

EUROBAROMETER 60.1

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PORTUGAL

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1. Personal expectations and trust in institutions

Within the EU, the Portuguese are the least satisfied with the life they lead. 56 percent of Portuguese citizens feel satisfied with their life - the lowest value for this indicator since 1989 and considerably below the European Union (EU) average (79 percent). Portugal is followed by Greece, Germany and France in terms of this ranking, while the Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden and Finland) and the Netherlands distinguish themselves from the remaining EU countries with their high levels of satisfaction with life.

This negative evaluation of their lives may well, at least partially, be connected with Portuguese citizens' concerns about their economic situation. Indeed, Portugal is the European country whose inhabitants have the most pessimistic expectations for the year 2004 with 52 percent of its citizens believing that the economic situation of the country will deteriorate. The elderly and the less educated cohorts are also the more pessimistic ones. Unemployment is the issue that worries the Portuguese the most – a concern shared by other EU citizens.

After Greece (65 percent), Portugal shows the highest level of trust in the EU (61 percent) – a value well above the EU average (41 percent). This is further reinforced by its citizens' trust in European institutions, namely, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Court of Justice. In all these cases, Portugal shows values above the EU average. Portuguese women, the elderly, and those who never discuss political matters tend to trust the European Parliament and the European Commission less. Nevertheless, generally speaking, the Portuguese express far greater levels of trust in these European institutions than in their national counterparts (such as the national government, parliament or legal system).

The previous Eurobarometer (EB) survey, conducted in Spring 2003, showed that the Portuguese appeared to be less satisfied with Portuguese democracy than with European democracy. This pattern, only shared by Italy, persists in this EB. Looking back over time, since 1999, an increasingly negative evaluation of the Portuguese of the way democracy works in both the EU and in their country has been observed. This is particularly evident with regard to national democracy.

2. Attitudes towards the EU

The majority of the Portuguese consider EU membership to be “a good thing”. While there has been a tendency for this majority to become less vocal, it is interesting to note that this phenomenon seems to be accentuated in periods of European (and thus also national) economic crisis. Indeed, a similar pattern can be discerned between April 1991 and November 1993. Attitudes of an “instrumental” nature, on the other hand, appear to be more favourable.

It should be pointed out that this difference between “affective” and “instrumental” attitudes towards the EU is not new in the Portuguese context. Indeed, this pattern has been visible since the very first Eurobarometer surveys in Portugal. Yet both diffuse and instrumental attitudes appear to be highly correlated with trust in the EU and with being satisfied with EU democracy.

On the other hand, the Portuguese are second only to the Irish in having a positive image of the EU. In terms of their interpretation of the EU, and in comparative terms, the Portuguese appear to favour issues related to economic security to the detriment to cultural matters or physical security.

In order to evaluate the extent to which the concept of European citizenship has taken root, it is crucial to know how the Portuguese see themselves in the near future. In this regard, national results are not as favourable to the European project as in previous surveys: over half of respondents see themselves solely “as Portuguese” (51 percent). There is clearly still much to accomplish in terms of building a sense of a European identity in Portugal, particularly among those with lower incomes and education levels.

With regard to the United States’ actions in the international arena, and, as highlighted in the report of the previous EB survey, the Portuguese tend to be more critical of the US than the EU average as regards matters of international security, but less so *vis-à-vis* the role of the United States with respect to social and environmental issues. This evaluation is more critical as the respondents move to the left in terms of political leaning. The evaluation of the EU’s role in the world is, in contrast, viewed more favourably.

3. Information about the EU

As in previous EB surveys, Portugal remains one of the countries whose citizens feel least informed about European issues. On a scale of 1-10, where 1 means the respondent feels he “knows nothing” about the EU, and 10 means he feels “knows a lot”, the Portuguese average position is 3.6. Not only is this the lowest level for the EU countries, against an EU average position of 4.4, it also represents a reduction in this measure as compared to 2002 and the earlier survey carried out in Spring 2003. This decline coincided with a period of atypically high exposure to European issues in Portuguese politics and media. It is possible that this greater visibility of European affairs highlighted to many citizens their insufficient knowledge with regard to the EU.

Previous reports pointed to the existence of specific socio-demographic groups in Portugal who felt their knowledge about the EU is particularly low: women, house persons, the retired, individuals with low incomes, and those with low educational attainment. These groups – for whom the average position is around 3 or lower - co-exist with other segments of the population who feel well-informed about the EU and who have an average position equal to that of Austria, a country whose citizens’ perceptions of their level of information about the EU are at the top end of the range. For this reason, the need for a diversified approach to information strategies, able to reach these potentially alienated groups in Portugal, becomes evident.

The feeling of a low level of information among these groups is partly accounted for by their high level of disinterest in the EU. When asked about sources of information on the EU, 17% of Portuguese respondents were that they “never look for such information” or “are not interested”. While this level mirrors the European average, for the five groups mentioned above the average is considerably higher, and is more than double the national average in the case of house persons. In the section below on the EU’s information strategy, the implications of this disinterest are discussed.

4. The process of European integration: its range and perspectives for reform

At a time marked by an economic crisis and rising unemployment, the somewhat more critical stance of the Portuguese towards the EU’s role in economic and employment affairs is perhaps understandable. Thus, only 27 percent consider the

EU's role in economic affairs to be positive, while 47 percent give a negative evaluation to the EU's actions in fighting unemployment.

Another area covered by EB 60.1 was respondents' positions on joint decision-making with the EU in certain policy areas. The majority of the Portuguese (60 percent) support EU responsibility for affairs that are not efficiently overseen by national, regional or local governments. This is particularly true for individuals who trust the EU and those who are satisfied with life.

As is well known, the EU already has a Common Security and Foreign Policy and a European Security and Defence Policy. With regard to the former, a certain degree of indifference is noted among the Portuguese, whilst the sharing of sovereignty in defence continues to divide respondents. In both issues, however, the differences are not significant in relation to the EU average or the results of the previous EB. Related to this is the question of whether decisions pertaining to European defence policy should be taken by national governments or, in a multilateral perspective, in conjunction with NATO or the EU. For 32 percent of the Portuguese, decisions on defence policy should be made solely by the national government. Only 7 percent support NATO co-decision, while 46 percent endorsed joint decision-making within the EU.

Enlargement is now very much a *fait accompli*. Portugal remains one of the countries whose public opinion is most open to enlargement to all countries: 31 percent of Portuguese share that opinion, compared to an EU average of 25 percent. Those with lowest incomes and individuals who trust the EU are the groups most open to a broader enlargement.

68 percent of Portuguese believe that institutional reform of the European Union is a priority - almost the same percentage as six months previously. This figure ranks Portugal among the countries that more clearly place institutional reform at the top of the EU agenda. Since 1999, a clear increase has been seen in the percentage of Portuguese citizens who consider the reform of the EU institutions to be a priority.

After the failure of the Summit that took place in Brussels, in December 2003, it is important to note that not only a majority of the Portuguese (55 percent), but of all EU citizens (62 percent) believe that the Union should have a Constitution. Concerning the Portuguese data, it is important to mention that a considerable proportion of people

(36 percent) did not answer the question about the Constitution. This high value of non-replies confirms the low levels of knowledge about the functioning of the European Convention, already noted in the previous Eurobarometer survey.

Irrespective of their general support for EU reform, the Portuguese tend to disagree with some of the proposals of the Convention. Only 17 percent of the Portuguese agree that the President of the European Commission should be chosen both by the European Parliament and the Heads of State; and 43 percent believe that the right of veto should be retained in order to preserve essential national interests. These two opinions also prevail among citizens in the other EU member countries.

5. Concluding remarks in relation to the EU information strategy

Successive Eurobarometer reports have made the case for a targeted information strategy on the part of the EU. As has been noted in previous Eurobarometer reports on Portugal, certain social groups systematically appear as the least informed on EU matters. These are those with least education, less income, women and the elderly.

Lack of information, in turn, leads to disinterest, a relationship that has also been shown in the EB60.1 Report and previous ones. This suggests that the information strategy to target these groups must not only facilitate their access to the information, but also raise their awareness of the benefits of knowledge about the EU. It is likely that the disinterest of these groups regarding the EU reflects a perception that they have little to gain by learning about it.

Unsurprisingly, the dominant source of information on the EU for the Portuguese is television. But while Portugal replicates EU15 patterns in terms of ranking, it does not do so in terms of magnitude – the Portuguese are almost exclusively reliant on television for information on the EU, and the results confirm the low levels of newspaper readership and use of other sources. The importance of television for information strategies is once again reiterated.

The data also show that the majority of the Portuguese feel their media are objective when it comes to reporting European affairs. This, combined with their perception that the media, by and large, under-reports EU matters, suggests that information strategies pursued through the media are likely to be well received.

However, as the results above highlight, the meaning of media could well be reduced to the single medium of television, given its predominance in the preferences of the Portuguese. Thus, both the preferred medium and the groups that should be targeted are reasonably well-defined, and confirm the trends already established in previous EB reports.

Lastly, EB data allow us to conclude that the Portuguese consider institutional reform to be a priority and there is agreement that there should be a European Constitution. However, national public opinion tends to disagree with the Convention proposals, in what concerns the way the Commission President should be elected (a majority would prefer that he or she were elected by EU citizens) and the (partial or total) abandonment of the right of veto in the Council of Ministers (a majority is against it). Portuguese opinion regarding these matters is similar to the EU average.