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Introduction: Citizens and the European polity

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CHAPTER

1 1 Introduction: Citizens and the European Polity

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Abstract

This chapter presents the volume, its fundamental motivation, and contents. It argues that the end of ‘permissive consensus’ and the entry of mass publics as relevant actors in the dynamics of European integration require a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of how attitudes towards domestic and European politics are linked, especially in the context of an enlarged EU. It describes the main attitudinal aspects addressed by the book chapters and the theoretical perspective that gives unity to the volume and to the entire IntUne series: a conceptualization of the subjective dimensions of European citizenship as consisting in Identity, Representation, and Policy Scope. It then outlines the main questions asked and answered in each of the volume’s chapters.

Keywords: [European integration](#), [permissive consensus](#), [identity](#), [representation](#), [policy scope](#), [political attitudes](#)

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In the last two decades, the nature of the European integration project has changed very significantly. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, enlargement took place at an unprecedented pace, raising the number of EU member states from twelve to twenty-seven. A common European currency was created, which is shared today by most of the member states. Institutionally, nobody today would be able to describe the European Union as a mere intergovernmental organization managing a common market and common trade policies. Instead, the EU has become a fully fledged multilevel system of governance, in which policy-making authority in a broad number of areas is shared by supranational and national authorities in an increasing number of policy areas. And yet, the full picture of developments in the last twenty years can hardly be described as rosy. In the same period, European Union countries witnessed civil war erupting close to their own borders, remained powerless to prevent it, and, most disturbingly, struggled in vain to find a common position as it unfolded. Such divisions were only exacerbated as fundamentalist Islamic terrorism posed a renewed threat to the world and the United States intervened in the Middle East. Free trade, the modest economic performance of many EU member states, the rise of the economic potential of industrializing nations in the East and the South, and monetary union and its convergence criteria have put enormous pressure on the previous consensus around “embedded liberalism” in Europe, arguably replacing it with an increasingly orthodox and monetarist consensus. However, the recent debt crisis only served to expose how fragile that consensus also was in terms of the actual budgetary policies pursued by member states, as well as the weakness of the political and institutional mechanisms installed to ensure a feasible common monetary policy. As the economic and financial crisis fully unfolded, the internal contradictions of the European project and the conflicts of interest between member states have again brought something that has become familiar in the last two decades: European policy paralysis. At the time of this writing, the challenges posed both to the survival of the euro and to the preservation of the standards of policy delivery in the European welfare states seem the most daunting ever faced.

The core motivation behind this volume flows from the clear sense that neither the origins of the current travails of the EU nor their eventual dénouement can be explained any more by simply focusing, as was often the case in earlier phases and crisis of European integration, on the role of political and technocratic elites. In fact, the other fundamental change that seems to have occurred in the last twenty years has been the entry of mass publics as relevant actors in the dynamics of integration. As EU membership widened and integration deepened, signs of the erosion of the previously assumed “permissive consensus” around integration among mass publics have multiplied. Previously high levels of popular support for integration have waned. Whenever voters were asked to participate in referendums concerning European issues, previously unsuspected resistances emerged, leading ultimately, in several cases, to rejections of treaties (Denmark in 1992, Ireland in 2001, France and Netherlands 2005, Ireland in 2008) or of entry in the eurozone (Denmark in 2000 and Sweden in 2003). In domestic party politics, political challenges to integration—some of a populist and nationalist nature—emerged in several member states. Both instances—the outcome of domestic referendums and the emergence of a resilient party-based Euroscepticism in many countries—brought home the notion that, in accordance with the shift towards multilevel governance referred to above, the European mass public’s views of integration are now clearly connected to the dynamics of public opinion and political attitudes at the domestic level. Support for, trust in, and evaluations of national and European institutions seem to be inextricably linked. Voting behaviour in European elections and referendums is dominated by considerations and themes arising in domestic political arenas. At the same time, although it is not yet widely politicized, a growing ideological cleavage over Europe does appear to be emerging among mass publics at the national level.

There is no shortage of excellent individual studies addressing these trends in the political cultures and mass public opinions in Europe. However, a general and encompassing overview of these transformations in book form is still missing. Broad comparative volumes—like the one contained in the seminal *Beliefs in Government* series, dedicated to *Public Opinion and Internationalized Governance* (Niedermayer and Sinnott 1995)—focused on developments prior to the early 1990s and mostly on Western European nations. Those works preceded both the deepening and enlargement transformations that followed the collapse of the Iron Curtain, as well as the main events and trends—monetary union, economic stagnation and the questioning of the European social model, civil war in Yugoslavia, and 9/11—that have affected the European politics since then. Furthermore, the most important volumes that have resulted from the cross-national study of voting behaviour and political culture written in the last decade have either focused on the small core of more industrialized and fully established European democracies (see, for example, Thomassen 2005a) or, instead, have tended to neglect the interplay and contamination between attitudes towards domestic and towards supranational European institutions.

The *Integrated and United* (IntUne) project, which originated the series in which this volume, *Citizens and the European Polity*, is integrated, allowed us to re-examine all these developments in Europe from the vantage point of the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. In this particular volume, our focus is on describing and explaining variations concerning mass attitudes in the last two decades, and the extent to which the crucial political, economic, and social changes we have described played any significant role. On the side of the *explananda* addressed in this book, we look into different categories of political attitudes where, especially in what concerns integration and the EU, the absence of clear theoretical distinctions has often been the source of considerable confusion. Obviously, as many others before us, we are interested in mass publics’ generalized attitude towards European integration, which has almost invariably been captured by survey items where respondents express their views about whether their country’s membership has been “a good thing” or a “bad thing”. However, one common aspect of the entire IntUne project is the notion that “citizenship”, and its fundamental cultural and attitudinal basis, requires additional distinctions: those between *identity*, *representation*, and *policy scope*. “Identity” concerns people’s feelings about belonging to a particular political community. “Representation” relates to people’s sense of the extent to which a particular set of institutions and elites articulates their preferences, allows chances at participating, and is responsive to popular preferences. And “policy scope” concerns the extent to which people award legitimacy to a particular set of political structures situated at this or that level of governance to become the main locus of policy making. To put it differently, we are addressing what Scharpf has long ago identified as the deficits in the input-legitimacy of the EU (Scharpf 1999). To what extent has a “sense of collective identity” emerged among Europeans? To what extent does “the lack of Europe-wide policy discourses, and the lack of a Europe-wide institutional infrastructure that could assure (...) political accountability” impinge on feelings concerning representation by European institutions? And how do both aspects relate to the overall legitimacy awarded to the EU as a policy-making authority? Furthermore, as we

pointed out earlier, the sense that developments in European integration are increasingly entwined with aspects of domestic politics has also led us to focus on several crucial attitudinal and behavioural variables that have more commonly been addressed in the study of national politics: support for democracy, ideological preferences and polarization, and political engagement.

On the side of the *explanantia*, following in the footsteps of, for example, Hooghe and Marks (2005), we also want to contribute with this volume and the entire IntUne project to some badly needed clarification. Put together, the different chapters address alternative explanations of public attitude formation and change. First, they focus on the extent to which variations across time, countries, and individuals can be explained by *instrumental rationality*, i.e. calculations about political or economic costs and benefits of alternative situations and course of action. They also discuss the role of *cueing rationality*, i.e. the use of heuristic and cognitive shortcuts under conditions of limited information, through which individuals rely on information conveyed by trustworthy sources and from realities close to their experience to form judgments about complex and more distant phenomena. *Affective/identitarian* factors, particularly feelings of attachment to groups and organizations, constitute a third tier of explanations that will be addressed in several chapters. *Cognitive mobilization*, citizens' level of exposure to information and formal education, is also treated as a factor potentially leading to a more cosmopolitan view of politics and, thus, potentially favourable to integration. Finally, several chapters also focus on *equity/fairness* considerations as drivers of political attitudes, particularly in what concerns perceptions of the workings of political institutions and policy outcomes. These five tiers of explanations are used in different ways in different chapters, depending on availability of survey and other data and on the specific theoretical agenda that our disciplines have developed concerning the different dependent variables. However, all chapters systematically ask the same basic set of questions:

- What trends can be found in the last two decades, and do they prolong or reverse trends found for the 1970s and 1980s?
- Are there events and external shocks that can be meaningfully and plausibly proposed as causes of observed changes?
- What cross-national differences emerge, and are those differences structured around the distinction between older and newer EU member states or deeper and more theoretically meaningful distinctions?
- What sort of explanations—economic, political, cultural, or social—can be found for the observed variations, and what do they tell us about how individuals form judgements and develop attitudes towards the domestic and European levels of government?

Chapter 2—*The Determinants of Democracy Satisfaction in Europe*, by Paolo Bellucci, Vincenzo Memoli, and David Sanders—places us right in the middle of what has been often treated as the most basic dimension of political attitudes: support for the regime and, in particular, citizens' satisfaction with democratic performance. One of the core findings of the *Beliefs in Government* series, based precisely on this indicator, was that there was little sign of a “legitimation crisis” either in Western (Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995) or in the nascent Eastern European democracies (Tóka 1995). However, support for democratic regimes seemed increasingly dependent on their ability to deliver sound economic performance, and the fall of the Iron Curtain raised the possibility that the disappearance of an external enemy resulted in “increasing criticism and political pressure” (Kaase, Newton, and Scarbrough 1996: 228). In the years that followed, such a possibility seemed to have become a reality, as scholars detected the rise of “critical citizens” (Norris 1999a) and “dissatisfied democrats” (Klingemann 1999). Bellucci and Memoli re-examine the available evidence, placing “satisfaction with democracy” within the context of other constructs capturing other dimensions of regime support and looking for cross-national variations. Furthermore, they use a panel analysis of survey data since 1995, looking not only for general trends in this respect but also asking the question of whether variations through time and between countries are fundamentally due to economic performance or, instead, whether citizens are also sensitive to other more stable features of the polity, such as their electoral system and the political performance of their institutions of governance.

Chapter 3—*Informal Political Engagement in Europe, 1975–2007*, by David Sanders and Paolo Bellucci—focuses on levels of political engagement across European societies. In this respect, the detection of secular trends in the past seems to have depended very much—and understandably so—on where and when such trends are being sought. While studies looking at evidence until the 1980s seemed to detect a rise in political involvement (Kaase and Marsh 1979), later studies pointed, again, to a fundamental lack of any major

trends in political interest (Gabriel and Van Deth 1995), and to the prevalence of cross-national discrepancies (Van Deth and Elff 2004). In this chapter, Sanders and Bellucci use the long series provided by the Eurobarometer data on political discussion, persuasion, and media use to gauge these trends, and consider not only the impact of political events but also the rival merits of explanations based on cognitive mobilization, equity/fairness considerations, and instrumental rationality.

p. 6 Chapter 4—*Ideological Polarization: Different Worlds in East and West*, by Hermann Schmitt and André Freire—addresses a second crucial theme in the literature of political attitudes in democratic regimes. It is a theme where, as with the issue of regime support, the existence of secular trends in Western democracies has often been hinted at, as part of an “end of ideology” (Bell 1960). However, the *Beliefs in Government* project showed that left–right materialist orientations remained relevant throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Knutsen 1995), while other analyses suggested the absence of any secular trend in ideological polarization (Klingemann 2005). Schmitt and Freire examine the most recent evidence, looking not only for general trends but also for a potential contrast between the Western democracies and those in Eastern Europe, where younger and less institutionalized party systems would lead us to expect different trends and different economic and political correlates of polarization.

Chapter 5—*Electoral Turnout at the National and European Levels*, by Markus Steinbrecher and Hans Rattinger—focuses on one of the central behavioural dimensions of contemporary democratic politics: turnout, in both national and European elections. Earlier studies have been sceptical about dramatic statements concerning the decline of turnout in Western democracies: while some saw no decline whatsoever (Topf 1995b), others saw a decline that, albeit real, was nonetheless relatively moderate (Franklin 2002). However, the most recent elections, especially those to the European Parliament, have again made evident that a broad trend towards disengagement from formal means of political participation may indeed be taking place. Steinbrecher and Rattinger discuss the possibility that, in spite of variations caused by obvious institutional causes, turnout in European elections is driven by factors both common to national elections and specific to the EP election, i.e. European attitudes. This helps relate this chapter to all the previous ones—particularly those focusing on political engagement, EU attitudes, and ideological polarization—and provides important clues as to why turnout has declined in a more pronounced way than previously thought.

p. 7 As the volume completes its overview of the basic developments in general political attitudes most commonly addressed in the study of *national* politics—support for democracy, political engagement, ideology, and electoral participation—it then moves to the core four dimensions of specifically *European* attitudes: identity, representation, policy scope, and generalized support for membership. In Chapter 6—*But Still It Does Not Move: Functional and Identity-Based Determinants of European Identity*—Pierangelo Isernia, Irena Fiket, Fabio Serricchio, and Bettina Westle examine data from the early 1970s until 2007 on the intensity with which individuals identify with Europe. Earlier broad comparative studies had shown that, while attachment to Europe was not contradictory with identification with other levels of government, it lagged clearly behind other indicators of European support, displayed a moderate ebb and flow around comparatively low levels, and showed little relationship with the length of a country’s membership of the EU (Duchesne and Frogner 1995). Isernia and his co-authors re-examine these conclusions in light of a large array of data, confronting the hypotheses derived both from a “neo-functionalist” approach—which assumes that EU identity would build up with time and the accumulated perception of benefits from integration—and from an alternative approach that allows for the role of short-term economic and political factors, reconducting to the instrumental and cue-rationality approaches that have been advanced as explanations of European attitudes.

Chapter 7—*Trust in the European Parliament: From Affective Heuristics to Rational Cueing*, by Mariano Torcal, Jordi Muñoz, and Eduard Bonet—turns our attention to the second dimension of European attitudes addressed in this volume, *EU representation*. We know from previous research that Europeans’ views about the democratic performance of EU institutions have been either sceptical or, when more sanguine—as in the case of the European Parliament—rooted in a very low level of information and understanding about the object of such support (Niedermayer and Sinnott 1995). Torcal and his colleagues, however, ask the question of whether individuals change the basis on which they judge the extent to which the European Parliament is indeed a trustworthy institution of representation over time. They look not only at trends in the overall levels of trust in the European Parliament but also at trends in the attitudinal basis of that trust, testing the hypothesis that time and/or membership in the euro have changed it from affective but cognitively shallow judgments to more rational-instrumental assessments.

Chapter 8—*Support for European Integration*, by Andrija Henjak, Gábor Tóka, and David Sanders—looks into the more conventionally employed measure of European support: generalized support for EU membership. This is, of course, a very well-trodden road in the literature, and the source of most of the extant theoretical approaches to account for attitudes vis-à-vis Europe. Tóka, Sanders, and Henjak revisit them using data since 1973, documenting how variation in the domestic political system and its performance, national economic conditions, and welfare-state entitlements, as well as successive waves of enlargement have influenced the degree to which citizens endorse further European integration or wish to see a reversal of this process. They are particularly concerned, however, in ascertaining the extent to which different theoretical approaches fare differently in different contexts, revealing how different mechanisms operate uniformly or unevenly across countries and periods, thus providing a more complete specification of the models accounting for generalized EU support.

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Chapter 9—*Europe à la Carte? Public Support for Policy Integration in an Enlarged European Union*, by Pedro C. Magalhães—focuses on our last dimension of European support, policy scope. We know from previous studies that the preference for assigning policy areas to the European level has varied significantly from policy to policy and from country to country (Sinnott 1995). ↪ Magalhães uses data from the late 1980s to test well-known hypotheses concerning the nature of policy areas themselves, i.e. the extent to which their Europeanization is intrinsically beneficial, testing whether citizens tend to make cogent rankings of policies from that point of view. However, he extends his analysis to the detection and explanation of variations through time and between countries, testing for the impact of economic and political variables that may account for the astounding—and highly consequential—diversity of preferences among European publics concerning what kind of political Europe they actually desire.

Finally, Chapter 10—*Summary and Conclusions: Europe in Equilibrium—Unresponsive Inertia or Vibrant Resilience?* by David Sanders, Pedro C. Magalhães, and Gábor Tóka—concludes the volume. It revisits and presents the relevant long-term trends in all the dependent variables treated in the volume and pulls together the conclusions reached in each of the previous chapters. More generally, it revisits previous notions about the fundamentals of the political attitudes of European mass publics and tests them against the changes that have occurred in the last two decades. When summarizing the remarkable efforts of the seminal *Beliefs in Government* project, Kaase, Newton, and Scarbrough (1996: 228) noted, in a perhaps undramatic but characteristically precise fashion, how the overall evidence favoured “political stability, continuity, and adaptation, rather than fundamental or wholesale transformation, even though there has been major and rapid social and economic change in the same period”. In Chapter 10, we ask if this general assessment still holds true. We focus on the trends, events, and external shocks, and national and individual-level variations and their correlates as identified by the chapters in this volume. Did the remarkable adaptability that European publics have exhibited in the past to political, economic, and social change persist in the last two decades? Has the same occurred with the well-known cross-national and individual-level variations in political attitudes? And what does that tell us about the likely consequences of the enormous political and economic upheaval that has been experienced in Europe as a result of the financial and budgetary crisis of the last few years? These are the questions addressed in the concluding chapter.