

Public opinion and Europe

European File

Twice a year since 1973 specialist pollsters in every Community country have undertaken a full-scale public opinion survey for the European Commission on Europe and what Europeans think about certain topics: their future, the economic and political situation, changes that should be made in society, etc. Between the 8 October and the 20 November 1981, 9 912 people living in 1 150 selected areas in 126 regions were questioned individually in their homes by professional researchers working to set procedures.

Europeans and society: a portrait

This 'spot' opinion poll of Europeans sampled their views on the situation in autumn 1981 and provides an 'instant' image which can be compared with earlier surveys. The main findings of the poll are:

- Europeans are quite pessimistic about the future. Although 8% to 25% of those questioned expect things to be better in 1982, some 38% thought the year would generally be worse than the one before. 56% expect economic difficulties and 50% anticipate international disputes. 44% of them expect to see an increase in social conflict and 64% an increase in unemployment. This pessimism is based on the current economic situation and the impressions given by the press and television. It has slightly decreased compared to the sample taken at the end of 1980. Pessimism is most widespread in Belgium and the Netherlands and is least in France and Greece. In France, at the time of the survey, the governing political party had just changed

and the same was about to happen in Greece raising expectations which were not present in earlier polls. In the other countries, optimists and pessimists were found in roughly the same proportions in each segment of society with one exception: young people. In 1981 as in 1980, youngsters for the most part expected, on the one hand, a better year (one-third of those under 25 compared to one-fifth of those over 54) and on the other, an increase in unemployment (two-thirds of those under 25 against 59% of the over 54's). The paradox is perhaps explained by two factors: the faith young people have in the future and the concrete difficulties they face trying to find their first job.

- Do Europeans think that there will be another world war within the next ten years? In 1971, 12% of the population believed there would be, at the end of 1980 there were 34% and at the end of 1981 24%. This decline in pessimism is particularly evident in Italy, the United Kingdom and France whilst the opposite is true of Luxembourg and Germany; in the latter country and in Belgium one-third of the population fear that a new war could break out before the end of the decade.
- Are Europeans happy with the way democracy works in their country? 49% are, compared to 43% who are not. This relatively positive result is lower than the figure polled in 1978 but is in line with the averages of the ten surveys undertaken between 1973 and 1981. But from one Community country to another these averages over a nine-year period conceal considerable divergences. Those most satisfied are generally the Germans (74% 'yes') followed by the Luxembourgers, the Danes, the Dutch, the Irish and the British (53% 'yes'). Next come the Belgians (48%), the French (44%) and the Italians (19%).

It should be noted that at the end of 1981 the figures for Luxembourg, Denmark and France stood above the national averages and in France the 'yes' responses were in the majority. By contrast, a significant decline was observed in the United Kingdom and in Belgium. In Belgium as happened some time ago in Italy, dissatisfaction has overtaken satisfaction by 49 to 35. Another characteristic trait is that attitudes vary little according to sex, age, degree of education, etc. amongst people questioned. But they can often depend on a person's political persuasion. For example, between October 1980 and October 1981, people on the political left in France changed their attitude from dissatisfaction to one of satisfaction.

- What are the basic attitudes of Europeans towards society? Do they radically want to change it — in the terms of the question put to them — through 'revolutionary action'? Do they want to improve things little by little through reform? Or do they want to defend what they have against subversion? 62% of Europeans prefer the 'reformist' option; they represent the majority in every country, including Germany, where in 1977-78 and in April 1981 a majority was in favour of resisting subversion. In October 1981, less than a third of all Europeans, but around 40% of Germans and Danes supported this 'anti-subversion' option.

The 'revolutionary' path is only supported by 7% of Europeans, though its popularity is on the rise in Belgium and the United Kingdom, where 10% of the population

favour it. 9% of the Greek population also prefer it, but only 6% of Italians and 5% of the French (compared to 9% and 11% respectively during the six polls undertaken between 1977 and 1979). Who are the revolutionaries? 60% of them state that they are quite satisfied with the life they lead, whilst only 36% are happy with the functioning of democracy in their country. In France and Italy they tend to represent the political left whilst in Germany they are more frequently, from the extreme political right. In other countries they are equally placed from these extremes or refuse to choose between the left, right or the centre.

- What are the concrete political issues which unite or divide the citizens of Europe? Faced with the question whether they were for or against certain measures, Europeans responded as follows:

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Extension of government intervention in the economy	62	25
Extension of nationalization	35	48
Redistribution of income	77	17
Environmental action against pollution	93	4
Increasing aid to the Third World	56	35
Increasing defence spending	53	31
Increasing penalties for terrorism	86	9
The development of nuclear energy	58	31
Increasing regional autonomy	66	20

These responses do not differ greatly from those recorded in 1979. But a slight increase in the popularity of public intervention in the economy can be seen. Nuclear energy, aid to the Third World and the defence spending also become slightly more popular, whereas a slight decline in popularity is evident for action on income redistribution. Some of the main differences are:

- People who are generally more educated and in touch with day-to-day events, who we can generally term 'opinion leaders' since they discuss politics more frequently and try to convince their contemporaries, are generally more enthusiastic about aid to the Third World and less inclined to increase the severity of action against terrorists (one can take the view that the State already has enough means at its disposal). In 1979, the candidates for the European Parliament gave similar replies.
- Young people tend to be more sensitive than their elders to the problems of the Third World, they are also more hostile to increasing military spending, stiffening the penalties for terrorism, and developing nuclear energy.
- From an ideological point of view, finally, those who say they are on the political left tend to be more sensitive to the problems of the Third World, income redistribution and the environment, whilst those of the political right generally favour nuclear energy, anti-terrorist measures and greater defence spending.

Unexpectedly, the questions of State intervention in the economy and nationalization produce much less homogeneous responses from those of the left and right. Both camps are equally divided for and against.

Towards European union?

The construction of Europe will only make progress if it can count on the consent and active support of public opinion. What are the current attitudes of European citizens?

- The first question to be asked is whether they are generally in favour of or against the efforts being made to unify western Europe. The result of the poll is clear: 74% are in favour (against 69% in April 1981, 73% on average between 1975 and 1980), 13% against (compared to 16% in April, 11% on average between 1975 and 1980). Those in favour are clearly ahead in all countries (83% in Luxembourg — a record — 65% in Greece, 64% in the United Kingdom, 62% in Ireland), though in Denmark they only represent 43% compared to 39% against. Neither sex nor age seem to have significant bearing on this generally supporting attitude. Only in Greece and in Denmark do those on the political right show a clear tendency to be more in favour. Those who we defined above as 'opinion leaders', who discuss politics the most and try to influence their contemporaries, are also more inclined to respond positively.
- Looking back, six Europeans in every ten think that relations between their country and their neighbours in western Europe are better than they were 25 years ago when the Treaties of Rome were signed. Two out of ten think the reverse is true. The age of the person interviewed has little bearing on these results. Even amongst those opposing integration, more than half of those questioned replied positively. The sceptics are only to be found in force in the United Kingdom (34%) and in Belgium (28%). In Greece, which has just joined the Community, the gap between the positive and negative viewpoints is largest (69 points). Next come Luxembourg, Germany and Ireland.
- Has the understanding between Community countries progressed during the 12 months preceding the survey? At the end of 1981, 19% of Europeans clearly replied 'yes' to this question (against 15% in April of the same year), 26% replied 'no' (against 33% in April). The most pessimistic on this point were the Danes and the Belgians. But in the United Kingdom, the gap between the pessimists and the optimists has decreased by half in six months, and in Germany, the optimists are making ground on the pessimists.
- And the future? Faced with the economic crisis, will Community countries reinforce the links between them over the next ten years? Will they let them lapse? Or will cooperation continue very much as today? The continuation hypothesis is supported by 33% of Europeans whilst 30% are optimistic and 25% pessimistic. The optimistic hypothesis is most often supported in Italy and in the Netherlands; it is

also predominant in France, Luxembourg, Ireland, Greece and, by a small margin, in Germany. By contrast, the more pessimistic assessment is subscribed to by more than a third of the Danes and the British. In general, there is a link between these responses and those given to the first question on the integration process. Those who support integration believe that links will be strengthened whilst those against it think that links will deteriorate.

- Is being a member of the Community a good or bad thing for my country? This question brought more of a response than the ones on European integration in general. It produced 53% positive responses (57% on average between 1974 and 1980, but 50% in April 1981: this could perhaps be the first indication of increasing popularity). Negative opinions were much less numerous: 14% (against 13% between 1974 and 1980, and 17% in April 1981). But opponents of the Community are ahead in the United Kingdom (by 41 to 27 whilst the score between 1974 and 1980 was 36 to 35 but 48 to 24 in April 1981). The two camps are roughly even in Denmark (around 30%). In Greece, the Community has 21% against it compared to 38% who support it, in Ireland 19% are opposed to it, compared to 49% in support. Finally, in the six founding countries, the Community's opponents only amount to 3% (Netherlands) to 7% (France) of public opinion. Supporters number more than 70% in Luxembourg, Netherlands and Italy. They amount to 55% in Germany, Belgium and France, where 'don't knows' account for more than 20%.

- If we combine the responses to the question above with those to another question dealing with the level of regret, indifference or relief which leaving the Community would cause them, groups of people can be identified whose commitment is more marked in one direction or the other. The main results are:
 - Europeans against the Community only represent 9% of public opinion, against 33% in favour. It is also evident that in Belgium the 'don't knows' are a little more numerous than those opposed, and that in the United Kingdom there are close on two committed opponents for each committed supporter, whilst in Denmark, the two camps are evenly matched.

 - In all member countries, strong supporters have seen their numbers decrease since 1975 when they represented 45% of European opinion. This trend is inevitably linked to people's perception of the economic crisis.

 - Generally speaking, attitudes towards the Community of the political left and right vary only slightly. The best example of this is Italy. But there are two exceptions, Greece and Denmark. Significant variations are apparent in relation to precise political issues. Supporters of the Community tend more than others to be against nationalization, in favour of increasing aid to the Third World, increasing environmental protection *and* developing nuclear energy, two issues which are viewed as being not necessarily contradictory.

 - A new factor, however, is the extent to which opinion leaders are a determining variable in nine of the countries, particularly in Belgium and in Germany. The

people most involved in politics are more favourably disposed to the Community (46% in favour, on average) than the rest of the population. Curiously, one exception is Greece where there is a close correlation but in the opposite sense.

- What do people expect (or dread) from the Community? To answer this we must look at the opinion poll undertaken in April 1981 (this question was not posed in October). Amongst the favourable effects of the Community, the majority of Europeans mention the reduced risk of war and a better selection of goods in the shops. Next comes the role which their country can play in the world, the capacity to counter the world economic crisis more effectively, energy supplies, the functioning of democracy and export opportunities. By contrast, as for as prices, agriculture and jobs are concerned, the majority of Europeans attribute as many bad effects to the Community as good ones. If by refining this analysis we relate this trait to general feelings about the Community it is noticeable that this attitude is closely linked to the assessment of the Community's capacity to counter the economic crisis. However, the French and the Luxembourgers give priority to the role of their country in the world, the Germans highlight the choice of goods in their shops, and the Greeks stress the impact on their farming and the functioning of democracy in their country.

Spain and Portugal at the Community's doorstep

Negotiations are currently underway for Spain and Portugal to join the Community, and for the first time, the European Commission has questioned a representative sample of the Spanish and Portuguese population. Here are the main findings of this survey:

- Are you interested in the problems of the Community? 51% of Spaniards respond positively to this question (31% say 'greatly') and 35% of the Portuguese (16% say 'greatly'). A similar question posed in April 1980 to citizens of the Community recorded 75% positive responses but only 22% said they were 'greatly interested'. The figure for Spain is thus in line with the Community average.
- Are you in favour of the efforts being made to unify Western Europe? 59% of the Spanish and 31% of the Portuguese respond positively to this question (compared to, we should recall, 74% of Community citizens). It is not that the opponents of integration are numerous: they only amount to 9% in Spain and 4% in Portugal. But the number of those not replying amounts to one-third of those questioned in Spain, and two-thirds in Portugal (against 13% 'don't knows' in the Community).
- Generally speaking are you more in favour or more opposed to membership of the Community? On this issue as well, there are a lot of 'don't knows'. About 52% of Spaniards and 20% of Portuguese are in favour of membership whilst only 6-7% are against. Although, since 1980, the number of supporters of membership has fallen half a dozen points in the two countries, public opinion does not appear to be any less favourable than it was in Greece before it entered the Community (38% for, 21% against).

- When the Spaniards and Portuguese are asked about the effect they expect the Community to have in ten specific areas, the positive assessments always exceed the negative but are expressed only by a small proportion of the population (one Spaniard in two and three Portuguese in four do not reply). The Spaniards appear, primarily, to expect the Community to strengthen democracy, to increase exports, to provide a greater choice of goods, advantages for their agriculture, and a greater role for their country in the world. The Portuguese put the accent on energy supplies, the choice of products in the shops, the role of their country in the world, the export situation, and a better capability to combat the economic crisis.



These are the principal results of this major opinion poll¹ aimed at obtaining a greater understanding of Europeans, their fears, their hopes and their aspirations. For those who, in one way or another, are interested in the Community, it is also an opportunity to reflect on the contribution that they can make to improve the situation and future opportunities for Europeans. A contribution which will be even more effective if it is based on awareness of European public opinion as well as active support.

If you wish to know more, follow the Eurobarometer series published every six months by the European Commission ■

¹ The survey was undertaken at the end of 1981 by Dimarso/Inra for Belgium, Gallup Markedsanalyse for Denmark, Emnid-Institute for Germany, the Institut de sondages Lavalie for France, Icap-Hellas for Greece, Irish Marketing Surveys for Ireland, the Istituto per le ricerche statistiche e l'analisi dell'opinione pubblica (Doxa) for Italy, the Institut luxembourgeois de recherches sociales for Luxembourg, the Netherlands Instituut voor de publieke opinie for the Netherlands, Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) for the United Kingdom, Gallup for Spain and Norma for Portugal. Coordination by 'Faits et opinions' (Paris). Publication: *Eurobarometer No 16* which contains details of sampling methods used etc. The data is stored in the Belgian Archives for the Social Sciences, 1, Place Montesquieu, B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve.



The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the official views of the institutions of the Community.

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