



HAL
open science

What do changes in the EVS questionnaire reveal?

Pierre Bréchon

► **To cite this version:**

Pierre Bréchon. What do changes in the EVS questionnaire reveal?. Luijkx Ruud; Reeskens Tim; Sieben Inge. Reflections on European values. Honouring Loek Halman's contribution to the European Values Study, Open Press Tilburg University, pp.100-113, 2022, 9789403658773. 10.26116/09eq-y488 . halshs-03781304

HAL Id: halshs-03781304

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03781304>

Submitted on 4 Aug 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

7. WHAT DO CHANGES IN THE EVS QUESTIONNAIRE REVEAL?

Pierre Bréchon

Abstract

The questionnaires of barometric surveys can indirectly highlight the changes in societies as questionnaires are witnesses of what is considered important to measure at one moment of time. After briefly recalling the origins of the survey, the first part is devoted to the first wave of the survey, which by then included a number of very innovative questions. The second part discusses the evolution of the questionnaire, which is closely linked to the evolution of European societies, the rise of new concerns on the political agenda but also the strategies of academics managing the survey.

7.1 Introduction

The evolution of barometric survey questionnaires can be explained by at least two phenomena. Firstly, depending on the cultural transformations of a country, certain questions may lose their interest while others, previously absent,

may become essential in order to take into account new social issues. But this evolution of the questionnaires is also dependent on the way in which those in charge of the survey evaluate the social transformations. Differentiating between the two phenomena is, however, very difficult. I would like, in this book of friends in honour of Loek Halman – probably the researcher who knows best the successive questionnaires of this survey – to highlight the main changes that have been made and try to explain them in the light of the two phenomena mentioned.

7.2 The Origins

The EVS project was built at the end of the 1970s around academics, Catholic intellectuals and survey specialists who were part of the Eurobarometer project. The concerns of this group joined those of European bishops who, on the eve of the first European elections by direct universal suffrage (see <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/about-evs/history/>), wondered whether Europeans still shared common values and whether Christian values would continue to infuse European culture. Catholic organizations and Christian Democrat foundations therefore strongly contributed to the financing of the first and sometimes subsequent waves of inquiry (Kropp, 2017).

As the survey is international, arbitration on the questionnaires is much more difficult than for a national survey. Because of the cultural diversity between countries, the demands of the survey partners are diverse. Researchers in each country want a questionnaire adapted to what they consider to be the most salient features of their national culture. But not all of them carry equal weight in the final decision. Sometimes it has been asked whether certain questions that measure traditional values, which no longer make much sense in Western Europe, should be retained while they may remain central in Eastern or Southern parts of the continent.

7.3 The Very First Survey

The 1981 questionnaire (around 1 hour and 15 minutes face-to-face), which is very detailed, is imaginative enough to track down the new values that are being announced; however, it also includes some very traditional questions. It includes about 300 questions, with 36 measures in the form of a scale from 1 to 10 but also many dichotomous questions for which it is not necessarily easy to choose. The main themes concern work, leisure, perception of self and others, the meaning of life, morals, religion, family, politics.

Some questions were real pearls to measure - indirectly - certain values and many are always present in the questionnaire. This is the case, for example, with the question on the categories of people one would not want to have as neighbors: people of another race, Jews, immigrants and foreign workers, heavy drinkers, people with a criminal record, members of religious sects or cults, large families, emotionally unstable people, right-wing extremists, left-wing extremists, unmarried mothers, students. Some categories have changed over the waves, but the first 4 mentioned are still part of the questionnaire.

Another very good decision was to introduce the first question of a scale developed by Maurice Rosenberg (1956) to measure trust in others or, on the contrary, to be careful with them. This is a general indicator that has been very stable over the decades - with large differences between countries - and is well correlated with many other attitudes and values, including political ones. This is an indication of sociability, which can be notably observed in the results through a fairly strong link with association membership, measured by being a member of different types of associations and doing voluntary work in them.

The questionnaire also included many other psycho-sociological questions: feeling lonely, not liking being with people different from oneself, feeling depressed or, on the contrary, feeling very optimistic. Some of these questions were dropped in 1990 and almost all the rest disappeared afterwards. But the theme of general trust in others has remained and was even extended in 2008 and 2017. There are also questions on happiness which are closely linked to an indicator of a feeling of autonomy: feeling free to make choices. These ques-

tions on happiness - which are now very often asked in surveys - show, surprisingly, that the feeling of happiness is increasing while the pessimism about societies seems to be growing.

In the large block on the meaning of work, a long battery - still partly present - concerned what is important in a job. The items correspond to two orientations, instrumental or expressive, in other words material (a good pay, not too much pressure, good job security, good chances for promotion, good hours, generous holidays) or on the contrary qualitative (pleasant people to work with, a job respected by people, an opportunity to use initiative, a useful job for society, meeting people, a job in which you feel you can achieve something, a responsible job, a job that is interesting, a job that meets one's abilities). It is a way of operationalizing, at the level of work, the distinction between materialistic or post-materialistic expectations.

A very general - dichotomous - question concerned moral action: in order to know what is right and wrong, should one refer to absolutely clear guidelines or should one assess what is right or wrong according to the circumstances? Unfortunately, this question was abandoned for the last wave. However, it highlighted the rise of a relativistic morality in all European countries since only a minority of Europeans said that one should act according to intangible principles.

Among the religious questions, some were classic at the time, but one was innovative: it asked the respondent whether he or she feels "religious, non-religious or convinced atheist". These were still few in number at the time, but they are much more numerous today. The question makes it possible to distinguish people who are simply detached from religions from those who are rather anti-religious. There are also some rather innovative questions about telepathy or distance visions, contact with a deceased person, the closeness felt with a spiritual force, indicators measuring new forms of religiosity.

Belief in God is accurately measured through three questions forming a scale: a dichotomous question: believing in God (yes/no); a question with four modalities: believing in a personal God, in a kind of spirit or life force, not knowing

what to think, not believing; a 10-point scale to measure the importance of God in one's life.

In the family questions, two batteries have been maintained since 1981. The first one is about what contributes to the success of a marriage, with 11 items: fidelity, a decent income, good housing conditions, sharing household chores, having children, sharing the same religious and political opinions, being from the same social background, good sexual understanding, respecting each other, showing understanding and tolerance (the first five items mentioned are still in place). The high level of importance recorded for fidelity in all waves is very indicative of the idealization of the couple, especially among young people.

The second battery concerns qualities to be encouraged in children, asking respondents to choose five from a list of 17. Today 11 have been kept: good manners, independence, application to work, sense of responsibility, imagination, tolerance and respect for others, thrift, determination and perseverance, religious faith, generosity, obedience. More traditional items have been abandoned. This question makes it possible, as with work, to distinguish between expectations that are more centred on conformist values and others that aim to promote individual autonomy.

As with the family, the section on politics includes questions frequently asked in electoral surveys, but also others that are more innovative. One of them, typical of EVS and WVS, concerns the measurement of materialist or post-materialist values, with the double question created by Ronald Inglehart (1977) in the Eurobarometers on a country's long-term objectives: should one give priority to maintaining order, combating price rises, increasing citizen participation in decision-making or freedom of expression? This index, often criticized (Flanagan, 1987), can be used in various forms and makes it possible to identify major trends in values. It has therefore been maintained.

One question concerns the "protest potential" of individuals. Six protest behaviours are taken into account: petition, boycott, lawful demonstration, unofficial strikes, occupying workplaces, material damage, physical violence.

The measure, taken up from Barnes and Kaase (1979), counts whether the respondent has done, might do or would never do. Although somewhat reduced, the question still exists.

Also innovative is a long question on confidence in institutions: church, armed forces, education system, press, labour unions, police, administration, parliament, major companies. The list has been lengthened over the waves. At a time when a crisis of political confidence seems to be worsening, it is very important to have reliable figures on the evolution of this confidence over the last 40 years. And the battery also makes it possible to prioritize trust according to the types of institutions.

Another battery looks at behaviours that the respondent feels as justified or not (in 10 positions). Although the list has been slightly modified, the following behaviours are still included in the questionnaire: claiming state benefits illegally, avoiding a fare on public transport, cheating on tax, taking drugs, accepting a bribe, homosexuality, abortion, divorce, prostitution, euthanasia, and suicide. The results show the rise of liberalism of morals and, on the contrary, the maintenance of rigorist values for the public space.

7.4 Entering the 1990s

From the 1990 wave, rather profound changes occurred in the piloting of the survey, in connection with deaths or withdrawals within the original founding group. The influence of Catholic circles weakened to the benefit of academics. The survey extended to Eastern Europe, which was in the process of emerging from communist influence.

The questionnaire begins with a question on the areas of life considered important: work, family, friends and relationships, leisure, politics, religion. It is a very good starting question, still in existence, with very stable results, allowing a sort of ranking of the main areas of life.

New questions appeared on the causes of poverty, on the commitment against

pollution, on national preference in employment, on equality between men and women in hiring or in the family, on European construction and the risk of losing national identities (question taken from Eurobarometers). All these new questions are closely linked to themes that are developing in the public debate in many European countries.

A new dimension, the evaluation of the economic opinions and values, is introduced with seven Osgood scales in 10 positions to measure judgments in economic matters: Should incomes be made more equal or individual effort more supported? Should private or government ownership of business and industries be increased? Is providing for one's needs an individual or a state responsibility? Should the unemployed have to take any job available in order to keep their unemployment benefits or have they the right to refuse it? Is competition good or dangerous? Is hard work brought a better life or is success more a matter of luck and connections? Does wealth come at the expense of others or is it good for everyone? If the last two alternatives have been removed, the others are still present to measure the economic values of Europeans.

The section on religion has been fairly significantly reworked. The list of the Bible's Ten commandments (including worshipping the Lord, not take the name of the Lord/God in vain, celebrating His weekly feast, honouring father and mother, not killing, not committing adultery, not stealing, not bear false witness against one's neighbour, not coveting one's wife and neighbour's belongings), for which the respondent had to say whether it still applies today, has fortunately been removed. It seemed particularly obsolete, since most Christians no longer refer to it.

A new battery on the meaning of life and death was introduced: does life have meaning because God exists, does it have no meaning, or would the meaning of life lie in an effort to make the best of it? Is death inevitable, is it natural, does death make sense only if God exists? Similarly, does pain only make sense if God exists? These questions give great importance to God in explaining meaning, with formulations worthy of a theologian: finding the meaning of death and suffering in the existence of God is not easy to understand for the average respondent...

New and interesting are a factual question about whether the respondent was raised religiously, a question about the importance of having a religious ceremony for birth, marriage and death, and a belief in the resurrection of the dead.

7.5 At the Dawn of a New Millennium

The 1999 questionnaire had been prepared at the European level by four thematic working groups (families and primary relationships, work, politics, religion and morals), which introduced a more participatory functioning than before. The future of the countries that emerged from the Soviet bloc was the strongest issue of this wave. Many wondered whether it was reasonable to integrate these countries into the European Union, fearing that their inhabitants did not share sufficiently democratic political values. It seems to have been fairly easy to find funding in the West with this type of questioning.

One question therefore concerns the evolution of democracy in the country: are we satisfied with it or not (four modalities)? Another question is about the system of government in the country: is it very bad or very good (ten positions)? And ten years earlier, how was the political system functioning: very badly or very well (ten positions)? This last question makes it possible to assess the possible rise of political pessimism and, in ex-communist countries, the existence of nostalgia for the old regime. These general questions are followed by four questions to find out which political systems are considered good or bad (four modalities): a strong man who does not have to deal with the parliament and the elections, experts who make the decisions, the army that rules, democracy. These questions, planned especially for Central and Eastern Europe, proved to be very useful everywhere. The results show the fragility of democratic values. Everyone is in favor of a democratic system but many also support other forms of regime. Only a large third of Europeans were “exclusive democrats” in 1999, with very wide variations between countries. The results are very similar two decades later.

Several new questions concern alternative religiosities: believing in telepathy, owning a good luck charm, thinking that one can protect and help (in ten po-

sitions), consulting one’s horoscope and taking it into account in one’s life, sticking to a particular faith or experimenting with different religious traditions (in ten positions). This reveals a growing interest in the diversification and deregulation of the religious field.

7.6 The 2008 Questionnaire

The questionnaire for the 2008 wave was prepared by a “Theory group”. Several dimensions were developed, notably on immigration, which is increasingly at the centre of political issues. Several Osgood scales (in 10 positions) have been created: immigrants take/do not take people’s work, the culture of the country is threatened/not threatened by immigrants, they accentuate/do not accentuate crime problems, they are a burden/not a burden for the social security of the country, in the future, the number of immigrants will be a threat/not be a threat for the society, it is better that they keep/do not keep their customs and traditions. Two questions are also devoted to the number of immigrants in the country: are they too numerous or not? Do people sometimes feel themselves like a stranger in their own country due to the number of immigrants?

The forms of nationalism are also targeted, with one question, coming from the ISSP tradition, trying to measure what makes a good citizen of the country. Is it important to be born in the country, to have origins there, to respect the law, to speak the language, to have lived most of one’s life in the country.

New questions also concern Euroscepticism, through the measurement of fears about the European construction (scales in 10 positions): for social security, for national identity and culture, for the country’s expenses, for the power of the country, for employment. Another scale relates to the enlargement of Europe: should it continue, or has it gone too far?

The old questions about the environment have been replaced by a very interesting battery of ecological values, largely taken up from Riley Dunlap (2000). The respondent must agree or disagree with statements about overpopulation, the disastrous consequences of not respecting nature, the belief in the genius

of man to keep the earth livable, the idea that nature is solid to compensate for industrial damage, that man is made to dominate nature, that the world is at risk of a major ecological catastrophe. From this, a typology can be developed that makes it possible to identify an anthropocentric group, but above all the development of “ecocentrism” (Bozonnet, 2017).

The development of socio-demographic variables is important in 2008. In particular, very precise questions concern foreigners: their nationality, their year of arrival, with the same questions for the father, mother and spouse. The composition of the family and the itinerary of couples are also specified: having experienced divorce, or that of their parents or another family member; having experienced the death of a child, father or mother; at what age these events occurred. An interesting test was introduced to identify disadvantaged people: to have been unemployed for at least three months in the last five years and dependent on social assistance (same questions for the partner). The respondent’s situation at the age of 14 is analysed: was he living with both parents, one alone, neither? What was the father’s professional situation at the time? At the same age, did the mother enjoy reading books, talking politics with the respondent, following the news (same question for the father)? Did the parents have difficulty making ends meet and replacing broken things? This shows the weight of family socialization on values.

7.7 The Most Recent 2017 Wave

For the 2017 wave, the redesign of the questionnaire was very important for two reasons. The executive committee wanted to limit the length of the questionnaire to 50 minutes, which meant that a significant number of questions had to be dropped. In addition, a procedure for an agreement with the WVS survey also resulted in a modification of the questionnaire. Each of the two surveys integrated a number of questions from the other tradition, which meant that some questions had to be dropped.

The questions on work were greatly reduced. Thus the long battery on the meaning of work was reduced to six indicators (three rather quantitative, three

rather qualitative). Questions asked only to people in paid employment were also removed: whether they are satisfied or not, what degree of freedom they have in their work. A question to know if workers must always follow instructions of their superiors or if they should only follow them when they are convinced that they are right was also removed.

The questions on religion have been significantly reduced. Admittedly, a significant corpus remains to measure membership, practices and beliefs. But the questions to count alternative religiosity to the great religions have been removed. The question about the degree of truth of religions has also been dropped (one true, many offer truths, none contain truths). This question made it possible, in particular, to distinguish between uncompromising and relativistic believers.

In comparison, the family domain, which was rather overabundant, was only modestly reduced. There were in fact deletions, but these were compensated by new questions, for example the battery of eight items to measure the roles of men and women in the family and society. The degree of agreement with the statement “Same-sex couples make as good parents as other couples” was also measured, an important addition in the context of the frequent legalization of same-sex marriage.

The political bloc experienced a fairly similar evolution. Numerous deletions have been replaced by WVS questions, especially on democracy. Thus, one question allows us to identify its essential characteristics through 9 definitions, some corresponding to representative democracy or respect for public liberties, others to an economic democracy, and still others corresponding more to features of authoritarian regimes. The following scales are used to measure expectations and disappointments regarding democracy: is it important to live in a democratically governed country? Is the country governed democratically? Is one satisfied with the functioning of the country’s political system? Eight WVS questions are also asked about the reliability of elections in the country. And three questions are introduced on the controls that the respondents accept or refuse: using video surveillance in the public space, mon-

itoring e-mails, collecting information on people without their knowledge.¹

7.8 Epilogue

All in all, the challenge of analysing the change in the European system of values was taken up rather well, with along the time a fine adaptation of the questionnaire, for which Loek Halman was a tireless facilitator, skilfully navigating between his theoretical convictions and the necessary pragmatism of an international survey.

List of References

- Barnes, S. H., Kaase M. (1979). *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*. Sage Publications.
- Belot C., Bréchon P., Gonthier F. (Eds.) (2021). Investigating forty years of French politics through the prism of value change, *French Politics*, Special issue 2-3.
- Bozonnet, J.-P. (2017). Ecocentrism in Europe. A Narrative for a Post-Industrial and Post-Religious Conception of Nature. In Bréchon P. and Gonthier F. (Eds.), *European Values. Trends and Divides Over Thirty Years*, Brill, 86-103.
- Bréchon P., Gonthier F. & Astor S. (Eds.) (2019). *La France des valeurs. Quarante ans d'évolutions*. Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.
- Dunlap R. and al. (2000). Measuring Endorsement of the New Ecological Paradigm: A Revisited NEP Scale. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56/3, 425-442.
- Flanagan, S. (1987). Value change in Industrial Societies, *American Political Science Review*, 81/4, 1301-1319.
- Inglehart, R. (1977). *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*, Princeton University Press.
- Kropp, K. (2017). The Cases of the European Values Study and the European Social Survey: European Constellations of Social Science Knowledge Production. *Serendipities - Journal for the Sociology and History of the Social Sciences*, 2/1, 50-68.
- Rosenberg, M. (1956). Misanthropy and political ideology. *American Sociological Review*, 21(6), 690-695.

¹ The results of the last wave compared to the previous ones for France are analyzed in Bréchon (2019) and in Belot, Bréchon, Gonthier (2021).