

EUROBAROMETER 64

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

AUTUMN 2005

NATIONAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PORTUGAL

The survey was requested and coordinated by the Directorate General Press and Communication.

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

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1. Climate of public opinion: expectations, trust in institutions and public policy priorities

Portuguese public opinion in this Eurobarometer is marked by serious pessimism. Portugal is the only country in the EU where the number of respondents who expect their personal situation to get worse in a year's time exceeds those who believe it will get better. This pessimism regarding the near future extends to other aspects also, namely the respondents' household financial situation, the country's economic situation and the level of employment in the next twelve months, with the Portuguese again emerging as the least optimistic of EU-25 citizens in each of these questions. These perceptions appear to be strongly influenced by the prolonged recession of the Portuguese economy, which shows, at best, tentative signs of recovery in 2006, according to official estimates.

Parallel to these negative economic perceptions, trust in the national government and parliament has been declining over the past few years. Until 2003, two institutions, Parliament and Government, enjoyed positive levels of net trust (the percentage difference between those who "trust" and those who "do not trust") among the Portuguese. From that year on, net trust has been negative for both Parliament and Government. There are differences between levels of trust in these two institutions: firstly, the decline in trust has been greater for the government than Parliament; secondly, there has been a slight rise in trust in Parliament in this Eurobarometer compared to the previous one, even though net trust for that institution remains negative. Despite these trends, this survey's results caution against an excessively pessimistic reading of these particular indicators: trust in national institutions in Portugal is not, by-and-large, lower than the EU-25 average, and, as such, distrust in national institutions does not appear to be a uniquely or exclusively Portuguese *malaise*.

The economic crisis appears to impact on the policy priorities of the Portuguese, which are overwhelmingly concentrated on issues such as unemployment, the economic situation or inflation. While these are similar to EU-wide priorities, the Portuguese place a greater emphasis on these issues compared to their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Equally, the focus of EU intervention for the Portuguese is concentrated on social and economic issues, such as fighting poverty and social exclusion, or fighting

unemployment. Again, the Portuguese place a greater emphasis on EU intervention in these areas than the EU-25 average. When asked about the sharing of sovereignty with the EU in specific policy areas, the Portuguese emerge as marginally more favourable to joint sovereignty than the EU-25: indeed, Portuguese support for sharing sovereignty is higher than the EU-25 average in 11 of the 16 policy areas considered. However, these differences are small, and the large number of Portuguese respondents who did not answer this question cautions against stronger assertions of a generalised support for joint sovereignty in Portugal.

2. Being a Member of the EU and the Individual and the EU

2006 marks the twentieth anniversary of Portuguese membership of the EU. As such, it is interesting to analyze the way in which national public opinion vis-à-vis the EU has evolved during that time period. The Portuguese have always shared rather positive attitudes - both “affective” and “instrumental” - towards the EU. Indeed, throughout this period, there has always been a majority of people who consider EU membership to be a “good thing” and who believe that Portugal has, on balance, benefited from being a member. Even though the consensus regarding instrumental attitudes has always been higher than the one concerning affective ones among Portuguese citizens, both have followed more or less the same pattern over the years. This suggests that the two types of attitudes are not independent, i. e., that they are influenced by each other.

Looking at specific policies or policy areas in which citizens consider the EU to have had a positive effect, “Maintaining the country’s security” emerges as the policy area most positively affected by the EU, an opinion which is shared by the EU-25 average. On the contrary, both national citizens and EU citizens generally agree that “agriculture” and “employment” constitute the two policies in which the EU’s effect has been less positive.

57 per cent of Portuguese citizens state that they think of themselves not only as being Portuguese but as being European as well. Furthermore, the great majority of the Portuguese (70 per cent) feel proud of being European, a value that is above the EU-25 average (63 per cent). The Portuguese remain nonetheless prouder of being Portuguese (89 per cent). This latter result does not differ significantly from the EU average.

These positive attitudes concerning the EU have to be placed alongside other indicators that provide evidence on the relative distance between Portuguese citizens and EU institutions. Indeed, only 24 per cent of the Portuguese state that they feel involved in European affairs. This percentage is similar to that observed both among the EU-15 and among the ten new member-states, suggesting that there is no connection between length of membership and citizens' feeling of involvement in EU affairs. Moreover, and again similarly to the EU-25 average, a great majority of the Portuguese (65 per cent) consider that "their voice does not count in Europe".

3. Trust and Knowledge of the European Union

The Portuguese express a high degree of trust in the European Union and in its major institutions – the European Parliament and the European Commission (each over 60 percent). Such high levels of trust are observed in only two other member countries, namely Greece and Luxembourg. These levels of trust contrast with attitudes concerning information on the EU. A meagre 27 percent of the Portuguese are satisfied with the degree of information they possess on the EU, and only 32 per cent claim to understand how the Union works.

2005 is characterized by a return to the lower levels of feelings of information that had been consistently observed between 1999 and 2003, but had been momentarily reversed in 2004. This fact allows us to hypothesize that the higher levels of feeling of information in 2004 may have derived from a series of events that helped to give greater visibility in the media to the EU. These events included the European eastern enlargement and José Manuel Barroso's nomination as President of the European Commission. Shifting from the longitudinal to the socio-demographic analysis, the most interesting finding is that young people do not appear to consider themselves any better informed than older citizens do, but levels of trust are higher in the younger cohort than in the older.

Whereas the Portuguese have lower feelings of information than the EU-25 average, the same is not true when their knowledge is tested in objective terms. In fact, the performance of the Portuguese in questions designed to test citizens' knowledge of the EU is identical and in some cases higher than the EU-25 average. In this

Eurobarometer, the only exception is the performance in the question regarding the European budget. Only 6 percent of the Portuguese answered it correctly, one of the lowest percentages in the EU-25.

In Portugal, exposure to television news broadcasts is high – 80 percent of respondents state that they watch TV news every day. Also, television is the most used source of information on the European Union, and is trusted by two thirds of the Portuguese. As is well-known, in Portugal there is a much lower proportion of citizens who listen to the radio or read the newspapers, one of the lowest in the EU. Concerning the relationship between the *media* and the European Union, a majority of the Portuguese feel satisfied with the frequency with which information regarding the European Union is broadcast and consider that the information is transmitted objectively.

4. Attitudes towards Political Union and the European Constitution

59 percent of the Portuguese support the development of a European political union, compared with 55 percent of Europeans overall. Despite being above the EU average, there are a few other countries where support for a European political union is substantially higher namely Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Greece. Also, on the same question, and compared with the results of the previous Eurobarometer, the percentage of Portuguese who reject European political union has risen 6 percentage points, the second highest growth in the EU, after Sweden.

Regarding the subject of the European constitution, we find that in Portugal the support for the idea of a European constitution has risen to 63 percent, whereas those who oppose it stand at 13 percent - the latter value being similar to the previous Eurobarometer. The novelty appears to be the decline in the percentage of non-respondents, which have decreased from 29 to 24 percent, although still higher than the European average (16 percent). When asked about what should be done about the future of the Constitutional Treaty, a plurality of the Portuguese defends the renegotiation of the treaty (41 percent) a value slightly lower than the EU average (49 percent). However, there seems to be a greater support among the Portuguese for the continuation of the ratification process (27 percent in Portugal versus 22 percent in the

EU as a whole), and much less advocacy of the abandonment of the treaty (7 percent versus 13 percent in the EU overall).

Concerning the future enlargement of the EU, we find very little difference between the results of the current Eurobarometer and the previous one. The Portuguese are still largely in favour of future enlargements, a percentage that is higher than the EU average. Also, a plurality supports the entry of any of the possible candidates, including Turkey (40 percent). The EU-25 average support for Turkish membership remains lower at only 31 percent.

An analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents who are opposed to political unification and the European Constitution revealed an interesting fact, namely, that citizens who share these attitudes are not differentiated in terms of gender, age or education. What unites them is a generally negative outlook on the European Union. In effect, those that have a negative view of the EU, believe that Portugal's membership is a bad thing or consider that Portugal has not benefited from being a member of the EU are most likely to be against political unification and a European Constitution. Regarding future enlargements, there are relevant explanatory socio-demographic factors: older citizens and the least educated tend to be against the accession of other countries to the EU.