

What Does the EU Actually Mean to Citizens? An in-Depth Study of Dutch citizens' Understandings and Evaluations of the European Union

ELSKE VAN DEN HOOGEN,  WILLEM DE KOSTER  and JEROEN VAN DER WAAL 

Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Abstract

Although citizens' attitudes towards the European Union (EU) have been examined extensively, there is a dearth of studies on what the EU actually means to them. Inspired by observations suggesting that the EU means different things to different people, this research aimed to uncover these views using an inductive approach: 13 group interviews with a heterogenous set of homogenous groups. 45 Dutch citizens, strategically selected from various social backgrounds, were interviewed in-depth. Four discourses on the EU were identified: pragmatic, federalist, anti-establishment and disengaged. We also demonstrated that these discourses go hand-in-hand with: 1) specific evaluations of the EU beyond the conventional 'Europhilia-Euro scepticism' dimension; and 2) similar criticisms regarding themes emphasised by interviewees themselves – wasting of money and a lack of transparency and democracy – but for very different, sometimes even counterposing, reasons. The wider implications of our findings and possible venues for further research are also discussed.

Keywords: EU attitudes; EU evaluations; Euro scepticism; public opinion; anti-establishment attitudes

Introduction

A rich body of literature, addressed below, has explored public support and opposition to the European Union (EU), but little attention has been paid thus far to what it actually *means* to citizens. Such a perspective is, however, very relevant, as there is ample indication that the EU could mean different things to different people. Positive and negative attitudes towards the body are not easily ascribed to a specific (political) group – they cannot be easily explained using the left–right dimension (Van Bohemen *et al.*, 2019), and groups that are ostensibly in opposition frequently share similar stances. Take the *Gilet Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) movement, which is explicit in its political ambiguity (claiming to be neither left nor right), but whose members share an unmistakable Euro sceptic stance (Lianos, 2019). Likewise, after the 2016 Dutch referendum on the EU treaty with Ukraine, journalists reported that 'no-voters' were 'an eclectic bunch', consisting not only of 'angry white men' but also 'lefties or Christians' (Schreuder, 2016). Furthermore, even among the electorate of Dutch parties that are supportive of the EU, there is evidence of discontent with the institution (Jacobs *et al.*, 2016).

These observations suggest that the same phenomenon – the EU – is understood in very different ways. Recent literature provides similar indications. Various scholars have observed that public opinion on the EU does not seem to follow any clear pattern (Hainsworth, 2006), arguing that 'Euro scepticism is a very broad umbrella covering a most unusual set of political adversaries' (Taggart, 2004, p. 281). It is noted, for example,

that ‘an identical sentiment’ on the EU is present among ‘diametrically opposite political camps’ (Evans, 2000, p. 542), and that ‘there is often little that holds together Eurosceptic groups or movements beyond some dislike or disquiet of a nominal referent object’ (Leruth *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). In short, ‘the concept of Euroscepticism connotes a wide range of meanings’ (Krouwel & Abts, 2007, p. 254). Yet, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid to uncovering those meanings as formulated by citizens themselves, whether the EU means different things to different people, and how those meanings inform their evaluations of the EU. This study aims to uncover this through an inductive approach using data collected via in-depth group interviews in the Netherlands.

I. Uncovering citizens’ Understandings of the EU: Towards a Meaning-Centred Approach

An approach focusing on the different meanings that citizens ascribe to the EU is promising for four reasons. First, extant literature suggests that individuals’ understandings of the EU likely vary. Sørensen (2008, p. 15), for example, found that ‘what one population wants from integration may be what another population fears will happen. This depends on the type(s) of [Euro]scepticism characterising a country’. In addition to such cross-national variation, we also expect to find different understandings of the EU within a national context. It is therefore noteworthy that Van Mol’s (2019) large-scale survey identified different views of ‘Europe’ among students, while Kufer (2009) reported diverse opinions of Europe among citizens more generally, even when analysing only a single, close-ended, Eurobarometer item.

Second, the existence of a variety of understandings of the EU is implied by the diverse types of Euroscepticism or EU support identified by academics. Taggart and Szczerbiak (2004) break down Euroscepticism into two varieties: *hard/soft* (‘outright rejection’/ ‘contingent or qualified opposition’) (p. 366); Kopecný and Mudde (2002) talk about *diffuse/specific* support (‘support for the general ideas/practice of European integration’) (p. 300); Lubbers and Scheepers (2010) define Euroscepticism as *political* (‘resistance to the process of the reduction of the nation-state’) versus *instrumental* (‘considering membership of the EU to bring few benefits’) (p. 787); De Vries (2018) distinguishes between *loyal supporters* (‘favour[ing] the EU over [the] nation state’), *exit sceptics* (‘favour[ing] the nation state over the EU’), and *policy and regime sceptics* (‘favour[ing] [the] nation state over the EU in terms of policies or the regime’) (p. 101); and Krouwel and Abts’s (2007) conceptualisation discerns *Euroconfidence* (‘obedient assent to EU politics’ (p. 261)), *Euroscepticism* (‘a trade-off between some dissatisfaction with current EU performance and confidence in [...] European integration’ (p.262)), *Eurodistrust* (‘frustrations with the perceived failure of the EU to meet the expectations and demands’ (p. 262)), *Eurocynicism* (‘generalized disdain for European authorities [...] and fatalism about the future of the European project’ (p. 262)), and *Euro-alienation* (‘the enduring and profound rejection of the EU’ (p. 263)). That these various understandings of EU support and Euroscepticism exist among a small number of academics suggests it is likely that the institution also means different things to different members of the public.

Third, while the literature initially treated the issue as a ‘single latent variable of fixed attitudes toward European integration, ranging from rejection of the European project to

high levels of support for European unification' (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016, p. 415), our approach is in line with the more recent perspective that 'the EU is an evolving multidimensional polity and research should reflect this' (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2011, p. 261). We go a step further: while earlier research has identified the dimensions of the EU (e.g., economic/utilitarian, political/democratic, national identity, sovereignty-related) that are generally relevant to the public at large (e.g., De Vreese *et al.*, 2019), our approach is sensitive to the possibility that meanings vary across subsections of the population.

Fourth, while the antecedents of the attitudes on the dimensions referred to above are likely to vary across sub populations, the focus has, thus far, been on their relevance *for the population at large*. For example, Boomgaarden *et al.* (2011) aim to 'contribute to a more refined understanding of the extent to which different antecedents matter in explaining different dimensions of [EU] attitudes' (p. 243); De Vries and Steenbergen (2013) find that 'response variability can be explained by attributes of the individual and the national political environment' (p. 137); Carey (2002) finds that stronger feelings of national identity lead to less support for the EU; Hooghe and Marks (2004) investigate whether citizens' support for EU integration is based on economic or identity rationality; and, similarly, Lubbers (2008, p. 74) conducted a 'battle of explanations' aimed at assessing whether identity, utilitarian or political attitudes are most relevant for explaining the outcome of the referendum on the EU constitution. In other words, extant research has produced insightful explanations of EU attitudes, but assumes that these are relevant for all citizens alike. We advance upon this research by showing that their relevance depends on the meaning citizens ascribe to the EU, and thus may differ across different segments of the population.

In short, although extant research, which primarily relies on secondary data (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016; Vasilopoulou, 2017), has yielded important insights, it also contains many indications that scrutinizing the different ways citizens give meaning to the EU is worthwhile. We build on this by inductively uncovering the various meanings people ascribe to the institution, answering recent calls for more subtle data than available to date (cf. Vasilopoulou, 2017).

II. Data and Method

We conducted small-scale group interviews to explore the different meanings ascribed to the EU by Dutch citizens. We spoke to two participants individually, reflecting their preference for such a setting over a group approach. In total, we interviewed 45 respondents in 13 gatherings (details in online supplementary material). The interviews lasted for an average of one to two hours, and were conducted by the first author from spring to autumn of 2019.

The Netherlands is a particularly relevant case. It is one of the early members, turned from a net beneficiary to a net contributor to the EU in the 1990s (Harmsen, 2004), and is characterised by relatively strong popular EU support. Yet, popular opposition is certainly not marginal, for instance reflected in the substantial electorate of left- and right-wing Eurosceptic populist parties (Van Bohemen *et al.*, 2019), and the outcomes of referendums on the EU constitution (e.g., Lubbers, 2008) and the association treaty with Ukraine (e.g., Jacobs *et al.*, 2016). In short, in this traditionally 'Europhile nation', a variety of

social groups oppose EU membership (cf. Usherwood & Startin, 2013, p. 6), making it a strategic case to uncover different EU meanings. The Dutch context, moreover, is practically feasible because all authors are well acquainted with it and the in-depth interviews call for thorough knowledge of the national language, culture and position within the EU.

Compared to individual interviews, group interviews have the bonus of interaction between the participants (Cyr, 2016), which ensures that the interviews mimic everyday conversation as much as possible, enhancing external validity (Peek & Fothergill, 2009). Furthermore, they provide insight into ‘characteristic patterns of citizens’ beliefs and perceptions’ (Baglioni & Hurrelmann, 2016, p. 113), enabling us to uncover the meanings they ascribe to the EU. Moreover, participants in group interviews can speak freely and voice their opinions without the restrictions of a structured interview or survey approach, which increases the number of topics discussed and helps to identify reasoning and thought-processes (Morgan, 1996).

As we aimed to uncover variety in understandings of the EU, we made extensive efforts to interview a broad array of citizens in such a way that they felt comfortable to share their views. We did so by maximising heterogeneity in terms of (social) backgrounds *between* the groups, and homogeneity and familiarity *within* groups. To achieve the latter, we selected key informants – those with ‘strong connections to the community of interest’ (Peek & Fothergill, 2009, p. 35) – who invited family, friends and acquaintances to participate and chose the interview location (e.g., someone’s living room or a cafe) to create an informal setting and mimic a day-to-day conversation. Furthermore, our approach reduces the ‘exaggerating, minimising or withholding [of] experiences’ that occurs more often in heterogeneous groups (Cyr, 2016, p. 242). Note, however, that the homogeneity within groups did not mean that participants agreed with each other during the interviews: disagreements and differing perspectives on the EU were prominent. The small group size (two to six participants) ensured that everyone felt able to speak and reduced the likelihood of one person dominating the conversation (Peek & Fothergill, 2009).

Participants were selected using a step-by-step approach, attempting to achieve variation in terms of age and education, which are relevant in relation to views on the EU (Lubbers, 2008), and geographic location (centre/periphery; urban/rural). Sampling aimed at saturation of discourse instead of statistical representativeness (Charmaz, 2014). The respondents were found through community centres, vocational schools, universities and churches, and by calls on social media, leaflets, and word-of-mouth. Various politically active Facebook groups (e.g., *Gele Hesjes*; *Volt*), and political platforms were contacted to reach more outspoken participants. The reimbursement (a €30 gift certificate) given to each participant proved to be important, as it enabled us to also attract less politically engaged participants.

All interviews started with the interviewer asking the participants to write words they associate with the EU on cards. These cards were then placed in the middle of a table, and each participant explained why they wrote down those associations. Participants were free to comment or respond to other respondents’ associations or explanations. The interviewer played a minimal role, mainly acting as an observer who directed the conversation back to the EU when the participants went off-topic, which further contributed to the informal everyday setting of the conversation. Probing inspired by a topic list was used when necessary, but the interviews were guided as far as possible by the participants’ initial associations. The topic list consisted of general questions about the EU (e.g., ‘What do

you think the EU should involve itself with?’ and ‘In which way do you notice the EU in your day-to-day life?’), rather than specific themes or directions (positive/negative), to ensure that the course of the conversation was not skewed. The interviewer did not introduce any of the topics that were discussed, neither at the start of the interview nor during probing following input of the respondents. All the topics that were discussed were considered to be relevant by the participants themselves. The group discussions ended by asking the respondents to briefly summarize what the EU meant to them and writing this down in one to two sentences. At the end of the process, those involved explicitly stated that they had enjoyed their participation, saying: ‘Everyone let each other speak [...] that went perfectly here’ (Anja); ‘It was very interesting to participate, and hear everyone’s opinion’ (Anniek); and it was ‘interesting to talk about something you never [normally] talk about’ (Mirena). The participants thus felt free and safe to express their, regularly contrasting, perspectives.

The interviews were analysed using the ATLAS.ti software package. During the interview process memoing was used to note and subsequently analyse the initial observations. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim (producing 529 single-spaced pages), and anonymized using pseudonyms. The initial observations made during the interviews were written down in memos informing the coding process, as these memos reflected overarching themes prevalent in the group discussions. The transcriptions were analyzed with a grounded-theory approach, using open-coding as the initial step (Charmaz, 2014), where all relevant meanings or evaluations on the EU were given a separate code. Later, these open codes were grouped together using axial coding. Within the overarching themes, the open codes were furthermore divided into codes reflecting meanings of the EU and codes reflecting evaluations of the EU (selective coding). The first author did all coding, and throughout the coding process the codes and themes were regularly and thoroughly discussed by all authors, and with other members of the research group, as to assure validity.

III. Uncovering citizens’ Understandings of the EU

Our analysis revealed four ideal-typical discourses about the EU: pragmatic, federalist, anti-establishment and disengaged. These different manners of speaking about the EU reveal starkly different meanings ascribed to the EU. Strikingly similar criticisms could be found in all the discourses: wasting money, a lack of transparency and a lack of democracy. *Why* these issues were considered to be problematic differed greatly across the discourses, as detailed below, highlighting evaluations of the EU that go beyond the frequently assumed ‘Europhilia – Euroscepticism’ dimension. Table 1 provides an overview of the core content of the four discourses, as well as the discourse-specific reasons underlying the criticisms that were commonly expressed about the institution.

Pragmatic Discourse: ‘There are a lot of things where you can say ‘why would you get involved with that, Europe?’”

The first discourse regards the EU as a tool with which to achieve and facilitate what the Netherlands is unable to (easily) do on its own: it is viewed as a means to an end. Variation within this discourse pertains to: 1) the matters the EU ought to be involved with,

Table 1: Central elements of discourses and discourse-specific evaluations of the EU

<i>Discourses</i>	<i>Central elements</i>		<i>Discourse-specific reasons underlying shared EU criticisms</i>			
	<i>Main concern</i>	<i>Group of primary interest</i>	<i>Intrinsic nature EU</i>	<i>Waste of money</i>	<i>Lack of transparency</i>	<i>Lack of democracy</i>
Pragmatist: The EU is instrumental for goals the Netherlands cannot achieve on its own	Transfer of national sovereignty to EU beyond what is deemed strictly necessary	The nation state	Neutral; dependant on its usefulness	The EU goes beyond what is necessary for achieving envisioned goals	Hampers the monitoring of sovereignty transfers	Undermines the legitimacy of sovereignty transfers
Federalist: The EU is more important than individual member states	The sovereignty of nation states hampers the EU as a whole	The EU as a whole	Good	Inadequate collaboration between member states	Shortcoming that endangers EU support among less-informed citizens	Nation states (Council of Ministers) have too much power
Anti-establishment: The EU is instrumental to an malicious elite exploiting the Netherlands and the 'common' people	Control and suppression by elite perceived as malicious	The 'common' people	Malicious	Malicious self-interested actions of the elite	Intentional lack of clarity, enabling the exploitation of the Netherlands and the 'common' people	Intentional lack of power of Dutch citizens, enabling the exploitation of the Netherlands and the 'common' people
Disengaged: Explicit disinterest in the EU, and haphazard associations	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

which are related to 2) the degree of sovereignty that the Netherlands is required to give up.

The most limited perspective on the EU in this discourse focuses on its value in enabling the smooth running of day-to-day issues, for example holidays and the easy use of the same currency throughout the bloc. Paulien, for example, says it is ‘nice and convenient for holidays’, while Walter notes it is ‘convenient’ that there are ‘no exchange rates’ to consider.

A somewhat more encompassing understanding in this discourse is that the EU should not stray from its original economic principles. The respondents want ‘to go back to the origin of the EU’ (Mike), with the focus on trade. As Anja states: ‘it would have been better for me if it stayed like it originally was’. This goes together with the notion that sovereignty should remain with individual countries as much as possible: ‘You can have agreements for Europe as a whole, but you still have the sovereignty of the country, so the basic rules need to stay within country borders’ (Mats). Mike, after noting that EU should go back to basics, likewise claimed that ‘all that other stuff they need to organize nationally’.

Internal and external affairs are both stressed in the most comprehensive pragmatic understanding. Internal issues pertain to policies that address problems that the Netherlands cannot manage alone: ‘migration’ (Sabine) and ‘environmental, climate, safety, migration issues’ (Henriette), are ‘things you can organize together’ (Sabine). The EU should thus only involve itself in matters that cannot be resolved by countries on their own: ‘The bigger things, not the small peanuts’ (Pien), because ‘we have our own government who can think’ (Henriette). The institution should not interfere with issues like ‘pensions’ (Guus), ‘paternity leave’ (Pien) or the ‘how high the dykes ought to be’ (René). This pragmatic purpose of the EU is therefore closely linked with only relinquishing national sovereignty if necessary: ‘There are a lot of things where you can say ‘why would you get involved with that, Europe?’ (René).

In this discourse, EU external affairs should focus on collaboration between countries that is deemed to be necessary to defend themselves against outside forces: ‘in a threatening world with Trump and China [...] it’s important that you’re stronger together’ (Esther). Likewise, Tim states ‘It’s essential that we unite to protect us from external threats’, because European countries alone ‘can’t do anything against these big powers’. Again, the acceptability of transferring sovereignty to the EU depends on the goal: as the institution’s purpose in relation to external affairs is perceived to be more important than in the case of internal issues, giving up some sovereignty is seen as appropriate.

In short, in this pragmatist discourse, the EU is seen as a means to an end, and the acceptability of transferring national sovereignty to the bloc depends on the goals identified as appropriate by the respondents.

Evaluation: The EU as a Necessary Evil

In the pragmatist discourse, the EU is seen as a necessary evil: as an institution that does not intrinsically spark enthusiasm, but which ‘has a right to exist’ (Henriette) because of the goals it serves. Evaluations are typically formulated as constructive criticism. For example, after listing quite a lot of criticisms, Anja adds: ‘It may seem like I’m very negative, but I do think the EU is a very noble pursuit’. Three more common points of criticism can be identified in this discourse: the EU’s wasting of money and its lack of

transparency and democracy. Although condemnation on these issues is relatively widespread, they are stressed in this discourse for specific reasons: dissatisfaction with the underutilization of the resources required to achieve pragmatic goals, and a perceived lack of control over transferred sovereignty.

In relation to the EU's apparent wasting of money, the respondents voicing this discourse do not oppose its spending in general, but believe it should be more efficient to achieve the institution's pragmatic goals: 'Public money is spent too easily' (Mike); 'too much money is spent on meetings, travelling, consultants' (Wieke); and the EU 'shouldn't throw money around' (Anja). Inefficient spending signals to the respondents that the EU is doing more than required to achieve its goals. Take, for example, the European Parliament's monthly move between Brussels and Strasbourg: 'It costs loads of money, moving every time' (Henriette); '[moving is] just too expensive' (Sabine). Moreover, accountability for the EU's spending is seen to be lacking: Anja claims that the EU 'should be held accountable', asking 'what's the money spent on?', while Pauline adds, 'But also, where does [the money] go to? Show it to us'.

The EU's perceived lack of transparency is viewed as problematic, because it hinders the ability to monitor the institution to which sovereignty was transferred by necessity: 'The common man who knows nothing or very little isn't being [kept] informed at all' (Pien); the EU is 'a cumbersome institution [that is] hard to understand' (Yannick); 'abstract' (Kylie); 'falls short with regards to information' (Mats). Therefore, the EU 'has to work on its level of transparency and information provision to the common man' (Pien). Likewise, the critique on a lack of democracy stresses the need to improve the relationship between the EU and its citizens, with the focus on increasing the latter's power. Gijs, for instance, claims: 'Even though we voted for the European Parliament, the parliament doesn't amount to anything', while Yannick notes that 'you vote here, but then it seems to take ages before [your vote] arrives in Brussels'. Consequently, the European Parliament 'should be closer to everyone' (Wieke). Such a criticism of the EU is given voice because a democratic deficit hampers the monitoring and accountability that are deemed to be necessary because of the sovereignty transferred to the institution.

Federalist Discourse: 'United States of Europe'

The second discourse has a federalist perspective on the EU. Collaboration between member states is desired within this discourse, not as a means to serve the interests of individual member states, but because it is intrinsically seen as good. Jack, for example, says he is 'in favour of a more federalist state, with one clear policy and one economic policy', while Vincent states that 'my dream scenario is more federalist, more United States of Europe'. Individual member states, then, are seen as inferior to the EU itself, with the claim being made that people in the EU 'think too much in nation states, rather than in terms of Europe as a whole' (Aaron). It is also claimed that Europeans all belong together: 'Why all the differences [between countries]? Only because we once drew a border somewhere?' (Walter).

In this federalist perspective, the EU can serve both internal and external goals. However, unlike the pragmatic discourse, the focus is not on achieving these goals with as little EU involvement as possible. Instead, shared policies are emphasized in relation to internal issues: 'It's incredibly important that legislation on all levels is the same for the whole of the EU' (Roland); the EU is 'the keeper of the peace' between countries (Kylie); and, with respect

to the exchange of cultures and practices: ‘To me, the EU is the uniting of different cultures and societies, which are more similar than they could have ever thought’ (Vincent). The EU is thus regarded as a single united bulwark, where all citizens belong together: ‘I really enjoy driving through Italy and thinking ‘I belong here too’ (Roderick).

An external focus of this discourse concerns protecting the EU against outside threats. This is not just about collectively defending national interests, but also means protecting European progressive values:

If you look, for example, at the international situation in the countries that have the biggest influence over the EU: America, Russia and China. And the EU is actually more progressive than all three. So, it will be very important to keep the EU as a community, to also protect that (Aaron).

In short, this federalist discourse envisions collaboration and unity between member states, both from an internal (between member states) and an external (between the EU and the rest of the world) perspective.

Evaluation: The EU as a Federalist Ideal

Evaluations of the EU within this discourse are again characterized by constructive criticism, but in this case from a perspective of federalist idealism: the EU is seen as *too limited*, rather than *too omnipresent*. It is thought to not have the power it needs: ‘They can do very little, with a limited budget, limited resources’, which means it has ‘little democratic legitimacy’ (Vincent). Some respondents claim that: the EU is ‘a united Europe, but at the same time it’s not’ (Jack); and that ‘the European Parliament needs a lot more power’ (Roland).

Again, there are more widely shared points of criticism that can only be understood by taking the meaning ascribed to the EU into account. Those adhering to the federalist discourse criticize the EU’s wasting of money, lack of transparency and lack of democracy, because this is what limits its potential power and so stands in the way of their ideal of a federalist Europe.

Compared to the pragmatic discourse, the critique of the EU’s wasting of money seems to be similar at first sight: Roland notes that ‘money is thrown around’ and Lin argues that salaries and reimbursements ‘should not be excessive’. Yet, where the pragmatist discourse focuses on the EU’s lack of efficiency when using money for achieving specific goals, the federalist viewpoint sees this more as the result of the (yet) unsatisfactory degree of collaboration between member states, because of different attitudes towards public money. Roland claims that ‘in Italy you’re considered an idiot if you pay taxes’, while Walter stresses the need for collaboration: ‘If you collaborate with so many countries, then you have to agree on what people get paid in parliament [...] in the south they were paid much better than in the north’.

The pragmatic discourse’s critique of a lack of transparency comes from a position where this is regarded as putting the monitoring role of citizens at risk. In the federalist perspective, however, this information deficit is seen as endangering support for the EU, since it can limit what other citizens understand about the institution. Information on the EU is viewed as being for the ‘happy few’ and people must ‘actively look for’ it (Roland), which is regarded as a ‘big problem’ as there ‘are a lot of citizens who don’t

know what goes on' (Aaron). This is seen as lamentable, since: '[the EU] does important things we never hear about' (Pieter), and 'generally only the negative stuff comes up' (Jack).

Furthermore, while the pragmatic discourse criticizes democracy within the EU because transfers of sovereignty should be legitimized, the reason underlying critique on EU democracy is radically different in this federalist viewpoint: the nation states are considered to have *too much* power, with respondents stating that 'the power of the Council of Ministers has to be restricted' because 'it's always the nation states that are obstructive' (Roland). The EU itself is considered to not have enough power: 'The European Parliament only has [a] little say in things, they have more of an advisory role' (Vincent). In line with this, Aaron claims that the EU should be represented more by its citizens than by nation states, noting that the EU seems an 'organization where states are represented, and not citizens themselves'.

Anti-Establishment Discourse: 'the EU is total control and suppression by the elite'

In this third discourse, the EU is seen as an instrument used by malicious elites exploiting the Netherlands and 'common' people. Indeed, the populist notion of 'us', the 'common' people, versus 'them', the 'elitist' EU, is prevalent. Such a perceived malicious intent leads to omnipresent negative assessments. As such, unlike the other discourses, *evaluations* cannot be identified separately from the *meanings* ascribed to the EU.

Along with explicit negative evaluations, two key themes are prevalent. First, the idea that the EU is primarily a group of people rather than an institution. This is characterized by numerous direct references to specific politicians and individuals when answering questions about the EU in general. Samantha, for example, commented on Jean-Claude Juncker: 'He's a drunk [...] and those kinds of people have to govern us?' Likewise, Aart claims that 'Juncker promoted Mr Selmayer twice in one day, without consulting anyone. That's nepotism'. This emphasis on the presumed self-interest of the elites is further illustrated by a focus on EU politicians as career politicians striving to get the highest possible position: Ernst, for example, notes: 'If you're [in Brussels] and you're smart, you make sure you stay there [...] it's all about money, not ideals' (Ernst). Jobs within the EU are thus kept within the in-crowd and passed around, as Aart states about Christine Lagarde: 'She's being pushed around the whole European circuit'. Similarly, Oert states: 'You won't get rid of certain faces until they die'.

Moreover, EU politicians are regarded as 'corrupt', with the claim being that they do everything they can to suppress the citizens below them in order to only better themselves. Rather than receiving bribes and acting accordingly, a corrupt politician is understood here as (mis)using public money for personal gain, spending money unnecessarily and generally doing everything for themselves rather than the greater good. The requirements for an EU politician are said to be 'that you're a narcissist, have no empathy [...] and are motivated by a fat bank account' (Wilma), and you 'are willing to commit corruption' (Charona).

The second prevailing theme is that the EU sits at the pinnacle of a power hierarchy. It is a 'clique on top, who call themselves the EU' (Samantha), and 'group of elites who rule every country' (Oert). As such, the Netherlands is said to be positioned below the EU and must abide by its wishes: 'Currently, we have a government that only does what it's told by Brussels' (Bernadet). The EU, then, is also seen as exploiting the Netherlands: 'They

want you to abide by the EU, and Dutch law is subordinate to that' (Samantha), while Charona describes the EU as 'a tactical coup'. This indicates that politics and politicians in the Netherlands are seen as being all parts of the same EU structure: '[...] the EU is nothing less than an extension of the bankrupt administration that we currently have' (Mike), with the Dutch prime minister (Mark Rutte) being regarded as 'the bellboy of the EU' (Samantha) or 'a pawn' (Charona). This exemplifies a cynical type of power-thought: the way politicians act reflects their focus on getting a better job, rather than improving the EU for its citizens.

To summarize, this anti-establishment discourse sees the EU as a malicious group of elites ruling over the citizens of the various member states and acting only out of self-interest.

Evaluation: The Malicious Intent of the EU

We predominantly find destructive, rather than constructive, critical evaluations within this anti-establishment discourse. Like the previous two discourses, more widely shared points of criticism were voiced, which can, again, be understood by taking the core idea of the discourse into account. So, in this perspective, disapproval of how the EU wastes money is an example of criticism aimed at what are seen as the malicious, money-grabbing actions of the elite, to the detriment of Dutch citizens: 'They claim expenses that turn out to be completely incorrect, and make citizens suffer' (Samantha), while Charona states that Nexit would make 'prosperity come back' because 'then we can spend the money on our own country'.

In this anti-establishment perspective, a lack of transparency on the part of the EU is seen as a way in which it, and so the elites, demonstrate their malicious intent. The EU is thought to control the media, meaning it lacks transparency and, as a result, suppresses the lower classes. As Samantha notes: 'They aren't transparent; they say one thing and mean another. And they all keep it behind closed doors. And that destroys citizens; they're being used as modern slaves. For their own self-glorification and self-enrichment'. Moreover, as Ernst notes: 'That's my biggest complaint about Europe: it's just like we're living in a dictatorship where the media all point in one direction'. Similarly, Samantha notes that 'the EU decides the news that we hear', while Wilma claims that 'everything's suppressed, so the truth won't come out'.

Moreover, a lack of democracy within this context is seen as a way in which the elites ensure that everything they do is for their benefit, not for that of the general public, with the EU described by some respondents as 'anti-democratic' and 'a force that actively works against democracy' (Oert). Furthermore, Ernst states a belief that the EU is 'imposed on us' and 'the people who are in it [the EU], I don't feel like those people represent me or that they were chosen'.

Disengaged Discourse: 'the EU means little to me'

In the fourth discourse, very little meaning is ascribed to the EU. Instead, this perspective stands out by the disengaged way citizens speak about the institution. Mirena, for example, expresses the view that the EU 'actually [means] very little [to me]', saying: 'It doesn't concern me much', while Myrthe says that she 'doesn't notice' the EU. One

way in which this discourse's disengaged perspective becomes clear is through the *manner* in which the EU is spoken about by the respondents.

First by second-order speaking – talking about what people in general think, instead of sharing one's own perspectives. Mirena, for example, says: 'You often hear [...] that Brussels tries to meddle in everything', although she admits she 'has too little knowledge to actually form a concrete opinion'. Myrthe echoes her parents' views: 'They talk about certain points that make me think it might be better for our welfare to have our own currency again' and Phoebe agrees because 'I hear my mum [talk] about it'.

Second by making haphazard associations. Linde, for example, says that one of the first words she associates with the EU is 'borders', because 'countries all share it with the European Union'. Likewise, Sofie associates 'leaders' with Europe, because 'leaders come together to have a meeting about how they are doing and so on' and 'the EU to me is countries who work together'. Myrthe, moreover, associates the EU with 'government', because that 'just crossed my mind'. This highlights that the respondents make such associations because they were asked to; these do not represent any coherent meaning that is ascribed to the institution.

In line with this disengaged discourse, there is an emphasis on a perceived distance from the EU. Sofie, for example, claims that: 'You don't notice if something changes because of the EU'. Likewise, Linde states: 'It doesn't cross your mind to talk about it'. Moreover, there are no ideological reasons for political participation in the institution: Sofie notes that she 'voted randomly' in the European Parliament elections because she 'didn't really know a lot about it', but she did want to go out and vote as 'I thought it would be [a] nice [thing] to do'; Myrthe 'voted because my parents made me'; and Mirena asks: 'Have there been European elections before? I've never voted'.

The associations with the EU made in this disengaged perspective can therefore be regarded as *meaningless*: the ideal-typical adherent to this discourse seemingly makes haphazard connections and actively notes their disinterest in the institution.

Evaluation: Indifference towards the EU

The disengagement within this discourse is reflected in an almost explicit indifference towards the EU. Forming a concrete opinion, then, is deemed to be difficult: 'It's so big and so complex [...] how can you have a concrete opinion about that?' (Mirena). Myrthe similarly exclaims: 'Look, we hear things, we say stuff now, but we don't even know what's true [...] So, I find it hard to say if I think something is wrong'. Evaluations within this discourse thus go beyond a continuum ranging from Eurosceptic to Europhile and are characterized by indifference. This does not mean that such citizens do not voice any criticisms of or enthusiasm towards the EU, but that these evaluations vary widely and depend on the context in which the conversation about the institution is being held. In other words, there is no clear-cut idea of the EU and, therefore, also no clear-cut evaluations. As a result, and unlike the other discourses, common points of criticism that have different underlying reasons cannot be identified in this perspective.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our use of in-depth (group) interviews in the Netherlands uncovered four discourses on the EU – pragmatic, federalist, anti-establishment and disengaged – which reveal

starkly different meanings of the EU, indicating that the EU is a polysemic concept. More so because the discourses identified do not easily lie on a continuum ranging from Euroscepticism to Europhilia. Instead, they differ nominally, and each informs specific evaluations: they share criticisms about specific aspects of the EU – the wasting of money and a lack of transparency and democracy – but differ in the reasons underlying these criticisms.

That the EU means very different things to different segments of the public, and that widespread criticisms are voiced because of altogether different reasons, is a novel insight: the field has thus far most notably focused on how the EU is understood and evaluated by citizens *in general*. For example, by: conceptualizing different types of EU opposition and support (e.g., Kopecký & Mudde, 2002; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004; Krouwel & Abts, 2007; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2010; De Vries, 2018); exploring the EU's multidimensionality in public opinion research (e.g., Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2011; Hobolt & Wrátil, 2015; de Vreese *et al.*, 2019); scrutinizing the most important antecedents to the citizenry's EU attitudes (e.g., Carey, 2002; Hooghe & Marks, 2004; Lubbers, 2008; Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2011; de Vries & Steenbergen, 2013); and presenting 'battles of explanations' (Lubbers, 2008), as indicated by titles as "Does Identity or Economic Rationality Drive Public Opinion on European Integration?" (Hooghe & Marks, 2004).

While previous research has carefully documented which dimensions of EU attitudes and which antecedents thereof are relevant among the public at large, our findings emphasize that different understandings of the EU exist among different segments of the public. Our study complements a wide body of extant research by indicating that the relevance of different types, dimensions and antecedents of EU support and opposition may be grounded in different *understandings* of the EU. For example, the strong sense of national identity linked to Euroscepticism by, amongst others, Carey (2002) and Hooghe and Marks (2004), does not necessarily associate with low EU support: we find it in those adhering to a Eurosceptic anti-establishment discourse, *and* in those adhering to the more Europhile pragmatic discourse. Another example is that critique on the EU does not necessarily reflect anti-institutionalism (e.g., Krouwel & Abts, 2007; Van Bohemen *et al.*, 2019); it certainly does in the anti-establishment discourse, but discourses embracing the EU also include substantial critiques. Moreover, whereas Inglehart's (1970) notion of cognitive mobilisation links Euroscepticism to a lack of political knowledge, those adhering to the most Eurosceptic discourse were clearly very knowledgeable about the issue. In our sample it is instead disengagement which associates with limited political knowledge. In short, our in-depth qualitative study does not so much reveal altogether novel types, dimensions and antecedents of EU support and opposition, but adds to the literature by demonstrating that they combine in specific ways among different citizens.

Our findings are relevant for understanding attitudes to the EU and have implications for widespread research practices, policy proposals and information campaigns. Take the following question in the widely used Eurobarometer survey: 'On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU?' (Eurobarometer, 2019). Citizens adhering to the pragmatist, federalist and anti-establishment discourses could all answer this question negatively, but for very different reasons. Whereas ideal-typical pragmatists, and especially those adhering to

the anti-establishment discourse, are likely to do so because they feel the EU has too *much* power vis-à-vis the nation state, the ideal-typical federalist will do so because they feel the EU has too *little* power. Clearly, therefore, a negative (positive) score on the abovementioned survey item – and many others conventionally used for assessing EU attitudes – cannot simply be interpreted as Euroscepticism (Europhilia).

Moreover, extant research generally implicitly assumes that respondents have concrete opinions on the EU. Yet, we demonstrated that for those adhering to the disengaged discourse it bears little to no meaning. Consequently, their responses to survey items would most likely be non-attitudes (Converse, 1970), prone to question-order effects. Note, moreover, that we uncovered the disengaged discourse even when the EU was highly salient and politicised in the media, as the interviews were held just before, during and after European Parliament elections. This suggests it is not a marginal phenomenon.

The four discourses on the EU uncovered here are also likely to be relevant to assessments of how attitudes to the EU are shaped by new policies or information. An example is the video accompanying the European Parliament's initiative, 'This Time I'm Voting' (European Parliament, 2019), which explains the EU's potential for reducing climate change, making borders safe and fighting terrorism, and urges citizens to think about their future and cast their vote in the European Parliament elections. This campaign is likely to be: 1) ineffective among the ideal-typical federalists, as it does not provide them with new information; 2) interpreted as a facade for the EU's malicious intent by those adhering to the anti-establishment discourse, which could incite further opposition; and 3) responded to by ideal-typical pragmatists in a wide variety of ways: neutrally (if they already have an encompassing, pragmatist understanding of the EU), positively (if they envisage new uses for the institution, thanks to the information provided), or negatively (if the themes addressed go beyond what they see as appropriate uses).

Accordingly, the impact of information campaigns or new policies is probably not universal, but contingent on the discourse to which citizens adhere. The exact same 'stimulus' may therefore lead to positive attitudinal changes among some, have a limited or no effect on others and inspire discontent among others still. Moreover, our results suggest that institutional changes impact EU attitudes in different ways in different groups, for instance when it comes to the much-debated issue of EU enlargement. Previous studies have suggested that 'some citizens have multifaceted opinions on the integration process' (Hobolt, 2014, p. 678), and that support for EU enlargement is contingent on 'instrumental self-interest and EU performance' (Karp & Bowler, 2006, p. 386) and 'utilitarian explanations of integration' (Hobolt, 2014, p. 678). Our findings, however, suggest that citizens' opinions on enlargement depend on the *meaning* they ascribe to the EU: while further EU enlargement is likely to spark enthusiasm among ideal-typical federalists, those adhering to the pragmatic and the anti-establishment discourses will probably respond negatively, albeit for completely different reasons: both perspectives explicitly criticize the size of the EU, but where the former views expansion as being beyond the institution's pragmatic uses, the latter interprets it as being evidence of a power-hungry, self-interested EU elite. Future (experimental) research could investigate how varying understandings of the EU shape the effects of institutional changes and information on EU attitudes.

Moreover, future studies could identify the relative importance of the discourses revealed here, as well as their social bases, for instance analysing the relevance of

characteristics known to affect Euroscepticism, like gender (e.g., Van Klingereren, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2013), level of education (e.g., Hooghe & Marks, 2005;), and age (e.g. Lauterbach & De Vries, 2020). Follow-up research can also illuminate how those discourses are shaped by events and by how the EU is framed in media outlets and by political elites, and shed light on the vital and complex question of whether, when and why citizens switch between, or combine elements of, different discourses. Future research could also uncover how far our findings travel beyond the Dutch case. That the Netherlands is a net EU contributor that champions financial frugality and has longstanding democratic institutions of relatively high quality, is likely related to our finding that negative evaluations regarding a waste of money and the EU's democratic performance (cf., Desmet *et al.*, 2012), were present across the board. However, the prominence of these issues may have been reinforced by a relatively high level of media attention during our field work, which partly coincided with the European Parliament elections. Whether the salience of these issues reflects more stable long-term concerns shared among the Dutch public at large is, hence, for future research to decide. Nonetheless, one would expect other issues to incite criticism of the EU in other countries. For example those regarding financial austerity measures in Italy or Greece, or those regarding the rule of law in Poland or Hungary (Krastev & Holmes, 2018).

All in all, Dutch citizens ascribe different meanings to the EU, and these inform how they evaluate its current state. Consequently, they voice the same type of critique, but for very different reasons, and such critique can go hand in hand with both a Eurosceptic and Europhile stance. Future research could uncover the wider relevance of these findings, both in the Netherlands and beyond.

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Correspondence: Elske van den Hoogen, Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, P.O. Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, the Netherlands.
email: vandenhoogen@essb.eur.nl

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Table S1. Overview of the respondents' characteristics.