

INTEREST IN EUROPEAN MATTERS: A GLASS THREE-QUARTERS FULL?

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A disconnect between European Union integration and the level of interest of EU citizens in European matters is a potential weakness in the EU's democratic foundations. The existence and possible size of this disconnect is a critical issue in assessing the potential for further integration of the EU and the risks to its stability.

To move beyond qualitative assessments of this disconnect, we use three indicators to measure EU citizens' interest in Europe: turnout in European Parliament elections relative to national elections, Eurobarometer surveys of interest in Europe, and the presence of European news in national newspapers, relative to all published news. We interpret our empirical results using three frameworks: Putnam's social capital concept, the agenda-setting hypothesis and the no-demos hypothesis.

All three indicators point to an increased interest in European matters, especially since the 1990s and the creation of the euro. However, this result does not settle the issue of whether the increased level of interest matches the actual state of integration of the EU's member countries. Our results indicate the European construction maintains a technocratic character.

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1 Introduction

The weakness of the European Union's democratic foundations is a perennial topic of debate, whether in connection with criticisms of the EU's COVID-19 vaccine procurement or the recurrent debates about the limits of the European Parliament's powers and the accountability of the European Central Bank. Lively discussions have also accompanied the decision in 2020 to mutualise for the first time at EU level a substantial amount of debt through the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which has been hailed as a historic decision and a big step towards increased integration.

In the decades since the creation of what is now the EU, economic integration and the accompanying integration of public policy at European level¹ has deepened substantially. But it remains unclear if this integration has been accompanied by a matching level of interest and awareness on the part of EU citizens. The possible disconnect between economic and policy integration, on one hand, and the interest shown by EU citizens in EU matters, on the other hand, could be a weak point in the EU's democratic foundations and therefore for its potential for further integration and even for its stability.

This possible disconnect is a particularly important topic in the light of the Conference on the Future of Europe²: a two-year forum to engage with citizens on the European construction and the perceived disconnect between their interest in the EU and its integration.

Since we are convinced that mere qualitative considerations are not sufficient to come to a conclusion about the existence of this disconnect, and its possible size, we use in section 2 different indicators to measure the interest shown by EU citizens in European matters.

We then provide, in section 3, three frameworks to explain why these indicators can indeed be considered as measures of interest in European matters: Putnam's social capital concept, the agenda setting hypothesis, and the no-demos hypothesis. The last is the interpretation receiving most of our attention, because of its wide-ranging nature and because it is potentially the most controversial one. Then we briefly conclude.

¹ Papadia and Cadamuro (2020) estimated trade and financial integration in the EU and measured the integration of public policy at European level by the number of European public employees relative to the aggregate number of national public employees.

² See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44679/st09102-en20.pdf>.

2 Empirical indicators of citizens' interest in European matters

It is not easy to quantify the interest of EU citizens in European matters³. To deal with this problem we use three indicators: voter turnout at European Parliament elections relative to turnout in national elections since 1979; public opinion survey results since 1973 on interest/attachment to Europe; and the frequency of European news in three selected newspapers. This last is by far the most comprehensive indicator, both because data goes back nearly 80 years and because our approach, using big data tools and covering several million press articles, is, at least to our knowledge, more systematic and novel than anything so far available.

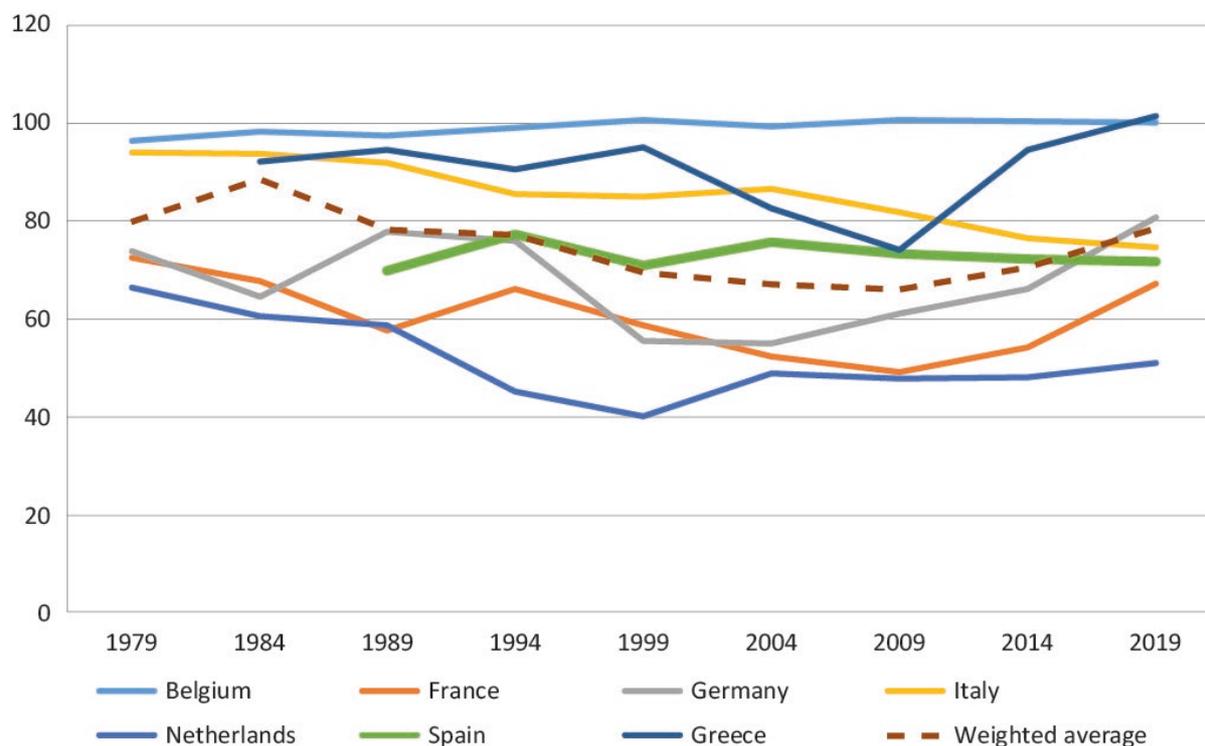
Voter turnout and survey-based measures of interest/attachment to Europe are relative indicators, comparing interest in European issues with interest in national matters. The frequency of European news is relative to all the news published in the selected newspapers. Therefore, the emphasis in all our measures is more on the relative than on the absolute level of interest of citizens in European matters.

2.1 Voter turnout

To assess the relative importance voters give to European elections, turnout is presented as a ratio to turnout in national elections. The countries covered by Figure 1 were chosen on the basis of two criteria: population size and length of EU membership.

³ Data from Eurobarometer surveys has been questioned because of the very limited response rate to surveys. However, de Vries and Hoffmann (2020) concluded that: *“Response rates might be low in the Eurobarometer, and this is not ideal. It is important to remember, however, that this does not necessarily imply that the Eurobarometer overestimates support for the EU”*.

Figure 1: European Parliament elections turnout relative to national elections (1979-2019)⁴



Source: Bruegel based on population weights from Eurostat (demo_pjan) and voter turnout data from IDEA (<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout>).

Figure 1 shows three phenomena:

- With the exception of Belgium⁵, and Greece in the most two recent observations, turnout is lower in European elections than in national elections, in some cases much lower. On average for the selected countries, at the end of the period participation in European elections was close to 80 percent of participation in national elections.
- Relative turnout per country is quite different, with the Netherlands and France on the low side and Belgium, Greece, Italy and Germany on the high side.
- Average relative turnout tended to fall in the first 2/3 decades in which direct European Parliament elections were carried out and then stabilised, before increasing more recently.

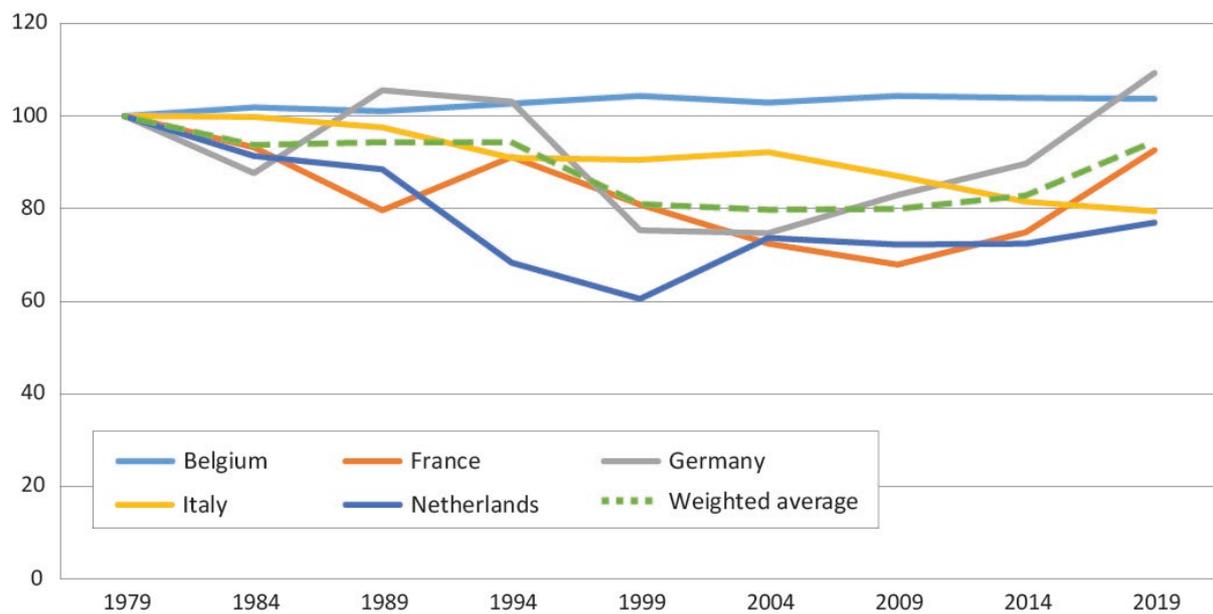
The decrease and then the partial recovery are even more visible in Figure 2, where the variables from Figure 1 are reported as indices (1979=100).

⁴ Since national and European elections are not always simultaneous, the national turnout rates (in the denominator) are constructed with linear interpolation between the closest national elections before and after the European elections. This way, the ratios can be calculated for years where there are no national elections. Same for Figure 2.

⁵ Belgium has compulsory voting, additionally Belgium synchronises its calendar of national elections with the European elections,

Figures 1 and 2, consistently with the interpretation of Hooghe and Marks (2009), Risse (2014) and Kriesi (2007), show that there has been greater engagement with European issues in the most recent years, which has replaced the “*permissive consensus*” that prevailed before, whereby electorates accepted European integration without particularly caring about it. This greater engagement does not necessarily mean more support for the EU. In fact, a factor in greater engagement has been the growth of radical nationalist-right parties that are opposed to the European Union.

Figure 2: European Parliament elections turnout relative to national elections (1979-2019), 1979=100

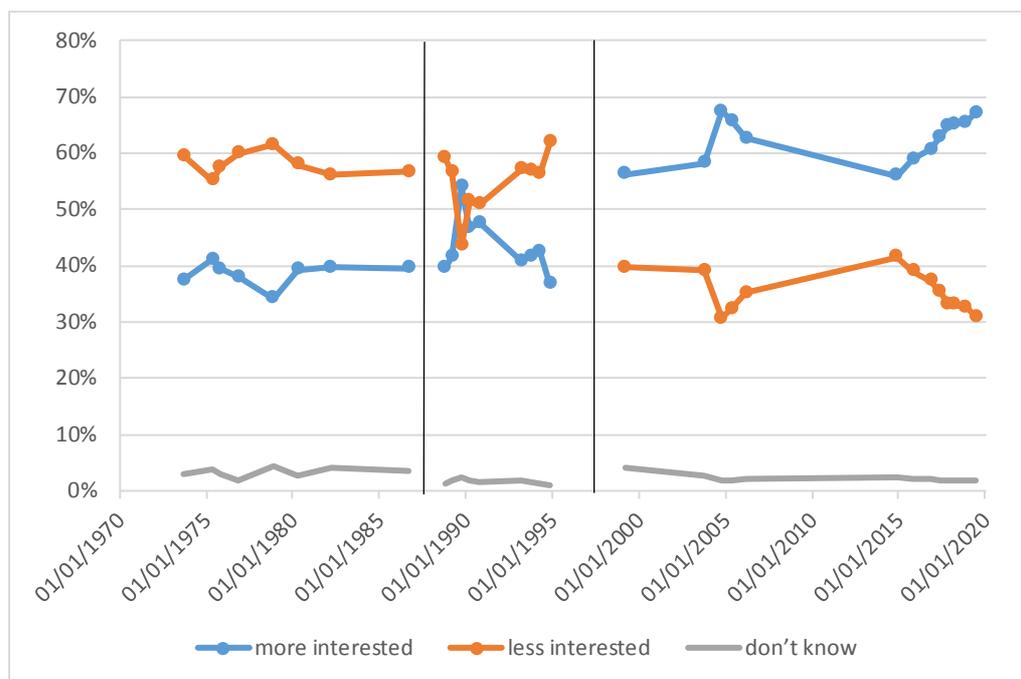


Source: see Figure 1.

2.2 Surveys on attachment to Europe

The Eurobarometer surveys includes questions that shed light on the sense of attachment EU citizens feel to Europe and to their own country (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Interest in European politics/attachment to Europe (1973-2019). Percentages



Source: Bruegel based on Eurobarometer (European Commission). Dots on the curve show actual Eurobarometer observations, the curve derives from linear interpolation between the available observations.

Figure 3 presents evidence drawn from different surveys: those providing the figures for the first two pairs of lines asked about 'Interest in EU politics', the survey underlying the third pair of lines asked about 'Attachment to Europe'. The difference between the first and the second panel is that an additional possible answer ('to some extent') was added in the later period for the question: *As far as European politics are concerned, that is matters related to the European Community, to what extent would you say that you are interested in them?*⁶.

⁶To make the figures comparable over time, we simplified the possible answers, putting the answers about interest in EU politics into only two groups, 'more interested' and 'less interested'. The former is the sum of 'a great deal' and 'to some extent', and the latter is the sum of 'not much' and 'not at all'. We created the time series for the entire period by linking these groups to the answers about attachment to Europe, ie we linked 'more interested' to 'more attached' (comprising very and fairly attached) and we linked 'less interested' to 'less attached' (comprising not much and not at all attached). For the earlier period, in which the 'some extent' option was not available to survey respondents, we estimated the answers to this option by using the first observation in which the option was indeed introduced: in this observation a share of the 'great deal' and a share of the 'not much' answers went into the 'to some extent' option and we used these shares backward to estimate the 'not much' option for earlier periods.

From 1973 to 1986, Figure 3 does not really show evidence of more, or less, interest in European politics.

From 1988 to 1994, the evidence is that interest overall in European politics somewhat decreased: the share of those 'less interested' grew, irregularly, from 59 percent to 62 percent. The share of those more interested in European politics correspondingly decreased, again irregularly, from 40 percent to 37 percent.

In the last two decades, there has been a clear, if irregular, increase in 'attachment to Europe' as the share of 'more interested' respondents has grown from 56 percent to 67 percent, while the 'not interested' have dropped from 40 percent to 31 percent. However, the formulation of the Eurobarometer question⁷ also became less clear in last this period, using a very generic term, 'Europe', which implicitly equates Europe with the EU, and may have influenced respondents in unknown ways.

An overall reading of Figure 3 shows no trend change between 1975 and 1994, and a significant increase in attachment to Europe only over the last two decades, coinciding, not surprisingly, with the introduction of the euro and EU enlargements. Between 1973 and 2019, one can detect an overall increase in the sense of belonging to Europe, but entirely due to the development over the last two decades⁸.

The very low correlation between the milestones associated with European integration and increases in attachment to Europe, at least as recorded by the measure in Figure 3, is remarkable. For the 1973-1986 period, the indicator was stagnant. The modest 1973-75 increase and subsequent decrease until 1978 may be connected to the expectation, then disappointed, of a common reaction from European countries to the 1970s oil shock. The modest increase in attachment around 1978-1980 could be connected to the first direct elections of the European Parliament and the creation of the European Monetary System. Attachment during the 1980s remained remarkably flat, in spite of the activism under the Delors Commission from 1984, notably the Single European Act of 1986, the single market programme and the increasing visibility and powers of the European Parliament. The Schengen Convention was signed in 1985, the same year as the White Paper on the Single Market⁹. Only in 1988-1990 was there an upturn in the indicator. Part of this could be linked to the renewed

⁷ The precise formulation of the question is: "People may feel different degrees of attachment to their town or village, to their region, to their country or to Europe. Please tell me how attached you feel to ... Europe – your country."

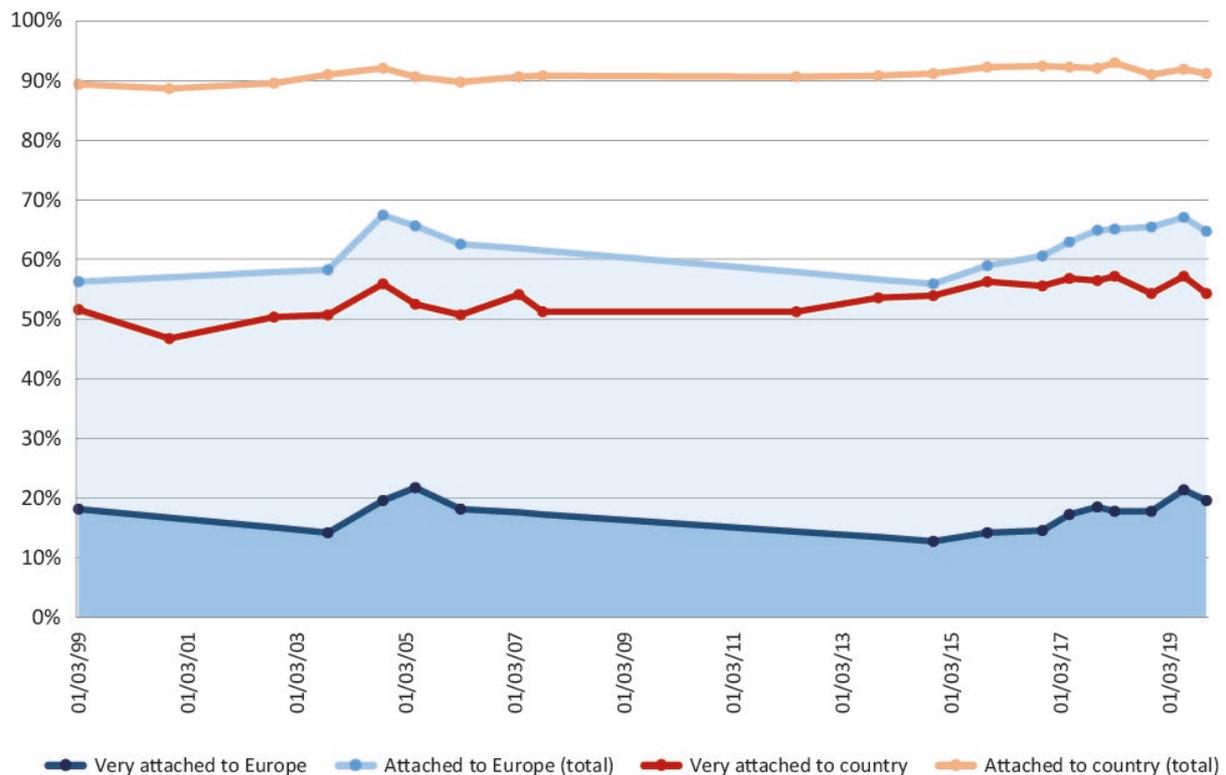
⁸ This result seems to contrast with that of Bellamy (2013), who noted that only a minority of EU citizens identify themselves as Europeans, while a majority identify themselves as national. The reconciliation of the two different results is due, in part, to the more recent data utilised here and to the emphasis on the change over time of relative attachment to Europe and to the respondent's nation, rather than on the level of the respective attachments.

⁹ 'Completing the Internal Market' white paper from the Commission to the European Council, Milan 28-29 June 1985.

discussions about economic and monetary union (EMU). However, the sudden jump in 1989, which quickly faded away in 1990, can hardly be attributed to European integration alone, but instead should be linked to developments in Europe in general, with the fall of the Berlin wall and the rapidly changing situation in central and eastern Europe.

Figure 4 looks more closely at the increase in attachment to Europe in the last two decades when significant change took place.

Figure 4: Degree of attachment to Europe and to one's country (1999-2019)



Source: Bruegel based on Eurobarometer. Dots on the curve show actual Eurobarometer observations, the curve derives from linear interpolation between the available observations.

Figure 4 shows that¹⁰:

- Attachment to own country (total, ie very + fairly) was, between 1999 and 2019, very high and about stable at 90 percent because of an increase in the 'very attached' (from 52 percent to 57 percent) and a decrease in the 'fairly attached' (from 38 percent to 35 percent)
- Attachment to Europe over the same period was notably lower in level, but growing:
 - From 18 percent to 21 percent very attached;
 - From 38 percent to 46 percent fairly attached; hence

¹⁰ In this survey, EU citizens are asked to compare their attachment to Europe with their attachment to their own country.

- From 56 percent to 67 percent total attachment.

Interpreted literally, this evidence not only shows an increase of 11 percentage points in attachment to Europe in the last two decades, but also that attachment to Europe was, at the end of the period, equal to about three quarters of own-country attachment. This is close to the result for turnout in the most recent European elections compared to national elections: around 80 percent.

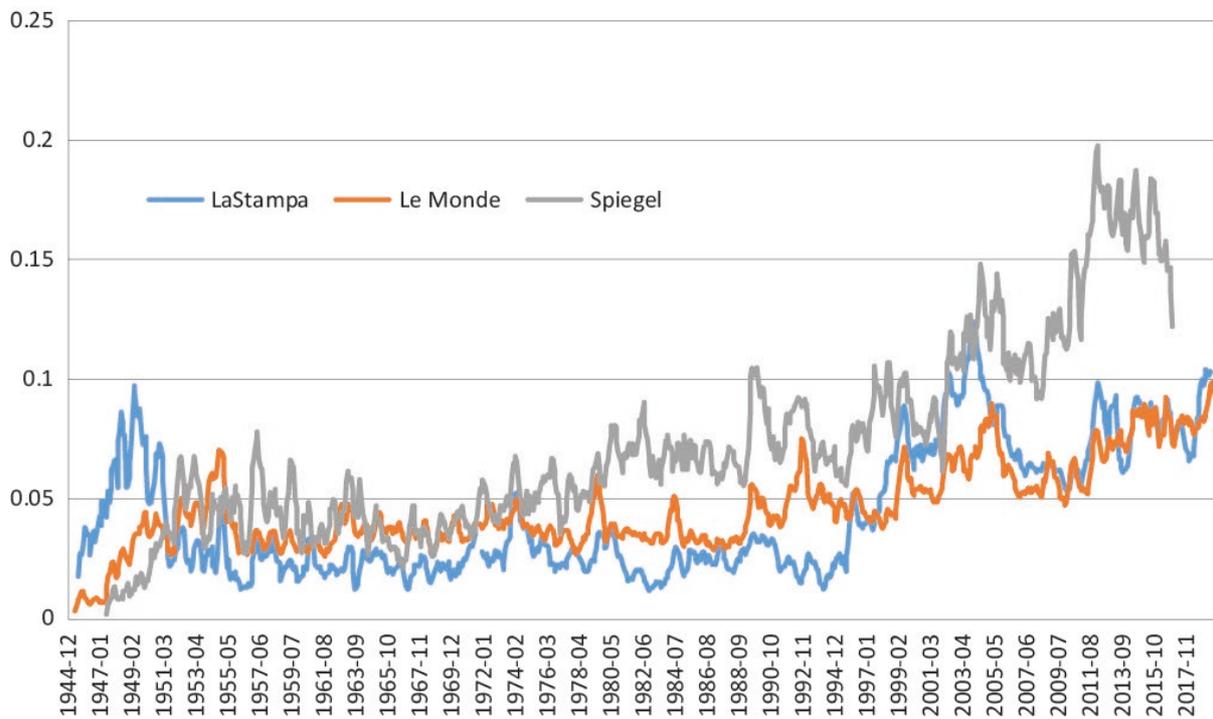
An overall reading of the available evidence, while not straightforward because of differences in the surveys, shows limited changes from 1975 to 1994 and a significant increase in attachment to Europe relative to attachment to one's own country only over the last two decades. This is broadly consistent with the recovery, albeit partial, in European Parliament election turnout relative to turnout in national elections recorded over approximately the two last decades (section 2.1). This confirms the view that the introduction of the euro coincided with, and possibly caused, increased awareness of European matters among EU citizens.

Overall, these results are consistent with the hypothesis of greater engagement with European issues presented in section 2.1.

2.3 Presence of European news in the press

Our new indicator of the interest of EU citizens in European matters relies on the frequency of articles dealing with EU-related news over the total numbers of articles in three national newspapers (*Le Monde*, *La Stampa* and *Der Spiegel*). This indicator comes with two qualifications: the three outlets are elite journals and they reflect not only the views of their readers but also those of their owners, journalists and editors. However, looking at these three newspapers over such a long period offers a consistent reflection of the change in the importance of Europe-related news in the public discourse (Bergamini and Murlon-Druol, 2021). Our working hypothesis is that if the press would pay only proportionally scant attention to European matters, it would signal equally scant interest in European matters on the part of EU citizens, and thus a potential problem for a viable democracy (Pfetsch, 2004; Risse, 2014).

Figure 5: Frequency of European news relative to total news, selected European newspapers, 1945-2018



Source: Bergamini and Murlon-Droul (2021). Note: E/T = European news as a share of total news.

For each of the three newspapers, a large dataset was scanned (after extensive cleaning, full details can be found in Bergamini and Murlon-Droul, 2021): 2.8 million articles for *Le Monde*, 300,000 for *Der Spiegel* and 10 million for *La Stampa*. European news was identified by means of keywords, with the words chosen (including for example ‘European’ and ‘euro’) leading to a broad range of news beyond that dealing with social, political or economic issues, e.g. belonging to sports sections, or articles mentioning the euro as a currency. Subsequent filtering removed these less relevant articles.

An overall finding of this exercise is a significant increase in the frequency of European news since the 1940s in all three newspapers¹¹:

- *Le Monde* included about two articles about Europe out of 100 total in the 1940s (post-war); the percentage increased about fourfold to around 8 percent in the 2010s;

¹¹ This result is consistent with that of Hooghe *et al* (2008) according to which: “Content analysis of media in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Britain, Switzerland and Austria reveals that the proportion of statements devoted to European issues in national electoral campaigns increased from 2.5 per cent in the 1970s to 7 per cent in the 1990s”. Also Risse (2014) reached similar results. The granular, but much shorter, analysis of Pfetsch (2000) confirmed that European news had reached in the early year 2000s quite a significant level.

- The frequency of European news in *Der Spiegel* increased by a factor of around six, from about 2 to more than 12 percent;
- The frequency of European articles in *La Stampa* increased about fivefold over the period.

There has been much variability in the level of European news, with some distinct peaks and troughs, but there is evidence of a more sustained level in the most recent decades: namely since about 1990 in *Le Monde* and *La Stampa* and about ten years earlier in *Der Spiegel*. This is consistent with the hypothesis, mentioned in sections 2.1 and 2.2, about the more recent greater engagement with European issues.

Some straightforward institutional milestones saw increases in the amount of European news relative to total news. European elections always appear as peaks in Figure 5. European summits until 1974 and European Councils from 1974 also induced peaks, as did EU-related referendums, such as the May 2005 French referendum on the constitutional treaty and the June 2008 Irish vote against the Treaty of Lisbon. The signing of treaties, however, does not always correspond with peaks. April 1951, when the Treaty of Paris creating the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was signed, only emerges as a peak in *Der Spiegel*. The signature of the Treaties of Rome in March 1957 was also only reflected in *Der Spiegel*. Other milestones do not correspond with notable peaks in European news: for example, this was the case for the Schuman Declaration on coal and steel of 9 May 1950, which has now become Europe Day. This came to be seen as a milestone in Europe's history only in retrospect. The June 1955 Messina conference – which was an important meeting ahead of the Treaty of Rome negotiations – does not appear in Figure 6 either.

However, the history of the euro in the last few years of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century, as expected, shows up in several peaks in all three newspapers, including for the May 1998 appointment of the first European Central Bank's board and, most obviously, January 2002, when euro banknotes entered into circulation. The multiple summits linked to the financial and euro-area crisis also appear as peaks, for instance in June 2010 (adoption of 'Europe 2020' strategy), and in October-November 2011 (reform of the Stability and Growth Pact), possibly because they attracted public attention through their potential impact on everyday life.

Other peaks in at least two of the newspapers include:

- June-July 1947, corresponding to the announcement of the Marshall Plan, which proposed post-war US financial aid to Europe;

- August-September 1950, corresponding to the first discussions about the development of a united European army, which would later culminate in the negotiation (and eventually abandonment) of the European Defence Community;
- October 1961, January 1962 and June 1962, corresponding to proposals on European political union (Fouchet Plan) and to French president Charles de Gaulle's acknowledgement of the breakdown of the discussions with European partners on the topic;
- November-December 1969, October 1972, December 1978, June 1988, April-May-June 1989 and June 1991, corresponding to high-profile economic and monetary union summits and agreements (for *Der Spiegel*, June 1989, corresponding to the European Council in Madrid that endorsed the objective to create an economic and monetary union, saw a particularly high European news peak).

The all-time highest peak in European news among all newspapers was in July 2015 in *Der Spiegel*, corresponding to the signature of the Iran nuclear deal. This was also one of very few mentions of events related to European foreign policy cooperation.

There are also some peaks, common to all three newspapers, that are hard to attribute clearly to a single event: July 1949, September 1951, November 1953, April 1954, February 1956, September 1956, November-December 1963, November 1964, May 1971, November 1973, December 1979, December 1980 (Euro-Arab dialogue), December 1983, May 1985, November 1998, June 1999 and May-June 2003.

3 Interpreting our empirical results

Overall, our evidence of indicators of citizens' interest in European matters is consistent with the hypothesis that greater engagement has coincided with monetary unification, which directly touched the everyday lives of Europeans and thus activated both favourable and unfavourable responses towards European unification. In this section three conceptual frameworks are presented to justify the use of the three indicators presented in the previous section as actual measures of the interest of European citizens in European matters.

3.1 Putnam's social capital

The concept of social capital developed by Putnam (2000) provides a first theoretical framework for interpreting our empirical results, in particular those relating to voter turnout and interest in EU

matters/attachment to Europe. In Putnam's definition (page 12) "*social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.*" Putnam's social capital is clearly related to a sense of belonging together. The "Attachment to Europe, compared to attachment to one's country, and interest in European politics, as measured by Eurobarometer (section 2.2), are clearly akin to a perception of belonging to a European community of some sort relative to belonging to one's country. As such they are not necessarily a measure of social capital but are clearly related to it. The use of indicators of social capital, rather than the search for a single synthetic measure for it, is consistent with Putnam's approach, in which he measures a plurality of variables to infer changes in the overall level of social capital.

The link between participation in elections and social capital is direct and is recognised as such by Putnam (Page 21): "*Voting is by a substantial margin the most common form of political activity, and it embodies the most fundamental democratic principle of equality.*" The measure of European election turnout relative to national election turnout can thus be taken as an indication of relative European versus national social capital.

Three conclusions one can draw from Putnam's analysis are useful in interpreting our indicators. First, social capital is a graded rather than binary variable. Second, Putnam shares with our approach the emphasis on very long-term developments in public attitudes: social capital only changes gradually. Third, while he presents (Page 172) "*evidence that social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy,*" he recognises there is also a dark side to social capital, especially when it takes the form of "*exclusive*" social capital. This is consistent with our approach in which citizens' interest in European matters does not necessarily imply a favourable attitude towards Europe.

Anticipating section 3.3, it is useful to explore the link between the concept of social capital and that of demos, which look clearly related. Indeed, one interpretation is that demos is the entity within which social capital is generated. Putnam measured social capital over time and took the geographical borders of his measurement, the United States, as given. In an alternative approach, changes of social capital over a geographic dimension can help define the borders over which demos prevails: measuring the intensity of social capital over different geographical ambits can establish the borders of demos, since an entity associated with high social capital denotes demos. More generally, as social capital fades, moving from a narrower to a larger ambit, we can infer that demos loses potency: the highest social capital is found in the narrowest social environment, the family; the lowest social capital is found in the widest environment, the globe. This observation leads to the theory of demoi-

cratisation, as developed, for instance, by Cheneval *et al* (2015) according to whom, democracy in an entity like the European Union is not based on a single demos but on a plurality of demoi, as will be seen below.

In conclusion, interest in or attachment to Europe relative to one's own country, and European election turnout, relative to national election turnout, can be considered indicators of European-level social capital. Both measures, as reported in Figures 1 and 4, indicate in the most recent period a level of European social capital at about three-quarters of the national level.

3.2 Agenda setting

The synthetic and straightforward formulation of the “*agenda setting*” hypothesis (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) can be presented as follows: the press “*may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about*” (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). In this formulation, the agenda-setting hypothesis is seen and tested as a causal link between media and the topics on which the public concentrates (Larcinese *et al*, 2011; Snyder and Puglisi, 2016). For our purposes, we can work with a weaker and more general version of the agenda-setting hypothesis, in which there is a correlation between the two variables rather than causation from one to the other (Neresini and Lorenzet, 2016). Indeed, it cannot be excluded that the media reacts to themes to which the general public pays attention, or that media and the general public react to some other third variable, such as opinion campaigns started by governments, political parties or economic agents, about which the public learns through the media.

A correlation link is in principle sufficient to justify the use of the frequency of European news over total news as a proxy of interest of readers in European matters.

The practical application of the agenda-setting hypothesis in the case of Europe, however, is complicated by the fact that there are no genuine European newspapers, in part because of language differences. Analysis must focus, therefore, on treatment of European news in national newspapers. Analysts have indeed taken this approach when looking at the frequency of European issues in national newspapers as indicators of the prominence of European matters in national settings and, more generally, of a fledgling Europeanised public sphere (Bruycker, 2020).

To better interpret the evidence on the frequency of European news in total news (section 2.3), the link between media and public opinion hypothesised by the agenda-setting theory should be more precisely seen, when empirically confirmed in either the correlation or the causation version, as a two-

link chain: from readers of elite media to elite public opinion, and from that to general public opinion.

Regarding the first link, traditionally the press has been given a critical role in public opinion: Habermas defined the press as *“the public sphere’s preeminent institution”* and quoted Bücher as follows: *“From mere institutions for the publications of news, the papers became also carriers and leaders of public opinion, and instruments in the arsenal of party politics”* (Habermas, 1989, p. 182).

On the second link, namely the relationships between different layers of public opinion, which is definitely not a homogenous reality, one should take into account that it is far easier to ascertain the attitudes of the elites than those of the other layers of public opinion. Elites have a disproportionate role in written and, more generally, structured communication, also because of a greater ability to formulate and defend opinions.

On this as well, Habermas provided useful insights, positing a causal link between elite and general public opinion: *“The group’s communication processes are under the influence of the mass media either directly or, more frequently, mediated through opinion leaders. Among the latter are often to be found those persons who have reflected opinion formed through literary and rational controversy”* (Habermas, 1989, p. 246).

Gabel and Scheve (2007) quantitatively analysed the relationship between elite views and general public opinion, specifically in relation to European integration, and found a causal link from the former to the latter.

Overall, the two links, between elite press and elite public opinion and from that to general public opinion, are definitely not perfect. However, the favourable testing of the agenda-setting theory found in the literature and the conceptual arguments developed by Habermas (1989) lead to acceptance of a significant, even if noisy, correlation between elite press and general public opinion, and thus between our measure of the frequency of European news within total news and interest of citizens in European matters. This conclusion is likely stronger as regards changes rather than levels of the two variables: the changes in elite public opinion are likely more closely correlated with changes in general public opinion, even if they differ in terms of level. It is indeed likely that elites have systematically more interest in European affairs than non-elite citizens, but there is likely quite a high correlation between the changes of interest in European matters in the two social groups.

In conclusion, the increase in European news within total news in certain newspapers, especially over the last few decades, is consistent with an increasing interest in European matters on the part of EU

citizens. This is in line with the gradual, yet still partial, Europeanisation of the public sphere, as analysed by Pfetsch (2004) and the politicisation of European issues, as in Risse (2014) and Grande and Kriesi (2014).

3.3 The no-demos hypothesis

The most radical argument about the difficulty of progressing towards the “*ever closer union among the peoples of Europe*”, foreseen in the EU Treaty, is the claimed absence of a European demos by some of the authors referenced below. The demos is assumed to be the necessary basis for this union to have a democratic character. How can a change as momentous as the progressive unification of Europe take place if there is insufficient interest in European matters, which must be a necessary, but definitely not sufficient, condition for a European demos?

An empirical test of this hypothesis is as difficult as it is necessary: difficult because it is not easy to test the hypothesis, which is rooted in political theory; necessary because its validation or refutation would have vast political consequences.

In order to offer a tentative test of the hypothesis, the concept of demos is presented and criticised, to show its different possible meanings. Then it is shown how the relative turnout in European and national elections, the attachment to Europe relative to the attachment to one’s country and the frequency of European news in printed media can advance us in the testing of the ‘no-demos’ hypothesis.

The Economist defined the no-demos hypothesis succinctly in 2019: “... *Europe is not America or China. It is a mosaic of nation states of wildly varying size and boasting different languages, cultures, histories and temperaments. Its aspiration to be as democratic as a whole as it is in its parts is profoundly hampered by the lack, to use a term familiar to the ancient Nemeans, of a ‘demos’ – a people which feels itself a people*”^{12, 13}.

¹² *The Economist*, ‘The European Parliament elections are responding to a changed world’, Briefing, 18 May 2019.

¹³ A strong supporter of the no-demos hypothesis is Lindseth (1999 and 2010). Rodrik (2017) developed reasoning similar to, while not fully coinciding with the no-demos hypothesis. Indeed, his insistence that democracy is, realistically, only possible in the nation state is consistent with the no-demos hypothesis. Also Bellamy (2013) supported the no demos hypothesis for Europe. Conceptual and empirical criticisms of the no-demos hypothesis were developed by Innerarity (2014). The conceptual criticism considers the sequence whereby the existence of a demos allows the constitution of a political, democratic entity to be false, indeed internally inconsistent. The demos and the democratic institution are not sequential one to the other but self-supporting. The empirical criticism is that the assumption that demos is perfect and concentrated at national level and absent at European level is not warranted.

In a more academic fashion, Weiler [1995] critically examined the no-demos thesis, starting from the definition of demos that he sees underlying the Maastricht Decision of the German Federal Constitutional Court, which is, he argues, the most articulate and powerful supporter of this thesis. In his view, underlying the definition used by the German Constitutional Court are (Weiler, 1995, Page 225): *“common language, common history, common cultural habits and sensibilities and - this is dealt with more discretely since the twelve years of National-Socialism - common ethnic origin, common religion. All these factors do not alone capture the essence of Volk - one will always find allusions to some spiritual, even mystic, element as well.”*

Weiler characterised this concept of demos as *“organic”*, a homogenous entity characterized by deep, quasi-immutable common characteristics, which, he argues, derives from the legal, and finally political, views of Carl Schmitt, a prominent Nazi legal expert.

Weiler supports, instead, a very different definition of demos as the basis of European unification: a European *“demos understood in non-organic civic terms, a coming together on the basis not of shared ethos and/or organic culture, but a coming together on the basis of shared values, a shared understanding of rights and societal duties and shared rational, intellectual culture which transcend organic national differences”* (Weiler, 1995, pp 242-243). One could add to this list the perception of shared benefits.

And this different type of demos can support a community vision of European unification, different from the unity vision, which would lead to the United States of Europe.

As seen above, Putnam accepted that social capital could have a dark side. In Weiler’s view, the organic definition of demos is mostly negative. From this point of view there is a similarity with the criticism of nationalism developed by Anderson (2006), who saw this not as a spontaneous phenomenon, and even less a kind of constant, as in the organic version criticised by Weiler, but rather *“a cultural artefact”*, with mostly negative implications.

A new, very interesting conceptual development, quite consistent with Weiler’s analysis, is the formulation, already mentioned above, of the demoi-cratism hypothesis, as presented by Nicolaïdis, [2013], Beetz, [2015] and Cheneval et al [2015]: *“In a ‘demosi-cracy’, separate states/peoples enter into a political arrangement and jointly exercise political authority. Its proper domain is a polity of democratic states with hierarchical, majoritarian features of policy-making, especially in value-laden redistributive and coercive policy areas, but without a unified political community [demos].”*

In this approach the search of an overriding European demos is futile, what has to be ascertained is the existence and power of a European demos alongside a plurality of national demoi.

The existence of a European demos alongside, more potent, national ones is consistent with the evidence found in the literature that redistributions are easier in contexts characterised by social homogeneity (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2004; Halvorsen, 2007). Specifically, in the European Union, it is clearly easier to have economic transfers within countries than between countries. The development of the Next Generation EU fund shows, however, that this is indeed possible also across the EU.

In conclusion, the no-demos hypothesis is not a good lens through which to look at the European Union: our empirical exercise (section 2) to find and measure indicators of interest in European issues is consistent with a non-organic definition of a European demos. Voter turnout at European elections relative to that at national elections, attachment to Europe relative to attachment to one's country, the frequency of European news over total news published in newspapers, are all indicators of a fledgling European demos existing alongside, more powerful, national demoi.

4 Conclusions

The three measures of the level of interest of EU citizens in European matters presented in this paper, which can also be interpreted as indicators of a European social capital in line with Putnam (section 3.1) and of a European demos, show varying results. There are, however, two general findings. The first is a trend increasing interest in European matters, which is particularly visible over the last few decades, consistent with the politicisation of European issues¹⁴ and broadly contemporaneous with the jump in the construction of European unity brought about by the euro as a single currency (Risse, 2014). The second finding is that the growing interest in European matters, the sense of belonging to Europe that it implies and, in the interpretation offered in the section above, the measure of a European demos alongside national demoi, rank below national levels. Interest in European issues can be measured as being roughly equal to three quarters of the interest in national issues.

Whether this level of interest in European matters is sufficient for integration to proceed or for it not to collapse when subject to shocks remains an open question. So far, European integration had a "technocratic" slant, since the interest of European citizens in it has lagged the degree of market and

¹⁴ Risse (2014) noted (Page 1213): "an emerging demos in the European polity and it has been strengthened during the euro crisis. Whether or not the growing politicization of EU affairs in the various national public spheres increases the sense of community among Europeans crucially depends on issue framing". Along the same lines, see Grande and Kriesi (2014) and Hooghe and Marks (2009).

policy integration (Papadia and Cadamuro, 2020). The empirical measures in this paper support the hypothesis of a remaining democratic deficit, notwithstanding the growing interest on the part of European citizens in the European Union.

The policy implications from the empirical analysis in this paper are as obvious as they are difficult to follow up concretely. Since it is hard to identify a majority in the EU population in favour of rolling back European integration, the disconnect between EU integration and the level of interest of European citizens in the EU should be addressed by increasing the latter instead of reducing the former. This should be done while recognising that greater interest does not necessarily mean greater support. Criticism of the EU is a source of more interest, in the same way that more support is. Everything that increases the interest of European citizens in the EU, independently of whether it has a critical or a supportive character, will serve to move the EU closer to its citizens.

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