

# Deeply contested yet taken for granted - The legitimation of the euro between the political and the everyday. An analysis through focus groups

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## Abstract

As questions on the legitimation of the EU have become central in the literature of European studies, so has the role of public opinion. Yet, in studying public opinion on the EU, relatively little attention has been paid to how legitimation takes place 'on the ground': how citizens perceive, understand and evaluate European integration. While a large literature has emerged mapping attitudes like support or trust on the basis of surveys, it lacks a good understanding of how citizens perceive the presence of the EU in their daily lives, how this relates to the way they make sense of the political questions surrounding European integration, and how this subsequently results in their normative positioning on the EU.

Addressing this gap, this dissertation proposes a theoretical framework for studying 'legitimation on the ground'. In turn, it applies this framework by empirically studying a particular case: the euro. As a huge step in the process of European integration, the euro on the one hand entails a deep transformation in governance, raising important questions of democracy, autonomy and solidarity. On the other hand, the euro is also a tangible, daily life object through which the EU entered the everyday lives of citizens. And while the euro on the one hand has become strongly contested in the political debate – particularly since the euro crisis – it at the same time has continued to see high support from citizens. The euro thus presents us with a puzzle that is at the heart of understanding EU legitimation, bringing up very sharply the question how legitimacy balances between the everyday and the political. How can an object with such deeply political consequences lend itself so easily to normalization – seemingly at least? Can the huge political questions attached to it simply remain latent? Or could it be that the euro's sustainability is in fact jeopardized because of people's opinions on underlying questions like solidarity and national autonomy? To put it in one phrase, how do citizens *legitimate* the euro?

Using a series of focus groups conducted in Italy, France and the Netherlands, this study employs a 'close reading' of public opinion on the euro. It investigates how citizens perceive and evaluate the euro, and whether the political implications of the currency union are compatible with the normative stances of its public. The focus group results show the importance of everyday life conceptions of the euro, in which the euro is perceived as a practical object having in the first place a utilitarian and symbolic meaning, and is seen in a relatively a-political light – even if relevant differences along national and social lines emerge as well. To the extent that people do talk about the euro in a more political way, their political understanding is often rather diffuse. As a consequence of this generally a-political perception of the euro, evaluations of the euro are likely to be based more on either practical considerations of convenience and daily life utility, or on more generic attitudes towards European integration in general – or even politics at large –, rather than on evaluations of the euro's specific consequences, meaning opinions are *embedded* in larger societal or political perceptions. Indeed, rather than being consciously evaluated, the euro itself is mostly taken for granted, and met with what we could call a banal acceptance. Focus group participants do

rarely question it, or affectively praise it for that matter, as they do not see the euro as a topic subject to political agency.

Stances towards the politics of the euro are more ambiguous however. On itself, the types of opinions expressed in the focus groups are not directly problematic for the euro, as most are in line with what the euro demands in terms of solidarity and autonomy. At least, focus group participants rarely reject the euro because of its effects in terms of such items. At the same time, this is also because these questions are seen as complex, and people have difficulty in connecting them to the euro, and in making sense of them in the first place. As a consequence, stances here are often characterized by ambivalence and indeterminacy, and appear susceptible to mobilization. And in that sense, such opinions are more feeble than appears on the surface. This is particularly because people hardly see the euro as a matter of common European concern, and primarily see questions related to the euro through strongly national lenses. Lacking a sense of community, the normative underpinnings of the euro are fragile.

Thus, this study shows how in understanding the legitimacy of the euro, it is crucial to understand the role of its everyday character, as well as the perceived complexity of its politics. In terms of support, the euro is currently 'protected' by its practical, 'banal' appearance, which shields it from public contestation. As long as people continue to see the euro as a relatively a-political entity and its political consequences as diffuse, even negative opinions on the euro's politics do not need to manifest themselves as active problems for the euro. At the same time, this is no guarantee for its stability, and the single currency's banality is no assurance for its continued legitimacy. Fundamentally, the euro requires some more fundamental predispositions from its public in order to make it normatively and functionally tenable, and the findings of this research suggest that these are fragile. This hints at a *potential* legitimacy deficit, in which mobilization by political elites plays a crucial role. Even if it might be difficult to lift the euro out of the banal, everyday light it is seen in now, opposition to its politics can still translate into functional problems. In the case push comes to shove in one way or another, the banal acceptance of the euro then also has another side: it means there also is little diffuse support protecting it. In that sense, the stability of the euro depends on its politics maintaining low salience.

Finally, the relevance of these results also goes beyond the euro itself, as they have implications for the way we understand the role of public opinion in the EU as well. By underscoring how opinions on European affairs can often be seen as a derivative of more general political opinions, and are thus characterized by a kind of diffuseness, they add to our understanding of the politicization of the EU. For in this way, they suggest that the constraining dissensus that is said to have emerged should not be seen so much as fueled by strong politicization of the EU at the citizen level, but rather as driven by a more general political discontent which creates a more fertile ground for mobilization against the EU by political challengers.