

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Extract from:

Salvatore Signorelli, "The EU and public opinions: a love-hate relationship?", *Studies and Reports No 93*, *Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, November 2012.

This study analyses the way in which Community institutions "relate" to the public opinion measured at European level. The idea is not to question whether European public opinion¹ exists – which is the subject of much debate and will probably continue to be until people "need" for it to exist so that they can use it to demand things² – but rather to report on what Community institutions are doing, and why they are doing it, namely by conducting transnational opinion surveys, in the 27 countries that make up today's European Union.

In this context, our study focuses on:

1. Analysing the European public opinion survey instruments available to Community institutions and how they work;
2. Studying the role of various Community institutions in defining and guiding public opinion investigation instruments in the European Union (mainly the Eurobarometer-EB) and their way of reading the results;
3. Understanding the related political issues as much as possible, given the imperviousness of power, or rather, the difficulty in bridging the gap between the public and the upper echelon of decision-makers.

1. See Pierre Bourdieu, "L'opinion publique n'existe pas" (1973), in *Questions de sociologie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1980, pp. 222-235; Philippe Champagne, *Faire l'opinion. Le nouveau jeu politique*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1990; Jürgen Habermas, *L'espace public*, Paris, Éditions Payot et Rivages, 1990; Dominique Reynié, *La fracture occidentale. Naissance d'une opinion européenne*, Paris, La Table-ronde, 2004 and "L'idée d'une 'opinion européenne'", in *Raisons politiques*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2005/3 – no. 19, pp. 99-117; Jean-Baptiste Legavre, "L'Opinion publique européenne" in Yves Déloye (dir.), *Dictionnaire des élections européennes*, Paris, Economica, 2005, pp. 491-494; Andy Smith, "L'espace public européen: une vue (trop) aérienne", in *Critique internationale*, No. 2 – winter 1999, pp. 169-181; Philippe Aldrin, "L'Union européenne face à l'opinion. Constructions et usages politiques de l'opinion comme problème communautaire", in *Savoir/Agir*, 7/2009, pp. 13-23.

2. Jean-Baptiste Legavre, *op. cit.*, p. 493. There is a consensus about the idea that public opinion, as a conceptual figure, is consubstantial to democracy. For the rest "to speak with precision of public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost"; Vladimir O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1961, p. 7. Quoted by Mathieu Brugidou, *L'opinion et ses publics. Une approche pragmatiste de l'opinion publique*, Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2008, p. 16. From the first page of the introduction of his well-known work on "the public sphere", Jürgen Habermas affirms that it is impossible for scientific fields (first and foremost law, politics and sociology) to substitute the traditional category of "public opinion" with a precise definition. Because "Non-public opinions are widespread, while 'the' public opinion (in the singular) remains fictitious", however, and this study shares the same consideration, "we must not reject the concept of public opinion in that it is a paradigm, since the constitutional reality of a social State should be included in the process in which the public sphere is created... It is in the perspective of this social-political evolution that we must therefore establish criteria to assess opinions from an empirical point of view, and to evaluate their more or less public nature". Jürgen Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

Initial conclusions are as follows:

1. **EU political and institutional policy has created a unique decision-making context in which analysing what the public says in opinion polls is not merely a simple instrument to collect information but a source of legitimacy.**
2. **Although public opinion analysis by Community stakeholders can be included in the set of EU “governance tools”, the structure that is devoted to it is part of “supervision and support” administrations, particularly the one that defines communication policy.** For that reason, our arguments have **mainly centred on the European Commission** because, in its “historic” role as “the voice” of European integration³, it has become the legitimate institution to implement and manage an official system for public opinion analysis. **Although the European Parliament has actively supported the Commission in this role from the outset, the Commission is no longer almost solely responsible for opinion polls. The Parliament is beginning to take a direct interest in them and to allocate its own funds to them,** which is a result of changes to EU institutions over time.
3. **The Eurobarometer is an effective investigative instrument for the Community institutions, but also more generally the public.** The ambitious goal of its creators may be considered partially accomplished because the regular publication of Eurobarometer surveys has certainly helped give life to the “idea” that there is a European public opinion. **Opinion leaders are now taking the opinion of Europeans into consideration and thereby have a vast database they can use to determine its geography.** Despite the more or less general lack of interest of national stakeholders in “Brussels”, it is important to study **the Eurobarometer, since it has become an essential source for intellectuals and Community policymakers since its institutionalisation.**
4. The Eurobarometer remains a database, which was established with the methodological and intellectual support of researchers in social sciences, but also an instrument designed and used by political institutions. Because of its hybrid design, **the political commitment of the Eurobarometer does not automatically translate into total control of the instrument, but rather slight pressure, which is felt within EU political priorities.**

3. We are referring here to the Spokesperson's Service and accredited journalists at Berlaymont.