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# Producing salience or keeping silence? An exploration of topics and non-topics of Special Eurobarometers

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Steven Van de Walle

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# Producing salience or keeping silence?

## An exploration of topics and non-topics of Special Eurobarometers

Markus Haverland\*, Minou de Ruiter\*\* and  
Steven Van de Walle\*\*\*

### Abstract

Public opinion does not fall out of the sky. What passes for public opinion in the European Union is largely the answers of its citizens to questions posed in surveys commissioned and controlled by the European Commission. This paper presents the first systematic mapping of the topics and non-topics of the 400 so-called Special Eurobarometers: reports based on batteries of questions about specific policy issues posed in face-to-face interviews to about 25,000 citizens, constituting nationally representative samples of all member states. This exploration is especially relevant against the background of the increased politicisation of the EU; both given the potential value of public opinion as a “substitute” for a more direct link to the electorate and as a power resource in decision-making. We chart the frequency of Special EBs over time, identify the topics (and non-topics) using the Comparative Agenda Project’s EU codebook, and relate their frequency to the distribution of competencies between the EU and its member states. We also document the variation across DGs in their effort to gauge public opinion. We conclude that the Commission is increasingly seeking public opinion and that it does so in a very broad range of policy areas. We find a curvilinear relationship between the degree of EU competencies and the frequency of Special EBs. Citizen input is less sought in areas where the EU already has far reaching competencies and in areas which are clearly in the national (or even sub-national) domain. The lion’s share of Special EBs is conducted in the realm of shared competencies, with an emphasis on those areas where the EU got involved relatively recently. We also detected only two Special EBs specifically related to the redistribution of resources (e.g., cohesion policy) and none on immigration. We also find a large variation across the DGs on whose behalf Special EBs are conducted. Three DGs are responsible for half of all EBs and nine DGs for less than five percent. These results open up promising avenues for research on the responsiveness of the European Commission and its agenda setting strategies and legitimacy seeking behaviour.

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# Producing salience or keeping silence?

## An exploration of topics and non-topics of Special Eurobarometers

### 1. Introduction

*'The concept of enhancing the link between Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) payments and environmental protection throughout the EU and limiting the amount of payments any individual farm can receive are broadly supported by EU citizens, according to a EUROBAROMETER opinion poll published today'...'* EU Agriculture Commissioner Dacian Cioloş welcomed the poll's findings, stating today: *'I have always underlined that the CAP is not just for farmers, but for all EU citizens. This poll confirms that some of the key concepts of our reform – such as "Greening" and "Capping" have wide public support.'* (European Commission, 2011)

*'It is important to remember that the Eurobarometer is an instrument created and financed by a political institution. It is therefore inconceivable that it could somehow damage that institution with the publication of adverse results in this regard'*

(Signorelli 2012: 69)

Public opinion does not fall out of the sky. In fact, what passes for public opinion in the European Union consists largely of the answers of European Union citizens to questions regularly posed to them in surveys commissioned and controlled by the European Commission. These surveys do not only

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enquire about general citizen attitudes towards the EU. In fact, around 400 times thousands of EU citizens have been surveyed through face-to-face interviews about specific policy topics ranging from nuclear waste disposal to sex tourism, from disaster management to breast cancer, from food safety to child care, and from corruption to public service liberalization. Questions may concern the citizens' problem perceptions, their behaviour, their awareness and evaluations of current EU policies, their preferred policy solutions and the level (national or EU) at which action should be taken.

Specific exemplars of these so-called Special Eurobarometers occasionally raise the interests of scholars working in a particular policy area, but to our knowledge there has never been a systematic overall mapping of these massive investments in gauging citizen opinion (however, see Signorelli 2012<sup>1</sup>). This lacuna is surprising for a number of reasons.

From a normative perspective the Special EBs can be viewed as a potentially important link between the Commission and citizens. This link may become more relevant in the aftermath of the Maastricht Treaty, which marked the end of the permissive consensus: winning support for further integration at referenda cannot be taken for granted, Eurosceptic parties have been established and have increased in importance, and trust in the EU is declining in the member states (e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2008). As a response, European institutions, and in particular the European Commission, claim to seek wider societal input by reaching out towards civil society organizations and the public at large. After the Dutch and French 'no' on a European Constitution, the European Commission drafted an 'Action Plan to improve communicating Europe' (2005).

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<sup>1</sup> In the course of our research it came to our attention that a policy paper by the think tank Notre Europe contains information covering the same ground as the third part of our analysis: the number of Special EBs requested by each DG (Signorelli 2012).

The action plan states that:

*'Communication establishes a relationship and initiates a dialogue with European citizens, it listens carefully and it connects to people. It is not a neutral exercise devoid of value; it is an essential part of the political process (European Commission, 2005: 3).*

According to the Commission, one of the most important elements of this 'listening process' is the analysis of Eurobarometer data (European Commission, 2005: 8).

While some instruments to link citizens to the EU, such as internet consultations, have received scholarly attention (see e.g. Persson 2007, Kohler-Koch 2012), the Special EBs have not yet been systematically addressed, even though citizens can express their opinion directly in these interviews without mediation by NGOs or other actors. Public opinion could be seen by the Commission as a substitute for the direct electoral link with citizens, as a weak form of 'input' legitimacy when it comes to developing new proposals and 'output' legitimacy regarding the evaluation of existing policies (Scharpf 1999). The first quote in the beginning of this paper illustrates the use of the results of a Special Eurobarometer for claiming this 'output' legitimacy.

Also and related to the former point, assuming that the Commission is at least partly an agent with own interests, the end of the permissive consensus might also have caused a shift in the strategy of the Commission to claim its importance. Majone and many other scholars have conceptualized the Commission as an institution that tries to expand its influence by expanding the legislative scope of EU policy (Cram, 1993; Majone, 1996; Wendon, 1998: 340; Pollack, 2003: 35; Wonka, 2008; 1146, Hartlapp et al. 2014). As Princen has argued "the European Commission and other supra-national actors had

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to demonstrate to a larger extent than the established national governments that ‘their’ level is the appropriate level to deal with the issue at hand.” (2011: 940). Empirical research has demonstrated that the Commission used to follow a depoliticized route of agenda setting, through relatively close policy (expert) communities (Princen & Rhinard, 2006; 1121). Against the background of the end of the permissive consensus, the results of the Special EBs may help to build credibility for new EU proposals. If a (large) majority of citizens in a (large) majority of countries declare that a topic should be tackled on the EU level, this should give the Commission a powerful resource to put the issue on the EU political agenda. At the same time, once an issue is dealt with on the EU agenda, the Commission may seek public support through public opinion research that helps her to argue in favour of goals, instruments and institutional forms that the Commission prefers. As the same questions are asked in all countries, the Commission might even claim to have tapped into the *European* public opinion. Hence the Commission may have an incentive to take citizen views into account as an important resource for their policy activities, in addition to expertise and support of organized interests (Haverland 2013).

As the results of Special EBs are public, the Commission may want to avoid a situation where a majority of citizens in a majority of countries voice an opinion that is detrimental to the Commission’s interests. As the Commission is in the driving seat with regards to which topics are to be addressed and which are not (“non-topics”), the Special Eurobarometer might not be the innocent instrument it appears at first glance.

These considerations raise a lot interesting research questions. The purpose of this paper has a rather modest explorative aim, however. We seek to answer the following questions:

First, against the background of the end of the permissive consensus, we wonder whether the European Commission increasingly seeks public opinion. In other words, we assess whether the number of Special EBs has increased over time.

Secondly, as the Commission is not obliged to seek public opinion but has to publish the results if it does so, we wonder on which topics the Commission surveys citizens and on which topics it does not. We will also relate the frequency of topics to the competencies of the EU as expressed in the Lisbon Treaty. This admittedly broad-brush approach helps to get a first insight into whether the Commission is more likely to invite public opinion in areas where they have comparatively more competencies.

Thirdly, we tap into differences within the Commission. The Commission is not a monolith. In fact, empirical research has demonstrated quite a measure of bureaucratic politics among its component parts: the Directorates General (DGs) (see e.g. Hartlapp et al. 2014). Special EBs are requested by specific DGs within the Commission. Hence results of Special EBs might not only be used as a resource vis-à-vis other political actors but also as a resource in inter-departmental negotiations within the Commission. Therefore, we map the frequency by which a DG requests Special EBs. For instance, we assess whether a Special Eurobarometer concerning the single market actually requested by DG Internal Market and Services or for instance by DG Health and Consumer Protection.

To be sure, our aim is 'only' an exercise in mapping and exploration. We do not present evidence as to what is actually done with the results of the Special EBs. We wish to strongly emphasize, however, the simple but important fact

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that having public opinion on an issue is a precondition for “producing salience”. Citizens’ opinions cannot matter, at least not by means of the Special Eurobarometer, if they are not measured.

In the remainder of the paper, we will first provide general information about the Eurobarometer surveys and their three main formats: Special EBs, Standard EBs and Flash EBs. In Section three, we will briefly review existing critical studies on the Eurobarometer. We will then elaborate on our design (Section 4). Sections five, six and seven will address our empirical results: the development in frequency of Special EBs over time, the topics addressed and neglected, and variations in the DGs who requested Special EBs. In the conclusion, we sketch research questions for future research.

## 2. The Eurobarometer: Standard, Special and Flash

The Eurobarometer started off as a small scientific experiment in the 1963, with “*L’opinion publique et l’Europe des Six*”. After two other surveys in 1970 and 1971, the Commission decided in 1973 to start a bi-yearly poll to gauge ‘European public opinion’ on a regular basis (Signorelli, 2012; 13). Since then, questions are posed to a representative sample of about 1000 citizens per member state at least two times a year.<sup>2</sup> The Eurobarometer is coordinated by the Commission, more specifically the Directorate General for Communication and currently carried out by TNS Opinion and Social, an international network of polling institutes, including for instance TNS NIPO in the Netherlands and TNS Infratest in Germany. Data are stored and made publicly accessible at the GESIS Leibniz Institute for Social Science.

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<sup>2</sup> The exceptions are Luxembourg, Malta and Cyprus with about 500 interviews per country.

Although mostly controlled by the European Commission, the European Parliament created in 2007 the Public Opinion Monitoring Unit to conduct their own Eurobarometer surveys (Signorelli, 2012; 17). According to Signorelli, the Eurobarometer can therefore be seen as ‘something of a trademark that can be used by the two institutions’ (Signorelli, 2012; 17).

The *Standard* Eurobarometer is made up of a set of questions that are posed repeatedly over time. These ‘trend’ questions concern general attitudes towards life and society, European integration and European institutions, and socio-demographic characteristics. There are also questions included, which tap into materialist and post-materialist values, reflecting the involvement of the eminent social scientist Ronald Inglehart in the early days of the Eurobarometer (GESIS, n.d.). The Standard Eurobarometer produces a wealth of cross-sectional and longitudinal data. Therefore, although mainly conducted for ‘policy counselling reasons’ (Saris & Kaase 1997a: 4), the Eurobarometer surveys are also hailed for their value for comparative social science research (Reif & Inglehart, 1991: xv).

However, the large-scale surveys conducted under the label Eurobarometer do not only contain the above-mentioned categories of questions. In fact citizens are also surveyed about a great variety of specific policy topics. Typically, batteries of questions regarding these specific topics are requested by various DGs of the European Commission, or sometimes other EU institutions, for in-depth thematic studies (about 100 pages long), the so-called Special Eurobarometer (Signorelli, 2012; 26). These thematic studies are the focus of this paper.

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According to an official of the Commission's Eurobarometer unit, there is currently space for about 40 Special EBs a year. There is also a policy to have no more than 3 Special EBs a year per DG. The final list is decided on a high hierarchical level involving for instance the heads of the Commissioners' cabinets and highly ranked communication advisors. Selection into the final list is based on the Commission priorities, which currently includes for instance employment and growth. The official felt unable to comment on the pre-Barroso period, though he expects that the process was more decentralized back then (European Commission 2014).

Initially, the two yearly waves of the Eurobarometer were used as an omnibus survey including the trend questions (Standard Eurobarometer) and the questions belonging to Special EBs. As we will see below, however, the number of Special EBs has increased significantly. A single survey can only contain a limited number of questions in order to be feasible, which is set at about 150 questions for the Eurobarometer. Therefore, there have been an increasing number of separate waves that only include questions for Special EBs. In other words, while it is widely believed that the Commission runs two surveys a year, it actually runs much more. The spring 'wave' of 2013 for instance consisted of four waves instead of one wave (79.1-79.4).<sup>3</sup>

In addition, since 2000, *Flash* EBs have also been conducted. Flash EBs are smaller in scale. They consist of telephone interviews, rather than face-to-face contact and often either focus on a specific target groups, such as

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<sup>3</sup> Since the early 1990s there have also been occasionally qualitative studies using focus groups. There have been 27 studies until November 2014, with 13 of them in the last five years (see European Commission, n.d.).

entrepreneurs or “the youths”, or on one or a few countries. There were 405 Flash EBs until November 2014.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Previous research on the Eurobarometer

To be sure, there have already been critical examinations of the Eurobarometer. These have had a different focus, however. Almost all studies concerned methodological issues such as sampling problems and cultural biases (e.g. Saris and Kaase 1997b). The study by Höpner and Jurczyk is one of the few that take a more ‘political’ approach, by linking methodological problems with a potential pro-integration bias of the Commission (2012). These authors have reviewed the German versions of those waves of the Eurobarometer that have been conducted between 1995 and 2010. Against a template of ten basic principles of good survey questions, they evaluated the quality of the questions and found a violation of seven principles. The authors emphasize that given the great number of questions, deviations from the ideal of survey questions are not surprising, but they argue that the deviations had such a systematic character that they amount to evidence for the strategic manipulation of questions (2012: 345). Also, there is anecdotal evidence by Signorelli, who has worked for the Commission. He cites the case of a Flash Eurobarometer about Iraq and the peace in the world, where the Commission – although ultimately unsuccessfully – tried to hide that almost 60 per cent of Europeans regarded Israel as the most important threat to international peace (Signorelli 2012: 69-70). Signorelli also mentions the “membership is a good thing” questions. This trend question has been asked since the earlier 1970s

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<sup>4</sup> We have explored these surveys as well and arrive at similar patterns with some exceptions. We will report these exceptions because in these instances the Flash Eurobarometer can be regarded as a functional equivalent compensating for a lack of attention by the Special Eurobarometer.

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but not after 2011, or at least for the current member states. A reason for this omission could be that the percentage of people who see EU membership as a ‘good thing’ has dropped below 50 per cent, with even lower results for some countries. Signorelli therefore concludes that “[t]he political interest behind the decision to not include a “Trend” question that reflects the difficult period that the EU is going through is obvious here” (2012; 66).

None of these studies, nor any other studies we are aware of, have however systematically explored the topics and non- topic of Special EBs. This study tries to fill part of this void by a first mapping and exploration of Special EBs.

## 4. Research design

The paper provides a systematic description and exploration of characteristics of Special EBs. The population of Special Eurobarometer reports is available through the Commission’s website (European Commission n.d). There are 400 Special EBs listed for the period 1970 to November 2014.<sup>5</sup> The dates of fieldwork for the survey and the publication of the surveys’ report are mentioned, which allows for tracing the frequency of surveys over time. The topics of the Special Eurobarometer are inferred from the title of the Special Eurobarometer report. If the title was ambiguous, the report was downloaded and read. The topics have been manually coded by two researchers independently using the EU codebook of the Comparative Agenda Setting

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<sup>5</sup> Officially the last Special Eurobarometer of our period of research carries the number 419. But not all numbers appear on the website. For instance, the website entails the numbers 303, 307, 308 and 313, but not the numbers in between. We do not exclude the possibility that this indicates that Special EBs that are hidden from the public, but based on our experience with coding the data we believe that that this rather an administrative artefact, the result of decentralized management, e.g. Special EB’s requested but the results never analyzed for idiosyncratic reasons, and the fact that some reports have been assigned sub-numbers and therefore ‘main’ numbers left vacant.

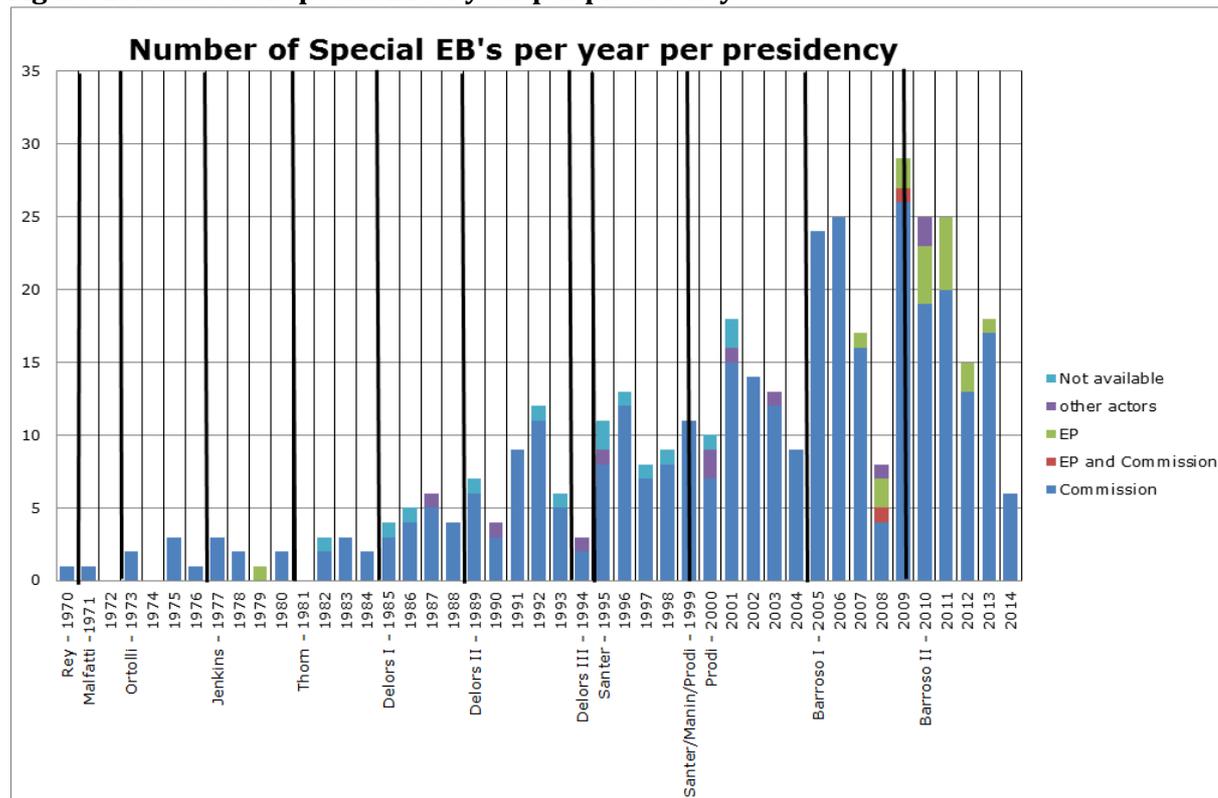
Project (Alexandrova et al. 2013). The EU codebook is a slight adaptation of the US codebook. The US codebook distinguishes 22 policy areas ('main topics'), basically all areas of government activities conceivable. Although the EU codebook specifies certain codes to make it better workable in the EU context, it keeps the comprehensive scope of the original. No policy areas are excluded. The EU codebook is regularly updated and we use the most recent codebook available at the time of writing. All Special EB reports, save one, contain the name of the actor that has requested the Eurobarometer. In addition, 15 reports (4 per cent) are not available for download, thereby resulting in missing values for the actor requesting the Eurobarometer and in some cases for the topic as well (as the title was too ambiguous to infer the topic code).

## 5. Increase in the production of public opinion?

The first question we posed was whether the European Commission increasingly seeks public opinion through Special EBs. Looking at the population of Special EBs, we see indeed a dramatic increase over time. Before the 1990s, hardly more than five Special EBs a year have been conducted. In the 1990s, the average was almost ten Special EBs a year, and in the 2000s the average further increased to about 15 (see Figure 1).

From the 1980s on, each Commission has executed more Special EBs than its predecessors, with the exception of the short-lived Delors III Commission.

**Figure 1: Number of Special EBs a year per presidency**



Source: European Commission (1970-2014), own calculations, total: 392<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Topics addressed and neglected

The previous section has demonstrated that the European Commission is increasingly commissioning Special EBs. It also shows that the European Parliament has become increasingly involved and that sometimes other actors request Special EBs. For the remainder of the paper, however, we want to focus on the European Commission which is responsible for 360 of the 392 Special EBs for which we were able to locate the requesting institution.

<sup>6</sup> The start and end dates of each EC presidency were found on:

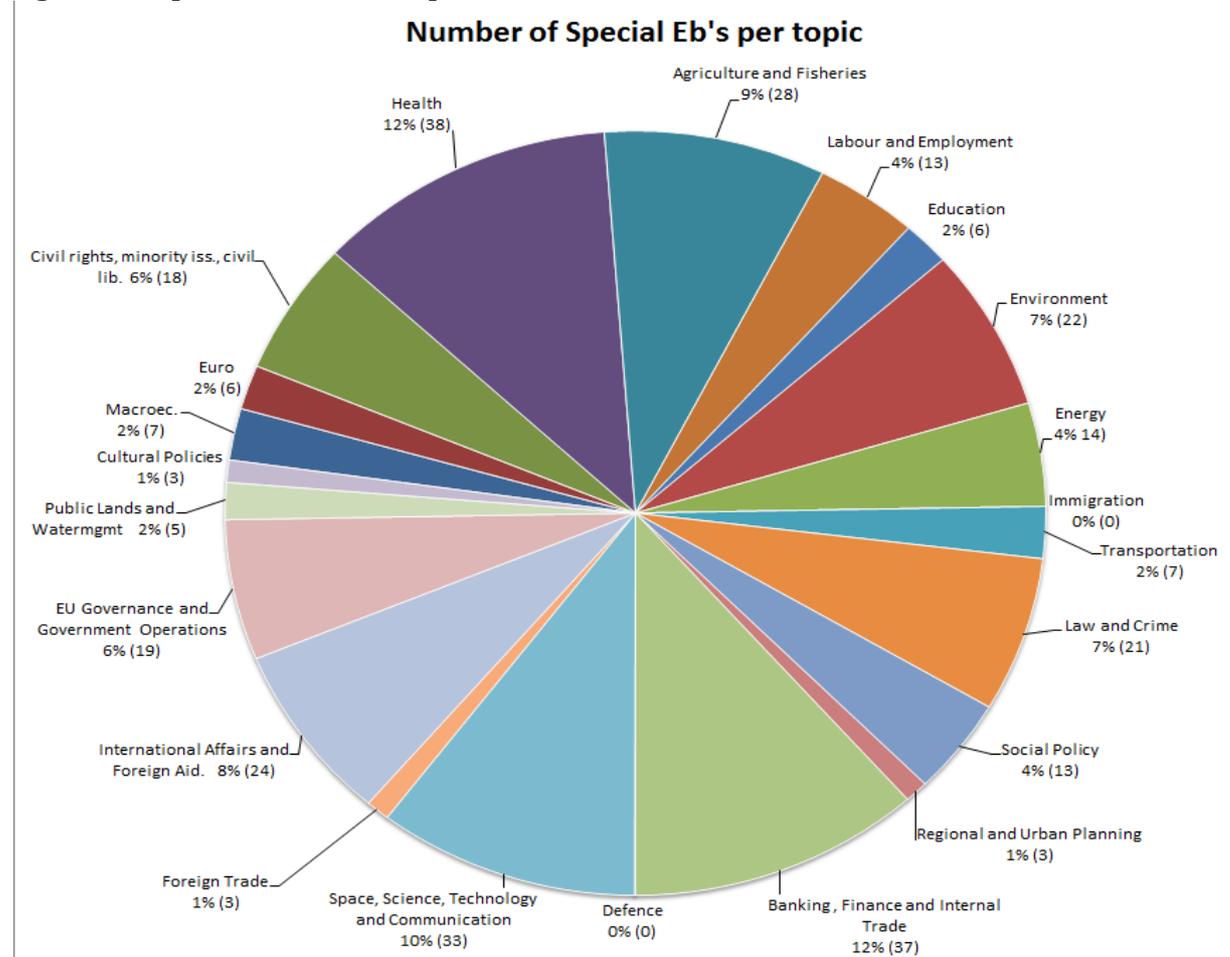
[http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission\\_2004-2009/president/history/](http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2004-2009/president/history/).

Eight Special EBs which were commissioned by the European Parliament were missing on the EC website. They were retrieved from:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00191b53ff/Eurobarometer.html>

This section addresses the question for which topics opinion is sought and for which topics not or in other words where the Commission ‘produces salience’ and where it ‘keeps citizens silent’.

**Figure 2: Topics addressed in Special EBs**



Source: European Commission (1970-2014), own calculation, total: 320<sup>78</sup>

As stated before, the topics are coded according to the EU codebook of the Comparative Agenda Setting Project. This codebook is a slight adaptation of a coding scheme initially developed for national policy-making. As Figure 2 reveals, Special EBs are commissioned in almost all areas that are also the domain of national policy making (see also below).

<sup>7</sup> We focused on the 360 Special EBs which are commissioned by the European Commission (in general or by a specific DG). However, forty Special EBs are too general to be meaningfully coded into one of the categories of the codebook, such as ‘social climate’. This leaves us with 320 Special EBs.fo

<sup>8</sup> The numbers between brackets are the absolute number of Special EBs per topic.

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In comparing the relative importance of different policy areas it is difficult to establish a benchmark. Where would one expect more or less effort to gauge public opinion? A useful starting point to us seems the degree to which the EU has competencies in the respective policy area. We have mapped the relative share of different topics on the division of competencies as stipulated by the Lisbon Treaty that has been adopted in 2007 and enacted in 2009 (see Table 1). This allows us to gain a rough picture as to whether the relative share is related to the degree to which competencies are located at the EU level. As the Lisbon Treaty is the most recent EU treaty and as there is no policy area where the Lisbon Treaty stipulates less EU competencies than any prior treaty (see e.g. Börzel 2005, Hix 2005: 20-21), this amounts to conservative measurement for Special EB's conducted prior to the Lisbon Treaty: if a Special EB is conducted in a policy area in which according to the Lisbon Treaty the EU has no or minor competencies, the EU had not more competencies at the time the Special EB has actually been conducted. Notwithstanding this, we will also report significant longitudinal variation in the appearance of topics.

In the Annex to this paper we explicate how the codebook's categories of main topics, and if necessary sub-topics, have been aligned with the categories of EU policy competencies (see Annex).

**Table 1:** Topics addressed in Eurobarometer mapped on division of competencies Lisbon Treaty<sup>9</sup>

<i>Exclusive competences of European Union</i>	
Customs union	0
Competition	0
Monetary policy for the Euro-countries	6
The conservation of marine biological resources	0
Common Commercial Policy (External trade )	3
<i>Shared competences</i>	
Internal market	21 <sup>10</sup>
Social policy, as defined in TFEU	5
Economic, social and territorial cohesion;	2
Agriculture and fisheries, excl. Conservation of marine res.	28
Environment	22
Consumer protection	14
Transport	7
Energy	14
Area of Freedom, Security and Justice	39
Public health as defined in TFEU	28
Research, technological development and space	33
Development cooperation and humanitarian aid	18
<i>Specific arrangements</i>	
Coordination of economic policies	7
Coordination of employment policies	8
Coordination of social policy	12
Common foreign and security policy	6
<i>Exclusive Competencies Member States</i>	
Protection and improvement of human health	10
Culture	3
Tourism	2
Education, vocational training, youth and sport	10
Civil protection;	1
Housing and Urban Development <sup>a</sup>	0
Public Lands and Watermanagement <sup>a</sup>	0

<sup>a</sup> Added by authors, not mentioned in the TFEU

<sup>9</sup> This table is based on all Special EB's commissioned by the European Commission (360) that could be meaningfully coded into one of the categories of the codebook (360->320). We excluded those that focus on EU Governance and Government Operations as such (320->301). Due to additional considerations provided in the Annex, the final number analysed amounts to 299 (see Annex).

<sup>10</sup> Many of these EBs take a consumer perspective but do not specifically deal with consumer protection

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Let us start with policies in the realm of **exclusive EU competencies**. Overall, not many Special EB's have been conducted in these areas. *Common commercial policies*, or in other words foreign trade, an area that is strongly related to economic globalization, is an exclusive competence of the European Union for already quite a long time. Yet, only three Special EBs (less than 1 per cent) have been devoted to this topic. On *competition policy* (merger control, state aid etc.), another area with a history of strong EU competencies, not a single Special EB has been carried out. The same holds for the *Customs Union* and the *conservation of marine biological resources*. Six Special EBs have dealt with monetary policy or more specifically with the ECU or the EURO. None of them were requester after 2002 however, despite the crisis in the Eurozone which has evolved since 2008.<sup>11</sup> Overall this exploration suggests that the European Commission does not prioritize public opinion research in areas where the EU (already) has exclusive competencies.

How is the situation at the other side of the spectrum, areas of **exclusive member state competencies**? In many areas that belong to the national domain (or sometimes even the sub-national domain) the Commission is indeed rather inactive. There are only three EBs on *cultural issues*, six on *education* (including vocational training) and none on *public lands and water management*. There have been three Special EBs that fall in the category of *regional and urban planning*. None of them actually dealt with purely regional or local issues. Rather, they deal with EU-related aspects, two on 'European and the Regions' and one on social-economic aspects of regions in Europe (see below). We consider *health* an exception to this. There have been ten Special EBs on health issues and the healthcare system. Note that these do not concern those health issues, where the EU has shared competencies (see

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<sup>11</sup> Note however that public perceptions concerning Euro-related issues are yearly monitored by Flash EBs for Euro-zone citizens since 2000 (Commission n.d.)

below). Finally one might also wonder why the Commission has conducted four Special EBs on *sport*.

Moving up the 'ladder' again towards more integrated areas we arrive at the so-called **specific arrangements**. These arrangements basically denote decision-making by intergovernmental bargaining and coordination, rather than the Community method. There are two broad areas here (socio-) economic policy and common foreign and security policy.

In terms of *economic coordination* seven Special EBs have been conducted by the Commission, dealing with inter alia demographic issues, the European citizens' knowledge of economic indicators and 'undeclared work' in the EU. The Commission has conducted one Special EB on unemployment (in 1977) and none on budgets and on taxation. This implies that citizens have not yet been invited by the Commission to provide their opinion on the economic crisis in the Eurozone and recent policies under the label of European economic governance, at least not through the Special Eurobarometer. Note however, that two Special EBs on the economic crisis have been conducted on behalf of the European Parliament.<sup>12</sup>

The Commission has been more active in the area of *social policies*, in the sense of welfare policies, which are since the Amsterdam Treaty (1999) subject to the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). There are 13 Special EBs, with eight of them dealing with poverty and social exclusion, some of them pre-dating the introduction of the OMC. Most of the eight Special EB in the area of *employment* policies are close to social issues as well, and again some of them are from the pre-OMC era.

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<sup>12</sup> Note also that the yearly Flash EBs concerning Euro-related issues also contain questions about European economic governance, see also Footnote 11 (Commission n.d.)

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We can be briefer on the other main area of specific arrangements: *common security and foreign policy*. There are considerably less Special EB's here than concerning the previously discussed economic and social policy issues. We counted six Special EB's in total. Note that the Commission never conducted a Special EB on defence.

The lion's share of Special EBs is conducted in the areas of **shared competencies**. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of them concern the *single market*, the core project of EU integration. Twenty-one of them focus on various aspects of the internal market (about half of those related to services), taking mostly a consumer perspective. In addition, 14 Special EBs focus on *consumer protection* in a narrower sense.

There are also many surveys concerning *Agriculture*, one of the oldest EU policy areas. However, none of the 28 surveys dealt specifically with what might be regarded the core of the *CAP*, agricultural subsidies and the common organization of agricultural markets. Note, however, that some surveys include issues in these domains such as 'capping', but they are not a prominent part of these more general inquiries. In contrast to this, we counted seven Special EBs on food safety and seven on biotechnology, for instance. This implies that citizen opinion is invited on the regulatory aspects of agriculture rather than its redistributive aspects.

That redistribution is rather a non-issue is further confirmed by the low number of Special EBs concerning *cohesion policies*. In terms of social cohesion, there has been one survey on the European Social Funds. Likewise, in terms of territorial cohesion only one Special EB explicitly touches upon EU wide inter-regional redistribution and that one is from 1980. In other words, for the last three decades, citizens were not asked about the largest redistributive

programmes the EU is running, the *EU Cohesion funds*. Note also, that there has never been a Special Eurobarometer about the EU budget as such.

Analysing the other areas of shared competencies we can make a preliminary distinction between domains where the EU already has competencies for a long time and areas where the EU has only recently gained competencies. We find relatively less Special EBs in the 'old' areas and they are relatively speaking from older vintage.<sup>13</sup> This holds for the five surveys concerning *Social Policy as defined in the TFEU*, that is health and safety at the work place and working conditions, the seven surveys on *transport policy*, and also for those on *energy* (14) the *environment* (22) and *development aid* (18).

We find more and relatively more recent activity concerning relatively new EU competencies. Twenty-eight surveys have been conducted in the area of *public health* including surveys on cancer, aids, drug abuse, smoking, alcohol, health risks related to the sun and to electric magnetic fields, and even mental health, oral health, blood donation and blood transfusions.<sup>14</sup>

We have counted 33 Special EBs dealing with *research, technological developments and space*. Since 1977 Europeans have been regularly quizzed about their view on science and technology, but in the last 15 years this have been supplemented with regular surveys on the usage of internets in households and on the 'information society'. No less than 39 Special EBs have been conducted concerning the *area of freedom, security and justice*, and almost all of them in the last decade. Eighteen deal with civil rights issues, such as EU citizenship, gender equality, racism, and data privacy. Twenty one deal

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<sup>13</sup> This does not hold for the Single Market and Agricultural Policy. Over the last forty years they received a roughly constant share of attention.

<sup>14</sup> Two Special Eurobarometer on public health actually consist of a series of thematical studies (six and seven respectively, indicated by sub-numbers on the Commission's website). We did not count them on the sub-number level. Hence our measure is conservative in this respect.

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with law and crime issues such as violence and white collar crimes like corruption. At the same time, there has not been a single Special EB (sic) that has focused on an immigration issue, such as refugees and asylum issues, the integration of immigrants, acquisition of nationality or border control.

Overall we find a roughly curvilinear pattern with relatively less Special EBs in areas where the EU already has far reaching competencies and in areas where policy issues are clearly (sub-) national. The lion's share of Special EBs is conducted in areas of shared competencies, and here we counted more Special EBs, and also on average on more recent vintage, in areas where the EU has gained competencies more recently.

## 7. Variation within the Commission in gauging public opinion

As stated above, Special EBs are not requested by the European Commission as such but rather by a specific Directorate General (DG). Although the Commission is organized according to the principle of functional specialization, topics are not always 'owned' by a specific DG. Many topics cut across several DGs, requiring coordination and potentially conflict and bureaucratic politics (see e.g. Hartlapp et al. 2014). It is therefore worthwhile to map which DG has actually requested the Special Eurobarometer.

For labelling the DGs we did not always use their proper names at the time when the Special EBs were requested. Otherwise it would not be possible to

study DGs over a long period of time.<sup>15</sup> Our labelling is informed by the portfolio of the Barroso I Commission. This implies for instance, that we pool the data for DG Energy and DG Move into the category DG Energy and Transport. We have also pooled for DG Home and DG Justice (into DG Justice, Freedom and Security), DG Agriculture and Rural Development into and DG Fisheries (DG Agriculture) and DG Environment and DG Climate Change (DG Environment).

We found that DGs vary starkly in their effort to gauge public opinion (see Figure 4). Three DGs are responsible for about half of the Special EBs. Quite a few Special EBs are carried out by DG Communication itself. Further analysis reveals that these are typically more general topics or topics that cut across many issues, such as the future of the EU or German re-unification. From the DGs with a policy portfolio, DG Employment and Social Affairs and DG Health and Consumer Affairs are the directorates that by far request the most Special EBs.

On the other end, there are some DGs who never or almost never seek the opinion of European citizens through Special EBs. The following group of nine DGs are responsible for in total less than 5 per cent of all 'Special EBs (15/345)<sup>16</sup>: DG Enterprise, DG Regional Policy, DG Trade, DG Economic and Finance, DG External Relations, DG Enlargement, DG Competition, DG Budget and DG Taxation and Customs Union. The latter three have not requested a single Special EB.

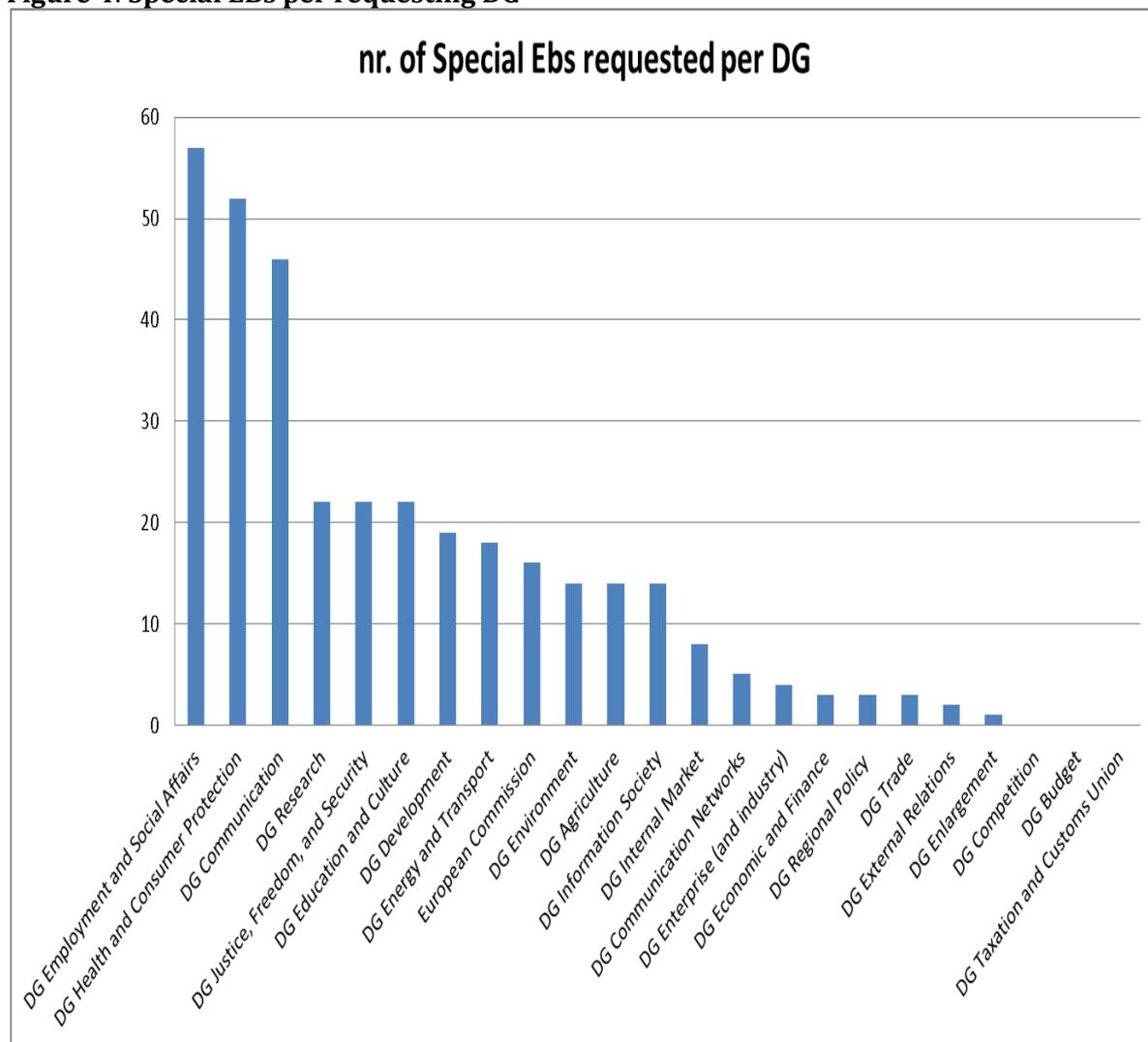
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<sup>15</sup> Since the start of the Eurobarometer in the early 1970s, new DGs have been created, DG's have been split up, DG have assumed new tasks and or have given away some of their tasks, and accordingly the number, their tasks and their names have constantly changed.

<sup>16</sup> We were unable to identify the responsible DG for 15 Special EBs, because these EBs were not available for download on the Commission's website. Hence, the number of Special EBs in this analysis is 345 instead of 360.

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**Figure 4: Special EBs per requesting DG**



Source: European Commission (1970-2014), own calculations, total nr. 345<sup>17</sup>

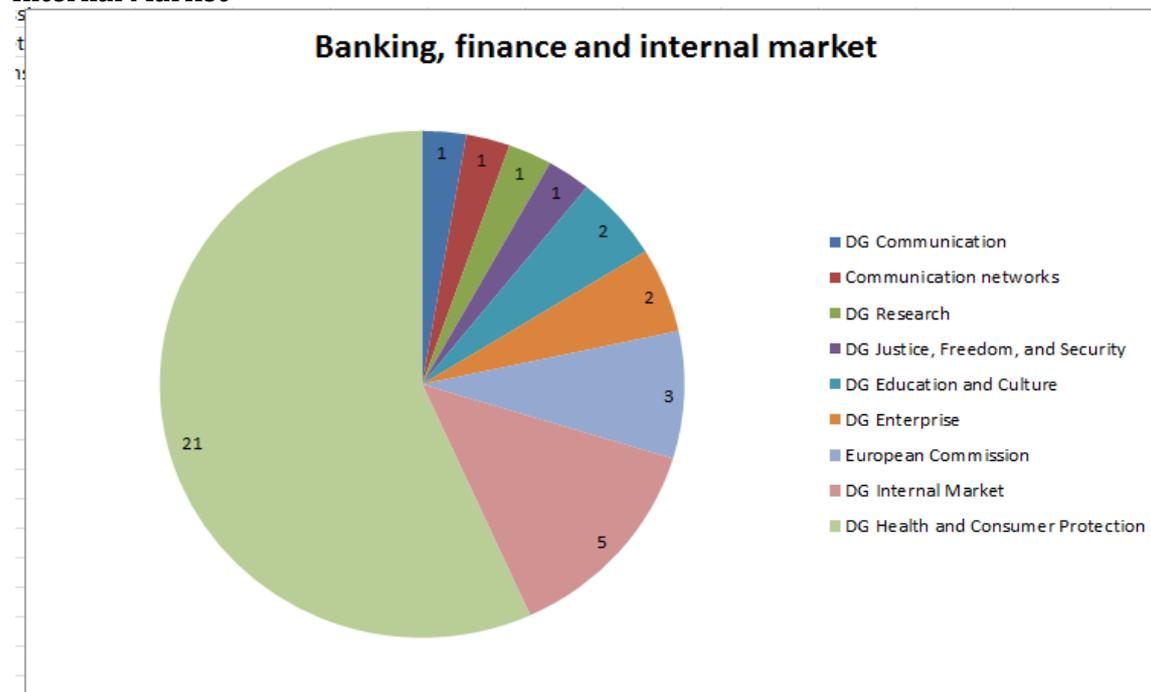
In other words, especially those DGs tasked with economic and foreign affairs issues almost never invite the opinion of European citizens. This is consistent with the results of our previous section, where we have seen that there are indeed only very few Special EBs in the area of foreign and security policies and core areas of economic policies areas such as competition policy, external trade policy, taxation and the budget.

At the same time citizens have been frequently surveyed about some particular economic issues, in particular those related to the internal market.

<sup>17</sup> See Footnote 17.

But as stated above these surveys often either take a consumer perspective or explicitly deal with consumer protection. It is typically not DG Internal Market or DG Enterprise who request Special EBs related to the internal market broadly understood, but DG Health and Consumer Protection (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: EC Directorate-generals requesting Special EBs in ‘Banking, Finance and Internal Market’<sup>18</sup>**



Source: European Commission (1970-2014), own calculations: 37

The large number of Special EBs for DG Health and Consumer Protection is based on activities in both areas of its responsibility: health and consumer protection.

The large number of Special EBs on behalf of DG Employment and Social Affairs is a result of the fact that this DG is responsible for almost all Special EBs in the area of Social Policy and of Employment Policy. In addition, this

<sup>18</sup> Note that this table is based on the relevant category of the agenda codebook. The codebook collapses a number of categories of EU policy competencies: internal market in a narrow sense, consumer protection, and tourism.

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DG is also responsible for nine of the 18 Special EBs in the category of civil rights focusing on discrimination, of for instance women or disabled people.

In addition, taking a longitudinal perspective suggests that DGs of relative recent vintages and tasked with subjects that have not been part of the original EEC Treaty are relatively eager to invite public opinion. For example, since Barroso II, the DG in the area “Justice, Freedom and Security” has been split into DG Justice and DG Home Affairs. Both have started to request Special EBs. Also DGs dealing with the Information Society, Communication Networks and Education and Culture have conducted Special EBs from the start. This is consistent with the findings of the previous section, which documented heavy use of surveys in areas where the EU has gained competencies relatively recently.

## 8. Discussion and Conclusion

Against the background of the increased politicization of the European Union, this paper presents the first systematic exploration of Special EBs: large scale public opinion surveys on specific policy topics commissioned and controlled by the European Commission. These surveys may constitute an important and hitherto neglected link between the European Commission and citizens. They may also provide an increasingly important power resource to the Commission. The amount of Special EBs has increased from almost none in the 80’s, to around 10 a year in the 90’s, to around 15 a year in the 2000’s.

Overall, Special EBs are conducted in all 22 broad policy areas that are distinguished in the codebook of the Comparative Agenda Setting project,

with the exceptions of defence and immigration. If one takes into account that the codebook has initially been developed to code national policies, one can appreciate the scope of the Special EBs.

The effort to seek public opinion through Special EBs however is not equally distributed across policy areas, however. Some topics receive more attention than others. Generally speaking, citizens are not often invited to voice their opinion where the EU either already has far reaching competencies, such as external trade and competition or which are clearly in the (sub-)national domain, such as public lands and water management. Citizen input is foremost sought in in areas of shared competencies, in particular those area where the EU has gained competencies relatively late. Perhaps strikingly, however, as mentioned above, there has never been a Special EB on immigration.

In terms of policy characteristics, we see Special EBs in particular in the area of regulation (e.g. health regulation, consumer protection, social rights). Although this fits the notion of the EU as regulatory state (e.g. Majone 1996) we find it worth mentioning that in redistributive areas in which the EU has competencies citizens are 'kept silent'.

We also see a large variation as to the DGs on whose behalf the Special EBs are conducted. DG Communication, DG Employment and Social Affairs, and DG Health and Consumer Affairs are responsible for almost half of all Special EBs. Most DGs who focus on economic issues and issues of external affairs almost never request Special EB. When economic issues are touched upon such as single market issues, the survey is requested by a DG that focuses in particular on the citizens' perspective: DG Health and Consumer instead of DG Internal Market or DG Enterprise.

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We are aware that this paper is no more than the first cut on the phenomenon Special Eurobarometer. The paper raises interesting puzzles that merit further research. How can we explain the curvilinear relationship between the degree of EU competencies and the frequency of Special Eurobarometers? The fact that the European Commission almost never enquires into areas where competencies are clearly national fits the image of an institution that is both responsive and aware of (the limits of) its competencies. But if the Commission is indeed responsive, why does it seldom ask the citizens' opinion in areas where it has a lot of competencies and in areas of shared competencies that concern redistribution. If, on the contrary, the Commission is a competence-maximizing agent, we would understand why it has little appetite to inquire into areas where it already has assumed far reaching competencies. But why then does the Commission display no stronger effort in some areas that are (still) in the national domain? Can variation be explained by characteristics of the policy area and the likelihood of getting results that are to the liking of the Commission? Can this explain why the Commission eschews surveys on redistributive issues, hence those that relatively visibly produce winners and losers, which may result in unfavourable answers as they test the solidarity of citizens, as well as on immigration issues which may be classified as too "sensitive"?

While these questions should make for a new and promising avenue of research, we want to conclude by reiterating what we see an important contribution of this paper: mapping where the Commission 'produces salience' or 'keeps the silence' is of crucial importance in its own right. Citizens input can only matter if it is asked for in the first place.

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## Annex: Linking EU competencies and categories of EU codebook<sup>19</sup>

Lisbon Treaty	Agenda codes - Main topic	Agenda codes - Subtopic (or 'search term')	
<i>Exclusive competences of European Union</i>			
Customs union	Banking, Finance , Internal Trade	'Customs Union'	0
Competition	Banking, Finance , Internal Trade	Competition Policy, State Aid	0
Monetary policy for the Euro-countries	Macro-economics	European Monetary System (Euro)	6
The conservation of marine biological resources	Agriculture and Fisheries	'Common Fisheries policy'	0
Common Commercial Policy (External trade )	Foreign Trade		3
<i>Shared competences</i>			
Internal market	Banking, Finance , Internal Trade	All, except Consumer Protection, Tourism, Competition, State Aid	21
Social policy, as defined in TFEU	Labour and Employment	Worker Safety and Protection, Working Conditions	5
Economic, social and territorial cohesion;	Social Policy	'European Social Fund' (1)	2
	Regional Policy	Cohesion Policy and Structural Funds (1)	
Agriculture and fisheries, excl. Cons. of mar.res.	Agriculture and Fisheries	All, except 'Common Fisheries Policies'	28
Environment	Environment		22
Consumer protection	Banking, Finance , Internal Trade	Consumer Protection	14
Transport	Transportation		7
Energy	Energy		14
Area of Freedom, Security and Justice	Civil rights, Minority Issues, Civil Liberties (18)		39
	Law and Order (21)		
	Immigration (0)		
Public health as defined in TFEU	Health	Subtopics dealing with public health issues	28

<sup>19</sup> According to the codebook, the five Special EB's on EU citizen's perception of German reunification fall into 'Public Lands and Watermanagement' as they concern territorial issues. We excluded them here because we believe that they do not really deal with (sub-) national issues as understood here. As similar reasoning applies to two Special EB's on Europe of the Regions, in our view, they should neither be coded as part of "Housing and Urban Development" nor as "Cohesion Policy". We added five Special EB's about 'Sport'. These EB fall under the category 'Miscellaneous', a category this is as such excluded because the themes are too general (see Footnote 8), but we felt that these five EB's are specific enough to be included here.

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Research, technological development and space	Space, Science Technology and Communication		33
Development cooperation and humanitarian aid	International Affairs and Foreign Aid	Foreign Aid	18
<i>Specific arrangements</i>			
Coordination of economic policies	Macro-economics	All, except Monetary Policy	7
Co-ordination of employment policies	Labour and Employment	All, except Worker Safety and Protection, Working Conditions	8
Coordination of social policy	Social Policy	All, except 'Social Fund'	12
Common foreign and security policy	International Affairs	All, except Foreign Aid (6)	6
	Defence (0 <sup>20</sup> )		
<i>Exclusive national competencies</i>			
Protection and improvement of human health	Health	All, except public health issues	10
Culture	Culture and Media		3
Tourism	Banking, Finance , Internal Trade	Tourism	2
Education, vocational training, youth and sport	Education (6)		10
	Miscellaneous	' Sport' (4)	
Civil protection;	EU Governance and Government Operations	Civil Protection	1
[Housing and Urban Development]	Regional and Urban Policy and Planning	All, except Europe of the Region and Structural Funds	0
[Public Lands and Watermanagement]	Public Lands, Watermanagement and Territorial Issues	All, except territorial Issues	0

<sup>20</sup> To be sure, one Special EB on defence has been carried out. However, it was not on behalf of the European Commission, but on behalf of the Belgian Minister of Defence.

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