Studying (De-)Politicization of the EU from a Citizens Point of View: A New Comparative Focus Group Study
Laurie Beaudonnet, Céline Belot, Hélène Caune, Claire Dupuy, Anne-Marie Houde, Morgan Le Corre Juratic, Damien Pennetreau, Tiago Silva, Virginie van Ingelgom

To cite this version:
Laurie Beaudonnet, Céline Belot, Hélène Caune, Claire Dupuy, Anne-Marie Houde, et al.. Studying (De-)Politicization of the EU from a Citizens Point of View: A New Comparative Focus Group Study. Politique européenne, 2022, 75 (1), pp.100-122. 10.3917/poeu.pr1.0004 . halshs-03923366

HAL Id: halshs-03923366
https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03923366
Submitted on 4 Jan 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.

Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives| 4.0 International License
STUDYING (DE-)POLITICIZATION OF THE EU FROM A CITIZENS POINT OF VIEW: A NEW COMPARATIVE FOCUS GROUP STUDY

Laurie Beaudonnet, Céline Belot, Hélène Caune, Claire Dupuy, Anne-Marie Houde, Morgan Le Corre Juratic, Damien Pennetreau, Tiago Silva, Virginie Van Ingelgom

L'Harmattan | « Politique européenne »

2021/0 Prépublication | pages Id à XXII
ISSN 1623-6297
DOI 10.3917/poeu.pr1.0004
Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-europeenne-2021-0-page-Id.htm
Studying (De-)Politicization of the EU from a Citizens Point of View: A New Comparative Focus Group Study

Whilst the politicization of the EU has been increasingly studied over recent years, the analysis has been focusing mainly on political parties and media. Thus, although not completely overlooked, studies looking at EU politicization amongst individuals remain scarce. This article presents a new qualitative dataset from 21 focus groups conducted across social groups and four countries. It was designed to observe processes of (de-)politicization at citizens’ level, how they talk about the EU and along which cleavages are their attitudes structured. This comparative research design sheds new light on discourses and opinions on Europe, mechanisms of politicization and political discussions.

Alors que la politisation de l’UE a été de plus en plus étudiée ces dernières années, l’analyse s’est principalement concentrée sur les partis politiques et les médias. Ainsi, les études de la politisation de l’UE chez les individus, sans être absentes, restent rares. Cet article présente un nouveau set de données qualitatives de 21 groupes de discussion dans quatre pays européens et avec des profils sociaux variés, permettant d’étudier les processus de (dé)politisation au niveau des citoyens, la manière dont ils parlent de l’UE et les clivages qui structurent leurs attitudes. Cette recherche comparative offre un nouvel éclairage sur les discours et les opinions sur l’Europe, les mécanismes de politisation et les discussions politiques.
Studying (De-)Politicization of the EU from a Citizens Point of View: A New Comparative Focus Group Study

Laurie Beaudonnet
Université de Montréal
laurie.beaudonnet@umontreal.ca

Céline Belot
Université Grenoble Alpes, CNRS, Sciences-Po Grenoble, Pacte
celine.belot@umrpacte.fr

Hélène Caune
Université Grenoble Alpes, Sciences-Po Grenoble, Pacte
helene.caune@sciencespo-grenoble.fr

Claire Dupuy
UCLouvain
claire.dupuy@uclouvain.be

Anne-Marie Houde
University of Warwick
Anne-Marie.Houde@warwick.ac.uk

Morgan Le Corre Juratic
European University Institute
Morgan.LeCorre@eui.eu

Damien Pennetreau
FNRS - UCLouvain
damien.pennetreau@uclouvain.be

Tiago Silva
Social Sciences Institute, University of Lisbon
tiago.silva@ics.ulisboa.pt

Virginie Van Ingelgom
FNRS - UCLouvain
virginie.vaningelgom@uclouvain.be
Introduction

The European Union (EU) had for long been sheltered from mainstream political contestation and had relied, almost exclusively, on output legitimacy (Scharpf, 1999; Moravcsik, 2002). But its growing involvement in policy making, the increasing significance of European issues and actors at the domestic level, as well as the recent weakening of the consensus on the rationale for integration (Eichenberg and Dalton, 2007; Down and Wilson, 2008; Hooghe and Marks, 2009) have unsettled this situation. The European issue has been politicized. Over the last two decades, citizens have been increasingly vocal in displaying their discontent with the EU, notably when given a chance to express themselves via referendum – such as illustrated very recently with Brexit (Hobolt, 2016; Andreouli and Nicholson, 2018; Carreras et al., 2019). Alternative visions of the European project have emerged (Cautrès, 2012; Dufour, 2010; Binzer Hobolt and Brouard, 2011) and in the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis that affected the Eurozone countries for nearly a decade, political parties (in particular the Greens and Left) have vividly pushed for the elaboration of an alternative European project.

Yet, while the politicization of the EU by political parties and media is now well documented (Statham and Trenz, 2013; Hurrelmann et al., 2013; Costa Lobo and Karremans, 2018; Braun et al., 2016; Grande and Hutter, 2016; Hurrelmann et al., 2020; De Bruycker, 2017), the picture is muddier when it comes to citizens. While some studies report the increased impact of European issues on individual vote choice (Belot and Van Ingelgom, 2015; Beaudonnet and Gomez, 2017; Le Gall, 2019; Goldberg et al., 2020), others demonstrate citizens’ indifference to and ambivalence over European integration (Duchesne et al., 2013; Van Ingelgom, 2014; Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016; Delmotte et al., 2017; Palonen et al., 2019; Le Corre Juratic et al., 2020). How, then, do European citizens see and talk about Europe?

The research detailed in this article – conducted within RESTEP (RÉSeau Transatlantique sur l’Europe Politique), an international research network bringing together researchers from ten European and Canadian universities, was designed to contribute to the scholarship on citizens’ relations to European integration.¹ Specifically, drawing from a comparative qualitative

¹ The RESTEP (RÉSeau Transatlantique sur l’Europe Politique) was led by Laurie Beaudonnet and Frédéric Mérand (Université de Montréal) and funded by the ‘Jean Monnet activities’ component of the European Commission’s Erasmus + Programme (project 587460-EPP-1-2017-1-CA-EPPJMO-NETWORK).
design and building on the qualitative turn taken by European studies in the last decades (e.g. Belot, 2000; Diez Medrano, 2003; Duchesne et al., 2013; White, 2011; Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016), it studies how citizens structure their discourses on Europe, when and how the European issues are politicized and whether citizens’ opinions are by specific cleavages across social groups and national contexts. 21 focus groups were organized with different socio-economic groups in four countries (France, Belgium, Portugal, and Italy) during a four-month time span in 2019.2

This article is organized as follows. The first section will present the theoretical framework and the research question at the heart of the research project. Second, the design of our study will be outlined in order to clarify the methodological choices made to realize the 21 focus groups. Third, the recruitment and the selection of the participants will be documented. Finally, the last section will focus on the discussion of our preliminary results.

Theoretical framework and research questions

Until recently, the EU was considered exclusively as a depoliticized object. On the one hand, the neo-functionalist thesis that drove the foundation of the EU, as well as the first generations of scholars, emphasized the technocratic as opposed to the political dimension, deemed too conflictual (Haas, 1958; Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970).3 On the other hand, Europe appeared

In addition, this research has benefited from the support of the Fonds de Recherche Société et Culture du Québec via the Research Support for New Academics Program (grant agreement 2016-NP-191505 awarded to Laurie Beaudonnet, Autre(s) Europe(s) project), and the European Research Council under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement 716208 awarded to Virginie Van Ingelgom, Qualidem project).

2 We are very thankful to colleagues who participated in the research design and greatly facilitated fieldwork: Ece Özlem Atikcan, Marina Costa Lobo, Tullia Galanti, Cal Le Gall, Heidi Mercenier, and to the research assistants without whom data collection and coding would not have been possible: Chloé Alexandre, Loli Battesti, Chloé Bérut, Mauro Caprioli, Glenda Cinotti, Risto Conte Keivabu, Maria De Bortoli, Jeanne-Lise Devaux Pelier, Marie Faucogney, Jacob Fortier, Edouard Francq, Costanza Gasparo, Théo Gratiolet, Florent Guntz, Marouane Joudni, Yani Kartalis, Tullia Pagani, Benedetta Rizzo, Susana Rogeiro Nina, Nelson Santos, Camilla Thiffault.

3 Note however that for the first neo-functionalists, politicization was a desirable stage that European issues and institutions would finally reach through the spillover mechanism once actors and issues would be much engaged in the EU political system.
too complicated or distant to citizens to play any part in their daily political considerations (Gaxie et al., 2010; Duchesne et al., 2013; Van Ingelgom, 2014; Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016; Delmotte et al., 2017). Moreover, as in most of the Member States the main political parties avoided opposing each other on European integration issues, citizens did not encounter diverging views on integration. Overall, the EU and European issues were (almost) isolated from political conflict. However, since the beginning of the 2000s, European studies have reconsidered the process of politicization, starting from a theoretical and normative perspective (Bartolini and Hix, 2006; Follesdal and Hix, 2008), and then moving on to empirical analysis. By politicization, we refer to “the process through which an issue, previously considered as non-political, becomes the source of conflicts and cleavages in a given social space” (Beaudonnet and Mérand, 2019: 10). De Wilde (2011) describes it more precisely as the result of a process of polarization carried out by a growing number of actors and resulting in high salience in the public sphere. An issue is politicized when it generates a cleavage, a polarization of positions among political actors (primarily political parties), public discourse and public opinion (Rokkan, 1999; Kriesi et al., 2008; de Wilde, 2011; Hurrelmann et al., 2015; Beaudonnet and Mérand, 2019). Somehow, citizens have been overlooked in this debate on the politicization of the EU as most of the discussions focus on political parties and media discourses. When considered, existing research points to distinct, if not opposing, directions.

First, the literature on citizens’ support for Europe has focused on explaining the determinants of such attitudes (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016), rather than how they might revolve around potential political cleavages. Indeed, if the left-right dimension is central to explain European party systems and domestic voting behaviour (Rokkan, 1999; Bartolini, 2005), it has not directly translated into European politics. Due to the nature of the EU’s political system (Papadopoulos and Magnette, 2010) and its policies based on the development of the market, or as Majone (1994) put it, the EU “regulatory state”, the role of the state in socio-economic policies has been challenged. The impact of economic integration on monetary and budgetary policies and hence on national redistributive policies tends to undermine the structuring power of the left/right divide and new politics has emerged with European integration (Hooghe et al., 2002). Research explaining support for integration with left-right positioning shows contradictory results (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2010; van Elsas and van der Brug, 2015). By generating costs and benefits to different social groups and countries, European integration (and beyond it, globalization) has created a cleavage that pits the winners of integration against the losers (Fligstein,
Research on the utilitarian approach shows how the (possible) benefits reaped from the financial, professional, and social opportunities related to European integration shape the level of support for Europe, highlighting high-skilled workers as the biggest supporters of integration (see for instance Anderson and Reichert, 1995; Gabel and Palmer, 1995; Fligstein, 2008). Other theoretical explanations stress the role of identity-driven support towards European integration, depending on collective, regional and national identities (Diez Medrano and Gutiérrez, 2001; Carey, 2002; McLaren, 2002). Other scholars underline the role of political cues, such as partisanship or the level of trust in national political institutions and in governmental action in order to understand citizens’ EU support (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Anderson, 1998).

Whilst the literature has focused on the variables of individual support towards European integration, these questions have been renewed with changes in politics at the EU and domestic levels. More specifically, the rise of Eurosceptic parties has been attracting a lot of scholarly attention, mostly on the realignment of European political parties and its electoral consequences. However, a strand of research has studied the politicization of the European issue and its role in individual vote choice at national (Gabel, 2000; De Vries, 2007; Belot et al., 2013; Beaudonnet and Gomez, 2017; Le Gall, 2019; Goldberg et al., 2020) as well as European elections (Belot and Van Ingelgom, 2015; van Elsas and Goldberg, 2019). Others have shown how political mobilisations have become increasingly directed towards the EU (Crespy, 2012).

Second, the qualitative shift in European studies has shed a different light on what we know about the factors that favour or hinder European citizens’ support toward European integration. Research particularly illuminated the great ambivalence of citizens towards the EU and how little their views are actually politicized (Duchesne et al., 2013; Van Ingelgom, 2014; Le Corre Juratic et al., 2019). Hurrelmann and his co-authors show that politicization seldom happens amongst citizens, and when it does, it is not often linked to institutions or specific dimensions of the project (Hurrelmann et al., 2015). Conversely, the lack of knowledge about the EU, its institutions and politics led to a specific form of uninformed politicization, not based on actual knowl-

---

For a summary of these three approaches of the determinants of citizens’ attitudes, see Hobolt and de Vries (2016).
edge and evaluation but on a generic feeling of disenfranchisement, especially among young citizens (Delmotte et al., 2017).

To narrow the gap between these strands of literature, the research presented here focuses on how citizens from different Member States, age, gender, socio-economic and education backgrounds, relate to European integration, how they not only react to but also reconstruct the visions and preferences of political parties and use them in political discussions. It studies the logics of (de)politicization of the European question at the individual level.

**Design of the study**

Building on previous qualitative studies (e.g. Duchesne et al., 2010), our research has been designed to empirically investigate how citizens’ opinions and attitudes are formulated, shaped and expressed, by relying on the very terms used by citizens. In order to access these discourses, in our project, we set out to gather discussions between citizens on the subject of Europe. Thus, we convened 21 focus groups with 95 European citizens in four countries. For each focus group, a set of people were invited by our team to discuss European politics and were queried concerning their ideas, beliefs, or perceptions. Our research design follows the classical definition of David Morgan – an author who was essential in developing this method in the social sciences – defining a focus group ‘as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher’ (Morgan, 1996: 130). When it comes to citizens’ attitudes, the choice of focus groups as a research tool is based on the conviction that individual attitudes are not given, but instead result from a process of construction that occurs using speech in a collective and sometimes even contradictory context (Duchesne and Haegel, 2004; Duchesne et al., 2013). Thus, focus groups assume – contrary to surveys – that attitudes, opinions, and perceptions are developed in part in interaction with other people and opinions cannot be observed in a vacuum as individuals do not form opinions in isolation. At the heart of the method is the analysis of shared meanings and disagreements (Van Ingelgom, 2020). Thus, obviously, if focus groups are not an appropriate method to measure attitudes (Barbour, 2007: 19), they are well-suited to study citizens’ discourses and how an object is – or not – politicized therein (Duchesne, 2017).
In particular, the data was collected to study conflict over European integration amongst citizens by following five general lines of inquiry: How do citizens envision the European project and talk about it (the meaning of European integration for citizens)? How do they perceive their relationship to politics, power distribution, and legitimacy within the EU? How do they hold various levels of government responsible for the stakes they care for? What frames do citizens use and how do they rely on political parties in the process? How do citizens mobilise knowledge when talking about the EU and about politics more broadly, and how do discussion dynamics within the focus group setting influence this mobilisation?

In order to account for differences in characteristics and contexts that are likely to influence citizens’ discourses we chose to study those questions in group discussions set in four countries and with five different socioeconomic backgrounds. Keeping in mind the potential sociological and cultural differences, it was crucial to look for specific characteristics while recruiting the participants, thus allowing for a comparison across the different groups.

As a means to primarily test the setting in two different national contexts and fine-tune the verbatim and logistics if needed, we conducted two pilot-focus groups, one in Belgium and one in France. For logistics reasons, we recruited students. Following some slight revisions to the scenario, minor differences in the actual phrasing and vignettes exist between these two tests and the rest of the corpus. However, data collection turned out to be similar enough to allow us to include these discussions in the final data set. To increase comparability across countries, we also conducted a student focus group in Italy.

Pilots aside, the first groups to be organised were with seniors with political skills, so as to provide the best opportunity to study politicization. As we know from previous studies (Gabel and Palmer, 1995; Karp et al., 2003), proximity with and knowledge on the European Union vary greatly among social groups. Considering the strong consensus in the literature (Duchesne, 2017), we postulate that people with higher education and professional skills feel

---

5 As we were oriented towards cumulative social sciences, we built not only theoretically but also methodologically on previous existing comparative qualitative studies. Thus, our research design has been largely inspired by earlier successful and rigorous comparative research studies on Europe (e.g. Duchesne et al., 2013; White, 2011). In particular, the filiation with the CITAE research project is clearly assumed as one of us was part of both research teams. For a presentation of this project, see in this journal for the making of the survey (Duchesne and Van Ingelgom, 2008) and for the preliminary results (Duchesne et al., 2010).
more competent politically speaking and therefore are more likely to express articulated views on the EU. To study the effects of political discussions and deliberations over time, we designed a series of sequential focus groups (each group would meet three times, over a four-month time span). We chose retired citizens (60-year-old or older and retired) to minimize attrition rate (assuming that retired citizens will be more easily available for a series of three meetings).

To compose the other groups we bore in mind the education and employment factors. Indeed, education has long been established as a key factor to explain levels of support, assessing that the more educated citizens are, the more likely they are to talk about and frame the EU in positive terms, and benefit from it (Gabel and Palmer, 1995; Hakhverdian, 2013). Similarly, unemployed people generally favour more antagonistic views of the EU as they do not perceive it to be beneficial to them. For those reasons, we included three other groups in our design: (1) white collars, (2) young unemployed individuals and (3) young professionals (without a university degree). Table 1 below displays the details.

### Table 1. Presentation of focus group data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Grenoble (France)</th>
<th>Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium)</th>
<th>Lisbon (Portugal)</th>
<th>Florence (Italy)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 2019</td>
<td>Seniors - 1st sequential Students</td>
<td>Seniors - 1st sequential Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2019</td>
<td>Seniors - 2nd sequential Young unemployed</td>
<td>Seniors - 2nd sequential Seniors - 3rd sequential</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>Seniors - 3rd sequential Young without diploma</td>
<td>Seniors - 3rd sequential Young without diploma</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young without diploma White-collar workers</td>
<td>Students White-collar workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Recruitment process and selection of the participants

The recruitment process and the strategy implemented to achieve it were crucial. Indeed, the match between the profiles identified theoretically and those actually gathered by the research team determines the validity of the
data produced. The focus groups were not pre-existing and were artificially constructed by the research team. These groups were not, nor were they meant to be, representative of the national or even social groups composition. Of course, this does not yet prejudge the quality of the data produced, which depends on the conduct of the discussions themselves. In addition to pilot discussions with students, different groups were targeted: senior citizens (pensioners); middle-aged white-collar workers; young professionals (without a university degree); young unemployed (with university degree). The selection of specific participants responded to several principles: First, a certain level of homogeneity was needed to ensure some degree of “shared meaning” for focus groups participants, to avoid self-censorship behaviours, to enable groups comparison across countries (Garcia and Van Ingelgom, 2010: 132), and guarantee gender balance. Second, heterogeneity was key to observe confrontations on the objects of study and gain access to a qualitative variety of individuals’ experiences. Hence, participants were selected to differ in terms of Left-Right positioning, on their partisan identity and on their attitudes towards European integration.

Recruitment was done first through various general channels (advertisements were placed in supermarkets, local shops, neighbourhood associations message boards and Facebook pages related to the specific geographical areas). This process worked relatively well in Grenoble and in Florence, but the results were mixed in Louvain-la-Neuve.

Second, more specific channels according to the target groups were also mobilised. Senior participants were targeted through local University of the Third Age. In Lisbon, all senior participants came from the same course on the EU,6 while the absence of such a channel in Florence led to an insufficient number of potential participants (two people only were recruited, so eventually no senior group was organised in this city). This strategy provided mixed results in Louvain-La-Neuve and Grenoble, and groups had to be completed with other seniors recruited elsewhere (diffusion via Lions club networks, retired associations). To recruit unemployed young people, ads were placed on social media and universities alumni groups and leaflets were left at the town hall, in post offices and in libraries. In some cases, the targeting strategy was further refined to recruit specific missing profiles (in terms of socioeconomics or political profile). Recruitment was therefore complemented with leafleting.

---

6 Even though all the participants were enrolled in the same university course, they did not know, or were close to, each other.
in local spots, such as outside evening classes, churches, demonstrations, or targeted workplaces. Candidates were contacted by phone and answered a pre-selection questionnaire. To limit self-selection and the recruitment of participants interested in politics and/or sophisticated politically, participants received 50€ per focus groups.

Overall, 95 participants were selected according to these criteria. However, focus groups composition varied due to national contexts, candidates’ availability, and in rare exceptions, fieldwork flaws. For instance, groups’ diversity in terms of support for the EU was relatively achieved according to nationality and age groups. Seniors or Belgian groups tended to be more consensual about further European integration compared to their younger or French and Italian counterparts. Similarly, groups composition in French, Italian and to a lesser extent Portuguese groups are skewed to the Left on the political spectrum whilst Belgian participants are skewed to the Right. These political attitudes can be partly explained by the national and local political contexts that this qualitative cross-national and cross-age/education design directly aims to address and study. Yet, cases of self-censorship and self-selection bias should not be overlooked. To address the issue of bias in focus groups participants, a post-discussion questionnaire inquired about the motivations behind interviewees’ participation and whether they felt at ease to participate in the discussion. Table in Appendix 3 provides a summary description of all groups.

To investigate the research questions mentioned above, we asked participants to speak about four main topics: (1) the important current issues and political actors’ responsibility, (2) the European election that was coming two months after the first focus group, and how they felt about the campaign and the results, (3) the status of their country and of different actors within the EU and (4) how they felt when confronted with different visual or discursive framings of Europe promoted by political parties or based on the traditional institutional narratives. Discussions were structured with broad questions (cf. Appendix 1) and minimal interventions from the moderator, leaving time and space for

The moderator would ask the first question and then write down words used by participants on a board, to provide visual support for the discussion and signal disagreement when a participant reported it. On some occasions, participants spent a few minutes looking at vignettes in smaller group, to encourage discussion. The participants can thus see the discussion progress, as well as participate in its production. In front of them, they have a summary of the comments and can therefore react to these later. This display technique is useful insofar as participants often need time to think, and seeing points written helps them to react, and in particular to express their disagreement. Duchesne and Haegel had used this technique, adapted
participants to elaborate. From those four main categories stemmed a series of questions asked over the course of around 3 hours (or, in the case of the seniors, over the three encounters\textsuperscript{8}). Our non-directive moderation technique did allow participants to engage in conflict, but on issues that were important to them; in other words, to discuss European integration in their own words.

**Discussion of the data and conclusion**

Our data allows for the studying of elements of the politicization, depoliticization or even non-politicization processes of the EU and of integration in its different dimensions. It seeks to supply the tools to study the salience and polarization of European integration in citizens’ discourses through different indicators and give insights into the rationales of individuals and how they build common understanding when talking about European integration. This section provides an overview of our first results.

Because of the large number of groups studied and people involved, of the time span of the focus groups and of some of the images presented to the interviewees - some of them chosen especially in order to provoke reactions -, the data facilitates the study of politicization through one of its often hidden dimensions: emotions. When confronting ideas with other people who do not share the same opinions, people often become very emotional, from uneasiness to anger, from affection to rejection. The data allows to analyse the place of emotions in discussions about Europe and their role in the politicization process (Delmotte, Mercenier and Van Ingelgom, 2017a). First results tend to show that European integration and politics in general are likely to elicit some emotional reactions, especially when discussing issues like Brexit and the future of the EU (see Houde, ongoing), and that citizens’ affective attachment to the EU tend to shape how they see it.

\textsuperscript{8} Due to severe technical problems, the third meeting of the French seniors couldn’t be recorded. We thus organized a fourth meeting to complete data collection. Question phrasing was slightly changed to maximize comparability with other meetings while avoiding having participants feel like they were repeating themselves.

\textsuperscript{8} From a method developed by a consultancy company, in their previous work on politicisation (Duchesne and Haegel, 2004: 882; Duchesne et al., 2013: 185).
These focus groups also enable us to study European narratives from a citizens’ perspective. In the context of growing protest about the EU, studies devoted to institutional, political elites’ and media narratives on European integration have arisen (Gilbert, 2008; Bouza Garcia, 2013; Kaiser, 2015). By analysing political framing of the European project, this scholarship aims at providing a comprehensive answer to the Eurosceptic, ambivalent or indifferent European attitudes of citizens. Yet, so far, not much attention has been given to the reception of such narratives by citizens. The present research design aims at investigating such use of narratives, through prompting (using political cartoons, campaign ad and party statements) or without input. The focus groups show that citizens rely on institutional narratives to talk about the European project, but that they also challenge and broaden them. Looking at two specific prominent institutional narratives, the peace narrative, and the free movement one, our results thus show that institutional narratives are received by citizens, but they are also (re-)constructed by them while being anchored in their own personal or national experiences. (Beaudonnet et al., 2021).

The data also provide ample evidence on how citizens view political parties and their role in discussing the European issue. When visions of Europe are directly suggested by political elites, prompted by polarized parties’ statements and policy proposals, many citizens seem to withdraw from the discussion and/or to reject these narratives altogether. Even though citizens are conscious that strong alternative projects are offered to them by parties (acknowledging it during the discussion), whether they believe in these narratives and make them their own appears to strongly depend on their level of trust in parties and democratic functioning. For instance, many negative traits are attributed to parties without distinction, such as private interest seeking, manipulative, distorting citizens mandate through dubious coalitions, vote-seeking. This mistrust is observed throughout the scope of participants and seems to prevent citizens from taking ownership of these political elites’ alternative narratives (Le Corre Juratic, ongoing). By providing first-hand empirical evidence on how citizens envision Europe, discuss it and connect it with political actors and beliefs, these examples offer promising avenue to better understand the (de-) politicization process of European integration.
Bibliography


Cautrès, Bruno (2012), “Multidimensionality of EU Attitudes in France: An Issue for the Understanding of the Politicization of Attitudes towards the EU”, European Integration Online Papers, vol. 16 (2).


Duchesne, Sophie (2017), “Using focus groups to study the process of (de) politicization”, in Rosaline Barbour and David L. Morgan (eds), A new era in focus group research, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 365-387.


Eijk, Cees van der and Franklin, Mark (1996), Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.


Le Corre Juratic, Morgan (2021), “(De)Mobilizing Europeans – Citizens Reaction to Party Polarization”, Restep Final Conference, 5-7 January 2021, online.


Van Ingelgom, Virginie (2014), Integrating Indifference: A Comparative, Qualitative and Quantitative Approach to the Legitimacy of European Integration, Colchester, ECPR Press.


White, Jonathan (2011), Political allegiance after European integration, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan.
## APPENDIX 1: SCENARIO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q1 What are the most important problems we are facing today?</th>
<th>Sequential 1: Q1 What are the most important problems we are facing today?</th>
<th>Sequential 2: Q1 What are the most important political events that recently got your attention?</th>
<th>Sequential 3 / 3b: Q1 What is the word that best describe your feeling when you think about the last European election? Variation Q1 SEQ3b: Could you explain why it is important to vote in European elections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q2a Who takes care of those problems?</td>
<td>Q2a What do you think are the five priority issues at the moment?</td>
<td>Q2 What are the most important problems we are facing today?</td>
<td>Q2 For these elections, some might have voted, some might have abstained. Regardless of what you chose, I would like you to tell me more about the reasons. Write the reasons why you decided to vote or not (three max)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2b Who should take care of those problems?</td>
<td>Q2b Who takes care of those problems?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Q3 What was at stake during those last Elections according to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2c As you may know, there are elections at the end of the month, on the 26th of May. Do you think these issues have been addressed in the campaign so far? Follow-up: by who?</td>
<td>Q2c Who should take care of those problems?</td>
<td>Q4 What are the issues you feel are missing from the campaign?</td>
<td>Q3 Did you hesitate when making your voting choice and why</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3 If there was a referendum about leaving the EU tomorrow, would you vote leave, remain or something else</td>
<td>Q3 If there was a referendum about leaving the EU tomorrow, would you vote leave, remain or something else</td>
<td></td>
<td>Q4 When choosing for which list to vote, what considerations did you take into account?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© L’Harmattan | Téléchargé le 11/01/2022 sur www.cairn.info (IP: 2.7.197.203)
Q4 When you think about European project, who do you think are the winners and the losers?

Q5* Here are some different visions of Europe. According to you, do they describe today’s Europe accurately? Cf appendix 1. “vignettes visions of Europe »

Q5* Here are some different visions of Europe. According to you, do they describe today’s Europe accurately? Cf appendix 1. “vignettes visions of Europe »

Q5 Speaking of political offer, do you consider you were offered a clear choice on European issues (for these elections)? Could you explain why?

APPENDIX 2: SYNOPSIS PRESENTATION OF THE 21 FOCUS-GROUPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Profile</th>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
<th>date of focus group</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Louvain-La-Neuve</td>
<td>Pilot</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>March 2019</td>
<td>LLN_P_STU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sequential (3 meetings)</td>
<td>Educated seniors</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>March, May, June 2019</td>
<td>LLN_SEQ_1,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>White collars</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>May 2019</td>
<td>LLN_WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>Young unemployed</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>May 2019</td>
<td>LLN_YU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>Young professionals</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>May 2019</td>
<td>LLN_YP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenoble</td>
<td>Pilot</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>March 2019</td>
<td>GRE_P_STU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sequential (3 meetings)</td>
<td>Educated seniors</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>March, May, June 2019</td>
<td>GRE_SEQ_1,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>White collars</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>May 2019</td>
<td>GRE_WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>Young unemployed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>May 2019</td>
<td>GRE_YU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>Young without diploma</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>May 2019</td>
<td>GRE_YP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisbon</td>
<td>Sequential (3 meetings)</td>
<td>Educated seniors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>March, May, June 2019</td>
<td>LIS_SEQ_1,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>FI_STU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>White collars</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>FI_WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>Young unemployed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>FI_YU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>Young without diploma</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>FI_YP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>FI_STU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>White collars</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>FI_WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>Young unemployed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>FI_YU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-shot</td>
<td>Young without diploma</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>FI_YP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX 3: SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS’ PROFILES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Average Left-right score</th>
<th>Attitudes EU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LLN_P_STU</td>
<td>20 to 24</td>
<td>4 men, 5 women</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>2 left, 3 centre, 4 right</td>
<td>9 pro-EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLN_SEQ_1, LLN_SEQ_2, LLN_SEQ_3</td>
<td>59 to 82</td>
<td>3 men, 4 women</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>6 centre, 1 right</td>
<td>6 pro-EU, 1 don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLN_WC</td>
<td>25 to 36</td>
<td>4 men, 3 women</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>3 left, 4 centre</td>
<td>7 pro-EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLN_YU</td>
<td>23 to 30</td>
<td>3 men, 3 women</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>5 centre, 1 don’t know</td>
<td>5 pro-EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLN_YP</td>
<td>19 to 26</td>
<td>5 men, 1 woman</td>
<td>No diploma or professional</td>
<td>1 left, 3 centre, 1 right</td>
<td>4 pro-EU, 2 don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRE_P_STU</td>
<td>18 to 26</td>
<td>5 men, 3 women</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>6 left, 1 centre, 1 no answer</td>
<td>4 pro-EU, 2 against, 1 not good nor bad, 1 don’t know,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRE_SEQ_1, GRE_SEQ_2, GRE_SEQ_3</td>
<td>61 to 77</td>
<td>4 men, 4 women</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2 left, 3 centre, 1 right, 1 don’t know</td>
<td>5 pro-EU, 2 not good nor bad, 1 it depends,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRE_WC</td>
<td>28 to 33</td>
<td>3 men, 4 women</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>1 left, 6 centre</td>
<td>7 pro-EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRE_YU</td>
<td>24 to 29</td>
<td>2 men, 3 women</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>3 left, 2 centre</td>
<td>5 pro-EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRE_YP</td>
<td>22 to 36</td>
<td>3 men, 3 women</td>
<td>No diploma or professional</td>
<td>1 left, 4 centre, 1 don’t know</td>
<td>2 pro-EU, 1 against, 2 not good nor bad, 1 don’t know,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIS_SEQ_1, LIS_SEQ_2, LIS_SEQ_3</td>
<td>60 to 77</td>
<td>4 men, 2 women</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>3 left, 2 centre, 1 right</td>
<td>5 pro-EU, 1 against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FI_STU</td>
<td>23 to 26</td>
<td>3 men, 3 women</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>3 left, 1 centre, 1 right, 1 don’t know</td>
<td>3 pro EU, 2 not good nor bad, 1 against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FI_WC</td>
<td>28 to 40</td>
<td>2 men, 2 women</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2 left, 2 centre</td>
<td>4 pro EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FI_YU</td>
<td>23 to 27</td>
<td>3 men, 2 women</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>3 left, 2 centre</td>
<td>3 pro-EU, 1 against, 1 don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FI_YP</td>
<td>24 to 30</td>
<td>2 men, 2 women</td>
<td>No diploma or professional</td>
<td>1 left, 1 centre, 1 don’t know, 1 refusal</td>
<td>3 pro-EU, 1 refusal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>