The European Commission Recovery Plan for Europe in French Twitter Public Sphere:

Opportunity and Restraint for the Legitimacy of the European Union

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Article

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION RECOVERY PLAN FOR EUROPE IN FRENCH TWITTER PUBLIC SPHERE: OPPORTUNITY AND RESTRAINT FOR THE LEGITIMACY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

This article explores the online public debate on Twitter, that followed the announcement by the European Commission on the 27th May 2020, of a plan for €750 billion borrowed directly by the Commission to tackle the historic economic depression associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan appeared to break with the traditional understanding of the commission, politicising rather than depoliticising a non-consensual policy, thereby exiting patterns that were long associated with the lack of legitimacy of the European Union. Proposing a novel approach which combines a content analysis of French politicians, media, and citizens' debates on Twitter in a mixed methods approach, I have shown that the proposal's main dimensions were a significant part of media coverage and were mostly neutral or positive. The hypothesis of a significantly fragmented media environment was refuted. However, important differences were found in terms of elite framing opposing populists to pro-European parties. On one side the opposition was framed in discourses of sovereignty, and the threat to national democracy. On the other, the recovery plan was described as a historical moment in European integration displaying the solidarity of the Union. If the plan was significantly present in elite and media discourse, the French general public scarcely debated the issue considering the scope of the proposal and its significance for the European Union. For the public that effectively participated, the findings of this article illustrate how the mechanisms that were historically associated with the European Union "communication deficit" can also positively contribute to the legitimacy of the policy proposal when elite and media discourse changes.

Introduction

The European integration process has been said to be in perpetual crisis (Jones, Kelemen & Meunier, 2021). Having difficulty gathering interest and support and maintaining meaningful legitimacy in large sections of the European population, public opinion has increasingly become central in debates surrounding the European Union. These problems have significantly constrained European integration such as following the failure of the constitutional treaty in 2005 (see Usherwood & Startin, 2013). In other instances, they have even contributed to forms of dis-integration, underlining the growing visibility of Euroscepticism. Resulting from the lack of visibility and direction of the European Union, its increasing negative politicisation, and the implementation of unpopular and divisive policies, the European Union has long found it difficult to garner public support for and the participation of the public in its institutions. In the primary instance of European democracy, voter turnout has consistently declined over many decades (European Parliament, 2020) and has systematically been lower than votes at the national level (Van der Eijk & Van Egmond, 2007). It has become a symbol of the 'democratic deficit' of the European Union. While in its early years the supranational institution was said to have benefited from a permissive consensus, European integration has increasingly become a polarizing topic defining what some scholars described as a 'constraining dissensus' (see Rauh et al., 2020). If crises have been understood as a driver of European integration (see Tosun et al., 2014), they were simultaneously the instance of increasing contestation and rejection of the European project (see the Eurozone crisis; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016).

With Covid-19, a new global threat had emerged. As it was first defined as a public health crisis (World Health Organization, 2020), it soon became clear that the reach of the pandemic would require exceptional countermeasures and significant sacrifice. With the direct consequences of the virus and the impact of the widespread lockdown measures on national economies, a new economic crisis awaited. The economic slowdown was predicted by the European Commission to be the worst recession in the existence of the supranational institution (European Commission, 2020), while uncertainty remained as to whether new restrictive measures would later be required to curve the pandemic. Directly in contradiction with the bloc coherence, the initial phases of the pandemic response were marked by the unilateral decisions of Member States to close of their borders and to restrict the transfer of medical supplies across Europe. The crisis was shortly preceded by signs of institutional instability symbolised by the 5th May 2020 Karlsruhe ruling or dispute on the Italian budget. With a heavily criticised initial reaction to the public health crisis given its lack of coordination, a continuing contestation of its legitimacy and signs of an institutional crisis, the European bloc was believed to be under serious threat, potentially at a turning point in its history.

Given these circumstances, ideas normally at the margin of European institutional debate gained traction. One of these, invoking the idea of a common European debt, as part of both long-term discussion about the Euro bloc and the response to the virus induced crisis, became central to the political debate. While the discussion about the so-called Eurobonds never reached a consensus in the early months of the crisis, the idea of a mutual European debt, if only temporary, gained significant traction as the economic consequences of the crisis extended beyond southern Europe.

Central to the joint declaration of Emanuel Macron, the French president, and Angela Merkel, the chancellor of the German Republic, the idea became integral to the European Commission recovery plan on the 27th May 2020. This marked the beginning of the idea's concretization and signalling a sharp turn in the European crisis response. A common EU debt was presented as a form of European solidarity that could alleviate the financial burden of the worst-hit regions. With a debt taken out by the European Commission on financial markets (European Commission, 2020), countries would benefit from the EC's grade on financial markets which would be of interest to the struggling southern European economies (with difficulties borrowing at low-interest rates on the financial market). Donations to Member States harder hit by the virus would be reimbursed according to the rule of EU budget contribution rather than be associated with the sum received and could be significantly reduced with the proposal to develop the EU's own resources. However, if the plan's aim was to help with the recovery from the economic crisis, it was also part of a broader European economic, environmental, and public health strategy. Together with a significantly reinforced EU budget and the objective to create the EU's own financial instruments, the recovery plan would give the EU significant "firepower" to support the crisis recovery and the preparation for the green (the 'Green Deal') and digital transition, would reinforce cohesion funds, and would support the creation of EU4Health, a European health agency. Thus, the plan in its initial proposition reached beyond a crisis response but was understood as part of a broader plan to prepare the future of the European Union, to invest in the capacity of the EU and improve the contested legitimacy of the European project as it would show "the true and tangible value of being part of the Union". It was "Europe's moment" (European Commission, 2020, p.3). The highly political nature of the plan and its association with the general direction of the EU makes the plan's reception by the public all the more essential, so as to ensure public support of the direction taken by the EU and could affect, by extension, the legitimacy of the European Union. Understanding how it was originally framed and how the public initially reacted to the plan can thereby be of real importance to the future of European integration by affording a good opportunity to understand the mechanism affecting the legitimacy of the political system at a time when it is the most likely to change.

This article focuses on the case of France. France has been one of the countries hardest hit in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and was predicted to have a strong recession. In that sense, the plan by the commission was of great importance and should potentially have received a lot of media coverage, particularly since Macron was a central element to the proposition. According to previous research, as one of the founding members of the European project, France should also have a comparatively higher level of coverage of the European Union (Wessler et al., 2008). France, therefore, offers a good case to observe the dynamics of the formation of public opinion about the Recovery plan, as it was meant to financially benefit from the plan and the plan was originally proposed by the French president, aligning, rather than clashing, with French democracy. The objective of this article will be to understand how the recovery plan was debated in the French public sphere and perceived by the general public, and how the recovery plan fits within the general dynamics that were believed to have shaped the legitimacy of the European project.

Literature Review: The politicisation of the European question

If the question of European legitimacy has been a prominent aspect of scholarly debate surrounding European integration for two decades, the legitimacy of the European project has not always been a central question. From the European Coal and Steel Community to the declaration of the European Union, the European project was first understood as a low salience issue attracting little attention from the public but one that was still perceived positively under what came to be named the permissive consensus. The greater part of the public was only dimly aware of integration and had formed attitudes only to a limited extent (Janssen, 1991). Decision-making processes were often the result of behind-closed-door deliberations that rarely percolated into the public debate (see Bijsmans & Altides, 2007). However, as the competence of the supranational institution grew and came to be of greater relevance to citizens' daily lives, so did the politicization of European integration. The Maastricht treaty marked the turning point in the matter (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2010). Indeed, the increased competence of the supranational institution was not followed by the transfer of democratic accountability (see Brüggemann, 2005). The competencies of the European Parliament, the primary instance of European democracy, were argued not to compensate for the loss of competence of national democratic instances (Börzel, 2016). Decisions taken by the European Union thereby lacked the legitimacy of policy input, ideally derived from the will of the people (Meyer, 1999). The European Union was thought to be suffering from a democratic deficit. This theory was associated with the mode of policymaking of the European Union where the fragmentation of political authority and the technocratic decision-making procedure were inaccessible to public scrutiny (Brüggemann, 2005; Bijsmans & Altides, 2007); a system that Meyer described as a system of governance which depoliticizes conflict and obfuscates political accountability. In that sense, European integration faced diametrically opposing forces. On the one hand, the European Union became an increasingly contested topic with the Eurocrisis marking a sharp emergence of the European question in public debates (see Behm & Brack, 2019). On the other hand, its own institutional practices were tied to downplaying its politicization (Hobold & De Vries, 2016). In addition, the complex distribution of responsibility and the tendency of the EC to strive for consensus has enabled nation state leaders to shift the blame to the supranational institution when taking unpopular decisions, downplaying the role they themselves had in the process (Bijsmans & Altides, 2007).

The European Union has evolved significantly since, with efforts to improve the transparency of its institutions (see Brüggemann 2005, Damay et al., 2017) and to increase the power of the European Parliament (Karp, Bowler, 2003). However, the problem of legitimacy remains well entrenched as Eurosceptic parties gather significant support from their home electorate and voter turnout in the European parliament election continues to decline; at EU level, they were at their lowest in history in the elections of 2014 (European parliament, 2020). In that sense, strictly institutional explanations are insufficient to explain the persistent historical limitation of the legitimacy of the European Union despite improvement in these aspects.

The formation of citizens' attitudes towards the European Union

The debate surrounding attitudes of European citizens towards the European Union has also investigated lower-level factors shaping citizens' understanding of the supranational

institution. A family of factors has been found encompassing different, albeit associated, characteristics. The current debate can be divided into four approaches: attitudes towards the supranational institution were understood through the result of (1) citizens' economic calculus, (2) social identity, (3) socio-cognitive skills, (4) or the effect of the media and elites' cues. Some of these explanations are in part reminiscent of the institutional setting and are not mutually exclusive.

The utilitarian approach has been a popular means to explain citizen attitudes and was originally seen as the primary determinant shaping attitudes towards satisfaction with democracy (Karp & Bowler, 2003). It stipulates that attitudes toward European integration result from the evaluation of the economic consequences of European integration. The approach can be separated between the individual level, where the individual assesses whether they would be worse off with or without the EU, and a collective approach more commonly based on individual evaluation of the collective benefit of EU membership. At the country level, while analysis of GDP and unemployment were shown not to be statistically significant (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2010), analysis of national contributions to the EU budget found mixed empirical results supporting an indirect effect moderating how ideology and identity shape EU attitudes (Hobolt, De Vries, 2016; Azrout and Vreese, 2018). At the individual level, Euroscepticism was associated with lower professional occupation and education (see Hakhverdian et al., 2013; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). Individuals with lower educational backgrounds were argued to be more vulnerable to the economic liberalisation associated with market integration and to the associated delocalisation which could threaten their job security, while more educated members of the public were believed to be more resilient to the change in the job market and more likely to benefit from the liberalisation of the market (see Hakhverdian et al., 2013). In that sense, studies also found that citizens' attitudes were associated with their expected economic prospect: those who emitted a negative opinion towards European integration were also those expecting their economic situation to worsen (Ritzen et al, 2015). Nevertheless, as pointed out by Karp and Bowler (2003), the strength of the link between economic conditions and attitude towards European integration significantly depends on voters' awareness of the economic consequences of EU policies.

The identity-driven explanation presents the strength of national identity as a predictor of defiance toward European integration. It was driven by the evidence that people with strong national identity and pride were less supportive of European integration (Carey 2002 cited by Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). Two different dimensions can be distinguished: the European Union poses a threat to the sovereignty of the nation, and the EU erodes the cultural integrity of the nation. In the first dimension, scholars assessed that the increasing competence of the EU could be perceived as diminishing the sovereignty of the nation and the strength of their democratic institutions (see Börzel, 2016). Scepticism towards the Union would then be the result of the loss of democratic oversight and power over the conduct of politics affecting their countries. In the second dimension, scholars argued the fear of losing one own's national identity could also shape the public attitudes toward the European Union. For instance, scholars have found national identity was correlated with the rejection of foreign cultures (McLaren, 2002) and a negative attitude towards immigration (Azrout et al., 2011 in Azrout et al., 2012).

The cognitive mobilization approach presents attitudes toward the European Union as being the result of the citizens' political skills and their political knowledge. As Janssen (1991) defines it, political skill corresponds to the ease of understanding political information and relating it to their own thoughts and experience. With higher political skill, abstract concepts, remote from the thoughts and experience of an individual become less threatening and more familiar. As the EU is assumed to be on the highest level of abstraction with a very low level of direct experience of European policies or its institutions (Janssen, 1991), political skills were assumed to play an important role in citizen attitudes. Janssen effectively found these were positively associated with a participant holding a positive view of the European Union. In that sense, political skills may offer an alternative explanation as to why the more educated and the knowledgeable (see Nardis, 2015) were more likely to hold a positive image of the European Union. Nevertheless, the approach has trouble explaining the permissive consensus; i.e., the positive assessment of European integration despite the very low salience of the issue in the public.

Viewed as an alternative to political skill, national benchmarking is based on the observation of a strong association between the evaluation of their national political system and their views of the European Union (see Anderson 1998). Since citizens appeared mostly unaware of European Union policies and had therefore little context to judge the distant abstract institution, they would then associate the European Union with a system that is closer to their experiences and with which they are far more familiar and knowledgeable, their own national political system. National politics thereby became a proxy for the European Union citizens' attitudes in different domains (economy, democracy) (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). European Citizens' lack of clear understanding of the European political systems has been at the centre of research on a European public sphere. This approach offers a bridge between the four different perspectives presented earlier by focusing on the role of information and knowledge on the formation of citizens attitudes toward the European Union

A deficient European public sphere?

The idea of a deficient European public sphere is based on the assessment that the EU is understood as remote from citizens' daily lives, where contacts between citizens, elected officials, and more generally EU policymakers are rare (Koopmans, 2007). Policymakers were argued to only have indirect access to public opinion while European Union actions remained distant from citizens' daily existence (Eriksen, 2005). In this relationship, mass media was believed to play an essential role in ensuring the responsiveness of political institutions to the public and helping the public form its opinion on the supranational institution. Other intermediaries' actors incorporated in the European civil society remained fundamentally invisible: European actors outside political parties were mostly unseen by the general public and were thought to represent only the interests of connected minorities (Koopmans, 2007; Walter, 2017).

A European public sphere in the model of their national counterpart therefore remained unlikely. To resolve the dead end of a European public sphere in the model of the nation state, researchers put forward the possibility of a nationally fragmented forum connected by a form of parallelisation of debate. This connection, even if limited, would help build a common identity and legitimacy through the idea of simultaneity, important in Anderson's

(2006) work on nationalism. Without a shared sense of communality (associated with a minimal sense of Europeanness), the European Union would lack a political community and hence the legitimacy associated with democracy. Scholars therefore tried to find differences between intra-European reporting and reporting in other countries. They uncovered a significant difference between European media in terms of coverage accorded to both EU and European States and in the terms of the debate. For instance, researchers uncovered clear evidence that the coverage of European Union questions was significantly more frequent in European media than from comparable countries such as the USA (see Trenz, 2004; Van de Steeg, 2006). However, the internal coherence between member States remained more contested. On the one hand, Van de Steeg (2006) found that factors internal to member states explained more variance than the media's country of origin (European level) in a case study of the Heider case. In a different case, Wessler et al. (2008) also found that there was no systematic difference in online news in ten Member States. On the other hand, De Wilde et al. (2014) found that European policies were often debated in terms of national interests, while Pfetsch (2008) uncovered clear divergences between countries' levels of Europeanisation of media. Overall, conclusions as to the existence of a strong communication deficit were dismissed as information about the European Union and other Member states significantly increased over time (albeit differently). At the same time, it remains clear that the European media sphere does not equate that of a national state.

A Virtual European Public Sphere

As an alternative to existing media, the emergence of social network sites was seen as a great opportunity to connect the EU, its political institutions, political elite, and democratic representatives to European citizens in a more direct manner (see Nardis, 2015; Fazekas, 2020). Indeed, the Web 2.0 was originally considered a revolutionary technology with the potential of giving widespread access to political information (Larsson, 2015), as having the potential to reach disinterested and normally inaccessible parts of the population (Loader, Mercea, 2011) while enabling them to discuss, participate and mobilise across borders (Bossetta et al., 2017). In short, the new technologies could have revitalised the idea of a European public sphere bridging the pre-existing gap between the European Union and European citizens by combining, on the same medium, political actors, mainstream media, and the general public (see Bossetta et al., 2017). Indeed, social media is now widely accepted as an important aspect of the political process (e.g., Nulty et al., 2016) with clear consequences offline (see anti-austerity protests in Greece and Spain, Bossetta et al., 2017).

However, as the empirical evidence tends to demonstrate, the promises of social media regarding the democratic gap, and of a Europeanised public debate, have arguably not emerged. At the general level, scholars have underlined the strength of homophily and the formation of echo chambers that have been argued to limit debate and the exchange of ideas to likeminded communities, fragmenting rather than uniting the European public debate. In that sense, Nulty et al. (2016) found on Twitter that nation-specific hashtags were systematically more popular than those EU-wide and that most Tweets were done in national languages rather than English. Additionally, while social media were thought of as a solution to the EU elite-citizen gap, scholars found that EP politicians on Twitter often used social media to broadcast information rather than engage with citizens, a finding also valid for candidates in the 2014 EP elections (Larsson, 2015; Ramos-Serrano, 2018; Fazekas

et al., 2020). Finally, social media debate was also found to be more often negative concerning the European project (Nulty et al., 2016).

On the whole, while social media could have theoretically improved the communication of the EU by enabling forms of direct communication between EU politics and citizens, research has shown that social media only performed this function to a limited extent, unlikely to fundamentally redefine the relation of the EU with European publics.

A Fragmented Europeanisation

If Europeanisation has been overall limited both online and offline, significant divergence exists depending on the issue at stake, the type of media, or the mode of decision-making. By investigating political domains within the competence of the EU, scholars found that media coverage was getting closer to the coverage of other political issues (see Pfetsch, 2008; Trenz, 2004). However, this assessment does not work in every field. For example, the Common Agriculture Policy, a highly integrated aspect of EU policy, was found to be covered within a national perspective, a potential consequence of intergovernmental decision-making, and the prominence of national governments in the negotiations. For issues associated with daily affairs and intergovernmental decision-making, news media coverage therefor appears deficient. For major events within the European Commission's scope of competence, media discourse proves to be close to the coverage of national political events. Finally, significant differences in news coverage were found between quality newspapers, more regularly covering European questions, and tabloids (Pfetsch, 2008). this evidence thereby supports the idea of a fragmented Europeanisation with domains covered at the national level and others framed in European terms.

Given the scope of the Recovery Plan proposed by the European Commission on the 27th May 2020, the policy is likely to have received significant media coverage as it deals with key events at the European level. However, the complex relationship between the factors described above makes it difficult to predict how the media have covered the recovery plan as the proposition was both intergovernmental in origin (Macron -Merkel proposition), as the European commission followed their solicitation and was bound to a unanimous decision of the European Council. Furthermore, given the policy's scope touching both domains within and outside the scope of EU competence (mainly economy, health, and taxation), no straightforward prediction can be made. Rather, it is possible these aspects would be divided to enter the public sphere in different patterns.

Media coverage and opinion about European questions

Scholars agree that media has a significant, albeit small and contextual, effect on citizen attitudes (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). To measure these effects, a range of methods have been used including surveys, media content analysis, experiments, and panel surveys combined and sometimes aggregated at the national level. At the national level, scholars have found that when EU coverage is more frequent, audiences showed stronger support for the European Union (Vress & Boomgarden, 2006 cited in Mourao et al., 2015). Those that consumed the most news were also the most likely to demonstrate positive attitudes towards the supranational institution (Norris, 2000 in Nardis, 2015). Lubbers and Sheeper (2010) found that the effect of media is contingent on citizens' type of Euroscepticism and

moderated by their country's net contribution to the EU budget. At the citizen level, Azrout et al. (2012) showed that citizen identity moderates the relationship between media and attitudes towards enlargement. According to these scholars, media reinforces pre-existing attitudes towards enlargement (in a case study of the integration of Turkey in the EU). In the domain of the Common Foreign Security Policy, positive news frames were associated with citizens' positive attitudes towards the EU policy (De Vreese & Kandyla, 2009 in Mourao et al., 2015). Finally, it was also suggested that coverage of conflict could foster the image of a poorly working institution (Triga & Vadratsika, 2017). While these researchers focused on different aspects of the European polity, such as the image of the EU, attitudes towards enlargement, trust in European institutions or positive or negative attitudes towards a specific policy, they are all aspects of the latent legitimacy of the European Union. Indeed, in the context of the recovery plan, a direct effect of media coverage on citizens' opinion of the EU is unlikely. Nevertheless, the policy and EU levels are intrinsically linked and the factors shaping the supranational level should also affect the policy level.

Overall, these studies suggest that media coverage affects the perception of the recovery plan in different ways:

- We expect that individuals exposed to more extensive coverage hold a more positive view of the recovery plan.
- We expect that citizens exposed to the coverage of the institutional conflict between the frugal four and other Member States to have their perception of the plan negatively affected.
- We expect that individuals more exposed to information about the policy display a more positive opinion about the recovery plan.

While these approaches stress media effect, theories on opinion formation have also stressed the agency of individuals and the role of their attributes regarding the choice of media they are exposed to and their capacity to evaluate new information. Indeed, if studies of the deficit of the European public sphere have usually focused on the general media environment and "quality press" (see Trenz, 2004), it is often at the cost of neglecting the underlying factors. Quality newspaper tend to be unrepresentative of their societies in terms of socio-demographic and political variables (Wessler et al., 2008) and do not allow to account for the increasing importance of the niche information environment, and the known difference of coverage between newspapers and "tabloids" (Pfetsch, 2008). As underlined by Trenz et al. (2004), the media public is not the public. The quality press audience is often believed to concentrate on the upper strata of the population which tends to hold more favourable views of the European Union (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016) while populist parties, more often Eurosceptic, have been presented as potentially benefiting from the advent of social media (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016*)*.

These internal differences, in line with the increased consumer choices and fragmentation of the information environment, open up the possibility for partial Europeanization. This leaves portions of the population outside the public debate on the EU, either by choice (selective avoidance), the result of socio-demographic variables (and their negative association to quality press consumption), principled opposition requiring no actualisation, or lack of interest and limited media consumption. Rather than seeing the communication

deficit as a unified characteristic of the national public sphere valid across the media landscape and affecting the entire citizenry, I propose to study the French national political public sphere on Twitter to assess the effect of elite cues and media framing on citizens' perception of the recovery plan.

This study proposes to answer two research questions:

1. How has the recovery plan been debated in the French Twitter public sphere?
2. To what extent does the structure of the French public sphere on Twitter explain how users discussed the recovery plan?

Design

The research proposes to study the discourse of three different types of actors within a mixed approach combining the methods of content analysis with other quantitative methods. This article focuses on the case of France. France has been one of the countries hardest hit in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and was predicted to have a strong recession. In that sense, the plan by the commission was of great importance and should potentially have received a lot of media coverage. As one of the founding members of the European project, France should also have, according to previous research, a comparatively higher level of coverage of the European Union (Wessler et al., 2008). The question of European integration was a crucial subject during the 2017 election campaign where Macron opted for a strategy of relegitimisation of the EU (Lequesse & Schild, 2018) directly clashing with the Eurosceptic tendency of the FN, the far-right party present in the second round of the presidential election. Furthermore, as presented in the literature review, the within-country fragmentation in terms of information environment could prove as problematic as the fragmentation of the debate in between national states. Focusing on a single country also enables a more in-depth exploration of an information environment, paying greater attention to its political elites, a wider range of media, their coverage and the subsequent discussion of the citizens.

Twitter data

This study proposes to use Twitter as a source of primary data as it is a cost-effective means to investigate simultaneously politicians' discourse, media coverage and public debate. This approach enables assess the immediate reaction of the elite and the public on a medium that was shown to reflect offline tendencies. Analysing elite discourse, media coverage, and public debate simultaneously is often impossible within the scope of one project as researchers need to deal with significantly different platforms and formats that offer little information as to the connection of these levels. A significant proportion of research about the EU public sphere associating public and media environment has usually made use of secondary and aggregated data at the country level (see Van de Steeg, 2006). If online research cannot be equated to offline results, research on the connection between the offline and online world has revealed strong proximities between users' offline and online interests, similar mechanisms (e.g., voting and retweeting pattern in the European Parliament (Cherepnalkoski et al., 2016) and associations between offline and online party strategy (see evolution of populists' discourse in the Netherlands, Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). Furthermore, while the users of Twitter are understood as different from the general

population, often more interested in politics, younger and better educated (Vaccari et al., 2015), there are limited theoretical reasons to support why this population would behave differently regarding the factors under investigation. In addition, their importance in the European political system, by engaging with politicians and European news made them far more likely to influence the political system.

Media and elite sample

To account for the known difference between the quality press and tabloids, left and right editorial positioning and the different format of news (e.g., television, newspaper), 12 different media were considered. The media sample was comprised of news media classified on the left and the right (e.g. Le Monde, Le Figaro), both considered quality newspaper and "tabloids" and also included TV media accounts (20Minutes, Euronewsfr, franceinfo, humanite_fr, LaCroix, Le_Figaro, le_Parisien ,lemondefr, LesEchos, Libe, RTenfrancais, Valeurs). Given that media activity of Twitter almost exclusively consists of linking articles published on their websites, the analysis of media was de facto the analysis of the articles which were linked on Twitter, and then retrieved with Nexis. The analysis consisted of 107 tweets as a defensive approximation of all the messages and associated articles mentioning the recovery plan during the period covering the 1ˢᵗ May to 10ᵗʰ June 2020. To represent political elites, the data of the Twitter accounts of sitting French national and European parliamentarians and leaders of the main parties and candidates of the 2017 elections were collected. Whereas the media was an approximation of the population, the data for political elites was the result of a weighted random sample weighted by parties to account for the material limitation of the project. Because the discussion about the recovery plan and the themes associated represented only a fraction of the data collected (between the 1ˢᵗ May and 10ᵗʰ June), the approach was supported by machine learning models to focus on the message of interest and prepare for the analysis of the public selected at random in the "full population" of French Tweets. Indeed, supervised machine learning techniques are often presented as an effective way to handle a very significant volume of data. These methods are designed to automate hand coding based on patterns observed in previously manually annotated observations. Two supervised models were built to identify messages related to the recovery plan and those related to the discussion about the recovery plan (see appendix).

Content analysis

Using the results of the machine learning approach, the messages discussing the recovery plan were analysed using content analysis. The codebook followed both an inductive and deductive approach (more detail about it can be found in the appendices). Following the literature on political support, two general levels were distinguished: firstly, the normative (diffuse) level connecting the policy evaluation to the general legitimacy of the EU; secondly, the policy level, connected more directly to the proposition. Indeed, these two levels reflect the technical description of the policy made by Ursula Von der Leyen (2020) and her description of the 'European moment', seeing the policy as an historical moment for European construction.

The policy level was separated into two distinct categories separating the theme directly related to the content of the policy and that of the institutional setting in which it emerged.

Indeed, at the time the messages under investigation were posted, high uncertainty remained as to whether the plan was going to pass the vote in the council as it required unanimity. In total, 10 variables were coded to capture the general ideas presented in the public debate (see appendix). To avoid having too many predictors in the statistical model and to limit the risk of multicollinearity, these items were aggregated to form three categories defined as the average probability of each item per political party or per news outlet. The '*normative*' aggregated dimension is calculated as the average probability of posting a message either negative or positive, '*institutional*' was built with institutional setting, and the chance of agreement while '*policy information*' was the result of the same operation for all the following items (except Macron-Merkle proposal). These items can be understood as the salience of these topics in media or elite discourse.

For the political elites, the data were aggregated at the party or parliamentary group level as an environment of ideas since it is clear the Twitter subsystem is likely to only represent a small proportion of the political information the public receives and to ensure a minimum of information on users. For media, the salience of the frame is then calculated as the number of messages (representing unique articles) posted by each group or media.

Public analysis

The objective was to capture how users talked about the recovery plan and how their discourses, and in particular the tonality, relate to elite and media framing. Following the recommendation of Rafail (2017) about semi-bounded populations, here restricted by the theme of the recovery plan, we first captured messages in French in a Twitter query using a wide range of keywords. A random sample of relevant messages was then selected, including the messages of users that fitted specific criteria about what account these users follow. To draw a link between the upper level of the public sphere, only the users following two politicians and one media account were selected. The assumption that Twitter users follow like-minded people has been widely observed (see Walker, 2019) including the specific link between political representatives' subscriptions and one person's political position. Once the subscription of each user was established, the probability of each category (and each level of the category) under the elite and media analysis was associated with each user. The value of these predictors was calculated as the weighted average of each party the user subscribed to, based on the number of political accounts in that specific party the user follows. For media, it was simply the sum. The objective of these operations was to ensure that the hybrid position of each individual was taken into account (n = 1026).

A random sample of messages (tweets and retweets) was then manually coded using a similar codebook to that of elites with the addition of tonality to link the public sphere to the legitimacy and perception of the plan. For this item, the messages posted by users were coded as either displaying explicitly negative, positive or neutral (or no) evaluation of the policy or the broader European question. The codebook was further simplified by considering the absence of certain dimensions. The institutional setting, comprising the chance of approval of the plan and general discussion about the institutions behind the plans, were recoded into a single category while the "recovery from the economic" was deleted, as most comments were too general to include any meaningful information.

Four control variables were added to the equation to control for users' general attitude towards the EU and the salience of the European Union in their discourse. To account for the general attitude about the European Union and their relations to a user opinion about the plan, the data from the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey was used to assign individual users the value of party position on the European Union. The public usually follows the same position on the EU as that of their party (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016) and provides a useful way to account for their general positions on the European Union. It also enables researchers to control for selective exposure, the tendency of individuals to read or watch like-minded media and elites, and enables us to distinguish between general dislike of the EU and disinterest in the European question. Empirically, the position of the party the user has the most subscription to was used to assign the value. Finally, as confidence in beliefs is associated with participation in political discussion, the salience of the European Union, the proportion of messages posted by the user (Tweets) about the European Union in the last 500 messages, was also added to the model.

Results
Media analysis

In the period between the 5th May and 10th June, 107 messages posted by media's Twitter accounts were identified as talking about the recovery plan. "Quality newspapers" such as *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* or *La Croix* and specialised magazines on the economy *Les echos* have covered the issue more often than *Euronews 20minutes*, *France info* and *Valeurs* suggesting the possibility for differential exposure to information on the recovery plan. Clear differences in the quality of the articles along the same lines were observed as the content of articles ranged from news alerts made up of only few sentences to articles describing the motivation of the frugal four in opposing the recovery plan during the council negotiation.

The overall national coverage is mostly positive across mainstream media although often in the form of a quote from institutional actors. The proposition is in turn compared to the role of Hamilton in the creation of the federal budget in the USA, understood as protecting the European Union from implosion (*Le Monde*). In *Le Figaro* an article describes the plan as mostly a symbolic act while in *Les Echos* a speaker describes the proposal as ambitious, reinforcing European solidarity and sovereignty. The broader question of the European project (normative) is present in 60% of all articles and overrepresented in the quality press (*Le Figaro, Le Monde, Liberation*). Coverage of the general institutional setting is less salient as it is present in 48% of articles while notes of the possibility of a disagreement in the council are only present in 36% of them. Concerning policy details, the EU4HEALTH initiative is rarely mentioned (10%) while the green and digital dimension of the plan is mentioned in 22 % of articles. The financial instrument itself received more coverage and is mentioned in 49% of articles underlying its central role in the policy while the comments on the suitability of the plan to face up to the economic crisis are barely present. If it is, it is in negative terms. Nevertheless, only 8.4% of messages coded directly questioned the suitability of the plan to the circumstances. Overall, the analysis shows disparities in the coverage of the different frames and shows certain aspects of the policy to be absent. The media investigated rather underline the primacy of the new financial instrument and the normative frame.

When looking in more detail at the coverage of the recovery plan and importantly that of the joint declaration by Macron and Merkel on the 18th May, the result of the analysis shows that the discussion of the European plan gained more coverage than the joint declaration of the French president suggesting the recovery plan was treated as European news. It confirms the politicisation of the European issue and its emergence as one independent from national politics although the affirmation is not true for all outlets. *Le Figaro* covered the Macron-Merkel initiative more, *Valeurs Actuelles* covered both equally (although with low coverage) and *20minutes* did not appear to cover the joint declaration. Following the work of Fazekas et al (2020) about the strong link between public engagement and retweet, it was found that articles about the recovery plan were significantly retweeted less (on average 12.9 times) than the average tweet posted by media (68.9 times) and are only slightly above the median (8 times). This result suggests the public only engaged in a limited fashion with recovery plan articles.

Analysis of political elites

The sample of politicians' and elected representatives' tweets is composed of 498 different messages. To explore the relationship between party and framing, a series of Chi-square tests were conducted to assess the level of difference in the framing of the recovery plan amongst the political parties. Overall, the French parties differ significantly in their discussion of the recovery plan. With regards to the normative aspects (46.6 %), the tone is more often positive (30 %) than negative (16%) but clear differences are separating the left from the right, distinguishing the leading coalition, mainstream and fringe parties (X-squared = 287.6, p<0.001). The centre-left and right (EDS, Agir ensemble) and the governing majority at the political centre (LREM, MoDem, UDI) tend to frame the plan within a positive image of the European project such as an historical turning point, deciding the future of the European Union with an underlying message of solidarity and hope. The two traditional governing parties are more balanced in their reactions (SOC, particularly LR) often presenting a moderate middle ground between the centre and the radical parties while the radical left (LFI) and right (RN, Debout la France (NI)) tend to frame the recovery plan within a negative albeit different image of the European Union. On the left, LFI stresses the risk of the conditionality of grants in the plan put forward by the commission as one possible instance of "austerity policies". The radical left group denounced the lack of democratic accountability behind the proposal while its leader (Melenchon) even presented the plan as part of a threat to the sovereignty of the French republic and its people. European solidarity would again be based on the 'budgetary' sacrifice of the people. Beyond the threat to national sovereignty and democracy, the RN also presents the plan as supporting a federalist agenda counter to the interest of the French people stressing the hidden agenda of the commission; a federalist folly on the 15th anniversary of the "Non" to the constitutional treaty.

For the description of the institutional setting, the results also show a statistically significant difference between the parties (X-squared = 80,0, df= 11, p < 0.001). For instance, the RN or LFI politicians mention the joint declaration as essentially a German idea (ordoliberalism) imposed on France. Similar differences were found in discussions about the chance of reaching an agreement (X-squared = 27.3, df = 11, p-value = 0.004) but no clear pattern distinguishing the parties on the relation between the plan and the crisis recovery (X-

squared = 21.3, p-value < 0.001) with only the RN not replacing the plan within the context of the crisis.

As in the media analysis, the health dimension of the plan had a relatively low salience as it is only discussed in 6% of all messages. Nonetheless, important differences also exist between the political faction (X-squared = 29.3, p-value < 0.001). The RN politicians made no mention of this idea whereas it is mentioned 11 times for LREM. The green and digital aspect are more frequently presented but, on the whole, remains scarcely mentioned. As was expected, significant differences are found between the parties as it captured the attention of green parties more significantly (X-squared = 71.1, p-value < 0.001). The possibility of creating European taxes is strongly divided along party lines (X-squared = 72.3, df = 11, p-value < 0.001). The RN seems to solely focus its attention on this topic as it is mentioned in 54% of its tweets while the LFI only mentions it in 2 messages (3%) or LREM (6 times or 5%). Presenting the plan as adapted or unadapted was also associated with party lines (X-squared = 132.2, p-value < 0.001) with EELV and LFI more often declaring the plan was insufficient. Finally, 34,7 % of messages referred to the joint declaration by Macron and Merkel with significant differences between the political group under investigation (X-squared = 38.7, p-value < 0.001). As with the media analysis, it confirms the plan is fundamentally understood as an EU initiative.

Overall, there are significant differences in parties' salience and framing as concerned with the recovery plan showing a fragmented discussion. Indeed, the normative aspect sees a direct opposition between, on the one hand, the framing of the governing coalition defending the European project (European solidarity) and its historical significance and, on the other hand, those associating the proposal with pre-existing symbols of opposition towards the European Union (namely austerity and the 2005 constitutional referendum). The centre is separated from the fringe parties by the previous two government parties (PS and LR) where the salience of the issue of the recovery plan is low in comparison to the other parties/group. While most parties present, at least once, all the different dimensions, the RN stands out as narrowly focused on the normative aspect and taxes with little analysis of other content of the plan. Understanding how these differences relate to the public will be investigated in the next section.

Result of the public analysis

The first step of the analysis was to understand the characteristics of the public reacting to the recovery plan on Twitter. From the random sample of tweets written in French during the period under investigation, no message was detected to have the recovery plan as an explicit subject, showing the low salience of the issue on Twitter.

Analysis reveals that there is a statistically significant difference (t-test, two-tailed) between users who posted about the recovery plan and those that did not. In two random samples of 500 users separating those who talked and those who did not talk about the recovery plan, those that were predicted to have discussed the recovery plan retweeted more often messages from French elected representatives and key political figures, retweeted messages from media and posted more often messages predicted to be related to the European Union (Tweets). In that sense, the debate on Twitter appears to be restricted to a small minority of more politically active users. These results show the limited scope of the

debate surrounding the commission plan as it did not gather significantly more attention than other articles.

To understand the link between the virtual public sphere and its main actors (namely political elites and media) an ordered logistic regression was run with the users' evaluation of the recovery plan as the dependent variable and elite data variables (salience, normative, institutional) and control variables (EU stance, proportion of messages about the EU) as predictors (see Table 1). Overall, the elite and media discourse are significantly associated with the tonality of the message expressed in the general public controlling for users' predisposition towards the European Union and the salience of the European question in their engagement of the platform. First, it was found that both media and elite discourses affected Twitter users' discourse about the recovery plan.

At the media level, the thoroughness of the coverage of the different aspects of the recovery plan was positively associated with the level of support towards the policy. Indeed, users exposed to a media covering more thoroughly the recovery plan also expressed more positive opinions towards the policy giving additional evidence in support of the association of exposure to news about the European Union and its attitude towards it. On the other hand, it was found that coverage of the institutional setting, including the uncertainty of agreement, was negatively associated with a positive depiction of the plan. Since the measurement is an aggregation of multiple items, dissociating the lack of agreement and the more general discussion about the institutional context shows that media coverage of the lack of agreement predicts more negative expressed opinions towards the recovery plan.

At the elite level, it was found that users' expressed opinion of the plan was positively associated with the frequency by which the elites they follow mentioned the recovery plan, the frequency by which they mentioned the institutional context (but not the chance of disagreement) and the level of detail given about the policy. Finally, the controls of the individual levels confirm the association between general attitudes towards the European Union and the recovery plan.

Ordinal regression exploring the relationship between public expression of support and opposition toward the Recovery Plan and elite and media discourse

Dependent variable		Negative, neutral or Positive framing of the Recovery Plan
Independent variables		
Media	Salience	0.001
		(0.003)
	Normative discussion	0.041
		(0.028)
	Institutional context	**-0.074*****
		(0.02)
	Information about the policy	**0.065***
		(0.025)
Political elites	Salience	**0.049*****
		(0.008)
	Normative discussion	0.066
		(0.041)
	Institutional context	**0.151****
		(0.053)
	Information about the policy	**0.243****
		(0.084)
Individual	EU general predisposition	**0.322*****
		(0.095)
	Salience of European questions	0.014.
		(0.008)
Constant	Negative to Neutral	8.784
		(1.191)
	Neutral to Positive	11.019
		(1.225)

McFarren Pseudo Rsquare: 0.31
Observations = 740

Note: Ordinal regression using the r package *Mass* , standard error in parenthesis, *** p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, . p < 0.10

Table 1: **Relationship between Twitter public expression and elite and media discourse about the recovery plan**

On the whole, our results show the importance of political elites and media framing and priming and the role of prior beliefs in the assessment of the recovery plan.

To further investigate the public debate and the degree to which the framing of the recovery plan at the individual level was associated with the ideas presented in media and by political elites, a series of binary logistic regressions were conducted investigating each frame of the content analysis (see appendices tables 3). Each equation used the presence or absence of

the frame in users' messages as the dependent variable and used the frequency of the frame in the discourse of the media and the elites he follows as independent variables controlling for a user position on the EU and the salience of the European question in his messages. Only three dimensions were significantly associated with media and elites' discussions: media policy description, normative discussion about the recovery plan and mentions of the green and digital element associated with the policy. The greater the salience of the normative aspect was in elite and media discourse, the more often the public talked of the recovery plan in normative terms. Hence our results suggest that media and elite framing directly shaped the manner in which the public debated the recovery plan. In particular, the normative aspect, tying the legitimacy of the plan with this of the European Union, shows how consequential the impact of elite cues can be on citizens understanding of the European policy question.

Discussion

The role played by the European Commission when it announced its plan of €750 billion financed by a European debt significantly differed from the traditional role assigned to the institution. It proposed a new text asserting the strategy of the Commission for Europe in an ambitious plan. Not only did it represent a move away from traditional methods by which the European Commission can be financed, it also included long-debated ideas that could have fostered integration in terms of health policy with the plan EU4HEALTH and fiscal policy with the idea of creating EU-wide taxation. Since the commission had not secured the approval of all member states before the announcement, it clashed with the usually consensual and technocratic aspect of EC (see Bijsmans & Altides, 2007) and potentially enabled the commission to be located as a political actor, which would clarify the responsibility of heads of states in the negotiations and avoid the possibility of the Commission of being blamed for the outcome of the council negotiation (Bijsmans & Altides, 2007). While the European Union had sought 'integration by stealth' during the Eurocrisis (Börzel, 2016), the Commission and the member states behind the proposal here attempted to politicise the matter to garner public support to influence the opposing countries for the coming negotiation in the council. In that sense, the initial proposal represented a departure from the general mode of policymaking previously considered an important factor behind the 'democratic deficit'. It allowed debating the proposition prior to decision-making and thus made the work of the European Commission potentially more visible to the public.

With increased politicisation, more public discussion could have been expected. From the analysis of the media article linked on Twitter, it was clear the question entered the public media sphere in relatively positive terms in line with previous research (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). The media discussion reflected the dual nature of the plan as framed as part of a significant policy direction of the European Union project and a policy to tackle the crisis. However, not all aspects of the proposition were equally discussed. Most articles noted the NGEU financial instrument behind the recovery plan but neglected the program on EU4HEALTH or the strategy to finance the Green and digital transition. In that sense, there is a continuing divergence between the media logic and European Union communication as the literature suggested; media appeared more interested in big events and debates that mark the future of European integration and conflicts rather than the details of policy (Trenz, 2004).

There were also significant differences between parties and political group affiliation. The framing of the policy within the broader question of the European Union is dominant but often in more negative terms than in the media. Indeed, there is a clear opposition between the centre coalition emphasising the historical nature of the plan, as part of showing European solidarity and building European sovereignty and the 'populist 'parties associating the plan with previous symbols of their struggle against the European Union. In line with previous research on Euroscepticism (e.g. Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro & Plaza-Colodro, 2018), the discourse of radical parties on the left (LFI) frames the proposition as undemocratic, violating the sovereignty of the French people, preparing austerity and debt in a neoliberal Europe while the radical right (RN) presents the spectre of a federal Europe financed by European taxation on the French people.

The two traditional governing parties are more incoherent and appear more cautious. In line with the work of Rauh et al. (2020), the two parties appear to be pulled by the constraining dissensus where they appear to avoid the question and seem more divided between the relegitimisation strategy of LREM and the 'Eurosceptic' LFI and RN. Some of the more radical parliamentarians opt for strong criticism in line with their radical side while their moderate wing gave a more positive assessment. In all, the question of the recovery plan follows the established patterns of Eurosceptic parties while providing new rhetoric for the pro-Europeans. It seems unlikely the mobilisation on old symbols would trigger a new wave of protest in the country as was the case for the migrant, financial and sovereign debt crisis as the issue was not at the heart of the public interest in the French debate.

Indeed, if the plan received non-negligible media coverage and attention from political elites and demonstrated non-negligible patterns of Europeanisation, the analysis of retweeting patterns of media and politicians' messages shows a relatively low diffusion of the issue. In line with the finding of the public analysis, most of the debates are limited to a population more often engaging with politicians and media content and more likely to be interested in the European question. These findings are in line with an offline poll (Ifop, 2020, see appendices) which finds that when participants were asked which of the following subject animated their conversations this week, the joint statement by Merkel and Macron ranked 11th with 32% of respondents saying they discussed the topic. The respondents were on average older, overrepresenting high occupational activities and participants declaring to be LREM (53%, PS: 43%, LR: 37%, LFI 21% and RN:22%). In that sense, despite the attempt by the commission and by the French and German national leaders to politicise the issue, it appears that the recovery plan remained of limited interest to the public. Given the timing of the announcement of the EU plan, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions as to the degree of interest on the part of the French. The absence of debate might indeed signal the existence of a consensus surrounding the policy and its lack of controversy.

With regard to the structure of the public sphere here understood as the effect of media and elite framing also has been shown to produce significant effects both on the framing of citizens' Twitter debate and their expressed opinions about the recovery plan. These results confirm the fragmentation of the French public sphere and the differential level of Europeanisation that can be associated with the public attitudes towards the recovery plan. Indeed, the public that was more negative about the recovery plan was also less likely to be exposed to the details of the policy in the media and was less often mentioned in the elite

circles they follow. While studies on media effect would point out the role of selective exposure, the tendency of individuals to follow news that corresponds to their predispositions, the significance of each effect controlling for an individual's overall predisposition toward the European Union gives supporting evidence that negative dispositions towards the recovery plan might be in part explained by the lack of information and discussion about the recovery plan. These results thereby support the thesis of a partial 'communication deficit' and confirm the preponderant role of media and elites' framing on the public understanding of EU-related questions. Furthermore, this research also reinforces existing findings on the negative impact of conflict coverage on attitude towards the European Union giving an example of how media logic can undermine the legitimacy of the European Union. Finally, the comparison of the three levels of the public sphere (political elite, media and public) in a single analysis has enabled us to compare the effects of media framing and elites' cues. The findings suggest that elite cues have a greater impact than media, particularly in a partisan setting. Further research would be required as the population under investigation was found to have users directly involved in politics, hence strongly unrepresentative of the general population. Nonetheless, the importance of partisans in political communication makes partisans, and subsequently the results of this research, significant.

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Appendices
Coding scheme

Normative level: each message or article was coded to understand whether the plan proposed was connected to the broader question of the European Union and its legitimacy and whether it connected to a positive or negative assessment of the Union. The category included messages such as "an historical moment for the European Union", "an act of solidarity", or in negative terms "a new step towards federalism" or a "neoliberal Europe".

Institutional setting: the article or the message presented the underlying process behind the decision for the recovery plan. In short, mentioned the actor involved and their motivations to support or oppose the plan.

Chance of agreement: the article or message mentioned the uncertainty of whether or not the proposal would be accepted in the council.

Recovery of the economic crisis: the article mentioned the objective of the policy and details about the financial instrument such as the reinforcement of the Cohesion fund.

Health integration: the article or message mentioned the plan for health EU4HEALTH.

Green or digital transition: the message or article mentions the ambition of the commission to accelerate and support the green and digital transition.

New taxes: the article or message investigated mentioned the objective of the commission to help finance the recovery plan with the creation of new resources.

NGEU: the article or message mention main financial tools for the recovery plan; Next Generation EU (the creation of a common EU debt)

Suitable response: the article or message presents the recovery plan (policy level) as an adapted or in adapted measure to tackle the crisis.

Macron -Merkel proposal: the message or article mentions the joint declaration by the two heads of State.

Offline poll
Le tableau de bord politique: Paris Match/Sud-Radio Juin 2020 Interviews realised on the 28th and 29th of May 2020 in a quota sample of 1005 respondents [Online] [Accessed on 9th October 2020] https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Tableau-de-bord-politique-Juin-2020.pdf

Machine learning method
Text is a specific form of machine learning as it requires a particular transformation of text data into a quantifiable objects. One of the most common assumptions for scientific analysis is the bag-of-word assumption, where each text is associated with a count of the words composing it. "All quantitative models of language are wrong, but some are useful"

(Grimmer, Stewart, 2013, p.3). The texts are decomposed into document feature matrices where each document is associated with the count for each word, ngram and skipgram present in the totality of the corpus (all documents under investigation). The data is then pre-processed so as to eliminate features (word or ngrams) that contain little information as words of patterns of words occurring in too many documents to be of value, or in too few, risking the model to overfit the data. Such processing was done with the R package 'quanteda' developed by Benoit et al. (2018). Once the document feature matrix is built, the dataset is separated in two groups; a training set, used to build the model, and a test set, used to measure the model's performance. The algorithms (here, random forest, Support Vector Machine, Gradient Boosting Machine (tree based) and XGboost (Chen, Gestrin, 2016) are then fitted to the training set using cross-validation to fine-tune the parameters using the features (word count) as predictors and the hand-coded classification as dependant variables. The model is then applied to the test set and the predictions of the model are then compared to the manually coded data. Scholars have then to demonstrate that the supervised methods are able to replicate human coding (Grimmer, Stewart, 2013). In this study, three models were used and combined in an ensemble method that combines the predictions of models diverse enough to improve accuracy and out-of-sample stability by weighting the model prediction in regard to their accuracy and precision (Grimmer, Stewart, 2013). As shown in Table 1, the Cohen Kappa, along with the accuracy, indicates that the models are capable of reproducing human coding accurately.

The construction of the algorithms was done in two steps. Because of the high-class imbalance (low salience of the recovery plan in comparison to the total volume of tweets), a random sample approach was not effective as it did not gather enough data on the recovery plan to be useful for the statistical learning methods. The first step was therefore to code messages about the European Union in a weighted random sample to gather a similar proportion of messages per media or party and hence avoid a biased prediction. Only messages that explicitly mentioned a theme directly related to the EU, (e.g. institution, a policy, head figure) were coded. This preparatory step was done on both media and politicians' messages. The first model was then used to predict data outside the coded sample that was then manually annotated through a balanced sample to reduce class imbalance. The coded data was subsequently used to build a second model which would serve as the work model. The same process was repeated to predict the message about the recovery plan with an initial step selecting data predicted as mentioning topics related to the European Union. Included in the recovery plan category were all messages relating to the plan presented by the commission - the idea of a common European debt, a plan for European health, European taxes and any mentions of elements of the Macron and Merkel joint declaration. The model thereby constructed yielded adequate performance (Both models yielded Cohen's kappa > 0.6).

	Overall Accuracy	Cohen's Kappa	Precision	F1
European Union	0.9457	0.86	0.9044	0.8963
Recovery Plan	0.8727	0.72	0.8363	0.8242

Table 2: Machine learning performances on a hold-out set (non-random sample overrepresenting EU related Tweets and messages about the recovery plan)

Binary logistic regression of the content of public users' messages and elite and media framing

Variable	Policy discussion	institutional	normative	Nextgen_EU	Health Policy	Green and Digital Transition	Tax proposal
(Intercept)	-5.87***	-4.418***	6.105***	-6.448***	-7.509*	-7.951***	-1.402
	(0.957)	(1.334)	(0.918)	(0.81)	(3.255)	(1.697)	(1.017)
Salience of the RC in the media	0.001	0	0.002	0	0.016	-0.009	-0.002
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.03)	(0.007)	(0.004)
Salience of the RC in Elite Discourse	0.012*	0.021**	-0.011.	0.04**	-0.002	0.008	0.014**
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.014)	(0.035)	(0.009)	(0.005)
Individual's Level of EU support	0.096	0.069	-0.09	0.027	-0.197	0.597.	-0.321***
	(0.064)	(0.078)	(0.074)	(0.108)	(0.515)	(0.345)	(0.093)
Salience of EU rquestion in users' activity	0.041	-0.011	-0.019*	0.002	0.041	0.007	0.002
	-0.032	(0.014)	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.032)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Salience of the variable in Media coverage	0.063*	0.001	-0.074**	0.018	0.222.	0.024	0
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.014)	(0.116)	(0.018)	(0.013)
Salience of the variable in Elite discourse	0.124	0.06	-0.15***	-0.003	-0.064	0.065	0.034
	(0.086)	(0.08)	(0.032)	(0.068)	(0.331)	(0.04)	(0.021)

Note: RC = recovery plan, Standard error in parenthesis, *** p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, . p<0.1

Binary logistic regressions of public messages and elite and media framing with interaction terms

	Variables	Policy discussion	institutional	normative	NextgenEU	Health Policy	Green and Digital Transition	Tax proposal
Control Variables	(Intercept)	-15.774	-29.563	19.782	-32.886	-35.064	-36.693	-26.736
		(535.414)	(1593.464)	(535.414)	(2614.853)	(7131.211)	(2616.815)	(1593.667)
	Individual's Level of EU support	0.051	0.062	-0.049	-0.005	-0.083	0.502.	-0.35***
		(0.069)	(0.083)	(0.068)	(0.116)	(0.573)	(0.26)	(0.093)
	Salience of EU rquestion in users' activity	0.017.	-0.011	-0.016.	-0.001	0.051	0.007	0.004
		(0.009)	(0.014)	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.035)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Interaction terms constants	Salience of the RC in the media (above median salience)	0.135	16.277	-0.961	11.013	15.077	15.554	14.395
		(2.1)	(648.805)	(1.799)	(1039.056)	(2882.594)	(1043.984)	(649.301)
	Salience of the RC in the media (below median salience)	-0.563	13.376	0.532	14.203	11.663	14.065	13.531
		(1.153)	(648.803)	(0.991)	(1039.054)	(2882.592)	(1043.983)	(649.3)
	Salience of the RC in Elite Discourse (above median salience)	12.252	14.442	-17.547	14.213	16.918	16.144	13.265
		(535.415)	(1455.398)	(535.412)	(2399.546)	(6522.64)	(2399.545)	(1455.398)
	Salience of the RC in Elite Discourse (below median salience)	11.454	12.934	-13.859	13.909	12.878	13.952	13.091
		(535.411)	(1455.398)	(535.411)	(2399.545)	(6522.639)	(2399.545)	(1455.398)
	Salience of the {variable} in Media coverage	0.058.	0.003	-0.084**	0.013	0.215.	0.031	-0.003
		(0.032)	(0.03)	(0.031)	(0.013)	(0.111)	(0.02)	(0.013)
	Salience of the {variable} in Elite discourse	0.129	0.068	-0.194***	0.058	0.299	0.162*	0.022
		(0.105)	(0.093)	(0.031)	(0.094)	(0.521)	(0.066)	(0.023)
Interaction terms	Salience of the {variable} * Salience (Media)	-0.057	-0.117	0.085	0.066	-0.358	-0.089	-0.045
		(0.116)	(0.072)	(0.075)	(0.046)	(0.476)	(0.065)	(0.037)
	Salience of the {variable} * Salience (Elite discourse)	-0.018	-0.256	0.137***	0.045	-0.591	-0.131.	0.005
		(0.187)	(0.172)	(0.04)	(0.108)	(0.58)	(0.076)	(0.021)

Note: RC = recovery plan, Standard error in parenthesis, *** p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, . p<0.1, Each variable is a independent regression model

Table 3: Binary regression of the dimension mentioned by users in messages about the recovery plan