

# Eurobarometer surveys provide an important insight into the European Commission's role as an agenda setter

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*Since the early 1970s a series of 'Eurobarometer' public opinion surveys have been conducted across the EU on behalf of the European Commission. But can the nature and scope of these surveys provide some insights into the Commission's role as an agenda setter? [Markus Haverland](#), [Minou de Ruiter](#) and [Steven Van de Walle](#) present findings from an analysis of 400 Special Eurobarometer reports published between 1970 and 2014. They write that the increasing number of Special Eurobarometers conducted and the topics covered highlight how the Commission's agenda building and legitimacy enhancing strategies have developed throughout this period.*



What passes for public opinion and public support 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 'Eurobarometer' surveys not only enquire about general problem perceptions and attitudes towards the EU ([Standard Eurobarometers](#)); but also include batteries of questions about specific policy topics, ranging from nuclear waste disposal to sex tourism, food safety and child care. These questions are built into comprehensive Eurobarometer 'waves', consisting of around 25,000 face-to-face interviews.



The results take the form of comprehensive reports of about 100 pages. There have been more than 400 of these so-called '[Special Eurobarometers](#)' so far, and they are the key source of knowing what the 'European' public thinks about specific policy issues and the appropriate political level to deal with them. Individual Special Eurobarometers have aroused the interest of scholars working in specific policy areas, but to our knowledge no systematic mapping of these massive investments in gauging citizen opinion has taken place.



This is surprising for a number of reasons. First, from a normative perspective Special Eurobarometers could be perceived as an important link between the Commission and citizens. This link may become more relevant since diffuse support of the EU (the permissive consensus) has been replaced by politicisation and declining trust. Second, other instruments linking citizens and civil society to the EU, such as internet consultations, *have* received scholarly attention. Third, in strategic terms, the Commission can use public opinion data to build-up input legitimacy for new EU proposals. Yet, as the Commission is in the driving seat when selecting and dis-selecting topics, the Special Eurobarometer might not be the innocent instrument it appears at first glance.

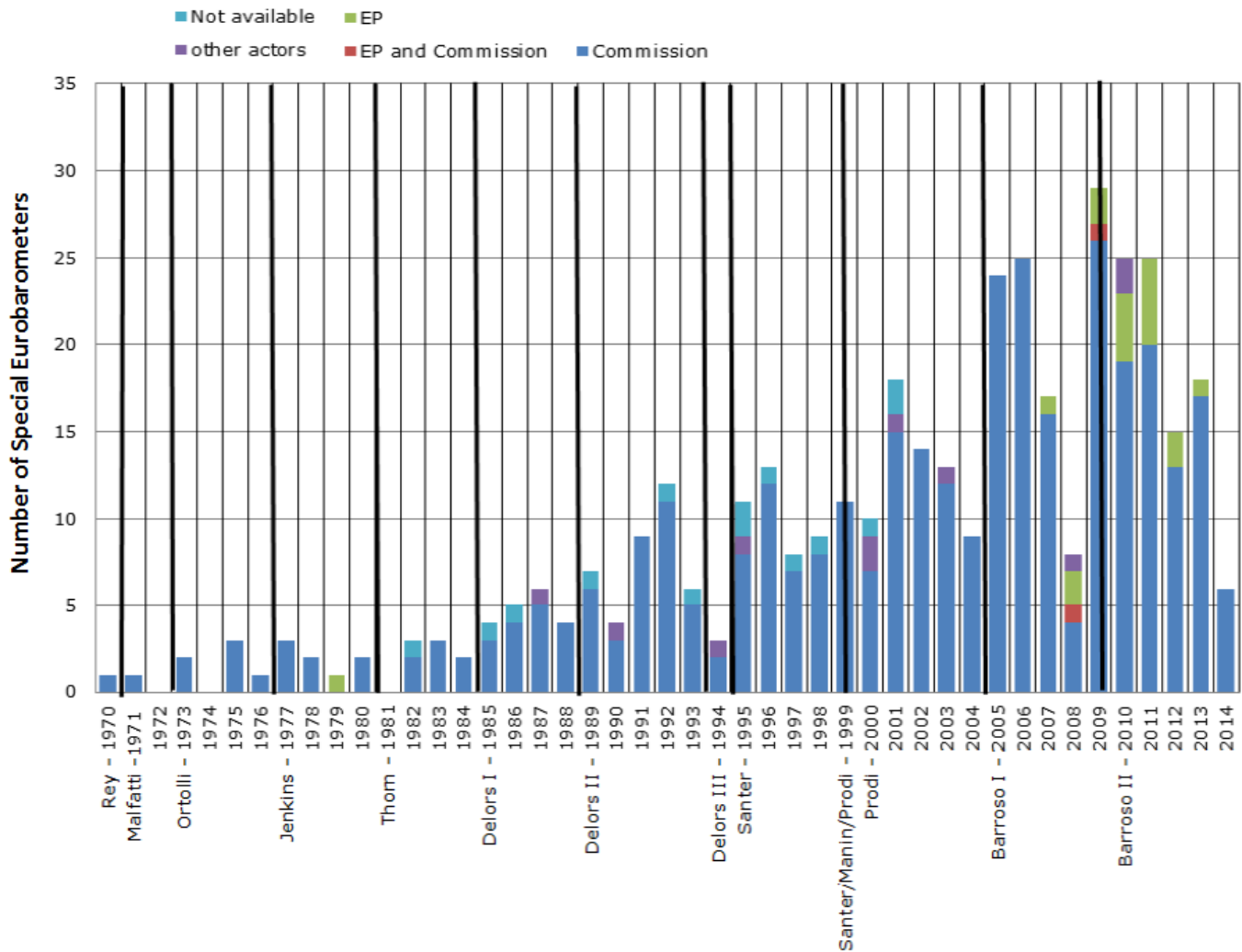
In a recent [LSE 'Europe in Question' discussion paper](#), we make a first effort to map and explore the policy topics that the European Commission invites public opinion on through Special Eurobarometers, and on which topics it does not. While we do not investigate the further usage of public opinion results in the policy process, we believe that our endeavour is important in its own right: Citizens' opinions can only matter if they are measured in the first place.

## Special Eurobarometers: development, topics and involved DGs

We have systematically analysed all of the Special Eurobarometers listed on the European Commission's website (1970-2014). Two researchers, using the EU codebook of the Comparative Agenda Setting Project, independently coded the topics of each Eurobarometer. We observe a dramatic increase in the number of Special Eurobarometers over time. As Figure 1 below shows, from the 1980s on, each Commission has executed more Special

Eurobarometers than its predecessors.

**Figure 1: Number of Special Eurobarometers by Commission presidency (click to enlarge)**



**Source:** European Commission (1970-2014); authors' calculations.

For comparing the relative importance of different policy topics, it is difficult to establish a benchmark. We took the degree of policy competences at the EU level and compared the topics addressed in Special Eurobarometers to the division of competences in the Lisbon Treaty, which is admittedly a rather broad brushed approach. The table below illustrates these topics.

**Table: Topics addressed in Special Eurobarometers mapped on division of competences in the Lisbon Treaty**

**Exclusive competences of the European Union**

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

**Shared competences**

Internal market	21
Social policy, as defined in TFEU	5
Economic, social and territorial cohesion;	2
Agriculture & fisheries, excl. marine conservation	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

**Specific arrangements**

Coordination of economic policies	7
Coordination of employment policies	8
Coordination of social policy	12
Common foreign and security policy	6

**Exclusive competencies of the Member States**

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*	0
Public lands and water management*	0

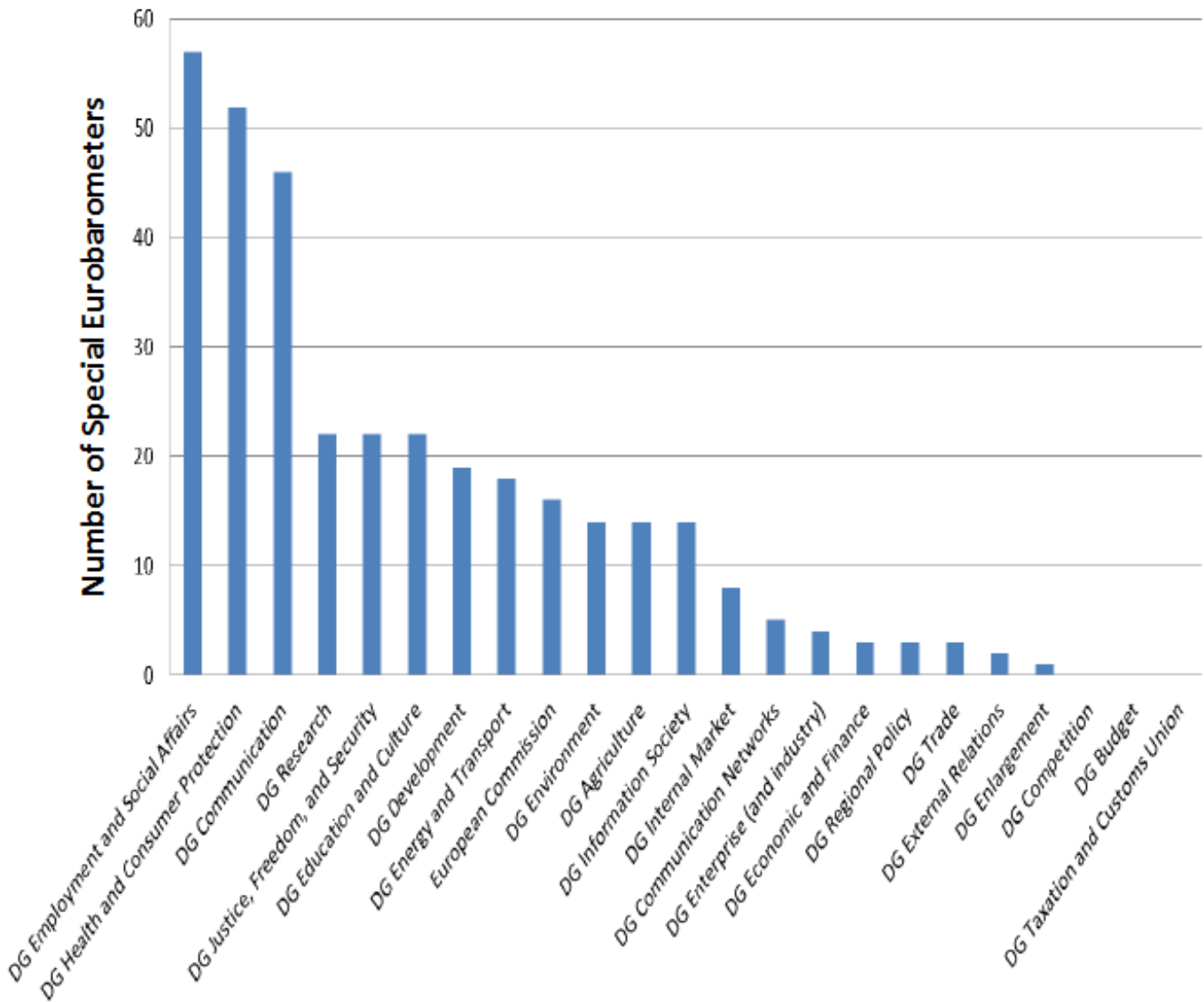
**Note: Topics marked with \* are added by authors and not contained in TFEU.**

We find a roughly curvilinear pattern with relatively less Special Eurobarometers in areas of far reaching EU competences and areas that clearly lie in the (sub) national domain. The lion's share of Special Eurobarometers is conducted in areas of shared competences. Within this category, we counted more (and more recent) Special Eurobarometers in areas of recently acquired EU competences, such as freedom, security and justice, and public health, rather than in older ones like transport or energy. Cohesion policy, the area that most explicitly aims at redistribution is present only two times and there has never been a Special Eurobarometer on immigration.

Many topics cut across several [Commission DGs](#), requiring coordination and potentially leading to conflict and bureaucratic politics. Therefore, it is worthwhile to assess which Directorates General actually requests information on public opinion. Figure 2 shows DGs varying starkly in their effort in this respect. DG Communication, DG

Employment and Social Affairs and DG Health and Consumer Affairs commissioned almost half of all Special Eurobarometers. DGs focused on economic policy fields and on foreign affairs almost never invite the opinion of European citizens. A longitudinal perspective suggests DGs of more recent vintage and tasked with subjects that received treaty status relatively recently, are particularly eager to invite public opinion.

**Figure 2: Special Eurobarometers by requesting DG**



**Source: European Commission (1970-2014); authors’ calculations.**

Exploring the scope and content of Special Eurobarometers leads to interesting puzzles regarding the European Commission as an agenda setter. The fact that the European Commission inquires rarely into areas where competences are national fits the image of an institution that is both responsive and aware of competency limits. However, if the Commission is indeed responsive, why does it seldom ask for citizens’ opinions concerning policies in areas of exclusive EU competences? If on the contrary, the Commission is a competency maximiser, why does it display no stronger effort in national policy areas? Also, can the likelihood of “negative” results explain why the Commission eschews surveys on redistributive issues, which by definition involves “winners” and “losers”, and on immigration issues?

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