

The Referenda on the European Constitution: A Crucial Moment for the Development of a European Public Sphere?

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The starting point of this project was the question if the possibility of political participation enhances the development of a European Public Sphere. When we developed this project idea in fall 2004 we expected a series of referenda to take place in different European Member States - and, similarly to most theorists and political practitioners of European integration, we expected them to go off without much of a hitch - maybe with the exception of the referendum in the UK that, at this time, was expected to take place in early 2006.

The negative outcomes of the referenda in France and the Netherlands radically changed the subject of our empirical analysis. First, it led to the cancellation of all referenda, except, obviously, the French one, in the countries of our case study. Second, it triggered - at least for some months - a much more heated debate on the European Constitution and the European Union than could have been expected beforehand.

It was our aim to scrutinize in how far a “democratisation from above” would influence the European Public sphere. More precisely, we planned to analyze the reaction of media to the possibility for citizens to have their say in the future development of European integration - a possibility that was conceded to them by some of their governments. Furthermore, we aimed at comparing public debates in countries where a referendum took place and countries where the citizens were not asked for their judgment. Little surprisingly, the quantitative analysis shows that in France, where a referendum took place, media coverage was by far larger than in all other countries. More interestingly, the main hypothesis of our project was also confirmed by the quantitative comparison of articles in those countries that intended to carry out a referendum (e.g. Portugal) and those that never had this plan (e.g. Austria).

For an analysis carried out from our theoretical point of view, it was, however, of much higher impact that political developments in France in fact dislocated hegemonic discourse on European integration. Obviously, this is not only due to the fact that a referendum took place in France, but, more importantly, to the emergence of a fierce opposition against the European Constitution and, more generally, against the continuation of European integration in its hitherto path.

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Our concept of a European Public Sphere derives from a normative view of the public sphere in general understanding: agonistic debate as the political core of democracy, identities as brought about by political debates, responsiveness of the political system as enabled by agonistic debate.

The precondition of these three functions of a public sphere is the existence of discourses on political matters, i.e. in our case on EU politics. Our study has, therefore, focussed on the discursive quality of debates on the EU. Can we find (temporarily) closed discourses with relatively stable chains of equivalences bound together by a nodal point, are these chains of equivalences weak and frequently changing or can we only identify discursivity without fixations? We looked for these discursive qualities first within one medium, then within one country and only in the third step in an transnational view. Thus, our first concern has not been for transnational similarities but for the existence of any discourses on European matters. Agonistic debates are, in our point of view, the most important feature of a European Public Sphere irrespectively of the question if they take place only within one medium, within one Member State or across the European Union. Similarly, European identities can be developed by agonistic debates on the European Union and different European identities do not have to be compatible with each other. We do not understand a political identity as a value by itself but as a precondition of democracy as only by identifying with a polity people are prepared to accept decisions that go against their interest. Thus, it seems perfectly unproblematic if we can find in the EU different French, British, Austrian etc. political identities or, even, if identifications with the EU differ within one Member State. However, in order to allow for responsiveness of the political system, i.e. to enable politicians to act accordingly to the wishes of the citizens, transnational discourses are necessary. Out of these theoretical considerations we have developed a three-step-model of analysis, searching first for European discourses in one medium, then in one country, and, finally, transnationally.

General Results

Little surprisingly, we have mainly found national debates on the European Constitution, i.e. subjects and concerns of the debates varied greatly according to national emphases. However, when the French debate became more intense, the issues brought about by the French referendum spread over the EU. Thus, due to political developments, we did not deal with questions brought about by national referenda on the Constitution but with a transnational debate on issues figuring prominent in the French debate.

Although the context of discussion is an important point for the interpretation of the subject, its mere articulation is even more important. If issues are not articulated at all they cannot become common concerns altogether. From this perspective the rejection of the Constitution and its intense discussion in France and the Netherlands have been crucial for the development of a European Public Sphere. This impulse triggered by the referenda becomes obvious in the analysis of the monthly frequency of published articles. In all media the coverage exploded in May and June 2005. There are strong parallels in the amount of published articles and consequently the intensity of discussion, above all their concentration on June 2004 and May/June 2005. These concordances in coverage can be interpreted as a

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common sphere of action. If we would re-separate the notion of the public in the parts of public (= political) acting and public debate of political acting, we could argue: the sphere of political acting is already coordinated in many respects, also in its perception, but the sphere of textual interpretation is not. To put it different: the usage of same signifiers provokes an increase of debating, but the characteristic and structure of these debates differ widely.

One of these differences can be found between broadsheet and tabloid coverage in all countries. Not only are there more articles addressing the topic of the Constitution in the broadsheets, but also themes and positions are more differentiated and complex in broadsheets than in tabloids. Although this is not surprising, it is interesting that the main issues often diverge within the same nation state.

Our analysis of alternative media was aimed at including voices outside of the mainstream as, normatively, we see a plural European Public Sphere as desirable. From this normative point of view, the results of this part of the study were disappointing as (1) coverage of European issues in alternative media were so scarce that they cannot be identified as critical discourses on these matters, and, (2) the arguments brought up in alternative media were not reflected in mainstream media. Thus, the possibility of these small counter-publics to become influential beyond their rather small own readership seems limited at best.

The analysis of speakers showed that across all media the political elite on EU level ranges after elites on national level and even in other Member States.

Relevant Issues

We identified four relevant issues for all countries. The most frequent ones focus on the QUALITY OF DEBATE and the gap between CITIZENS and ELITES. The debate on SOCIAL ISSUES was very strong in France but in none of the other countries. Discussions focussing on the relation between Member States and the EU (NATIONAL VS EU) were intensely debated in Ireland, Poland, and Portugal. British media differed from this overall pattern in that media coverage of all these issues was relatively weak there whilst the French debate is concentrated extremely on the two focal points SOCIAL ISSUES and QUALITY OF DEBATE.

Assessments of the QUALITY OF DEBATE occurred frequently in all countries of our study, however the structures of these debates differed widely. We can, therefore, state that the quality of debates formed nodal points of discourses in single media or countries. However, due to the differing discursive structures in which this position appeared, it was not able to structure a transnational discourse. Obviously this issue is that prominent, because media often see themselves as speaking tubes of public opinion.

Two nodal points - ELITE VS.CITIZENS and SOCIAL ISSUES - seem of crucial relevance for the future development of a European Public Sphere. The gap between elites and citizens is a re-evolving subject of European integration and the issue figures prominently in all media of our analysis - including the alternative ones, frequently combined with national concerns, such as the question of national referenda. With the highly interesting exception of Poland (where positive evaluations of the elite/citizen-gap could be found) the elite/citizens gap was everywhere evaluated negatively.

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The French debate and its spill-over to other Member States led to a relatively stable new combination of the elite/citizens gap with social issues. Oppositional forces in France used the referendum to emphasize the general feeling of under-representation of citizens in the EU and matched it with the debate on social issues. Also, the question of immigration/enlargement came up within this context. Prior to the referenda, the social issue was missing in the debates on the Constitution - in terms of our theory the social issue was an element. Then it entered the discourse at a certain point, dislocating the tacit agreement on the positive impact of the European Union. Thus, at least, we can identify discursive formations in the sense that national debates (in national fora) have taken advantage of elements produced by EU politics in order to structure these new discursive elements around national nodal points.

However, social concerns only played an "authentic" role for national debates in France. There, this issue formed, in fact an interesting nodal point as moments related to it contradicted each other with regard to the assessment of the Constitution - would it lead to a more or less social EU? While the elite/citizen gap played an important role in all countries of our analysis, it was frequently combined with national questions, e.g. national referenda. Media coverage on social issues rather represents a "spill-over" from the French debates than genuinely national positions. This result is of interest with regard to official political reactions to the French "No" putting the social question in the centre of their considerations on a closer relationship to the citizens. From our results, the conclusion is probable that, in fact, this interpretation is problematic if not contrafactual with regard to overall European interests that are much more related to national concerns than to a general preoccupation with social developments (In this vein, Portuguese media e.g. focussed on the problems of their national referendum while the main question for Polish coverage were the weighting of votes and the lacking reference to God/Christianity in the preamble. Irish media, on the other hand, focussed for quite some time on the success of its presidency) We can conclude, if there is a national concern, it becomes the most important issue in coverage, if not, references to other Member States range on top. The variety of national interests forms a problem for the responsiveness of the European political system becomes obvious.

The NATIONAL VS. EU debate is not interpreted in similar ways. Not surprisingly, the discursivation of national competencies and sovereignty differs from Member State to Member State. The different demands of nations contrasting the ones of the European Union do not only emerge on the political stage, but also in media discourse. These are not always explicitly articulated requests via-à-vis the EU. Rather the subtle structuration of classical stereotypes of an elite-citizen-gap and national-vs.-EU battle reflect these political differences also on a social level (i.e. discursivation of social imaginaries, social values etc.). Sweden can be named as a specific example here frequently pointing out the higher democratic quality of the own nation state compared to the EU level. Quite contrarily, Portuguese debates often concede that European institutions are superior to their own ones but still hold on to national sovereignty and identity. Irish press coverage, to name a third example, has for quite some time focussed on the success of the Irish presidency in reaching an agreement of EU governments on the Constitution. Not surprisingly, the national-vs.-EU debate dominated in the UK.

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The rejection of the Constitution in France and the Netherlands brought about a broad debate on the consequences of this development. The content analysis and also the analysis of metaphors showed a certain convergence in the judgements of this new situation; adversaries as well as supporters of the Constitution used similar images for descriptions and focused in their arguments on similar questions. These debates found a nodal point in their assessment of the "Noes" as vital and led to an agonistic debate on its concrete impact - the final demise of the Constitution, the possibility to implement it after all or, even, the chance to get a better Constitution. While the convergence of these debates can be interpreted as a transnational discourse, it seems probable that this discourse will prove limited in time and impact as it merely consists of a form of description of political developments and does not lead to propositions for the continuation (or end) of European integration.

To sum up, we have found several discursive formations: (1) the elite-citizens gap being reactivated and combined with national concerns (e.g. the call for a national referendum in Austria and Sweden) and (2) the assessment of quality of debate linking to French discussions on the referendum and dealing as a primary function of media coverage.

Agonistic discourses could only be found - to a limited degree - in broadsheet media. Yellow press and alternative media mainly reproduce one-sided hegemonic positions. The only common issue we identified for mainstream and alternative media was the elite-citizens gap. The feeling of being underrepresented seems to be a general phenomenon of representative democracies and not a genuine European one.

Final Remark

Neither before nor after the referenda real EU discourses can be found and for that reason the possibility of a collective identification and legitimisation is missing. What has changed by the referenda is the openness of the structure. The latter got dislocated by the collision of traditional dissatisfactions (i.e. elite-citizen-gap, social concerns) and thus opened up possibilities for new hegemonic articulations. To put it in another way: Precisely the lack of agonistic discourse on European integration enabled alternative discourses. This result goes along with our theoretically derived assumption that it is the contestation of European politics and not the call for its overall acceptance that can lead to a European Public Sphere.

But, at least, there seems to be the possibility to fill this rift in the structure (the discursivation of the EU as such) with new social imaginaries. In the interest of the emergence of a European Public Sphere, it is to be hoped that this possibility will not be abandoned after the referenda (although the fact that media coverage declined rapidly as early as in summer 2005 points exactly towards such a development). The debates around the French and Dutch referenda showed the possibility of a European public sphere going beyond national concerns, a public sphere based upon the potentiality of public discursivation, because of its dynamisation by unsatisfied citizens. It is this kind of a European Public Sphere that could open up for the European Union the possibilities of the democratic horizon aimed at by the theory of radical democracy.