

Final Report  
over a Research Stay at the Institute of European Studies,  
University of California, Berkeley

**The European Public Sphere and Theory of Democracy -  
A Comparison with the American Public Sphere.**

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**I. Introduction: comparing the APS and the EPS**

My research stay at the Institute of European Studies (IES) at the University of California in Berkeley (March until end of May 2006) greatly promoted the academic work at my doctoral thesis and gave me the possibility to collect literature that will be the basis for my future work on the European and the US-American Public Sphere. I was warmly welcomed at the IES by Beverley Crawford and the necessary administrative tasks were settled within a few days. Gia White-Forbes, the Institute's Management Services Officer and Heidi Sutton, who, amongst others, is responsible for Visiting Scholars guided me through the administrative maze in a very professional way. I was lucky to be granted a little office space at the Institute which gave me a kind of "basis" without having to transport my necessary working materials back and forth to the library every day. Within a few days I thus could start my work.

In the course of the three months I pursued three central goals. First, I aimed at collecting as much relevant literature as possible on the American Public Sphere which, to a considerable extent is not (easily) available in Austria. In addition to this, I also collected a number of publications from the quickly growing body of literature on the EPS. Second, I continued the work on the theoretical part of my doctoral dissertation. Finally, I could make use of the online archives that are provided by UC Berkeley to download a large number of newspaper articles that are the basis of the empirical part of my dissertation. On April 12 I was lucky to be given the possibility to present my ongoing work within a "Noon Lecture" at the IES. The lecture was entitled "*25 into 1? Studying the EUropean Public Sphere and its Political Functions*" and was followed by a very stimulating debate. Amongst others, it was interesting

for me to see that the concept of “public sphere” seems to be used far less frequently in the USA, while in recent years it has become a kind of catch-word in Europe. It seems, that in the USA the concern is rather with “the media” or “the public” when issues are addressed that in Europe usually are dealt with under the header “public sphere”. This, to be sure, can only be a very general statement as some important theorists on the public sphere are based in the USA, such as Nancy Fraser, Craig Calhoun or Seyla Benhabib. Nevertheless, when it comes to empirical work on media issues, the concept of public sphere is hardly ever used. This differing focus was also reflected in the kind of articles and books on the American Public Sphere that I collected. Much of the literature does not make use of the authors and theories that are central to the debate in Europe, but are concerned with issues such as the impact of media coverage on the political opinions held by the citizens or the news coverage on certain key political issues, such as presidential elections.

## **II. Comparing the EPS and the APS**

The overall aim of my research stay was to further the theoretical argument of my doctoral dissertation on the conditions of possibility of a European public sphere (EPS), understood as an ensemble of Europeanized national public spheres. As I have argued in my project proposal, a comparison between the situation in the EU and the USA promises to yield important insights on how to conceptualize the linkage between the public sphere in the mass media and the political system. Not least, what makes a comparison between the EPS and the situation in the USA interesting is that in both cases there are only few truly pan-European / pan-US media, while there is a large number of regional, local and, in the EU, national media. The insights from this comparison can be used to counter the often illusionary normative assumptions that characterize much of the contemporary research on the European Public Sphere. Within this body of literature, one of the most widely spread assumptions is that, as a *sine qua non* of a (European) Public Sphere, national mass media must engage in a process of trans-national communication, not only by quoting views communicated by media (as well as other actors) from other countries, but also by actively taking these opinions/view/arguments into consideration when articulating the respective own point of view. (most recently, this notion was articulated by e.g. Neidhardt 2006; Tobler 2006; Brüggemann et al. 2006) According to this approach, which is usually referred to as “horizontal Europeanization”, e.g. a journalist working for the French *Le Monde* would have to refer to an argument with regard to a certain political issue presented in, e.g., the British *Times* and explicitly counter (or support) this stance when articulating his/her own perspective. This view, I claim, is ultimately based on the ideal of a face-to-face communication, in which two (or more) individuals have the possibility to exchange arguments and reach a common understanding of an issue at stake. (cf. Garnham 1992: 365

for a similar criticism) Much of the research on the EPS is done by researchers with a background in communication studies (Publizistik). As a result, the pivotal role played by the political system in the establishment of a viable public sphere is often neglected. Achieving an adequate understanding of a EPS in which Europeans can discuss issues that are to be regulated by the EU, however, in addition necessarily requires to consider the particularities of the political system of the EU and its inter-relation with the mass media. Research on the EPS thus must be inter-disciplinary in character, thereby going beyond the now predominant focus on empirical media studies. Especially in this regard, the comparison between the EPS and the American Public Sphere (APS) is of great relevance. If researchers were right who make the existence of large scale transnational communication the necessary condition for a EPS, then we also would have to observe this kind of communication between the media based in the 50 states of the USA. When applying this model to the USA, one quickly finds that it is rather unrealistic to assume that, say, *The New York Times* permanently refers to, e.g., what is said on *Fox News* or that the *Arizona Republic* regularly reports on the issues and views presented by the *San Francisco Chronicle* or the *Berkeley Planet*. To be sure, this kind of communicative exchange does take place to a certain extent, but what ultimately binds these media together in one, though pluralist and multi-faceted public sphere is that they refer to a political system which serves as a common point of reference. More than this, political actors from the national level permanently address the US public in their attempt to promote their respective stances on different political issues. These political statements in turn structure the public debate in the 50 states. This means, that mass media, depending on their ideological orientation, will report in an either affirmative, a neutral or a critical/rejecting way on the political statements that emerge from "Washington". If, however, issues are at stake that are regulated not in Washington, but at the level of the respective state, media from other states will in most cases not show much interest.

When taking these insights from the situation in the USA, important conclusions can be drawn for an analysis of the situation in the EU. The notion that a permanent communicative exchange on EU issues between media from different member states is indispensable for the creation of a EPS is rebutted by the situation in the USA. Though, as one can safely assume, US media only rather exceptionally quote each other and even more rarely refer to the opinions presented by other media when articulating their own stance, it is usually assumed that a public sphere in American mass media *does* exist. This assumption can be theoretically justified, when applying the so-called "arena model" for conceptualizing the public sphere. According to this model, the public sphere consists of a set of public forums, which can be imagined as a stadium in which speakers address an audience. (cf. Ferree et al. 2002; Gerhards / Neidhardt 1990) Given the lack of a truly pan-European media arena, a European public sphere will have to do with a set of national media arenas. In order to avoid

fragmentation, however, in these national arenas the *same* speakers should appear, addressing various publics across Europe at the same time. What is pivotal for the creation of a public sphere is thus, (1) a transnationally structured civil society and (2) a political system whose representatives permanently address the larger public with their views on certain policy issues or – more general – of the “common good”. With regard to political representatives this presupposes that they have an incentive to permanently address the wider public with their political views. This incentive in democratic nation states is provided by regular elections in which the respective government can either be re-elected or “kicked out of office”. Party representatives thus have a strong incentive to permanently address the public, thereby providing the public sphere and not least the media, with a never ceasing input of issues to report and relate to, thereby triggering a communicative exchange between the political system and the wider public without which the political functions of the public sphere could not be realized. Within my dissertation, I analyze three of these political functions: (1) the construction of a European identity, (2) the construction or the denial of legitimacy of the EU and its policies, and (3) the role played by the public sphere in enabling responsiveness. I claim that rather than conceiving of one homogeneously defined European identity, one will have to reckon with a multiplicity of different European identities. The articulation of these identities will be influenced not only by ideological cleavages, but also by discourses on national identity. Due to the variety of the contexts of articulations of these identities, one has to conceptually allow for the possibility of diverging European identities. With regard to the construction or the denial of legitimacy in the public sphere, I argue that what will be perceived as legitimate or illegitimate to a certain extent is dependent on the context of articulation, not least the national contexts. As Lene Hansen put it,

“the legitimacy debate is composed for the most part of a set of national debates, and it might well be that while some initiatives undertaken at the EU level might ameliorate the legitimacy crisis, they might exacerbate it in another.” (Hansen 2002: 4)

With regard to the theoretical work, during my time in Berkeley I have most notably elaborated the conditions of possibility for the third political function mentioned above, i.e. responsiveness. In doing so, not least the work of Berkeley scholar Hanna Pitkin (cf. Pitkin 1967) was of central relevance. The following pages are the respective chapters – 7 and 8 - from my dissertation in which I argue that due to the institutional set-up of the EU, the conditions for responsiveness of the EU currently are very unfavourable. Furthermore, I claim that the discursive requirements of the different political functions do not easily go together. To solve this tension, which is described in-depth below, I introduce the concepts of “floating signifier” and “chains of equivalence” derived from the discourse theory developed by Ernesto Laclau.

### III. Excerpts from the dissertation written in Berkeley (chapters 7 and 8)

## 7. Responsive Governance and the European Public Sphere

### 7.1. Introduction

#### 7.1.1. Defining Responsiveness

The term “responsiveness” is a rather new member in the group of central political scientific concepts. Only in the last three or four decades “responsiveness” has started to attract the interest of political scientists. (Herzog 1998: 298) Still, with regard to the study of the democratic deficit of the European Union, the debate on responsiveness, with a few exceptions (e.g. Pollak / Slominski 2002), remains rather limited. The main reason for this shadowy existence can be found in the fact, that the discussion on the EU's democratic deficit for quite a long time was focused mainly on institutional questions. From this perspective the concern was rather with the set-up of “government structures and their interrelationship.” (Kuper 1998: 143) The awakened interest in the role of the EPS, however, now gives the possibility to consider the conditions and preconditions under which responsiveness of the European polity is possible and thus to address a concept that is of crucial importance for democratic governance.

Basically, responsiveness refers to the ability of political representatives, to take into consideration the wishes, political preferences or interests of the citizens, when making political decisions. (cf. Herzog 1998: 298) Hannah Pitkin, who developed the probably most influential theoretical account of this concept, in her classic *The Concept of Representation* (1967) located responsiveness in the broader discussion on representation and made it a central element of her understanding of representation. According to Pitkin,

“a representative government requires that there be machinery for the expression of the wishes of the represented, and that the government respond to these wishes unless there are good reasons to the contrary. There need not be a constant activity of responding, but there must be a constant condition of responsiveness, of potential readiness to respond. [...] a representative government is one which is responsive to popular wishes when there are some. Hence there must be institutional arrangements for responsiveness to these wishes.” (Pitkin 1967: 232f)

In this quotation, Pitkin touches upon several aspects that will be elaborated on in this and the following chapters.

First, Pitkin points to the necessity of a “machinery for the expression of the wishes of the represented”. In large scale democracies, such a machinery must be understood as a viable public sphere in which these “wishes” are not only expressed, but also, as one has to add,

developed. The notion, that political preferences develop in the course of debating political issues in the public sphere, but also in the private realm, is not uncontested. Bingham Powell, for example, assumes that the “chain of responsiveness” “*begins* with the policy preferences held by citizens” (Bingham Powell 2004: 91; italics by C.B.). Later, in the same article, with regard to the party system, he states that the latter must “make it possible for citizens to *express* their preferences.” (ibid.: 93; italics by C.B.) Such formulations suggest that the citizens’ political wishes exist independently of the political process, that citizens have ready made preferences with regard to different policy areas which merely have to be taken up and “expressed” by political representatives. As argued in chapter XXXX, this assumption is inadequate as it constructs the unrealistic notion of citizens holding fixed preferences on a wide range of policy issues before a debate on these issues has even started. As Pitkin states straightforwardly, it is much more realistic to assume “that the represented have no will on most issues”. (Pitkin 1967: 163) In such a situation, it becomes the role of public actors in general, and not least of elected representatives, to trigger public debates on political issues by articulating their respective positions on these matters. By presenting their opinions on certain issues, they not only make these issues public, but also provide the public with evaluative stances that can *stimulate* public debate. These publicly communicated evaluative stances provide an incentive for the public to develop a stand with regard to the issue at stake and the public may react in an approving or disapproving way to the public representations. Only then will most citizens be put in a situation in which they are given the possibility to develop political preferences on the issue at stake. (cf. also Pennock 1952: 791) This process of public opinion formation that takes place in the public sphere, in turn, should be taken into account by the representatives when taking decisions (responsiveness).<sup>1</sup>

Such preference formulation, in turn, should not be understood as usually taking the shape of a “rational” exchange of arguments and counter-arguments, as normatively stipulated by some representatives of the theory of deliberative democracy. Pitkin presents another picture of the process of opinion formation:

“The readiness of citizen A to vote for a certain candidate, derived from a casual conversation with B, who got it from overhearing C discuss an article in publication D – this readiness is, in a sense, a part of public opinion, even though A may not be able to muster a single reason for his vote, and may not care about the immediate issues. Perhaps it is to this kind of public opinion that the representative must be responsive, and can be responsible.” (Pitkin 1967: 224)

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<sup>1</sup> Laclau in his recent book argues that Pitkin’s discussion of responsiveness „revolves around the question of respect for or ignorance of the popular will, without considering how that popular will is constituted in the first place, and whether representation is not the very premiss of that constitution.“ (Laclau 2005: 161) This judgement, I would argue, does not do justice to Pitkin’s argument, who several times points to the central importance of acts of representation for the constitution of a “popular will”, as should also become clear from the summary of her ideas presented in this chapter.

Put differently, citizens' political preferences are the outcome of occasional conversations with friends, colleagues or family members on political issues which in turn are influenced by the debate in the public sphere, not least in the mass media. While Pitkin in her study could only make allusive reference to the complexity of actual will formation, empirical studies have spelled out in detail the intricate interplay of influencing factors. Summarizing earlier empirical studies, Wodak in a recent publication gives us an impression which factors have an impact on actual will formation. What makes the following quotation especially interesting in the context of this study, is that Wodak and her team analyzed the individual perception of news coverage.

“Due to different belief and knowledge systems, news is experienced and stored depending on available *cognitive frames*. This became most apparent when we interviewed people after they had listened to certain news items and asked them to summarize important contents (Wodak, 1987). The summaries were always related to their personal experiences and commented upon from their own perspective. This explained why different people obviously inferred significantly different meanings when confronted with the same information. The summaries also largely depended on background knowledge as well as on opinions and perceived stereotypes; thus, information was adapted to existing and stored event models.” (Wodak 2006: 182f; cf. also Buchstein 1997: 424; for an empirical analysis of the influence of personal communication on political issues cf. Schenk/Rössler 1994)

Opinion and will formation thus are highly complex processes and it would be inadequate to simply infer from, for example, media discourses to the actual will of citizens. Nevertheless, as Wodak points out, it is widely uncontested that there is a relation between “textcomprehension” on the one hand and “explicit utterances, text and talk as well as [...] social phenomena” on the other hand. (Wodak 2006: 180)

Second, when now turning back to the discussion of Pitkin's notion of responsiveness, another aspect of her definition has to be taken up. As she argues, citizens preferences should be taken into consideration when taking political decisions, unless, “there are good reasons to the contrary”. As has briefly been argued in chapter XXXX, there is no simple answer to the question *when* exactly it is justified to ignore citizens' preferences and to act in a way contrary to their wishes. This question is at the heart of the so-called “mandate-independence controversy”. Pitkin discusses the two positions concerning the exact role of representatives, that can be found in the literature, extensively. The one group of scholars – the “mandate theorists” – argue, that representatives are bound by the mandate that they are given by the represented and thus have to behave in a way that expresses the political preferences of their constituency. The other group of scholars – the “independence theorists” – claim, that representatives have to have a room of discretion and that representation does not simply mean to do, what citizens want. If the mandate theorists were right, citizens could

simply "mail in" their decisions (Pitkin: 1967 151f) and would not need a representative at all. Summing up this controversy, Pitkin writes:

"The mandate theorist says: if the situation is such that we can no longer see the constituents as present then there is no representation, and if the man [i.e. the representative; C.B.] habitually votes the opposite of their wishes we can no longer see them as present in his voting. At most it might be a formal representation; they will be bound by his vote. The independence theorist says: if the situation is such that we can no longer see the representative acting, but rather we see the constituents acting directly for themselves, then there is no representation; and where he merely carries out their orders they seem to be acting directly for themselves." (ibid.: 153)

Indeed, this tension between the two approaches is one of the most puzzling problems for theorists of responsiveness. As Pitkin argues, neither to "'follow their [i.e. the citizens'; C.B.] wishes' nor to 'ignore their wishes' will do." (ibid.: 166) A solution to this problem can only be formal, and can not provide us with a definite benchmark which could serve as us to decide whether or not a representative's decision (not) to be responsive to citizens' preferences is justified. It seems, that "there is no rational basis for choosing between them *tout court*." (ibid.: 165) Rather, representatives must accomplish a *dual* job: On the one hand, they must act in the "interest" of the represented. However, as in most cases there will be differing interpretations of what the interest of the represented is, the representatives, on the other hand, must be granted a room for manoeuvre for freely deciding according to their own evaluation of a situation. Doing the opposite of what (even a majority of) citizens want, thus becomes a possibility. Such a situation, however, "calls for explanation or justification" (ibid.: 164) to a larger extent than situations, in which representatives' decisions are in accordance with the views of (the majority of) their constituency. Attempts to solve the tension between the mandate and the independence theorists by arguing, for example, that representatives should be as responsive "as possible", but take long-term interests into consideration to the "necessary extent", such as suggested by Uppendahl (1981:131) do not solve the problem. Questions on the right degree of (un)responsiveness are inherently *political* questions and thus can not in advance be solved by the political theorist if he/she does not want to make substantive statements on which policies are more desirable than others, e.g. by arguing in favour of neoliberal instead of socialdemocratic policies. Pitkin acknowledges this fact and argues that any attempt to settle the mandate-independence controversy will depend on the theorist's "metapolitics – his broad conception of human nature, human society, and political life." (Pitkin 1967: 167) In the context of this study, no such attempt will be made. Rather, the public sphere is here considered as the place in which the debate on whether or not representatives act rightly when taking / not taking citizens' preferences into consideration when making political decisions is permanently negotiated.

### 7.1.2. Different understandings of Responsiveness

Apparently, Pitkin's definition of responsiveness on which the present study is based, is focused on policy making. Eulau and Karps, on the contrary, present us with a definition of responsiveness which besides policy responsiveness, also comprises "service responsiveness", "allocation responsiveness" and "symbolic responsiveness". (cf. Eulau / Karps 1978)

*Service responsiveness*, following these authors, refers to the "non-legislative services that a representative actually performs for individuals or groups in his district." As examples for this kind of non-legislative services, Eulau and Karps name helping citizens in "difficulties with a tax agency, delays in welfare payments, securing a job in government, and so on." (ibid.: 64) As this kind of responsiveness is mainly related to helping individuals in difficult situations, this kind of relationship between representative and citizen in most cases will not trigger a public debate. Only in cases, in which the "help" provided by a representative for (a group of) certain citizens is perceived as, for example, nepotism or as being unjustified for other reasons, this kind of responsiveness is likely to be addressed in the public sphere.

The second component of responsiveness mentioned above, *allocation responsiveness*, is defined as "legislative allocations of public projects" that "involve(s) advantages and benefits presumably accruing to a representative's district as a whole." The "critical point" in the definition of this kind of responsiveness is, that the "'allocator' [...] seeks to anticipate the needs of his clients and, in fact, can stimulate their wants."(ibid.: 65; italics by C.B.) Transferred to the situation in the EU, one could imagine a national representative of a country X who tries to raise EU funding for building a high-speed train connection between two small towns in his/her country. In order to promote this idea, the representative organizes a *national* campaign aiming at convincing local citizens of the desirability and necessity of such a train connection and finally succeeds to "stimulate their wants". Such an attempt to gain financial support for a project which can not make credible its "European importance" is likely to fail in EU institutions. (cf. also the reasoning in Laclau 2005: 158) Moreover, with regard to the public sphere, the representative's focus on the national public and the attempt to "stimulate the want" of his national constituency for a high-speed train between the two small towns in X would imply the focus on the *national* public sphere of X. The politician will make press releases, public speeches and may even organize a media campaign for the project. However, as soon as the issue is taken up and discussed in the public spheres in other EU Member States, it is likely that the potential spending of large amounts of money for a project that lacks "European importance" is likely to be fiercely criticized. Only if the politician from X can make credible, that the two small towns that will be connected by the high-speed train are of European importance, for example, due to their geo-strategical position or due to their outstanding economic potential, such an attempt will have a chance of

passing the test of public scrutiny. Put differently: In the EU, allocation responsiveness aiming at the stimulation of regional or national wants is likely to fail in situations in which the European dimension can not credibly communicated. This has two consequences: *Either* such projects will only have a chance of being realized if the matter is decided secretly, without triggering much public debate. Such a solution, however, would not be desirable from a normative point of view. *Or*, the agents that promote the project succeed in convincing a broader European public of its desirability. In this latter case, one then could no longer speak of “*allocation responsiveness*” as it implies a “European dimension” rather than merely being a matter of regional or national interest. The possibilities for allocation responsiveness involving a pan-European debate are thus rather unfavorable. Allocation responsiveness in the EU is more likely to succeed if the decision is taken secretly, which in turn is undesirable from a normative point of view.

The final component of responsiveness discussed by Eulau and Karps, i.e. *symbolic responsiveness*, refers to representatives’ attempts to signal that they are “truly the people’s representative and ready to be responsive to them.” (ibid.: 66f) The examples given by Eulau and Karps, such as “fire-side chats, telephonic call-a-thons, visits to economically stricken areas, being ‘Jimmy’ Carter, and so on” (ibid.: 66), make clear that the term “*people’s representative*” should be understood as “representative of the *common citizen*”. The intention of such measures is to signalize to citizens that a representative “is one of them”, is close to “them” and understands “their” concerns. This understanding of symbolic responsiveness is relevant to the study of the public sphere in as far as the quoted measures are *public* gestures which are meant to be perceived by a large number of citizens. In the context of this study, however, this kind of symbolic responsiveness will not be taken into consideration as it would imply, for example, a study of political rhetoric used by representatives. This, however, is not the central aim of this study. Based on these considerations of service, allocation and symbolic responsiveness, the focus will remain on policy responsiveness.

### *Media responsiveness*

The understanding of responsiveness as used in this study should not be conflated with another use of the term responsiveness that can be found in the literature. Gerhards (1997) in his considerations on the relation between mass media and politics is concerned with policy responsiveness and the media’s role in enabling it. His concern is to find a *normative benchmark* for measuring the degree to which the media fulfill their role in enabling responsive governance. He argues that the *media* have to behave in a responsive way to the political debates taking place in the political system, especially within parliament. Only if the

media present citizens an adequate “collective representation” (Gerhards 1997: 151) of the debates going on in the political system, can they be said to fulfill their democratic function. He specifies his understanding, by arguing that mass media *first* have to mirror the distribution of speakers in parliament, according to their party affiliation. Thus, if for example 30 % of the speakers in parliament are members of party A, the share of speakers from A quoted in the media’s reporting on this particular issue should be approximately 30 % as well.<sup>2</sup> The *second* criterion given by Gerhards is the degree to which media reflect the *interpretations* of political issues, as uttered in Parliament. *Finally*, Gerhards argues that media should also reflect the “level of discourse” (“Diskursniveau”; *ibid.*: 151). Drawing on Habermas, he argues that the level of discourse is defined by the extent to which arguments are used in the debate and by the level of complexity of the debate. (*cf. ibid.*: 152)

Gerhards’ focus implies a *shift* from policy responsiveness to media responsiveness. Though, of course, media should report on the issues that are dealt with in the political system in order to enable citizens to develop political preferences, one should not go as far as claiming that the media have to *mirror* debates. This would mean to reduce the role the media in the political process to a mere transmission belt of Parliamentary debates (or other debates within the political system). Such an understanding does not do suffice to the media’s possibility to report on political issues in a way that does not merely mirror the debate in Parliament, but weighs the contributions of Members of Parliament differently or presents arguments and standpoints that were not uttered in Parliament. As Trez put it, “The media are not the mirror of the political system. Newspapers design their own maps of the political landscape and use different scales from political actors.” (Trenz 2004: 313) This misfit between Gerhards’ normative argument and empirical reality as such does not delegitimize his position. More important, are the wider normative implications of Gerhards point of view. If media were mostly to mirror parliamentary debates, opinions that are not reflected in these debates would have fewer possibilities of being perceived by the broader public. This would impoverish the public debate and would limit, for example, the access of minorities of different kinds to the public sphere. Thus, though it is important that media report on political issues dealt with by the political system, they should not merely mirror debates. On the contrary, one reason why media are of central importance for democratic polities, is their potential to voice a wide range of differing political views and agendas and thus reflect the inherently multiple character of contemporary societies.

After having defined the concept of “responsiveness” the following chapters will elaborate on the preconditions that are necessary for responsive governance (chapter 4.2.), before

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<sup>2</sup> Gerhards in the empirical part of his analysis used a ratio of .75 as a threshold for measuring media responsiveness. This means, that the amount of speakers from A as quoted in the mass media should not deviate by more than 25 %. (*cf. Gerhards 1997: 155*) Such a numerical fixation is necessarily arbitrary.

applying these insights to the investigation of the conditions for responsiveness in the EU (chapter 4.3.). Based on these discussions in chapter 4.4., by way of conclusion, the question, which empirical indicator one should use for empirically investigating whether or not media discourses fulfill the preconditions for enabling responsive governance, will be addressed.

## **7.2. The conditions of possibility of responsive governance**

Policy responsiveness as defined by Pitkin is a very demanding concept that requires the fulfillment of several preconditions, both, with regard to the political system and with regard to the public sphere and the mass media. In the following pages, these preconditions will be introduced and explained, before considering their conditions of possibility in the EU.

### **7.2.1. Transparency**

Central to the concept of responsiveness is a communicative exchange between the political system and the public sphere. The public sphere is the realm where citizens are given the possibility to inform themselves on political issues and where processes of political opinion formation take place whose results are permanently communicated back to the political system. A very basic precondition for enabling this communicative exchange is that the political system is *transparent* to the public. The notion of transparency comprises two different aspects. First, it means that citizens must have *access* to relevant discussions and documents from within the political system. The right to access documents from within the political system enables people not only to gain information on the issues dealt with by the polity. More than this it is also a necessary precondition for enabling the investigative work of journalists. The notion of transparency, however, also comprises another aspect which is crucial for enabling responsiveness. The public must, second, also have the possibility to *follow the process of policy formation*. The public needs to know which issues are currently being dealt with by the political system and *who* makes *which* proposals to tackle these issues. It is not sufficient to merely inform the public *ex post* on what decisions have been made. Rather, information has to be provided to the public already during the very process of policy formation. The public is then given the possibility to form their opinion on the issues at stake before they are decided upon, which is a crucial precondition for responsiveness. If the public is either uninformed or simply indifferent with regard to political issues, responsiveness of the political system becomes impossible.

### **7.2.2. The role of political actors**

Implicit to the transparency argument is the notion, that there have to be political actors who *actively communicate* their political agenda to the broader public. The mere access to documents from within the polity - however important it may be - is not enough to enable responsive governance. Political actors communicating their political concerns can be either from within the political system in the narrow sense, or from the broader realm of civil society. As has been argued in chapter XXXX, actors from civil society, such as NGOs or more spontaneous citizen initiatives, in many cases have succeeded in raising public interest for concerns, such as gender or environmental issues. They were successful in setting these issues on the public agenda, which also forced representatives of the political system to address them. (Habermas 1998: 461) In most day-to-day politics, however, it is representatives of the political system who address the public with their views on policy issues and try to gain public support for their standpoints. As empirical studies have shown, the issues taken up by the mass media to a large extent depend on the issues that are dealt with by the political system. (cf. Neidhardt et al. 1998; Beyme: 1994) This can be understood, when considering the dual role that actors from the political system have with regard to the public sphere. What distinguishes them from other public actors is that they actually have the possibility to make collectively binding decision. Representatives of the political system thus are what Fraser has labelled a "strong public" as opposed to the much broader category of "weak publics", which lacks the possibility to make collectively binding decisions. (cf. Fraser 1997: 145) Actors from the political system thus have a privileged position when it comes to setting the agenda of the issues taken up in the mass media. Furthermore, the political system, especially parliament, is an institutional site where opposition between different political parties is institutionalized. Due to their need to gain popular support for their political programs, different political parties permanently actively address the public with their respective views on certain issues. This, as has been argued, in turn is pivotal for the development of a viable public sphere as it provides an incentive to public will formation. After all, if the questions how to understand a certain political issue and which measures should be taken to solve the issue would be uncontested from the outset, a public debate could not develop. In addition, differing views expressed by political actors also have a *structuring effect* on the political debates as they serve as opinion poles to which the public debate can relate in affirmative, amending or critical ways. Such public processes of will formation in turn may have an impact on the political views as expressed by the representatives and have an impact on policy decisions. Finally, the permanent communicative efforts of political parties are pivotal for the development of a public sphere that goes beyond isolated discussions, but that has a *durable* character.

### **7.2.3. Elections**

Responsive governance presupposes not only a viable public sphere in which opinion formation can take place, but also representatives who have an *incentive* to take public opinion formation into consideration when taking decisions. As Pitkin argues, such an incentive must take the shape of “institutional arrangements”. (Pitkin 1967: 233) Even a dictator can decide to be responsive to the political preferences of his subjects. Still, in such a situation, despite responsiveness with regard to one issue, one would not consider the dictatorial political *system* as being a representative one, because “We should be reluctant to consider any system a representative government unless it held regular elections, which were ‘genuine’ or ‘free’”. (ibid.: 235) Following this argument, only *elections* can guarantee that the citizens’ preferences are of relevance for the representatives. If citizens have the possibility to vote their representatives in or out of office, then the latter have an incentive not to be ignorant to the political “wishes” of their respective demos. (cf. also Habermas 1998: 627) As discussed above, this does not imply that representatives will simply behave like a puppet on a string. After all, the possibility of neglecting public opinion is part of the relative autonomy of the political system. (cf. van den Daele / Neidhardt 1996: 32) It becomes, however, much more difficult for representatives to *systematically* ignore public debates, if their very status as representatives is dependent on the electoral approval by the citizens.

Following Pitkin’s argument, elections are a way of “punishing” representatives who did not perform as citizens expected them to do. Inherent to this argument is another important prerequisite for responsive governance. If citizens are supposed to vote their representatives out of office, they must be given the possibility to actually *assess the achievements and political plans* of the former. Elections can only be meaningful if those who vote are given the possibility to know *which* representatives were (not) responsible for *which* political decisions in the last years and which representatives propose what programs for the future. This, as discussed above, presupposes representatives who actively communicate their programs on the one hand and transparency of the political decision making process on the other. But again, transparency alone is not enough. If the decision taking process is organized in a way in which responsibility cannot be ascribed, because the share of responsibility of the various representatives in the final decision can no longer be assessed, then the conditions for casting an informed vote are neither fulfilled. At the national level, the distinction between a parliamentary opposition on the one hand and parties / a party supporting the government on the other hand makes the ascription of responsibility rather easy. As will be argued below, the institutional set-up of the EU is far less suited to allow for this ascription of responsibility.

#### **7.2.4. Media: “focus”, “consonance” and “duration”**

While the preconditions for responsive governance discussed so far – i.e. transparency, the role of political actors in the public debate and elections – all focused on the political system in the narrow sense, a certain kind of media reporting can also be *supportive* to enabling responsive governance. As Neidhardt et al. argue, the chances for media coverage to become politically relevant increase if *several* media not only report on the same issues (“focus”), but if they also present a *similar interpretation* of the events, i.e. if their reporting shows a high degree of evaluative “consonance”. The higher the degree of consonance of the evaluation of political events as presented in news media, the more likely it becomes that the “*direction of the political effects*” (“*Richtung politischer Effekte*”; Neidhardt et al. 1998: 14) will be influenced by the media. The chances of influencing the behavior of the representatives further increase, if media coverage in addition shows a certain *persistence* over time. Put differently, the longer the time span during which a certain evaluation of a particular political issue is presented in the media, the higher the likelihood of having an impact on the behavior of representatives. (cf. *ibid.*: 16) Cases where the coverage of political issues by the media is focused, consonant and persistent, Neidhardt et al. consider being a highly “integrated” voice of the media. The authors contrast this situation with a disintegrated and heterogeneous public debate. Under the latter conditions, they argue, a public communication which would make it possible for the political system to connect to public opinion (the term “Anschlußfähigkeit” is used here; *ibid.*: 17) will not develop. In this case one is confronted with an “anomalous condition of public opinion formation” (“*anomischer Zustand öffentlicher Meinungsbildung*”; *ibid.*: 17) Though I agree with the authors that the above-mentioned three factors increase the likelihood that representatives will behave in a way that takes into consideration citizens’ wishes, Neidhardt et al. overstretch their argument, when saying that the political system can not “connect” to public debates, if the latter are heterogeneous. On the contrary, an ideal situation of a homogeneous public debate, as described by Neidhardt et al. should be considered the very exception. It is safe to assume that on the vast majority of political issues public debates are divided to differing degrees. From this, one should not conclude that responsive governance is impossible. Indeed, such an evaluation would imply a misconception of responsiveness. Responsiveness to political preferences as articulated in the public sphere in pluralist democracies in most cases will be necessarily a *selective* responsiveness, taking into consideration some political preferences while neglecting others. The focus, consonance and duration of media coverage thus should not be understood as a *necessary* precondition for enabling responsive governance. Rather, situations in which these three criteria are met are exceptional in so far as they suggest to representatives a rather homogeneous public opinion, which implies that much is at stake for representatives if they decide to ignore citizens’ preferences. However, given the representatives’ capability to behave in a different manner than suggested by

public debates, even a consonant, durable and focused way of media reporting does in no way guarantee responsive behavior.

### **7.3. Conditions for responsive governance in the EU**

As has been argued, responsive governance presupposes not only access to information from within the political system, but also political actors who actively communicate their agenda to the citizens through the mass media so that the policy making process becomes transparent as well. The strongest incentive for political actors to actively communicate their agenda in public and to seek the support of the citizens for their proposed policies is that the political actors are dependent on the approval by their constituency in elections. Furthermore, the media can facilitate responsive behavior of representatives by reporting on political matters in a focused, consonant and durable way. The latter, however, is not a precondition for responsive governance, but makes responsive behavior easier as this way of media reporting suggests a rather unified public opinion on a certain political issue.

When now turning to the EU, the question arises whether and how these preconditions are met by this polity and which impact the characteristics of the EU polity have on the public sphere in the media. What are the conditions for responsive governance in the EU?

#### **7.3.1. Commission and Council**

Responsive governance can only take place if there is a communicative exchange between the citizens and their representatives. This process presupposes both that interested persons can have access to relevant documents and information from within the political system and that the process of policy formation is communicated to the broader public. When applying these insights to the European Commission and the Council of Ministers one will find that both institutions are deficient in both aspects.

As Gramberger argues, the Commission (in the shape of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community) from its very beginning rather avoided the public and followed an information obstruction policy ("Informationsverhinderungspolitik"; Gramberger 1997: 100) Emanuele Gozzo, the founder of the news agency *Agence Europe* was reportedly even actively prompted to end this enterprise. (cf. *ibid.*: 100) This arcane policy remained rather stable until the early 1990s when the negative outcome of the Danish referendum on the Maastricht treaty (1992) led to a reconsideration of the EU's information policy. The treaty of Maastricht already included first provisions concerning transparency. Since then the EU has aimed at becoming more transparent, by building up an information network that comprises such differing measures as EU information centres, information material, the information

service "Europe direct" or the Europa-Webpage (<http://europa.eu.int>) including, amongst others, numerous documents and treaties. (cf. Brüggemann 2005: 14) Nevertheless, as pointed out by Brüggemann, these measures "do not reach out to those who do not care about the EU" and thus do not actively make use of these services. (cf. *ibid.*: 14) To enable responsiveness the Commission and the other institutions involved in policy making would rather have to actively communicate their agenda to the broad public. One of the efforts to develop a strategy for more active communication with the public was the so-called de Clercq Report which was commissioned by Jacques Delors. The suggestions made in the report, however, were far from what is necessary for establishing a critical public debate. In the report it was suggested

"that the Commission should treat the EC as a 'branded project", to 'target' journalists and editors, so that they subsequently 'become enthusiastic supporters of the cause', and women, because they think 'intuitively' and 'instinctively', possess 'moral values', 'detest war' and 'love their families'". (quoted in Meyer 1999: 624; cf. also Gramberger 1997: 226)

These suggestions were heavily disputed not only within the Commission, but also met fierce critique in many media. (cf. *ibid.*: 227f) In 1993 for the first time a Commissioner (João de Deus Pinheiro) was appointed whose predominant task it was to deal with information policy. Under the aegis of Pinheiro for the first time a systematic communication strategy was developed which perceived of communication not only as advertisement, but also as a "dialogue" with citizens. (cf. *ibid.*: 231) Also the measures suggested in the most recent attempt to improve communication with European citizens, i.e. the *White Paper on a European Communication Policy*, published by the *European Commission* in February 2006 (cf. Commission 2006) do not allow for a substantial improvement of the situation. Though it is stressed, that "Communication is essential to a healthy democracy" and that communication must be "two-way street", the actual measures suggested in the White Paper would not make the EU a more responsive political system. Indeed, the wording of this document is very revealing with regard to the limits of responsive governance in the EU. Under the header "participation" it is explained that "Citizens should have a right to express their views, be heard and have the opportunity for dialogue with the decision-makers." (*ibid.*: 6) "Being heard" and having a "dialogue with the decision-makers", however, does not yet assure that what is being "heard" by the "decision-makers" is indeed deemed relevant by the latter. Under the header "Empowering citizens" it is stated that what is decisive is to "give as many people as possible access to information". (*ibid.*: 6) But again, having access to information does not necessarily imply that people are "empowered" as well. What is blurred in such phrases is the distinction between information and communication on the one hand, and actual participation on the other. Responsiveness, to be sure, requires both. The Commission's attempts to communicate more actively with the public, to "bring decisions

closer to the people" (ibid.: 12) does not yet allow for responsiveness. Meyer's evaluation from 1999 has not lost any of its relevance:

"Political deliberation occurs only at the very end of a technocratic policy-drafting process. After months or years of experts' work, potential public reactions are often properly considered only a few days before the proposal's planned adoption. By then it is usually too late for any non-cosmetic changes [...]" (Meyer 1999: 628)

Responsiveness would require a communicative *exchange* between the political system and the public. In addition, there have to be structural incentives for this communicative exchange to be relevant for the decisions that are to be taken. Both requirements would be fulfilled if the representatives in the Commission would be dependent on the results of general elections. In such a case, there would be a structural incentive for the Commission to permanently relate to the public in the development of their policy proposals. In the absence of such an incentive a "technocratic mindset" (ibid.: 628) can develop which allows for a disconnection between the political system and public debates. The current modus for appointing the Commission does not provide structural incentives for assuring the relevance of public debates. According to the current legal rules, the President and the members of the European Commission are nominated by the Member States and have to be approved by the European Parliament. (cf. Hix 2005: 59f) One could thus argue that the elections to the EP give citizens a very limited possibility to influence the composition of the Commission. Citizens, however, do not know in advance (i.e. before the EP elections) which people will be nominated by the Member States for becoming commissioners and neither does a competition between several candidates take place which could be decided by the citizens by casting a vote. Under these circumstances, the influence of citizens' voting behavior in EP elections on the selection of the commissioners is very limited. (cf. Hix 1997) As the EP has no right to nominate candidates, the structural position of Member States in choosing Commissioners is much stronger. Ultimately, Commissioners are dependent on their support by the Member States. As a consequence, once elected their very status as Commissioners is not dependent on the electoral support by the European electorate. Thus, in the case of the Commission there is no structural incentive to take into consideration public debates when taking decisions.

With regard to the *Council* the situation is very similar. Policy positions of the Council are being prepared behind closed doors in numerous committees. Here the *COREPER* (Committee of Permanent Representatives) is of central importance. These committees, depending of the issue at stake, are either staffed with the ambassadors of the various Member States (Coreper II) or their delegates (Coreper I). The negotiations in the *Coreper* are intransparent to the public and information about which delegate stands for which position are not available. A public debate on the issues dealt with by the *Coreper* thus

cannot take place. As Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace (1995) have estimated, only 10 to 15 % of all issues dealt with by the Council are actually discussed by the Ministers, while the vast majority of issues is being decided by the committees. (quoted after Hix 2005: 83) However, a – modest - step towards more transparency was made at the Council meeting in Seville in 2002 when it was decided that the Council's deliberations will be open to the public when it acts according to the co-decision procedure (i.e. when decisions are taken together with the EP). (cf. General Secretariat 2005: 1f) But again, such publicity only occurs at the end of a policy making process in which the final negotiations are dominated.

Neither does the modus in which the representatives in the Council are appointed provide the structural incentive for responsiveness. At first sight, one could argue that European citizens have the possibility to influence the Council's composition through their voting behavior in national elections. This relation between national elections and the appointment of the Members of the Council is problematic for two reasons. First, as empirical studies have shown, matters of European integration de facto are only of minor importance in national elections. For example, even such an important matter as the possible British participation in the Euro-Zone in the general elections in the UK in 2001 only ranked third in terms of saliency. (cf. Lord 2004: 164) But even where European issues influenced the public debates preceding national elections, "it is still relatively rare for them to shape voter choice." (ibid.: 165) Not surprisingly, it is national matters that decide national elections. What results from this is that the political fate of national representatives in the Council, i.e. their very status as Ministers, usually is not dependent on the policies that they pursue at the European level. As a consequence, the way in which the members of the Council are appointed does not provide the structural incentive aimed at by Pitikin. National elections simply do not provide a structural linkage between the achievements of national representatives at the European level and their status as representatives. Second, also from a normative point of view it is problematic to use a single vote to express views on two different - though connected - polities, i.e. the EU *and* the domestic level. (ibid.: 165) After all, citizens may well support a party "A" with regard to its domestic policies, but disagree with the same party on its view on European integration. Assuming that there actually would be a possibility to directly elect the Council, in such a situation citizens may decide to vote differently than at the national level to influence the composition of this EU institution. Citizens' votes in national elections thus signal to their EU representatives only to a very limited extent what their political preferences with regard to European integration are and thus are hardly a suitable instrument for promoting responsive behavior.

### **7.3.2. The European Parliament and Responsiveness**

Different from the Commission and the Council, the European Parliament is an institution which is directly elected by the European citizens. *Prima facie* it thus seems to be much better suited for responsive governance than the aforementioned bodies. Nevertheless, the specific character of EP elections and the European Parliament's working method imply several obstacles for responsive governance:

In 1972, that is 7 years before the first elections to the EP were held in June 1979, the former president of the Commission, Walter Hallstein, expressed his optimism concerning the positive effects of the introduction of popular elections to the EP. According to Hallstein, the campaign preceding such elections,

"would force those entitled to vote to look at and examine the questions and the various options on which the European Parliament would have to decide in the months and years ahead. It would give candidates who emerged victorious from such a campaign a truly European mandate from their electors; and it would encourage the emergence of truly European political parties." (Haugstein, quoted in: Hix 2005: 193)

More than three decades after this statement was made, Hix claims that much research has come to the conclusion that these optimistic expectations „could not be further from the reality." (ibid.: 193) One of the main reasons for this failure of EP elections to trigger a pan-European process of opinion formation is their character as "second-order national contests." The concept of second-order contests was first applied by Reif and Schmitt (1980) to the study of EP elections. They argue that "'first-order' elections in parliamentary systems are the national parliamentary elections, and in presidential systems, the national presidential elections". In addition, there is a "plethora of 'second-order' elections", such as "by-elections, municipal elections, various sorts of regional elections, those to a 'second chamber' and the like." (Reif/Schmitt 1980: 8) What is specific to second-order elections is that

"Many voters cast their votes in these elections not as a result of conditions obtaining within the specific context of the second-order arena, but also on the basis of factors in the main political arena of the nation." (ibid.: 9)

Reif and Schmitt stress that the probably most important feature of second-order elections is, that there "is less at stake" and they argue that "everything really important" (ibid.: 3) is decided at the national level. At the time when their article was written, i.e. in 1980, this assumption may have seemed rather unproblematic. Though the competencies of the EP cannot be compared with a national parliament, in the two and a half decades that have passed since then, the EP has substantially gained in influence. Thus, the assessment by Reif and Schmitt that "everything really important is decided at the national level" no longer can stand unchallenged. Nevertheless, the statement *can* be upheld, when not referring to the actual competencies of the EP, but to its *perceived* insignificance. Reif and Schmitt argue

that several consequences result from this insignificance. Second-order elections are likely to show a *lower level of participation* than first-order elections and a higher percentage of invalidated ballots. Furthermore, they predict "*Brighter prospects for small and new political parties*" and that government parties are more likely to lose as citizens "who generally support the government vote for the opposition in secondary elections in order to apply pressure on the government". (ibid.: 10) In an empirical investigation of British EP elections Heath et al. (1999) have found "considerable support for Schmitt and Reif's theory of second-order elections." (Heath et al. 1999: 406; cf. also Marsh 1998) They argue that the patterns of support for EP parties largely follow the support for parties in general elections. (cf. ibid.: 394) A mere 13 % of British voters have "split their ticket", i.e. voted differently in EP elections than in general elections. Among these 13 %, the largest group (35,3 %) have voted "tactically". This means, that they voted a party "that they do not in their hearts support but may instead use their vote to warn their own party to mend its ways." (ibid.: 407) Such expressive voting, in turn "had little to do [...] with the substantive European [...] issues". (ibid.: 409) What follows from these data is that the domestic, first-order arena is of crucial importance for deciding upon the voting behavior in EP elections. The behavior of voters, but also of the competing parties in EP elections is "significantly shaped by domestic issues and national patterns of political competition". (Lord 2004: 119; cf. also Hix 2005: 192ff) As a consequence, the elections to the EP do not imply a judgment on the achievements or the future plans of the EP itself and thus hardly provide MEPs and the parties in the EP with information on how they could "align the exercise of European parliamentary powers with public opinion on European Union issues." (Lord 1998: 69) Under second-order circumstances, EP elections can not "be interpreted as a judgement on rival programmes for a forthcoming EP." (Lord 2004: 119) This has important implications for the conditions of possibility of responsive governance. As it is not the achievements or future plans of the MEPs that citizens decide upon when voting for the EP, "MEPs have no special incentive to follow the preferences of their electorate. Their chances of re-elections are conditioned by the domestic political cycle and not by any actions of their own." (ibid.: 121) As a consequence, though MEPs have to stand up for re-election, their dependency on elections does not provide them with an incentive to behave in a responsive way to citizens preferences.

Also with regard to the current working method of the EP important hindrances for responsiveness can be discerned. As has been observed by several scholars, in the EP there is a "frequent recourse to the formation of a kind of 'grand coalition'" including the two biggest parliamentary party groups, i.e. the Party of European Socialists in the EP (PSE) and the Christian Democratic European People's Party (PPE) as well as other parties. (Kreppel

2000: 341) As Kreppel argues, this tendency of the parties in the EP to form broad coalitions can be explained by the institutional design of the European Union:

"The existence of a legislative triumvirate within the EU means that the EP (and the party groups) must pass moderate proposals that will be acceptable to the other institutions (which are themselves multi-partisan) if it wishes to influence final policy outcomes." (ibid.: 342)

What follows from the necessity to pass "moderate proposals" and the ensuing broad coalitions, is that the competition between the party groups is more limited than in most national parliaments. This has important consequences for the possibility of responsiveness of the EP. As Follesdal and Hix point out,

*"political competition is an essential vehicle for opinion formation. Competition fosters political debate, which in turn promotes the formation of public opinion on different policy options. [...] Without such debates, voters would not be able to form their preferences on complex policy issues."* (Follesdal / Hix 2005: 17)

The working method of the EP thus does not provide many incentives to trigger public debates. The institutional incentive to suggest "acceptable proposals" favors centrist policy proposals, promotes broad coalitions and leaves the European citizens without policy alternatives. As a consequence, it becomes difficult for citizens to discern policy alternatives and to change the overall political direction of the EP by casting their vote. What is more, the formation of "moderate" positions is the result of negotiations between the various party groups of the EP. In this negotiation process public debates only to a limited extent can have an influence, as the acceptability of the proposal for the Commission and the Council cannot be lost sight of and thus puts institutional constraints on the range of possible policy options. Coalitions in the EP, however, are not only broad, but they are also *shifting*. Different from national parliaments, the parties in the EP are not split up in an opposition group on the one hand and a group of parties (or one single party) which supports the work of the government on the other. At the national level, this working logic makes it easy for citizens to ascribe the responsibility of political decisions and take the achievements of the representatives into consideration when deciding on how to cast their vote. In the case that citizens were not satisfied with the overall performance of their representatives, they have the possibility to "throw the rascals out" at the next elections. In the EP, however, the distinction opposition/government does not apply. Rather, in the EP decisions are taken on the basis of shifting party coalitions that potentially can include *all* party groups. While one political issues may be supported by, for example, the Social Democrats, the Liberals and the Conservatives, a second policy proposal may be rejected by the Social Democrats, but be supported by the Green Party Group, the Liberals and the Conservatives. The social-democratic party group, for example, within the EP may vote together with liberals on a

certain issue, but they may join the Christian-Democrats on another issue. (cf. Kreppel/Tsebelis: 1998; Hix 2005: 190ff) This implies that the overall performance of the EP cannot simply be ascribed to a majority that was *fixed* during the last legislative period. The ascription of responsibility for the overall performance of the EP to a certain party is thus highly complicated. As a consequence, it is far less clear which of the many “rascals” citizens should vote out of Parliament if they feel that the performance of the EP was not satisfactory. Of course, it is possible to investigate which parties supported a certain policy proposals and which parties voted against it. The composition of the party constellations supporting or opposing policy proposals, however, will change from case to case. The *overall* performance of a single party is thus very difficult to assess and would require citizens to make much bigger efforts than at the national level to investigate how a certain party behaved in the last legislative period. The result of this special characteristic of the EP is that the proceedings of its parties remain, though publicly accessible, intransparent and that the distinguishing characters of the respective parties remain hard to discern. (cf. Piepenschneider 2004: 242) This is problematic in so far as the conditions for casting an *informed* vote, based on the actual achievements of the parties, are considerably weakened under these conditions. This is not to suggest that citizens should cast their vote only if they are well informed on the political programs of the various parties. This would indeed pose unrealistically high demands to citizens and imply a misconception of how citizens’ decisions to vote for a certain party develop. Nevertheless, it is important to normatively uphold the claim that a party’s profile must be discernible for citizens so that they are given the possibility to assess its achievements. Such discernability is given to a lesser extent if the political debates are not structured along the cleavage opposition parties vs. parties supporting the government. As Follesdal and Hix point out, under such circumstances, citizens are deprived of the possibility “to identify alternative leaders or policy agendas” and “to determine whether leaders could have done better or to identify who is responsible for policies.” (Follesdal / Hix 2005: 16)

### **7.3.3. Multiple Publics, Multiple Addressees**

Finally, one more point has to be made when analyzing to which extent the conditions for responsive governance are given in the EU. The very idea of responsiveness is based on the assumption that there are political actors capable of taking binding decisions, on the one hand, and citizens who through their public discussion of political issues not only develop political preferences, but, due to the public character of these debates, also communicate them to their representatives, on the other hand. There has to be both, a public discussing political issues and political actors who have an interest in following these debates and who are the addressees of this communication. Who are then the publics and the addressees in the EU polity?

Due to the multi-national and multi-level character of the EU, the process of policy making involves a number of institutions and of representatives both at the national and at the supranational level and is thus more complicated than at the national level. In nation states policies are usually the outcome of the interplay between parliaments and governments. These two institutions, in turn, are connected with each other through parties that structure the parliamentary opinion formation and support (or oppose) the government. When turning to the EU, one will find that though there is a Parliament and though there are institutions that have executive duties, their interaction is organized in a quite different manner and the role played by parties differs as well.

The most important institutions for policy making are the Council, the Commission and the EP. According to the current legal situation, the interaction between these organizations is organized differently, depending on the political issue at stake. Since the Maastricht treaty, the EU is organized into three pillars, in which different policy matters are being dealt with. The first pillar comprises the former European Community treaties and thus covers a total of 20 policy areas, ranging from agriculture, transport, economic and monetary union, research and technological development, customs co-operation to environmental issues. In the second pillar, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is located, while the third pillar covers matters concerning the Co-operation in Justice and Home Affairs (JHA). These pillars differ in so far as the decision taking processes and the balance of powers between the various institutions are organized differently. (for an overview cf. e.g. Gusy 2000: 134ff; Hix 2005) The first pillar is sometimes said to be based on a *supranational* mode of decision taking, since the Commission and the EP have a stronger position in the decision making process than in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> pillar. In the latter two pillars, the Member States and their representatives in the Council have a bigger weight, so that these pillars are sometimes referred to as the *intergovernmental* ones. When following this rough distinction, one could now analyze the conditions of possibility of responsive governance, depending on the mode of decision taking. One could argue that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> pillar the institutional prerequisites for responsiveness are actually met as the members of the Council and national governments ultimately are dependent on the electoral approval by their respective national demoi. Under such circumstances, they have an incentive to take the political preferences of their electorate into consideration when making decisions. However, as argued in the preceding section, national elections are fought only in few cases on the basis of matters of European integration. National representatives thus do not have to fear to be elected out of office due to their performance in the European arena. Their dependency on national elections with regard to their behavior at the European level does not function as an institutional incentive to behave responsively to citizens' preferences.

With regard to the first pillar, one could argue that due to the way in which the Commission is appointed (cf. above), it is not directly dependent on citizens' approval and thus lacks this basic institutional incentive for responsive governance. With regard to the EP, as has been argued above, one has to point to the specific character of EP elections as second-order national elections, which to a large extent deprives them of their capability to function as an institutional incentive for responsive governance. (cf. Bärenreuter 2005b)

Such a rough distinction between pillars, however, would not do justice to the intricate relations between the various EU institutions as it does not take into consideration that there are neither pure supranational nor pure intergovernmental modes of decision making in the EU. Rather, decision making processes in all three pillars include supranational as well as intergovernmental aspects. This intertwining of supranational and intergovernmental aspects of decision making adds another dimension to our evaluation of the conditions of possibility of responsive governance in the EU. What follows from this intertwining is that the addressees of the communicative input into the EU polity are always located at both the supranational level (Commission, EP) and the national level (Member States, Council). In the EU we are thus confronted with a *multiplicity of addressees* who are operating within different institutions. These institutions, however, are not connected with each other through political parties that would structure opinion formation. This multiplicity of addressees makes responsiveness more difficult than at the national level.

One aspect of this problematique is that members of the Council try to achieve in negotiations what they perceive as the interest of their respective *national* *demos*. Due to the lacking public debate on many issues dealt with by the Council, these perceived national interests often are not the result of a communicative exchange between the national representatives and their national publics. More than this, even if one was to *hypothetically* assume that the members of the Council represent the *homogenous* will of their respective national *demos*, the working logic of negotiations in the Council and of the *Coreper* who prepares Council decisions forces them to make compromises between the various national standpoints, so that the final outcome will necessarily deviate from any single national standpoint. Of course, also at the national level compromises between different standpoints are necessary. At the national level, however, citizens every few years through their vote have a possibility to "correct" the direction of the overall policies pursued when they feel it is necessary. This possibility is not given at the EU level, so that citizens, apart from the highly problematic way of influencing Council behavior through national elections, have no way of influencing the overall performance of this central EU institution.

But even a situation in which a Member State (or several Member States sharing a certain interest) actually succeeds in pushing through its (their) respective interests on a certain issue, would be problematic with regard to responsiveness. After all, decisions made at the

EU level are binding for all the Member States. The problem in such a situation is not, as in the aforementioned case, that the decision implies a deviation from any single national standpoint, but that the interests of *some* Member States simply had no impact on the decision taken. This situation highlights another dimension of the problematic character of national representatives being the most influential ones to make decisions in the EU. If national representatives behave in a responsive way they can be expected to do so merely with regard to the interests of their respective *national* *demos*, thereby usually not taking into consideration public debates conducted in Member States other than their own. The institutional incentives to consider public opinion from other Member States simply do not exist. This is problematic in so far as the Council decides on legal propositions that have a binding effect on *all* Member States.<sup>3</sup> The only incentive to take into consideration even public opinion in other Member States that actually exists is based on strategic considerations. In intergovernmental negotiations in the EU success often depends on forming coalitions with other Member States. Under these circumstances, it is advisable to cede to the interests of other Member States on some points, so that these Member States may give in with regard to another issue. This situation, however, corresponds to the situation described above and cannot be a functional equivalent for the direct exchange between publics and the addressees, which is an indispensable prerequisite for responsiveness.

The third, and probably central problematic implication of the existence of multiple addressees for the possibility of responsive governance at the EU level, follows from the fact that the different actors in the EU decision making process follow *different institutional logics*. While the agenda-setting Commission tries to define a European interest, the Council is supposed to represent the interests of the Member States and the EP those of the European citizens. These institutions, however, are not connected with each other through a party system that could not only serve to structure the internal opinion formations, but also link these processes with the broader public. As Lord, drawing on Marsh and Norris, argues,

“Most parliamentary democracies link political representation to public opinion and voter choice through a competitive system of party politics [...]: political parties simplify and structure choice, and parties then use their disciplines to ensure that parliamentarians compete and cooperate to enact the programmes on which they were elected.” (Lord 1998: 67)

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<sup>3</sup> From this, however, it should not be concluded that a European Public Sphere should be based on the permanent communicative exchange between countries or the permanent observation of opinion formation in other countries. This, as argued in chapter XXXX, would indeed imply a misconception of the public sphere in the mass media. Rather, as will be discussed in the following chapter on “chains of equivalences”, from this the necessity of pan-European representative structures that allow for a pan-European structuring of opinion formation emerges.

On the one hand, parties structure political choice, by proposing distinct policy sets to the public. At the same time, these distinct policy sets have a structuring effect on public debates, in which the question which policy is the more desirable one is discussed. On the other hand, parties link legislative and executive institutions not only with each other, but also with the public.

When now turning to the EU level, one could argue that the current institutional set-up of the EU provides multiple possibilities of representation. However, it is exactly this multiplicity of channels of representation and the lack of political parties linking them that makes this democratic way of simplifying and structuring political choice impossible. Due to their different institutional logics, the EP, the Commission or the Council may develop different understandings of what is in the best interest of the public. The decision which will finally be taken by the EU, is the outcome of inter-institutional bargaining between the institutional elites, who in many cases negotiate "behind closed doors". Such a decision making process can neither trigger nor structure a public debate, nor does it provide institutional preconditions for taking public debates into consideration. Citizens thus have neither the possibility to influence the overall direction of policies through casting a vote nor through their public deliberations.

Another implication of the multi-national composition of the EU which is closely related with the existence of multiple addressees, is that there is also a *multiplicity of national publics*. Due to the far-reaching lack of a truly *pan-European* public sphere, the processes of will formation currently take place in 25 national public spheres in which the mass media play a crucial role. As a result of the multiplicity of national publics in the EU it is possible that in addition to cleavages along different ideological lines, different national cleavages may develop. Taken together, such an intermixture of political preferences would make the *complexity of the communicative* input into the political system *considerably higher* than in single nation states. This is not to say that public debates on European issues in national public spheres *necessarily* imply national cleavages, as empirical evidence may well show that public debates are structured along "transversal cleavages" (Schmitter 1992) Nevertheless, in a multi-national polity this is a *possibility* that has to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the conditions of possibility of responsive governance in the EU. In such a situation representatives at the EU level would be confronted with criss-crossing national, ideological or regional interests and/or preferences. Such a high degree of complexity, in turn, would make it impossible to take the preferences of citizens into consideration in a non-random way. The reason therefore is that

"there may be limits to the number of cleavages that can be accommodated in any political system, however ingenious its construction: if political actors are to be cohesive, they have to

arrange themselves in relation to a limited number of social choices and conflicts.” (Lord 1998: 49)

Put differently: Assuming such a high complexity of the communicative input into the EU polity, it remains unclear which of the many expressed preferences representatives should take into consideration, when taking decisions. Different representatives – to the extent that they have an incentive to consider public debates (cf. above) - may perceive different preferences articulated in the national public spheres as being relevant, depending on their national and/or ideological background. Such a situation further enhances the standing of the EU institutions in the decision making process as it structurally impairs the potential political influence of public debates. The final decisions under such conditions will then finally depend on intra- and inter-institutional negotiation processes.

#### **7.4. Conclusions: the EPS and Complexity**

From the above discussion it follows that the institutional prerequisites for responsive governance are hardly given in the EU. Obstacles can be found, both with regard to the political system of the EU and opinion formation in the public sphere.

On the part of the polity, the far-reaching lack of electoral accountability of the Commission, but also of the Council, as well as the little impact of EP elections on the overall policy direction of the EU, the EP elections' character as “second-order national elections”, the shifting and broad coalitions in the EP as well as the fragmentation and secrecy of the policy-making process for different reasons all have a detrimental effects on the possibility of responsive governance in the EU. With regard to the public sphere, the existence of multiple publics and the ensuing *possible* fragmentation of public debates following national cleavages have negative consequences as well. Under such circumstances, the complexity of the communicative input into the EU polity would be characterized by numerous criss-crossing national and ideological cleavages. The resulting high complexity of the communicative input would make responsiveness impossible as any decision would necessarily have to relate to public debates in a random way. What follows from this description, is that a *reduction of the complexity* of the communicative input would enhance the possibility of responsive governance. Such a reduction could be achieved if debates on a certain political issue taking place in national public spheres were structured similarly. More concretely, a set of political preferences would have to be expressed that *differ according to the substantive, ideological point of view, but are structured transnationally*. Put differently, the same issues should be discussed in the various public spheres at the same time, thereby expressing different, but transnationally structured political preferences. Let us assume, for example, that with regard to a random policy issue there exist basically three different preferences, labeled A, B and C. In an ideal situation A, B and C would be articulated in all

25 Member States. Due to specific national, historical, political, cultural (etc.) factors, such preference articulations, however, are likely not to be completely identical. Rather, as will be spelled out more in detail in the following chapter, the same preferences may be articulated/justified in different ways. The preferences A, B and C thus would take the shape A1, A2 (...) to A25, B1, B2, (etc.) and C1, C2 (etc.) Under these circumstances EU policy makers both at the supranational level and in the various Member States face not only a *limited* number of political preferences, but furthermore these preferences are also basically the *same* across the EU. Under such circumstances, the complexity of the communicative input would be clearly reduced and thus the chances for responsive governance in the EU enhanced. This argument in no way is supposed to suggest the necessity of homogeneous political preferences as expressed in the public sphere. This would indeed be contradictory to the notion of a pluralistic public sphere, enabling opinion formation on political matters. The argument is rather, that the cleavages structuring the political debate in Member States should follow *transnational* lines.

The same logic also applies for the debates preceding EP elections. A transnationally structured debate in which different notions of the "common European good" are created would provide MEPs with a truly European mandate (or rather mandates) that they should pursue in the following legislative period. To answer the question to which extent such a transnational debate could be discerned in the mass media in the four countries under scrutiny in the EP elections in 2004, is one of the central tasks of the empirical study presented in the later chapters.

But even if debates are structured transnationally, expressing largely the same political preferences, the institutional deficiencies for responsiveness remain. Indeed, as will be discussed more in depth in the following chapter, the transnational structuring of public debates in Member States, as just described, is intimately linked with institutional questions. Here, it suffices to say that it is the lack of representative structures in the EU that are, on the one hand, capable of structuring public debates transnationally and of linking public opinion formation with decision making processes, on the other hand.

## 8. “Floating signifiers” and „Chains of Equivalence“

### 8.1. Identity/Legitimacy vs. Responsiveness?

The discussion of the conditions of possibility of three central political functions of the public sphere in the EU – identity construction, ascription/denial of legitimacy, enabling responsiveness – has led to the conclusion that the different functions pose different requirements to media debates. On the one hand, it was claimed that a European identity can only develop if it is not cast as the radical “other” to hegemonic identities. Rather articulations of “Europe” have to make plausible how it can be plausibly linked to established identities, such as national ones. Based on the theoretical assumption that the empirical construction of legitimacy presupposes that the constituents of a polity identify with that polity, it was argued that there is a tight link between identity construction and construction of legitimacy. Due to its interdependent relation with hegemonic identities and the interests that come along with them, articulations of “Europe” and the ensuing evaluation of the legitimacy of the EU will *vary*. In the discussion of the conditions of possibility of responsive governance, on the other hand, it was argued that the communicative input into the political system, emerging from the 25 national public spheres of the EU's Member States, potentially implies a very high degree of complexity. Ideological and specific national stances may create a criss-crossing web of political articulations, whose complexity is too high for the political system to respond to it. From this analysis, it was concluded that what is necessary is a reduction of the complexity of the communicative input into the EU. Such a reduction of the complexity could be achieved if the differing positions that are articulated with regard to a certain political issue (such as a policy matter or EP elections) would not follow national lines, but were structured transnationally.

When following this argumentation, one will find that there is a *tension* inherent to the requirements that the different functions of the public sphere pose to public debates in the EU. While the articulation of a European identity and the ensuing evaluation of the EU's legitimacy must *vary*, so that it can be adapted to the respective contexts of articulation, responsive governance requires that debates show a certain *similarity* with regard to the political preferences that they articulate. Of course, the distinction between discourses on identity and legitimacy on the one hand and on governance issues (or, as in the present case, EP elections) on the other, is a merely analytical one. These distinctions refer to different analytical perspectives on the *same* discourses. The tension between difference and similarity that follows from the discussion in the previous chapters thus can not be solved simply by claiming that they pertain to different discourses. If the different requirements for the fulfillment of the different functions were incompatible, we would indeed be confronted with a dilemma. Under such circumstances, the construction of different European identities

and the attached EU legitimacy would make impossible the articulation of transnational political preferences. In the converse case – which is very unlikely to occur – the articulation of homogeneous political preferences across the various EU Member States would clash with national particularities and thus lead to a rejection of the proposed political preferences. The situation, however, is not as dire as just described.

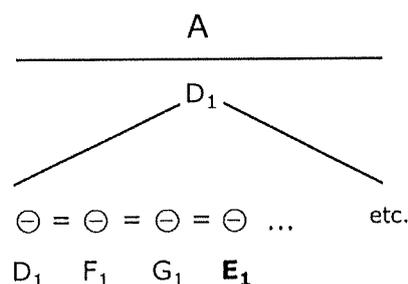
For solving this tension on a theoretical level, I suggest, to further explore the notion of “floating signifiers” and its relation with, what Laclau and Mouffe have called “empty signifiers” and “chains of equivalence”. These theoretical concepts, I claim, are very useful to provide an account of how the different functions of the public sphere can be fulfilled, even in the multi-national setting of the EU. Aspects of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory have already been discussed in the chapter on collective identities. There it was explained that Laclau and Mouffe conceive of discourses as attempts to give a structure to the “field of discursivity”. Their theory is based on the anti-essentialist assumption that any link between a certain signifier (such as a word) and its signified (i.e. its content) is contingent. Given this contingency, discourses attempt to give a certain structure to the relation between signifiers and signifieds as meaning would otherwise be impossible. What follows from this anti-essentialist ontology is that discourses that aim at giving a structure to the field of discursivity are purely relational. This means, that the basic operation upon which discourses build, is the *distinction* between the elements of the discourse ( $A \neq B$ ). The means by which the sliding of the signifiers is stopped are labeled “nodal points”. Nodal points, such as the “nation” or “god” construct a center which allows systems of meaning, i.e. discourses to develop around them. The construction of such nodal points, Laclau and Mouffe stress, is a highly political process and is equivalent to the attempt to make a certain world view *hegemonic*. Hegemony, in this reading, indeed is constitutive of the political as “it defines the very terrain in which a political relation is actually constituted.” (Laclau 2000: 44) What is indispensable for the construction of a discourse is the drawing of a border that distinguishes the identity of the in-group on the one side from the antagonistic out-group on the other side. The hegemonic operation thus is also the moment in which a collective identity is created. This identity, as Laclau stresses, is based not on shared commonalities of its elements, but on the rejection of the excluded other. That is, only “*vis-à-vis* the excluded element, all other differences are equivalent to each other”. (Laclau 2005: 70) However, given the negative character of identities the question arises how the collective can be signified. According to Laclau, what happens is that out of the differential elements that make up the identity, one particular element is transferred into an “empty signifier” that claims to represent the identity of the collective. These abstract considerations quickly gain in concreteness, when giving an empirical example, say socialist ideology. Analyzing socialist ideology using the terms of

Laclau/Mouffe's discourse theory, one can describe the outside that is constitutive for the construction of a socialist identity as the capitalist system. Socialism, hardly surprising, in a profound way is defined by its opposition to capitalism. The empty signifier that represents the unity of socialism and gives a positive content to it, is the "socialism". Socialism, however, is not a homogeneous movement, in which nothing but the interests of the working class are articulated. Rather, it also comprises e.g. discourses on gender equality, environmental or consumer protection. Despite this plurality of socialist discourses "socialism" is the signifier that stands for the unity of socialist ideology. Other political movements and their demands are thus *inscribed* into the demands presented in the name of socialism. In this way differing political demands are articulated in a way that makes them compatible with each other. It is exactly this way of uniting different political projects in a single discourse, that Laclau and Mouffe call "chain of equivalence". The construction of a chain of equivalence, as should be clear, does not imply that its elements become *identical* with each other.

"On the one hand, each element of the system has an identity only so far as it is different from the others: difference = identity. On the other hand, however, all these differences are equivalent to each other inasmuch as all of them belong to this side of the frontier of exclusion. But, in that case, the identity of each element is constitutively split: on the one hand, each difference expresses itself as difference; on the other hand, each of them *cancels* itself as such by entering into a relation of equivalence with all the other differences of the system." (Laclau 1996: 38)

In a nutshell, it can thus be said that the elements of a chain of equivalence "are only the same in one aspect while being different in others." (Torfing 1999: 97) A graphic depiction of a chain of equivalence is useful to grasping the discursive logic at work:

**Graph:** *Chain of equivalence* (adapted from: Laclau 2005: 130)



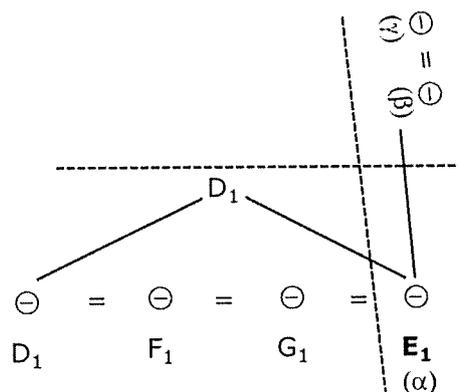
In this graph "A" stands for the antagonistic other which constitutes the identity of the collective, "D1" represents the positive reversal of the antagonistic other, i.e. the empty signifier (the "working class" in our example). D1, however, does not only appear in the upper

section where it stands for the empty signifier, but also in the lower part of the graph, which indicates its equivalence with other political demands. All the demands, symbolized by the little circles, are split by a dividing line. While the upper half of the circle indicates those aspects that they share with the other elements (equivalence), the lower half indicates that the various elements nevertheless differ (difference). The letter “E” in this as well as in the following graphs stands for “Europe”.

The unifying effect of the empty signifier, however, is not a neutral one, but has an impact on the different discourses that are united in the chain of equivalence. As Laclau and Mouffe put it, “equivalence is always hegemonic insofar as it does not simply establish an ‘alliance’ between given interests, but modifies the very identity of the forces engaging in that alliance.” (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 183f) Europe (E) in the present example thus takes the shape of “E1”, making it part of the discourse “1”, which, let's assume, is a socialist discourse. E thus becomes an integral part of a socialist political project and different political demands that come along with such a political discourse are inscribed into E, making it E1.

What distinguishes a floating signifier from an empty signifier is that the former is a site of *struggle* between discourses struggling for hegemony. Empty signifiers are, so to stay, stronger, as they are capable of unifying a discursive terrain. To continue our example, there can be attempts to include the floating signifier of “Europe” into another hegemonic project, say a neo-liberal discourse that stresses market liberalization, cutting on welfare expenditures (etc.). In such a situation “Europe” becomes a contested political project, which different political projects aim at incorporating in their discourses. Developing on the above figure, such a situation can be graphically depicted in the following way:

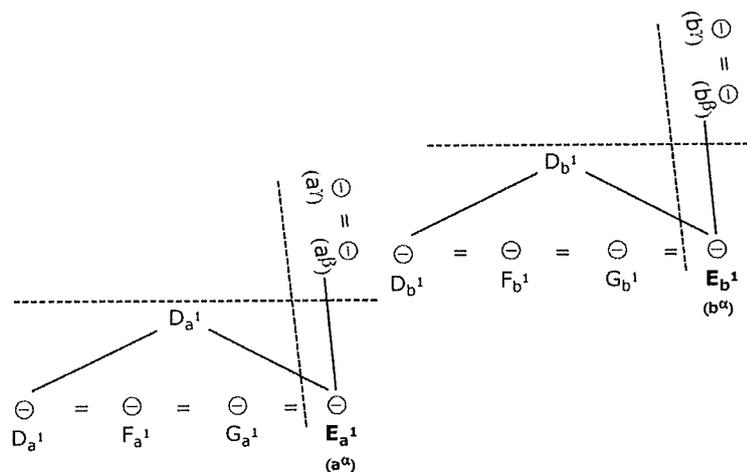
**Graph:** *Floating signifier as a site of struggle between two chains of equivalence.* (adapted from Laclau 2005: 131)



The floating signifier "E" ("Europe"), in the above graph is exposed to two different discourses, or, to put it in Laclau's words "receives the structural pressure of *rival* hegemonic projects." (Laclau 2005: 131) On the one hand, "E" is articulated in a different way, by a neo-liberal discourse and thus also takes the shape "Ed", linking it with "β" and "γ".

To solve the tension that was described at the beginning of this chapter, I claim that "Europe" should assume the status of a floating signifier. That is, it should become the site of a struggle between differing political projects that present different notions of the European common good and that inscribe their political demands in the floating signifier "Europe". Put differently, "Europe" should be articulated in competing chains of equivalences in debates in the public sphere. However, as has been argued throughout this thesis, a EPS is most likely to develop out of a Europeanization of *national* public spheres. Therefore these chains of equivalences should be articulated not in one or two, but ideally in *all* the national public spheres of the EU's 25 Member States. The floating signifier "E" and the different chains of equivalences that struggle for its definition thus should ideally be found across the 25 national public spheres in the EU. Transferred to the concrete study of media discourses on political issues in the EU, what one should find are diverging evaluations with regard to a certain political issue that are articulated in the different national public spheres. Such a situation would allow for the necessary similarity of public debates with regard to the political preferences that are articulated. Furthermore, due to the floating character of "Europe", these preference articulations can be adapted to the respective discursive contexts enabling thereby a discursive reconciliation of the "nation" and "Europe". Developing on the above graphs, the existence of similarly structured chains of equivalences in national public spheres in the EU can be depicted in the following way:

**Graph:** "Europe" as a floating signifier in two competing chains of equivalence in various national public spheres (two national public spheres – (a) and (b) - depicted in the graph).



In the above graph the position that “Europe” is given in the discourse on a certain issue is indicated by the letter “E”. As the public sphere is structured nationally (in the case of this study: national newspapers) “E” is likely to be adapted to a certain national context (a) and will thus take the shape E(a). E(a) in the above graph is exposed to two different chains of equivalences which transfers E(a) into E(a1) and E(a $\alpha$ ). However, as the same issue is also debated in another national public sphere, the articulation of “E” also takes the shape of E(b). If the same political preferences are articulated also in (b), then we would also find the articulations E(b1) and E(b $\alpha$ ). As the grey arrow that points in both directions indicates, these differing articulations are also found in further national public spheres (c), (d) etc. Under such circumstances, we would have an *ensemble of pluralist national public spheres, in which diverging, but transnationally similar, political preferences with regard to “Europe” are articulated*. This kind of structuring of public spheres in the EU allows for both, a reduction of the complexity of the communicative input into the EU polity, that is necessary for enabling responsiveness *and* for a certain adaptation of the articulated preferences to the respective national discursive contexts.

Claiming that “Europe” should take the position of a floating signifier that is inscribed in differing political discourses in several ways connects with the overall argument of the thesis:

*First*, as has been argued in the chapter on responsiveness, the existence of competing political forces is a prerequisite for the establishment of a public sphere that exists out of more than sporadic public debates developing around single issues. Debates in the public sphere can only develop if there are differences with regard to certain political issues. What is necessary for an EPS to develop is the establishment of discursive struggles on political issues in which the floating signifier “Europe” is inscribed in different ways. In the absence of such differences, a public sphere which is *more* than just the realm in which policy-decisions are communicated *ex post* can not develop.

*Second*, claiming that “Europe” should take the structural position of a “floating signifier” instead of an “empty signifier” has several implications. As has been argued, floating signifiers are the site of struggle of different discourses. A floating signifier is thus, by definition, characterized by its articulation in different political projects. Conceptualizing “Europe” as a floating signifier thus allows us to do justice to the necessarily plural articulations that a European identity will have to take, if it is to relate in a non-antagonistic way with existing, hegemonic identities. Furthermore, if “Europe” were to take the structural position of a floating signifier, the potential dangers of *one* hegemonic articulation and the ensuing exclusions would more likely be countered. Essentialist or even racist definitions of

"Europe" would then be countered by other discourses that construct a more desirable European identity.

## **8.2. Representation, Contestation and Participation**

Following this line of argument, it may be objected that "Europe" actually already is a floating signifier, inscribed in different discourses on the common European good. Indeed, one can point to, for example, federalist visions of Europe, the idea of a "Europe of the nation states", the notion of an "other Europe", as articulated by ATTAC or economic ideas that conceive of Europe as nothing more than a free trade zone. These different discourses provide different, competing or even incompatible discursive constructions of Europe. Nevertheless, these discourses do not suffice to establish a stable EPS that goes beyond occasional public debates on "European" issues. The reason of this failure is easily understood when taking into consideration the crucial role of representation and participation for the creation of a public sphere. As has been argued, what is necessary is an institutional arrangement that does not only allow for the articulation of different political projects, but, crucially, also allows for popular participation in this articulation *and*, finally, links these articulatory practices with the actual possibility for citizens to participate in decision making. This link between popular participation in the articulation of political projects, on the one hand and political participation, on the other, is at the heart of the concept of representation, as discussed in chapter XXXX. Acts of representation (apart from a few extreme cases) are not external to the articulation of interests and identities. Rather, through the act of representation the identity of the represented and the ensuing interests are constructed. Representative institutions, finally, capable of taking binding decisions are crucial for linking the discursive construction of different visions of "Europe" with the actual decision making process. The different notions of Europe mentioned above, however, do not emanate from representative institutions of this kind. Their representations of "Europe" are not based on a "two-way process", i.e. a "movement from represented to representative, and a correlative one from representative to represented." (Laclau 2005: 158) As a consequence, they remain elite discourses without wider currency in the broad public. The trick of linking political competition with opinion formation and decision making processes in representative democracies is done by political parties that have to run for re-election. Political parties thus are of pivotal importance for the establishment of a public sphere. To be sure, this is not to downplay or neglect the importance of "civil society". Civil society in its broad conception and the many modes of expression that come along with its inherent plurality are central for a viable public sphere. Without a vivid civil society the discursive link between representatives in the political system and the broader public would be prone to being dominated by the latter group of actors which would potentially turn the two-way process in a one-way street.

Representative institutions that would suffice for the discussed requirements are currently lacking in the EU. The institution that could be expected to link popular opinion formation with decision making processes, i.e. the EP, currently is not capable of providing the necessary incentives for a EPS. As has been argued in the chapter on responsiveness, the EP's shifting coalitions, an institutionally induced tendency to propose centrist policies and the national character of EP elections all impair the EP's capability to induce (transnationally structured) opinion formation. Its – at best – shared competencies with regard to decision making are a further obstacle for the linkage of public opinion formation and participation in decision making processes. Truly pan-European parties, competing in EP elections with distinguishable pan-European party programs for electoral support, so far, do not exist. Neither does the necessary link between the results of EP elections and the overall direction of EU policy decisions exist to a sufficient extent. Would institutions exist that meet the above described criteria, this would have important impacts on opinion formation processes in the EU and – more general – on the possibility of a EPS. Such parties would provide for a representative institutional layer that would be capable of structuring debates across the EU's Member States. An institutional set-up of this kind would provide publics across the EU's Member States not only with *issues*, but also with competing political evaluations to which the public could relate in supportive, indifferent or declining ways. As a consequence, it can be assumed, that public debates in the Member States would lose some of their national "flavor". Against the argument presented here one could, however, object that such pan-European discourses emanating from a pan-European party system would be rejected exactly on the basis of national particularities and thus are likely to meet popular resistance. This, indeed, is a plausible assumption and it is easy to imagine national (but also pan-European!) political movements that would make extensive use of anti-EU rhetoric to oppose such a political system. Nevertheless, this argument does not sufficiently take into consideration that collective identities and interests are not stable and fixed, but the result of representative interventions. The existence of a pan-European party system that is representative in the sense advocated here would provide possibilities of identification with political projects that go beyond the nation state. Under these circumstances "Europe" would become the object of political struggles that also allow for an "affective investment" (Laclau 2005: 110) which is important for any attempt to build collective identities. (cf. Stavrakakis 2005) Finally, a pan-European party system, can be assumed to also weaken nationalist discourses that aim at delegitimizing "Europe". One of the reasons for the increasing Euro-skepticism can be found in the EU's lacking capability to include political opposition, i.e. to institutionally include political forces that have a credible chance of gaining power and changing the political course of the EU. Due to this failure to include "alternative leaders or

policy agendas" (Follesdal/Hix 2005) in the EU's political system, opposition necessarily has to come from the outside of the EU. Such oppositional forces increasingly – and hardly surprising – take the shape of partly blatant anti-EU-discourses. *Including* opposition in EU politics in a way that allows for a linkage with public opinion formation thus can also be expected to weaken such movements by providing not only actual possibilities of participation, but also sites of identification that allow for an affective investment in "Europe".

Given the absence of such a representative system, the question remains to which extent political discourses in national public spheres can be found that would enable the EPS's central political functions. Put differently, to which extent can we discern chains of equivalence that appear not only in one national public sphere, but – ideally in all Member States? Before answering this empirical question with regard to the public debates on the EP elections in 2004 in Austria, Germany, Malta and Sweden it is necessary to translate the abstract theoretical assumptions that were presented so far, into concrete methods that can be applied to the empirical study of media texts. This is the subject of the following chapter.

#### **IV. Concluding Statement**

The empirical chapters of my dissertation will include an empirical analysis of the media debates in 7 media in 4 countries on the 2004 European Parliament elections. I am currently working at this analysis, using discourse-analytical strategies to operationalize the abstract theoretical considerations that I have developed in my dissertation. I hope to finish the dissertation by the end of this year or the very beginning of the year 2007.

Based on my doctoral dissertation and on the publications that I could collect in Berkeley, after the completion of my dissertation I will develop an in-depth comparison between the EU and the USA. As a first step, I am planning to publish an article in which I want to spell out in detail the theoretical lessons that one can learn from a comparison between the APS and the EPS. Furthermore, I am lucky that I could raise the interest of my current employer, the *Institute for European Integration Research* at the *Austrian Academy of Sciences*, in the topic, so that this line of thought is likely to be pursued at a larger scale at one point, including an empirical comparison of news coverage in the USA and in the EU countries respectively.

## V. Literature – quoted and other literature collected in Berkeley:

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