

EUROBAROMETER 60.1

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

AUTUMN 2003

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FRANCE

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This report was produced for the European Commission's Representation in France

This document does not represent the point of view of the European Commission.
The interpretations and opinions contained in it are solely those of the authors.

INTRODUCTION

The Eurobarometer (EB) 60.1 public opinion poll was carried out on the request of the European Commission in all the fifteen Member States of the European Union. In France, 1015 people were interviewed between October 1st and November 7th, 2003. Comparisons are also made with the findings of the previous EB poll conducted in Spring 2003.

This report sums up the results concerning France. It is divided into five chapters.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of French opinion.

Chapter 2 deals with French views regarding the European institutions.

Chapter 3 describes French attitudes towards the enlargement of the EU.

Chapter 4 analyses the strong support for a common foreign policy.

Chapter 5 is about how the French feel about the future of the European Union.

1. OVERVIEW OF FRENCH OPINION

- Expectations for the coming year have never been so low since the crises of the years 1992-93. 52% of the French expect their country's economic situation to get worse in 2004; and 53% feel that unemployment will increase.
- Radio networks, NGOs, the army and the police are the institutions the French trust most. 37% tend to trust the European Union (as opposed to 49% who do not), 33% trust the French Parliament and 30% the French Government. The institutions the French trust the least are major companies (30%) and political parties (12%).
- Respondents feel that the main problems France has to face are unemployment (54%), crime (30%) and the economic situation (29%).
- As preferred sources of information about the EU (respondents could give several answers), the French poll continues to favour television (53%), followed by newspapers (29%), radio (26%), brochures and leaflets (24%), magazines (16%) and books and the Internet (14%). Minimal use is made of other sources, such as videotapes, CD-ROMs, information offices and computer databases.

2. THE FRENCH AND THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

- One Frenchman out of two (45%, -4%) has a fairly good (38%) or very good (7%) image of the EU; 21% (+4%) have a fairly bad (15%) or a very bad (6%) image of it.
- 44% (-6%) of respondents consider their country's membership to be a good thing; 17% (+5%) think it a bad thing and a further 36% (+3%) neither good nor bad. Furthermore, 48% (-2%) consider their country has benefited from being a member of the European Union, while 19% (-5%) think the opposite and 33% (+7%) do not know.
- 68% (-7%) of French citizens are in favour of the Euro, whereas the number of opponents has increased up to 28% (+8%).
- Some European bodies are far better known than others. A large majority of the French population had heard of the Parliament (96%), the Commission (90%), the European Central Bank (72%), the Council of Ministers (71%) and the Court of Justice of the European Communities (70%). However, the other bodies are little known.

3. THE FRENCH AND EU ENLARGEMENT

- In spite of a few slight variations since the previous EB poll, support for enlargement remains the lowest in Europe: only 34% of the French (+3%) are in favour of enlargement, whereas 55% (+1%) are opposed. Furthermore, 41% of the population believe that no new members should accede and 35% favour the accession of only some of the applicant countries.
- The gap between those in favour of and those opposed to enlargement has reached 21 points. This is the highest figure in the European Union.
- Residents of large towns are more favourable to enlargement (39%) than those living in small and middle-sized towns (35%) or in rural areas (27%).
- Opposition to enlargement is particularly strong in Nord/Pas-de-Calais (66% of respondents) and in the Mediterranean area (71%). Only in the Centre-East of France is there a slight majority (46%) in favour of it.
- 38% of those who usually vote for left-wing parties, 35% of centrists and 33% of right-wing voters are in favour of enlargement.

4. SUPPORT FOR A COMMON FOREIGN POLICY

- In spite of a slight drop since the last survey (which took place during the war in Iraq), support for a common foreign policy (64%) and for a common security and defence policy (71%) remains very strong.
- Anti-Americanism is still very high. A large majority of French citizens believe the US plays a negative role regarding environmental protection (69%), the fight against poverty (68%), world peace (65%), the growth of the world economy (49%) and the fight against terrorism (4%). One Frenchman out of two (49%) thinks decisions concerning defence should be taken by the EU, 22% by their national government and only 9% by NATO.

5. THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

- When asked what the EU's priorities should be, the French are in favour of joint decision-making within the EU regarding some areas such as the fight against poverty and unemployment and environmental protection. On the other hand, they are, for the most part, against a transfer of decisions on justice, education and health policies to EU level.
- The French strongly support the idea of a European constitution: 60% of them are in favour and only 8% against. In this field, the figures are almost identical to those in the previous survey (Spring 2003).
- When asked how the President of the Commission should be selected, 40% of the French are in favour of a direct election; 17% think he or she should be appointed by both the European Parliament and the Heads of State and Government; 11% support an election by a majority in the European Parliament; 11% favour an appointment made solely by the Heads of State and Government. As usual, support for a direct election is higher in France than the EU average (34%) due to France's constitutional tradition.
- Regarding the reform of the Commission, 73% of the French think that every Member State should have the right to designate its own Commissioner.
- 44% (-7% compared to EB 59.1) are in favour of keeping a right of veto in order to defend national interests, 27% think it should be limited to a very small number of key-issues and 9% feel it should be given up where all decisions are concerned, in order to make the EU more efficient.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion focuses on the two main objectives of the information campaign that has been launched in France: fuelling the debate about the draft European Constitution and creating support for EU enlargement.

- After the failure of the Brussels Summit, the political agenda is unclear for the coming months as regards the Constitution. It is difficult, therefore, to conceive of and launch any new action on a grand scale. The European Institutions should, however, carry on publicising the draft Constitution that was put forward by the Convention.
- In particular, schools and universities should be provided with a handy summary of its main points (Charter of fundamental rights, the way the new institutional system should work...). Experience proves that a strong bottom-up effect exists in this field: informing students amounts to informing their families.

ENLARGEMENT :

- Low support for enlargement is the main characteristic of French public opinion. Two alternative scenarios can be imagined for the months following enlargement. Either the French grow used to it, as happened with the euro – resulting in strong support following months of persistent scepticism; or they will remain mistrustful of the process, which will imply the need for a whole range of information actions.
- As enlargement comes closer, the media will tackle this issue comprehensively, through reports, articles and special programmes. European institutions should not (and cannot) compete with the media. However, it should be their role to provide the media with appropriate material.
- Particularly during the five weeks between the 1st of May (the date of the accession of the ten new countries) and the European elections, it would be useful to organise some large-scale events, as was done for the euro campaign. During this period, leaflets should be on display in shopping centres, transport facilities and public buildings, such as city halls.
- These leaflets would present readers with the basic facts about enlargement (such as the names of the new member states, some information about them, as well as the responses to the most common fears concerning enlargement). As far as the written press is concerned, it would be useful to publish these basic facts on the European Union in the form of permanent inserts.