

Indicator 6: Civic capabilities

How far and how equally do citizens enjoy civic capabilities needed for them to exercise public control over the polity?

Measures that could be relevant for this indicator are: citizens' objective knowledge of the European Union (6.1); awareness of different EU institutions (6.2); and citizens' knowledge that their own country holds the Presidency of the Council (6.3).

6.1 Citizens' objective knowledge of the European Union

It is by no means obvious how much knowledge citizens need of political systems. Political competition can help simplify matters to the point at which citizens do not need a great deal of information in order to exercise public control and choice over policies. It may, for example, be enough for citizens to know who is in government and who is in opposition if they are to have the ability to 'throw' one lot of rascals out and replace them with another. It may likewise be enough for citizens to have some rough idea of how different parties relate to one another along some key dimension of choice – such as 'left versus right' - if they are to exercise some influence over the broad direction of public policy.

Moreover, in a well-functioning system of representation, representatives acquire the information and the expertise needed to decide and deliberate on behalf of those they represent. Citizens don't need to be experts on public matters where representatives can be relied upon to acquire expertise on their behalf. Yet, some minimum of knowledge is needed if citizens are to exercise judgement on whether their representatives are indeed representing them. In this regard, it is often argued that the complexity of the Union is likely to overwhelm citizens' attempts to acquire knowledge of it.

For some years now, Eurobarometer has attempted to construct an objective measure of citizens' knowledge of the Union by asking respondents a handful of simple questions about the Union. Table 6.1. shows the average number of respondents from different member states who answered all the questions correctly in recent surveys. The following are examples of the questions asked in Eurobarometer 73:

1. The European Union has 27 Members, True or False?
2. The Members of the European Parliament are directly elected by the Citizens of each Member State, True or False?
3. Switzerland is a Member of the European Union, True or False?
4. One of the objectives of the Lisbon Treaty was to strengthen the position of the EU in international relations, True or False?

Eurobarometer itself offers the following rather gloomy assessment of its own findings: 'Given that the test is fairly simple, the fact that 42 per cent of Europeans gave at least one wrong answer out of three shows that the European population's knowledge of the EU remains fragile and fragmented' (Standard Eurobarometer 74, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', November 2010: 53).

Indeed Eurobarometer notes a further curiosity, as follows. 'It is remarkable that the method of electing the European Parliament is much better known in the new than the old member states. The level of correct responses is 70 per cent in the 12 newest member states and only 56 per cent in EU15 countries (Standard Eurobarometer 73, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', vol. 1, May 2010: 199).

Table 6.1. Citizens' objective knowledge of the European Union

	Average percentage of correct responses to five questions in Eurobarometer 72	Average percentage of correct responses to four questions in Eurobarometer 73
AT	53	70
BE	56	66
BG	29	59
CY	42	64
CZ	50	66
DE	47	66
DK	51	71
EE	45	58
EL	43	70
ES	32	50
FI	51	70
FR	53	61
HU	38	66
IE	49	66
IT	33	56
LT	35	57
LU	65	75
LV	40	54
MT	45	65
NL	52	63
PL	40	61
PT	42	62
RO	29	49
SE	52	68
SI	54	76
SK	46	74
UK	40	49
EU ave	42	60
Iceland		52

Sources

Standard Eurobarometer 72, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', October-November 2009: 205
Standard Eurobarometer 73, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', Vol. 1, May 2010: 198.

6.2 Awareness of different EU institutions

As seen, the Lisbon Treaty claims that citizens are represented twice over in European Union institutions: once through the participation of their own elected governments in the Council of Ministers; and a second time through the European Parliament, directly elected by citizens themselves. These two bodies are structured to give priority to two different forms of representation. The Council primarily provides territorial representation of member states (although each national government is also a left-right party formation). On the other hand, The European Parliament provides ideological representation of the different left-right party families that cross-cut national territorial divisions in so far as parties belonging to most of the party families are to be found in most member states.

It is important that citizens should be aware of this difference. Knowing how the EP is organised for representation – and which party formations are directly responsible for the

everyday exercise of its powers – is a piece of information that might be considered useful for citizens to have when they elect the EP.

Special Eurobarometers known as ‘Parlemeters’ ask respondents: Do MEPs sit in the European Parliament according to a) their political affinities or b) their nationality? Table 6.2.a. summarises the responses to this question when it was asked in 2010. Two findings stand out:

- a) Across the Union as a whole the understanding that citizens are represented in the EP by left-right party groups is relatively low. Indeed, only slightly more respondents believe that representation in the EP is structured by political affiliation (42 per cent) rather than nationality (38 per cent).
- b) In some member states misunderstanding of the structure of representation in the EP is especially high. Less than a third of respondents correctly identify the EP as organised by political affiliation in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Italy and Greece.

Table 6.2.a. Proportion of public who believe that MEPs sit in the European Parliament according to political affinities versus their nationality

	Political Affinity (Correct Answer)	Nationality (Incorrect Answer)	Don't know	Balance of correct over incorrect answers
NL	61	33	6	+ 28
BE	60	35	5	+ 25
SE	59	33	8	+ 26
EE	59	30	11	+ 29
SI	58	27	15	+ 31
FI	56	32	12	+ 24
PT	53	31	16	+ 22
RO	52	29	19	+ 23
CY	52	22	26	+ 30
DK	52	36	12	+ 16
LT	51	27	22	+ 24
LU	50	37	13	+ 13
FR	48	33	19	+ 15
ES	47	33	20	+ 14
MT	46	28	26	+ 18
IRE	41	35	24	+ 6
LV	46	41	13	+ 5
UK	38	34	28	+4
EU ave	42	38	20	+ 4
DE	37	34	29	+ 3
AT	44	43	13	+1
PL	40	40	20	0
BG	33	35	32	-2
HU	42	49	9	- 7
IT	32	53	15	- 21
SK	34	56	10	- 21
EL	32	54	14	- 22
CZ	26	64	10	- 38

Source

Special Eurobarometer / Wave 74.3, ‘The Parlemeter’, November-December 2010: 12.

Away from the EP itself, Eurobarometer also test citizens' awareness of the range of Union institutions by asking them whether they have heard anything recently about the Commission, Council of the European Union, European Central Bank, European Court of Justice and European Parliament.

One difficulty stands out. Although the question is hardly very demanding, significantly fewer citizens are aware of the Council than of the Commission or the European Parliament.

This finding is worrying in so far as it suggests that many citizens may have a distorted understanding of the European Union as a polity that 'acts upon' its member states, rather than one which usually acts with the participation of member states in its decisions to the point at which it is actually quite rare for any Union decision to be made without the unanimous agreement of all member state governments, even in instances where qualified majority voting is possible.

There is also a high level of variation across member states here. In Slovenia, 84 per cent of respondents claimed to have heard something recently about the work of the Council of Ministers when the question was asked in 2010. In the UK only 41 per cent gave a positive answer. Those citizens who are unaware of the extent of their own government's participation in Union decisions through the Council, will necessarily also be unaware that one way in which they can attempt to exercise public control over EU decisions is precisely via their own national governments.

Table 6.2.b. Respondents who claim to have recently heard talk of the different institutions of the European Union

	2010 ¹					2005 ²					2000 ³				
	COMM	COUNCIL	ECB	ECJ	EP	COMM	COUNCIL	ECB	ECJ	EP	COMM	COUNCIL	ECB	ECJ	EP
AT	89	73	90	-	93	87	66	83	77	91	89	74	78	75	94
BE	88	66	79	-	94	88	65	64	64	94	90	71	62	76	96
BG	86	72	85	-	96	(69)	(58)	(66)	(42)	(80)	-	-	-	-	-
CZ	83	77	80	-	94	84	77	70	54	92	-	-	-	-	-
CY	80	76	78	-	86	76	75	58	81	84	-	-	-	-	-
DE	78	59	92	-	93	76	60	81	86	92	72	57	81	78	87
DK	88	63	85	-	98	89	81	81	96	97	94	75	74	92	99
EE	85	76	79	-	90	81	68	63	55	86	-	-	-	-	-
EL	95	82	92	-	97	85	80	72	81	91	69	67	55	65	85
ES	75	66	81	-	85	72	60	65	55	84	76	73	70	56	90
FI	96	82	97	-	98	95	76	92	79	97	95	74	89	80	96
FR	84	61	76	-	91	85	65	66	52	91	86	75	72	66	93
HU	86	75	74	-	95	82	72	51	50	89	-	-	-	-	-
IE	93	78	95	-	97	92	69	83	69	97	89	72	83	72	95
IT	75	63	71	-	87	74	61	63	47	85	82	67	77	52	95
LT	80	67	75	-	90	69	57	57	42	82	-	-	-	-	-
LU	90	78	85	-	93	92	75	83	82	96	94	86	82	88	97
LV	82	68	72	-	88	79	65	63	51	83	-	-	-	-	-
MT	82	75	74	-	92	84	75	66	69	93	-	-	-	-	-
NL	86	69	89	-	95	81	67	85	64	94	83	66	85	80	94
PL	88	76	68	-	93	83	69	58	66	87	-	-	-	-	-
PT	90	75	89	-	96	90	81	86	80	94	83	76	69	59	92
RO	79	70	69	-	93	(76)	(70)	(60)	(54)	(85)	-	-	-	-	-

Table 6.2.b. (continued)

SE	87	50	93	-	97	89	50	86	94	97	92	81	82	76	97
SI	91	84	92	-	97	91	82	73	77	96	-	-	-	-	-
SK	85	77	83	-	97	83	77	69	65	94	-	-	-	-	-
UK	74	41	59	-	83	76	42	54	62	87	74	37	57	57	88
EU ave	81	63	78	-	90	79	62	68	65	89	79	63	73	66	91
ICE	75	55	79	-	79	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Sources

¹ Standard Eurobarometer 73, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', Vol. 1, May 2010: 159-162.

² Standard Eurobarometer 64, 'L'opinion publique dans l'Union Européenne, October-November 2005.

³ Standard Eurobarometer 53, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', annexes, April-May 2000: B.69.

6.3 Citizens' knowledge that their own country holds the Presidency of the Council

Another indicator of how much member state governments are prepared to advertise the extent of their participation in Union decisions to their own publics is provided by responses to a Eurobarometer question that asks the publics of the member state holding the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union whether they are aware of their own country's Presidency. As shown in Table 6.3., there appears to be a significant difference between large and small member states. With the exception of Portugal, the six member states where the public was least likely to have heard something about their country's own Presidency in recent surveys are all amongst the largest member states.

Table 6.3. Citizens' knowledge that their own country holds the Presidency of the Council

	Year of Presidency	Percentage of citizens knowing that their country holds the Presidency of the Council
SI	2008 ¹	92
DK	2002 ²	92
FI	2006 ³	91
SE	2009 ⁴	87
CZ	2009 ⁵	84
EL	2003 ⁶	84
LU	2005 ⁷	82
AT	2006 ⁸	79
IE	2004 ⁹	77
NL	2004 ¹⁰	75
DE	2007 ¹¹	74
IT	2003 ¹²	69
ES	2010 ¹³	67
FR	2008 ¹⁴	63
PT	2007 ¹⁵	57
UK	2005 ¹⁶	46

Sources

¹ Standard Eurobarometer 69, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', April-May 2008.

² Standard Eurobarometer 58, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', October-November 2002.

³ Standard Eurobarometer 66, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', October-November 2006.

- ⁴ Standard Eurobarometer 72, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', October-November 2009.
- ⁵ Standard Eurobarometer 71, 'Public Opinion in the European Union' June-July 2009.
- ⁶ Standard Eurobarometer 59, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', March-April 2003.
- ⁷ Standard Eurobarometer 63, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', May-June 2005.
- ⁸ Standard Eurobarometer 65, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', May-July 2006.
- ⁹ Standard Eurobarometer 61, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', February-March 2004.
- ¹⁰ Standard Eurobarometer 62, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', October-November 2004.
- ¹¹ Standard Eurobarometer 67, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', April-May 2007.
- ¹² Standard Eurobarometer 60, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', October-November 2003.
- ¹³ Standard Eurobarometer 73, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', May 2010.
- ¹⁴ Standard Eurobarometer 70, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', October-November 2008.
- ¹⁵ Standard Eurobarometer 68, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', October-November 2007.
- ¹⁶ Standard Eurobarometer 64, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', October-November 2005.