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RSCAS 2014/107
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
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ISSN 1028-3625

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Printed in Italy, October 2014
European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy
www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/
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Abstract

The last European elections of 2014 were characterized by a concrete effort to increase public participation to the European political debate. However the overall electoral turnout remained disappointingly low. In this paper I deal with the problem of the formation of a European electorate and argue that a better representation on the European integration dimension should substantially contribute to the formation of a transnational electorate. Often, there is the fear that European political conflict framed on this dimension would lead to a radical bipolar conflict between pro- and anti-EU parties. In this paper I show that, if citizens' preferences are properly represented, this does not have to be the case. What I show is that citizens' preferences on European integration are distributed in three roughly equivalent blocs: pro-EU, anti-EU and a neutral position. The point I make is that a proper representation of the neutral position should ensure that the conflict does not become too radical, as the parties representing the neutral position would be the necessary coalition partners of both pro- and anti-EU parties. An important shortcoming of the current European parliament, I argue, is that the neutral position on European integration is not represented and that consequently there is a disproportionate high presence of pro-EU parties. This misrepresentation in the long run may increase the public appeal of Euro-sceptic parties. The data on which my argument is based are from the 2014 Eurobarometer survey.

Keywords

EU; Democratic Deficit; European Integration; Representation; European Parliament; Euroscepticism; European electorate

Introduction

For the first time in the history of the European Union, at the European elections of 2014 voters had a chance to directly express their preference for the presidency of the Commission. During the campaign, in fact, the main party-families of the European Parliament (EP) indicated before-hand who their preferred candidate was, with the concrete expectation that the Council would take the results of the elections into account when bringing its proposal for the presidency of the Commission. This novelty created high hopes for breaking the trend of low electoral turnout that has always characterized European elections (Hix 2013). However, the 2014 elections registered the lowest turnout ever in the history of European elections (*Euractiv* 2014a). This scarce public participation represents an open wound for the aspirations of democratizing policy-making within the EU, as it indicates that a truly European electorate has not yet been formed. The question then is if such an electorate can ever be formed. In this paper I answer this question positively, arguing however that the requirement is that parties at the European level compete on the dimension of European integration. My argument is both prescriptive and causal. With the prescriptive side of my argument I introduce the idea that the process of European integration creates new conflicts that need political representation and that these conflicts are shared by all the different national electorates. With the causal side of my argument, I report Eurobarometer (2014) data that show that citizens' preferences regarding European integration are similarly distributed all over Europe. With this data I explore how a European party-system shaped around the European integration dimension could develop.

The main point I make with my causal argument is in many ways a response to the fear openly expressed by the European political elite that political confrontation on European integration would lead to a radical bipolar conflict between pro- and anti-Euro parties, and thus inevitably to a referendum on the Euro (*The Independent* 2013; *The Telegraph* 2010). Contrary to this fear, with the Eurobarometer data I show that on the European integration dimension the main electoral power is in the middle and not on the extremes. Consequently, given that the EP has a proportional electoral system (Lijphart 1999), my expectation is that on this dimension a multiparty system would form in which parties with the most moderate views would constitute the main electoral force. These parties would then also be in a position to play a *pivot* role, as they could alternatively decide to ally with the parties favoring more integration or with the more Euro-sceptic parties. Following this logic, the political confrontation on European integration should lead to a moderate and not to a radical political confrontation. The doom scenario feared by the European political elite, instead, could eventually take place as a consequence of the disproportionate presence of pro-EU parties in the current EP. The pro-European parties in fact occupy around 70% of the total seats, whereas the pro-EU citizens, as the Eurobarometer (2014) data show, amount to roughly 30%. In the final section of the paper I therefore unite the implications of both sides of my argument and argue that the misrepresentation of citizens' preferences in the current EP may gradually increase the public appeal of the claims of Euro-sceptic parties, who will most probably be isolated in the parliament (*BBC News* 2014*)*. Consequently, if at the next election voters are faced with the choice between pro- and anti-EU parties, the vote-share of the latter might dangerously increase. At that point, the doom scenario feared by the European political elite might indeed take place.

Before developing my argument, in section 1 I first sketch the debate regarding the democratic deficit in the EU and indicate where my argument stands in this debate. Departing from this discussion, in section 2 I develop the prescriptive side of my argument. The core of the paper is section 3, in which the Eurobarometer data are reported. In the final section, I look at the implications of both sides of my argument for the current EP. I conclude by reflecting on what kind of empirical validation my argument still needs.

1. The democratic deficit problem in the EU

The claims about a lack of democratic legitimacy in EU policy-making and the need to reduce this deficit are not uncontested. The advocates of these claims (for example Follesdal & Hix 2006; Scharpf 2012; Streeck & Schmitter 1991) indicate a number of factors causing there to be a democratic deficit. One of these factors is that the main European institutions are 'too distant' (Hix & Hoyland 2011: 132) from European citizens: the Commission for example is in many ways something in-between a government and a bureaucracy that is appointed according to (for the citizens) obscure procedures. Another factor is that the policy process tends to be highly technocratic and therefore does not really lend itself for clear political preferences. Consequently, the elections for the European parliament tend to be fought on national rather than European issues, and therefore cannot be considered really 'European' elections (Reif & Schmitt 1997). Moreover, as national ministers are, next to the Commission, the main decision-makers in EU politics, the power of national parliaments *vis a vis* their executives has decreased (Hix & Hoyland 2011: 132). The advocates of the democratic deficit argument therefore argue that all these factors together result in the adoption of policies that are not supported by a majority of European citizens (Hix & Hoyland 2011: 133).

The main arguments against the claims about a democratic deficit have been raised by Majone (2002) and Moravcsik (2008). Majone (2002) argues that policy-making at the European level does not need political representation in the traditional sense: the EU produces mainly regulatory policies that aim at correcting market failures and therefore, in order to be efficient and effective, the policy-process needs to be technical rather than political. While Majone's (2002) argument practically circumvents the issue by claiming that there is no need for democratic legitimation of European policies, Moravcsik (2008) argues that the EU does have democratic legitimacy because on the one hand national governments are directly accountable to their citizens and on the other there has been a significant increase of powers of the European Parliament. Moreover, the system of checks-and-balances that characterizes the policy-making process of the EU ensures that policies are agreed on the basis of a large consensus.

The developments after the out-break of the Euro-zone crisis, however, with the increased pressure of European institutions on national governments to implement austerity measures, raise a number of problems about the points made by Majone (2002) and Moravcsik (2008). First of all, as the austerity measures promoted by the European Council and Commission have considerable consequences on the different national welfare states, it becomes very difficult to hold that EU politics is merely about regulatory policies. Secondly, even though it is true that national governments are directly accountable to their citizens, it is also true that there is an increased tendency of national politicians to defend their policies as being the result of European agreements on which they had very little influence (Alonso 2014). Thirdly, while it is true that the European Parliament has increased its powers considerably, to the extent that it is now a co-decision-maker on the EU budget (Hix 2013), it must also be remembered that the European elections are not fought on European issues and therefore the EP does not represent citizens' preferences in this regard. As a consequence of all this, it is questionable whether the consensus on the basis of which policies are agreed at the European level is representative of the preferences of a majority of European citizens.

This debate about the democratic deficit can be synthesized through Scharpf's (2012) distinction between input- and output-legitimacy, where input-legitimacy refers to the extent to which an executive is representative of a majority of the population and output legitimacy refers to the extent to which an executive serves the common good. The advocates of the democratic deficit argument point mainly to a lack of input-legitimacy: as there is no European electorate, the executive of the EU cannot be representative of a European majority. The defenders of the legitimacy of the EU, on the other hand, emphasize aspects of output-legitimacy: as the EU is mainly concerned with correcting market failures, its policies are aimed at the common good and therefore the policy process should remain technocratic rather than become political. Scharpf's (2012) argument is that, while the EU always lacked input-legitimacy, before the financial crisis of 2008 it did have a certain extent of output-

legitimacy, as there was a general consensus that EU policies aimed at correcting market failures and therefore aimed at the common good. Since the crisis, however, and mainly with the growing dissatisfaction with the austerity measures, the EU seems to be losing also a large part of its output-legitimacy (Scharpf 2012).

The solution that Scharpf (2012: 30) proposes to this situation is to 'stop defending the Euro' and to go back to pre-1999 European Monetary System. However, as Scharpf (2012) also recognizes, EU policy-makers have ruled out this option. The alternative solution, according to Scharpf, would be to decrease the demand for legitimacy by decreasing the political salience of EU policies. In my view, however, the need for input-legitimacy at the European level is not only a matter *per se*, but it is functional to the further output-legitimation of EU policies: there is a need to define a European common good and the parameters within which a European executive should work to achieve that. European elections should therefore become an arena for confrontation between different views on European integration. If the EP elections are fought on European issues, there can potentially be a democratic input about the direction Europe should go. More specifically, if European integration constitutes the main dimension of representation in the EP, then the question about whether to move towards a European super-state or reduce the EU to some form of cooperation among member-states can be decided upon through the traditional democratic game of party-competition and elections. In the following sections I explore the pre-conditions and possibilities for this transformation of European political competition.

2. Towards a new dimension of conflict

The EU as we know it today is the result of 'a process of voluntary integration among the nation states of Europe' (Hix & Hoyland 2011: 1). This process is characterized by the lowering of internal borders and the creation of new external border outside the EU (Bartolini 1998: 48). Consequently, this process simultaneously creates new 'requests of exit'and 'new requests of closure' (Bartolini 1998: 48). In other words, European integration is a process that creates new winners and losers and therefore can be considered as a new source of conflict. The conflict I am referring to is the same conflict as the one identified by Kriesi *et al* (2008; 2012) between the 'winners' and 'losers of globalization': in both cases the conflict originates from the opening up of national borders, which gives rise to new opportunities and new threats. The 'winners' are of course those individuals capable of taking advantage of the new opportunities, whereas the losers are those individuals who fear their life chances will no longer be protected with the opening up of national boundaries (Kriesi *et al* 2008: 4-5). Even though this new conflict has given rise to new political forces, mostly on the populist right, political conflict in European countries is nevertheless still mainly framed along the traditional economic left-right divide (Kriesi et al 2008; 2012).

As European elections tend to be mainly fought on national political issues (Reif & Schmitt 1997), the two biggest party-families in the EP are the center-right European People's Party (EPP) and the centre-left alliance of Socialists & Democrats (S&D). These two party-groups include almost all mainstream parties from the different European countries. Their standpoints are reported in the table below.

Table 1 – S&D and EPP standpoints

Socialists & Democrats	**European People's Party**
• ***Principles***: freedom, equality, solidarity, diversity and fairness • ***Commitments***: social justice, jobs and growth, consumer rights, sustainable development, financial market reform and human rights • ***Priorities***: fight unemployment, ensure that societies and markets become fairer, give people back trust in the EU	• ***Principles***: more competitive and democratic Europe • ***Commitments:*** social market economy, good economic governance, competitiveness, sound financial regulation, consumer protection, solidarity, growth and jobs, sustainable development • ***Priorities***: support the Eastern and Southern Neighborhood, improve regulation of the financial system, protect consumers
Source: http://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/mission-vision-values	Source: http://www.eppgroup.eu/

Both party-groups express their commitment to the social market economy and their respective views differ only on the modalities through which the market economy should be developed: the S&D group puts slightly more emphasis on social justice and the EPP on economic competitiveness. The issue of European integration, thus the lowering of national borders, however, remains out of the competition. The issue, in fact, does not constitute any source of conflict between the two party-groups, as mainstream parties across Europe, especially at the elite level, are generally strongly pro-European integration (Hix & Hoyland 2011: 138; Crum 2007). As these parties tend to win around 80% of votes in national elections, mainly by competing on the left-right dimension, in the EP there is a strong presence of pro-European political parties. The pro-European citizens, on the other hand, as I'll show in section 3, amount to roughly 30% of the electorate. Consequently, this mismatch between parties and the electorate may lead to situations like in 2005, when the EU Constitutional Treaty of 2005 was supported by almost all European mainstream parties (Crum 2007), but voted down by voters in referenda in France and the Netherlands. This incident, in my view, is a significant example of how the misrepresentation of the electorate on the dimension of European integration may undermine the democratic legitimacy of the institutional architecture of the EU.

Representation on the European integration dimension in the EP, moreover, would be complementary to the representation on the economic left-right dimension in the national parliaments. The new emerging conflict between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization has, overall, only partly been integrated in the national party-systems (Kriesi *et al* 2008; 2012). The demands of the 'losers' have been mainly captured by parties at the extremes of the political landscape who tend to express these demands mainly in cultural terms. Thus, while these demands are essentially about material interests, such us maintaining job securities, they tend to be expressed by the parties in cultural terms, such as the need to defend the national culture. The national political arenas, thus, seem to not have yet fully succeeded in integrating this dimension of conflict and, in my view, the European arena would be much more appropriate for representing the conflict: while at the national level parties compete on the extent to which the state should intervene in the economy (left-right divide), it would make sense that at the European level parties compete on the extent to which states should lower their borders. This would create a double sphere of representation in which the European sphere exploits a transnational political conflict and the national sphere would continue to function along the left-right divide. The representation of the left-right divide at the European level is, in fact, in some way at the

heart of the difficulties for the formation of the European electorate: as every member state has a different economy and a different political system, there can be no clear transnational demands regarding the relationship between the government and the economy. What is shared by the different national electorates, instead, is the process of European integration. In the next section I show how, according to data on citizens' views on the issue, this dimension does indeed offer the prospects for the formation of a transnational European electorate.

3. A party system around the dimension of European integration

As the EU is the result of the integration process (Hix & Hoyland 2011: 1), I consider the image that people have of the EU as the expression of the extent to which they favor more or less European integration. The Eurobarometer surveys present the question whether the EU 'does conjure up to a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?' (*Eurobarometer* 2014: 6). In table 2 (below), I report the time-trends of the responses. The 'very' and 'fairly positive/negative' responses are clustered into one group.

Table 2: Citizens' views on EU: time trend

	Average 2006-2009 period	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**
Positive	47,33%	42,00%	40,00%	31,00%	30,00%	35,00%
Neutral	34,55%	37,00%	38,00%	39,00%	39,00%	38,00%
Negative	15,66%	19,00%	20,00%	28,00%	29,00%	25,00%

Source: Eurobarometer spring 2014

Compared to the 2006-2009 period, in the last five years the number of citizens with a positive image of the EU has considerably decreased, while the number of people with a negative image has increased, with the result that the two groups are slowly becoming equivalent in size. This trend seems to have slightly reversed in the last year, but on average, compared to the pre-crisis period, the number of people with a positive view has decreased by roughly 10%, while people with a negative view have increased by 10%. The group of citizens expressing a neutral view, instead, has remained relatively constant, increasing over the last eight years from around 35% to 38%. Since 2012, thus, the preferences on European integration seem to be distributed in three roughly equivalent blocs.

The data on people's opinion on the European Monetary Union (EMU) feature a strikingly parallel trend. The data are reported in Table 3 (below). Important to note is that the 'neutral' answer was not available to respondents. The available answers were 'in favor', 'against' or 'no opinion' (*Eurobarometer* 2014: 19).

Table 3: Citizens' opinion on EMU

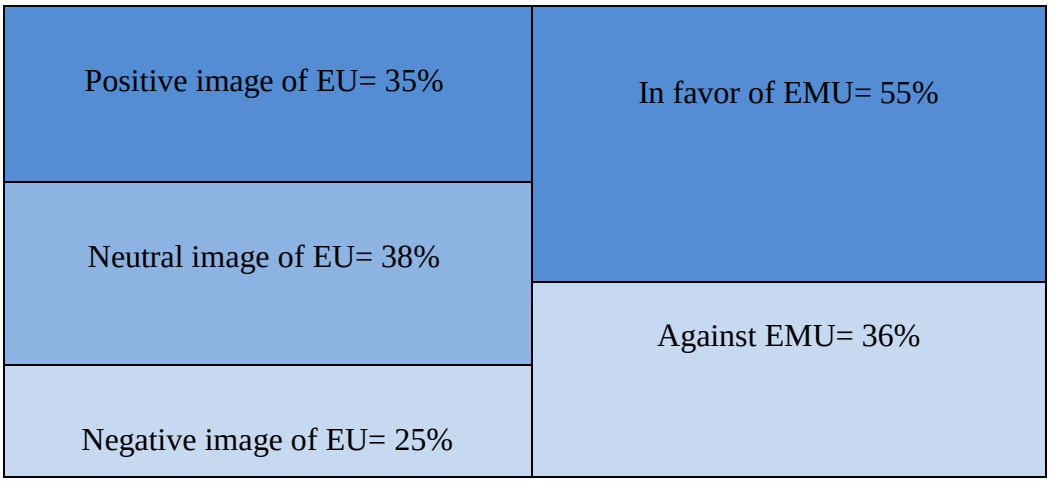
	Average 2006-2009 period	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**
In favor	60,62%	56,00%	56,00%	52,00%	51,00%	55,00%
Against	32,50%	37,00%	37,00%	40,00%	42,00%	36,00%

Source: Eurobarometer spring 2014

Similarly as with people's image of the EU, also with regards to the EMU there is a simultaneous decrease of views in favor and an increase of the views against. Moreover, the data in Table 3 suggest that with the absence of a 'neutral' option, the preferences tend to be split in two blocs, one in favor

and one against. If we put the figures of 2014 from the two tables next to each other, the following picture emerges:

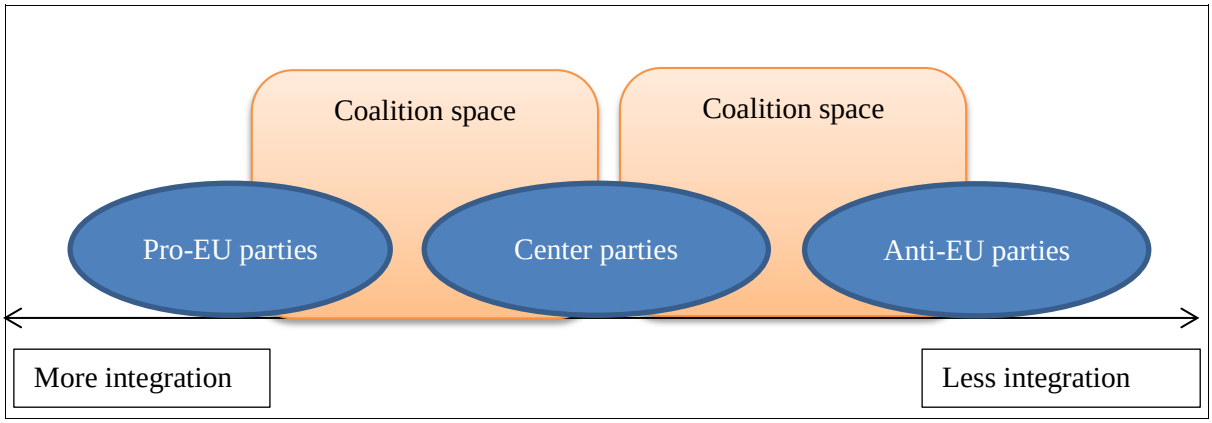
Figure 1: Citizens' views on EU and EMU



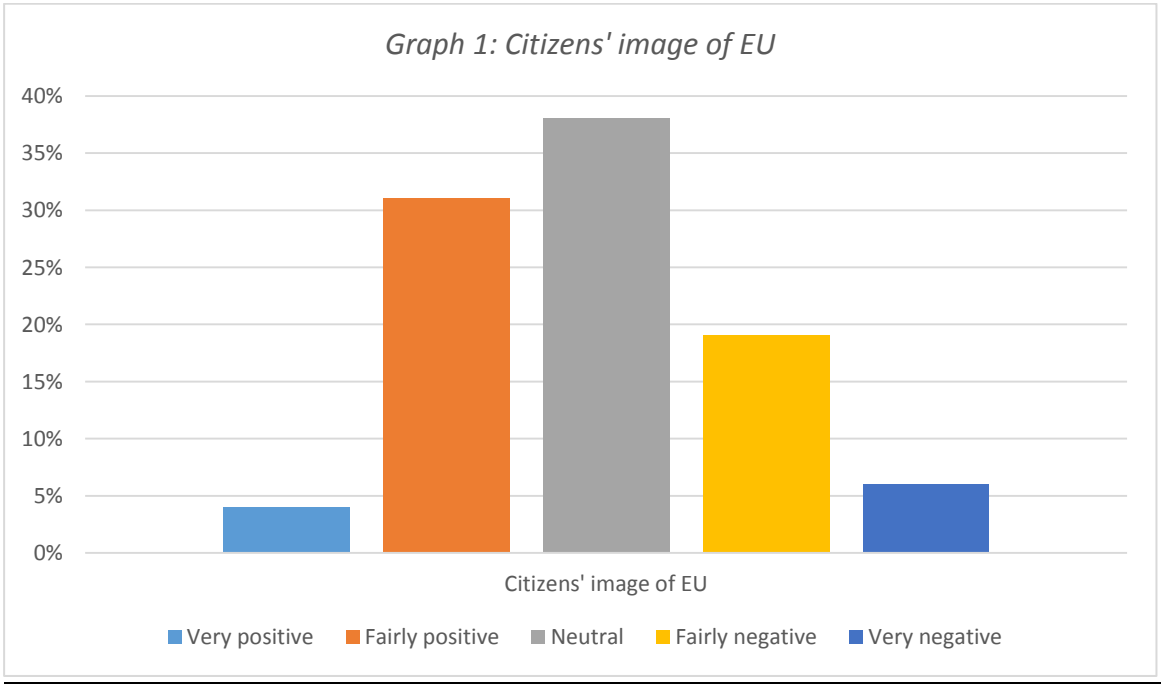
Assuming that citizens with a positive image of the EU in general are in favor of EMU and that citizens with a negative image are against, from the picture sketched in Figure 1 it can be deduced that a party system shaped around the dimension of European integration could develop in two ways. Following the theory of issue voting by Rabinowitz & MacDonald (1989), parties could polarize the competition by giving a clear direction to their position: for example, the confrontation on European integration could be framed simply in terms of being for or against EMU. This is what tends to happen when mainstream political parties are confronted by Euro-sceptic parties, and is also the doom scenario feared by the European political elite. Following this logic, a bipolar party-system would form where the voter can choose between a much deeper integration and the break-up of the Eurozone.

On the other hand, following Down's (1957) economic theory of political action, parties could compete in order to win the preference of the voters placed in the center of the dimension of conflict. Following this logic, parties would be incentivized to moderate their positions towards the center in order to win more votes. Moreover, on the basis of the evidence regarding the relationship between electoral systems and party-systems (Lijphart 1999), the proportional electoral system of the EU should guarantee the formation of a multiparty system. Consequently, being at the center of the dimension of conflict is not only functional for winning votes, but brings also substantial strategic advantages. Parties in the center, in fact, would be in a position to play a *pivot* role, as they could alternatively decide whether to ally with the pro- or anti-EU sides. Figure 2 (below) sketches this scenario.

Figure 2: A three-polar party-system



The pro-EU, center and anti-EU parties would respectively represent the positive, neutral and negative images held by the citizens on the EU. The coalition spaces represent the theoretical spaces on the European integration dimension where alliances for legislative action could form. The idea is that coalitions can only be formed in the central parts of the dimension and not at the extremes. This idea derives from theories on coalition formation (Gamson 1961; Laver 1997), according to which coalitions are formed on the basis of ideological proximity and the need to form a majority. Given the distribution of preferences, thus, the center parties are the necessary coalition partners for both sides of the conflict, as for both pro-EU and anti-EU parties they are the ideologically closest and the necessary allies to form a majority. The center parties, consequently, can decide to alternate coalition formation with one side or the other, following their own strategic preferences. This alternation of coalitions will ensure two things. First that, contrary to the fears expressed by the European political elite (*The Independent* 2013; *The Telegraph* 2010), the legislative action deriving from representation on European integration would result in moderate and not radical decisions. Second, that these legislative actions would be highly representative of citizens' preferences on European integration. If we look more in detail at the responses given regarding the image of the EU, in fact, the following distribution emerges:



This distribution approximates a normal distribution, showing that also the 'negative' and 'positive' views tend to be moderate rather than extreme. Therefore, the sum of the two coalition spaces theorized in figure 2 would match the preferences on European integration of around 85% of European citizens. Moreover, the distribution of preferences on this dimension remains strikingly similar at the different national levels. In table 4 (below) I report the numbers from a sample of European countries.

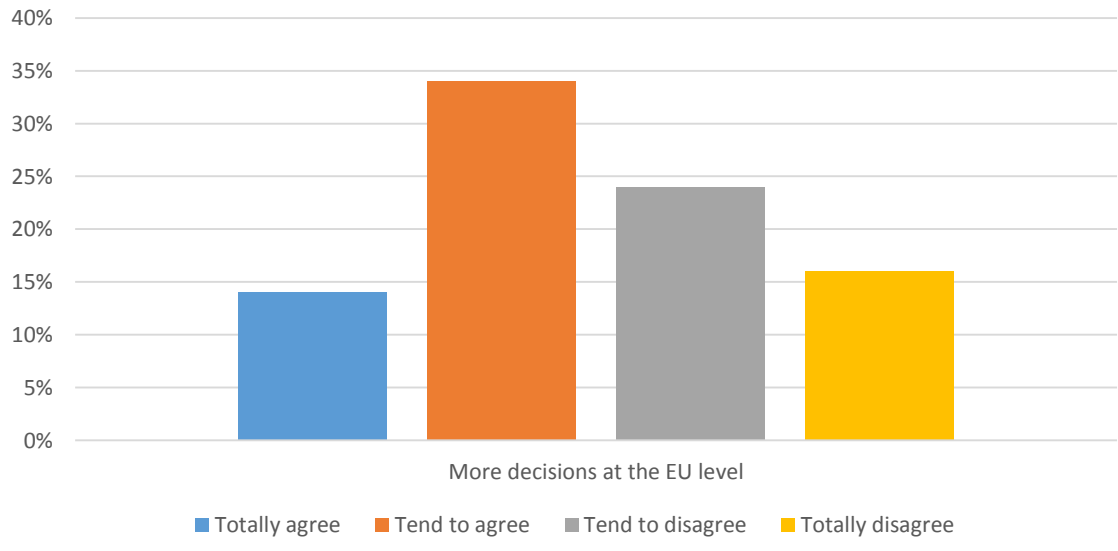
Table 4: Citizens' image of the EU in different countries

	Very positive	Fairly positive	Neutral	Fairly negative	Very negative
France	5%	33%	34%	20%	7%
Germany	4%	32%	43%	17%	3%
Italy	2%	28%	38%	22%	7%
Netherlands	3%	32%	40%	22%	3%
Finland	2%	32%	44%	18%	3%
Hungary	2%	31%	45%	16%	5%
Spain	2%	23%	43%	23%	6%
United Kingdom	3%	20%	36%	24%	12%
Greece	2%	20%	34%	25%	19%
Croatia	7%	34%	39%	13%	7%

Source: Eurobarometer 2014, Appendix

The data show that in countries as diverse as Germany and Greece, or Croatia and the Netherlands, citizens' image of the EU tends to be neutral. This similarity across countries confirms that this dimension of conflict does indeed constitute a political space on the basis of which a transnational European electorate could form. The data reported in tables 2 and 4 in fact shows that the citizens holding a 'neutral' view on European integration constitute a stable electoral group both across time and across countries. The electoral strength of the center on this dimension is shown also by the distribution of answers to other related questions on European integration. The graph below shows the distribution of preferences on whether more decisions should be taken at the EU level. The option 'neutral' was not available to respondents. Despite that, the majority of the preferences are still grouped around the center.

Graph 2: Citizens' opinion on having more decisions made at EU level



Again, the data show that the majority of European citizens have a moderate rather than an extreme view on the extent to which decisions should be more or less taken at the EU level. Around 60% of the respondents, in fact, preferred to answer 'tend to' rather than 'totally (dis)agree'.

Besides reaffirming the stability and the strength of the electoral group placed on the center, however, graph 2 also shows that, with the absence of the 'neutral' option, the electorate may be split in a pro- and anti-EU front. This means that the threat of a bipolar political conflict on European integration would always be latent. This scenario must be avoided through the identification and representation of the demands of the 'neutral' citizens by political parties. This requires an exploration of this electoral group. While it is relatively intuitive that the pro- and anti-EU citizens roughly respectively coincide with the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization, the identification of the 'neutral' group needs deeper empirical investigation. On an intuitive basis, two things can be expected from this group. The first thing is that the citizens in this group would, overall, be neither the 'winners' nor the 'losers' of globalization: I expect these to be individuals that are either scarcely affected by the process of the lowering of national boundaries, or individuals that deal with both the advantages and the disadvantages of this process. The second thing is that this group would be suspicious of further European integration but at the same time it does not want to destroy the European project. The more specific demands, and how these could be translated into policy-programs, however, need to be further explored. What can be deducted from the existing data, is that this electoral group exists transnationally and that it has the potential to constitute the basis for solid electoral and political power. Also, the representation of this electoral group, next to being fundamental for avoiding the doom scenario feared by the European political elite, would substantially improve the representation of citizens' preferences on European integration in the EP. Therefore, in my view, it would be a huge step in reducing the democratic deficit in the EU. In the current EP, however, I argue in the next section, this group does not seem to be represented and this shortcoming, I argue, may have dangerous consequences for the next elections of 2019.

4. The dimension of European integration in the current European Parliament

To say that European integration did not play a role in the campaigns for the 2014 Elections would be false. The campaign, in fact, saw the participation of Euro-sceptic parties who, all together, won around 24% of the total seats (Emmannouilidis & Stratulat 2014). The citizens with a negative view about the EU, thus, do indeed have their fair share of political representation in the current EP. The Euro-sceptic parties, however, are not a united front and in the run-up to the elections they failed or refused to bring forward a preferred candidate for the presidency of the Commission. Consequently, they did not participate in the presidential debates that were broadcasted live on television all over Europe. The race for the presidency of the Commission became thus mainly a competition between the traditional big party-families of the EP, with the main competitors being the EPP, S&D, the Alliance of European Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) and the Greens. The debates, however, did not succeed in increasing public participation and, moreover, in many ways they were characterized by a lack of political conflict (*The Guardian* 2014; *Euractiv* 2014b). This lack of political conflict is, in my view, attributable to lack of conflict on European integration.

The lack of deep political conflict between the main party families has not only been relatively evident during the presidential debates, but is generally also observable in their voting behavior in the EP (Hix 2013). The EPP and S&D have repeatedly proven to be very united on issues in which division would require a divergent view on European integration. In the 2009-2013 Parliament, in fact, the EPP-S&D coalition, alternatively joined by ALDE and the Greens, has been strongly united in five policy areas: Budget, Constitutional Affairs, Legal Affairs, Fisheries and Agriculture (Hix: 2013: 5; 7; 9). Position on these policy areas is very much dependent on the position on European integration, as policies in these areas generally have strong implications for the power-balances between the EU and the member-states. Moreover, these are also areas in which the EU has produced policies that are not supported by a majority of citizens in most member states (Hix & Hoyland 2011: 133). The left-right

divide that characterizes the political competition between the party-families, instead, resulted in divisions on other types of issues such as maternity leave or the phasing out of nuclear energy (Hix 2013: 6-7). On the other hand, however, this divide did not prevent these parties (with the exception of ALDE) to vote together on an issue such as the introduction the European Financial Transaction Tax (Hix 2013: 8). Given that taxation is generally at the heart of the conflict between left- and right-wing parties, this particular case can be seen as an example of how the unity of these party families on European integration may even let them overcome their left-right divisions.

Given that EPP, S&D, ALDE and the Greens jointly occupy around 70% of the total seats, a strong unity between them on a certain dimension deserves special attention. While among European citizens the preferences on European integration are grouped around the most moderate positions, in the current EP preferences are disproportionally distributed at the extremes: 70% pro-EU and 25% anti-EU. This means that in the current EP the 'neutral' view, which is representative of the preferences of almost 40% of European citizens, is not represented. Instead, in the current EP there is a bipolar conflict on European integration in which the anti-EU side is likely to become an irrelevant minority (*BBC News* 2014). On the dimension of European integration, there is thus an evident over-representation of pro-EU parties. If this disproportionate representation results in legislative action that excessively pushes towards more European integration, then the claims of the Euro-sceptic front may gain in public appeal and maybe even in democratic legitimacy. If 70% of the EP remains strongly pro-European, thus, the consequence may be that the vote share of anti-EU parties will significantly increase at the next elections. In order to avoid this, a consistent group of the pro-EU parties would have to moderate their views towards a more 'neutral' position during the course of this legislature. This strategy, moreover, as I have shown in section 3, can potentially bring electoral gains for these parties at the next elections, as the big majority of European citizens appear to have a moderate position on European integration.

This argument about pro-EU parties having to moderate their positions on European integration, however, is based on a presumption and a claim that need further empirical investigation. The presumption is that public participation at European elections would substantially increase if European integration would become the main dimension of conflict. The claim is that across Europe there is a stable electoral group having a neutral position on European integration. In the case of the presumption, it needs to be assessed the extent to which voters regard European integration an issue that has a fundamental impact on their lives. This can to a certain extent be explored with data on the saliency that people give to issues related to European integration. A problem that would remain, however, is to know whether citizens are aware of the impact that decisions on these issue have on their lives. The claim about the stable 'neutral' electoral group, on the other hand, does have some stronger empirical foundations, as in section 3 I have shown that the size of this group remains stable both across time and across countries. However, the characteristics of the individuals composing this group remain almost totally unknown. As representation of this group is fundamental for the functioning of the multiparty system I theorized in this paper, it is extremely important to gather information about these individuals. If the presumption is empirically validated and the characteristics and demands of the 'neutral' electoral group are identified, then the arguments of this paper may be interesting for scholars dealing with the trans-nationalization of the European electoral landscape (for example Bright *et al* 2014), as well for parties wishing to adapt their strategies for the European elections of 2019.

Conclusion

The presidential debates held before the European elections of 2014 were a concrete effort to reduce the democratic deficit within the EU. However, they did not succeed in substantially reversing the trend of low electoral turnout. In this paper I have introduced and developed the idea about tackling this problem with a political confrontation on European integration. The idea is that, as this dimension of conflict is shared by all national political arenas, it can constitute the basis for the formation of a

transnational European electorate. On the basis of Eurobarometer (2014) data on public opinion, I have shown that if citizens' preferences on this dimension are properly represented, then the confrontation on this dimension should take a moderate rather than a radical form. Therefore, a partisan competition framed on the basis of preferences on this dimension, besides stimulating the formation of a truly European electorate, should also allow for the continuation of a process of moderate European integration. With a little more empirical validation, the arguments of this paper may become relevant for scholars dealing with the democratic deficit within the EU as well as for parties competing at the European elections of 2019.

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