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Introduction

This Eurobarometer Report is perhaps one of the more interesting on the UK to have been published for some time.

The UK has, in recent years, achieved the nickname as the 'don't know, don't care' capital of Europe when it comes to matters European.

Low levels of knowledge on European institutions led to suspicion and low levels of trust. The UK citizen prospered on his island, was unconcerned by many of the problems of the EU and was also unaware of the wide-ranging benefits this organization was bringing to millions of European citizens.

But a wind of change is blowing through the UK in its relationship with the EU. Realisation that good legislation from Brussels is not only possible but has emerged and will continue to do so.

Over the past six months, there has been a noticeable improvement in EU25 citizens' attitude towards membership of the EU.

In EB64, just six months previously, 50% of citizens said membership was a good thing and 16% said it was a bad thing – a gap of 34 percentage points.

These figures have improved so that there is now a substantial 42 percentage point difference between the 55% supporting the Union and just 13% taking the contrary view.

There has also been a marked increase in the percentage of UK citizens believing that EU membership had brought benefits to the country.

The UK figure, at 42%, is up from 37% just six months previously.

Those taking the contrary view have seen their numbers fall from 47% to 44% meaning that the gap between these two opinions has narrowed sharply from 10 percentage points to just 2 points.

A further positive sign regarding UK figures can be seen in the general fall in the 'don't know' factor indicating that UK citizens are becoming better informed.

Just six months previously, more UK citizens (35%) held a negative view on the European Union than those who held a positive view (29%). This situation has now been reversed and a third (34%) of the poll holds a positive view compared with 29% taking a negative stance.

It would seem that a basic prerequisite for citizens to be able to make judgments or comments on the functioning of any aspect of the European Union is based upon the requirement that they understand how the European Union works.

In the UK, the percentage of those polled saying that they understand how the EU functions has increased from 35% to 41% in six months.

What is also encouraging to note is that now only 12% of the UK poll say that they know nothing at all about the European Union compared with 18% some six months previously.

There is a welcome decline in the negative aspect of the UK data. Six months ago, in EB64, 28% of UK citizens said they never looked for information on the EU. It has now reduced slightly, but significantly, to 23%.

Attitudes to the European Union are, to a great extent, fashioned by the media. What is encouraging in this Eurobarometer is that for all the three main media (TV, radio and press), UK citizens wanting more information on the EU substantially outnumber those who want less.

There are also more UK citizens saying that the three media present the European Union in too negative a way than those who say the presentation is too positive.

There is still a long way to go but the UK seems to be understanding the European Union better, and with this understanding comes both the desire for more information and greater trust in that organization and realization of the benefits it has brought to UK citizens' lives.

The main points are as follows. The full socio demographics related to these issues can be found in the main report together with discussions on other important issues.

Understanding how the European Union works

It would seem that a basic prerequisite for citizens to be able to make judgments or comments on the functioning of any aspect of the European Union is based upon the requirement that they have a basic understanding as to how the European Union functions.

A year ago, 43% of EU citizens and 38% of those in the UK said that they understood how the European Union works. Six months later, these figures had disappointingly fallen to 41% and 35% respectively.

In this latest report, however, there is a welcome indication that levels of understanding are improving.

Accordingly, across the European Union, 46% of those polled say that they understand how the EU functions – an increase from 41% six months previously.

The rate of improvement is higher than average in the UK where the figure increases from 35% to 41%.

Subjective knowledge of the European Union

As might be expected, there is an enormous variation in people's self-assessment of their knowledge levels concerning the European Union and its policies and institutions.

In this latest Eurobarometer survey, it is seen that the general level of knowledge across the European Union has increased from 4.2 to 4.5 (an increase of approximately 7%) over the past six months.

In the UK, there has been a greater than average increase in this figure of approximately 10% from 3.7 to 4.1. What is particularly encouraging to note is that this increase is to a large extent fuelled by the fact that now only 12% of the UK poll say that they know nothing at all about the European Union compared with 18% some six months previously.

Never looked for this kind of information

There is a welcome decline in the negative aspect of the UK data. Six months ago, in EB64, 28% of UK citizens said they **never looked for this kind of information**. Although it is still the highest figure in the 25 Member States of the European Union, it has now reduced to 23%.

Trust in the European Union

In a further welcome set of data, trust in the European Union generally has increased noticeably across the EU25 over the past six months. In EB64, 45% tended to trust the EU and a very similar 43% took the opposite view.

In this latest poll, there is now a nine percentage point gap in these figures with virtually half (48%) of those polled trusting the Union compared with 39% who tended not to trust.

A similar major shift in opinion is noted in the UK where, in EB64, 25% trusted the EU and 55% took the opposite viewpoint with a high 20% 'don't know' factor.

This 30 percentage point gap has now been reduced by a third resulting in an improved level of trust with 31% of those polled now taking this positive view.

Trust in the European Parliament

Both in the UK and across Europe, there was a noticeable increase since EB64 in the 'don't know' factor. This has increased from 16% to 19% across the EU25 and an even larger increase from 17% to nearly a quarter (23%) is seen among those polled in the UK.

While 52% of EU25 citizens trusted the European Parliament, this figure falls to 31% in the UK.

However, there is good news in the UK data as over a period of just six months the number of citizens trusting the European Parliament has risen from 27% to 31%, while, at the same time, the proportion of those tending not to trust this body has fallen from 55% to 46%.

Trust in the European Commission

Once again, there is a noticeable improvement in UK trust levels relating to the European institutions. When the question is asked in relation to the European Commission, there is a slight increase from 26% to 28%.

Similarly, while six months previously, half (50%) of the UK poll said they tended not to trust the European Commission, this figure has fallen to 42%.

Putting these two sets of data together the percentage point difference between the positive and the negative view has fallen from 24 points to 14.

Across the EU25, levels of trust rose slightly from 46% to 47%, while those not trusting decreased in number from 33% to 29%.

'Don't know' factors were 24% across the Union and a substantial 30% in the UK.

Support for EU membership

Over the past six months, there has also been a noticeable improvement in EU25 citizens' attitude towards membership of the EU.

In EB64, 50% of citizens said membership was a good thing and 16% said it was a bad thing – a gap of 34 percentage points.

These figures have improved so that there is now a substantial 42 percentage point difference between the 55% supporting the Union and just 13% taking the contrary view. In the UK, this improvement is worth closer analysis.

In the autumn of 2005, there was a marginal 6-point difference between the 34% of those polled who saw EU membership as a good thing compared with 28% taking the contrary view. Now, just 6 months later, the differential has increased nearly three-fold so that 42% of the UK poll now sees EU membership as being a good thing, while just 25% deem it to be a bad thing.

The relative size of this significant improvement in UK attitude can be further demonstrated by making comparison with the statistics for Latvia and Finland. Six months previously, 36% and 38% of these countries' polls saw EU membership as a good thing – figures slightly larger than the 34% in the UK.

Now six months later, the Latvian and Finnish figures have both risen by just one percentage point to 37% and 39% respectively. These small gains contrast with the substantial leap in the UK statistics of eight percentage points.

Benefits of EU membership

There has been a marked increase in the percentage of UK citizens believing that EU membership had brought benefits to the country.

Although still below the EU25 average of 54%, which itself shows an improvement of 2 percentage points, the UK figure, at 42%, is up from 37% just six months previously.

Those taking the contrary view have seen their numbers fall from 47% to 44% meaning that the gap between these two opinions has narrowed sharply from 10 percentage points to just 2 points.

A further positive sign regarding UK figures can be seen in the 'don't know' responses. In many previous Eurobarometer reports, the UK has lived up to its nickname as the 'don't know, don't care' capital of Europe. On this, and many other issues covered by this Eurobarometer, the 'don't know' factor is falling.

While the EU25 average remains constant at 12%, the UK statistics show a decline from 17% to 14% - getting noticeably closer to the EU25 average.

The Image of the EU

Across the EU25, there is a significant improvement in citizens' attitudes relating to the image of the EU. While the neutral view is held by 32% of citizens in both the EU and in the UK, the positive view has increased from 44% to 50% in the 25 Member States and from 29% to 34% in the UK.

The UK figures are still noticeably behind the EU25 average, but there is a particular significance in the figures in this Eurobarometer issue.

Just six months previously, more UK citizens (35%) held a negative view on the European Union than those who held a positive view (29%). This situation has now been reversed and a third (34%) of the poll holds a positive view compared with 29% taking a negative stance.

Desired Level of information on the EU in the media

Respondents were asked as to the level of information on the EU that they received through different media and whether it was too little, too much or the right amount.

The UK and EU25 figures of those who said there was a 'sufficient level' of information on the European Union on **television** are broadly similar. This is a judgment made by 50% of the EU25 and 44% of the UK poll.

However, the interesting factor to emerge is that, across the Union, more than a third (35%) of those polled say there is too little information about the EU on television. The figures in the UK are at 37% - a minimal increase from the 36% noted six months previously.

The UK and EU25 figures show that approximately five times as many people want more information than those who feel there is too much on this subject already.

The largest proportion of the EU25 (42%) and the UK (36%) polls said that they received enough information on the EU via the **radio**.

But, once again, nearly a third of all EU citizens (EU25: 30%, UK: 31%) said they had too little information compared with just 4% saying they had too much.

Yet again, the most significant feature to emerge when looking at the amount of information on the EU available via the **press** was the fact that 23% of the EU25 and 25% of the UK poll felt there was not enough information of this kind in this medium.

Editor's comments:

Looking overall at these figures for TV, radio and the press, the overriding impression is that while approximately half of the poll across Europe felt that there is the right amount of news relating to the EU, a very significant proportion - ranging from a quarter to a third of the poll - would welcome more information on the EU.

Media attitude towards EU

Respondents are also asked how they assess the attitude of various media towards the EU.

Approximately half of the poll believed that **television's** 'attitude' towards the EU was objective with figures of 53% recorded across the EU25 and 48% in the UK.

Where, however, a serious difference emerges is in the polarized views. Across the Union, 20% of those polled consider TV to be too positive as opposed to half this number (11%) saying the attitude was too negative. In the UK however, this picture is reversed with just 13% saying that TV coverage is too positive and a much larger 23% believing it to be too negative.

A similar pattern to that shown in the previous section on television is also seen in relation to **radio**.

Again, a large proportion of those polled believe radio reports on the EU in an objective way with figures of 48% across the Union and 41% in the UK.

However, the broad EU25 figures show that 13% of those polled think the attitude is too positive compared with 8% taking the view that the medium's attitude is too negative.

In the UK, the opposite view is held with just 8% of that country's poll seeing radio's attitude to the EU as being too positive – just half the number (15%) seeing the comment as being too negative.

When the **press** is reviewed on this issue, yet again, the broad pattern shown in citizens' views of other media attitude to the EU is repeated.

Across the EU25, half (49%) of the poll see press coverage as being objective, while 13% see it as being too positive compared with 10% seeing it as being too negative.

The UK figures, again, run contrary to the general EU view. While a majority (35%) sees this comment as being objective, there is again a substantial proportion (27%) of the poll believing this comment to be too negative – more than three times the 8% taking the contrary view.