



*Standard Eurobarometer*



# EUROBAROMETER 61

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

## SPRING 2004

### NATIONAL REPORT

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### PORTUGAL

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## **1. Personal expectations in the context of enlargement and trust in institutions**

Previous Eurobarometers have shown that the Portuguese tend to have a negative attitude towards their life. In EB60.1, in autumn 2003, 43 per cent of the Portuguese were dissatisfied with their life, the highest value recorded in the European Union (EU). In this Eurobarometer (EB61), questions regarding this issue were put slightly differently. On the one hand, citizens were asked whether they perceived their current personal situation to be better than in the past; and, on the other, they were asked about their expectations for the future. While the Portuguese, like the Germans, think that their life is worse now than it was five years ago (44 per cent share this opinion), they tend to believe that it will improve in the next five years (49 per cent). This last value is 10 points higher than the EU average, and similar to the percentages in the most optimistic countries, namely Greece, Spain, Ireland and United Kingdom.

The EB61 survey included other questions concerning citizens' expectations for the near future on such topics as life in general, the household's financial situation, the respondent's professional situation and the country's economic and employment prospects. Looking at the answers given by Portuguese respondents concerning these issues, greater pessimism comes to the surface, which contrasts with the optimism shown in the paragraph above, when asked about prospects for the following five years. Thus, only 14 per cent expect the aspects mentioned above to improve in the next twelve months while 43 per cent expect them to worsen. Even so, citizens are relatively more optimistic concerning their own personal situation, whilst sharing a more negative view regarding the country's future economic and employment situation.

Portugal has been one of the countries where enlargement is viewed most favourably, as measured by successive Eurobarometers. The EB61 confirms this attitude: On the eve of enlargement to the East, 52 per cent of the Portuguese are in favour of the entry of ten new countries into the EU (the fieldwork was carried out between February and March 2004). However, as previous Eurobarometers have shown, although a broad positive consensus exists among the Portuguese concerning the political consequences of enlargement, the same is not the case in regarding to the economic ones. It is thus not surprising to find that respondents who are against enlargement are also those who

have relatively negative expectations concerning the future of their personal situation and especially that of Portugal.

The pessimistic outlook concerning the country's economic prospects is characteristic of all EU citizens. However, the Portuguese exhibit greater pessimism than the EU average. Of the four most-cited problems facing Portugal, three were economic. Unemployment was the most frequently cited problem (by 66 per cent), with a rise of ten percentage points compared with the results in the previous survey six months previously.

Security problems are second to economic concerns in the EU. On these issues, the Portuguese appear slightly less worried than the EU average. Terrorism, for example, was only mentioned by 7 per cent of citizens, against 15 per cent among EU citizens. The Portuguese show the lowest level of concern about immigration in the EU.

Some questions allow us to compare the ten new EU members with the previous fifteen, namely that concerning citizens' level of trust in the EU. On average there is no difference between the EU15 and the New Member States (NMS). In both, around 40 per cent of citizens trust the Union. However, these averages conceal important differences within the two sets of countries: while in the EU15 scores vary from 68 per cent of trust (Greece) to 19 per cent (United Kingdom), in the NMS, there is less variation: the highest value is 57 per cent (Cyprus) and the lowest is 33 per cent (Poland). Portugal, as often tends to be the case, is among those countries whose citizens trust the EU the most, showing the second highest percentage within the EU25 (60 per cent).

Looking at the Portuguese data from a longitudinal perspective, it would appear that while trust in the national parliament has been decreasing since 1999, trust in the EU and in the United Nations has remained stable.

## **2. Knowledge and Information about the EU**

Portugal remains one of the EU countries whose citizens feel least informed about European issues. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means the respondent feels s/he “knows nothing” about the EU and 10 means s/he “knows a lot”, the Portuguese average position is 4.0, the lowest of all EU countries. However, these data show a slight positive evolution in comparison with the last EB.

Thus, it is not surprising that Portuguese public opinion does not consider itself “very well or well informed” about enlargement: indeed, only 22 per cent feel “very well or well informed” (European average: 29 per cent).

It is clear that this sentiment changes not only according to the nationality of those polled but also according to their social and attitudinal characteristics. Some groups in particular expressed perceptions of lack of information namely women, the elderly, those on low incomes and those with least education. On the other hand, those who have a favourable view of EU democracy tend to feel better informed.

Irrespective of what citizens perceive their knowledge about the EU to be, it is important to assess what they objectively know. This EB included some questions that allow us to do just that. These results show that the Portuguese are slightly more informed than the EU average. An average of 43 percent answered ten questions about the EU correctly, while the average EU score was 39 per cent.

There is, however, still substantial ignorance concerning EU matters among the Portuguese. Though most of them (74 per cent) know that the flag is blue with yellow stars, only a few (9 per cent) are aware that there is not one star for each member country. The percentage of Portuguese who do not know the headquarters of the European Commission are not in Strasbourg is relatively high (38 per cent) and - what is even more striking – 35 per cent think the EU currently consists of twelve Member States.

Another issue in which the Portuguese - this time more than the EU average - show a lack of knowledge concerns the budget. Both in Portugal and the EU overall, citizens

believe most of the budget is allocated to “administrative and personnel costs, buildings” (23 and 24 per cent, respectively). The right answer, “agriculture”, was only mentioned by 7 per cent of the Portuguese (and 14 per cent of EU citizens overall).

When asked about sources of information on the EU, respondents replied that the television is their preferred medium: 81 per cent in Portugal; 73 per cent in the EU average. However in the EU as a whole, daily newspapers (54 per cent) and radio (35 per cent) constitute more important sources of information than in Portugal. Moreover, the percentage of those in Portugal who claim to receive information about the EU through television is the highest level ever recorded in Eurobarometer surveys. This is a very positive trend that should be highlighted. Between the EB 57 (May 2002) to the present survey, the percentage of Portuguese polled stating a lack of interest in the EU has gradually diminished: it was 28 per cent in May 2002 and is now just 13 per cent.

It is also important to understand the way in which the Portuguese evaluate the role of the national media in the reporting of European affairs. 41 per cent tend to think that mass media coverage of the EU is sufficient. Compared with the EU average, the differences cannot be considered relevant. On the other hand, when asked to evaluate the way the mass media portray the process of European integration, there are interesting differences between Portugal and the EU average: the percentage of Portuguese who consider the media deal with the EU in a “rather negative way” (18 per cent) is higher than those who think the contrary (10 per cent). Generally speaking, the reality is different in EU countries overall: 23 per cent consider the media speak in a rather positive way, while only 13 per cent think the opposite.

### **3. Attitudes towards EU integration**

For most of both the Portuguese and Europeans in general (46 and 50 per cent, respectively), Europe means “the euro”. Also, 35 per cent of citizens surveyed in Portugal identify Europe with the free circulation of people and goods. This and other attitudes towards the EU are different from the EU average. Indeed, instrumental attitudes remain stronger than diffuse ones. In spite of a positive and gradual change, there is still little sense of a European identity in Portugal, especially among individuals

with low income and little education and among those who are dissatisfied with both national and EU democracy.

With regard to European integration, 53 per cent of Portuguese consider that EU membership has increased their sense of security (41 per cent). Similarly, 45 per cent of them consider that the EU has brought their country economic stability, whereas in the EU overall the value is 40 per cent. Also, the percentage of the poll believing they understand the EU political system (40 per cent) is almost the same as the European average (41 per cent). This is interesting, since it contradicts, to a certain extent, the feeling of lack of information shared by a majority of Portuguese elsewhere in the survey.

The evaluation of the European integration process is also positive. 62 per cent agree with the following statement: "Portugal has much more influence now", a percentage that is much higher than the European average (50 per cent). The Portuguese also share some fears in regard to European integration. They fear more than most other Europeans the loss of power of smaller states, as well as increased drug trafficking and organized crime.

From a longitudinal perspective, the most evident change in the state of public opinion in relation to fears regarding European integration regards both economic and social issues. For instance, in 1996, 48 per cent of the Portuguese feared the loss of "social welfare"; today, this figure has increased to 68 per cent.

When asked to evaluate the EU's role in specific public policies, attitudes are relatively negative. In Portugal, in a period characterized by a rise in the unemployment rate, 46 per cent of citizens consider that the role of the EU in the fight against unemployment has been negative (in the EU as a whole, the average is 40 per cent). At the same time, with the economy not yet showing concrete signs of growth, a relative majority of Portuguese evaluate the EU's role in the economic situation negatively (40 per cent compared with a 34 per cent EU average).

Regarding the institutional reform of the EU, as has already been noted in previous Eurobarometers, the Portuguese, although in agreement with the idea of a European

Constitution, are against several proposals presented by the Convention. This trend can be further observed in the responses to two questions asked in this EB.

The main divergences relate to the maintenance of the right of veto and the voting rules within the Council of Ministers. In fact, 54 per cent of the Portuguese think that the right of veto should be maintained in order “to defend the national interest”. This represents a much higher percentage than the EU average (45 per cent). As far as the voting system in the Council of Ministers is concerned, only 22 per cent support the Convention’s proposal while the EU average is 34 per cent.

It is interesting to note that, in this dimension of the European project, a new cleavage is seen to be emerging: on one hand, there is the public opinion in the small and medium sized countries, which wants to preserve their national interest in the European political system, and, on the other, the public opinion in the larger countries which tends to support the Convention’s institutional reforms. Individuals with high income and those who trust the democracy in the EU also tend to be more favourable towards institutional reform.

#### **4. The European Parliament and the elections of June 2004**

“Are the European elections really important?” Most of the Portuguese tend not to think so. Even though they consider the EP has more power than their national parliament, the Portuguese still think that the national parliament and government have more influence in their daily life.

What contact has there been between voters and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)? 6 per cent of Portuguese claimed to have had heard an MEP on the radio (EU average: 15 per cent). 9 per cent read something related to the MEPs (average: 32 per cent) in the newspapers. Television is by far the medium by which the Portuguese had greatest contact with their MEPs (45 per cent compared with the EU average of 48 per cent). A substantial proportion of respondents claim, however, to have had no contact at all with an MEP. This tends to lend support to the idea that there is considerable distance between European citizens and their representatives in the EP. Individuals with

low educational attainment and those who are not satisfied with EU democracy have even less contact with MEPs.

Portugal's official abstention rate in European elections rose very rapidly from a low level of 28 percent in 1987 to over 60 percent in the last two elections. Indeed, the Portuguese average abstention rate in the 1990s is only exceeded by the UK and the Netherlands. The EB61 data suggests that forthcoming elections would not see a reversal in the trend of low levels of turnout of Portuguese for European elections.

Respondents were asked to indicate the probability that they would vote in European elections if these were held tomorrow. 25 per cent of the Portuguese are certain they would not vote. This value is the highest within the Union, more than double the EU average (12 per cent). This figure appears to be particularly high if we take into account that survey results generally tend to underestimate abstention rates.

Some groups are over-represented among those who state they will abstain, namely: young people, those who generally do not discuss politics with friends and those who tend to think that the EU is "a bad thing".

Generally speaking, the data confirm the pattern of differential turnout between European and legislative elections both for Portugal in particular and the EU in general. Indeed, only in Belgium does the average probability of voting in European elections exceed that of legislative elections. Lastly, the Portuguese do not seem to be very sensitive to any possible measures to increase electoral participation. Nevertheless, 23 per cent of respondents (the highest percentage in the EU) agreed that they would be more likely to vote in European elections if these would take place on the same day as local, regional or national elections.

Having analysed the perspectives for the turnout, it is important to discuss what could motivate the Portuguese to vote in these elections. Firstly, it seems the political parties' agendas need to match the wishes of the Portuguese electorate: according to respondents, their electoral choice depends mainly on their opinion concerning "national affairs" (38 per cent, compared with a 40 per cent in the EU overall). Importantly, the Portuguese distinguish themselves in their lack of interest in European affairs: whereas 35 per cent of Spaniards claim their electoral choice will hinge on European matters,



only 14 per cent share that opinion in Portugal (in contrast to an EU average of 30 per cent).

In Portugal and in the majority of EU countries, “the candidates’ personality” seems to have a modest impact on electoral behaviour. However, candidates’ proposals play a much more important role for the Spaniards (39 per cent), for instance, than for the Portuguese (23 per cent). For 25 per cent of the Portuguese, “the party” is more important than the candidate’s electoral manifesto.

For what concerns the European election campaign, almost half of the Portuguese (48 per cent) consider that the electoral debate should focus on national subjects, or, for an even larger percentage of the population, on unemployment (70 per cent) - an issue that dominates the country’s public opinion. Matters such as a common defence policy, foreign affairs, enlargement, institutional reform, as well as the European Parliament’s activities seem to interest Europeans little and the Portuguese even less.