



EUROBAROMETER 62

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY **FRANCE**

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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 62 public opinion was carried out on behalf of the European Commission between 14 - 30 October 2004. The survey took place following six months of intense activity at European level: the enlargement of May 1st, the European Parliament elections and the approval of a Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. For the first time, the survey took place in all twenty-five Member States of the European Union and in four applicant countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Turkey), as well as in the northern part of Cyprus. In France, 1020 people were interviewed.

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

Chapter 1 gives an overview of French public opinion.

Chapter 2 deals with relations between the French and the European Union.

Chapter 3 focuses on the common foreign policy.

Chapter 4 concerns the future of European integration.

1. OVERVIEW OF FRENCH PUBLIC OPINION

- Expectations for the next twelve months are quite pessimistic: 43% of the French expect the economic situation of their country to become worse and 47% feel that unemployment will increase. 34% feel their situation has worsened in the last five years.
- However, 47% of the French think their personal situation will improve in the next five years while only 17% expect it to worsen.
- In the poll's view, the main issues that France is facing at the moment are unemployment (51%, -7%), crime (27%, -2%), the economic situation (24%, -2%) and inflation (21%, -3%).
- NGOs (74%), the army (70%) and the police (60%) are the institutions the French trust most; 38% (+3%) trust the national Parliament, but only 29% (=) the French government. The institutions the French trust the least are trades unions (51%), major companies (59%) and political parties (82%).
- Trust in international organisations has increased markedly since the last survey: 52% (+9%) of the French tend to trust the United Nations and 50% (+8%) the European Union.
- Awareness of certain European institutions is much higher than for others. A large majority of the French population has heard of the Parliament (93%), the Commission (87%), the European Central Bank (72%), the Court of Justice of the European Communities (71%) and the Council of Ministers (66%). Awareness of the other institutions is low.

- To get information about the EU, respondents mainly use television (62%), newspapers (46%), radio (33%) and discussions with friends and relatives (28%).
- 25% of the French use the Internet to get information about the EU. This is a substantial increase on the 15% figure recorded one year ago, the 13% two years ago, the 8% three years ago and the mere 3% seen in October 2001.
- When asked how they would prefer to get information on the EU, 46% of respondents cite television, 30% detailed brochures, 28% daily newspapers, 22% radio, 21% the Internet, 18% books providing a complete description and 15% for both magazines and short leaflets.

2. THE FRENCH AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Once considered as one of the most sceptical EU Member States, public opinion in France now appears to be more "European" than the EU-25 average. In particular, a very significant shift is seen in the way the French view European integration.

- In the near future, 55% of respondents see themselves as both French and European, 30% as French only, 9% as both European and French and 4% as European only.
- One Frenchman out of two (53%, +8%) has a fairly good (45%, +6%) or very good (8%, +2%) image of the EU; 17% have a fairly bad (13%) or a very bad (4%) image of it.
- Support for the European Union has never been so high since the beginning of the new century. 56% (+13%) of respondents consider their country's membership to be a good thing; 18% (-4%) a bad thing and 28% (-7%) as neither good nor bad.
- Furthermore, 54% (+8%) consider their country has benefited from being a member of the European Union, while 35% (+1%) think the opposite and 20% (-10%) do not know.
- When asked what Europe means to them personally, 53% cite the freedom to travel, work and study in a foreign country, 49% the Euro, 48% cultural diversity and 40% peace.
- France is now one of the countries most favourable to the common currency: 78% (+10%) of the French are in favour of the Euro, 19% (-8%) are opposed to it, while 3% do not know.
- France is no longer the country with the weakest support for enlargement. 39% of the French are in favour of further enlargements of the EU in the coming years. Although these figures remain low compared to the EU-25 average (50%), this figure has increased by 8 points since the last Eurobarometer (February-March 2004) survey.

3. COMMON FOREIGN POLICY

- Support for a common foreign policy (69%, +3%) and for a common security and defence policy (81, +6%) has increased still further since the last survey.
- 89% of the French think that in the event of an international crisis occurring, the member states of the European Union should agree on a common position and 85% feel that European Union foreign policy should be independent of that of the United States.
- Only 10% of respondents think the United States plays a positive role regarding peace in the world and 8% see its role as being positive in the fight against poverty in the world.
- 64% (+12%) of respondents think that decisions concerning European defence policy should be taken by the EU, 16% (-5%) by national governments and only 10% by NATO. French public opinion is thus one of the most favourable in the Union as regards a European defence policy (higher levels of support are only found in Greece, Cyprus and Belgium).

4. THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

- The French strongly support the idea of a European Constitution: 70% (+8%) of them are in favour, 18% are against (+2%) and 10% do not know (-10%). These figures are almost identical to the EU-25 average (68% in favour and 17% against).
- Surprisingly, identical support levels are found whatever respondents' political affiliation: 73% of left-wing voters, 73% of centrist and 73% of right-wing voters are in favour of a European Constitution.
- 76% of 15-24 year olds, 72% of 25-39 year olds, 70% of 40-54 year olds and 67% of those who are older than 55 years are in favour of a European Constitution.
- However, it should be noted that the poll did not include any question on the Constitutional Treaty that was signed in Rome at the end of October.
- Regarding the reform of the Commission, 82% of the French think that each Member State should have the right to designate its own Commissioner.
- One in two of the French poll (49%) is against "enhanced cooperation" (i.e. "the speed of building Europe being faster in one group than in other countries), whereas 35% are in favour of it (and 16% are against it).

CONCLUSIONS

The ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution will undoubtedly be the main European topic of the year 2005. This Eurobarometer survey does not provide significant evidence to say whether there is a majority in favour or against the Constitutional Treaty. Although 70% of the French are in favour of a constitution, it does not necessarily mean they are for THE Constitution signed in Rome at the end of October 2004. At the beginning of December, a referendum was held within the French Socialist Party: this provided useful information about the forthcoming national referendum, which will take place before the summer (according to President Chirac).

In particular, during the Socialist Party referendum, the European Union was accused of being too liberal from an economic point of view and, once again, not democratic enough. As usual, the opponents did not actually say they were "against" Europe, but that they were for "another" Europe. These topics will undoubtedly appear again in the public debate in the coming months.

It will be the Government's job to prepare and distribute several millions of copies of the Constitutional Treaty. It would be useful not to send the copy of the Treaty on its own (as was done in the case of the Treaty of Maastricht) but to accompany it with a short leaflet, explaining the structure and the main novelties introduced by the Constitution. The European Commission could provide this leaflet since some useful documents have already been prepared and printed by its services.

When asked by the national governments, the European Commission could also offer its help - as suggested by Commissioner Wallström - to promote the Constitutional Treaty. The French Government is about to launch a national campaign. One thousand experts are about to visit all regions of France. Jointly with the French Government, the European Commission could provide them with some informational support tools (e.g. leaflets on the Constitution, brochures answering the key questions and giving some "success stories", books on the history of European integration...), which could be useful in assisting them in their task.