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How the eurobarometer blurs the Line between research and propaganda

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MPIfG Discussion Paper 15/6

**How the Eurobarometer Blurs the Line
between Research and Propaganda**

Martin Höpner and Bojan Jurczyk



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Abstract

This paper reviews Eurobarometer surveys from 1995 to 2010 and shows how Eurobarometer selects and frames questions in ways that systematically produce “integrationist” outcomes. The violations of the rules of good public opinion research concern incomprehensible, hypothetical, and knowledge-inadequate questions, unbalanced response options, insinuation and leading questions, context effects, and the strategic removal of questions that led to critical responses in previous Eurobarometer waves. It is highly unlikely that the violations happen unintentionally. Eurobarometer therefore blurs the line between research and propaganda.

Zusammenfassung

Dieses Paper unterzieht die zwischen 1995 und 2010 durchgeführten Eurobarometer-Umfragen einer kritischen Überprüfung und weist nach, wie Fragen so ausgewählt und formuliert werden, dass sie zu „integrationistischen“ Ergebnissen führen. Die Verletzungen der Regeln guter Umfrageforschung betreffen die Nutzung von überkomplizierten, hypothetischen und wissensinadäquaten Fragen, die Vorgabe einseitig gepolter Antwortkategorien, Suggestivfragen, Kontexteffekte sowie die strategische Entfernung von Fragen, die in früheren Befragungswellen zu unerwünschten Ergebnissen führten. Es ist sehr unwahrscheinlich, dass diese Regelverletzungen unintendiert geschehen. Das Eurobarometer verwischt daher die Grenze zwischen Forschung und Propaganda.

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How the Eurobarometer Blurs the Line between Research and Propaganda

1 Introduction

This Discussion Paper is a revised, shortened and updated version of an article that we published in 2012 in the German social science journal *Leviathan*. In this article, we showed how the Eurobarometer selects and frames questions in ways that systematically produce “integrationist” outcomes (Höpner/Jurczyk 2012). Due to the reactions we have received since publication, we decided to make our findings accessible for English readers as well.

Eurobarometer

The Eurobarometer is a series of surveys conducted twice yearly since 1973 across all the member countries of the EEC/EC/EU (hereafter referred to as “the EU”).¹ One strength of the Eurobarometer is that, in addition to the questions specific to each survey, several standard questions recur over long periods of time. The datasets obtained from the surveys therefore allow both country-by-country and period-by-period comparisons. The Standard Eurobarometer is supplemented by ad hoc surveys on specific topics (the so-called Special Eurobarometers and the Flash Eurobarometers).

The key Eurobarometer questions address citizens’ attitudes toward European institutions, European policies, and the integration process in general. The Eurobarometer also compiles opinion data on, among other things, social conditions within member states and on policy areas such as foreign, economic, security, and cultural policies. The data are collected using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). Approximately 1,000 persons aged 15 years or older are interviewed in each member country, the exact number varying according to the size of the country in question: for example, in Germany approximately 1,500 persons are interviewed, while in Luxemburg, Cyprus, and Malta this figure is around 500.

We would like to thank Reinhard Blomert, Aleksandra Maatsch, and Armin Schäfer for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.

1 See Reif (1991) and Schmitt (2003) for general introductions to the Eurobarometer surveys.

The initiator of the Eurobarometer is the European Commission, which implies partial congruence of the object and subject of research. The Commission may therefore be encouraged to blur the line between survey-taking and PR. This paper shows evidence that this is the case.

Reactions to our original article

The starting point for public attention to our initial article (Höpner/Jurczyk 2012) was a report in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in which the author (Kühn 2012) correctly summarized our findings and concluded: “One can only hope that it [the Commission] does not only believe in the stats that, in the Churchillian sense,² it has doctored. The fall of the GDR shows where such self-deception can lead.”^{3,4} After the newspaper report had appeared, our paper became the subject of an inquiry in the German parliament. Bundestag member Andrej Hunko asked the government whether it shared the impression that the Commission uses the Eurobarometer for the purpose of strategic manipulation, and whether the government was willing to intervene (question 34 in Bundestagsdrucksache 17/11282).⁵ The response by minister of state Cornelia Piper, provided on 7 November 2012 was, however, short and negative: “The federal government does not hold the view that the Commission orders manipulated polls. The federal government therefore sees no reason for deliberation with the Commission” (Plenarprotokoll 17/203, Anlage 21).⁶

We suspect that both the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* report and the inquiry in the Bundestag, perhaps the former more than the latter, stimulated a response by the Commission. In issue 3/2012 of *Leviathan*, Karl-Alois Bläser of DG COMM answered our critique. The response does not deny that our article showed evidence of violations of

2 Churchill is said to be the creator of the bon mot “I only believe in statistics that I doctored myself”

3 “Man kann nur hoffen, dass sie [die Kommission] nicht nur im churchillschen Sinne gefälschten Statistiken glaubt. Wohin solch ein Selbstbetrug führen kann, konnte am Untergang der DDR beobachtet werden.” (This and all following translations of German citations in this paper are the authors.)

4 Our findings were also reported in *The Telegraph* (Swann 2012) and in a number of internet blogs.

5 The German wording of the inquiry was: “Teilt die Bundesregierung das aus Sicht des Fragestellers eher wissenschaftlich begründete Urteil einer strategischen Manipulation der Eurobarometer-Umfrage durch die Europäische Kommission ..., und inwiefern wird die Bundesregierung gegenüber der Kommission zu dieser Strategie Stellung nehmen, die nach Ansicht des Fragestellers eine Scheinlegitimation der EU darstellt und angesichts der öffentlichen Interpretation durch die Kommission ... eher als Propaganda gesehen werden kann?”

6 “Die Bundesregierung ist nicht der Ansicht, dass die Europäische Kommission manipulierte Umfragen in Auftrag gibt. Die Bundesregierung sieht daher keinen Anlass, dieses Thema mit der EU-Kommission aufzunehmen.”

good scientific practice. However, the author argues that “given the enormous number of Eurobarometer polls, the examples are far from sufficient to raise suspicions of systematic manipulation and to conclude that the public’s willingness to accept integration is being portrayed as more extensive than it actually is” (Bläser 2013: 354).⁷ We will come back to this line of defense in the conclusion. Bläser also raises doubts with respect to the intentions of the Eurobarometer critics: “It is ... unfortunate that parts of the German academic and political debate frame their obvious aversion to the European integration process as a criticism of the survey instrument” (ibid.: 354f.).⁸

Structure of this paper

In the original article, we added a theoretical twist to our empirical observation. In short, we started from a supranationalist rather than intergovernmentalist perspective and argued that the Commission is driving the integration process further than the European member states would agree to if the setting was purely intergovernmentalist. This, we argued, widens the gap between legitimation requirements and legitimation supply. Given the lack of available instruments that could increase the democratic legitimation of the Commission’s integration policies – that is, legitimation on the input side – it would be attractive to the Commission to at least be able to claim that its integration policies are in keeping with the integration preferences of the European public (legitimation on the output side). While we still think that this interpretation makes sense, we have to admit that this claim is not empirically testable, at least not with the material we present.⁹

7 “Bei der enormen Fülle durchgeführter Eurobarometer-Befragungen reichen diese Beispiele jedoch bei weitem nicht aus, dem Eurobarometer-Team einen systematischen Manipulationsverdacht zu unterstellen und daraus abzuleiten, der Integrationswille der Bürgerinnen und Bürger werde positiver dargestellt, als er wirklich ist.”

8 “Es ist daher bedauerlich, wenn in Teilen der deutschen wissenschaftlichen und politischen Diskussion eine offenkundige Aversion gegen den europäischen Integrationsprozess in einer Kritik am Befragungsinstrument des Eurobarometers abgearbeitet wird.” But note that Bläser does not direct this accusation at us, but rather at Hans Herbert von Armin, Max Haller, and Markus Pausch.

9 Interestingly, Bläser’s view of the achievements of the Eurobarometer is pretty much in line with our reasoning: “The Eurobarometer cannot negate the accusation of a democratic deficit and a lack of democratic legitimation of European policies, but its findings show at least indirectly whether it satisfies the political will of the people” (Bläser 2013: 352). Original German wording: “Der Vorwurf eines demokratischen Defizits sowie einer mangelnden demokratischen Legitimation europäischer Politik kann zwar durch die Eurobarometer-Befragungen nicht aufgehoben werden, aber durch die Ergebnisse zeigt sich doch indirekt an, ob sie den politischen Bürgerwillen erfüllt.”

Therefore, in this paper, we concentrate on our empirical point and proceed as follows. Section 2 briefly describes previous research on the Eurobarometer (some of it published after our original article) and states where our contribution fits in. Section 3 introduces ten rules of good opinion polling. In Section 4, we show examples of the structuring and formulation of questions and response options that fail to meet the rules of thumb introduced in Section 3 in a way that makes “integrationist” responses more likely. In the concluding Section 5, we state whether Bläser’s response (see section 1) is able to absolve the Eurobarometer of the suspicion of blurring the line between scientific research and integrationist political propaganda.

2 Previous research

The Eurobarometer is not only a valuable data source, but also the subject of ongoing research. One strand of the literature traces the public relations efforts of the Commission (see Brüggemann 2008 as an introduction) and identifies the Eurobarometer as a decisive instrument for this purpose.¹⁰ For example, Kruke (2011: 70) analyses the early phase of the Eurobarometer in the 1970s and argues that the intention was from the beginning to use polls for the purpose of justifying integration. Similarly, Aldrin (2010: 217–218) distinguishes three aims of the Eurobarometer: the symbolic creation of a “European” public opinion, justification of ongoing supranationalization, and legitimization of the Commission’s increased communication efforts vis-à-vis both the member states and the European Parliament.

Another strand questions the data quality and scholarly usability of Eurobarometer data. Two lines of this strand can be distinguished. The first line warns against unintended methodological pitfalls. Nissen (2014), for example, points out that the Eurobarometer does not survey the same people in each poll wave. It therefore does not meet the prerequisites for panels, although its data are often interpreted as panel data. Karmasin and Pitters (2008) emphasize the different sampling methods applied in different member states. Both Pausch (2008) and Nissen argue that translation problems and changes in the wordings of questions make the comparability of the data across time and space problematic, and Karmasin and Pitters as well as Pausch point out that different national cultural biases and meaning contexts make the comparability problem even worse. Common to these critiques is that they open our eyes to the methodological limits with which users of Eurobarometer data have to deal, without raising the suspicion of intentional steering of results.

10 On the Commission’s Communication and public relations activities in general, see Gramberger (1997).

The second line of the “critical” literature strand deals with intentional manipulation and, as a consequence, integrationist propaganda. The Eurobarometer, the authors argue, not only aims at polling the preferences of the European peoples, but also manipulates the instrument in a way that makes maximally integration-friendly outcomes likely. The “mother” of this line of critique is the “grand dame” of German poll research, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1993), who criticized the Eurobarometer for its “sunshine questions,” with which she meant “question formulations that make only the positive but not the negative side of public opinion’s reaction visible” (ibid.: 27).¹¹

The manipulation, according to the authors, takes several forms. One form is to confront respondents with questions to which pre-existing opinions hardly exist (Pausch 2008; Aldrin 2011). Another form is the strategic selection of questions. Haverland et al. (2015) analyze the topic selections for Special Eurobarometers and show strikingly how topics are being left out when integration-critical results can be expected. When questions concern the economy, for example, they often deal with European consumer protection. Redistributive concerns are rarely addressed in the questionnaires, and so far not a single Special Eurobarometer has dealt with immigration issues and border controls (ibid.: 18–23). Signorelli (2012: 64–70) documents how questions disappear from the questionnaire when they fail to deliver integrationist results, which even happened to the famous “is the EU membership of your country a good thing?” question in the Eurobarometer 73 survey (a survey conducted after the 1995–2010 period that is the subject of this paper). Yet another form is the strategic formulation of questions that steers respondents in a desired direction (Aldrin 2010: 219), a problem to which we will pay particular attention. Generally, all critics we could identify agree that the Eurobarometer “constructs” a European public opinion that hardly exists empirically.¹²

As we see, the accusation of strategic manipulation is not new but the object of an ongoing debate. This paper aims at providing new evidence. As far as we can see, it is by now the most comprehensive collection of evidence of the Eurobarometer’s manipulative tendencies.

11 Original German wording: “Sonnenscheinfragen,” also “Frageformulierungen, die nur die positive, nicht die negative Seite der Reaktion der öffentlichen Meinung erkennen lassen.”

12 See also von Arnim (2006) and Haller (2009) whose analyses do not just concern the Eurobarometer but who do incorporate critical views on it into their wider discussions of European integration.

3 Ten rules of good public opinion research

In the following sections, we examine whether the Commission uses its monopoly on questioning and assessment to steer Eurobarometer results in a desired direction. In doing so, we focus on the formulation and structuring of questions and optional responses. In some cases, we also pay attention to the way the respective results are presented in the Commission's Eurobarometer reports. The empirical basis for our study are the 93 Standard Eurobarometer questionnaires that were used between 1995 and 2010 (in one case, we will also discuss a question that appeared in a Flash Eurobarometer). Specifically, we are concerned with Surveys 43.0 to 73.4.

Violations of good scholarly practice can take various forms. Variations in the structure of questionnaires or in the formulation of questions and optional responses, barely perceptible to a lay person, can trigger distortion. In a number of methodology books,¹³ the rules of good opinion poll research have been summarized in terms of “ten commandments,” “guidelines” or “rules of thumb” to which we refer in the following sections.

According to these ten rules, survey questions:

1. must be simple and understandable;
2. must be non-hypothetical;
3. must require only knowledge that respondents actually have;
4. must avoid double stimuli;
5. must avoid unclear terminology;
6. must avoid inexact time references;
7. with multiple items must have both negative and positive response options;
8. must avoid insinuation and leading questions;
9. must have response options that are balanced, logically complete, and free of overlap;
10. must avoid contextual effects.

These rules have to be understood as an ideal towards which good public opinion research should strive but which nevertheless will never be fully achieved. Two advantages are gained by applying these ten rules as benchmarks here. First, they are common sense and understandable even to those not regularly involved in public opinion research. Second, since the ten rules are widely accepted as part of the basics of public opinion research, they are certainly familiar to Eurobarometer officials. Single violations will always occur, even in the best opinion polls, but if some of these rules are being obviously and grossly violated, we can assume that this does not happen unintentionally. We will come back to this in the conclusion.

13 See Babbie (2007: Ch. 9); Bryman (2004: Ch. 7); Ellard/Rogers (1993); Iarossi (2006: Ch. 6); Payne (1951).

Section 4 reports on our results. To aid understanding of our data, the questions are shown in tables.¹⁴ For each question, the top line indicates the survey in which the respective question first appeared and – in cases where a question was used more than once – in which it last appeared. The subsequent lines contain the question as it was worded along with possible responses. If we refer to specific Eurobarometer polls, we quote them by referring to the number of the respective wave of the poll (for example, EB 69.2), while the Commission’s written interpretations of results are referenced in the bibliography (for example, EB 1997).

4 Violation of rules

Incomprehensibility, hypothetical questions, and questions that do not match the respondent’s knowledge

The first three rules are closely related and therefore grouped together in this subsection. Similar to rules 4–6, they require questioners to avoid biases which might occur by systematically overtaxing the respondent. According to rules 1–3, questions should be comprehensible, no more complex than necessary, non-hypothetical, and appropriate to the respondents’ level of knowledge. With this combination in mind, we examine the question in Table 1, which has also been discussed by von Arnim (2006: 101).

Table 1 Survey 60.1 (2003); last survey 62.0 (2004)

(Q29) What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it.

- A European Monetary Union with one single currency, the Euro
- One common foreign policy among the member states of the European Union, towards other countries
- (... 5 other items ...)
- The fact that the European Commission is composed of commissioners coming from each of the member states

(for) (against) (don’t know)

The eastward enlargement of the EU in 2005 and 2007 was preceded by a debate on the required adjustments in the structuring of the European bodies, including that of the Commission. Up until that point, the larger member states had appointed two commissioners each and the smaller states just one. The Commission now favored a model in which each country would send only one commissioner.

¹⁴ Discrepancies in spelling and style stem from the original sources (use of capitalization as well as punctuation marks at the end of questions vary between the individual tables).

The question in Table 1 refers to the composition of the Commission and appears at the end of a list of eight “key themes,” none of which is explained in detail. Public opinion research often deals with opinions and attitudes that concern complex problems. But the implications of a monetary union or a common foreign policy – that is, *policy*-level issues – are easier to grasp than the composition of the Commission, which might be termed a *polity*-level issue.¹⁵ That every member state is considered equally for Commission membership sounds fair and just and can be quickly understood. However, critics pointed to the potential risks of a bloated Commission and of a gradual inter-governmentalization of supranational agencies. Such implications are not quick and easy to understand and therefore require additional information. Given such asymmetry, it is unsurprising that the proposal received an approval rating of over 70 percent,¹⁶ which enabled the Commission to claim: “Citizens want one Commissioner by Member State” (EB 2004: 159). Any kind of meaningful interpretation of this question is, however, doubtful.

We will turn now to the question in Table 2.

Table 2 Flash 211 (2007)

(Q4) According to your opinion, should Europe set up its own navigation system, or should Europe rely on American, Russian or Chinese systems.

- The EU should set up its independent system
 - There is no need for an independent system
 - Don’t know
-

(Q5) Have you already heard about the European Galileo project?

- Yes/No
-

(Q6) Galileo is the name of the positioning system that the European Union has started to develop seven years ago. Currently, it seems that in order to complete the Galileo system additional public funding is necessary (about 2.4 billion euros, which is the cost of about 400 km motorway). What do you prefer:

- The EU should secure the necessary funds in order to complete Galileo as soon as possible
 - The EU should not secure extra funds, even if it means that the project will be significantly delayed, or even that it fails
 - Don’t know
-

This set of questions was taken from a telephone survey conducted in 2007 (a Flash Eurobarometer) concerning the controversial “Galileo” European satellite navigation system, a system which the Commission supported. The leading nature of the explanation of costs in Q6 is clearly evident. Our interest here, however, concerns violation of rule number 3 and the interpretation of the respective result. The filter question Q5 is correctly positioned ahead of Q6. Approximately 80 percent of respondents to Q4

15 Similarly, Schmitt (2003: 248) criticizes overly-challenging questions that address *policy means* rather than *policy ends*.

16 Throughout this paper, we report the results for the EU as a whole. Where this is not the case, we indicate accordingly (see page 14).

selected the first option; 64 percent of respondents to Q6 indicated that they wanted public funds to be used for the project. On the basis of this result, the Commission emphasized in its press release that an “overwhelming majority” of Europeans were in favor of Europe establishing its own navigation system (EB 2007). Problematic here is that 60 percent of the respondents to Q5 stated that they had never heard of the “Galileo” project. Nevertheless, their answers were counted in Q4 und Q6. Intentional violation of rule 3 is evident here because filter question Q5 indicates that the Eurobarometer officials were aware of the lack of knowledge among respondents.

In our view, sham requests for non-existent knowledge occur repeatedly in Standard Eurobarometer questions. One example is the frequently posed question about respondents’ trust in EU institutions.¹⁷ Perhaps widespread knowledge can be assumed among respondents on the structure and responsibilities of the Council, the European Parliament, and the Commission (though we have serious doubts with regard to the Commission). However, questions on trust also include the European Court of Auditors, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the European Ombudsman. Respondents regularly answer “no” when asked whether they have ever heard of or read about such institutions, but are nevertheless required to state whether they “tend to trust” or “tend not to trust” them (most recently in EB 73). Why would respondents, having no knowledge of the responsibilities and activities of the Court of Auditors, “not trust” it? The responses to such questions are then merged into obviously meaningless success claims, as in: “The high level of trust in Finland in the Ombudsman is also striking” (EB 2010a: 182).

Rule 2 refers to problems associated with hypothetical questions. Such questions require respondents to imagine and then evaluate non-existent situations. Hypothetical questions should be posed only for the simplest possible situations. An example of this is the Eurobarometer’s often asked question on how respondents expect their lives to be in one year’s time. This forecast is hypothetical but nevertheless realistic enough for respondents to cope with. Questions on how European economic policy programs will develop ten years down the line (Table 3) represent, by contrast, complex hypothetical situations.

Table 3 73.4 (2010)

(QC2) Thinking about each of the following objectives to be reached by 2020 in the European Union, would you say that it is too ambitious, about right or too modest?

- The share of funds invested in research and development should reach 3 percent of the wealth produced in the EU each year
 - To reduce EU greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20 percent by 2020 compared to 1990
 - To increase the share of renewable energy in the EU by 20 percent by 2020
 - Young people leaving school before getting a diploma should not be higher than 10 percent of pupils
- (too ambitious) (about right) (too modest) (don’t know)

17 Haller (2009: 359) also refers to this fact.

The period of ten years and the complexity of detail portray an abstract rather than a realistic situation. Hypothetical items such as “To reduce EU greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20 percent by 2020 compared to 1990” overburden the cognitive abilities of respondents. Who can evaluate whether such goals are “too ambitious,” “about right,” or “too modest”? There is a high risk here that respondents will tend to give socially desirable answers rather than actual estimates. In fact, the survey results showed that two-thirds of respondents judged the goals to be reasonable. Interestingly, even the Eurobarometer Unit remarked that “this result must probably be analyzed more as the expression of an expectation ... than as reasoned opinions on each of the targets” (EB 2010b: 187). But despite this acknowledgement of the question’s failings, it was still used in the Commission’s subsequent reporting: “The specific targets set by the European Commission to shape the Europe 2020 Strategy and to measure its results seem reasonable to European citizens” (EB 2011: 17).

Double stimuli, unclear terminology, and inexact time references

Rules 4, 5, and 6 are also intended to avoid imposing excessive demands on respondents. Questions should avoid double stimuli – that is, more than one issue per question. Terms must be clear to the respondents and inexact references to time such as “a long way off” or “in the near future” should be avoided. We identified a number of cases of doubt, but no flagrant violations of these rules to steer responses in a desired direction. In this respect, we conclude that the Eurobarometer surveys are “clean.”

Negative and positive response options

Respondents have a tendency to answer many questions with “I agree” or “yes,” regardless of the question’s content, a problem referred to as “acquiescence” (Iarossi 2006: 44–45). Therefore, by using only positively or negatively formulated choices, a survey can steer results in a desired direction. To obtain accurate information on the degree of acquiescence, statements should be balanced, as rule 7 states. For example, a statement such as “body X needs to have more competencies” should be supplemented by an inversely oriented statement such as “the powers of body X should be limited”.

Questions requiring “tend to agree” or “tend to disagree” responses appear frequently in Eurobarometer surveys. Close examination, however, reveals that the choices provided on EU topics sometimes veer persistently in a positive direction. Let us look at the example in Table 4.

Table 4 69.2 (2008)

(QA15a) Please tell me for each statement, whether you tend to agree or tend to disagree.

- I feel I am safer because (OUR COUNTRY) is a member of the EU
- I feel we are more stable economically because (OUR COUNTRY) is a member of the EU
- I feel we are more stable economically because (OUR COUNTRY) is a member of the euro area
- My voice counts in the European Union
- My voice counts in (OUR COUNTRY)
- On European issues, my voice is listened to by my government
- On European issues, my voice is listened to by the Members of the European Parliament
- On European issues, my voice is listened to by the European Commission
- I understand how the European Union works
- (OUR COUNTRY)'s voice counts in the EU
- The interests of (OUR COUNTRY) are well taken into account in the EU
- The European Union imposes its views on (OUR COUNTRY)

(tend to agree) (tend to disagree) (don't know)

This question block has been used regularly since the Eurobarometer survey of autumn 2001, occasionally including new statements, occasionally omitting older statements. Nearly all the statements veer in a “Europe-friendly” direction. Note in particular that items such as “[our country’s] voice counts in the EU” and “the interests of [our country] are well taken into account in the EU” are logically close-by, a situation in which inverse orientation of one of the statements would be clearly appropriate. Such a negatively poled statement was provided for the first time in spring 2008 in the form of “the European Union imposes its views on [our country]” (see the last bullet point in Table 4). It immediately received the highest level of agreement and was removed just two surveys later. Interestingly, a statement about the Commission taking citizens’ opinions into account was added at the same time. Despite being positively poled, it received only 25 percent of respondent agreement and was also subsequently omitted.¹⁸ It is clearly evident here that the Commission is targeting “integrationist” results while suppressing “Eurosceptical” ones.

On the issue of EU enlargement, we have found further evidence of intentional steering of responses. Since 1997, respondents have regularly been asked to agree or disagree with statements along the lines of “The more countries there are in the EU, the more ...”. As early as Survey 48.0 (Q37), rule 7 was being faithfully upheld, with respondents being asked negatively-oriented statements as well, such as “the more unemployment there will be in ...”. However, this approach was suspended in 2001 just as the Commission was carrying out a special survey dealing with the EU’s eastward enlargement. Positively oriented statements were now in the majority and statements that had previously been

18 The item “The European Union imposes its views on [our country]” was included in survey waves 69.2 and 70.1; it immediately received the highest agreement of any statement, at 60 percent. However, the item was omitted when the question block was next used in survey wave 71.3 (QA12a). The items “On European issues, my voice is listened to by the European Commission” and “On European issues, my voice is listened to by the Members of the European Parliament” received only 25 percent and 22 percent agreement, respectively, and have not been included in surveys since.

negative now appeared in inverse formulations. Respondents were now being asked to rate statements such as “Enlargement will help to create more jobs.”¹⁹ Although the results obtained here certainly remained unsatisfactory from the Commission’s viewpoint, the Commission could henceforth avoid negative messages such as “Fifty percent of Germans expect unemployment to increase.” Instead, the reported result was positive and one-sided: “20 percent [agree] that it would create more jobs” (EB 2001: 3).

Insinuation and leading questions

Insinuation and leading questions are a convenient method that enables interviewers to steer responses in a desired direction (Loftus 1975; Bryman 2004: 154–155). Such formulations prompt the respondent to provide the answer the interviewer and/or the respondent-peer group desires. To answer otherwise would disappoint the interviewer or imply a deviation from group norms. Rule 8 is therefore also aimed at avoiding the effect of “social desirability.” In this context, let us examine the question in Table 5.

Table 5 44.0 and 44.1 (1995)

(Q59) Some say the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, should become member states of the European Union. What is your opinion on this ? Should they become members ... (READ OUT – ONE ANSWER ONLY)

- ... in less than 5 years
 - ... in the next 5 to 10 years
 - ... in over 10 years
 - I don’t think these countries should become members of the European Union (**SPONTANEOUS**)
 - Don’t know
-

The question’s opening sentence is leading because it gives the issue a one-sided, positive connotation – in contrast to a sentence stating that, for example, some warn against too much EU expansion. As in other examples, we see that more than one of the rules are being violated simultaneously. Respondents are, in effect, being presented with a *fait accompli*, with a choice of only three different time schedules for eastward enlargement. Opposition to enlargement was registered only when respondents revealed it voluntarily and indeed a remarkable 50 percent did so (EB 1995); we can only speculate on the outcome had the respondents been presented with a methodologically clean question.

Table 6 presents a further example of the Eurobarometer’s use of leading questioning.

19 In Survey 55.0 (Q22), eight positively-oriented statements were juxtaposed to only two negative statements.

Table 6 59.1 (2003)

(Q21) I am going to read out a list of actions that the European Union could undertake. For each one, please tell me, if in your opinion, it should be a priority, or not?

- Successful enlargement of the European Union to include new member countries
- Getting closer to European citizens, for example by giving them more information about the European Union, its policies and its institutions and bodies
- Successfully implementing the single European currency, the euro
- (... 12 other Items ...)

(priority) (not a priority) (don't know)

Two of the response items are clearly formulated to lead responses in a particular direction – how can anyone oppose giving priority to “successful” actions? Interestingly, the leading nature of the statement on eastward enlargement seems to have been acknowledged by the Eurobarometer officials. In a subsequent survey (EB 60), it was replaced by a more neutrally formulated statement (“Welcoming new member countries”). As one might expect, its removal led to a change in the results. Now only 27 percent (in EB 60) rather than 33 percent (in EB 59) expressed the opinion that enlargement should be treated as a priority. Responses to the question of whether one is for or against enlargement remained constant in both surveys (46 percent for in EB 59, 47 percent for in EB 60), indicating that the above discrepancy of 6 percentage points was in fact attributable to the removal of the leading formulation rather than to a shift in opinion.

The Commission, however, made no reference to these circumstances²⁰ and simply emphasized that “[t]he level of support of European Union citizens for the principle of enlargement remains virtually identical”: “[A] relative majority in favour” (EB 2003: 75). Violation of the rules of good public opinion research are extensive here because the “natural experiment” of presenting the same question in two successive surveys, with and without the leading formulation, clearly demonstrates the effect of deliberate manipulation (“Successfully implementing”). Nevertheless, the leading formulation in the question on the euro (“Successfully implementing the single European currency, the euro” – see the third bullet point of Q21) remained unchanged from Survey 59.1 and was included in 21 subsequent surveys. We can surely rule out the possibility that the skewing effect of the word “successful” was acknowledged in the enlargement question but remained undetected in the euro question, appearing only two lines below it.

20 This is significant because the Commission’s reports usually point out changes in the formulation of questions.

Unbalanced response options

The ninth rule of good public opinion research requires that closed or partially closed questions should have balanced and logically complete response options that are free of overlap (Bryman 2004: 240). Witting or unwitting violations of this rule distort results.

A special problem is the lack of neutral response options (Iarossi 2006: 61). The mere lack of a neutral option does not necessarily indicate manipulative intentions. However, when combined with other manipulative elements, the omission of a neutral option can strengthen the steering effect. With this in mind, let us examine the question in Table 7, one of the most important standard questions in the Eurobarometer (a problem also discussed by von Arnim 2006: 100). Respondents are asked to evaluate the effects of EU membership on their own country.

Table 7 Lastly 73.4 (2010)

(QA10a) Taking everything into account, would you say that (OUR COUNTRY) has/would on balance benefited/benefit or not from being a member of the European Union?

- Benefited/would benefit
 - Not benefited/would not benefit
 - Don't know
-

The question is formulated unsatisfactorily. The possibility “benefited/would benefit” is explicitly mentioned, but not the logical counterpart (for example, “disadvantaged/would be disadvantaged”). In addition, a neutral response option is missing (for example, “both” or “neither/nor”). In Eurobarometer 66, conducted in 2006, 49 percent of German²¹ respondents chose “benefited/would benefit,” 41 percent “not benefited/would not benefit,” and 10 percent gave no answer.

It is now interesting to see how the results change when the question is formulated satisfactorily and given a neutral response option. In the same year – 2006 – the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* political polling group did this (see also von Arnim 2006: 100). The wording of the question was as follows: “All in all, EU membership mainly provides the German population with...,” and the response options were “advantages,” “disadvantages,” “both advantages and disadvantages,” and “don’t know.”²² Forty-six percent of respondents chose the neutral option; 22 percent saw more advantages; 29 percent saw more disadvantages; and 3 percent gave no response. Thus, a seemingly insignificant change in the formulation of the question significantly altered the overall picture. Re-

21 We refer here to the survey results for Germany to enable a comparison with the survey conducted by the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* described in the next paragraph.

22 The original German wording of the question was: “Die Mitgliedschaft in der EU bringt alles in allem gesehen der deutschen Bevölkerung eher ...” and the response options were “Vorteile,” “Nachteile,” “Vor- und Nachteile,” and “weiß nicht.”

ardless of how one interprets the results from the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* survey, it would have to be substantially different from that of the Commission: “A majority still believe that their country has benefited from EU membership” (EB 2006: 9).

We will now look at the problem of imbalances in response options. Table 8 contains one of the many examples of this problem. The question concerns the likely benefits of monetary union (which was still in development at the time) from the viewpoint of the respondents’ home country.

Table 8 50.1 (1998)

(Q58) Which of the following statements comes closest to your opinion? For (OUR COUNTRY), the European Monetary Union is ...

- useful and brings benefits
- necessary but doesn’t bring benefits
- is creating more problems than benefits
- don’t know

At first glance, the way the question is formulated and the available response options appear to be fair. However, closer examination reveals that this is not so: two of the three optional responses are geared toward support, while only one implies disapproval. The number and order of the options suggest the presence of a neutral option, which in fact does not exist. A respondent who selects the apparently neutral option signals approval of EMU (“is ... necessary”) rather than indifference.

Table 9 reveals a further example of an imbalance of response options. Respondents are presented with a long list of statements and asked to select the phrase(s) that best describe(s) what the EU means to them.

Table 9 47.2 (1997); in this version, lastly 55.1 (2001)

(Q9) Which of the following statements best describe(s) what the European Union means to you personally? (SHOW CARD – READ OUT – SEVERAL ANSWERS POSSIBLE)

- | | |
|---|-----|
| – A way to create a better future for young people | (+) |
| – A European government | |
| – The ability to go wherever I want in Europe | (+) |
| – Guaranteed lasting peace in Europe | (+) |
| – A means of improving the economic situation in Europe | (+) |
| – A way to create jobs | (+) |
| – A way to protect the rights of citizens | (+) |
| – A lot of bureaucracy, a waste of time and money | (–) |
| – Just a dream, a Utopian idea | |
| – The risk of losing our cultural diversity | (–) |
| – Others | |
| – Don’t know | |

Significantly, there is an imbalance of positive options. Six items have positive connotations, while only two are negative (compare the signs we have inserted on the right side of the box). The only way for respondents to express alternative opinions is directly to the interviewer. The predominance of positive answer options is amplified here by a glaring violation of rule number 7: all the items with EU-friendly connotations appear in the upper end of the list, while EU-critical items are listed at the bottom. The question's peculiar construction makes it difficult to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of its responses. The Commission's interpretation, however, is that "Overall the impression which emerges is a positive one" (EB 1997: 56).²³

Contextual effects

The results of a survey may also be distorted by problematic question order. This occurs when questions posed earlier in an interview "seep" into later questions – particularly in consecutive questions. This phenomenon, which has frequently been demonstrated, is referred to in public opinion research as a contextual, halo, positioning or order effect. Consider the following example (Strack et al. 1988): American students were asked to rate their level of satisfaction in dating situations as well as their general satisfaction in life. The results of the two questions proved to be only very slightly positively correlated. However, if the question about dating was positioned directly before the question on general life satisfaction, the correlation became stronger (ibid.: 435). Thus, the activation of the previously requested information "seeped" into the response to the following question. In order to minimize contextual effects, pretests are necessary to ensure that questions are presented in a neutral, non-manipulative order.

With this in mind, let us examine three questions (Table 10) that were part of a poll wave focusing on the future of the EU.

Q12 was a newly introduced question, positioned directly before two questions on attitudes towards EU performance. Q12 requires the interviewer to read out a list of EU accomplishments to respondents who are then asked to select the two best. Let us ignore the peculiar construction of Q12 which *presumes* the success of the EU actions and leaves no room for respondents who may not share the presumption.²⁴ Instead, let us direct our attention to a violation of the tenth rule: Q12 actively gives a positive stance toward European politics. Therefore, a contextual effect on Q13 and Q14 may occur. Such a potential source of error should have been rectified. Questions on the EU's

23 The question has since been reformulated: beginning with EB 57.1, there has no longer been an overbalance of positive answer options; and since EB 65.2, the interviewer has been instructed to "Rotate top to bottom/bottom to top."

24 Respondents can only reject these items as being the "most positive" or "second most positive" EU accomplishment by directly expressing this to the interviewer (that is, "spontaneous" responses). However, there is no option for respondents to rate the items as *unsuccessful*.

Table 10 65.1 (2006)

(QA12) Which of the following do you think is the most positive result of European unification? And the second most positive result?

- Peace among the Member States of the EU
 - The free movement of people, goods and services within the EU
 - The euro
 - Student exchange programmes such as ERASMUS
 - The Common agricultural policy
 - None (SPONTANEOUS)
 - Other (SPONTANEOUS)
 - Don't know
-

(QA13) Using a scale from 1 to 10, how would you judge the performance of the European Union in each of the following areas? "1" means that the European Union's performance in a specific area is "not at all satisfactory" and "10" means that its performance is "very satisfactory."

- The fight against unemployment
 - The protection of social rights
 - The protection of human rights
 - (... 7 other items ...)
 - The promotion of democracy and peace in the world
 - Cooperation in the field of research and innovation
 - Ensuring continuous energy provision
-

(QA14) At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in (OUR COUNTRY)? And in the European Union?

- Things are going in the right direction
 - Things are going in the wrong direction
 - Neither the one nor the other (SPONTANEOUS)
 - Don't know
-

accomplishments have now become part of the Standard Eurobarometer repertoire but the "success" question, Q12, has not appeared on the questionnaire since. It is therefore reasonable to ask whether Q12 was strategically positioned before Q13 and Q14 in the "future of Europe" survey in order to obtain a desired contextual effect.²⁵

5 Conclusion

Our review of Eurobarometers 43.0 through 73.4 has revealed significant methodological anomalies. So far, so good (or bad). But what do these findings prove?

25 In fact, the results changed significantly when the "success question" (in Table 10: QA12) was removed in the next survey from its position before QA14. In EB 65.1, 39 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that things were developing in the "right direction" in the EU, but only 33 percent did so in EB 66.1. The number of respondents who answered "wrong direction" rose inversely by exactly six percentage points (from 27 percent to 33 percent).

Our intention is neither to preach methodological purism nor to scandalize errors that can occur even in the best planned studies. Given the large quantity of questionnaires under review, one might argue (as Bläser 2013: 354 does, compare section 1) that the number of errors we detected is unsurprising, and that condensing these errors to just a few pages inevitably gives the impression of insufficient scientific diligence. But our point is not about diligence. As stated in Section 3, we believe that the ten basic rules we used as a benchmark describe an ideal towards which good public opinion research should strive but which nevertheless will never be fully achieved. What concerns us here is the fact that all the violations we found *systematically steer responses in a pro-European, integration-friendly direction*. In fact, we did not find a single example in which the violations steered responses inversely. While we still cannot rule out that these violations happened without strategic intention, it is fair to argue that this possibility is highly unlikely. Note that there is a less than 0.1 percent probability that just ten violations are “coincidentally” all steered in the same direction. This finding leaves the scientific integrity of the Eurobarometer surveys open to question.

The widening gap between the integration preferences of elites and citizens is a serious problem. But bridging the gap by means of survey manipulation is a strategy that must not be tolerated. Our aim is to heighten awareness among those who use the Eurobarometer for their integration research and also to signal to Eurobarometer officials that their strategic steering efforts do not go undetected. We strongly believe that the Eurobarometer could do better and that doing so, rather than blurring the line between research and propaganda, would be the best service to the European project.

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