Integrating Indifference

A Comparative, Qualitative and Quantitative Approach to the Legitimacy of European Integration

Virginie Van Ingelgom

Translated by Katharine Throssell
Arriving at this stage of writing acknowledgements for my first book – furthermore, in English – was not an inevitable outcome of my thesis nor an unconfessed wish when I began it in 2006. This book has taken longer to write than I had hoped, but now I understand how each day was important. So was each meeting and discussion. Although I have had many great moments during its development, I have faced rough times too. And in my way, I made it through. But this journey, both intellectual and personal, was only possible because of the help and the presence of important people – colleagues, friends and family (these categories being not exclusive to one other). During these years, I have amassed a great amount of personal and professional debts. I hope that finishing this book will now give me the time and energy to return the support of those who have supported me tirelessly – whatever their own projects may be.

My first thankful words go to my thesis co-supervisors Sophie Duchesne and André-Paul Frognier, without whom nothing would have been possible. It is no exaggeration to say that this book owes as much to their friendly collaboration as did their first chapter written together in Beliefs in Government. I know all I owe to Sophie and to her constant support and trust in me from the very beginning. She was there at each step of my intellectual and personal journey and I want to tell her – in writing – how grateful I am for what she did for me as a colleague (because she has always treated me as such) and as a friend, when offering levity or comfort over this long journey. I would also like to thank André-Paul for his always-wise advice. Thank you so much for trusting me even when I did not trust myself, and for offering me enough freedom to let my work evolve, methodologically and theoretically. His open mind was as precious as his broad knowledge and long experience. I only wish every doctoral student could receive from their supervisor half as much as I did from both of them.

I am also deeply indebted to my other colleagues from the Citizens Talking About Europe Project: Elizabeth Frazer, Florence Haegel and Guillaume Garcia. Our collective adventure was as essential to this book as it was to my personal journey and nascent career. The 24 focus groups conducted in Brussels, Paris and Oxford are only the visible part of what I owe them. The submerged part of the iceberg is enormous and comprises, among others, long hours of discussion, a number of papers given together, common publications, deep methodological reflections, friendly dinners and high tables in New College, and a beautiful first book, Overlooking Europe.

At an institutional level, my gratitude goes to the FRS – FNRS and the Institut de Sciences Politiques Louvain-Europe. They granted me the funding that made this research possible and offered me a comfortable three-year postdoctoral position that gave me time to digest and rewrite my doctoral thesis. Some other institutions have provided me with valuable resources and, more importantly, a great intellectual environment at different stages of my work: the Sciences Po...
European Studies Center (CEE), the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, and the European Union Center of Excellence and Department of Political Science, Université de Montréal. I would also like to thank the Sciences Po European Studies Center (CEE), the Maison Française d’Oxford and the ‘Research in Paris’ Programme of the City of Paris, for complementary financial support over the course of this research.

As this book relies in part on data gathered in the framework of the Citizens Talking About Europe project, I am deeply grateful to all 411 citizens who applied to take part in these focus groups, and in particular to the 133 who participated in group sessions. I would like to thank again a number of people who assisted the CITAE research team, at the group organisation and data-handling stages, who worked through more than 72 hours of discussion and 3,000 pages of transcript: Patty Chang, Paul Honey, Adam Humphreys, Gemma Hersh, Géraldine Thiry, Anouk Lloren, Sophie Langohr, Vanessa Hick and Vincent Guilluy. This project was supported by the administrative staff at CEVIPOF, Sciences Po Paris, the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford and the Institut de Sciences Politiques Louvain-Europe, Université catholique de Louvain. I am very grateful to the UCL-Cliniques Saint-Luc in Brussels (Woluwe) who allowed us to use the welcoming Salle des Toges for the Belgian group sessions. Besides the funding of my own research, the CITAE project was funded by many institutions: the French Ministry of Research (ACI grant INT0040); Sciences Po Paris European Studies Center (CEE); the Leverhulme Foundation (grant F/01 089/1); the Nuffield College Research Fund; Programme Tournesol (grant 18123NK); the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford; and New College, Oxford.

In the editing phase I have benefited enormously from Katharine Throssell’s talented pen. Her contribution to this book is much greater than a simple translation. If the mistakes and blunders in language are all mine, she helps a lot in lightening my initial text and I am very grateful to her for this. I am also grateful to Dario Castiglione and Deborah Savage, as I am to Laura Pugh, Kate Hawkins and to the staff at ECPR Press for their assistance and patience at the production stage of this book. I thank the ECPR and the Institut de Sciences Politiques Louvain-Europe for generous funding support in the translation costs.

This book also owes very much to four juries. First, I am immensely thankful to the members of my dissertation committee: Renaud Dehousse, Lieven De Winter, Juan Diez Medrano and Adrian Favell. Their sensible remarks and well-considered comments and arguments on my dissertation were valuable resources in the evolution of this book. I am also very grateful to the members of the juries that awarded my thesis the three following prizes: the Theseus Award for Promising Research on European Integration, the Best Dissertation Prize in Comparative Politics from the French Political Science Association and the Mattei Dogan Foundation, and the ECPR’s Jean Blondel PhD Prize. These awards gave great visibility to my book long before its publication, granting me not only recognition, but confidence in my work. Thanks to those juries for being my first anonymous readers. In the wake of these awards, I would also like to thank all the scholars who cited my work before its publication.
From my very first paper presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions in Rennes – where I met outstanding scholars who left their mark on my ideas and on the way I address the issue in this volume – to these very last pages and the kind endorsements that accompany them, I am most grateful to those who took the time to read my papers and chapters. I had the great fortune to be able to share my thoughts with scholars from many institutions and from a variety of theoretical and methodological backgrounds. My special thanks go to Céline Belot, Damien Bol, Géraldine Bozec, Amandine Crespy, Florence Delmotte, Tom Delreux, Charlotte Dolez, Claire Dupuy, François Foret, Nuria Garcia, Cesar Garcia-Perez-de-Leon, Borbála Gönzc, Virginie Guiraudon, Marc Hooghe, Achim Hurrelmann, Sophie Jacquot, Camille Kelbel, Justine Lacroix, Jean Leca, Christopher Lord, Frédéric Mérand, Kalypso Nicolaïdis, David Paternotte, Gaëlle Pellon, Julie Pollard, Benoît Rihoux, Richard Rose, George Ross, Olivier Rozenberg, Nicolas Sauger, Sabine Saurugger, Vivien Schmidt, Steffen Schneider, Claudia Schrag, Florian Stoeckel, Ferdinand Teuber, Anja Thomas, Katharine Throssell, Vincent Tiberj, Hans-Jörg Trenz and Jonathan White. I am deeply indebted to them and all the other colleagues who, here and there, supported, discussed and criticised my work at its different stages and in diverse academic occasions.

With their unfailing presence, my family and my friends have greatly contributed to this book. Friendly thanks in particular to Cathy, Vanessa, Manu, Géraldine, Gaëlle, Ferdinand, Mus, Minet, Printen, Eric, Dimi, Céline, Kath, Johnny and Jean-Lou, for never stopping asking me how I was doing. Loving thanks to Nico, Pauline, Tom and Clémence for never asking how work was doing. A special word of thanks to Daphné and Julie who have so often provided an essential friendly refuge in Welkenraedt as Sophie, her family and the Creusois did in France, and Joan did in Barcelona. An extended thank to Claire whose path I was lucky enough to cross at CEVIPOF and who has shared so much of this experience with me from Paris, Montréal, Oxford and Louvain. This book owes her more than I can say, and certainly more than she would ever concede. She was there whenever I needed her. She has read almost every word and commented on almost every page, sometimes more than once. Our unfailing friendship was part of this journey and will continue after it.

Above all I would like to thank my brother and my mother, my load-bearing walls. Without their unswerving support, I wouldn’t be who I am and I could never have been able to make the choices that were mine and do the job that I choose. I am deeply indebted to them. Thanks to Vani for being such a generous and attentive big brother. He has been by my side since the beginning, enduring my adolescent, then professional, self-doubts. He has always had a kind and funny word to make light of everything, even during the most difficult times. My last word goes to my mum, to whom I owe everything. I am thankful to her for having given us everything we needed and, more than that, all by herself. Because her presence has erased all absences, I dedicate this book to her. Merci pour tout Suzi.

Virginie Van Ingelgom
Welkenraedt, April 2014
Introduction

There are few historical examples of politicians, bureaucrats, and scholars searching so frenetically for ‘democracy’ and ‘legitimacy’ that no citizen has demanded (Bartolini 2005: 407).

As is often the case, the origin of this book lies in a series of questions left unanswered by the existing literature and, in particular, by the results of European studies and more especially the analysis of citizens’ attitudes towards European integration. Three surprising observations were the impetus for this book.

The first of these observations was a discrepancy I experienced personally, between my own training in European studies and my family and friends’ lack of interest in European questions. For a long time there appeared to be two parallel universes, telling very different stories about European integration. On one hand, the discipline of European studies was tirelessly searching for citizens’ attitudes towards the European integration process in the form of European identity or, more recently, euroscepticism. On the other, I could not help noticing the extreme lack of salience of European integration for my friends and family; for them, Europe was a non-issue.

Yet as young Belgian and European citizens my friends and I are immersed in Europe – it is all around us. Shopping trips to Maastricht and Aachen are frequent; the European institutions are close by. The weak, multi-levelled Belgian national identity seems conducive to the development of identification with Europe. As young, university-educated, former Erasmus students, middle class and living in close contact with other European countries/people, I felt that my friends and family should be among the most supportive European citizens. According to European studies they should have developed a strong sense of belonging to this Europe that surrounds them; they should condemn its democratic deficit and, more recently, regret its economic problems.

The reality was (and still is) quite different, however. My friends and family were far from demonstrating the interest in or attachment to the European project that was expected of them. They did not discuss European integration and were not really very interested in it, except when it came to my own work. This sparked the idea for this book by leading me to ask a couple of simple questions. Why is European integration not an issue for these young European elites? And, above all, how can this significant gap between the strong academic interest in Europe and the lack of salience of European integration for non-academics be explained?

The second surprising observation was directly linked to the research framework used for the Citizens Talking About Europe (CITAE) project which I was involved
The study was based on 24 focus groups conducted in Brussels, Paris and Oxford between December 2005 and June 2006. These focus groups were not only a response to a desire to study how citizens talk about European issues, they also sought to analyse how and under what conditions citizens politicise discussions of European integration. On both these levels, the eight groups conducted in Paris in winter 2006 led to a surprising observation: the French participants only evoked the Constitutional Treaty very sporadically. Yet the groups were organised less than a year after the impassioned debates that surrounded the referendum of 29 May 2005 (Schrag Sternberg 2013: 161–73). Not only was the referendum notably absent from discussions but we observed a certain indifference regarding the pursuit of integration rather than a genuine rejection (including among the defenders of the ‘no’ position) – and this in spite of the presence of members of both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ factions within each group (see Duchesne et al. 2013). Indicators of the eurosceptic attitudes, particularly in the working-class milieu, which are so dreaded by European institutions and European specialists, were difficult to identify in these discussions. This raised the following questions. Where was this majority of French citizens against Europe? Where and how was this euroscepticism expressed, given that only a few months after the ratification of the Treaty we could find hardly any trace of it? Finally, where was this popular opposition when the Lisbon Treaty was adopted a few months later?

The third curious observation occurred with the systematic study of the Eurobarometer survey data analyses. It seemed to me, in light of many other articles, that the decline in support for European integration was purely and simply attributed to an increase in euroscepticism. Yet the indicator of support for one’s country belonging to the European Union (EU) is itself not binary! It has a median modality that reflects a composite and uncertain evaluation of the country’s membership to the EU, seen as being ‘neither a good, nor a bad thing’. The fact that this category was rarely or ever taken into account seemed to me to be even more intriguing and problematic in light of Léon N. Lindberg and Stuart A. Scheingold’s classic text Europe’s Would-Be Polity (1970). Essential aspects of their analysis had simply disappeared from later adaptations of their model. The question of the level of support is clearly central to their work but so is that

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1. The CITAE project, initiated by Sophie Duchesne and Florence Haegel, was conducted in close collaboration between Sciences Po Paris, the University of Oxford and the Catholic University of Louvain. The research team, co-ordinated by Sophie Duchesne, was made up of Florence Haegel, Guillaume Garcia, Elizabeth Frazer, André-Paul Frognier and myself. As a research assistant, I was initially responsible for conducting the fieldwork in Brussels. I also helped conduct the groups that took place in Oxford. Following this, I took part in the analyses and publications produced by the research team as a whole (Duchesne, Frazer, Haegel, and Van Ingelgom 2013; Duchesne et al. 2010). The focus groups used in this book were conducted as part of the CITAE research project. The entirety of the data produced is accessible on the BeQuali website: http://www.bequali.fr/app/enquete/10/metadata/. I am individually responsible for the arguments and analyses presented in the current volume.

2. ‘Generally speaking, do you think that (your country’s) membership of the European Community (Single Market) is “A good thing”, “a bad thing”, “neither good nor bad”?’
of the intensity of this support, as part of a broader reflection on the salience of European integration (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970: 249–79). European studies’ systematic lack of attention to indifferent and undecided citizens is clearly visible in this, even though this category was at the heart of the theory of the ‘permissive consensus’, along with those who supported the European integration process. The model generally evoked the tacit consent of the masses.

At the intersection of these three observations is the question of ordinary citizens’ indifference to the European political order. The objective of this book is thus to reintroduce the notion of indifference into the study of citizens’ reactions towards European integration process, as part of a reflection on the political legitimacy of the process, understood as the acceptance of a (new) political order. Starting from current debates, both scientific and political, this book thus deals with the question of political legitimacy in the particular context of the EU, focusing on western founding member-states. Overall, the originality of this book lies in the fact that it attempts to grasp the legitimacy of the EU in all its complexity, in both its active and latent aspects.

At the very moment of writing the last words of this introduction, I can only rejoice at the recent but still timid reappearance of median (Rose 2013), indifferent (Göncz, 2013; Rose 2013: 110–11; Van Ingelgom 2012), or ambivalent (Dakowska and Hubé 2011; de Vries 2013; Stoeckel 2013) citizens in European studies. These middle-of-the-road attitudes, marked by uncertainty – as I will argue in this book – are now held by a significant number of European citizens, more than ever previously. In May 2011, in the midst of the economic and financial crises sweeping across Europe, the category of undecided European citizens who said that European integration was ‘neither a good nor a bad thing’ made up 31 per cent of EU citizens, whereas those who said that it was a ‘bad thing’ represented only 18 per cent of them (European Commission 2011). This is a good time to study this category of citizen, who declare themselves neither eurosceptic nor europhile but whose attitude is characterised by indifference and ambivalence towards the European integration process. Proposing this research agenda is also and above all about drawing attention to those who are overlooked by European studies: these silent European citizens whom European integration, along with our western democracies, has not succeeded in integrating.

**Studying European legitimacy: at the crossroads of normative and empirical traditions**

Although legitimacy is far from being a new concept it has attracted renewed attention in European studies over the course of the last two decades. It has notably been connected to democracy and its ‘crisis’ at the European level (Dehousse 1995; Føllesdal and Hix 2006; Majone 1998; Moravcsik 2002, to name a few). As far as European integration is concerned, the question of its legitimacy was posed with intensity from 1992 onwards, following the debate in the wake of the negative result of the first Danish referendum to ratify the Maastricht Treaty and the close score on the positive result that followed in France. On this same occasion, the
Chapter Three

Focus Groups as a Microscope

The lesson to be drawn for other social sciences is the need for more systematic data-rich comparative projects that combine qualitative and quantitative methods and do not hesitate to answer macro questions with a microscope (Guiraudon 2006: 5).

The remainder of this book aims to contribute to the questions raised in the two previous chapters by offering a complementary perspective, based on the analysis of 24 collective interviews conducted in (francophone) Belgium, France and Great Britain in December 2005 and June 2006. Although complementary – qualitative – data is unfortunately not available for periods prior to this, one additional qualitative data was collected following a moment of exceptionally intense public debate on European integration: the failed EU Constitution (Schrag Sternberg 2013: 160–96). This chapter presents the research design used here, the object of which was to reveal all the aspects of the problem of acceptance of the new political order and, by extension, the politicisation of the European space. This chapter will thus be dedicated to the methodological and epistemological choices that led to the writing of this book.

My approach is – at least in part – situated in what has come to be known as the sociological approach to European integration (Saurugger 2008), or a sociology of the EU (Favell and Guiraudon 2011). It is also part of the CITAE research project, which chose to innovate by using focus groups in its methodology (Duchesne, Frazer, Haegel and Van Ingelgom 2013). The first section of this chapter will present the justification for the use of focus groups as a microscope through which to study ordinary reactions towards European integration and provide a detailed presentation of this methodology, still relatively rarely used within European studies.¹ Then I will move on to the justification of how this methodology is articulated with the Eurobarometers and the advantages of combining these two types of data in understanding the research object in all its complexity. In so doing, this book takes a mixed-methods perspective, defined here as ‘an approach to knowledge (theory and practice) that attempts to consider multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions, and standpoints (always including the standpoints of qualitative and quantitative)’ (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner 2007: 113).

¹. Among the studies having mobilised focus groups, to various degrees, within European studies. (See: Bruter 2005; Gaxie, Hubé and Rowell 2011; Hurrelmann and Schneider 2013; White 2013)
The second part of this chapter shows how the focus groups were constructed and conducted in order to enable a comparison on several levels. Considering the amount of existing literature, both normative and empirical (see Chapter One), it would have been difficult for the research design to attempt to be totally inductive. Essential advances in this research field could not go unobserved. It appeared to me that certain results could be considered as a scientific ‘given’. This book thus takes on the thesis of scientific cumulativity; but cumulative does not necessarily mean repetitive. The research design used here was constructed on the basis of a series of postulates and hypotheses. The wide variety of literature has demonstrated the importance of social cleavages and national differences in attitudes towards Europe; these two variables thus served to structure the population (Duchesne et al. 2013). The comparison between (francophone) Belgium, France and Great Britain enables me to shed light on substantial national differences in the ways in which this new political order has been and is perceived (Haegel 2013). From the perspective of social comparison, the typification of the population into three categories – ‘workers and those in temporary employment’, ‘employees’ and ‘managers’2 – reflects the sociological cleavages in place (Duchesne 2013).

In the third and final section of this chapter I will outline the protocol for conducting the focus groups and the mechanisms enabling the emergence of the debate. I will come back to the rationale of political diversification that accompanied the recruitment of participants as well as to the scenario for the discussion and, finally, to the particular methods for running the groups. This section will enable me to demonstrate to what extent the framework was in fact a real experimentation of politicisation (Duchesne and Haegel 2009: 46–7).

By way of conclusion I will emphasise the importance of the ‘complementarity of approaches’ (Abélès 1997) in the context of a broader reflection concerning the place of this book in mixed-method research.

The focus group as a research tool

The objective of the previous chapters has been to provide an in-depth analysis of citizens’ attitudes towards European integration in the long run, using survey data. A specific and innovative method of study was chosen to complete the survey data analysed in Chapter Two. This section presents the focus-group method, more broadly referred to as group interviews, as a research tool. It deals with the question of how this method is specific in its contributions to the study of citizens’ reactions to European integration and, in particular in this book, to the absence of these reactions. The image of this method that I draw here is necessarily selective and centred on the choices that guided the CITAE research project.3 I

2. The terms chosen to name the group categories are purely descriptive and should not be seen as conveying value judgements of any kind.

3. The book by Sophie Duchesne and Florence Haegel (2004a) is the key reference in the francophone literature but there are many studies and textbooks on focus groups in the Anglo-Saxon tradition (see, for example, Barbour 2007; Morgan 1996, 1997; Wilkinson 2004).
Focus Groups as a Microscope

will begin by presenting certain fundamental points of this methodology, which are indispensable for the presentation of the research design that is to follow.

What is a focus group?

The definitions and uses of the method are varied and diverse, as one can see by the many related terms. ‘Collective interviews’, ‘group interviews’, ‘discussion groups’, or ‘focus groups’ all refer to interviews conducted with several respondents at the same time. In order to define more precisely what is meant by this term, I will begin with the three-point definition provided by David L. Morgan, an author who was essential in developing this method for use in social sciences. He defines a focus group ‘as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher’ (Morgan 1997: 130). Three elements stand out in this relatively inclusive definition. First, the focus group is a research method designed to collect data. It is thus intended for research interests, in other words, collecting discursive data destined for analysis; data provoked and collected by a researcher on themes that she or he has chosen (Duchesne and Haegel 2004a: 42). Second, in the focus group the source of data lies in the interaction within the discussion group; the social relations that characterise them are not reduced to the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee but require the interactions of a collective discussion to be taken into account. Third, and finally, the focus group supposes the active intervention of the researcher in the creation of the group discussion in order to collect data.

This definition enables us to exclude a series of configurations similar to focus groups, such as collective interviews used outside a research context, for example, for marketing or training purposes. It also enables us to distinguish this method from other procedures that included multiple participants but which do not allow the emergence of interactive discussions between them, such as group experiments aimed to record actions rather than discourse. This definition also excludes direct observation of naturally occurring discussions that cannot be described as interviews in so far as the researcher does not intervene in the creation of data. Collective interviews therefore cannot be assimilated to ordinary conversation, such as might occur in everyday life. The framing of the discussion is always made clear by the presence of a moderator, who imposes the subject on the participants and makes sure – in a more or less direct manner – the discussion is kept alive. The focus group thus differs on these different points from the citizen conferences initiated by the EU as a way of including citizens in the political decision-making process and reinforcing deliberation and public debate (for example, Boussaguet and Dehousse 2008; Kies and Nanz 2013).

The choice of focus groups as a research tool

Beyond the actual definition of the focus group, the scientific uses of the method are also quite diverse. Indeed, focus groups can be used in very different epistemological frameworks, which I will not review here. Like any method, the
Chapter Five

Neither Eurosceptic nor Europhile: The Median European

There is a mixture of motives for taking this middle-of-the-road position. Some are ambivalent, seeing Europe as having a mixture of advantages and disadvantages. Others are indifferent; as long as the EU appears irrelevant to their lives they have no opinion (Rose 2013: 49–50).

In the Introduction, I discussed the need for a reconciliation of the findings of statistical analysis of Eurobarometer data and similar surveys with the findings of recent interpretive analysis of interview and focus-group data. In Chapter Two, I highlighted the uncertainty and indifference that characterised the attitudes of European citizens in the post-Maastricht period. Following these two assessments, in this chapter I propose to analyse the particular category of citizens who, when they are surveyed by Eurobarometer, say that they evaluate their country’s membership of the EU as being ‘neither a good thing nor a bad thing’. On average, they represent 30 per cent of the European population and 33 out of the 133 participants in the focus groups.

Focusing on this specific category is important in more than one respect. First, qualitative work has revealed that European issues are not prominent for ordinary citizens and has emphasised the difficulty, even impossibility, for ordinary citizens to appropriate the reality of the EU into their own reality, as it were. More recently, such work has also highlighted the fact that attitudes towards Europe, often uncertain, are based on diverse evaluations and feelings of varied intensity. This leads to a rebuttal of the assertion that the European public is simply divided into two categories, one ‘europhile’ and the other ‘eurosceptic’ (Dakowska and Hubé 2011: 85–100; Van Ingelgom 2012). Of course, the data presented here can make only a contribution to criticism of this binary interpretation. Thus, the discussion transcripts suggest strongly that the interpretation of Eurobarometer data is often rather hasty.

According to the Eurobarometer survey data, from the time when the group interviews were convened in spring 2006, 28 per cent of European citizens (EU15) considered that their country’s membership of the EU was ‘neither a good nor a bad thing’, while 55 per cent considered it was ‘a good thing’ and 13 per cent considered it ‘a bad thing’. Researchers who analyse the Eurobarometer data have often labelled those who answer ‘a good thing’ europhile and labelled those who answer ‘a bad thing’ eurosceptic. At the same time, they have tended to ignore the ‘neither-nors’. In the standard Eurobarometer survey conducted in spring 2006,
the percentage of ‘neither-nors’ is 25 per cent for the Belgians, 32 per cent for the French and 28 for the British (European Commission 2007). Moreover, there is a striking increase in the percentage of respondents in this category between 1990 and 2011. The percentages increase from 19 to 23 in Belgium, from 25 to 33 per cent in France and from 24 to 37 in Britain, while the European average went from 21 per cent to 31 per cent (Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File, 1973–2002; European Commission 2011).

The interpretive analysis reported in this chapter shows that this response should not be ignored or discounted; it is, indeed, a specific reaction characterised by uncertainties regarding the European integration process, sometimes in the sense of ambivalence and sometimes of indifference, and based on alienation or on fatalism. I assume that I can examine the category as through a microscope (Guiraudon 2006) in order to improve the understanding of the significance, the persistence and the increase in the uncertainty and indifference of ordinary citizens towards European integration. So I wish to link my own operationalisation, for the purposes of this last part of my analysis, firmly to those of mainstream quantitative studies. As I have said, these frequently take responses to the question ‘Do you think your country’s membership of the EU is a good thing […]?’ as indicating an individual’s support for or rejection of the integration process.

In the questionnaire completed by all the focus-group applicants, we explicitly posed this classic question. Recruitment procedures explicitly aimed to classify the participants on European questions – broadly pro and anti – so as to secure a balanced, and potentially antagonistic, discussion. But we had multiple recruitment criteria, including wanting groups to be diverse in age and ethnic heritage and homogeneous with regard to education and employment (see Chapter Three). So in the end we selected a number of participants whose attitudes regarding Europe were more uncertain. Of course, this is not surprising – given that they represent about 30 per cent of the population. We were also keen to recruit citizens who usually elude surveys, particularly those from the working classes, and it is notable that in these groups we had the highest recruitment of those who answered ‘neither-nor’ to this question. Table 5.1 presents the list of participants in this category.

Out of 133 participants, 82 participants are categorised as favourable to their country’s membership (or europhile), while 18 are categorised as disapproving (or eurosceptic), according to this measure. Here I focus on the positions in the discussion of European issues of the 33 ‘neither-nors’. Representativeness in qualitative research is typological, not statistical, so the limited number of cases is not in itself a problem. I want to maximise understanding of the logic of these participants’ positions and, as far as possible, of their motivations. So, to put their words and positions into context, I here present interpretive analysis (again produced using the software package Atlas.ti) of all 24 of the focus groups. Two-thirds of the ‘neither-nor’ respondents are in the most working-class categories – of the 33, 20 belong either to the category workers or employees; 16 individuals in the middle category are British, 13 are French and only four are Belgian. The Brussels corpus here is distinctive – it does not include a single ‘neither-nor’ respondent from among the groups of managers and activists.
This chapter specifically aims to analyse and understand the motivations of these respondents and to attempt to explain their position. Initially, with a view to refuting a minimalist interpretation of this response category, I will show that these respondents do have cognitive frameworks that allow them to think about Europe. These frameworks are relatively homogenous among these interviewees, whatever their social class and national characteristics. Then my analysis will focus on the specific references to Europe made by them. Finally, I distinguish between three kinds of reaction: first ambivalence, then distance and alienation and, finally, fatalism. In the last section, these three kinds of reactions are scrutinised in order to assess whether they should be perceived as a tonic or a poison for European democratic legitimacy. I also ask how they can be related to the hypothesis that questions of Europe are becoming increasingly politicised in political and public discourses.

The (non-)explanation from ignorance

An obvious hypothetical explanation of this response might be that respondents are unaware, or unacquainted, and therefore are unable to react to or evaluate the fact of their country’s membership, unlike their europhile and eurosceptic counterparts. This classic hypothesis is fully in line with the ‘minimalist’ interpretation. This implies that ‘opinions’ gathered from this category of respondents would be superficial, unstable and inconsistent – classifiable as ‘pseudo-’ or ‘non-attitudes’.

Table 5.1: Participants evaluating their country’s membership of the EU as ‘neither good nor bad’ (N = 33/133)

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Chapter Six

Conclusion: Integrating Uncertainties

[...] the Community may, in any case, be too closely identified with existing structures and established values to be accepted as the legitimate vehicle for effective social changes (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970: 257).

Beyond the conventional story

The concept of legitimacy has attracted increasing attention over the past two decades in the context of reflections on democracy, governance and the ‘crisis’ of legitimacy at the European level. In this context, the social legitimacy of European integration is defined as ‘a broad societal (empirically determined) acceptance of the system’ (Weiler 1991: 416). Yet views on the democratic deficit of the EU and its search for legitimacy have changed dramatically in recent years. As a result, understanding what people think about European integration and why they have developed such opinions is crucial. In a context of perceived political and economic crisis, the focus of Europeanists – along with journalists, experts and politicians – has been on opposition to the EU among both political actors and citizens (Leconte 2012; Serricchio, Tsakatika and Quaglia 2012; Wessels 2007). Today there is extensive recognition that euroscepticism is a more significant phenomenon in the post-Maastricht period than it was in the earlier decades of the European integration process (Vasilopoulou 2013).

In explaining this scepticism, most Europeanists tell a conventional story that goes something like this. Once upon a time, on the European continent, there was a permissive consensus (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970); a consensus that meant European integration began amidst the general indifference of ordinary citizens. The permissive consensus referred to an enchanted land where citizens of the member-states were either generally supportive of their governments’ actions to promote further European integration or not interested in or affected by it at all. This sentiment was said to have characterised the first decades of European integration and to have ended in the 1990s, with the difficulties surrounding the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. From that moment, the EU had to face a constraining dissensus (Hooghe and Marks 2008), which came to disrupt this enchanted land. This sleeping giant of dissensus was rapidly named ‘euroscepticism’ by scholars and journalists. The EU was increasingly subject to public contention over European matters; citizens moved away from the European project and polarisation of their attitudes towards European integration increased. In other words, a cleavage between europhiles and eurosceptics emerged (Fligstein 2008).
The European public was becoming increasingly sceptical of European integration and decisions could no longer be taken without popular consent. In the wake of these developments, the politicisation of the European political order was more and more at the heart of many academic debates (Bartolini 2005; De Wilde 2011; De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hix and Bartolini 2006).

By the end of the 1990s, however, European studies had experienced a qualitative turn that told a very different tale, to those academics and commentators who were willing to listen. Contrary to the established understanding of the breakdown in the permissive consensus and the growing polarisation of opinion (often reduced to rising euroscepticism), qualitative studies converge in demonstrating the low salience of European integration for ordinary citizens (Duchesne 2010; Duchesne, Frazer, Haegel and Van Ingelgum 2013; Gaxie, Hubé and Rowell 2011; Meinhof 2004; White 2011, to name a few). The discrepancy observed between mainstream quantitative analyses and qualitative studies led to the approach taken in this book: analysing the indifference and indecision of ordinary citizens using both quantitative and qualitative data and methods in a mixed-methods perspective.

Comprehension of the social legitimacy of European integration as a complex political reality requires the concerted efforts of different disciplines and a combination of different types of data and methods. The task of this book was thus twofold. On one hand it sought to improve understanding of the lack of salience of European issues for a growing part of the public and on the other to address the puzzle of the discrepancy between these two research traditions.

The aforementioned qualitative studies and the convergence of their results with those presented in this book prompt us to reconsider the widely accepted premises of the conventional story. I therefore suggest that the evolution of citizens’ reactions to the European integration process cannot be reduced to the alleged end of the permissive consensus and subsequent rise of euroscepticism in the post-Maastricht period. Through its mixed-methods perspective, this book demonstrates that an interpretation based on the binary of permissive consensus and euroscepticism is empirically incomplete (if not erroneous) in many different ways. In emphasising the dynamics behind the evolution of research on citizens’ attitudes towards the EU, the first chapter of this volume suggests that the alleged breakdown in the permissive consensus amongst citizens needs to be put into perspective. The evolution of research on public opinion has been driven by political and institutional developments, theoretical trends in EU studies and the available survey data (Ray 2006). The role assigned to European citizens has changed over the course of integration and they are now assumed to hold opinions on European issues that are both politicised and polarised. My first step in re-evaluating the evolution of citizens’ attitudes, therefore, was to distance this analysis and its results from the normative models that characterise the different periods of European integration (see Chapter One). In order to do this empirically, I needed to adopt a long-term analytic perspective. Therefore, in Chapter Two, I demonstrated that the levels of mean, variance and kurtosis were not significantly different in the 1990s and in the 1970s. This means that, in the 1970s, the period during which the permissive-consensus model was dominant, the situation was
not significantly different from that observed in the post-Maastricht period, which supposedly signalled the end of this model in terms of citizens’ attitudes. The kurtosis measures, which describe the evolution of the ‘pointiness’ of the distribution, are particularly important in this observation (Di Maggio, Evans and Bryson 1996; Down and Wilson 2008). In the post-Maastricht period, none of the eight countries studied in this chapter presented kurtosis levels below -1.3, a value that would suggest a certain trend towards polarisation of public opinion. On the contrary, the events of Maastricht led to a flattening of most of the national distributions and a reinforcement of the median category, which is characterised by indifference and ambivalence. Moreover, dividing the period into three (1973–81; 1982–1991; 1992–[…]) enables us to better account for the evolution that can be observed over the long term.

My demonstration is based on the importance of this median ‘neither-nor’ category, its stability and even its increase in size over time. It is therefore not sufficient to simply analyse support for or resistance to integration; the intensity of this (non-)support must also be taken into account. Although it is impossible to deny the impact of Maastricht on the European political system, both on an institutional and a political level, these results show that it seems to have slowed the enthusiasm for integration rather than ‘broken’ the permissive consensus. This echoes results obtained in similar research (Down and Wilson 2008; Eichenberg and Dalton 2007).

In order to further characterise these uncertain and indifferent reactions towards European integration, I used an exploratory quantitative analysis to focus more specifically on the middle-of-the-road attitudes of a large proportion of ordinary citizens (see Chapter Two). This approach uses regression analysis with the most recent Eurobarometer survey including both questions of my index (2004). This analysis demonstrates that these attitudes of indifference and ambivalence cannot be equated to the critical assessments of European integration that characterise Eurosceptic citizens. Indeed, citizens who are ambivalent and indifferent are more supportive of their national governments and have greater trust in the EU. At the same time, they are also more proud of being European than their eurosceptic counterparts, but they declare they know less about the EU. They also distinguish themselves from the more supportive citizens, particularly on measures of politicisation and cognitive mobilisation.

Moreover, the current situation is also tainted by this uncertainty. Chapter Two analyses the impact of the economic crisis to show that, even in this context, citizens are becoming increasingly uncertain about the integration process rather than turning their backs to the EU en masse. This analysis uses the neither-nor category as a proxy for indifference and ambivalence and in so doing demonstrates that the basic shift in public attitudes towards European integration is, in fact, towards indifference and ambivalence and not yet (or not only) towards rejection. As a result, it is no longer possible to summarise the current situation simply in terms of the thesis of the breakdown in the permissive consensus in European public opinion (in the countries where this consensus existed), nor to conclude that there is a polarisation of opinion in any of the eight countries studied in Chapter