Representation in a supra-national polity in times of crisis: themes and theoretical questions (Maurizio Cotta)

The peculiar nature of the European system of representation

If we assume that the EU can be seen as a representative system, what has happened to it during the most serious period of crisis of its history? From the normative point of view, the first assumption is warranted. The European Union explicitly affirms to abide by the “principles of representative democracy” (TEU art.10) and that “citizens are directly represented in the Union by the European Parliament” (art 10.2) (Kroeger 2015). It also states that “political parties at the European level contribute [...] to expressing the will of citizens of the Union” (art. 10.4). As the Commission (to be partially equated to a government of the EU) is now responsible to the European Parliament, the basic rules of parliamentary democracy are “constitutionally” established in the EU. Given the special nature of the Union, a channel of institutional representation of the member States is also provided: “Member States are represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their governments” (Art. 10.2). The current normative design of the EU thus combines as in federal states representation of the citizens and representation of the States.
The practice, however, offers an interpretation of this “constitutional design” which is clearly skewed in the direction of the national channels of representation. This is obviously true for the European Council and for the Council: it is the normal national elections, which determine the composition and political mandates of these bodies. From the point of view of the European process of representation and accountability, what is more problematic is that the other channel too works according to multiple disjunctive national dynamics. It has been shown that European elections predominantly work until now as the sum of a series of independent national elections rather than like one Europe-wide election. The reasons are well known: European elections are still “captured” by entrenched national political mechanisms: party systems, electoral programs, selection of candidates, campaigns are all national, while the corresponding European wide elements are substantially missing.

To balance a bit the picture with regard to this component of the EU representation process, it must be observed that some degree of “Europeanization of representation” takes place indeed within the European Parliament. Nationally elected MEPs come together in the European parliamentary groups and these groups to a significant extent vote together following a left-right alignment which cuts across national allegiances (Hix, Noury and Roland 2007). But the ability of European parties to project their identity “downwards” into the national representation processes remains almost non-existent.

To describe the practice of representation in the EU we need therefore to talk of a composite “European representation system” (ERS) made of different components: 1. A set of “national representation systems” (NRS) (with a strong historical inertia and dynamism of their own, but increasingly affected in their working also by the European constraining conditions); 2. The projection of these NRS at the European level in the “intergovernmental institutions of the EU”; 3. A somewhat more European but still rather weak representation process through the EP channel and its connections with the European Commission. Summarizing, we can say that the EU process of representation is at the electoral level still predominantly national. It becomes European only with the second step (in the EP and in the Councils). This means that the articulation of European representative platforms and the definition of the policies derived from them do not take place “in front” of the voters but rather in the Brussels corridors of the European Council, the Council or the European Parliament. In the ERS some important functional elements, commonly expected in democratic representation, are missing or weak:

1. A common and Europe-wide institutional forum of public contestation of European policy choices is missing. Public contestation takes place in the national fora, but fails to materialize in a Europe-wide institutional space.
2. By consequence, the “construction” of common European interests, of a view of the common good through a political dialogue, which would also involve the people, is extremely difficult.
3. The conception and deliberation of Europe-wide policies are produced essentially through “second level” consultations between “national representatives” coming together in Brussels or by technocratic bodies.
4. The accountability of the European rulers is minimal, as the European citizens are not able to “throw the rascals (of Brussels) out” when they are dissatisfied by their performances. Only the people ruling in Brussels in the Councils can be dismissed separately via national processes.
5. This complex institutional mechanism contributes to a slow decision-making, strongly conditioned by national veto powers.

What happens then when multiple crises hit the European Representation System?

This composite representation (and governance) system seemed to work sufficiently well in normal times. The level of satisfaction of the public was not exceedingly high and the permissive consensus of the beginnings left the place with time to the constraining dissensus (Hooghe and Marks 2008); this could delay major changes but without challenging dramatically the course of European integration.

In a historical moment when exceptionally serious crises have affected the Member states individually and the EU collectively, the missing attributes of the European representation system seem particularly consequential.

The temporal coincidence of three major crises (economic and financial, immigration and security) has applied a significant “stress” to the ERS:

1. The increased inconveniences suffered by important groups of the population (touched by economic hardships, the impact of an extraordinary influx of immigrants, and serious threats to security) generate new demands and put to a test the efficacy of existing policies.
2. Given the persisting high level of heterogeneity of the European Union, the impact of the crises is asymmetrical across the member states; dissatisfaction and claims can also be expected to be asymmetrical in their intensity, targets, and levels.
3. The current European system of governance shows a limited ability to develop and implement effective and timely policy answers to serious crises. Popular dissatisfaction and demands do not receive sufficient attention. The deficit/delay of efficient European responses enhances the probability that crises have centrifugal effects and thus increase the difficulties of achieving common policy answers.

4. At the same time, the high levels of (mainly negative) integration achieved make national responses to the crises significantly more difficult (particularly in the economic domain).

How has this fed into the ERS?

1. Complaints about current hardships and deficient policy responses have fueled public opinion dissatisfaction for: a. current policies, b. political actors (leaders, parties); c. institutions of democracy (governments, parliaments); and even, under special conditions, d. the polity.

2. The first channels for the expression of dissatisfaction have been the national representation systems (NRSs). This has led to a greater vulnerability of governments, the fragility of the established (and predominantly pro-European) parties and to the rise of challengers (new parties and leaders).

3. In view of the negative/insufficient role played by European institutions, public opinion dissatisfaction has also targeted the Union (its policies, institutions, and possibly, the Union itself).

4. New challengers have exploited this dissatisfaction and directed their attacks both to national elites and to European authorities/regime/polity for not providing satisfactory solutions to the crises or even for making them more difficult.

5. Faced with this challenge, established parties have been tempted to shift the blame and enhance their criticism of Europe (Braun, Popa, Schmitt 2017). Only exceptionally more bold leaders have opted for responding with proposals for enhanced integration (the recent Macron example is here relevant).

6. The NRSs, having borne the brunt of the dissatisfaction originated from the crises, have transferred their different readings of them into the European level (through the European Council, the Council, and the EP).

7. As different views have already been crystallized at the NRS level the elaboration of a common European view of the problems and responses has been particularly painstaking.

8. In particular, the asymmetries of the problems and demands originating from the crises have put to a serious test the willingness to accept Europe-wide sharing of responsibility and burdens.

9. The lack of an efficient European outlet for popular political dissatisfaction and the absence/weakness of mechanisms of accountability for European authorities have produced a greater discontent towards the EU in general and favored the diffusion of positions of total or partial rejection of the Union. The recent Brexit case suggests that the extreme case may happen.

To put it in a nutshell: the European Union has been faced with unexpected crises for which its established policy instruments were largely inadequate. At the same time, its representation system still predominantly based on national representation systems was ill equipped to channel effectively popular dissatisfaction to the Union authorities in Brussels and also to produce a common European view of the problems and solutions. This, in turn, has reduced the ability of the EU to react timely and effectively.

Given the national asymmetries of the crises and their effects, tensions between groups of countries have been enhanced by the limited ability of the ERS to “imagine” (Anderson 1983) Europe as an inclusive political community. This has put at the center of the current European debate the question of who has the responsibility for the negative effects of the crises and who should bear the burden of the costs. To what extent the countries, which suffer from a crisis, are entitled to the solidarity of the other EU countries or to a special help from Brussels, and vice versa which are the obligations of other countries and Brussels have become eminently relevant questions in this period.

The relevance of the burden sharing questions is obviously practical (for both the receiving and the giving sides), but is also highly political; the answers are strictly connected to the views about the (desired) nature of the European polity and could potentially alter the future course of the EU. A European Union, which decided to strengthen its burden-sharing rules and to invest significant resources for this purpose in case of serious crises, would be a rather different polity from a Union that decided to refrain from such a course.

References


Euengage Survey, approaching the second wave  
An interview with Pierangelo Isernia

The EUENGAGE project is building eight different datasets focusing on citizens (Euengage Mass Survey, Data on the deliberation online- e-Voice), elites (Euengage Elite Survey), parties (CHES, EP Election 2014 Party Manifestos), political leadership (EUSpeech), social media (EP Election 2014-Tweets) and online media (MRC Data). The first wave of the Euengage Mass and Elite survey was run in the summer of 2016 in ten European countries: Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The survey explores public attitudes through a Computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) system, involving more than 25 thousands citizens, 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, Immigration, and the EU), Brexit, personal values and beliefs and socio-demographic information. In particular, the questionnaire focused on six key subjects: concern/salience, policy solutions, solidarity within the EU. The survey also conducted some population-based experiments on the three main issues explored. After a year, Euengage launches the second wave of the survey. We asked the deputy coordinator of the Project, Prof. Pierangelo Isernia to give some anticipation.

Professor Isernia, during the last year, is the political scenario changed within the countries under analysis and Europe as a whole?

Over the last few years, we have gotten used to a rapid pace of change in Europe.

To mention a few things happening between the first and the second wave: Brexit came in (indeed, the fieldwork of the first wave straddled the British referendum and we were able to make good of this opportunity in order to explore the short term effects of Brexit), Trump got into power in the US, Macron won the Presidential elections in France and, of course, a new Italian government stepped in after the rejection of the constitutional referendum. Clearly, not all of these changes can be reflected in a project as large and complex as Euengage, with many of its scientific goals set out years in advance, but we tried to do our best to take some of these critical events into account in designing our second wave questionnaire.

What is new in the second wave of the survey?

Being a panel survey, we, of course, struggled to strike a balance between the need for continuity – to maximize the panel nature of the design - and the desire to make sense of some of the too many changes occurring around us. I hope we did a good job. Three are the main things we introduced that were not planned at the beginning of the project. First, we explored the perceived impact the new Trump administration is having on the process of European integration and on the role of Europe in the world. Second, we devoted some attention to the role of information and news, including fake news, on attitudes towards European integration. Last, we included an interesting behavioral experiment on solidarity that nicely matches the several experiments we have run in both the first and the second wave on solidarity issues among European countries.

What is consistent or linked to the first wave?

The bulk of the comparison is about the three policy areas at the core of the project – the financial and economic crisis, immigration and the security concerns related to what is happening in the South and Eastern part of the Mediterranean and on the borders with Russia. Moreover, we used some of the results of the first wave as data input to engage the respondent in thinking over some of the answers she gave in the first wave, a pretty new approach in a standard survey. Last, as planned in the project, we also exploited the panel design to increase the number of pre-dispositional questions, in order to better gauge what is changing in attitudes toward Europe among citizens and business people in the 10 countries part of the project.

The Euengage mass and elite surveys allow comparisons between economic elites and general public, how do they differ?
The two questionnaires for business people and the general public are identical, with the exception of a few socio-demographics and information about the size and sector of the firm. We were initially worried business people – a sample that covers business firms of quite different size and sectors of activity – would have been reluctant to answer questions not obviously related to their business core. However, the first wave showed our worries unfounded. In fact, we have now data to assess to what extent business elites differ from the general public. Preliminary analyses show that, in political terms, they are much closer to the general public than to the political elites.

As to political elites survey, beside a few questions too technical to be asked to the general public, the main difference with the general public is that – as in the first wave – the political elite survey does not include any experimental question. We deemed the sample too small for this kind of questions and we stuck to our decision in the second wave as well. However, we tried hard to explicitly link the two questionnaires, elite and public, making some of the information gathered in the first wave from public opinion available to elite and vice versa. As an example, we imputed the average position of the elite as information for the general public in answering what their position was on different policy issues and we did the same for the political elites, using the public opinion data.

Data from the first wave of the survey are being analyzed, the results have been presented in international conferences and articles have been submitted to academic journals. Why the data coming from the survey are important for understanding the past and present of the EU? And how would they be used?

I see two main contributions coming out of this project. First, with Euengage, we can say that we were “present at creation.” Many important things are happening in Europe and elsewhere right now, and the Euengage survey is probably among the few on the spot to record them, with a carefully implemented panel design and a vast battery of questions both attitudinal and psychological. This project will offer a unique opportunity for the scientific community to gauge what is happening in the European polity and it will help us to better understand in what direction it might go. In fact, we are actively working in the closing part of the project to make this scenario-building activity possible. Second, like in the Indian parable of the blind men confronting the elephant, we are now struggling to make sense of what is going on in Europe putting together a disparate set of evidences. Combining the many different data sources created during the project is a really exciting challenge for the entire team and one that promises to answer what kind of beast the European institutions are becoming.
Professor Kenneth Benoit and his team at LSE have collected an extensive dataset on the activity of Twitter users related to the 2016 EU Referendum. The team captured all tweets mentioning “Brexit” and “EUreferendum”, and focused also on hashtags and user accounts clearly associated with the referendum. Their explorative analyses on almost 30 million of Tweets about Brexit found salient differences between Leave and Remain supporters.

The first crucial task after the collection of the data was to classify the users in supporters of the Leave position or of the Remain one. As the team collected tweets from about 3.5 million of users, they opted for a machine learning classification known as multinomial Naïve Bayes. This method predicts the probability of supporting one of the two positions based on benchmarking texts from a small set of high-profile, and clearly partisan user accounts.

The results produced very plausible classifications for both general user and for users of known positions, such as sitting MPs, party leaders, academics etc. Both the trend and the overall count of messages show that the volumes of Tweets have been pretty similar for the Leave and the Remain side (Fig a). This volume of tweets progressively increased approaching to the Referendum and had an amazing peak on 23 June. Moreover, a large-scale surge of Tweets by Remain users came too late, right after the referendum on 24 June.

The contents of Tweets showed other interesting preliminary results, visible when creating “word cloud” plot of hashtags, partitioned according the users’ predicted side in the debate (including “neutral”). Without presenting in details the different words used, it is clear that supporters from each side framed the referendum by using different hashtags and in different volumes. Cases like #strongtogether, used by the Remain supporters, and #strongerout, used by the supporters of Leave, synthesize the opposition in framing the issue. Hashtags relate also to the issues discussed during the referendum campaign. Issues such as the future of the National Health System (NHS) or immigration clearly show big divides between the two sides. The Leave twitter users preferred hashtags such as #savethENHS or #NHSmillion.

In contrast, there are not many Remain hashtags that contain NHS: #NHSoutofTIP and #NHSsaferIN are (rather infrequently used) hashtags for the Remain side. Hashtags on immigration, such as #immigration, #migrants and #migration, lean toward Leave. Differently from the NHS case, supporters of the Leave basically monopolized the migration issue creating popular hashtag such as #migrationcrisis (ranked 240th). Minor hashtags such as #iamaneumigrant (I am an EU migrant) and #migrationEU are Remain hashtags, but it is hard to imagine that tweets with these hashtags could effectively appeal to wider citizens.
A complete list of hashtags and scores used for the analysis is available at http://rpubs.com/amatsuo/feature_scores.

Figure 2: Word cloud

Compared to the pro-Remain side, the Leave supporters used a more positive language (according to the psychological dictionary, the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count), more oriented toward the future, less tentative, more about assertions of power and less quantitative.

The analysis of the networks of the supporters of both sides shows other interesting relationships. Users are more likely to follow an account with a viewpoint similar to their own. Benoit and Akitaka identified around 400 Twitter accounts often followed by Twitter users in our data, downloaded the entire follower network of these accounts, and then estimated the ideological positions of followers and the followed. The analyses reveal that the followers are very close to the positions of the accounts followed.

This may corroborate our results on the classification of users and show the effect of users’ network.

Overall, it seems safe to conclude that given their use of hashtags, choice of words and general patterns of following, it is – in retrospect – evident that the Leave side were in a better position on Twitter. They generated a larger volume of tweets, conveyed positive messages, and offered a wider range of pro-Leave accounts to follow.

Watch Professor K. Benoit presentation at https://youtu.be/lVayXmtI2VM.

Note: re-worked version from http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/03/16/more-positive-assertive-and-forward-looking-how-leave-won-twitter/
Brexit has shaken the European Union to its core. Much has been said about the motivations of voters during the UK Brexit referendum as well as its (possible) consequences. Less is known, however, about how the referendum was depicted in the mass media in the European Union, and how these depictions can be explained. The work carried out in WP7 adds to this topic by applying advanced automated content analysis methods on the news corpus collected in the previous stage of the project.

The collection of online media data has ended this winter and produced a dataset with 121,170 news articles on 4 topics: Brexit, Immigration, Economy and Security. The articles were published between January 1, 2016 – October 31, 2016 by 30 different media outlets in the 10 European countries studied in the project: Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom.

In WP7 we are currently working on an academic paper that uses two sets of EUENGAGE data. In a first step, it utilizes this media content data to paint a fine-grained, week-to-week picture of how the EU referendum in the UK was depicted, both before and after the Brexit vote happened. To this end, it uses advanced automated content analysis methods like topic models and sentiment analysis. It then goes on to link this media content with mass survey data - also collected as part of EUENGAGE - to explore whether demand side characteristics, like the public’s interest in the EU and support for the EU, may help explain, across national media systems, (1) EU salience in the news, and (2) the way in which the referendum made the news.

**NEWS**

**Euengage Partners are attending the following conferences and events:**

- European Political Science Association meeting in Milan, 22-24 June 2017.
- ECPR General Conference, Oslo, 6-9 September 2017
- SISP Annual Conference, Urbino, 14-16 September 2017

**Publications (forthcoming)**


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.