latent public opinion.” Cf. Entman & Herbst 2001: 203–225.

³⁸ Cf. Brettschneider 1995: 22.

³⁹ Cf. Converse 1970.

⁴⁰ Lemert 1994: 45, see also Champagne 1994: 114.

⁴¹ Cf. Zaller 1992: 32–34 and Marquis 2005.

⁴² Cf. Page & Shapiro 1992 and Eckstein & Pappi 1999: 300–302.

⁴³ See for a discussion hereon Pappi & Shikano 2007: 89–102.

⁴⁴ See for instance Pfetsch 2000.

⁴⁵ Cf. Neidhardt 1994.

what the majority opinion is (whether or not that portrayal is factual) and might reinforce a so-called “spiral of silence”: The theory of the spiral of silence, developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, builds on the assumption that people fear social isolation. It assumes that those who feel their opinion in minority become less likely to speak out while those who think themselves in majority will state their opinion with growing self-confidence.⁴⁶

In sum, both survey opinion and media opinion are important indicators of public opinion.⁴⁷ What is being conceived as “dominant opinion” is in the end a matter of perspective. Since this paper focuses on government responsiveness in Germany it needs to know what German political leaders perceive as public opinion. This understanding corresponds to what James B. Lemert has called “effective public opinion”: “We define effective public opinion as opinion that reaches decision-makers as they try both to discern public opinion and decide how to react to it.”⁴⁸ A series of semi-directive interviews with high-ranking politicians has been conducted in order to find out what they perceive as “public opinion”.⁴⁹ The result was that they pay attention to both survey opinion and media opinion. They see polls as an important source of information but not as an imperative to be blindly followed. This result is consistent with findings of James B. Lemert who cites a political leader saying: “Opinions need to be weighed, not counted.”⁵⁰

How to weigh public opinion? Here, the media come into play. The media can boost the salience of an issue simply by reporting and commenting on it. The interviewed politicians see them as important agenda setters. In communication research, there is an old debate whether the media tell the people what to think, or only what to think

⁴⁶ Cf. Noelle-Neumann 2001.

⁴⁷ Cf. Sarcinelli 2005: 53.

⁴⁸ Lemert 1994: 42–43.

⁴⁹ Interviews have been conducted with (alphabetical order): Peter Altmaier (CDU), Kurt Bodewig (SPD), Daniel Cohn-Bendit (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), Björn Engholm (SPD), Hans-Dietrich Genscher (FDP), Wolfgang Gerhardt (FDP), Günter Gloser (SPD), Werner Hoyer (FDP), Otmar Issing (Bundesbank/ECB), Klaus Kinkel (FDP), Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger (FDP), Matthias Machnig (SPD), Angelica Schwall-Düren (SPD), Rainer Steenblock (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), Edmund Stoiber (CSU), Michael Stübgen (CDU), Theo Waigel (CSU). All interviews were conducted over the course of the year 2008. The interview with Matthias Machnig was held on the phone; all other talks were face-to-face. A framework of guiding questions structured the conversations and allowed for a systematic comparison. These questions, however, varied in wording and order according to the concrete interview situation and, if needed, were complemented with further questions. The interviews were aimed to resemble as much as possible a “normal” conversation in order to motivate the interlocutors to speak openly. All interviews were confidential and therefore no citation is directly attributed. On the method see Cohen 1999 and Gläser & Laudel 2004.

⁵⁰ Lemert 1994: 46.

about.⁵¹ The interviewed politicians assumed both effects. They did not equate media opinion with public opinion, but they attributed a great persuasive power to the media. In their eyes, as soon as the media are backing a certain policy, people are likely to follow.

Several politicians mentioned a third indicator they use in order to grasp public opinion: Talks with ordinary people. This indicator can hardly be reconstructed in the present analysis. The paper thus concentrates exclusively on survey opinion and media opinion, but it should be borne in mind that these are not the only indicators for political leaders to define public opinion.

The present paper measured survey opinion by Eurobarometer polls. Media opinion was operationalized by an analysis of all journalistic commentaries on the EMU that were published in the center-left daily “Süddeutsche Zeitung” (SZ) and the center-right daily “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” (FAZ)⁵² over a three-year-period from November 1991 until October 1994.⁵³

2.3 Electoral competition

The concept of competition presupposes opponents battling for one and the same aim – in our case election victory. Joseph Schumpeter was one of the first political theorists to state that electoral competition produces a valuable by-product for democracy.⁵⁴ Anthony Downs⁵⁵ further developed this idea and called the unintended side-effect of electoral competition “responsiveness”. Even though Schumpeter’s and Downs’ approaches have been criticised for diverse reasons,⁵⁶ the general idea that there is a link between electoral competition and political responsiveness is widely accepted by political scientists.

Stefano Bartolini discussed the concept of electoral competition in greater detail. He defined four conditions that need to be met so that electoral competition grants

⁵¹ For the debate on agenda-setting, priming and framing see McCombs & Shaw 1972, Cohen 1993 and Iyengar & Reeves 1997.

⁵² SZ and FAZ both belong to the so-called “quality press”. Empirical studies have shown that political leaders draw their information mostly from quality newspapers. Cf. Fuchs & Pfetsch 1996.

⁵³ The SZ was available via the database “Süddeutsche Zeitung Archiv” from 1992 onwards. The articles of November and December 1991 were consulted by microfilm. The FAZ was available from 1993 onwards. Earlier issues were consulted by microfilm. For the issues listed in databases, the following key words were searched: (Währung OR Währungsunion) AND (EWG OR EU OR Europa OR europäisch*).

⁵⁴ Cf. Schumpeter 2005.

⁵⁵ Cf. Downs 2001.

⁵⁶ For a critical discussion on Schumpeter and Downs see Bartolini 1999.

responsiveness: First, elections must be contestable. Contestability implies for instance that barriers for entry are not set too high and that all parties have the chance of accessing the resources necessary for an electoral race. Second, incumbents must be vulnerable, and third, voters must be available. That means that voters must be willing to punish and to reward, thus willing to modify their electoral choice when indicated. Fourth and most important to our analysis, the electoral offer must be decidable. As Bartolini summarized:

“So far responsiveness assumes contestability, and it depends on vulnerability. The latter requires voters’ availability. Now, the next step is to deduce what motivates the available voter to act for or against the incumbent government or any party/candidate. This must be the differentiation of the offer [...]. If products are not differentiated (or their difference is not perceived), voters can punish or reward at random, and no responsiveness will be achieved.”

The decidability of the offer is the only condition that can be directly influenced by political leaders. Electoral contestability, the incumbent’s vulnerability, and the voter’s availability are largely given. Decidability, by contrast, becomes the focal point of strategic political action. Bartolini defines decidability as “the level of policy or issue position differentiation among parties, and the visibility and clarity of these differences for the voter.”⁵⁷

When this paper describes electoral competition, it focuses first and foremost on what Bartolini calls decidability. Electoral competition is operationalized by means of a qualitative content analysis of electoral campaign materials.

3 The case of Germany and the European Monetary Union (EMU)

The case study covers a three-year-period from November 1991 until October 1994. Thus it starts shortly before the European summit in Maastricht on December 9-10, 1991, and ends some months after the passage to the so-called second stage of the EMU in 1994.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Bartolini 2000:33.

⁵⁸ Agreements on many controversial questions concerning the EMU had already been found at the numerous formal and informal sessions preparing the summit. Open questions that remained for the Maastricht summit were most notably the criteria of entering the third stage of the EMU and the formulation of opt-out clauses. For a more detailed description of the Maastricht negotiations see Weidenfeld 1994. On the history of the EMU see Schönfelder & Thiel 1994.

In Maastricht, the European heads of state and government specified the roadmap to the EMU.⁵⁹ Four criteria were fixed to measure the member states' economic convergence.⁶⁰ Earliest on January 1, 1997, and January 1, 1999, at the latest, those fulfilling the criteria should enter the last stage of the EMU. This passage was declared to be irreversible. Furthermore, the Maastricht treaty fixed the political independence of the future European Central Bank (ECB) and the maintenance of price stability as the ECB's primary objective.

The Bundestag approved the Maastricht treaty on December 2, 1992,⁶¹ and the Bundesrat did so on December 18, 1992. On October 12, 1993, the Federal Constitutional Court declared the Maastricht treaty to be compliant with the German Basic Law. The treaty could consequently come into force on November 1, 1993. A few days earlier, on October 29, the European Council had decided that the European Monetary Institute and the future ECB should have their respective seats in Frankfurt am Main. In December 1993, the heads of state and government appointed Alexandre Lamfalussy as first president of the European Monetary Institute.

The second stage of the EMU began on January 1, 1994. During that stage, member states had to ensure that their national laws were compatible with the Maastricht treaty, and to demonstrate their economic convergence by fulfilling the four criteria laid down in the treaty.

3.1 Survey opinion and media opinion on EMU

Within the analyzed period of time, Eurobarometer polls showed an increasing opinion polarization.⁶² The number of abstentions decreased and the opposition towards

⁵⁹ Cf. Rahmsdorf 1992: 125.

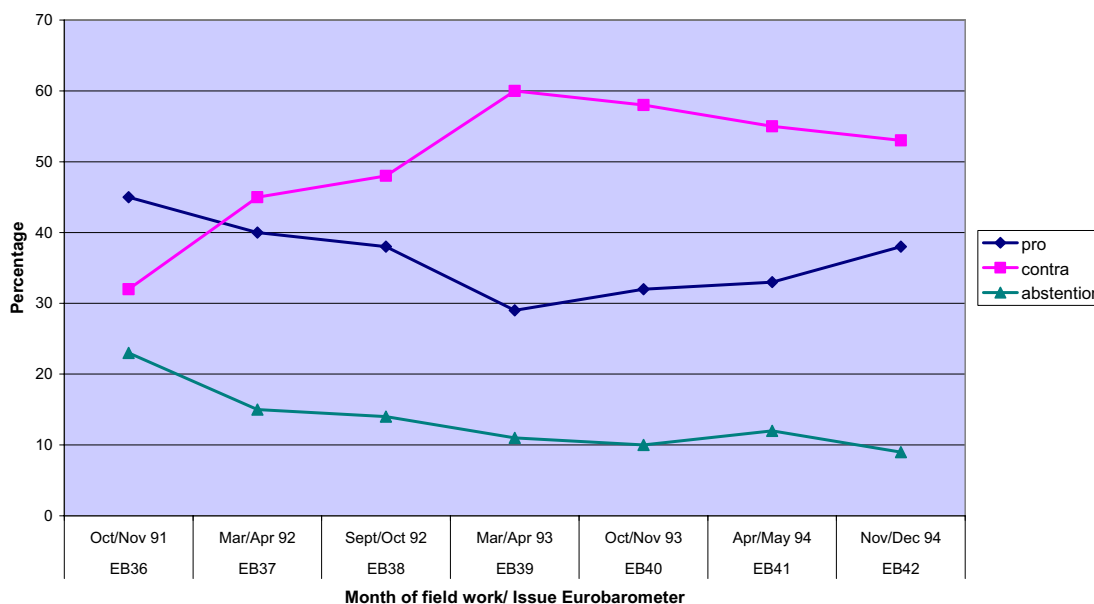
⁶⁰ First, the inflation rate of the applicant country must not be more than 1.5 percentage points higher than the three lowest-inflation member states. Second, the ratio of the annual government deficit to gross domestic product must not exceed 3%, and the ratio of gross government debt to gross domestic product must not exceed 60%. Third, the national currency should not have been devaluated for two consecutive years. Fourth, the nominal long-term interest rate must be less than two percentage points higher than in the three lowest-inflation member states.

⁶¹ The Bundestag made the condition, however, that it will be consulted again before entering the third stage of the EMU.

⁶² There were slight differences in question wording: EB 36 "The Council of Heads of State and Governments of the European Community has called for intergovernmental conferences to discuss details of a European Economic and Monetary Union and of a Political Union. I am going to read you a number of statements. For each one, please tell me whether you are in favour/ not in favour of: Within this European Economic and Monetary Union, a single common currency replacing the different currencies of the Member States in five or six years time." EB 37 and EB 38: "At the moment, the debate on European Union continues. Could you please tell me whether you are in favour or not of ... within this European

the creation of the EMU was on the rise. Since spring 1992, the polls showed a majority of the Germans hostile towards the idea of a single European currency. The number of supporters declined dramatically and reached its lowest level in spring 1993 when only 29 % of the interviewees declared themselves favorable towards the EMU. Even though the resistance decreased a little, the opponents of EMU stayed in majority until the end of the case study (Figure 1).

Fig.1: The attitudes of the Germans towards the EMU (Nov91-Oct94)



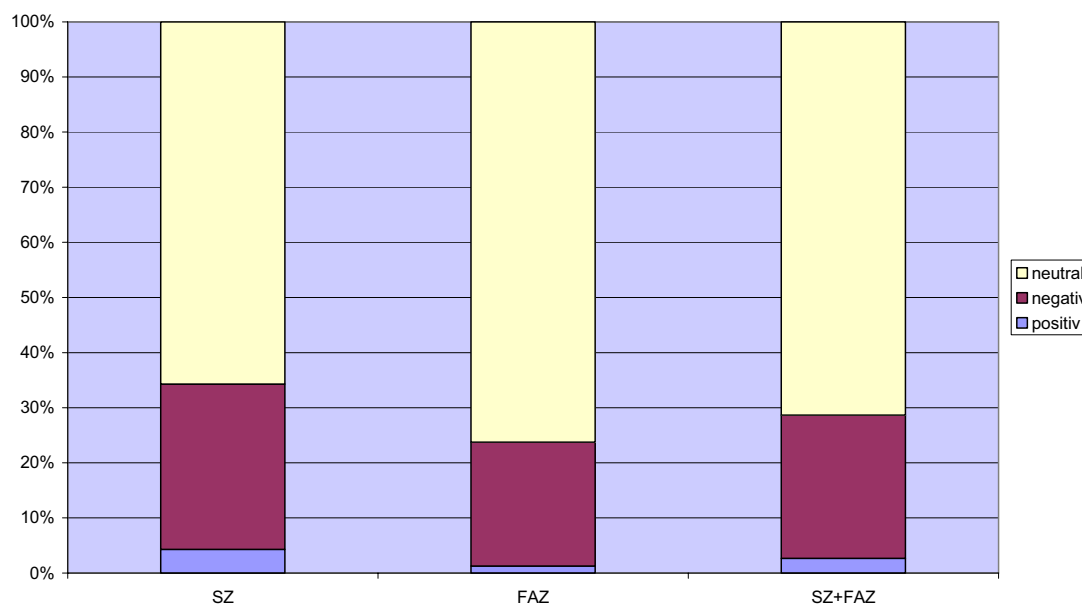
The unwillingness of the Germans to give up their national currency for a European one had mainly historical roots: The Deutsche Mark stood for Germany’s economic rise after the Second World War and was a symbol of national identification. Additionally, the Germans had witnessed dramatic inflations twice within one generation and were extremely reluctant towards any sort of “experiment” with their at last so stable currency.

Not only survey opinion but also media opinion turned out to be very hostile towards the idea of a single European currency. All commentaries on the EMU published by SZ and FAZ were coded according to their approval/disapproval of the single European currency. Commentaries in favour were coded +1, commentaries

Economic and Monetary Union, a single common currency replacing the different currencies in the Member States in five or six years time?” EB 39, EB 40, EB 41 and EB 42: (EB 39: “Irrespective of other details of the Maastricht Treaty...”) “What is your opinion on each of the following proposals? Please tell me for each proposal, whether you are for it or against it: There should be a European Monetary Union with one single currency replacing by 1999 the (NATIONAL CURRENCY) and all other national currencies of the Member States of the European Community/ European Union.”

against -1. Neutral or ambivalent commentaries were coded 0. Following the principle of “hard coding”,⁶³ only clearly positive or negative articles were coded +1 or -1. The advantage of this procedure lies in a relatively high reliability of the results.⁶⁴ Given the fact that most commentaries carefully balance arguments, it would have been in the case of many articles a rather subjective decision to describe them “a little less positive than negative”, or the other way around. For this reason, ambiguous commentaries without a clear tendency were strictly coded 0. The disadvantage of this “hard coding” principle lies in a large 0-category. The SZ published 70, and the FAZ 80 commentaries on the EMU within the analyzed period. Three articles of SZ and one of FAZ were coded in favour of the EMU, 21 commentaries of SZ and 18 of FAZ were coded against. As Figure 2 shows, both SZ and FAZ were very reluctant towards the EMU; the political orientation of the paper seems to carry no weight.

Fig.2: Media opinion on the EMU (Nov.91-Oct.94)

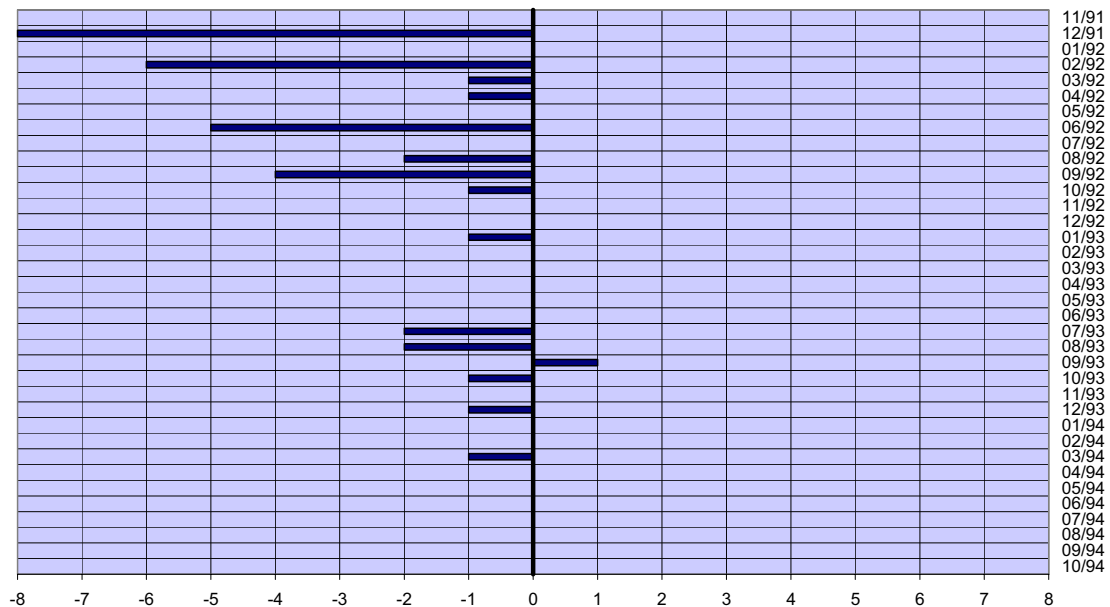


By picturing the evaluation of the EMU by the German media over time, it becomes evident that media opinion was already very much opposed to the EMU when survey opinion just started to become hostile. Figure 3 shows all commentaries, coded with -1, +1 and 0, summated per month. The maximum of critical comments was exactly at the time of the Maastricht summit, in December 1991.

⁶³ Cf. Rössler 2005: 149.

⁶⁴ As the coding was conducted by one person only, a test of inter-coder reliability was no option in order to examine the solidness of the results.

Fig.3: Media opinion on the EMU over time (SZ+FAZ)



3.2 The issue of EMU in the Bundestag electoral campaign 1994

Having demonstrated that public opinion was by majority hostile to EMU, the next step is now to analyze the electoral competition on the EMU in order to check, in a third step, the theoretical assumption that electoral competition is a necessary condition for government responsiveness.

Elections to the Bundestag were held on October 16, 1994. Chancellor Kohl was candidate for the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party Christian Social Union (CSU). Rudolf Scharping was top candidate for the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In the end, the governing coalition of CDU/CSU and the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) won by a close margin.⁶⁵ The issue of EMU played a very marginal role in the electoral campaign.

The CDU/CSU's leaflets and posters⁶⁶ on external and European affairs highlighted general values instead of concrete policy questions such as EMU: Chancellor Kohl was presented as a warrantor for stable international relations. In contrast to the leaflets and posters, the CDU/CSU manifesto directly addressed the question of EMU:

⁶⁵ The results of all parties represented in parliament: CDU/CSU: 41.4%, FDP: 6.9%, SPD: 36.4%, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen: 7.3%, PDS: 4.4%. On 15 November, the members of parliament voted with 338 to 333 voices Helmut Kohl for chancellor.

⁶⁶ The CDU/CSU campaign material was consulted at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Sankt Augustin.

“By means of a common stable European currency, CDU and CSU want to further economic growth, and most notably strengthen the competitive position of the export-oriented German economy. CDU and CSU advocate a currency policy within the united Europe that is oriented on the successful model of the German Central Bank. We stick to the goal of monetary union; it will come into force when the stability conditions of the Maastricht Treaty are fulfilled without concessions.”⁶⁷

In relation to the overall manifesto, however, this single paragraph did not carry much weight. Even within the chapter on Europe, the question of EMU played a minor role. Furthermore, one has to bear in mind that people pay far less attention to manifestos than to posters or leaflets.

Just like CDU/CSU, the smaller coalition partner FDP⁶⁸ mentioned the issue of EMU solely in its electoral manifesto. The FDP manifesto stressed that the EMU would only come into force when the convergence criteria were strictly met and highlighted the importance of a politically independent ECB. It claimed:

“The Economic and Monetary Union is a consistent advancement of the single European market [...]. As the party of currency stability, the Liberals stand up forcefully for the stability of a future European currency.”⁶⁹

Despite the massive unpopularity of the EMU, the opposition party SPD⁷⁰ chose not to highlight the issue in its electoral campaign. There is no known leaflet or poster on the issue. In its electoral manifesto, the SPD promised:

“We will not allow that the monetary union will weaken the Deutsche Mark. A softening of the conditions for a stable common currency that was fixed in the treaty of Maastricht won't happen with us.”⁷¹

Differing from the governing parties, the SPD did not state explicitly its wish to realize the EMU. It rather pointed out what it wished to prevent: A weakening of the currency's stability. This, however, was no unique feature of the SPD, given the fact that the governing parties, too, presented themselves as guarantor for currency stability.

The Green Party “Bündnis90/Die Grünen”⁷² did not take any stance on the issue of EMU, neither in leaflets or posters nor in the manifesto. Concerning European politics, the Green Party highlighted other questions, such as European enlargement to the East.

⁶⁷ CDU/CSU 1994, own translation.

⁶⁸ The FDP campaign material was consulted at the Archive of Liberalism in Gummersbach.

⁶⁹ FDP 1994, own translation.

⁷⁰ The SPD campaign material was consulted at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Bonn.

⁷¹ SPD 1994, own translation.

⁷² The Green Party campaign material was consulted at the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin.

In sum, the issue of EMU did not carry much weight in the electoral campaign of 1994. Only CDU/CSU, SPD and FDP mentioned the issue at all. None of the parties highlighted the issue through leaflets or posters. Furthermore, neither in questions of principle nor in questions of method was there a pro/contra politicization: None of the parties generally opposed the idea of the EMU, and all of them agreed that ensuring the new currency's stability was of top priority. Hence the decidability of the offer, in Bartolini's sense, was extremely low.

3.3 An evaluation of government responsiveness

Due to the low level of electoral competition, we would expect a rather low level of government responsiveness. This theoretical expectation came true: Concerning the question of EMU, the German government's responsiveness to public opinion (survey opinion as well as media opinion) was very weak in the analyzed period of time.

At the time of the Maastricht summit, the Eurobarometer polls did not yet indicate a clear rejection of the EMU.⁷³ But even though the polls showed a growing public refusal in the following months, the German government continued to be a driving force behind the EMU. The principle goal of creating a unique European currency was never called into question by the German government. At the time of the Bundestag elections in October 1994, survey opinion was clearly hostile towards the creation of a unique European currency. But all for that, the government parties confirmed their aim to realize the EMU.

With regard to media opinion, the level of responsiveness was even worse. The media already massively opposed the creation of the EMU at the time of the Maastricht summit. The German government, by contrast, promoted not only the creation of the EMU in Maastricht but in addition a declaration to state the irreversibility of the process. These actions were diametrically opposed to media opinion, which refused any sort of definitive decision on the creation of a European currency.

How did the German government handle this obvious gap between governmental actions and public opinion? Broadly speaking, it tried to weaken both the salience and the decidability of the issue. The governing parties did not highlight the issue during the

⁷³ Eurobarometer surveys usually show much euro-friendlier results than national polls. While Eurobarometer indicated in December 1991 that 45% of Germans were in favour and 32% against EMU, the Allensbacher survey already showed more Germans holding a negative (49%) than a positive (26%) opinion on EMU. See Noelle-Neumann 1992.

election campaign and drew the voter's attention to other subjects. Furthermore, they tried to frame the EMU as a valence issue. The question if the EMU should be realized was no subject of discussion during the election campaign. Competition focused exclusively on the attribution of competence. The decisive question was: Who is most competent to guarantee the stability of the new currency? Bartolini points out:

“The transformation of divisive issues in valence issues is a process which weakens decidability. [...] Position issues are inherently divisive as they involve explicit for-or-against choices. [...] In the case of valence issues, choice essentially comes down to the question of whether one party can do better than the other that which is defined as a matter of general and agreed concern.”⁷⁴

As a matter of course, the governmental strategy of weakening salience and decidability works only if the opposition parties choose not to highlight the issue and not to offer divisive positions either. That is what happened in the case of the EMU indeed. Why is that? There are basically three answers:

First, expert interviews⁷⁵ gave evidence that there was no majority within the SPD or the Green Party generally opposing the idea of EMU. On the substance, they widely agreed with the governing coalition.

Second, chancellor Kohl successfully transferred the EMU from an economic to a political question: He framed EMU as an essential step on the road towards deeper *political* integration.⁷⁶ Chancellor Kohl consequently insisted on the convocation of an intergovernmental conference on political union parallel to the intergovernmental conference on monetary union. While many Germans did not see any sense or economic necessity in giving up the Deutsche Mark for a unique European currency, the support for the general idea of European integration was very high in Germany. Chancellor Kohl thus offered a justification for the disliked project of EMU that the Germans could accept. At the same time, he rendered an electoral competition on the issue even less likely: By linking the question of EMU to the more general question of European integration, any critic of the EMU could be interpreted as a critic of the principle idea of European integration.

Third, the government tried to take the public on board in defining the way in which EMU should be realized. People and the media alike were worried if the new currency would turn out to be as stable as the Deutsche Mark. In order to appease these worries,

⁷⁴ Bartolini 1995: 49–51.

⁷⁵ Cf. footnote 49 for further details on the interviews.

⁷⁶ Cf. Risse 1998.

the German government promoted the idea that the Deutsche Mark should serve as a model for EMU. On the European level, the German government insisted on a strict compliance with the convergence criteria and on a contractual fixation of the ECB's political independence. In the end, the statute of the ECB was even more rigorous than the one of the Bundesbank. Furthermore, the German government advocated Frankfurt am Main to be the ECB's seat. This was intended to underline that the ECB would follow the stability-oriented tradition of the Bundesbank, which was also based in Frankfurt.

In sum, government responsiveness was very low on the question of principle. The goal of EMU has never been called into question during the analyzed period of time. Nevertheless, the German government did not completely ignore public opinion. It was well aware about the Germans' wish for stability, and advocated corresponding measures on the European level. Furthermore, interviews revealed that the government knew about the power of symbols, such as the ECB's seat in Frankfurt, for convincing the people.⁷⁷ Last but not least, chancellor Kohl tried to find a justification acceptable to the media as well as the masses in framing EMU as a political instead of an economic integration project.

4 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explain how political leaders react to hostile public opinion in European politics. It started with a theoretical reflection on government responsiveness and developed the hypothesis that governments won't act in a responsive manner unless the issue at stake is salient and causing an electoral competition. This general analytical framework was then applied to European politics. A case study on Germany and the creation of a European currency was intended to check the plausibility of namely the second condition: The paper argued that even if a European policy question reaches the masses, it is the absence of electoral competition that renders responsiveness on European issues so unlikely in Germany.

⁷⁷ Later in the process of EMU, beyond the period of the case study, other symbolic measures followed: The Minister of Finance, Theo Waigel, suggested for example to call the new currency "Euro" as he considered this name more likely to be accepted by the people than the former labelling "ECU".

The case study found that public opinion (survey opinion as well as media opinion) was by majority hostile towards the EMU during the analyzed period of time. An examination of the 1994 Bundestag electoral campaign showed subsequently that electoral competition on the issue of EMU was virtually non-existent. Given that configuration, a rather low level of responsiveness was the theoretically expected outcome, and indeed, while public opposition was significantly rising, the German government had never revised the principle goal of creating a unique European currency. At the same time, the qualitative analysis demonstrated that political leaders did not completely ignore public discontent. Even though they were not responsive in the sense of giving up the aim of creating the EMU due to public disapproval, they tried to appease worries about the new currency's stability.

To put the case study on EMU in a broader context: What does an absence of electoral competition imply for public consent towards European integration? From Maastricht until today, all established parties in Germany support the general process of European integration. One could imagine an electoral competition on concrete European policy questions without calling into question the overall principle of European integration. Even that, however, happens to be rather seldom in Germany. On the question "What kind of Europe do we want?", voters are often left without any political alternative. This lack of electoral offers risks to have negative side effects: When people cannot express an eventual resentment in a politically effective manner, growing frustration and alienation are likely results.⁷⁸

In conclusion, the present paper has contributed first to European integration studies by establishing a largely neglected link to responsiveness research, and second to responsiveness research by complementing the predominantly quantitative analyses with a qualitative case study. The case study has shed light on the complex interplay between governmental action and public opinion, going beyond the usual simple responsive/non responsive coding. The strength of the paper, however, is at the same time its weakness: Based on one single case study, empirical findings are dense, but their scope is limited. The hypothesis that governments won't act in a responsive manner unless the issue at stake is causing an electoral competition has passed a first

⁷⁸ Cf. Holtz-Bacha 2002.

empirical inquiry. What is needed now is a systematic comparison of situations with varying levels of responsiveness and electoral competition. Including different European policy questions, time periods and countries, such a comparative analysis would allow for more generalizable results.

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