

## “DEMOS AND DEMOCRACY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION”

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Every democracy requires an agreed definition of those who are entitled to be included in voting and deliberation. A little less obviously it needs agreement not just on who the actors should be but on what they should do: on the roles and capabilities the democratic process can reasonably expect of them. Together, these two elements constitute the ‘demos’ or membership conditions of any democracy. The EU could quite conceivably have resolved either by restricting direct membership of its democratic institutions to its Member states – each of which is after all a democracy in its own right – and by otherwise making no demands of individuals. Yet in practice it has raised individuals to the status of direct participants in its democratic institutions by creating a directly elected Parliament, and, then, in many important matters, giving that Parliament powers to co-decide with representatives of Member States. This is often thought to raise a problem of political community: do individual inhabitants of the Union have a sufficient sense of political community to accept the legitimate right of European parliamentary majorities to make decisions binding on all, even where those decisions over-ride the deeply held values of national majorities who may be able to ‘trump’ their European counterparts in both electoral legitimacy and a capacity to mobilise popular identities to their side of the quarrel (Dehousse). The paper accepts this is an important question. But it also suggests there is another more neglected problem: in attempting to design democratic processes suited to a polity with a low and uneven sense of political community, the Union has also made it hard for individuals to perform even the limited roles expected

of them in the EU political system. Institutions have on the whole been successfully adjusted to a weak sense of political community but only at a price of aggravating what I have defined here as the second aspect of the 'demos' problem: that of not just defining a membership but of aligning its capabilities with the demands of the political system.

## **IDENTITY**

It is often remarked that no 'democracy' can be legitimate unless its 'demos' is agreed to the mutual satisfaction of its participants. Where the right of the unit or collectively itself to make binding decisions is in dispute, no amount of agreement on what would be a democratically impeccable procedure for it to employ can make it legitimate. This is, moreover, the one question that cannot be determined by democratic process itself, since the latter presupposes prior settlement of the very point at issue: who is to be included and who excluded from voting and deliberation (Dahl, 1989).

Yet, recent 'turns' in the literature have had the effect of lessening what might be involved in constructing a sufficient sense of political community to support the legitimacy of European Union decisions. The first 'turn' has been towards regarding identity formation as offering a rich and flexible menu of choice. Thus identity can be cultural or constitutional, national or postnational, thick or thin, forward or backward looking and so on.

A second 'turn' in the literature has emphasised that the process of developing a sense of political community can, to some degree, take place within a political system and does not, therefore, entirely need to precede either its formation or its tentative democratisation. A Euro-identity could, for example, be consciously

constructed within the EU's political system, cultivated according to a teleological view of integration and steered towards realisation through the leadership and resources of Union institutions. Alternatively, a Euro-identity could be negotiated through active participation and deliberation with the citizenry that is to be constituted at the European level (Shaw, 1999), and that this could be done in an open-ended manner that does not pre-empt opportunities for future generations to redesign the meanings they attach to Europeanness. Yet another possibility is that an identity might emerge incrementally and empirically as participants in integration reflect on the ethical implications of their emerging practices and adjust their practices to those reflections.

A third 'turn' in the literature has been to recognise that the menu for democracy-building is as varied as that for identity formation, and that the legitimacy of representative democracy depends on the discovery of just one 'matched pair' between the two menus, not on the devouring of all dishes offered by both. What a political system needs by way of shared identity varies with the model of democracy it is intended it should practice, and there is no shortage of experience in designing democratic institutions for polities with even quite problematic identities. Such political systems (Belgium, Canada, India, Russia, Switzerland) normally solve the demos problem by relying on some form of consensus democracy, either in the form of a consociation or a system that requires the concurrent consent of majorities elected at different levels. This has two effects. First, the burden of accepting the collective bindingness of democratic procedures is lightened to the degree the decision-rule is 'agreement of the greatest possible number' rather than of a bare majority (Lijphart, 1984). Procedures that offer protections against arbitrary decision-making by bare majorities are more likely to be accepted (Pettit, 1997). Second, membership of the wider body is to varying degrees 'indirect' or mediated through some other

unit that has already an agreed sense of identity. The EU is, arguably, even a system of extreme consensus politics (Lord, 1998), sometimes following consociational methods (Treaty formation, appointment to office and decision-making in the second and third pillars), at other times requiring the concurrent consent of more than one super-majority formed from different kinds of representative (Co-decision in pillar one). Moreover, the difficulty of accepting the collective is further lightened by the fact that the EU is a non-state political system. Whilst its law takes priority over national law, the Union can only act where authorised to do so in its closely specified Treaties. It is thus some distance from being a 'state-like' political unity with wide ranging discretionary power to regulate all other social relationships (Beetham, 1991).

In sum, the prospects of supporting representative government at European level with a shared sense of political community are likely to be less daunting if identity can be variously and undemandingly formed, if democracy can be variously constituted, if democracy and identity can be endogenously adjusted to one another, and if only viable combination of the two is needed. But these are only conjectures. Do we have any empirical evidence of whether the Union has yet succeeded in aligning political community with institutional design? Imperfect though they are as a source of evidence, Eurobarometer opinion polls suggest that low and patchy identification with the Union may indeed be compatible with even quite ambitious options for its democratic design. Section A of table 1 confirms limited popular identification with the Union. Yet Section B demonstrates support for a Union that is wide in its scope across policy areas. Across the Union as a whole a majority of respondents prefer at least some joint decision-making at both national and European levels to action by Member States alone in most policy areas (19 out of 27). Section C then probes public willingness to accept the determination of outcomes by Union-wide majorities of

voters or representatives. At first sight the results seem at odds with one another. Questions 4 and 5 (asked as a pair) indicate a reluctance to see Member States lose their veto rights in matters they consider to be of vital national interest. Yet Questions 6-8 (also asked as a block) show a clear preference that national veto rights should be (further) relaxed in favour of the direct or indirect election of the Commission President at Union level. It might be that these responses are simply confused. However, an alternative possibility is that there is an underlying coherence to the responses: elements of further democratisation at selected points in the EU's political system - such as the election of a Commission President - are acceptable to the public on the understanding that any expanded role for those chosen and controlled by democratic majorities formed at the Union level should have to slot into a consensus system defined precisely by the retention of significant veto rights at other points in the Union's political system.

Table 1. Public Identification with the EU

<b>A. FEELINGS OF IDENTITY</b>	EU 15	Aus	Bel	Den	Fin	Fr	Ger	Gr	Ire	It	Lux	Net h	P	Sp	Sw e	UK
1. Index of Feeling of Europeanness (0-1) <sup>1</sup>	0.25	0.23	0.29	0.24	0.17	0.27	0.28	0.20	0.21	0.32	0.35	0.23	0.21	0.28	0.17	0.16
2. Percentage who feel exclusively national	38	45	34	38	55	33	39	48	47	20	26	41	43	28	54	62
<b>B. ACCEPTANCE OF JOINT DECISION-MAKING</b>																
3. Number of issue areas (max 27) where majority accept joint decision-making	19	13	19	12	10	17	20	16	14	23	20	17	21	27	9	10
<b>C. ACCEPTANCE OF MAJORITY DECISIONS</b>																
4. Member States should retain vetoes to preserve essential national interests	50	67	45	71	62	51	51	69	57	51	68	50	44	38	60	47
5. States should drop vetoes to	25	16	33	18	27	28	30	12	15	25	17	32	15	23	26	19

<sup>1</sup> The index of feelings of Europeanness is calculated from the answers in Eurobarometer 57 (2002) to the standard question in which respondents are asked whether they feel a) European only b) in the first place European and in the second place citizens of their own country c) citizens of their own country in the first place and European in the second place d) national only. Responses d) to a) are scored from 0 to 3 respectively and then expressed as a decimal of the maximum possible score taking into account 'don't knows' for each country.

make EU more efficient																
Difference 5-4	-25	-51	-12	-53	-35	-23	-21	-57	-42	-26	-51	-18	-29	-15	-34	-28
6. The President of the Commission should be selected by Heads of Govt	14	16	11	22	22	16	13	14	23	15	18	14	21	13	18	10
7. EP should elect President of the Commission	32	31	35	40	35	26	38	35	21	37	30	39	18	25	39	24
8. Citizens should elect President of the Commission	34	32	36	25	29	41	33	31	28	32	42	31	26	34	29	36
9. Commission should resign if loses confidence of EP (balance of agreeing over disagreeing)	+5 5	+6 1	+5 3	+7 0	+7 5	+5 5	+6 3	+5 4	+5 0	+6 4	+7 0	+5 0	+4 2	+5 8	+6 6	+3 1
<b>D. EU CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION</b>																
10. The EU should be taught at school (balance of those agreeing over disagreeing)	+7 1	+7 7	+7 9	+8 2	+8 2	+7 3	+7 2	+7 0	+7 9	+8 1	+8 7	+8 3	+7 9	+7 0	+8 7	+5 0

Indeed, it is highly questionable that the Union lacks sufficient identity to support public acceptance of its decisions. There are few historical examples of widespread non-compliance of citizens with Union decisions. Since this extends even to cases where an unpopular measure is widely understood to have originated from Union institutions it cannot be attributed to a tendency to experience Union rules as national ones on account of their implementation by domestic agencies. It may just be that the EU does after all have a political system that is broadly compatible with low and uneven levels of identification. Its consensus procedures lighten the need to identify in order to accept.

## **CAPABILITIES**

Yet democratic citizenship requires more than a sense of political community. It also requires civic capabilities such as knowledge of the political system. Choices between candidates and parties in European elections, and associational activity in relation to Union institutions, imply an instrumental understanding of how the EU's political system can be used to promote particular needs and values. Individuals should at least have sufficient grasp of means-ends relationships in the European arena to put all choices available to them in an ordinal ranking, even if the precise consequences of each option are unknowable. Deliberative ideals – such as an ability to ‘reason publicly’ and reflect on the arguments of others – are even more demanding of citizens’ understanding (Rawls, 1993). Some of the limited evidence of whether individuals do indeed have sufficient knowledge and understanding to exercise those citizenship roles and capabilities presupposed by the EU's political system are set out in table 2. Section A of the table simply reproduces a subjective measure of how much respondents.



Table 2. Public Knowledge of the EU. (Sections A + B from Eurobarometer 57; Section C from European Commission, 2000)

<b>A. SELF-PERCEIVED KNOWLEDGE</b>	EU 15	Aus	Bel	Den	Fin	Fr	Ger	Gr	Ire	It	Lux	Neths	Por	Sp	Swe	UK
Percentage of those rating their own knowledge of the EU as:																
a) Almost nothing	21	10	21	10	18	20	14	17	28	17	17	22	32	22	13	37
b) A bit	50	41	45	54	51	54	48	50	47	48	55	46	50	57	60	45
c) Quite alot	26	41	32	33	29	24	31	30	21	31	22	31	16	18	26	16
d) A great deal	2	5	1	3	2	1	4	2	3	2	6	0	2	2	1	1
<b>Balance (c+d)-(a+b)</b>	<b>-43</b>	<b>-5</b>	<b>-33</b>	<b>-28</b>	<b>-38</b>	<b>-49</b>	<b>-27</b>	<b>-35</b>	<b>-51</b>	<b>-32</b>	<b>-44</b>	<b>-37</b>	<b>-64</b>	<b>-59</b>	<b>-46</b>	<b>-65</b>
Index of respondents self-confidence in their knowledge of EU.	0.36	0.46	0.37	0.43	0.38	0.35	0.41	0.39	0.33	0.39	0.39	0.36	0.29	0.33	0.38	0.27
<b>B. AWARENESS OF INSTITUTIONS</b>	EU 15	Aus	Bel	Den	Fin	Fr	Ger	Gr	Ire	It	Lux	Neths	Por	Sp	Swe	UK
<i>Percentage of those who have recently heard of:</i>																
Commission	78	87	85	92	95	82	84	81	86	80	94	84	81	80	85	73
Council of Ministers	63	76	72	77	76	54	54	68	67	73	83	66	76	78	90	36
European Court Just	73	84	77	95	79	67	77	67	67	57	90	78	70	62	71	56
European Central B	67	84	71	82	91	67	81	56	84	76	89	83	76	75	80	56
European Parliament	89	90	92	98	97	92	84	81	95	93	97	96	87	90	96	86
Ave of above	<b>74</b>	<b>84.</b>	<b>79.</b>	<b>88.</b>	<b>87.</b>	<b>72.</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>70.</b>	<b>79.</b>	<b>75.8</b>	<b>90.6</b>	<b>81.4</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>84.4</b>	<b>61.4</b>
Committee Regions	27	2	4	8	6	4	27	6	8	26	39	13	49	42	24	12
Convention	28	47	31	33	40	27	21	29	31	26	48	28	47	42	28	14
Index of specificity of citizens' assessments of the EP	0.26	0.26	0.16	0.33	0.28	0.21	0.33	0.22	0.26	0.24	0.31	0.30	0.16	0.18	0.30	0.26

<b>C. AWARENESS OF POLICIES</b>		Au s	Bel	De n	Fin	Fr	Ge r	Gr	Ire	It	Lux	Neth	Por	Sp	Swe	UK
Countries where OPTEM focus groups mentioned following																
Agriculture/Fisheries	13	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Education/Culture	4		X								X		X	X		
Energy	4	X	X			X				X						
Employment	3							X		X	X					
Environment	7	X		X				X	X		X	X			X	
External Security	4	X			X									X	X	
Health/Consumers	6	X				X	X		X			X	X			
Human Rights	2							X	X							
Internal Security	7	X				X		X		X	X	X		X		
Monetary (Euro)	13	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Single Market/Trade	7		X	X	X	X						X	X	X	X	
Social	7	X	X					X					X	X	X	X
Structural/Regional	6				X		X		X					X	X	X
Transport/Infrastructure	3	X	X									X				
Total number of Union policies recognised		9	7	4	5	6	3	6	6	5	5	7	6	6	7	3

think they know about the Union, and uses it to compute a 'balance' and an 'index' of how self-confident they feel in their knowledge. Across the Union as a whole those who do not feel self-confident in their knowledge of the Union outnumber those who do by 43 per cent. In no Member State is the balance positive, yet it varies hugely from minus five per cent in Austria to minus 65 per cent in the UK. The index of self-confidence likewise averages 0.36 across the Union, with variation from 0.27 (UK) to 0.46 (Austria).

Citizens do not just lack confidence in their own knowledge about the EU. Objective tests show they really are poorly informed. Richard Sinnott has analysed replies to 30 Eurobarometer questions that test citizens' knowledge of the EU. He found two-thirds of respondents had 'no', 'little' or not very much knowledge. In contrast, knowledge of national political systems was 'high to very high' (See discussion in Blondel et al, 1998, pp. 92-9). Sinnott's approach demonstrates the value of not merely aggregating citizens' knowledge of the EU into a single score, but of distinguishing different kinds of understanding of the Union's political system – of its institutions, of its policies and of its *dramatis personae* - and then drawing inferences from patterns of weakness or strength. Since public understanding of these dimensions has recently also been tested by a series of 86 focus groups from right across the 15 Member States of the Union and 9 candidate countries - the Commission's Optem survey (European Commission, 2001b) - it is possible to complement Eurobarometer statistics with more qualitative and spontaneous evidence of where gaps in citizen understanding of the EU are most glaring.

Section B of table 2. shows many citizens claim to have 'heard something' about what are probably the five Union institutions most likely to influence their lives. However, the distribution of Citizen awareness across Member States and particular institutions is significant. The average level of awareness of the five institutions varies from 90.6 per cent in Luxembourg to just 61.4 per cent in the UK.

It is also questionable how far the EU's political system is understood in the same way across national arenas. Although it is a structure in which outcomes are shaped by interactions between institutions as much as by decisions within any one body, Member States vary in how far their citizens have a comprehensive, rather than a selective, ability to recognise the main Union institutions. In some (Austria and Luxembourg), public recognition is relatively even across all five main institutions of the EU. In others (France and the UK), there is a wide difference in levels of recognition of individual Union institutions. The example of the ECB illustrates that knowledge of Union institutions may not even correlate with membership of them. Respondents in Denmark, Sweden and the UK are equally above or below the EU average in their recognition of the ECB (of which their country is not a member) as they are in their recognition of the other four institutions in which their countries participate fully.

The fact that the Council of Ministers has the lowest public recognition amongst the main institutions arguably means that citizen understanding of the EU's political system is in inverse proportion to the actual distribution of power (Blondel et al, 1998, p. 93). Indeed those claiming to 'have heard something' about the Council of Ministers fall to particularly low levels in at least three out of four of those large Member States –France , Germany and the UK - that are best placed to exercise its powers as measured by voting weights. This has serious implications. First, citizens are likely to exaggerate the powers of the Commission and EP and underestimate those of the Council in a manner that leads to misattribution of responsibility for outcomes. Indeed, the Optem survey found that UK focus groups tended even to 'confuse' the Commission 'with the Union as a whole' (p. 71). Second, claims that the Council can function as a 'representative body' are not yet underpinned by public consciousness of it. Again, the Optem focus group findings drive the point home:

Only the Commission and Parliament are recognised as institutions, even though the public barely know what they do. Sometimes the Court of Justice is also recognised, though it is commonly confused with other international or

European Courts. The Council of Ministers is not generally known, the European Council even less so.

As suggested by this quotation, the standard Eurobarometer which asks respondents whether they have recently heard anything about the EU institutions is too superficial to test understanding of them. A more occasional Eurobarometer question asks respondents whether they have particular likes and dislikes about the European Parliament. This is used in the last line of Section B of Table 2. to construct an index that shows that public assessments of the Parliament are lacking in specificity (only 0.26 on average across the Union as a whole), even though the EP is also the Union institution of which Eurobarometer respondents claim to be most aware.

Only the Optem survey (rather than the aggregate Eurobarometer results) comes close to testing public comprehension of the composition, powers and roles of the Union institutions, as well as demarcations between them. Understanding seems least deficient on questions of institutional composition. Focus groups in several Member States identified Commissioners as nationally appointed and the EP as comprising directly elected MEPs. Many were also aware that national leaders and other ministers meet to discuss Union questions but few named those gatherings as the European Council and Council of Ministers respectively or understood them as structured parts of the Union decision-making process. Many of the focus groups seemed to assume that Member States watch the EU from the sidelines, rather than participate as decision-makers. Indeed, understanding of roles was reported as patchy, and that of 'interactions' between institutions as almost non-existent.

If citizens have poor understanding of the EU institutions and the distribution of power between them, they also have difficulty putting a 'face on the Union'. As Blondel et al (1998, p. 96) point out even Jacques Delors enjoyed lower public recognition than national ministers of finance and foreign affairs – let alone Prime Ministers - at the end of his ten-year tenure of the Presidency of the Commission.

Documents produced by the Commission agree that the seeming facelessness of the institutional process is a source of alienation from it:

People do not know the difference between the institutions. They do not understand who takes the decisions that affect them. They expect Union institutions to be as visible as national governments... People are dissatisfied because they fail to understand the Union's objectives and are often unable to put names and faces to tasks (European Commission 2000, pp. 4-5).

Of course, another dimension to understanding the *dramatic personae* of Union politics is to have knowledge of which other countries are Member States. Given that democracy is rule by others, it would be a concern if citizens had difficulties naming the other Member States whose representatives participate in decisions binding on all. One of the few pieces of evidence on this score is the survey for Blondel *et al* (1998, p. 96) which indicates that a common pattern is that respondents correctly identify around a half of EU Member States and that some – France and Germany – are almost recognised as being fellow Members. Beyond that, however, confusion lies.

Nor, indeed, would citizens even seem to have much understanding of their own somewhat limited role in the EU. Eurobarometer 47 tested public awareness of eleven EU 'citizenship rights'. Average awareness was just 34 per cent. The least known of the rights (recognised by 23-25 per cent of respondents) was, in fact, the one which relates most directly to the democratic process, namely that of any EU national to stand and vote in the local or European elections of another Member State if resident there. A further survey (Blondel *et al*, 1998, p. 93) indicates that answers to the question who elects the European Parliament? are only slightly better than random although many respondents presumably have themselves taken part in European elections.

If individuals seem to lack understanding of the input side of Union politics – of the institutional opportunity structure to channel, aggregate, consult or deliberate individual preferences – do they at least have some knowledge of its outputs: of what 'public goods' it provides or of what allocations of value its institutions make? At first sight, citizens would seem to have better understanding of at least some of the policies and outputs of the Union than the processes by which they are produced. Some of the Union's outputs – the CAP, the Euro and the Single Market Programme – seem to be fairly wide known. Otherwise, understanding of what the Union does is patchy, once again across national arenas, but also between policies themselves (Table 2, Line 5).

Even if citizens had more understanding of the output than the input side of the EU's political system, it is unclear how reassuring that finding would be. It could even be read as confirming that citizens have a fatalistic conception of themselves as objects rather than actors in the Union polity, and that, they, accordingly, regard it as a technocracy, rather than a democracy. To the extent that such a supposition discourages participation in debate or investment of effort in the acquisition of knowledge of how the Union works (European Commission 2001) it is in danger of being self-fulfilling.

Problems of limited knowledge clearly constrain the ability of citizens to perform the roles expected of them within the democratic institutions the Union has already put in place. The best indicator of this is provided by participation in European elections. Here the key facts are well known. Across the Union, participation in the 2004 European elections averaged only 44.5 per cent, with turn-outs of just xx in the new Member States, falling to less than 20 per cent in two of them, Poland and Slovakia. A further concern is that turn-out to European elections is not only relatively low. It is also apparently declining. Over the last 20 years it has been 65.8 (1979), 63.7 (1984), 63.6 (1989), 58.4 (1994) and 49.4 (1999). At first sight, this seems to show that as the EP has become more powerful, voters have participated less! It also appears to be an accelerating down-trend. Indeed, the two themes came together in

June 1999: the most precipitous decline to date in participation in European elections occurred just three months after the Parliament demonstrated its capacity for the first time to force the resignation of the Commission.

Key, though, to our analysis is that there would seem to be a strong relationship between how knowledgeable of the EU individuals perceive themselves to be and the likelihood they will vote in European elections. On average those with 'low' self perceived knowledge of the EU rank the probability of their participating at just 5.81 on a scale of 1 to 10, whilst those in the 'high' category rank the probability of their voting at 8.45 (Eurobarometer, 57, 2002, p. 98). Moreover, European elections are themselves poor sources of information and of incentives to acquire information. As long as European elections are mainly dominated by the domestic political cycle, those competing for election have reduced incentive to ensure that *ex ante* information on what they intend to do in the coming parliament, and *ex post* information on what they or others did in the last parliament, hits home with all voters. All of this is confirmed by data revealing how little parties spend on European elections. Commenting on the 1999 European elections, Pascal Delwit has criticised national parties for 'making a parsimonious effort' to the point at which one can ask whether there 'has really been an election at all' (Delwit, 2000, p. 310). The difficulty with low profile campaigns is that it may be necessary to pass a certain 'threshold of visibility' in order to achieve 'cognitive mobilisation' (Gerstlé et al, 2000) .

A similar critique can be made of how the media cover European elections and not just of how political parties contest them. Although European elections are the one opportunity for mass democratic participation in the Union they cannot be assured of significant coverage in all Members States. In a comparative content analysis of the British, Danish and Dutch media, Claes De Vreese found that the key Dutch TV networks 'mentioned the [1999] elections only once, on the evening prior to Election Day'. Nor would the media appear to have learnt over the experience of five European elections to cover them in ways more likely to engage with public opinion.

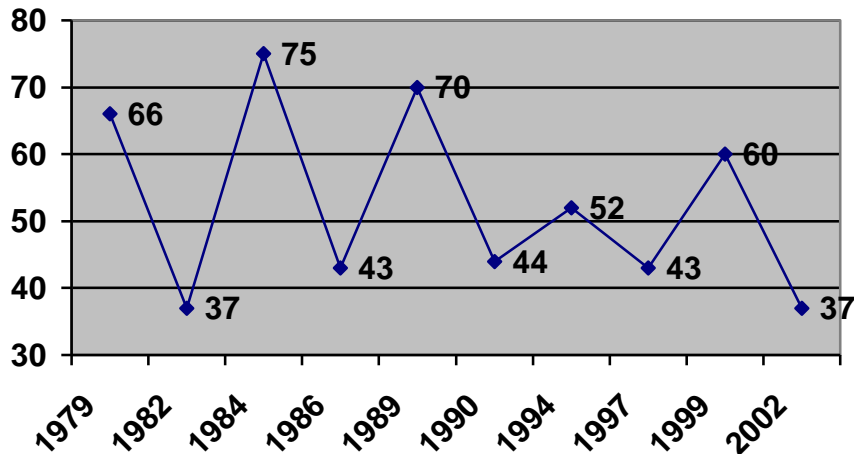


One indicator which is useful because it is based on a question regularly asked by Eurobarometer since 1977 is the percentage of those claiming recently to have heard something about the European Parliament. Figure 1 shows how positive answers have followed a consistent pattern. They regularly fall to a trough 12-18 months before European elections and then increase significantly at the time of the poll. On the one hand, this would seem to confirm European elections do have the potential to promote political socialisation. On the other hand, that effect would not seem to be lasting. Each spike in awareness of the EP has failed to produce any long-term up-trend. As Blondel et al put it (1998, pp. 86-7).

'it is surprising there is little or no evidence of a cumulative increase in the awareness of media coverage of the European Parliament over the last two decades: in 1994 awareness of the European Parliament was only marginally ahead of what it had been in 1977, two years before the first direct elections'.

Indeed, peaks in 'awareness of the European Parliament through the media' were lower during the European elections of the 1990s than in those of the 1980s, suggesting either declining media coverage or diminishing citizen interest (Eurobarometer, 52, p. 79). The environment may even be becoming less 'information rich' on EU questions, not because there is objectively less information available on the Union, but, as much as anything else, on account of the huge competition any topic has in struggling for attention in a media culture that it at once fragmented and saturated.

**Figure 3.1. Percentage of those who have recently heard about the EP through the media (various Eurobarometers)**



Indeed the media aside, it is most unlikely that the role of poor understanding in constraining the capacity of citizens to perform the role of informed voting assigned to them by the inclusion of a directly elected parliament in the EU's political system will resolve itself over time. To the contrary, the self-reinforcing nature of the relationship between poor understanding of the European Union and low electoral participation is brought out by the observations that voters 'learn to participate by participating' (Held, 1996, p. 313) and that the knowledge required for equal and effective democratic citizenship is a capacity that grows with use (March and Olsen, 1995, pp. 96-8). Elections that continue to have a heavily domestic content cannot perform the socialising role of improving citizens' understanding of how best to use the EU's political system to achieve their needs and values. In fact, it is by no means far-fetched to expect understanding of the Union to fade with time. One of the main educational experiences available to Member societies is accession itself which, in many cases, involves negotiation of several Union policies and then a referendum.

The key difficulty is that the vicious circle between low participation and poor citizen understanding of the European Union is only to be expected given the different shapes of national and European political systems (Lord, 2004). The practice of using national general elections as a benchmark to appraise turnout to European elections is only reasonable to the extent the electorates are almost identical and considerations such as the sense of sociological obligation to vote are, therefore, the same. It is unreasonable to the degree political systems at the two levels are so fundamentally different as to ensure wide differences in what is 'at stake' in the two sets of elections: Member States elections allow voters to choose the executive and the legislature at the same time. European elections, on the other hand, only allow voters to choose one part of the legislative power. Incentives to participate, find out more, and treat the elections in hand as 'first-order', rather than 'second-order' are systematically greater in national than in European elections.

## **CONCLUSION**

There are two aspects to what has come to be called the no-demos problem in constructing a system of democratic politics at European level: the European Union's apparently weak and uneven sense of political community; and the difficulty of ensuring that the 'people' have the capabilities needed to perform the roles expected of them in any European Union democracy. The European Union has largely developed institutions that meet the problem of weak political community, but in doing so it has created a system of complex and divided government that is not easily made 'incentive-compatible' with the development of a core civic capability needed for informed democratic citizenship at European Union level: namely sufficient understanding of the political system to encourage large numbers of citizens to participate in elections and then vote on issues relevant to the Union itself.

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