

focus

News and views

from the European Information Association

Finding out about...

public opinion

February's White Paper on a European Communication Policy identifies ways in which citizens might be involved in the development of the European Union.

As a response to the perceived need to better understand citizens' views on 'Europe', the Commission's Directorate-General for Communication organised a conference on European public opinion research.

Held in Madrid on the 27 October, the event - said to be a first step towards creating a network of national experts in public opinion research - brought together pollsters, journalists, academics and representatives of the EU Institutions and national governments.

Margot Wallström, Commission Vice-President with responsibility for Institutional Relations and Communication Strategy, said its primary objective was to "deepen our understanding of European public opinion and to explore new [a]venues to make the best use of existing tools and research at national and at European level."

Scope

The European Commission has been monitoring public opinion in the Member States since 1973, and has published the results primarily in the series 'Eurobarometer'. According to the

booklet 'How the Europeans see themselves - Looking through the mirror with public opinion surveys' (*European Documentation*, September 2000):

"... the Commission's public opinion surveys have collected information about nearly every aspect of European Union life. Although much of the work has focused on public support for and knowledge of the European Union, its policies and its institutions, the Eurobarometer surveys have also looked at how satisfied Europeans are with the life they lead, what their expecta-

tions of the future are and what their concerns are ..."

With an increasing number of people opting not to participate in the formal political process, keeping track of their views arguably becomes more important. The Union's diverse membership can make monitoring public opinion particularly difficult, and understanding it is a greater challenge than is usually the case in a single country.

The 'Latest Updates' section of the Commission's 'Public Opinion' website >>

AIDS prevention

Consumer protection

Avian Influenza

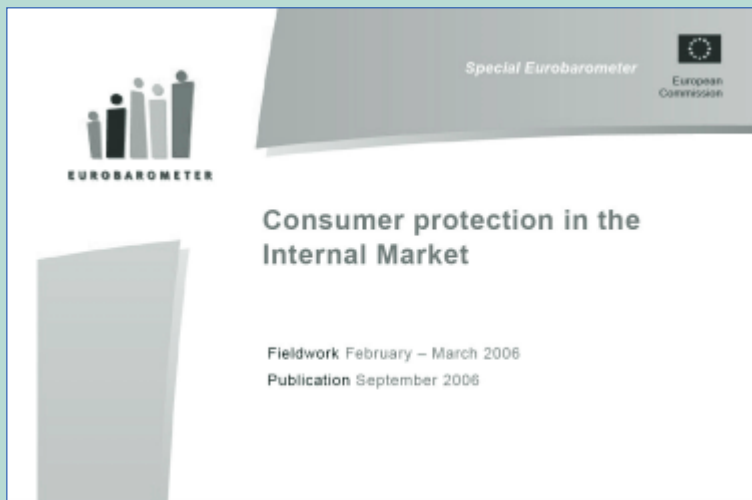
The Union's neighbours

Energy

EU enlargement

The Future of Europe

Languages



(ec.europa.eu/public_opinion) illustrates the range of topics covered, which include:

- ▶ The European Union and its neighbours
- ▶ AIDS prevention
- ▶ Consumer protection in the Internal Market
- ▶ Attitudes towards EU enlargement
- ▶ Avian influenza
- ▶ Introduction of the euro in the new Member States
- ▶ The future of Europe
- ▶ Europeans and their languages
- ▶ Risk issues
- ▶ Attitudes towards energy

Remember ...

Are these things of interest to providers of EU information? They certainly should be. For two reasons: one, they often contain figures (mis)quoted by the media, which it can be useful to see in their original context (most of the surveys will be the subject of a press release to stimulate interest in their findings); and two, some of them report directly on people's views

about the provision of information on the Union (for example, "more than a third (35%) of those polled say there is too little information about the EU on television" said the Standard Eurobarometer 65 of July 2006).

Highlights of some reports are now available as PowerPoint presentations - including Standard Eurobarometer 65. This Eurobarometer is also an example of one which is available not only as a Europe-wide report, but also as individual country surveys.

Note that each report is produced for an EU Institution - usually the Commission's DG Communication - but that there is invariably a disclaimer to the effect that "the interpretations and opinions contained in it are solely those of the authors" and that they do not represent an official viewpoint.

As always with documents which quote opinions, it is important to take note of who was asked what and when. How and when a question is put to someone can influence their

response - and give us all cause to debate, ad nauseam, the 'real' meaning of the results. And then, of course, the results are invariably presented as a series of statistics, and we all know what that means ...

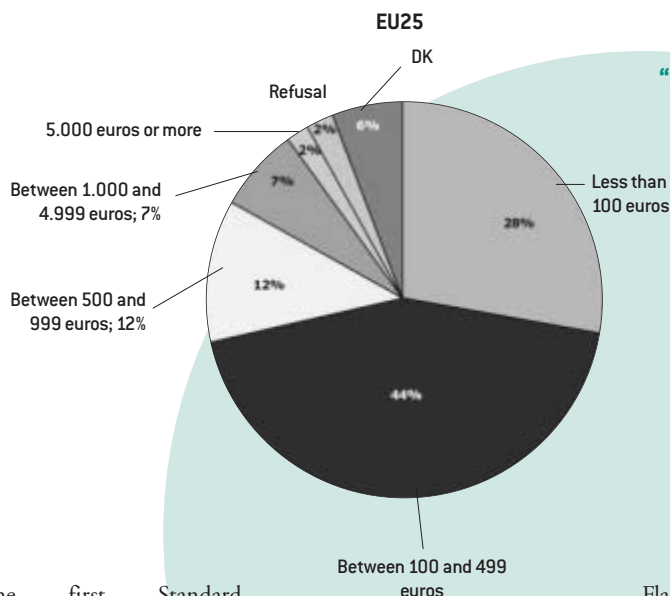
Eurobarometer

The address of the Commission's 'Public Opinion' website is ec.europa.eu/public_opinion. Eurobarometer reports comprise the majority - though not all - of the material available on the site. Eurobarometer is divided into a number of series:

Standard Eurobarometer (EB) was established in 1973. Surveys are undertaken between two and five times each year, with reports being published twice each year (each report provides the date of the relevant survey(s) as well as that of publication). The Standard Eurobarometer is based on face-to-face interviews with some 1,000 people in each Member State (figures are higher for Germany and the UK, and lower for Luxembourg).



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“Just as a barometer can be used to measure the atmospheric pressure and thus to give a short-range weather forecast, this Euro-barometer can be used to observe, and to some extent forecast, public attitudes towards the most important current events connected directly or indirectly with the development of the European Community and the unification of Europe.”

Introduction to the first Eurobarometer, July 1974

The first Standard Eurobarometer was published in 1974, and showed that wages and prices (interpreted as “inflation”) were of most concern to respondents, followed by “the economic crisis, jobs, unemployment and the energy crisis”, “domestic policy” and “the sick society”.

Special Eurobarometer reports (also abbreviated to ‘EB’) are themed surveys undertaken at the same time as the Standard Eurobarometer. The first Special Eurobarometer focused on European Unification. It was published in 1972 and is not available via the website; the earliest available report in this series is ‘The European Consumer’, issued in 1976.

The Central and Eastern Eurobarometer (CEEB) was conducted annually between 1990 and 1998. A survey of the general public, it was first undertaken in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, with the final edition covering 10 countries, and a total of 19 being included in the 1996 version. Only the 1996 and 1998 editions are available on the ‘Public Opinion’ website.

The CEEB was replaced by the Candidate Countries Eurobarometer (CCEB), the first of which was carried out in Autumn 2001 and published in March 2002. It covered the 13 countries which at that time had applied for EU membership.

The CCEB is published annually, with the addition of occasional ‘special reports’ covering, for example, ‘Safer Internet for children and adolescents’, ‘Financial services and consumer protection’, and ‘Attitudes regarding defrauding the European Union and its budget’ (all issued in 2004).

Flash Eurobarometers are undertaken at the request of the Commission or other EU Institutions. Intended to focus on particular target groups and to provide results relatively quickly, the interviews are conducted by telephone. The earliest Flash Eurobarometer is from May 2001 (‘Les médecins et la société d’information’), with some 75 having been produced up to July 2006. The euro has been a recurring topic, with the Constitution also accounting for a number of reports. The United Kingdom’s relations with the EU have featured (January 2005, July 2006), as have SME’s access to finance (October 2005), entrepreneurship (June 2004), and various aspects of the internet.

Qualitative Studies investigate the motivations, feelings and reactions of selected social groups to particular topics or concepts. The studies are based on listening to people and analysing their way of expressing themselves in discussion groups or using non-directive interviews.

In addition to examining attitudes to the future of Europe, this series covers consumers’ attitudes towards a range of issues, including labelling, television programmes with a European content, cross border shopping, services of general economic interest, and integrating gender mainstreaming into employment policies. Just 10 reports have been published since June 2001 (some are available only in French).

The Archives section of the website gives access to all these series, plus:

- ▶ CTS - Continuous Tracking Survey (1996-1998; the CTS consisted of some 200 telephone interviews conducted for 44 weeks each year in the Member States)

- ▶ Top Decision Makers survey (1996)
- ▶ Youth takes the floor (“Background note based on relevant findings from Eurobarometer data”, published December 2005)
- ▶ Foreign and Security Policy (undertaken in the context of the Convention on the Future of Europe, 2003)

Other links

The main page of the ‘Public Opinion’ website highlights selected ‘Key issues’: the Constitution, enlargement, the euro, and ‘How the Europeans see themselves?’. All have links to relevant publications, although the last item links to the text of a September 2000 booklet in the series *European Documentation* entitled ‘How the Europeans see themselves - Looking through the mirror with public opinion surveys’.

The link ‘The European Constitution’ for example leads to a page which brings together 10 surveys on that topic, most of which are from the ‘Flash Eurobarometer’ series.

The website also provides links to ‘Social Science Data Archives’ in Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Israel, and South Africa, and to ‘Opinion Poll Institutes’ in 28 European countries.

Elsewhere, the Commission’s White Paper on a European Communication Policy (COM (2006)35) can be found at:

ec.europa.eu/communication_white_paper, and details of the Commission-organised conference ‘Understanding European public opinion’ are at www.eurobarometer-conference.eu. ■