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Public Opinion and Participation in the European Union

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The link between public opinion and participation has never been more important for the future of the European Union. Politicians want to know citizens' satisfaction with government policies and the state of the economy and their policy preferences. Surveys of public opinion tap into people's degree of satisfaction and help decision makers adjust their policies and strategies to ensure success in upcoming elections. As such, public opinion polling has become an important tool of governments everywhere whether European Commission or member states or private individuals and organizations conduct them. In addition to electoral issues, public opinion surveys provide valuable information on peoples' changing attitudes, beliefs, and values.¹ Today, the EU faces surmountable challenges that threaten the future of the Union. These include economic and financial problems of many member states, institutional shortcomings at the EU level to provide effective policies for economic recovery, two-track EU integration (Eurozone and others), and democratic deficits to name a few.

EU Quo Vadis?

There is no denial that "ever closer union"² must be achieved economically as well as politically if the EU is to survive the domestic and external challenges it faces. On the economic front, a deepening of integration will enhance the advantages of EU's internal market (yet to be completed) and protect its members against external and domestic shocks by creating symmetry across the regions. Politically, a deeper union will legitimize governance of a more united EU and bring its institutions closer to the people. Such deepening of political integration will also provide protection against nationalistic outlooks that favor a dissolution of the Union. At the same time, it will go a long way in legitimizing the EU as a true global actor.

Perhaps jumping into Economic and Monetary Union prior to completion of the Common Market (Single Market) was premature but external systemic changes pushed European leaders to make that decision. Subsequent monetary union among some of the states further created division within the union. Add to this the very slow pace of political union and one gets a formula for disaster. As many economists would say

¹ There are numerous works that examine the impact of public opinion on important policy issues in the EU as well as works that address public perception of EU integration and related matters. For example, see Jørgen Bølstaad, "Dynamics of European integration: Public opinion in the core and periphery" *European Union Politics* March 2015 vol. 16 no. 1 23-44; Kathleen M. Dowley, "Support for Europe among Europe's Ethnic, Religious, and Immigrant Minorities" *International Journal Public Opinion Research* (2011) 23 (3): 315-337; Richard, Eichenberg and Russell Dalton, 1993. "Europeans and the European Community: The Dynamics of Public Support for European Integration." *International Organization* 47: 507-34; Gaspare Genna. 2009. "Positive Country Images, Trust, and Public Support for European Integration." *Comparative European Politics*, 7(2): 213-32; Ronald Inglehart, (1967). *The Socialization of Europeans*, University of Michigan; Rose Lemardeley, "Democratic deficit and public opinion in the EU: A trust issue?", *Nouvelle Europe* [en ligne], Monday 4 February 2013, <http://www.nouvelle-europe.eu/node/1631>, displayed on 27 December 2015; Konstantin Vössing "Transforming public opinion about European integration: Elite influence and its limits" *European Union Politics* June 2015 vol. 16 no. 2 157-175.

² Desmond Dinan, *Ever Closer Union*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner 2005.



“monetary union without a political union would not work.”³ It only takes one major financial crisis to bring that monetary union down like a house of cards. The EU is currently working hard to ensure that will not happen by pushing ahead with new formulas for fiscal coordination that blends its supranational and intergovernmental decision-making mechanisms. Yet, ordinary citizens are rarely informed of the EU, its institutions, or its policies. In other words, while the EU knows a lot about its citizens through extensive surveys, the same cannot be said the other way around. So where lies the problem?

Public Opinion

The Eurobarometer (EB) has been the instrument of choice for surveying public opinion in the European Union. Jacques-René Rabier, a senior official involved in social sciences at the Commission, began this work. He studied political economy and law at the Sorbonne University and the École Libre des Sciences Politiques. Between 1970 and 1973, he headed the Press and Information Directorate-General of the Commission. In that position, he started working on the first Eurobarometer public opinion studies in 1973 and was influenced by Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan. This collaboration allowed Rabier to tailor the surveys to tap into peoples’ values, attitudes, and beliefs. Upon his retirement in 1973, he became a special advisor to the Commission and served until 1986.⁴ The Eurobarometer is conducted twice a year in all member and candidate countries and provides EU leaders with valuable information, on the EU and national level, about people living in these countries. Political leaders pay attention to these results when they address key policy challenges. However, the survey remains almost unknown outside academic and scientific circles. European citizens rarely find Eurobarometer opinion polls available for them through traditional or new forms of social media.⁵ As Salvatore Signorelli notes “The Commission does not have the means to “disseminate” poll results for public consumption. This work is done through colloquia and conferences mostly organized in institutional bodies (the same goes for the Parliament) and it is therefore difficult for citizens to be aware of it.”⁶ The same can also be said about two other two surveys which are equally important for academics and policy makers. These are the European Values Survey and its sister World Values Survey

³ William Riker. “Federalism,” in *Handbook of Political Science*, eds. Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby, Vol 5., 1975, pp 93-172; and Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2012.

⁴ Karlheinz Reif and Ronald Inglehart (eds), Eurobarometer. *The Dynamics of European Public Opinion. Essays in Honour of Jacques-René Rabier*, London, Mac Millan, 1991.

⁵ Bréchon Pierre et Cautrès Bruno (dir.), *Les enquêtes Eurobaromètres. Analyse comparée des données socio-politiques*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1998.

⁶ Salvatore Signorelli, *The EU and Public Opinions: A Love-hate Relationship?* Notre Europe www.notre-europe.eu Paris. November 2012, p. 71.

studies. An informal group of academics (the European Value Systems Study Group or EVSSG) in the late 1970s initiated the European Values Study. Today, it is carried on in the setting of a foundation, using the (abbreviated) name of the group: European Values Study (EVS).⁷ Numerous scholarly works used these data to examine causal factors behind various economic, social, and political developments.⁸ Similar to the EVS, the World Values Survey (www.worldvaluessurvey.org) is a global network of social scientists studying changing values and their impact on social and political life, led by an international team of scholars, with the WVS association and secretariat headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden.⁹ The WVS is the largest non-commercial, cross-national, time series investigation of human beliefs and values ever executed. The WVS seeks to help scientists and policy makers understand changes in the beliefs, values and attitudes of people throughout the world and data obtained have been used to test for causal relationships and main assumptions of human development theories.¹⁰ These data and other similar surveys have also been widely used by government officials, journalists and students, and groups at the World Bank have analyzed the linkages between cultural

⁷ European Values Survey (<http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu>). At the time of the first survey, the first elections for the European Parliament were approaching, a bishops conference was organized and questions were raised such as: Do Europeans share common values? Are values changing in Europe and, if so, in what directions? Do Christian values continue to permeate European life and culture? Is a coherent alternative meaning system replacing that of Christianity? What are the implications for European unity? To answer these questions, organizers of the EVS designed and conducted a survey in 1981 in ten European countries (also including Northern Ireland which was investigated separately from Great Britain). The research project aroused interest in many countries around the world and led to the establishment of the World Values Survey. To explore the dynamics of values changes, a second wave of surveys was launched in 1990 in all European countries as well as the US and Canada. Almost ten years later the third EVS wave followed in almost all European countries and in 2008 the fourth wave took place.

⁸ Depository of works published that use EVS data is at <http://evs.uvt.nl>. Catalogues by author name, concept, country, and key work it includes article (728), chapter (437), book (164), unknown (35), doctoral thesis (17), conference paper (15), report (9), and working paper (3).

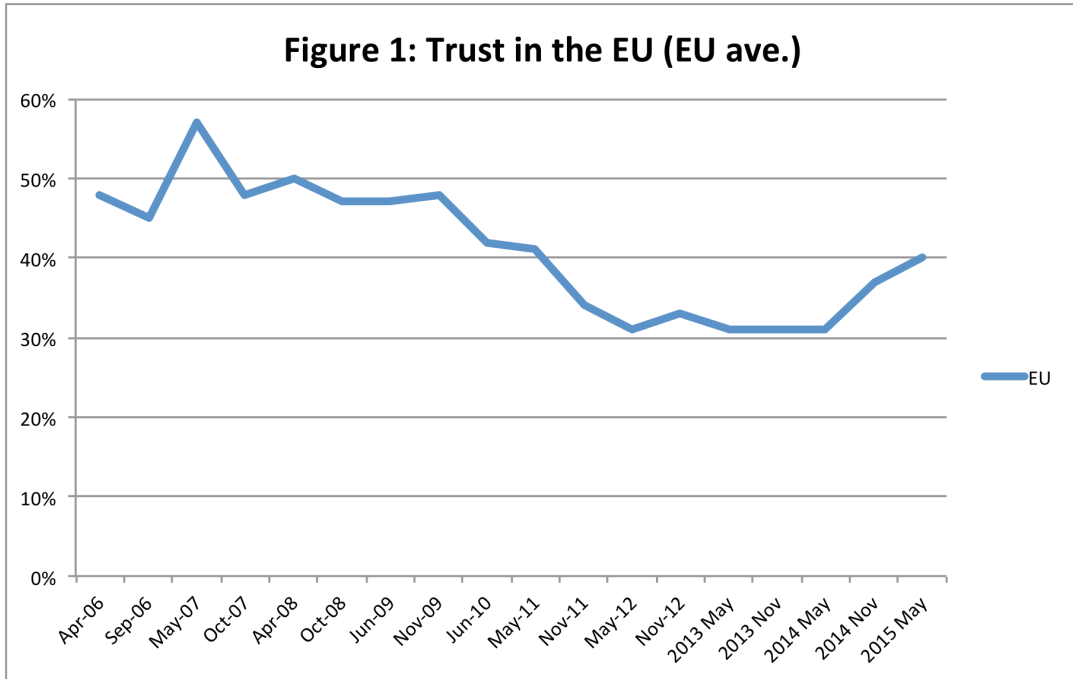
⁹ World Values Survey (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>) The survey, which started in 1981, seeks to use the most rigorous, high-quality research designs in each country. The WVS consists of nationally representative surveys conducted in almost 100 countries which contain almost 90 percent of the world's population, using a common questionnaire. Moreover, the WVS is the only academic study covering the full range of global variations, from very poor to very rich countries, in all of the world's major cultural zones.

¹⁰ For example, see Christian Welzel, (2013). *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Mark Abdollahian, Travis Coan, Hana Oh and Birol Yesilada. 2012. "Dynamics of Cultural Change: The Human Development Perspective." *International Studies Quarterly* 56, 827-842; Yilmaz Esmer and Thorleif Pettersson eds, *Measuring and Mapping Cultures: 25 Years of Comparative Value Surveys*, Leiden: Brill; Inglehart, Ronald. 1997. *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Ronald Inglehart, 2008. "Changing Values among Western Publics from 1970 to 2006." *West European Politics* 31, 130-46; Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker. 2000. "Modernization, cultural change, and the persistence of traditional values" *American Sociological Review* 65, 19-51; Ronald Inglehart, and Christian Welzel. 2005. *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: the human development sequence*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press;

factors, economic development, support for integration, religion and identity, religiosity, and trust.¹¹

Citizens' apathy in EU elections is one example of this disconnect between the EU and European citizens that is highlighted by EB data. Throughout EU history, people have participated in national elections at a much higher level than at the EU level (i.e., EU parliamentary elections or citizen initiatives in Brussels). Today when the EU is experiencing its most challenging economic and financial difficulties, the May 2014 EU election witnessed the lowest voter turnout on record – 42.54% which is significant fall from the initial election in 1979 (62%). The trend has been a steady decline in people's interest in EU elections when deepening of integration means more EU level decisions that affect everyone's lives. Another trend that should be of concern is people's trust in EU institutions. Data obtained from the EB surveys show that European officials should be very concerned about the lack of trust at a time when they are moving towards greater union among member states (see Figure 1).

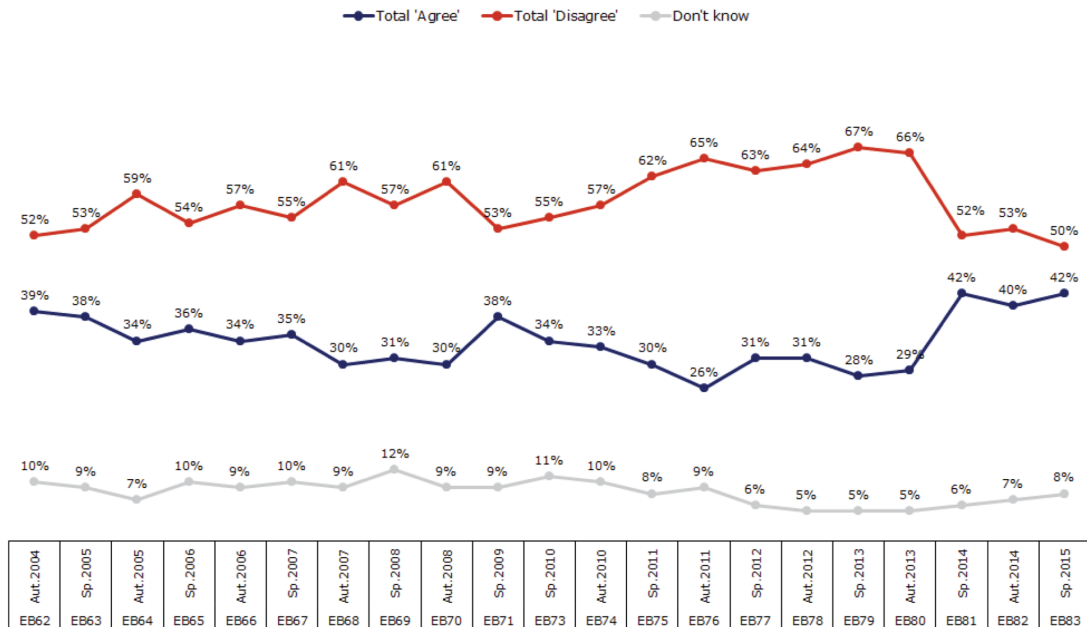
¹¹ Oya Dursun-Ozkanca "French public opinion on the European Union's Eastern enlargement and public-elite relations" *French Politics* 11, (September 2013), pp241-258; Christopher J. Anderson, 1998. "When in Doubt, Use Proxies: Attitudes Toward Domestic Politics and Support for European Integration." *Comparative Political Studies* 31: 569–601; Sean Carey, 2002. "Undivided Loyalties: Is National Identity an Obstacle to European Integration?" *European Union Politics* 3: 387–413; Juan Medrano Diez, 2003. *Framing Europe: Attitudes to European Integration in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Bernd Schlipphak "Action and attitudes matter: International public opinion towards the European Union," *European Union Politics* December 2013 vol. 14 no. 4 590-618; Gaspare Genna, 2015. Images of Europeans: Transnational Trust and Support for European Integration. *Journal of International Relations and Development*. DOI: 10.1057/jird.2015.9; Brent F. Nelsen and James L. Guth, *Religion and the Struggle for European Union: Confessional Culture and the Limits of Integration*, co-authored with James. L. Guth (Georgetown University Press, 2015); and Brent F. Nelsen and James L. Guth, "Religion and the Creation of European Identity: The Message of the Flags," *Review of Faith & International Affairs* (Forthcoming, 2016); Birol A. Yesilada and Noordijk, Peter. 2010. "Changing Values in Turkey: Religiosity and Tolerance in Comparative Perspective." *Turkish Studies*, 11, 9 – 27.



Source: Eurobarometer

It is painfully apparent that level of trust in the EU fell significantly during the last financial crisis and recovered to its pre-crisis level in 2015. However, the overall trend is a steady decline since 2003. This raises another concern for EU integration, that of legitimacy. Several factors can be identified that result in this low participation: problems of legitimacy, recession, mistrust, anti-EU propaganda of nationalist political parties, migration, etc. It is true that European integration has proceeded in a rather peculiar way as an elite exercise often detached from its constituencies. Developments on the ground (see Figure 1 above) make it clear that it cannot continue this way any longer. In the early years, the political elites set the agenda. Big business elites joined them in the late 1970s and 1980s as these powerful individuals lobbied the Delors Commission to complete the Common Market. However, it was not until the Lisbon Treaty that citizens' participation took the stage with the European Citizens Initiative (ECI). This is a significant step forward in providing a channel for direct participation in the decision-making mechanism of the EU at the supranational level especially when one considers the fact that most people do not believe that their voice counts in Brussels institutions (see Figure 2). In fact, Europeans have always maintained that the EU does not listen, is often out of touch with the people and is intrusive.

D72.1. Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.
My voice counts in the EU - % EU



source: Eurobarometer 83, p.143.

Participation

As noted in previous sections, public participation remains a serious challenge in European politics. Public participation is more than casting votes in elections. It is the process by which affected and interested citizens, interest groups, and political figures engage in active communication before political decisions are made in functioning democracies. Formal and informal channels of communication make it possible for voices to be heard at the decision-making level. Presence or absence of such channels could be key determinants of system stability as Samuel Huntington noted many years ago.¹² As the EIPP reported, “Public participation recognises the pluralism of aims and values, and enables collaborative problem-solving designed to achieve more legitimate policies . . . Public participation in this sense is intended to complement conventional modes of policy-making in which elected representatives take decisions based in part on their perception of their constituents’ preferences.”¹³ The EIPP further concludes that

¹² Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Cambridge: Yale University Press, 1968.

¹³ EIPP, *Public Participation in Europe*, June 2009. <http://www.participationinstitute.org/index.php?id=17&L=2>

there are three key requirements for effective public participation in embedded (genuine) democracies.¹⁴ They are:

1. A clearly defined constitutional framework for public participation. This framework must clarify to what degree the outcomes of a participation process will be taken into account by decision-makers. [?]
2. A methodology for choosing adequate methods of public participation. This ought to take the form of an easy to use tool with real added value to the work of the organisers of public participation processes.
3. More consistent and systematic evaluation of participation processes in order to build a knowledge base. Only the development and continuously keeping it up to date will allow a realistic and fruitful use of public participation in manner that realizes its democratizing potential.¹⁵

There is no shortage of public participation in the local and national political sphere by individuals in many mature democracies of the EU. Different and more effective mechanisms are developed to engage the public in deliberative discussions by government bodies. However, the EU is lagging behind such developments perhaps due to its much lesser political union than its economic and monetary integration. A large problem behind public disinterest in EU politics is the nature of EU agenda setting that excludes citizens from the deliberative process. This is despite recent efforts to provide a more effective mechanism for public participation (i.e., Lisbon Treaty).¹⁶ In recent years, the Commission started using other qualitative methods of survey research than its EB (quantitative method) to obtain useful public data. This is due to some inherent problems (i.e., cultural biases leading to differing responses to survey questions) associated with survey questions that sociologists have noted. Therefore, the Commission added focus group studies to its public opinion data collection to obtain information with more open ended questions and discussions. These studies are relatively new and will take time to show their impact on EU agenda setting.

¹⁴ Embedded or genuine democracies, as opposed to institutional democracies, are measured in terms of democratic practices and free choice people have in their lives. For a detailed discussion see Wolfgang Merkel, "Embedded and Defective Democracies," *Democratization*, Vol 11 (2004): 33-58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40

¹⁶ For works related to participation and governance see, Andrew Moravcsik, "Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union," *JCMS*, vol 40, no. 4 (November 2002):603-624; Barbara Finke, "Civil Society Participation in EU Governance," *Living Reviews in European Governance*, 2(2007: <http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2011/2479/>); Beate Kohler-Koch and Barbara Finke, "The Institutional Shaping of EU-Society Relations: A Contribution to Democracy via Participation?" *Journal of Civil Society*, vol 3, no. 3 (2007): 205-221); and Ruud Koopmans and Jessica Erbe, "Towards a European Public Shpere: Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of Europeanized Political Communication," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, vol 17, n0 2 (2004): 97-118.



A significant development that aims to give citizens direct input to EU agenda setting is the ECI found in the Lisbon Treaty. As of April 1, 2012, European citizens enjoy a new right which gives them a stronger voice.¹⁷ Once formally registered, the ECI gives citizens an opportunity to collect one million signatures from at least one quarter of EU Member States to invite the European Commission to propose a legal act in areas where the Commission has the power. By law, the Commission must decide whether or not it would act, and explain the reasons for that choice. At present there are five open ECIs at the Commission.¹⁸ They include “Mum, Dad, and Kids initiative to Protect Marriage and Family,” “Wake Up Europe,” “Stop Plastic in the Sea,” “Fair Transport Europe,” and “We will at WHO.” They cover a wide range of public policy issues but perhaps the one on “Wake up Europe” goes to the heart of difficulties EU leaders face in supranational and national-level policy coordination. This ECI asks the Commission to trigger sanctions against the Hungarian government for “serious and persistent breach of EU values” as Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union outlined. The issue at hand is Hungarian Prime minister Viktor Orban’s policies that are perceived as undemocratic, xenophobic, and contrary to the principles of the rule of law as well as his unacceptable treatment of migrants. While this ECI raised strong objection of the Hungarian member of the Commission who was not present at the time the Commission’s registration of the initiative on November 30, 2015, many members of the European Parliament support the move. This ECI and the politics surrounding it highlight the complexities of public participation in horizontal and vertical governance structures of the new EU. As more ECIs come forward, they will move the EU in the direction of embedded democracy a step at a time.

Final Thoughts

There is no doubt that these are challenging times for the EU. As economic and political problems threaten integration, European leaders need to tap into citizens’ aspirations, concerns, and changing values in order to address them with effective policies. Different survey instruments provide EU and member states’ leaders with ample information on European citizens. Moreover, a rich set of academic publications, some noted in this paper, give valuable insight into how and why people’s aspirations, attitudes, beliefs, and values change. The challenge for agenda setting is that ordinary citizens feel distant to Brussels institutions and do not believe that their voices are heard. As such, they are often alienated from EU decisions. Reversing this trend requires collaborative effort of horizontal and vertical governance between Brussels institutions, national and local governments to engage EU citizens more effectively. Institutionally, recent changes attempt to bridge this gap as seen in the case of ECIs. However, unless more direct citizen participation is achieved, the EU will be destined to be an institutional and not a

¹⁷ *Lisbon Treaty*, http://ec.europa.eu/archives/lisbon_treaty/glance/index_en.htm

¹⁸ <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/initiatives/ongoing>

genuine (effective) democracy. For genuine democracy to flourish in the EU, deeper political union must include clear mechanisms for engaging citizens. Academic research on participation in EU politics has provided valuable insight into present challenges in this field.