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**PUBLIC OPINION AND DIRECT ELECTIONS  
TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

With polling day for the first direct elections to the European Parliament fast approaching, a clear majority of the electorate in the European Community believes the occasion in June will mark an important step in the process of determining the future shape of Europe.

A full 75 per cent of people interviewed by the European Commission in its latest public opinion poll selected the ability to decide what kind of Europe the electorate wanted as the most powerful argument for holding direct elections to the Parliament. In the past, members of the assembly have been appointed by the national parliaments of the nine member states, and the European Commission has long argued for a change to foster greater democracy.

The second most popular reason chosen by those interviewed in the survey for holding direct elections was the need for increased democratic control over "officials in Brussels". Sixty-three per cent of those questioned felt this was an important advantage. By contrast only 35 per cent of the sample thought that direct elections would give too much power to the European Parliament, while 43 per cent of those interviewed disagreed (Table 1).

Public opinion polls are organized by the European Commission twice a year. In the latest survey 8,700 people were interviewed in the nine member states. Most of the sixty or so questions dealt with one aspect or other of the forthcoming direct elections to gauge the level of public awareness, the importance attached to the event, voting patterns and so on.

## PUBLIC AWARENESS

The survey found that public awareness of the forthcoming elections had increased in some member states but not in others. By comparison with the previous survey, the percentage of those who had heard something about the subject - vague awareness - and those who were able to recall without prompting that the subject discussed was direct elections - definite awareness - had increased in Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Ireland and Belgium. In Italy the situation remained largely unchanged.

But the most unexpected results were in Britain and France, where in spite of much political and media discussion, the public as a whole felt little if any involvement in the forthcoming elections. Both countries have traditionally been among the most cool to the whole concept of direct elections (Table 2).

Another question in the survey asked whether those interviewed were in favor or opposed to direct elections. In the Community as a whole seven out of ten people thought the elections were a good thing. Support was most strong in Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands where 80 per cent were in favor of direct elections. They were least popular in Britain and Denmark where one person in five is still opposed to the whole concept of direct elections (Table 3).

## LIKELY TURNOUT

One of the great uncertainties about the forthcoming elections is the likely turnout on polling day and two questions were posed in the survey to try to determine how heavy this will be. The questions were: "How likely is it that you will go and vote?" and "When the European Parliamentary Elections are held, will you be personally interested to know the strengths of the different parties in the new European Parliament?"

By collating the answers to both questions, the Commission came to the tentative conclusion that in the Community as a whole 61.4 per cent of those eligible to vote were probable voters, 21.3 per cent were probable abstainers and 17.3 per cent were doubtfuls. On a country-by-country basis the greatest turnout was likely in the Netherlands, Italy, Ireland and France (about 10 per cent) and the lowest in West Germany, Denmark and Britain (between 53 and 59 per cent). In Belgium and Luxembourg the turnout is bound to be high because voting is compulsory in both countries.

The Commission concedes that these estimates are on the low side compared with turnouts for national elections. In Italy and Germany more than 90 per cent of the electorate normally vote in a national election, in Denmark and the Netherlands, just under 90 per cent, nearly 85 per cent in France and about 75 per cent in Britain and Ireland.

## VOTING INTENTIONS

People interviewed in the survey were also asked which political parties they would vote for in June to try to gain some idea of voting intentions on polling day. However, the replies are unlikely to be much of a guide either in predicting how voting will go, still less the probable distribution of seats in the new Parliament. Of the electors who answered this question 38.5 per cent supported Socialist, Social Democratic or Labour candidates, 22 per cent favored Christian Democrats and around 10 per cent chose Conservatives, Liberals, Communists or far Left candidates.

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY

Several questions in the survey dealt with general attitudes towards greater European unification and the European Community. Some of these are likely to have an important bearing on electoral behavior in June.

Six out of ten people questioned felt that the unification of Europe had advanced during the past ten years rather than lost ground. The feeling of progress was most marked in Germany (70 per cent) in the Netherlands (68 per cent) and in Ireland (66 per cent).

Another encouraging element was an increase in support for the European Community during the six months preceding the survey. Nevertheless the long-term trend since 1973 (before the oil crisis) shows that support has remained largely unchanged during the intervening six years.

## RELATIONS BETWEEN MEMBER STATES

The survey showed once again that members of the public find it difficult to decide whether understanding between the countries of the European Community had improved or lost ground during the twelve months preceding the interviews. Some 20 per cent of those questioned did not reply and nearly 40 per cent could not say whether understanding had progressed or fallen back.

Of those who opted for one or the other alternative, a majority thought that understanding between member states had improved -- 28 per cent for and 12 per cent against -- compared with 28 per cent for and 19 against a year earlier.

As far as speeding up or slowing down movement towards greater European integration, attitudes remained largely unchanged in the latest survey. Nearly 40 per cent of those interviewed were in favor of an acceleration towards European Union, slightly less wanted to continue as at present and less than one person in ten wished to see a slowing down of the process.

On a country-by-country basis the survey revealed that the Italians were alone in having a majority of support for speeding up integration over continuing as at present. By contrast the British, Irish, Danes and even the Dutch were more in favor of pressing ahead with integration at its present rate.

SPANISH MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMUNITY

Questions in the survey about the further enlargement of the Community revealed that the attitude of the public towards Spanish membership, in particular, is becoming increasingly neutral. Asked whether Spanish membership would be a good or bad thing or would make little difference to his or her country, a growing number of those interviewed felt that it would be neither good nor bad. About one person in three felt that the accession of Spain would be good for his country while seven out of ten thought it would be an advantage for Spain, itself. As in the past surveys the Italians, the Irish and the Germans are most in favor of Spain joining the Community.

TABLE I

Arguments for and against elections to the European Parliament

1. Elections are necessary to give more democratic control over the Community and the officials in Brussels.

	BEL	DEN	FRG	FR	IRE	IT	LUX	NETH	GB	EC
Agree completely	19	23	23	15	37	17	17	27	29	22
Tend to agree	29	34	42	42	41	36	38	36	48	41
Tend not to agree	11	9	11	11	7	17	21	14	6	11
Completely disagree	9	9	5	5	2	8	8	11	4	6
Do not know	32	25	19	27	13	22	16	12	13	20
1978 index (1)	2.85	2.95	3.03	2.91	3.29	2.79	2.76	2.90	3.16	2.98
1977 index (1)	2.96	3.17	3.06	2.98	3.32	2.76	3.17	2.91	3.19	3.00

2. Elections are necessary to decide what kind of Europe we want.

	BEL	DEN	FRG	FR	IRE	IT	LUX	NETH	GB	EC
Agree completely	34	22	31	31	46	33	28	34	34	32
Tend to agree	32	35	42	45	40	43	42	44	45	43
Tend not to agree	3	9	10	6	6	8	14	9	6	8
Completely disagree	3	10	4	3	2	3	3	5	5	4
Do not know	28	24	13	15	6	13	13	8	10	13
1978 index (1)	3.33	2.91	3.15	3.20	3.38	3.21	3.09	3.15	3.20	3.19
1977 index (1)	3.36	3.09	3.23	3.32	3.39	3.20	3.51	3.28	3.24	3.25

3. Elections would lead to too much power for the European Parliament compared with your own (national) Parliament.

Agree completely	14	20	8	13	15	7	12	16	16	11
Tend to agree	19	22	23	21	31	21	25	22	30	24
Tend not to agree	21	18	29	24	25	26	30	29	25	26
Completely disagree	12	11	18	13	9	27	13	23	11	17
Do not know	34	29	22	29	20	19	20	10	18	22
1978 index (1)	2.53	2.71	2.27	2.47	2.65	2.08	2.44	2.34	2.63	2.37
1977 index (1)	2.47	2.72	2.37	2.43	2.53	2.07	2.36	2.25	2.61	2.37

(1) Agree completely = 4, Disagree completely = 1.

TABLE II

Public awareness about direct elections to the European Parliament.

	Have heard or read something recently about the European Parliament			Have heard or read nothing about election	Not replied
	Total A+B	Knew about election (A)	Did not know about election (B)		
<u>Belgium</u>					
Spring 1977	46%	19%	27%	45%	9%
Autumn 1978	49	28	21	43	8
<u>Denmark</u>					
Spring 1977	49	25	24	48	3
Autumn 1978	60	37	23	37	3
<u>Germany</u>					
Spring 1977	33	18	15	47	20
Autumn 1978	51	40	11	32	17
<u>France</u>					
Spring 1977	57	37	20	40	3
Autumn 1978	57	27	30	41	2
<u>Ireland</u>					
Spring 1977	47	17	30	49	4
Autumn 1978	48	28	20	49	3
<u>Italy</u>					
Spring 1977	52	26	26	44	4
Autumn 1978	49	27	22	45	6
<u>Luxembourg</u>					
Spring 1977	62	37	25	29	9
Autumn 1978	49	30	19	49	2
<u>Netherlands</u>					
Spring 1977	40	13	27	47	13
Autumn 1978	48	22	26	48	4
<u>United Kingdom</u>					
Spring 1977	58	20	38	39	3
Autumn 1978	44	18	26	53	3
<u>Community</u>					
Spring 1977	49	24	25	43	9
Autumn 1978	50	28	22	43	7

TABLE III

For or against the election.

	BEL	DEN	GER	FR	IRE	IT	LUX	NETH	GB	EC
<u>FOR THE ELECTION</u>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Autumn 1973	52	36	69	51	45	64	67	62	33	54
Autumn 1975	53	32	73	69	56	78	75	59	41	64
Autumn 1976	69	42	76	69	63	77	77	74	57	69
Autumn 1977	63	54	73	70	74	79	76	77	69	72
Spring 1978	64	54	74	67	71	77	82	80	65	71
Autumn 1978	62	54	70	67	75	80	80	82	63	70
<u>AGAINST THE ELECTION</u>										
Autumn 1973	14	43	12	18	31	12	12	16	49	23
Autumn 1975	9	43	11	13	23	8	7	11	42	18
Autumn 1976	9	37	10	13	14	8	9	11	22	14
Autumn 1977	12	29	11	14	11	9	14	10	18	13
Spring 1978	14	22	7	12	10	7	11	9	17	11
Autumn 1978	13	22	7	11	7	7	12	8	21	11
<u>NOT REPLIED</u>										
Autumn 1973	34	21	19	31	24	24	21	22	18	23
Autumn 1975	38	25	16	18	21	14	18	30	17	18
Autumn 1976	22	21	14	18	23	15	14	15	21	17
Autumn 1977	25	17	16	16	15	12	10	13	13	15
Spring 1978	22	24	19	21	19	16	7	11	18	18
Autumn 1978	25	24	23	22	18	13	8	10	16	19

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