Euengage at midterm: brand new data for social sciences and promising findings

After 18 months of intense work the Euengage Project has achieved a number of results. One of the most ambitious achievements is the creation of different datasets targeting citizens, elites, politicians, parties, social media and electronic media. In June 2016 we conducted an elite and a general population survey in ten European countries (Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom). A representative sample of about 25 thousands people were interviewed through Computer Assisted Web Interview - CAWI, 3 thousands of which represent political and economic elites in the analysed countries. The questionnaire focused on crucial political topics such as immigration, economic crisis, international security, the UK Referendum along with attitudes towards national and EU institutions and voting orientations. The questionnaire included some “experiments” through random assignment of questionnaire items to different groups of respondents. Along with well-established indicators of public opinion, the Euengage first wave survey includes brand new questions on policy preferences and people views about the UK Referendum. Political elites are also studied through their speeches within EU institutions and the IMF. The University of Amsterdam collected more than 18 thousands of speeches from EU leaders (and national prime ministers) from 2007 to 2015. Some preliminary findings on the discourses of leaders are already available in the publication section of the project website. A rich dataset on political parties has been released by the project and is now publicly available (chesdata.eu). It collects information about the positioning of 268 parties on ideology, European integration, immigration, redistribution, decentralization, environmental policy, populism, etc. Thanks to this effort, the Euengage Project has contributed to make CHES the "longest running, most extensive expert survey on political parties in Europe". The Euromanifesto Study is also part of the Euengage Project. The University of Mannheim (MZES) has collected 199 Party Manifestos of the 2014 EP Elections from 28 Countries and the European Groups. This highly comprehensive dataset expands comparative manifesto research as it includes detailed information on issue salience and party positions with respect to various issues. The London School of Economics (LSE) has built a dataset of tweets about the European Parliament elections of 2014.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

“Will a majority of public opinion remain supportive of European integration or, on the contrary, will it begin to see integration as a threat to its basic interests?”

“Will the political leaders remain confident about the value of the EU project, or will they look back to re-nationalising options?”

“Will the political leadership be able to reconcile the specific interests of the different national populations with the requirements of a large supranational Union, or will the gap between public opinion and politicians continue to grow?”

“Can the internal diversities among member states be reconciled in a common enterprise, or will centrifugal drives prevail?”

Data collected within the Euengage Project also includes electronic media. The Media Research Centre (MRC) has collected textual data from news media in selected countries. Newspapers, in particular, have been selected from a variety of sources (e.g. European Audiovisual Observatory Yearbook, Zenith Optimedia, World Press Trends Database, etc.) and with respect to audience size, journalistic style, information quality and political outlook. In addition to other general issues, the dataset offers a special focus on the three key topics of Brexit, immigration, conflict in Syria and Libya.

Finally, a Deliberation Online (DoL) experiment was conducted in October 2016. It involved about 450 citizens around Europe, our collected data will bring new knowledge for the study of opinion formation and deliberation, as well as deeper understanding of what people think about some emergence issues and a set of crucial policies at the EU level (find more about DoL in the dedicated section of the Newsletter).

Debating crucial issues around Europe: the Euengage Deliberation Online (eVOICE - DoL)

From October the 17th to the 27th of 2016, the University of Siena, in partnership with Kantar Public, conducted the Euengage Deliberation online (DoL). This unique interactive online forum brought together about 350 citizens from 10 European countries (Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom) to discuss among themselves and with politicians three challenges EU is facing: the economic and financial crisis, the immigration and the security crisis. The citizens involved in Euengage DoL interacted through an online platform, created by Krealinks for this project, for 11 days.

The main goal of the Euengage DoL was to provide a full-fledged and dynamic image of the state of public opinion on these issues and to inquire into the current tensions between the supranational EU governance and popular mobilization at the national level.

Participants in the DoL were randomly recruited among the pool of about 2,000 interviewees per country of the first wave of the Euengage mass panel survey, carried out by Kantar Public in June/July 2016. Two questionnaires, administered to participants before and after the DoL, explored people’s opinions on the three issues of the DoL as well as their views about political participation and representation. During the DoL, people could express their opinions, confronting their
comments on the discussion threads provided by the platform.
Communication among national groups was managed through professional moderators, coordinated by the Inventio Group, under the supervision of the UNISI research team and with the collaboration of Kantar Public.
Citizens had also the opportunity to ask questions to experts, who provided insightful answers and clarifications to their queries.

Some groups received a video message addressed to them by a number of national politicians who kindly accepted to take part to the experiment. Participants had an opportunity to ask questions to politicians and get their answers in two rounds of discussion that offered a constructive opportunity for dialogue between the representatives and the represented.

Citizens’ were also involved in two games, designed to make citizens reflect on the principles of redistributive justice (Rawls game) and on mechanisms of cooperation and solidarity to address common problems (the Public Good Game).

At the end of DoL, participants were asked to formulate policy proposals to address the immigration, economic and security crises. A selection of 10-20 proposals for each issue was then subjected to the participants’ vote in the post-DoL survey. These proposals are now disseminated through our social media accounts.

The variety of data collected through this experiment represents a valuable source of information to investigate how opinions on these issues formed and are shaped by discussion, information and the exchange of arguments. Researchers at the University of Siena (UNISI) are currently analyzing all these data.

80% of the participants found this experience useful. Strong majorities gave positive evaluations of the activities in which they have been involved. 82% felt they had the opportunity to freely express their views, in a discussion that was civil and in which all ideas were respected (72%) and people had not fear to express their opinions (52%).

As to the first substantive results, both the pre-post surveys and the posted comments show a great concern about the flow of immigrants among the participants, followed by worries concerning the consequences of the economic crises. On these two issues, people’s preferences are for national decision-making, while, on the contrary, it is thought that security threats are best addressed at the EU Level. Throughout the discussions and the Q&A with experts, however, people stressed the need for an enhanced effort and cooperation at the EU level to effectively handle these crises.

Participants to the DoL argue for “more action at the EU level”, under condition of a fairer and more efficient Europe. This is confirmed by the preferred policy solutions voted by participants: to strengthen EU coordination in the fight against smugglers and in the redistribution of migrants across EU member states; to avoid social dumping within the EU and to establish a basic income for all EU citizens; to have the EU speaking with one voice in foreign and security policy and to set up a centralized European intelligence agency to better handle security threats.

Do you want to know more about the Euengage Deliberation Online? See our video presentation at

http://www.euengage.eu/deliberation-line-dol/
In June 2016, the partner of the EUENGAGE Project TNS Kantar Opinion launched the first wave of our mass and elite survey in ten EU countries (Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom). The survey explores public attitudes trough a Computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) system, involving more than 25 thousands people, a panel of economic elites of the member states, and a sample of national MPs. The questionnaire focused on three main issues (Security, the Economy and Immigration) collecting opinions on six key subjects: concern/salience, policy opinions (on security, economy and immigration), attitudes towards the EU, values/belief, and socio-demographic information. The survey conducted also some population-based experiments on the three main issues explored.

The first results of the analyses conducted through the EUENGAGE Mass and Elite 1st Wave Survey show both some continuity with past trends and new, emerging phenomena.

Consistently with other surveys conducted at the EU level (especially Eurobarometer surveys), our data show some criticism in attitudes toward the EU membership. On average, 61% of the population and 71% of elites of these 10 Member States, believe their country has benefited from belonging to the European Union.

When asked about their current main concerns, respondents show a general anxiety for most topical issues related to the economy (respectively 88% for mass and 86% for elites), immigration (87% and 80%) and international security in Ukraine (63% and 62%). As far as these issues are concerned, should the EU have a more prominent role than the members states? About eight questions of our survey addressed this topic for different policy domains. On economic policies and budget, both economic elites and general population mainly prefer national decision-making over European action. Only in Spain does the majority within economic elite support a powerful role of the EU vis a vis the national government. This situation is reversed for international security. The idea that the EU Member States should give a joint response to security threats is supported by the majority of citizens in all ten countries, both among the mass and the business world. When the question concerns immigration (whether the number of immigrants that every country should host should be decided at the EU or at national level) bigger differences appear. The sovereignist perspective is a majority opinion in France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Greece, and reaches overwhelming percentages in Poland, United Kingdom and Czech Republic. Only in Italy and Spain the majority of respondents prefer a decision at the EU level.

Finally, we want to highlight some interesting results on Brexit. The questionnaire asked in all countries if the UK should leave the EU or remain. Both before and after the date of the referendum on June 23, while support for the Leave was higher than 40% both for British economic elite and mass, economic elites and citizens of other Member States, on the whole, did not approve of the Brexit option (70-64%). This suggests that a “secession” of the United Kingdom from the EU was considered, by citizens from the other states, as a not convenient choice for British people.
Europe is facing a combination of unprecedented crises. The first descriptive analyses reveal a situation characterized by considerable elements of uncertainty and ambiguity. Benefits coming from the EU, the European identity, and support for more integration in crucial policy domains, show controversial opinions among different countries and, to a lesser extent, among the elites.

Paradoxically, citizens support further EU integration, vis-à-vis member states’ decisions, in less integrated policy domains such as security. On the contrary, they are less supportive of further economic integration, traditionally the most “European” policy domain.

Immigration and its perceptions among Europeans

The 358,403 arrivals of 2016 (source: IOM on 21st of December 2016) confirm that immigration is still one of the most important emergencies that Europe is facing. The situation has become more critical since 2014 when the number of people crossing the Mediterranean Sea increased to 250 thousands (more than four times higher than 2013 - UNCHR). Two years ago, when the number of arrivals in Europe reached a peak of one million, the Migration Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos defined it ‘the worst refugee crisis since World War II’. According to the UNCHR, the largest part of migrants comes from Syria (23%) and Afghanistan (12%). Along with the Middle East, the other most important zone of origin is Sub Saharan Africa (Nigeria, 10%; Guinea, 4% etc.).

How do EU citizens perceive this humanitarian and political crises?

Since 2015, the Eurobarometer Survey showed that immigration has become the most salient issue for European citizens. Although a sensitive decline of arrivals in 2016, this sentiment is still resilient in EU citizens’ minds.

The EUENGAGE first wave survey offers an in-depth view on citizens’ perceptions of the immigration issue in ten countries (Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom).

The data reveal three main findings:

1) The majority of people in the countries under analysis believe that immigration threatens security. People consider immigration as a main source for terrorism, and no less than 60% of respondents in each country believe it increases the threat of terrorist attacks. Religion as a threat is a more controversial issue, with very different results in each country (from 83% in the Czech Republic to 39% in Portugal who perceive immigrants’ religion as a threat). Except for Spain, the majority of people in each state believe also that immigration increases crime.
In a recent paper we found that, at the individual level, fear of immigration and a sense of insecurity among citizens create a stronger demand for EU initiatives. Given the transnational scope of the phenomenon, the ability of the state to handle the immigration pressure is not sufficiently trusted and those who are more keen to delegate policy to the EU are those very subjects who are most frightened by immigration and who demand stronger protection and stricter policy against immigration.

2) The majority of people think that Immigration negatively affects the welfare state. Except for the UK (55%), people in the other countries do not believe that immigrants contribute more in taxes than they benefit from welfare. However, in some countries immigrants are positively seen because they take the jobs that indigenous do not want, while their culture is perceived as a richness (Germany, Portugal, Spain, UK).

3) A more active role for Europe. Especially in those countries that are more exposed to arrivals, the majority of people tend to ask more EU-coordinated action.
A Spotlight on Euengage Results

The figure depicts the correlation between a party’s position on European integration and the salience it places on anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric. As one would expect, these variables correlate rather highly with one another ($r=-0.70$) and show that parties that oppose European integration generally emphasize anti-elite/anti-establishment rhetoric whereas pro-EU parties are much less likely to use this type of rhetoric.

Source: Polk et al. (2016)

The figure places European parties on a common ideological space, which produces a cross-nationally comparable measure of the economic positions of European parties. To establish anchors for cross-national comparability, we created a series of vignettes in the 2010 round of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) on party positioning in Europe. The vignettes depicted the economic position of three ideal-type hypothetical parties, one distinctively left, one centre-right, and one to the economic right. As authors describe in more detail in the journal article (The Journal of Politics) the expert placements of the vignette parties allow us to use scaling techniques to identify and adjust for cross-contextual differences and generate placements (with uncertainty estimates) for the actual political parties of Europe on a common left-right scale.

Source: LSE Blog

Correlation of EU position and salience of anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric. Source: CHES Data 2014

European parties in a common ideological space
The Euengage WORKING PAPER SERIES IS ONLINE! To read abstracts and download the papers visit EuengageWPS page.

Euengage partners met at University of Siena on 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} of February 2017 for the Project General Assembly. We shared preliminary research results and planned synergies among different working packages for future studies and publications. For updated news follow our Twitter account @ EuengageProject!
The EUENGAGE project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Its main goal is to inquire into the current tensions between supranational EU governance and popular mobilisation at the national level, critically questioning EU driven policies and EU legitimacy, and to propose remedial actions based on sound empirical research on the relationship between public opinion, national and supranational political elites.

“The EUENGAGE project identifies in the conflicting messages emanating from the functioning of political representation a critical and urgent problem for the future of the EU”.

In this perspective it proposes to set up an interactive, dynamic, multilevel and replicable quasi-experimental research design. Using a variety of instruments and techniques, it will allow not only to study the process of representation in vivo, but also to experiment how innovative and efficient interactions between citizens and politicians can increase the awareness of citizens of the common problems of the Union, and the ability of the European leadership to respond innovatively to the discontent of public opinion.

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