The History of the Eurobarometers:
fascinating data for European citizens and researchers

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Perspective on Academic Research with the
European Commission’s Eurobarometer Surveys »
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Plan

- The context of birth:
  - the beginning of opinion polls
  - the European building
- The founding father: Jacques-René Rabier
- The first EEC surveys before EB
- Conjonctural creation and characteristics of the first standard EB
- Questionnaires
- A huge source of data
- Evolutions
- Some problems
The beginning of opinion polls

- Opinion polls only began in the 1930’s in the US.
- In Europe, very few national opinion polls before WWII.
- National opinion polls developed very progressively.
- Very few repeated questions through time:
  - but electoral surveys (American National Election Studies since 1948, British Elections Studies since 1964),
  - social attitudes: GSS (1972) in USA, ALLBUS (mid-70’s) in Germany, BSA (1983) in GB.
- Still less international surveys:
  - 1st international survey in 1947, at the beginning of the Marshall Plan in 10 or eleven European countries,
  - In 1948, for UNESCO, Buchanan and Hadley carried out a survey in nine countries: « How nations see each other? »,
  - Several surveys of US Information Agency in the 50’s to inform the US government about the opinions of European citizens. Results were only released for researchers after a certain time.
The process of European integration

• Creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, chaired by Jean Monnet. The latter was convinced that it was necessary for the new European organizations to develop a policy of information.

• J. R. Rabier, the EB founding father was the first director of the Press and information Service at Luxemburg, the central offices of the ECSC.

• In 1960, a common service (for ECSC, European Economic Community – EEC - and Euratom) was established for Press and information at Brussels, with Rabier as director.
The founding father, Jacques-René Rabier

A French senior civil servant, also advocating for United States of Europe as were many of the first administrative elites at Luxemburg and Brussels. He will be 96 years old in 16th September 2015.
A senior civil servant fascinated by opinion polls

- Rabier was the chief of the staff of Jean Monnet as ministry of French planification just after World War II in the period of rebuilding of the French economic infrastructures. And he followed Jean Monnet at the ECSC, in charge of information.

- He began to be fascinated by opinions polls since 1942 when he attended to a conference of Jean Stoetzel, a French sociologist who worked with Gallup in 1936 in the USA. He quickly understood the interest of this tool which allows policy makers to know what people think with a reduced sample of well chosen interviewees.
A long lasting friendship with Ronald Inglehart

• He met Ronald Inglehart around 1965 when the latter was a young doctorate student in political science coming to Brussels to achieve his Ph. D. and work on the European Community. Inglehart was in fact an europeanist at the beginning of his carrier.

• Inspired by the first European data and a survey about the events of 1968 in France, Inglehart proposed the theory of postmaterialism around 1970.

• Since this period, they were good friends and very often discussed together. They published together many papers on various topics, particularly about European opinions and values, using EB in the 70’s and 80’s. It is with EB data that Inglehart explained the process of social change by replacement of generations.
The urge of knowing European opinion

• Very early, Rabier thought that the European integration could go any further if it was only supported by policy makers. So it was - and it still is - crucial to try to convince European people.

• For this, a precise assessment of the state of opinion is necessary. And it is also necessary to understand values underpinning opinions.

• For European elites, a better understanding of European values allows them to adjust their policies but perhaps also, opinion polls as Eurobarometers could be a resource to influence some state members which do not want more European process.
The first surveys from the EEC

- A second survey was carried out only in 1970 about the European unification and a third one in 1971 « Les aspects régionaux et agricoles du Marché commun, l’unification politique de l’Europe et l’information du public »).
- In 1972-1973, a first process of enlargement of Europe occurred, which entailed large discussions within the public opinion and also five referendums on the process of enlargement (France, Irland, Norway, Danemark, Switzerland). In this context understanding how citizens perceive this process is more and more important.
- Rabier wa thinking about the institutionnalization of regular surveys. And he tried to convince the Commission and the European Parliament. The principle is acted in 1971 by the Commission and in 1972 by the Parliament. But there is a gap between the principle and its implementation.
A very conjunctural creation

• At the beginning of 1973, due to the arrival of new countries in the EEC, it was necessary to assign people from new member states some senior civil servant positions. So the position of Rabier as director of Press and information was given to an Irishman. And Rabier was appointed as special councillor to do what he wants. He asked to be in charge of the creation of two surveys by year, in all the countries of the EEC. He was alone for doing that with one full-time secretary and one part-time at the moment of publication of reports.

• With the agreement of the commission to do so, the expenses being paid with the budget of the Service of information, he immediately began to prepare the first survey. He published a public tender and IFOP and the Gallup network of European institutes were chosen to carry out the surveys. Jean Stoetzel and the director of the English Gallup institute prepared the questionnaire, with probably the help of Ronald Inglehart.

• EB 0 was carried out in fall 1973 in the nine member countries.
The characteristics of the first Eurobarometers

- During thirteen years, Rabier was in charge of these surveys, did all the questionnaires and wrote all the reports (35 surveys and reports). He benefited of a large autonomy and told that there was no political control on questionnaires and on what he wrote (interview 04 07 15).
- The adopted principle was to publish all the results with comments very quickly in order to inform commission, members states, medias, political and social actors. This choice is much more democratic than in many states where results are kept secret and only used for political action.
- Since the beginning, the samples consist in 1000 people from 15 years old and more, selected by quotas (+ 300 for Northern Ireland and Luxemburg). Thus the sampling is realized on a national basis, what shows how national cultures and contexts are still important in the European Union.
- The results have a margin of error but are roughly representative of the opinions of each member country, but not of national subgroups.
- In 1989, the administration mode was harmonized with a random route process.
- Data are quickly deposited in two data banks: Zentral Archiv (Koln) and ISR (Michigan).
The questionnaires (1)

- Since the beginning, the aim was to repeat the same questions so as to measure opinion change. The name of Eurobarometer comes from this will to repeat the same and comparable questions.
- Face-to-face interviews, very long (about one hour).
- A lot of questions – and more and more along time – are about the European process. For example, a very classical question, already present in the 1962 survey was:
  
  In general, are you for or against efforts being made to unify Western Europe? Are you ...?

  For-very much, For-to some extent, Against-to some extent, Against-very much, Don't know

This question was dropped in 1995 because its wording was outdated, people and elites no more believing in a quick unification of European countries.
The questionnaires (2)

• A core trend question exists since 1973 and is a kind of synthetic indicator of the general position of interviewees about Europe:

  Generally speaking, do you think that (our country)’s membership of the European union is...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1973</th>
<th>2012</th>
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<tr>
<td>... a good thing</td>
<td>56 %</td>
<td>54 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... a bad thing</td>
<td>11 %</td>
<td>14 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither good nor bad</td>
<td>20 %</td>
<td>29 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>3 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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• With this kind of indicators, the evolution is not very important. But the number of countries taken into account is very different (from 9 to 28).

• A very close question is about having benefited or not benefited from being a member. It is possible to build an index with these two questions (from 1983). Even if there are not strong differences on the first indicator along time, the rise of europessism is more salient on the second one and on other dimensions: trust in EU, the Parliament, other European institutions, having a positive or a negative image of Europe...
The questionnaires (3)

- During the fifteen first years of EB, there were many questions about values in many other domains like national pride, politicization and political participation, use of medias, support to democracy, materialist vs postmaterialist values, protection of environment, trust in other countries and people, opinion about economic, social and political situation, immigration, perception of citizens of non member states, moral permissiveness, religious feeling and practice (61 trends questions listed in the interactive search system of the EB website, sometimes for a long period, sometimes for a shorter one).

- These data nourished many analyses from social scientists:

A huge and very rich database

- A qualitative jump was realized with this data. New theories were produced and it was possible to better understand the social change in many domains of life, and to distinguish generation, age and period effects.
- Besides the standard EB (the core trend questions), « trains » of questions on specific topics are launched just after the normal wave at spring or fall, financed by directorates-general, for exemple gender gap, poverty, science, retirement, youth, racism, cancer, energy, environment, public health, with partly repeted questionnaires all the 4 or five years. Some surveys are also ordered by the European Parliament, in particular for European elections.
- Now, some qualitative surveys,
- This international barometer was in fact the first one of a long set of similar successful tools:
  - The European and World Values Surveys (from 1981),
  - The International Social Survey Programme (from 1985),
  - The Latinobarometer (from 1995),
  - The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) from 2000,
  - The European Social Survey (from 2001),
  - The Arab Barometer (from 2005).
Evolutions (1)

- After Rabier, the EB was progressively integrated in the DGX. It was run by an academic, Kharleinz Reif (University of Mannheim) till 1996.
- He also created new tools:
  - The Flash Eurobarometer (quick telephone surveys on specific subjects or target groups). Today, about 420 flash Eurobarometers from which results are also published,
  - The Continuous Tracking Survey (1996-1998) with 200 telephone interview in each country member each week,
Evolutions (2)

- Anna Melich, a Swiss Academic (University of Geneva) succeeded at Reif (1997-1999). After, the EB unit was again headed by civil servants:
  - Harald Hartung, Thomas Cristensen, Ruben Mohedano-Bréthes, Renaud Soufflot de Magny, Antonis Papacostas, David Voidies...

So the EB began as a strong institution, used by many private and public actors, and also many researchers.

The balance between topics progressively shifted:
- More and more questions about European opinions,
- More and more questions to assess the current policies of the EU and not only to prepare new decisions. Also more questions to measure the effect of awareness campaigns to a policy,
- Less and less questions about attitudes and values on other dimensions (politics, sociability...).
Some problems : languages

- With the enlargement of the EU, the number of spoken languages is growing (24 today). So, when the master questionnaire is ready, it has to be translated (and retro-translated to see the difference of meaning in certains phrases) in all languages (Now TNS Opinion takes over the translation process). And as for all international surveys, some problems of translations are unavoidable. It is recommended to create attitudinal scales as often as possible, to limit this kind of problem.
Some problems: questions

- Perhaps too many questions about the same subject, sometimes redundant.
- Sometimes too complicated questions. It is a common tendency of civil servants and researchers to imagine too complicated questions.
- Perhaps too much change in the wording of questions, which prevent the measure of change. Balance is difficult to find between a necessary conservatism of questionnaires to read evolutions and a necessary innovation to measure new problems at the agenda.
Some problems : questions

- The removal of certain dimensions is a problem. For example, « your life next year will be better, the same or worse », has not been asked since 2010; religious indicators are now very rare in the background variables (last time for the religious belonging en 2012).

- The EB are sometimes criticized for their results which would be too much in favour of the European integration. In my opinion, questions are generally rather neutral, not voluntary biased in their wording, but the comments are rather optimistic, which is somehow inevitable since the European commission publishes the results and gives its own point of view on these results. It is its responsability of DG for information.
Conclusion

• An impressive tool to gain understanding of the European public opinions, European feeling and identity. This database is unique for social sciences.

• Whatever its limits and problems, it is as essential for citizens, political and social actors as for social scientists. Many new theories have been elaborated with these data.
Two very important websites for social scientists

- http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion

Thank you for your attention.