

The Eurobarometer and the process of European integration

Methodological foundations and weaknesses of the largest European survey

Sylke Nissen

Published online: 16 December 2012
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2012

Abstract For nearly 40 years, the European Commission has observed the development of the European Union as it is reflected in public opinion. The Eurobarometer measures the European population's attitudes about various issues related to Europe. The informational value of the Eurobarometer is viewed as quite high, since the surveys, which are conducted twice a year, generate a large quantity of data. This article investigates the role of the Eurobarometer in the process of European integration by analysing the methodological foundations of the Eurobarometer and discussing its weaknesses. The final section addresses the issue of whether the European Commission, as the contracting entity, utilizes the Eurobarometer as a political instrument to promote support for the process of European integration. It is argued here that the Commission's instrumentalisation of the Eurobarometer jeopardizes its informational value, whereas at the same time the political benefits of this shift remain debatable.

Keywords Eurobarometer · European Commission · Survey methodology · Sampling method · Influence of contracting entity

1 Introduction

In the early 1960s, Jacques-René Rabier, the founder of the Eurobarometer, began developing the idea of “systematic studies throughout the EU of Europeans’ ideas, attitudes, and positions. These studies must pursue two aims: to better understand and to make known [first] what Europeans think about Europe in the process of integration since 1950 and [second] how they assess the same problems across national borders” (Rabier 2008, p. 1, translation S.N.). This new survey instrument was to generate knowledge about informational deficits in the European population and help reduce those deficits. Wilhelmus Schuijt, at the time a member of the European Parliament from the Netherlands, presented his *Rapport sur la*

S. Nissen (✉)
Institute of Sociology, University of Leipzig, Beethovenstrasse 15, Leipzig 04107, Germany
e-mail: nissen@uni-leipzig.de

politique d'information des Communautés européennes in 1972, which contrasted the goals and deficits of the European Communities' information policy and subsequently paved the way for systematic surveys of public opinion in the EC (see Schuijt 1972). The Commission of the European Communities endorsed Schuijt's analysis and formulated its expectation that surveys in all member states would yield information about public attitudes towards the process of European unification. The "primary interest of the European Commission ... in funding these regular surveys was to gain information on the topic most dear to its heart: the process of European unification, as reflected in the attitudes and beliefs of the people in the EU member states" (Saris and Kaase 1997, p. 6). Moreover, the surveys were perceived within the context of "justifying decisions already reached internally and of public relations for the EC [European Community] in general and the Commission in particular" (Reif 1991, p. 46, translation S.N.; see Haller 2009, p. 358).

The results of the first wave of the survey conducted in April and May 1974 were published in July of the same year (European Commission 1974). Since then, the Eurobarometer has regularly provided the European Commission with information on the effects of its policies, or *retroinformation*, of the kind called for by Schuijt (1972): "Effective information policies imply that the Community's institutions recognize the responses that its policies generate in public opinion. ... Opinion polls constitute a very important area of feedback" (Schuijt 1972, pp. 33, 34, translation S.N.).

In borrowing the name of a meteorological instrument, the Commission's aim was to create a vivid metaphor for its intention in conducting the surveys. Like a real barometer, the Eurobarometer was to be employed as a tool for observing public moods and also for formulating cautious forecasts (European Commission 1974, p. 1; see Pausch 2009, p. 540). This second application—the Eurobarometer's potential use as a tool for predicting public acceptance of future political decisions—has always been realized with great restraint. Interpretations of survey data have focused on generating retrospective data on attitudes and on tracing developments in public opinion.

In the following sections of this article, I will discuss some structural and methodological issues associated with the Eurobarometer and analyze how the Eurobarometer has changed from an instrument that aimed to provide the Commission with information about the public's attitudes towards various aspects of European integration to a political tool, with which the Commission attempts to influence public opinion and perceptions of the process of European integration.

2 Structure of the Eurobarometer

In its brochure *35 Years of Eurobarometer*, the Commission outlines the fundamental structure of the surveys as follows: "repetition at regular intervals of certain questions (i) always worded in the same way, (ii) using the same reliable methodology and (iii) in all the European Union Member States" (European Commission 2008a, p. 2). Moreover, as the text states, the "Eurobarometer (Standard and Special) can be considered as an omnibus, because it contains a series of questions commissioned by various Directorates-General of the European Commission" (ibid.). The survey principles ensure that the results can be analyzed in three ways: as longitudinal data for comparison over time, as data for transnational comparisons between member states, or for combinations of these two perspectives (see Saris and Kaase 1997, p. 6).

Historical continuity is realized for the most part within the context of the *Standard Eurobarometer Survey*. For each wave of the survey, approximately one thousand individuals from

each member state are interviewed face-to-face in their home.¹ Thus, over the years, the Standard Eurobarometer alone has generated an exceedingly large amount of data. In order to obtain information on specific issues more quickly, the *Flash Eurobarometer*, which draws on telephone interviews, was introduced in 1993. *Special Eurobarometer Surveys* integrated into the polling waves of the Standard Eurobarometer are conducted on specific topics. The first survey results were published nearly 40 years ago. In 2011, the European Commission published the 75th edition of the Standard Eurobarometer, the 330th Flash Eurobarometer, and the results of the 375th Special Eurobarometer.

With “generally ten or so questions” (Rabier 1976: 141) and about twenty tables, the first publications of survey results were only some 40 pages long. Today, the Standard Eurobarometer is so extensive that the results must be divided up into several sub-reports focusing on specific topics. Eurobarometer 75 encompassed nearly eighty interview questions to yield data relevant to the basic indicators of the Standard Eurobarometer and also polled attitudes on the economic and financial crisis, on the Europe 2020 strategy, and on the European Union budget. The report and its two annexes with some 240 tables is 469 pages long (European Commission 2011a,b). Considerably more voluminous were Eurobarometer 73 and Eurobarometer 69, with 789 and 1415 pages respectively (European Commission 2008b, 2010a,b). This quantity of data and the continuity of the surveys referred to above have long been cited as invaluable aspects of the Eurobarometer. “The lasting significance of the Eurobarometer, created by Jacques-René Rabier, for empirical social research and the politics of European integration can hardly be overestimated. ... both national longitudinal surveys and cross-national transversal studies are usually deemed to be invaluable ... The possibility of conjoint cross-national and longitudinal comparison, however, renders the Eurobarometer into a truly unique enterprise, the scientific and applied potential of which will be difficult to exhaust” (Van der Eijk and Schmitt 1991, p. 257). The Eurobarometer is considered “very valuable for the European Commission in order to see what the support is for different policies and the EU as a whole in the different countries through time” and “the most obvious advantage of these 24 years of regular surveys is its potential to look at change over time” (Sarlis and Kaase 1997, pp. 6, 8). The temporal and thematic continuity of the surveys is also praised by Keil, since they make it possible to “identify and understand trends and tendencies over longer periods of time” (Kromrey 2009, p. 430, translation S.N.).

This brief review of the establishment of the Eurobarometer and the intentions of its creators shows that the Commission aimed to utilize this new tool to acquire information about the population of the European Community. Scrutiny of actual practices in the ensuing years reveals that this goal was subsequently eclipsed by other aims. Karlheinz Reif, who succeeded Rabier in 1987 as the head of Eurobarometer, has described the benefits of the survey in much more cautious terms. The significance of the fact that the survey “exists”, Reif noted, was something one could hardly overestimate (1991, p. 52). Equally reserved is the assessment offered by Karmasin and Pitters, who assert that the Eurobarometer “works, produces results, and ... (despite all the discussions about this instrument), no adequate alternative for collective self-observation exists” (Karmasin and Pitters 2008, p. 437, translation S.N.). This lukewarm praise, on the one hand, and the generally uncritical and widespread acclaim for this survey tool, on the other hand, give rise to speculation that the goal of generating qualitative data once pursued by Rabier and Schuijt has not been adequately met. The following examination of the Eurobarometer’s methodological foundations aims to ascertain whether the continuity and extent of the survey have now taken on a life of their own and

¹ In Cyprus, Malta, and Luxembourg, 500 people are interviewed in the course of each wave.

whether the mere existence of the survey now masks the European Commission's tendency to utilize the polls for its own political ends.

3 The methodological limits of the Eurobarometer

A continuously growing body of data is not an indicator of data quality per se. Especially when precise information on data collection methods is lacking, doubts about the validity of data increase. "In principle, it does not seem that those responsible have addressed the problem of correct and appropriate survey methods in connection with constructing times series, in order to ensure that the prerequisites for reliability and validity are realized" (Tomaselli 2003, p. 11, translation S.N.; see Scheuch 1993[1968], p. 107; Laumen and Maurer 2006, p. 9). In relation to the large number of publications that use Eurobarometer data and evaluate the survey results for research purposes,² only a small number of publications that assess the survey methods critically have been published. This may be due to the fact that data collection is poorly documented in the Eurobarometer and its methodological foundation is something of a "black box" (Marcus 2009, p. 159). Nonetheless, various aspects potentially offer grounds for criticism, including the sampling procedures, the questions used in the survey, and the evaluation of Eurobarometer data. In the following sections of this paper, methodological weaknesses of the Eurobarometer will be discussed; these are deficits that should not be tolerated, unless the goals pursued with these surveys are political rather than academic, and methodological reliability is considered to play a subordinate role in realizing these goals.

3.1 Selection of the sample

In view of the continuity of data collection, various authors have asserted the Eurobarometer's "unique longitudinal quality" (Karmasin and Pitters 2008, p. 447, translation S.N.). In fact, however, the data fails to meet the key prerequisite for panel studies, since the research institutes that conduct the Eurobarometer do not survey the same people in each wave. Instead, they select new samples from the same statistical population for each wave. As a result, the Eurobarometer is not a panel survey, but must instead be considered a semi-annual cross-sectional study. Even the European Commission does not assert that the Eurobarometer is a longitudinal study. But it does not explicitly correct the tendency prevalent in many publications to suggest that, because of the duration, frequent repetition, and nature of the questions, they are similar to panel surveys. This is a result of the very limited information about the sampling methods provided by the Commission. "For many years ... nothing was published about the composition and modalities of the sample selection, so that ... frequently the lack of reliability [of the studies] and the arbitrariness of the entire study process have been criticized" (Tomaselli 2003, p. 12, translation S.N.).

The technical information supplied with all editions of the Eurobarometer offer some insights into how the samples are selected. A closer look reveals that different procedures for selecting samples have been used in the course of the survey's history and in the different

² A search in the Gesis Eurobarometer Bibliography yielded more than 2,400 entries since 1973 (www.gesis.org/eurobarometer/service-guide/publications/bibliography/), a search for the period 1990 to 2011 in wiso-net using the term Eurobarometer generated more than 4,000 hits, and google scholar produced nearly 18,000 hits for the same period (www.wiso-net.de/scholar.google.de/), accessed 10 March 2012. These results are quoted here only as a simple indicator of the wide reception of the Eurobarometers. Double entries, the EU own publications, or mention of the Eurobarometer in the context of advertising have not been identified and omitted.

member countries. A “multi-stage, random (probability) design” that is intended to generate a representative sample of each respective country’s population according to various criteria was not introduced in all member states until 1989 (on this aspect see for example [European Commission 1989](#), p. A14f. or [European Commission 2011a](#), p. 71). Until this standardization was implemented, quota samples were selected in France, Italy, Great Britain, Ireland, Belgium, and Germany according to gender, age, and occupation³ or combinations of various sampling methods were used, whereas in other countries random samples were employed. Thus, the Eurobarometer data generated since 1974 are not based on a standardized sampling method, whether within each country, between the various member states, or over time. Thus, uniting the samples selected according to different principles into a single group is methodologically highly problematic.

The citizens of the individual member states of the EU are the basis for the Eurobarometer samples. However, in the period in which the Eurobarometer surveys have been conducted, this population has been redefined in two ways, but the data series was not labelled to reflect these changes. First, until 1993, the statistical population in a single member state was composed of all people who resided in that country and who were citizens of *that* member state. The Eurobarometer 41 was the first to include in the sample individuals who lived in *any* country of the EU and who were citizens of *any* member state.⁴ Shortly before this change was implemented, Reif had criticized that what was being collected was data only on the opinions of citizens, rather than data from residents of the EU (see [Reif 1991](#), p. 51). The basis for this critique was not completely dispelled by the subsequent redefinition of the statistical population. **Introducing EU nationality as a criterion ignores relevant minorities in some member states.** For example, Russian citizens who live in the Baltic states are not interviewed; in France, people originally from countries in northern Africa who are not citizens of France or another EU state are also excluded from the sample.

Secondly, the statistical population for the entire EU has obviously also changed in the past few decades with EU enlargement, that is, **the increase in the number of member states from six to twenty-seven.** These changes become visible in the Eurobarometer when reference is made in tables and graphs to the EU-15, EU-25, or EU-27. But for many questions that are regularly included in the survey, these steps in enlargement are not explicitly labelled. **Some answers are visualized as long-term tendencies on the basis of data from 9, 15, 25, and 27 countries.** Such times series can be based on data that may stem from as many as seven different statistical populations. Among the questions that are included in every wave is a respondent’s attitude towards his or her own country’s membership in the EU. The responses to this question are presented in diagrams showing EU averages that may present 15 and more years of data and thus reflect various enlargements of the statistical population (see for example [European Commission 2000](#), p. 7 and [2010c](#), p. 138). Figure 1 is reprinted from Eurobarometer 56. The preliminary remark states that “Eurobarometer public opinion surveys (‘Standard Eurobarometer surveys’) have been conducted each Spring and Autumn since Autumn 1973. From Autumn 2001, they have been conducted on behalf of the Directorate-General Press and Communication (Opinion Polls) of the European Commission. They have included Greece since Autumn 1980 (Eurobarometer 14), Portugal and Spain since Autumn 1985 (Eurobarometer 24), the former German Democratic Republic since Autumn

³ On concerns about the quota procedures see for example [Böltken and Gehring \(1984\)](#), [Reuband \(1998](#), p. 50f.), [Schnell et al. \(2008](#), p. 301f.) and [Kromrey \(2009](#), p. 275).

⁴ Whereas Eurobarometer 39 states that “the population of the respective nationalities” was interviewed, one year later the explanation was “Eurobarometer 41.1 interviewed 13,096 citizens of the 12 countries in the European Community (nationals and non-nationals but EU-citizens)” [zocat.gesis.org/webview/](#), accessed 20 March 2012. See also [Moschner \(1995](#), p. 17), [Tomaselli \(2003](#), p. 4) and [Karmasin and Pitters \(2008](#), p. 441).

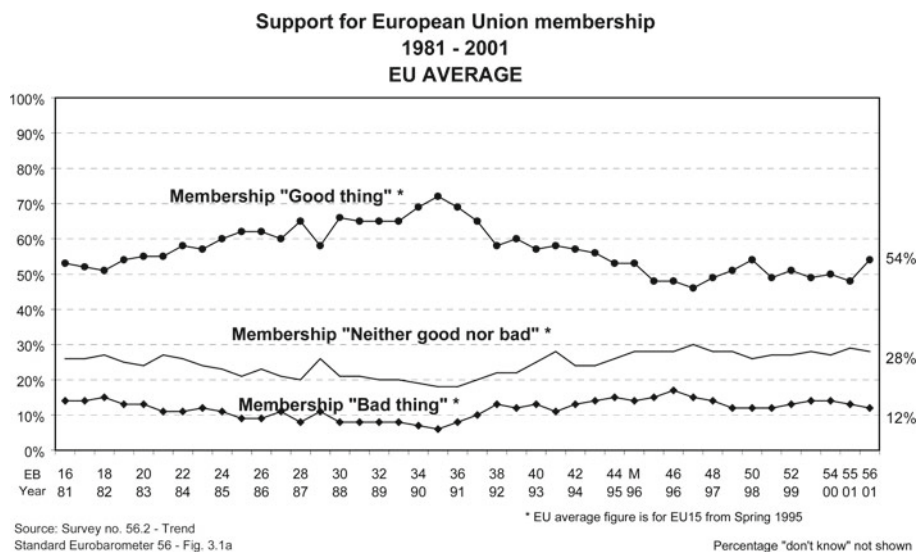


Fig. 1 Representation of long-term developmental trends on the basis of changing statistical populations.
Source [European Commission \(2002, p. 21\)](#)

1990 (Eurobarometer 34) and Austria, Finland and Sweden from Spring 1995 (Eurobarometer 43) onwards” ([European Commission 2002, n. p.](#)). In other words, survey results from EC-10, EC-12, EU-15, and EU-15 including the new German Länder are summarized in one line. However, the impressions of public opinion that are linked in this manner reflect the attitudes of highly diverse populations. This data is not a reliable basis for making statements about developments over time, nor should it be used to formulate interpretations of causes.

3.2 The wording of survey questions

On the occasion of the renaming of the European *Community* in *European Union* in 1993 in keeping with the provisions of the Treaty of Maastricht, the authors of Eurobarometer 41 discussed the methodological issues involved in formulating survey questions. “As is well known, public opinion poll results, e.g. percentage distributions of answers, may be (and most of the times indeed are) quite different as soon as the same issue is addressed with different question wording and/or replies offered. This applies also if only one of the key terms changes in an otherwise identical set of question-cum-replies offered. If one wants to measure the ‘real’ change of public opinion over time, one must keep the wording of one’s question (as well as the wording and format of the replies offered) fully identical. Different results obtained at two different points in time may otherwise be either due to a real change in public opinion or simply due to the difference in question wording (and/or format)” ([European Commission 1994, p. v](#)) Applying this principle to the wording of questions and replies is in keeping with standards formulated in state-of-the-art literature on methods in opinion surveys. However, the Eurobarometer repeatedly falls to meet this standard in two respects: first, because of the procedures for translating questions and responses into all of the official EU languages, and, second, due to variations in the wording of questions over time.

The Eurobarometer polls are conducted in all EU countries. The questions and response choices are presented to every interview partner in her or his native language. The principle of back-translation is employed to ensure the quality of the translation in developing questionnaires. One translator prepares the translation of the questionnaire and a second translator, who has not seen the original questionnaire, translates these questions back into the original language. The wording in the two versions is compared and the text in the target language is then adapted and optimized (see Moschner 2008; cf. Wendt-Hildebrandt 1983). Back-translations should and can serve to monitor the choice of wording. As a means of controlling the equivalence of meaning, however, this method is now considered to be inadequate (see Harkness and Schoua-Glusberg 1998; Johnson 1998; Harkness 2003a,b). In assessing the back-translation method, Scheuch concludes, “While this is undoubtedly a fine technique to check the ability of translators, it does little to control the chief problem in question wording: equivalence of meaning”, and he goes on, “In designing questionnaires for cross-cultural surveys, the emphasis has changed from insistence upon the correctness of literal translations to comparability of meaning” (Scheuch 1993[1968], pp. 108, 112; see de Ulzurrun 2002; Nissen 2002). Translation and back-translation cannot ensure that questions formulated in different languages are identical in meaning. As a result, it is entirely possible that purportedly identical wordings of questions used in different member states in fact have different meanings, with the corresponding consequences for the responses obtained and the information they offer.

A serious issue with consequences for the reliability of the survey findings arises from the variations in wording that have been used over time. Questions have been and are posed with different wording in the various Eurobarometer waves, and response categories have changed, as well. Nonetheless, the results of these surveys may be summarized in a single table or diagram. An instructive example can be found in the publication presented on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the Eurobarometer. Under the heading “European citizens’ interest in European affairs”, a graph shows the increasing interest of the population in European politics (European Commission 2008a, p. 13). With this diagram, the Commission aims to demonstrate that the portion of the people interviewed who expressed a strong interest rose by about twenty percent between the early 1970s and the early 1990s (Fig. 2).

However, the questions that correspond to the answers and response categories summarized in this diagram vary considerably. The exact wording is documented in the text that accompanies the figure. In Eurobarometer 0/1973, 6/1976, 10/1978, and 13/1980 the question was worded as follows: “Are you personally very interested, a little interested, or not at all interested in the problems of the European Community (The Common Market)?”; in Eurobarometer 17/1982 and 26/1986: “Newspaper, radio and TV often present news and commentaries about the European Community. Are you personally very interested, a little

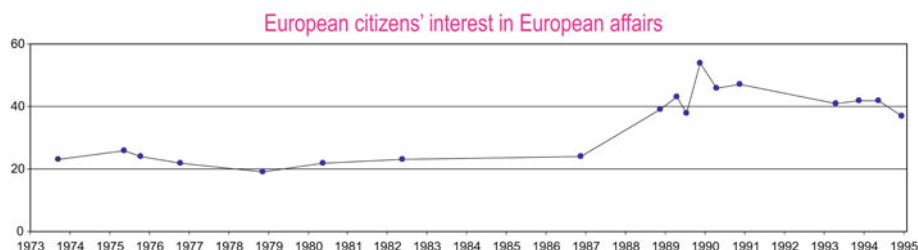


Fig. 2 Representation of long-term developmental trends on the basis of responses with different wording. Source European Commission (2008a, p. 13)

interested, or not at all interested in the problems of the European Community?"; in Eurobarometer 39/1993: "To what extent would you say you are interested in European politics, that is to say matters related to the European Community: a great deal, to some extent, not much or not at all?"; in Eurobarometer 50/ 1998: "As far as European politics are concerned, that is matters related to the European Community, to what extent would you say you are interested in them? A great deal, to some extent, not much or not at all?" (ibid.) As the authors of the 35th anniversary publication note, "The wording of the question used in the Eurobarometer to analyse this aspect has changed with the various waves over the years" (ibid.).

Katz warns that such reformulations may have far-reaching consequences, not only for the Eurobarometer data. "The usefulness of this time series is marred by a number of changes in question format" (Katz 1985, p. 104). Similar criticism of changes in wording is raised by Tomaselli, since such changes render it impossible to interpret the responses over time and also preclude analyses of the causes of developmental trends (Tomaselli 2003, p. 10).

The "creative development" of questions as well as the fact that, frequently, there is a lack of continuity in including specific questions in the survey catalogue detract from the Eurobarometer's informational value. Moreover, many questions exhibit further qualitative deficits because of *poor* or *suggestive* wording. Despite the fact that the Eurobarometer's principles include avoidance of question wording that suggests a particular answer or answer direction, suggestive questions do in fact appear (see Faulbaum et al. 2009, p. 74ff.; Holm 1986, p. 59ff.). Suggestive questions are subtly worded and, through the use of minimal deviations from neutral wording, tend to steer respondents towards specific answers. Klein examined Special Eurobarometer 376, published in March 2012, on Women in Decision-making Positions, focusing on aspects of the misuse of public opinion research. He shows where the wording of questions in this survey suggests specific interpretations, where the summary does not state which answers were presented to interview partners, and where contradictory questions were posed within a single series of questions. Klein concludes that with this type of "outright manipulation", the survey presents results that meet the expectations of EU justice commissioner Viviane Reding, who is the commissioner responsible for gender equality (Klein 2012). Haller, too, criticizes the "suggestive nature of some EB [Eurobarometer] questions" (Haller 2009, p. 359, translation S.N.), which distort the answers preferred by the EU.

Among the poorly phrased questions are those that unintentionally leave room for interpretation on the part of the respondents, for example by asking questions that are too general⁵ or questions with answer categories that fail to realize the principle that each individual category should exclude all others and vice-versa. Eurobarometer 52 reported on a survey conducted in autumn 1999 that asked why people did not vote in the European Parliament elections. Respondents could choose from the following seventeen answers, which overlap significantly: Away // Don't trust/dissatisfied with politics generally // Not interested in European politics // Not interested in politics as such // Don't know much about the European Union // Rarely or never vote // Too busy/no time // Don't know much about the European Parliament // On holiday // Voting has no consequence // Opposed to the European Union // Sick // Dissatisfied with the EP as an institution // Family reasons // Registration problems // Involved in leisure activity // Not satisfied with the EP electoral system (European

⁵ Tomaselli quotes a question from the Flash Eurobarometer 151, "Iraq and Peace in the World" as an example: "For each of the following countries, tell me if in your opinion it presents or not a threat to peace in the world?" The names of countries are then listed as possible answers. But as Tomaselli points out, the answer "Israel" does not specify what is meant, i.e., the existence of the state of Israel, the Sharon administration in office at the time, or the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians (see Tomaselli 2003, p. 6f., European Commission 2003, p. 78).

Commission 1999, p. 87; see Tomaselli 2003, p. 10; Faulbaum et al. 2009). Also inadequate from a methodological standpoint are questions for which it is likely that respondents will be unable to supply the information or the opinion requested. In these cases, it is possible that answers will be shaped by respondents' lack of sufficient knowledge or competence. Among the topics that have been addressed by Eurobarometer for which observers question whether the public has sufficient knowledge to express a credible assessment are, for example, genetic engineering or the EU satellite system Galileo (see Urban and Pfenning 1996; Urban 1999; Charlemagne 2008).

Eurobarometer questions that target the effects of globalisation, e.g., "Please tell me for each statement, whether you tend to agree or tend to disagree: Globalisation is an opportunity for economic growth" (European Commission 2011a, p. 41), also reflect this kind of deficit, at least as long as control questions that monitor the extent of respondents' knowledge about globalisation are not included. Moreover, for many interviewees, this question is not only inappropriate, it is also poorly phrased, in the sense outlined above, since there is no definition in the survey of what is meant by globalisation.

Even questions that relate to the Commission's core aim of obtaining information on public attitudes, such as those that address trust in EU institutions, are imprecisely worded. Furthermore, hardly any effort is made to gauge and document the public's level of knowledge by including appropriate questions. The only control question included in the surveys is whether the interview partner has ever heard of or read about a number of European agencies or institutions (see European Commission 2011a, p. 44). Consequently, such poorly phrased or inappropriate questions yield results that merely document the opinions expressed by a population that cannot or does not want to form an opinion about a number of topics (see Urban and Pfenning 1996, p. 118; Pausch 2009, p. 546; Haller 2009, p. 359).

Besides this kind of technical problem that is manifested in the wording of questions, the procedures for carrying out the Eurobarometer surveys also generate a context problem. Eurobarometer questions are used in polls conducted throughout the EU in the same time period. This means that the surveys take place at the same time, but that the relevant context in each nation maybe very different. If, for example, a particular member state is in the midst of a national election campaign, respondents' interest in politics and active participation in political discourse are presumably much higher than in another member state, in which the national parliament is in the middle of its legislative period. Different levels of political mobilisation are reflected in response behavior (see Scheuch 1993[1968], p. 127ff.) and limit the comparability of results.

3.3 Analysis

This final step in examining the methodology of the Eurobarometer focuses on how the data collected twice per year is evaluated. Despite the fact that the critique of the data summarized here so far leads one to conclude that reliable analysis can hardly be expected, the Eurobarometer publications nonetheless present extensive evaluations that must be examined. The reports summarize results in thematic sections and present some of the findings in tables or diagrams. The standards reached in presenting and interpreting the results are in general rather low. "As in the autumn 2010 Standard Eurobarometer, 46 % of Europeans think that the EU 'is going in the right direction to emerge from the crisis' whereas 23 % believe the opposite: that it is taking the wrong direction."⁶ (European Commission 2011b, p. 18) Data evaluation rarely goes beyond frequency counts and percentage calculations. At most, these

⁶ The question that yielded this result – "Having heard the priorities of the EU, do you think that the EU is going in the right or the wrong direction for exiting from the crisis and facing up to the new global challenges?" – is

results are cross-tabulated with socio-demographic factors in the sample: “A socio-demographic analysis reveals that the more the respondents belong to an ‘advantaged’ category the more likely they are to make plans for the future, whereas the most ‘vulnerable’ categories tend to live day by day” ([European Commission 2010b](#), p. 55).

Influences that go beyond socio-demographic factors and might affect the national samples are not taken into consideration. Divergent cultural standards and developmental levels that have an effect within the European Union and can influence the interview partners’ response behavior are not taken into account, be it in the standardized procedures for conducting the surveys or in the evaluation of the data collected. In contrast to respondents in northern or central Europe, a village resident in Romania or southern Italy might find it difficult “to perform that peculiar operation that we call ‘giving an opinion’” ([Scheuch 1993\[1968\]](#), p. 118; cf. [Karmasin and Pitters 2008](#), p. 442ff.). No attempt is made in the Eurobarometer survey to deal with the effects of such cultural factors that can limit the validity of survey findings.

Presentation of results follows the following general pattern: first, findings that are considered positive are outlined, followed by less favourable developments. Then, the results are broken down for each country, and once again, positive developments are highlighted before less favourable results are cited. In some cases a third step is then added, in which the EU averages are split according to criteria of socio-demographic structure. Presentation is for the most part schematic and remains primarily on a descriptive level (see for example [European Commission 2008b](#), p. 14ff.; also [Haller 2009](#), p. 360f.). Even simple analytical procedures such as calculation of a net index from the difference between positive and negative responses, which yields more meaningful results than reference to the development of agreement and rejection over time, are only rarely undertaken.⁷

However, in the face of extensive criticism of the Eurobarometer data, criticism which addresses problems at various levels, it is hardly appropriate to reproach the authors of these reports for presenting rather undifferentiated data analysis. As has been discussed above, even presentation of graphs showing long-range series of data can constitute an over-interpretation of the data collected.⁸ The uninspired presentations convey the impression that Europe continues to enjoy a period of uninterrupted favourable development. “Interpretation of the results [is] generally conducted in a rather naïve, pro-EU mode” ([Haller 2009](#), p. 360, translation S.N.) The Commission’s efforts to control the reliability of the survey results are limited. Keil interprets the Commission’s lack of concern about the ways in which the surveys fail to meet fundamental self-set methodological standards by asserting that the Eurobarometer is not a survey conducted for the purpose of academic research but rather a poll designed to measure political attitudes ([Kromrey 2009](#), p. 430). But in view of the numerous methodological deficits, the validity of the opinions recorded by Eurobarometer

Footnote 6 continued

a further example of the kind of poorly worded question discussed above. It completely lacks a definition of what might be the right or wrong direction; moreover, there is no indication that respondents were aware of the EU’s priorities ([European Commission 2011b](#)).

⁷ The net index allows for “a more precise and convincing interpretation of long-term trends than merely focusing on positive assessments. This second approach can lead to false conclusions. For example, every increase in positive assessments suggests that there is a concurrent increase in support for the EU on the part of the public. But this is not necessarily the case. It is also possible that together with the reduction of indifferent responses the relative amount of negative replies also increased” ([Laumen and Maurer 2006](#), p. 12, translation S.N.).

⁸ The conclusions of the Madrid Eurobarometer Conference 2006 indicate that attention is now being directed to the Eurobarometer’s deficits. At the conference, one of the suggestions made was that secondary analyses of the survey results should be undertaken, but so far this proposal has not had any recognizable effect ([European Commission 2008b](#), p. 101).

records must be questioned. Like Keil, Kohler arrives at a rather cautious assessment with respect to the methodological quality of the Eurobarometer, after comparing various international surveys. He emphasizes in his conclusion, “I would only like to remind all of us that survey data used to advise policy makers should be of *very good quality*” (Kohler 2008, p. 422, emphasis in the original).

We might conclude that, in view of this statement, the Eurobarometer should best be put to rest, but in practice it not only continues to exist but indeed grows from one year to the next. The Commission is the driving force behind this development. Without the Commission, there would be no Eurobarometer, and neither the Eurobarometer’s “ongoing overriding importance for the Commission as a political-administrative instrument” (Moschner 1993, p. 16, translation S.N.), nor the significant role of the Commission for the Eurobarometer should be underestimated.

4 Effects related to the commission’s role as the contracting entity

If we shift our attention from the methodological weaknesses of the survey to the role of the contracting entity, then perception of the Eurobarometer also shifts. What might seem a rather naïve discussion of opportunities for improving the collection of data in and for Europe becomes a debate about the Eurobarometer’s transition from an instrument for acquiring information to a political tool.

With respect to the Eurobarometer, the “relationship between political actors and the surveys they conduct or contract to have other parties conduct” (Pausch 2009, p. 540, translation S.N.) manifests itself on several levels. The Commission finances the Eurobarometer and determines what questions are posed. For those interviewed, the Commission appears as the contracting entity; it holds a monopoly on interpretation of the data, and it publishes the results (see Tomaselli 2003, p. 2).

Quantifying the Commission’s exact expenditures for the Eurobarometer is difficult. The *Economist* estimated that the surveys conducted in 2007 cost the EU about 16.5 million Euros (Charlemagne 2008).⁹ The Commission supplies the funds for the surveys from the EU budget and determines the extent and the content of each poll: “... whenever necessary, in other words when Commission departments so request, and funds happen to be available, a specific list of questions is added to those of Euro-Barometer” (Rabier 1976, p. 141). External parties are allowed to add their questions to a survey wave only if the Commission gives its consent. What is asked and what is not depends on the financial resources available but is also a reflection of “political hopes for ‘nice’ results. This at times extends to exercising political influence on a massive scale, which exceeds the limits of what is professionally defensible”, according to Reif (1991, p. 51, translation S.N.). Sensitive topics such as racism or religion are neutralised in the polls so that unfavourable results—for example, different levels of tolerance in various European countries—do not have to be published (Charlemagne 2008). Suggestive questions steer respondents towards answers considered to be desirable (Haller 2009; Klein 2012). In other words, the Commission has expectations with respect to the goals and outcomes of the Eurobarometer and, as the contracting entity for whom the survey is conducted, influences how the polls are carried out. In doing so, the Commission contributes to discrediting the survey and detracts from the validity of the results.

⁹ Flash or Special Eurobarometer surveys cost an estimated 400,000–700,000 Euro; see for example www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getAllAnswers.do?reference=E-2009-5713&language=EN, www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getAllAnswers.do?reference=P-2006-3669&language=EN, www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getAllAnswers.do?reference=E-2010-0666&language=EN (accessed 21 March 2012).

Besides the issue of the direct effect a contracting entity can have on the survey itself, several authors discuss how respondents' answers can be influenced by their knowledge of who is the contracting entity for the poll. One possible effect is that various aspects of the face-to-face interview situation can influence the answers chosen. Respondents do not want to make a fool of themselves; they may be eager to please the interviewer, who represents the contracting entity, to make a good impression, and to do everything right (see [Urban and Pfenning 1996](#), p. 138). Haller therefore notes that it is likely that there is a positive correlation between participation in surveys conducted for the EU and a tendency to respond in an EU-affirmative manner to questions ([Haller 2009](#), p. 359).¹⁰ If public perceptions of the EU and its institutions deteriorate, however, the opposite effect may also be observed. Respondents may not want to improve this negative public image by voicing positive opinions. When it comes to the assumption that knowledge about the contracting entity may lead to distorted results, whether such influence makes replies more or less positive is not decisive.

It is also plausible to assume that the contracting entity has an influence on the process of evaluating survey data. Data is evaluated and interpreted for the Commission and in keeping with the basic assumptions it defines. "The Commission emphasizes that the reports reflect solely the views of the Eurobarometer authors and not those of the Commission, but no further information is supplied about who the authors are" ([Pausch 2009](#), p. 547, translation S.N.). However, the Commission makes use of its monopoly on the interpretation of survey findings by defining which results are defined as relevant and keeping those deemed less relevant out of the limelight. Because the Commission, at least in the first phase, has exclusive access to the data,¹¹ it can also ensure the data is presented in an over-simplified manner and thus influence how it is perceived by addressees. This goal can be pursued with simplifications like the following: "Seven out of 10 Europeans are optimistic about the European Union's future"¹² ([European Commission 2007](#), p. 171) or "Europeans feel that their compatriots do not have enough information about European political affairs"¹³ ([European Commission 2007](#), p. 120). The portion of diagrams used in survey reports, which is already high and continues to increase, also serves as a tool for simplifying reporting on results. Readers' attention is first drawn to visual elements, which generally depict positive survey findings. Due to the Commission's monopoly on the interpretation of results, its selective influence in formulating the questions asked is then extended to evaluation and interpretation of the data collected.

Dissemination of the findings is closely linked to the content of data evaluation. Here, the Commission uses its resources in the realm of information and media politics to set the agenda (see [Nissen 2002, 2010](#)). EU commissioners select the news to be presented at their press conferences, decide what aspects will be emphasised, and what results will not be mentioned at the top of their press release. "The content that is finally passed on to the public by the

¹⁰ Stocké and Becker are not convinced about this correlation, but they observed that the willingness to participate in a survey is more pronounced if the institution commissioning the survey is considered to be reliable ([Stocké and Becker 2004](#)).

¹¹ The Commission can decide to postpone publishing certain data by as much as two years. "On request of the European Commission, certain data on special topics are under embargo" (www.gesis.org/eurobarometer/data-access/embargo-provisions/, accessed 20 March 2012).

¹² This statement is based on the finding that 69 % of respondents view the future of the EU rather optimistically or very optimistically (see [Pausch 2009](#), p. 547).

¹³ This question is: "Overall, do you think that in (OUR COUNTRY), people are well informed or not about European political affairs?" Fifty-five percent of respondents said that people in their country were not well informed, twenty percent speculated that they were not informed at all (see [European Commission 2007](#), p. 120).

media is, in the end, no more than a minimal segment of the total Eurobarometer results, which has previously passed through several filters” (Pausch 2009, p. 547, translation S.N.). The small remaining segment is reduced even further because the results that are then presented meet with perceptions of journalists and the public that are shaped by national factors. The Eurobarometer becomes “27 national self-observations” (Pausch 2009, p. 549, translation S.N.; see Brüggemann 2008, p. 398). In view of the issues discussed above, presenting and perceiving the survey results by differentiating for each member state is in effect the only methodologically valid procedure. Nonetheless, it is obvious that such a “‘conservative’ interpretation of results” (Karmasin and Pitters 2008, p. 548, translation S.N.) cannot ensure that the informational goals originally associated with the Eurobarometer will be met. But the Commission’s attempts to use the survey to influence the process of European integration by setting the themes for the political agenda has also failed. Since the Commission shapes the Eurobarometer—from its content, to the conduct of the surveys and evaluation of the data collected, to publication of the results—it is responsible for the fact that the outcomes of each poll lack openness and it has also impaired the credibility of the results.

5 Conclusion

This sketch of the structure and development of the Eurobarometer has revealed the shift in the intentions associated with it. The Eurobarometer was introduced in 1973 as a tool which the Commission could use to collect and evaluate information about the public and the development of European integration. Due to the way the Commission has influenced the concept and implementation of the Eurobarometer, this survey tool no longer fulfills the original intentions about its role in practical politics in Europe. Current use of the survey results in the public sphere has turned the Eurobarometer into a political instrument that centres on influencing the public rather than functioning as a tool for gathering information.

As closer scrutiny has shown, the current political function of the Eurobarometer collides with the original purpose of obtaining information, because the way in which the Eurobarometer is functionalised impairs its reliability. Doubts about the quality of the surveys result, first of all, from methodological weaknesses that have been observed by various authors. Moreover, the effects of factors related to the Commission’s role as the contracting entity are seen at various levels, and they generate considerable scepticism regarding the validity of survey results. The European Commission’s monopoly on defining the goals and basic concepts of the survey and on financing and implementing the polls as well as interpreting and publishing the results is reminiscent of political processes in a centrally planned economy (see Charlemagne 2008): the Eurobarometer is subject to political influence and the more the image of Europe evoked by the presentation results seems to be constructed, the more questionable the value of survey results becomes. In the process, the Commission loses information but the influence it gains is limited, since the credibility of the Eurobarometer is challenged and the EU public relations efforts linked to this untrustworthy tool fail to fulfill these goals.

These structures call to mind Bourdieu’s remark that “polls are not an instrument for guiding democracies but rather an instrument of rationalistic demagogy” (Bourdieu 1992, p. 129, translation S.N.). The Eurobarometer was established not by independent researchers but rather by the European Commission and the European Parliament, who originally intended “to observe, and to some extent forecast, public attitudes towards the most important current events connected directly or indirectly with the development of the European Community and the unification of Europe” (European Commission 1974, p. 1; cf. European Commission

2008b, p. 1; Rabier 2008, p. 1). The 40-year history of the Eurobarometer demonstrates that this goal has been jeopardized in the interests of politics.

References

- Böltken, F., Gehring, A.: Zur Empirie des Postmaterialismus. Quota und Random. Äpfel und Birnen, Kraut und Rüben. *ZA-Information* **15**, 38–52 (1984)
- Bourdieu, P.: Die verborgenen Mechanismen der Macht. VSA, Hamburg (1992)
- Brüggemann, M.: Europäische Öffentlichkeit durch Öffentlichkeitsarbeit? VS, Wiesbaden (2008)
- Charlemagne. Ask a Silly Question. The European Commission is Wrong to Think Opinion Polls can Provide it with a Democratic Mandate. *The Economist*, Feb. 21 (2008)
- de Ulzurrun, L.M.D.: Associational membership and social capital in comparative perspective a note on the problems of measurement. *Politics and Society* **30**(3), 497–523 (2002)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 1. Brussels (1974)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 32. Brussels (1989)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 41. Brussels (1994).
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 52. Brussels (1999)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 53. Brussels (2000)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 56. Brussels (2002)
- European Commission: Flash Eurobarometer 151 “Iraq and Peace in the World”. Brussels (2003)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 67. Brussels (2007)
- European Commission: 35 years of Eurobarometer. European Integration as Seen by Public Opinion in the Member States of the European Union: 1973–2008. Brussels (2008a)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 69. Brussels (2008b)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 73, Part 1. Brussels (2010a)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 73, Part 2. Brussels (2010b)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 70. Brussels (2010c)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 75: Public Opinion in the European Union. Brussels (2011a)
- European Commission: Eurobarometer 75: Europa 2020. Brussels (2011b)
- Faulbaum, F., Prüfer, P., Rexroth, M.: Was ist eine gute Frage? VS, Wiesbaden (2009)
- Haller, M.: Die Europäische Integration als Elitenprozess. VS, Wiesbaden (2009)
- Harkness, J.: Questionnaire design in comparative research. In: Harkness, J., Van de Fijver, F.J.R., Mohler, P.P. (eds) *Cross-cultural survey methods*, pp. 19–33. Wiley, Hoboken (2003a)
- Harkness, J.: Questionnaire translation. In: Harkness, J., Van de Fijver, F.J.R., Mohler, P.P. (eds) *Cross-Cultural Survey Methods*, pp. 35–55. Wiley, Hoboken (2003b)
- Harkness, J., Schoua-Glusberg, A.: Questionnaires in translation. In: Harkness, J. (ed.) *Cross-Cultural Survey Equivalence*. ZUMA-Nachrichten Spezial, no. 3, pp. 87–128. ZUMA, Mannheim (1998)
- Holm, K. (ed.): *Die Befragung I*, 3rd edn. Francke (UTB), Munich (1986)
- Johnson, T.P.: Approaches to equivalence in cross-cultural and cross-national survey research. In: Harkness, J. (ed.) *Cross-Cultural Survey Equivalence*. ZUMA-Nachrichten Spezial, no. 3, pp. 1–40. ZUMA, Mannheim (1998)
- Karmasin, M., Pitters, H.: Methodenprobleme international vergleichender Umfragen am Beispiel des “Eurobarometer”. In: Melischek, G., Seethaler, J., Wilke, J. (eds.) *Medien- und Kommunikationsforschung im Vergleich*, pp. 435–450. VS, Wiesbaden (2008)
- Katz, R.S.: Measuring party identification with Eurobarometer data: a warning note. *West Eur. Politics* **8**(1), 104–108 (1985)
- Keil, S.I.: Die Datengrundlage der Politischen Soziologie in Forschung und Lehre. In: Kaina, V., Römmele, A. (eds) *Politische Soziologie*, pp. 421–445. VS, Wiesbaden (2009)
- Klein, M.: Europäische Meinungsmacher—Wie man Umfrageforschung für seine Zwecke missbraucht. <http://www.sciencefiles.org/2012/03/06/europaische-meinungsmacher-wie-man-umfrageforschung-fur-seine-zwecke-missbraucht/> (2012). Accessed 20 Mar 2012
- Kohler, U.: Assessing the quality of european surveys. Towards an open method of coordination for survey data. In Alber, J., Fahey, T., Saraceno, C. (eds.) *Handbook of Quality of Life in the Enlarged European Union*, pp. 405–423. Routledge, London (2008)
- Kromrey, H.: *Empirische Sozialforschung*, 12th edn. Lucius und Lucius, Stuttgart (2009)
- Laumen, A., Maurer, A.: Jenseits des “Permissive Consensus”. Diskussionspapier Forschungsgruppe EU-Integration, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (2006)

- Marcus, J.: Der Einfluss von Erhebungsformen auf den Postmaterialismus-Index. *Methoden-Daten-Analysen* **3**(2), 137–166 (2009)
- Moschner, M.: Eurobarometer 1973–1993: 20 Jahre “Dauerbeobachtung” der öffentlichen Meinung in Europa. *ZA-Information* **33**, 13–17 (1993)
- Moschner, M.: Eurobarometer 41.0. Trade issues, blood donation, Aids and smoking. *ZA-Information* **37**, 13–18 (1995)
- Moschner, M.: Sampling and fieldwork. www.gesis.org/eurobarometer/survey-series/standard-special-eb/sampling-fieldwork/ (2008). Accessed 20 Mar 2012
- Nissen, S.: Die regierbare Stadt. Metropolenpolitik als Konstruktion lösbarer Probleme. Westdeutscher Verlag, Wiesbaden (2002)
- Nissen, S.: Kommunikation in der Krise Entwicklung und Erfolgsbedingungen der EU-Informationspolitik. *Zeitschrift für Politik* **57**(4), 453–473 (2010)
- Pausch, M.: Eurobarometer und die Konstruktion eines europäischen Bewusstseins. In: Weichbold, M., Bachter, J., Wolf, C. (eds.) *Umfrageforschung. Herausforderungen und Grenzen*, pp. 539–552. VS, Wiesbaden (2009)
- Rabier, J.-R.: European barometer and socio-political research. *Eur. J. Polit. Res.* **4**(1), 141–146 (1976)
- Rabier, J.-R.: Speech at the Conference “Thirty-fifth Anniversary of Eurobarometer—Understanding European Public Opinion”. Sciences Po-Paris, 21 November 2008 (n.t., 2008)
- Reif, K.: Organisatorische Randbedingungen und Probleme empirischer Sozialforschung aus europäischer Perspektive. Das Eurobarometer der EG-Kommission. In: Sahner, H. (ed.) *Sozialforschung im vereinten Deutschland und in Europa*, pp. 43–53. Oldenbourg, München (1991)
- Reuband, K.: Quoten- und Randomstichproben in der Praxis der Sozialforschung. Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede in der sozialen Zusammensetzung und den Antwortmustern der Befragten. *ZA-Information* **43**, 48–80 (1998)
- Saris, W.E., Kaase, M. (eds.): Eurobarometer: measurement instruments for opinions in Europe. In: Zuma Nachrichten Spezial Band 2. ZUMA, Mannheim (1997)
- Scheuch, E.K.: The cross-cultural use of sample surveys: problems of comparability. *Hist. Soc. Res.* **18**(2), 104–138 (1993[1968])
- Schnell, R., Hill, P.B., Esser, E.: *Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung*, 8th ed. Oldenbourg, München (2008)
- Schuijt, W.: Rapport sur la politique d’information des Communautés européennes. DOCUMENT 246/71, Brussels (1972)
- Stocké, V., Becker, B.: Determinanten und Konsequenzen der Umfrageeinstellung Bewertungsdimensionen unterschiedlicher Umfragesponsoren und die Antwortbereitschaft der Befragten. *ZUMA-Nachrichten* **54**, 89–116 (2004)
- Tomaselli V.: I Sondaggi dell’Eurobarometro: Valutazioni e Prospettive di Analisi. Manuscript (2003)
- Urban, D.: Wie stabil sind Einstellungen zur Gentechnik? Ergebnisse einer regionalen Panelstudie. In Hampel, J., Renn, O. (eds.) *Gentechnik in der Öffentlichkeit. Wahrnehmung und Bewertung einer umstrittenen Technologie*, pp. 56–97. Campus, Frankfurt/Main (1999)
- Urban, D., Pfenning, U.: Was messen Fragen zur Bewertung neuer Technologien? Semantisierungseffekte bei der Messung von bilanzierenden Einstellungen zu Bio- und Gentechnologie. *ZUMA-Nachrichten* **39**, 116–140 (1996)
- Van der Eijk, C., Schmitt, H.: The role of the Eurobarometer in the study of European elections and the development of comparative electoral research. In: Reif, K., Inglehardt, R. (eds.) *Eurobarometer. The Dynamics of European Public Opinion*, pp. 257–274. MacMillan, Houndsmill (1991)
- Wendt-Hildebrandt, S., Hildebrandt, K., Krebs, D.: Zur interkulturellen Validität von Messinstrumenten. *ZUMA-Nachrichten* **13**, 45–57 (1983)