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► **To cite this version:**

Philippe Aldrin. The eurobarometer and the making of european opinion. Perceptions of Europe, EPCR, pp.17-34, 2011. halshs-00868867v2

HAL Id: halshs-00868867

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00868867v2>

Submitted on 2 Oct 2013 (v2), last revised 24 Nov 2013 (v3)

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Philippe Aldrin — « The eurobarometer and the making of european opinion »
Chapter of : Daniel Gaxie, Nicolas Hubé and Jay Rowell (eds.), *Perceptions of Europe*
A Comparative Sociology of European Attitudes
ECPR Press, Colchester, 2011, p. 17-34.

The eurobarometer and the making of european opinion

Philippe Aldrin

A debatable, yet seldom debated, monopoly on expertise

The European Commission has claimed that a ‘European public opinion’ exists and has therefore scrutinised its mood swings for more than thirty years. Well before the Brussels institution created the semi-annual survey programme called Eurobarometer (EB) in 1973, Jacques-René Rabier, its founding father, inferred a rise of a ‘European political awareness’ and the existence of a ‘consensus in favour of European integration’ from the results of the very first European-wide polls,¹ saw the rise of a ‘European political awareness’ and of a ‘consensus in favour of European integration’ (Rabier 1965: 53 ff.).² Four decades and six hundred opinion surveys later, this prophetic intuition has become an institutional truth. Indeed, the regular publication of the EB surveys, and the echo created by them, have since largely contributed to naturalising the idea of a European public opinion in European political, intellectual and media circles. Furthermore, the extensive database that they now constitute has been institutionalised to the point where it now prevails as the essential source of information on the state of public opinion in Europe, as well as the reiterated statistical evidence of support for the Community process by the majority of Europeans.

Among the EB’s so-called ‘trend’ questions,³ the one that aims to measure support for the EU – ‘Generally speaking, do you think that [your country]’s membership of the European Union is: a good thing/a bad thing/neither good nor bad’ – invariably elicits a majority of ‘positive’ answers. Over the 1998–2008 period, more than 52 per cent of respondents on average chose the first option. While the (slight) drop of the number of positive answers and the latest electoral trials have recently led the writers

of EB reports to reconsider the enchanted vision of a spontaneous and generalised Europhilia,⁴ the scores obtained by this answer are now held as evidence of Europeans' approval of political Europe. A few weeks after the 2005 referendums, in which both French and Dutch voters rejected the constitutional treaty, the heads of state and government gave this reminder in the conclusions of the European Council: 'We have noted the outcome of the referendums in France and the Netherlands. We consider that these results do not call into question citizens' attachment to the construction of Europe' (Declaration by the Heads of State and Government, European Council, 16–17 June 2005, Brussels, SN 117/05). In the aftermath of another less encouraging verdict expressed in the voting booths, this official certainty was partly based on the EB's longitudinal results and post-referendum surveys.⁵ An instrument like the EB, which virtually holds a monopoly over the analysis of Europeans' opinions and so assiduously supports both the European integration project and the supranational path (both spearheaded by the backing institution) should attract sociological curiosity. How is the EB made? Who makes it? According to which methods? Which means (material, human, conceptual) are used and which aims (institutional, political, ideological) are sought? Does the EB have an influence – and if so, what kind – on political, media and scholarly perceptions of 'European public opinion'? Surprisingly, a review of the academic literature on the topic reveals that there has been very little research attempting to shed light on these questions,⁶ even though the literature on European opinion makes systematic and liberal use of EB data (Inglehart and Reif 1991; Bréchon and Cautrès 1998).

In the context of the Concorde research programme, it has occurred to me that it would be useful to consider the various processes – manufacturing, publication, mediatisation, uses, secondary exploitations – at work in the equivalence between EB and European public opinion. The analysis presented in this chapter thus explores the instrument's several dimensions: as a Community programme for measuring opinions; as an instrument of political governance used within the EU's institutional game and at the interfaces of European decision-making; as a dominant, or even exclusive source of data on the Europeans' attitudes. In order to try to understand the EB's unprecedented dominance (as surveys backed and published by a political institution) over the general knowledge of Europeans' opinions on Europe, I will first analyse the questionnaires and raise some methodological issues. Then I will go on to study the ins and outs of the institutionalisation of EB results, to understand how a monopolistic and official production of 'European public opinion' has come to prevail.

(Sociologically) questioning the questionnaire

To understand the place that the EB now holds, we need to go back to the origins of the instrument. This historical analysis, however, is made more difficult by the numerous accounts provided by the EB's founders (Rabier 1993; Melich 1998), who have shaped a powerful founding mythology, in the spirit of a general discourse on the 'heroic' early stages of the European Community (Dumoulin 2007). Embedded in this etiological discourse, the EB's genesis is short-circuited by an indigenous objectivation of sorts, against and with which the process of sociological objectivation has to unfold. The sociological deconstruction of the founding mythology requires dissociating the study of the EB surveys' production chain and the analysis of their social uses and effects. Hence, in this first part, the focus is on the EB reports, considered mainly on the basis of their properties as material objects containing indications on methodology (how the questionnaires are conceived, how the data are interpreted), survey set-up (how the questionnaire is administered), and the rhetoric of evidence (how the data are treated and modelled, conclusions) (see Topalov 1999), which specifically concern the political opinions collected by the instrument. This will be an internal analysis, and thanks to close attention to possible biases – immanent (inherent to the analysis of opinions through closed-ended questions), induced (generated by the conception and the administration of the questionnaires) and topical ones (linked to the specificities of the theme imposed and the public required to contribute) – of the EB method, I will endeavour to identify their effects on the orientation and dispersion of the data.

Recording political opinions on Europe in surveys

Opinion surveys relying on closed-ended questions entail a number of inherent biases, inscribed in the hypothesis on which such an approach is based, and which may be reinforced by their practical application (intellectual and material conception of the surveys, modes of administration of the questionnaire). While I do not wish to stir up the controversy between those who use and defend opinion surveys (Cayrol 2000) and those who denounce both their epistemological foundations and their effects (Bourdieu 1993; Champagne 1990; Lehingue 2007c), surveys, like any other method of empirical observation, should be subjected to scientific discussion. Such a discussion starts with the two 'sociological' assumptions that condition the very existence of opinion surveys: persons asked to respond to a survey have an opinion on the theme of the survey that can be recorded, measured and classified; their opinions display to the same extent the qualities – sincerity, consistency, stability – that justify their interpretation through various statistical operations of distribution,

aggregation, comparison or cross-study with the respondents' properties (age, gender, level of education, occupation, place of residence). The sociological critique of these assumptions is as old as the introduction of surveys in democracies (Blondiaux 1994), but has never offset the promise of this 'science of opinion' that offers the illusion of a social cartography of political attitudes and of the predictivity of votes. Yet, we cannot dismiss the hypothesis positing that persons who are requested to respond by an interviewer do not always have a previously constituted or even latent opinion on the questions asked (Converse 1964). In such situations, the practice that consists in making the respondents choose between pre-worded answers in a closed-ended list and then considering that their compliance with the request amounts to an opinion arguably produces opinions that are entirely artefactual, 'by-products' of the interaction between pollster and pollee (Lehingue 2007c: 137). Assigning the status of 'opinions' to these data and submitting them to extensive statistical treatment can therefore be problematic. This ultimately depends on the type of solicitation and the modalities of responses offered by the survey. How do EB surveys fare on this issue?

The political questions of European Commission surveys include a wide range of demands, such as classifying options, comparatively evaluating predictions, engaging in self-assessment or introspection, or choosing a side in political controversies. Sometimes the solicitation involves the respondents themselves, about a choice they will or would have to make as citizens; sometimes it requires that they put themselves in the shoes of leaders facing the imperative of hierarchising priorities and launching initiatives. This last type of solicitation implies varying levels of realism (depending on the respondent's social status, age, and interest in politics) and complexity (depending on the precision, technicality, or lexical specificity of the question), as these questions from the EB database show:

Excerpt 1 (EB 10, 1978)

Which one of these opinions comes closest to your own on the future elections to the European Parliament?

- It is an event with important consequences which is certain to make Europe more politically unified.
- It is an unimportant event because the national governments will not be bound by the votes in the European Parliament.

Some of the respondents likely have a pre-existing personal opinion, even if it is a confused one, on the election of MEPs with direct universal suffrage. But how many among them have asked themselves the question in these terms, or based on the alternatives suggested? This issue of the adequation between the informational elements given by the pollster and the respondent's spontaneous disposition to express an opinion is also raised when we consider the choices of answers offered and both the polarised and

precise character of the possible answer options. The conception of the question-answers group tends to place the respondent in an unusual situation of choice, sometimes even unreal, as it is very far from common ways to understand to societal or political problems. Hence, the situation cannot be compared to pre-election polls, whose relative predictivity has legitimised the validity of all political opinion surveys. The reliability of pre-electoral polls increases as the electoral campaign develops,⁷ as the political projects and the competing personalities come into focus, and especially as the moment when the voter will effectively have to make a personal choice draws nearer.⁸ But with the exception of rare situations, such as the organisation of referendums on the ratification of a constitutional treaty or the election of MEPs,⁹ political Europe is a rather remote subject, even foreign to the preoccupations of most social actors. The fictional character of the theme and of the method of questioning can only be heightened when the respondent is asked to react as if he or she were a policy-maker.

Excerpt 2 (EB 3, 1975)

Taking into account the great problems facing your country at this time, which of these three ways would you prefer to solve the problems?

- National independence
- Inter-governmental cooperation
- The political unification of Europe with election of a single Parliament evolving quickly into a true European Government.

Excerpt 3 (EB 63, 2005)

From the following list of actions, could you tell me what should be for you, the three actions that the European Union should follow in priority? (Max. 3 answers). (List: Fighting illegal immigration/Asserting the political and diplomatic importance of the European Union around the world/etc.)

Aside from the biases I have pointed out (lack of realism of the injunction to provide an opinion, shift from expected social roles towards role-playing), this type of solicitation directly mobilises a vocabulary and concepts borrowed from political or legal analysis. Yet, only part of the population uses schemes of conceptualisation of political subjects that directly refer to explicitly political categories of understanding and judgement. Indeed, the propensity to have recourse to ‘political principles’ (Bourdieu 1984) to judge political questions is distributed neither equally nor randomly in society. It is correlated with the level of education, social status and occupation. Individuals who are weakly politicised and have little educational capital tend to rely on ‘ethical principles’ to produce their political opinions, in the sense that they refer more to ‘common sense’ and domestic morality (Bourdieu 1984). EB questions, which are built around an explicitly political terminology and theme, therefore run the risk of confronting respondents with an unrealistic request which hinders the sincerity, the consistency and the stability of their answers. There are

significant chances that some respondents will only make a choice in order not to lose face and not to break the fleeting ‘pact of the survey’ that links them to the pollster,¹⁰ not to mention the many risks of misunderstandings between the question as it was conceived and worded by the pollsters and as it is understood by the pollees (Gaxie 1990). The degree of misunderstanding of the questions – and of their specifically political implications – and the feeling of incompetence that respondents may experience facing such solicitations cause biases that are all the more significant as Europe is generally perceived as a remote and complex topic.

***Generating and interpreting opinions on Europe:
the Eurobarometer’s induced and topical biases***

To a large extent, the EB’s credit derives from the rigour and the scientific apparatus of its methodology. Since the programme was launched, the Commission has added ‘technical specifications’ to the reports, where the survey methods and conditions are briefly outlined (institutes in charge of administering the questionnaire, number of respondents per country, etc.) The instrument’s reliability and objectivity are asserted through the ostensible compliance with the canons of scientificity: the method is openly exposed; guarantees are provided on the independence and competence of the authors and of the subcontractors; and in a more recent development, the margins of error of the results are also made explicit:

*Excerpt 4 (EB 62, 2004)*¹¹

In all countries, gender, age, region and size of locality were introduced in the iteration procedure. [The process of ‘weighting’ for the calculation of EU averages is explained.] Readers are reminded that survey results are estimations, the accuracy of which, everything being equal, rests upon the sample size and upon the observed percentage. With samples of about 1,000 interviews, the real percentages vary within the following confidence limits:

Observed percentages	10% or 90%	20% or 80%	30% or 70%	40% or 60%	50%
Confidence limits	± 1.9 pts	± 2.5 pts	± 2.7 pts	± 3.0 pts	± 3.1 pts

These explicit signs of scientificity can be interpreted by readers of EB reports as tokens of ‘scientific’ credibility,¹² and attest to the validity of the data and of their analysis. But beyond the ostensible compliance with statistical rigour, the EB survey system has biases related to the processes used to generate answers and to interpret data. The first bias classically concerns the intelligibility of the questions. Indeed, as Madeleine Grawitz pointed out, opinion polls ‘obviously depend closely on the interviewees’ answer possibilities’ (Grawitz 2001). ‘Answer possibilities’, however, can be understood in at least two ways: first, as the latitude granted to the respondent by the degree of orientation (or polarisation) and the more or less limited number of answers. Then, as the comprehensibility of the question-answers groups, which hinges on the wording (clarity of the

formulation and of the terms) and on the social significations of their content (readability of the individual and/or collective stakes raised by the question). The problem of the latitude of possible answers leads us to study its potential effects on the distribution and therefore on the structure of the results, which is crucial in statistical interpretation. The problem of the ambivalence of significations, on the other hand, suggests evaluating the social range of the intelligibility of the problems raised by the questions, and therefore questioning the nature of the responses obtained.

Before I delve deeper into these issues with EB surveys, I want to briefly discuss the distinction – in terms of method and effects of the method – between opinion polls on politics and polls on everyday behaviours (habits, material or symbolic consumer practices, education, etc.), on the perception of public objects (image of a public figure, a party, popularity of a brand or institution) or social problems which the respondents feel personally concern them (purchasing power, security, etc.). EB surveys combine these different categories, but here their affiliation with the first category will be considered. In principle, political opinion polls do not differ from others in any way: they collect, classify, compare judgements, attitudes and subjective perceptions according to a method that precisely aims to calibrate and normalise these subjective opinions – hence, to deprive them of their personal, singular character – in order to be able to code them and statistically process them. This depersonalisation is the price to pay for the comparability of the data collected. In order to achieve it, questionnaires often exert a certain degree of symbolic violence on the respondents, through the overly academic character of their questions (technical vocabulary, politicised questions) and the extreme standardisation of the answers offered (polarised and limited choices). Then, by imposing such solicitations, in strictly identical terms, to respondents who are unequally endowed with the competence to express opinions on political subjects, this type of survey is ultimately more likely to measure (with an inappropriate tool) the interviewees' level of political literacy¹³ than to find out how their points of view on the question asked are constructed and why they are expressed. In the methodology of opinion polls, this bias is inevitable (due to the requirement for comparable data), but it can be kept in check by wording question-answers groups less technically or emphatically, by introducing open-ended questions or by giving the possibility to give so-called spontaneous answers, so that the principle of uniformisation does not cause a laminating effect (opinions are crushed and silenced) or a ventriloquism effect (the opinions collected are purely artefactual). In this case, it depends on the level of political formalism of the instructions given to respondents. Do EB surveys capture the way the respondents perceive the issues and challenges of the EU, or do they inadequately measure their level of European literacy? The following excerpt provides some elements to answer this question.

Excerpt 5 (EB 42, 1995)

For some time there has been talk of a ‘Two speed Europe’. This means that some countries would be ready to intensify the development of a common European policy in certain important areas, while other countries would not. Please tell me, for each of the following countries, whether or not you see it as being ready to intensify the development of a common European policy in certain important areas. [List of Member States]

This question, which I have picked among many similar ones, attests to the explicitly political character of EB questions. Admittedly, the phrase ‘Two speed Europe’ is explained somewhat didactically to the respondents.¹⁴ Yet, in order to be able to formulate informed answers to such questions – i.e. being aware of the political issues involved and being able to take a stance on that basis – respondents require a pre-existing knowledge of the problems raised by the institutional situations mentioned and a structured vision on the alternative positions or solutions available in the debate. Overall, on such a political question, the likelihood of collecting an actual opinion depends not only on the comprehension of the question’s terms and concepts, but also on the knowledge of European institutional mechanisms (here, the Member States and their respective stances vis-à-vis Community integration). Hence, simplifying the wording does not fully solve the problem of the intelligibility of the question-answers groups.¹⁵ Indeed, with such questions, the problem of intelligibility is twofold; it is both linked to the specifically political nature of the issue raised and to the somewhat esoteric character of European political affairs. In addition to the bias induced by the means used to generate ‘opinions’ (politicisation of political questions), there is another topical bias linked to the material, cognitive, and symbolic distance that generally separates respondents from EU realities, as the few studies relying on qualitative material show (Bélot 2000). Reasons that can explain this confused relationship towards Europe include the feeling of geographic and ‘affective’ distance from Brussels, the originality and the impersonal character of the mechanisms of EU decision-making, and its changing borders. This confusion manifests itself through the interviewees’ difficulty to assign specific responsibilities to the EU in terms of public action.

Questions that are explicitly about the EU and its functioning are perceived almost as academic tests of knowledge for which the interviewees almost always feel insufficiently qualified. This dimension of the relationship to political Europe is confirmed by the results of qualitative surveys financed by the European Commission in the past few years. These studies have relied on focus groups, and their results very clearly contradict the opinion trends traditionally observed by the EB.

Excerpt 6 (Qualitative EB, The European Citizens and the Future of Europe, May 2006)

[There are] admission[s] of ignorance of the process perceived as complex and difficult to understand. Judgements requested from respondents on the functioning of the Union are therefore very rarely backed up by known facts. Participants from several groups for that matter state right away that they are unable to voice a well-founded opinion. Without having much clearer views, respondents from numerous other groups have rather negative impressions, with the concept of complexity, opaqueness, slowness of processes or low efficiency...

As they give interviewees more opportunities to express themselves, these qualitative studies collect opinions that are rather different from those generated by closed-ended questionnaires and highlight the feeling of lack of knowledge on European institutions. The quizzes included in EB questionnaires in the past few years have actually confirmed this point:

Excerpt 7 (EB 67, 2007)

For each of the following statements about the European Union could you please tell me whether you think it is true or false? [EU answers]

	True	False	DK
The EU currently consists of fifteen Member States	23%	57%	20%
The members of the European Parliament are directly elected by the citizens of the EU	45%	35%	20%
Every six months a different Member State becomes the President of the Council of the European Union	49%	25%	26%

NB: Correct answers are in bold

For the authors of the EB surveys, these responses work as indicators of the respondents' 'objective knowledge' (or 'actual knowledge'). Despite the shaky logic of the testing system,¹⁶ this 'quiz' shows the high rate of incorrect answers and the very high rate of 'Don't Know' answers to questions on basic institutional mechanisms. For several years, the EB questionnaire has also included a solicitation for a self-assessment of the interviewee's knowledge on the EU, which is taken as an indicator of 'subjective knowledge'.

Excerpt 8 (EB 63, 2005)

Using this scale, how much do you feel you know about the European Union, its policies, its institutions? (Scale from 1 (know nothing) to 10 (know a great deal)) Results [EU]: Know (almost) nothing (1–2): 19%/Know a bit (3–5): 51%/ Know quite a bit (6–8): 27%/Know a great deal (9–10): 2%. The average level of subjective knowledge of European Union citizens is 4.5.

These results are also debatable¹⁷ but the general tendency of the answers (stable for a decade) confirms a widely shared feeling of lack of knowledge on how the EU works. Several types of results converge on this point,

which calls into question the actual properties of the EB data. When 70 per cent¹⁸ of respondents say that they only know ‘a bit’ or ‘nothing’ about the EU, questioning the sincerity and the consistency of their responses to the remaining solicitations of the questionnaire is not illegitimate.

The internal analysis of the EB instrument thus shows that the conception of political questions introduces various biases. The lack of realism of the solicitations, the politicisation of the questions, the socio-centred character of the instructions (which follow the conceptualisation and the vocabulary used by the pollsters and those who commission the polls), and, lastly, the social resonance of the European object produces raw data whose sociologically debatable character cannot be overshadowed by the sophistication or the rigour of the statistical treatment applied in primary and secondary analyses.¹⁹ The analysis of opinions on Europe does require recourse to quantitative methods for an initial outline – making out general trends, regularities, identifying paradoxes – before going into more in-depth sociological investigation (Zalc and Lemerrier 2008). But both the promoters and exegetes of EB data grant them much more value than merely providing an overview on relationships towards Europe. Displaying a genuine instrumental positivism (Bryant 1985), they view it, or feign to view it, as the numerical expression of European public opinion; the statistical and rationalised version of its concrete reality.

The monopolistic market of European polls

While opinions on Europe exist independently from the polling instrument that records them and may constitute a European public opinion (henceforth EPO), the latter is first and foremost comprised of what the EB measure, to paraphrase George Gallup’s famous assertion. Apart from a moving and composite phenomenon investigated by sociologists and philosophers (Ferry 2006), the EPO appears as a social and political reality mostly in the form of a normalised designation of a statistical assembly of attitudes recorded through polling. In this perspective, it can be seen as the ‘product of a conventional process’ that manufactures shared attitudes through extrinsic equivalences²⁰ and therefore provides European leaders with a concrete reality which can be used in their interactions (Desrosières 1993: 7). Indeed, for more than thirty years, the EB has performed a double process of substantialisation and pre-emption over the EPO. The very first EB-labelled survey presents the programme as a means to ‘follow the trends in *European public opinion* with regards to Community activities, particularly the areas of most interest to the public’ (EB 1, 1974, my emphasis). The idea of a EPO is now so naturalised that nobody even seems to think about debating whether it has any foundation. Based exclusively on

EB results, academics claim that ‘Europeans support the Europeanisation of public power because they doubt the skills of their State in the context of globalisation’ (Reynié 2008: 11), or that ‘the fact that more than half of Europeans express some form of identification with Europe, even if usually secondary to the national or regional identifications, is indicative of a proto-Europe- an society layered over national and subnational societies’ (Diez Medrano 2008). Opinions collected by sample and interpreted by the EB commands so much credit that nothing, even actual elections, seems to be liable to challenge it. While, sociologically speaking, it is difficult to claim that the EPO is – or is not – what the EB polls measure, the EB-EPO equivalence is considered as self-evident and never called into question by the principal users of the Commission’s surveys. The instrument gives form and intention to the EPO and, in so doing, proves to be very useful to all actors interested in the Europeans’ attitudes and opinions, including political leaders, specialised journalists and scholars. The transformations undergone by the EB programme since its inception reflect the instrument’s progressive instrumentalisation quite well.

From an experimental feedback tool...

On the market of trans-European polls, the EB holds a seldom challenged monopoly position, the only exception being the four waves of the European Values Survey over the last thirty years: 1981, 1990, 1999, 2008. This position is maintained by a powerful institution (the European Commission), which funds, orders, controls and regularly publishes a state of opinion of which it is both the guarantor and the driving force. The first reason for this situation, of course, lies in the difficulty and in the means required to simultaneously collect, analyse and compare opinions of twenty-seven national populations. By publishing EB reports and then making them available online free of charge, the European Commission has managed to turn its polling programme into an ideal database for students, journalists or researchers working on the subject.²¹ In Europe’s current institutional configuration as in less democratic regimes (Rowell 2005), the fact that only politicians are in charge of measurement instruments that allow the definition and handling of a ‘social reality’ is problematic, especially when said instruments explicitly borrow from science their supposedly apolitical truth in order to make their analysis of that reality indisputable.²² Since its inception in 1958, the European Commission has progressively come to rely on increasingly sophisticated tools of management of the public space and opinion, justified through the imperative of counteracting its deficit in popularity and legitimacy, pointed out by observers (Marquand 1979) and MEPs beginning in the late 1970s. The EB, created in 1973, has played an increasingly important role in this instrumentation and, like all tools of government, has experienced and been transformed by the tensions, priorities and beliefs of the institutional actors

in charge of it.

The development of a semi-annual polling programme backed by the Commission was initially conceived as a ‘feedback tool’ allowing European decision-makers to be informed on the state of opinion on Europe through regular and longitudinal opinion surveys conducted in all Member States.²³ In a Community born from diplomatic negotiations, built on technocratic processes, with support from national parliaments but no popular consent, this was a way to get a feel for the attitude and the support of European populations towards the integration process, in the absence of electoral consultations and recognised opinion brokers. The EB’s early stages were tentative and the success of the endeavour was uncertain. It was initially a marginal, even precarious experiment: not only is this shown by the status of its founder Jacques-René Rabier,²⁴ but also by the lack of institutional resources (an office and a secretary) and the amateurism of the first EB reports. The first eleven reports were introduced as ‘Working document for the Commission of the European Communities’; they were typewritten, with many typos and incorrect table borders. Conducted by the French polling institute IFOP using the quota method, these polls are retrospectively striking in terms of their freedom in the wording of the questions, their analysis, the inventiveness of the indicators and the scientific reflexivity on display. For instance, the following remarks were made on the possible methodological effects related to the very principle of soliciting an opinion on whether more or less Europe was needed:

Excerpt 9 (EB 1, 1974)

There are two possible explanations for the fact that what the Commission is doing is now considered insufficient and it is difficult to choose between the two at the stage reached in the analysis. This critical reply may be a stereotype by which the public expresses its feeling that ‘the Government never does enough’.

While they may seem entirely justified, these considerations on the effects of the method of questioning – and their tendency to artificially manufacture favourable opinions towards Europe – progressively disappeared.²⁵ Likewise, the first EBs included questions whose theme and wording soon came to be perceived as ‘unnecessarily controversial’.²⁶

Excerpt 10 (EB 3, 1975)

If you were to be told tomorrow that the Common Market was to be scrapped, would you feel: Very sorry/indifferent/Relieved/Don’t know?

Excerpt 11 (EB 6, 1976 and EB 21, 1984)

This is a list of the countries belonging to the European Community (Common Market). (Show CARD). Among these countries of the European Community, are there any, including your own, you would prefer not to be in the community? Which ones? (Followed by a list of the ten member countries)

Excerpt 12 (EB 3, 1975)

Would you, or would you not, be willing to make some personal sacrifice - for example- pay a little more taxes to help bring about the unification of Europe? Very willing/Fairly willing/Not very willing/Not at all willing/No reply.

Results [EC]: Very willing 5%, Fairly willing 21%, Not very willing 24%, Not at all willing 43%, No reply 7%.

The greater publicity and media visibility of the results led to a transformation of the EB reports, both in form and content. With regard to form, in the 1990s, the reports as material and then virtual objects (on the Internet) resembled products delivered by marketing and polling institutes to their customers: they were printed in colour on glossy paper, with a recognisable graphic charter and layout, and the main results were projected onto maps, etc.²⁷ In terms of content, results were now presented as sound, and doubts or scientific discussions on possible invalidating points were no longer mentioned. The questions likely to reveal or feed tensions between Member States were removed. Beyond the directness, even the brutality of their wording, the questions on scrapping the Common Market and personal sacrifice were also progressively removed because their results contradicted the fundamental measure of support for the EU. The latter is traditionally in the majority among respondents, even though only one out four respondents is very or fairly willing to accept sacrifices for the unification of Europe. Faced with the perspective of 'scrapping' the Common Market, more than a third of respondents chose 'indifference', and a sizeable proportion (13 per cent in 1975) went for 'relieved'. The desire of being part of Europe is contradicted by the 'indicator of tension': many German (33 per cent), Luxembourgian (38 per cent) and French (41 per cent) respondents preferred Great Britain to be out of the Community; 47 per cent of Danish and 28 per cent of British respondents excluded their own country (EB 21, 1984).

As the years passed, even though respondents mostly feel incompetent, indifferent,²⁸ badly informed and not interested in being informed on European politics,²⁹ results favouring unification have been more systematically highlighted. Since it proposes a restricted number of responses, the EB survey system concentrates and polarises the distribution of responses, with remarkable rates for variables that would not otherwise be salient or significant. This is the case for the measure of support for unification, trust in the European Parliament or the wish to have the EU's competences extended to other fields. In 1975, during an era defined as one of 'permissive consensus', the distribution of responses to the question 'All things considered, are you in favour of the unification of Europe, against it or indifferent' reveals the respondents' low level of involvement: 35 per cent were 'very much in favour', 34 per cent were 'somewhat in favour', 15

per cent were 'indifferent', 5 per cent were 'somewhat against', 4 per cent 'against' and 7 per cent 'Don't know' (EC Results, EB 3, 1975). While the official interpretation given consists in adding up the first two percentages to claim that 'seven out of ten interviewed (69 per cent) were in favour of the unification of Europe' (ibid.), undetermined ('indifferent') responses, ones that entail less involvement from the respondent ('somewhat...') and negative responses add up to 58 per cent of the overall number of respondents, without taking into account 'Don't know' answers. Probably for this reason, questions were progressively rewritten in more polysemic terms, with less involving wordings, and only offering one possibility for an in-between or neutral response, thereby reducing the gradation and the dispersion of the results. Hence, the politically very sensitive question held as an indicator of support for the unification process requires respondents to assess their country's membership of the EU as a good or bad 'thing'. The removal of the phrase 'political unification' and the undetermined, vague character of the term 'thing' might contribute to neutralising the politically involving character of the question. Similarly, the reduction of the number of answer possibilities limits the fragmentation of the responses, which would emphasise the ambiguity and even the fragility of the support expressed.

Excerpt 13 (EB 70, 2008)

Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)'s membership of the European Union is: a good thing/neither good nor bad/a bad thing/don't know? Results [EU]: A good thing 53%, neither good nor bad 27%, a bad thing 15%, don't know 5%.

Generally speaking, the strategy of presentation of the results aims at down-playing the importance of negative, neutral responses and non-responses. Since the 1990s, the results judged by the authors of the reports to be the most significant are presented to the reader as map projections and bar charts, which never concern marginal values, 'negative' results, distant or qualified responses (Lehingue 2007c: 54 ff.). Behind this very selective presentation of the results, early on, a number of researchers pointed out the relative weakness of very favourable opinions towards the EU, and the importance of a form of 'benevolent neutrality' for Europe. (Percheron 1991). The statistically sizeable proportion of rates recorded for all low involvement responses is sociologically significant: it provides an indication of the social and symbolic distance between pollsters and respondents as well as between respondents and political Europe. This presentation of the results shows that the feedback tool has progressively become an instrument of political expertise, whose data are oriented by techniques of generation and valorisation facilitating the control of publicisation effects – a well-known and recognised mechanism of production of EPO, used both to organise the Union's 'governance' and to exhibit European democracy as the Commission's leaders conceptualise it.

... to a governance instrument

The Commission's official documents now present the EB as a 'governance' instrument,³⁰ capable of revealing citizen expectations to European decision-makers. Indeed, it is perceived as a tool to discover the dispositions of particular social groups towards Community initiatives, to help make informed decisions, to structure the political agenda and to devise communication plans. The analysis of the Commission's official documents on communication policy clearly indicates such use of EB surveys by the EU's institutional partners (college of commissioners, the Commission DGs, the Press Service of the European Parliament, the Member States' communication services).

Before funds of European messages can be developed on major issues, an in-depth analysis must be carried out of public opinion in the Member States. The European Commission has the necessary experience and capacity at European level to do this. Eurobarometer, and the opinion polls and qualitative studies which it draws on, enable it to develop this perception on a consistent and regular basis. [...] This cooperation [with Member States] should make it easier to meet the expectations and needs of ordinary Europeans more effectively. The development of this information monitoring capacity – which could take the form of a web-based network linking all the partners involved – will thus provide a framework in which to formulate the messages needed for each topic or information campaign.

(European Commission, An information and Communication Strategy for the EU, 2002)

As such documents must be made public in Europe, 'information monitoring' of opinion is presented as a service to citizens. But this rhetorical smokescreen hardly conceals the instrument's political instrumentalisation.³¹ Since its inception, the EB has proved to be an efficient tool to assess political leeway for Community action. As early as EB 3 (1975), the attitude of respondents towards the possibility of having MEPs elected by direct universal suffrage was studied. This question was systematically asked until the effective introduction of the reform. The same goes for the introduction of the single currency, the European passport, European diplomacy, a European Olympic team, but also for the harmonisation of labour laws, of social contributions or the idea of European protectionism. The themes of Special EBs and the Flash EBs have signposted the transformation of the feedback tool into an instrument of political governance most often in the service of the Commission's projects. Keeping in mind that the Commission embodies and defends Community interests against national objectives and resistance from the States, we may have another perspective on the undoubtedly political role of the EB's publication and mediatisation in institutional power relations, i.e. in Commission-Parliament- Council relations. Ostensibly constructed as the faithful and objective (and scientific, therefore undebatable) reflection

of EPO, the EB reports are meant to provide evidence of the social demand for ‘more Europe’, which can be generated artificially,³² even in unfavourable European contexts. Even though they expose European citizens’ confusion and lack of knowledge on Europe, qualitative studies are also used to support the diagnosis of public support for political integration: a qualitative EB claims ‘that strong expectations remain towards the European Union can be clearly seen when asking the respondents about the Union’s goals and the priority objectives which they would set for it’ (The future of Europe, May 2006). The EB is also now considered as one of the main resources of the participatory turn in European communication, aiming at setting the ‘listening process’ as one of the Commission’s new legitimating principles. Since 2001, the Commission has claimed it wants to ‘draw more systematically on feedback from citizens’ in the conception of European policies.

The research function will be the fundamental element of the ‘listening process’, through the analysis of Eurobarometer and other survey results, as well as media [...] monitoring.
(European Commission, Action Plan to Improve Communicating Europe, 2005)

The opinion manufactured by the EBs works both classically as a ‘legitimizing principle for political discourses and actions’ (Champagne 1990: 42) and as a means to assess opportunities and clear paths to develop Community initiatives. Some Colleges have used EB more systematically than others. The Delors presidency (1985–1995) was a period of intense development and exploitation of opinion polls by Commission services, before a relative decline during the Santer and Prodi Commissions. Since the introduction of the first Barroso Commission (2004), there has been a surge of interest in the EB, mainly linked to the overhaul of the EU’s communication policy. After the rejection of the constitutional treaty, the White Paper on a European Communication Policy (2006) announced the launch of ‘a special series of Eurobarometer polls [...] to provide the best possible data for analysis’ and went on to explain that:

In modern democratic societies, policy-makers devote a great deal of attention to analysing public opinion, using tools such as opinion polls and media monitoring. The importance of these tools has increased in parallel with the tendency for citizens to withdraw from traditional politics (joining political parties, voting in elections, etc.). European public opinion is complex and diverse, reflecting different national perspectives. Understanding it therefore poses a particular challenge. The European Commission has been a front runner in developing modern tools – such as the Eurobarometer surveys – for analysing European public opinion.
(European Commission, White Paper on a European Communication Policy, 2006: 10)

In addition to its expertise, the instrument is now also presented by the

Commission and other institutions³³ as an instrument for listening to citizens and interacting with them. The ‘State’ polling programme has progressively turned into a democratic artifice thought to be capable of bridging the gap between political Europe and European citizens.

Conclusion

It does not seem that the scientifically debatable character of EB data on political opinions or the instrument’s blatant instrumentalisation are likely to slow the dynamic of its extensive and multiple uses. Most discourse and studies on opinion trends and European values, after all, very closely depend on the data built and published by the Commission (see Chapter 1 in this volume). This situation of excessive, sometimes exclusive, dependence on a political instrument raises a number of ethical and methodological issues. Researchers who conduct secondary analyses of the EB database are generally willing to admit its imperfections, but rarely acknowledge its institutional origins. Hence, Pierre Bréchon concedes that the EB, like other major international surveys (European Values Survey, World Values Survey), provides ‘fragile’ data, which ‘are not as refined as qualitative data’, and that some of its indicators are ‘in some respects simplistic’ (Bréchon 2002). But he argues in the EB’s favour in terms of necessity (the EB, he says, provides invaluable and irreplaceable services in furthering scientific knowledge) and, especially, scientific rigour (the sophistication of the secondary treatment is seen to rectify the data’s genetic biases). Usefulness ultimately prevails over the data’s intrinsic weaknesses. Such arguments are rather common among consumers of international surveys and tend to neglect the key discussion of legitimate scientific objections to their use, for instance on sample representativeness³⁴ or the political role of EB results. Similarly, the question of whether EPO is an extrinsic reality to the instrument that measures it is seldom raised.³⁵ The systematic lack of regard for these issues is likely related to the forms of institutionalisation of the instrument which, since its inception, has resulted from close and permanent cooperation between Community agents schooled in social science,³⁶ specialists of survey research and polling institute professionals (Aldrin 2010). Books (Inglehart and Reif 1991; Bréchon and Cautrès 1998), workshops and conferences³⁷ on the EB are traditionally presented as a publicised moment of this process of coproduction of expertise on EPO, to which each category of partners brings their own specific legitimacy: institutional and political legitimacy for senior officials and commissioners, professional and technical legitimacy for pollsters, and scientific and academic legitimacy for researchers. To a large extent, this state of affairs explains that the instrument is perceived as an oracle and elicits so little critical discussion.

Notes

1. This programme systematised experiments with ‘European polls’ conducted in the 1950s and 1960s. ‘Just as a barometer can be used to measure the atmospheric pressure and thus to give a short-range weather forecast, this Eurobarometer 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.’ (EB1, 1974). We refer to the EB reports following the nomenclature used by the Commission, which assigns them a number based on order of publication. When there is no additional precision, ‘EB’ refers to the so-called ‘standard’ EBs; when other EBs are discussed (Flash, Special surveys, etc.), this will be mentioned.
2. This consensus was soon said to be a ‘permissive’ one (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970).
3. These questions are named ‘trend’ questions because they have been asked since the early stages of the programme.
4. A survey report published in February 2005 claims: ‘We note growing support for the European Union membership in the majority of Member States [...]. However, beneath this increase lie differences in opinion. In 7 countries, this rise comes hand in hand with an increase in respondents regarding membership as a bad thing’ (Special EB 220, wave 62.2: 7).
5. According to them, even in countries that voted ‘no’, a large majority of citizens support membership in the European Union: 88 per cent of French respondents (Flash EB 171), and 82 per cent of Dutch respondents (Flash EB 172).
6. For an analysis of the EB’s political uses, see Smith 1998.
7. Especially in national elections, campaigns induce a general upsurge in interest for politics (Bennett 1988).
8. Polling voting intentions amounts to questioning citizens on a choice they will effectively have to make, in a role – that of voter – that is familiar and that they acknowledge to be theirs. The realism of the solicitation increases near the day of the vote, when the choice will inevitably become concrete through one of the following actions: abstain, vote blank or vote for a given candidate or party (Berelson *et al.* 1954).
9. These elections are characterised by low turnouts and low level of mobilisation during campaigns where national political issues prevail (Bélot and Pina 2009).
10. According to Alain Garrigou, there is a ‘pact of the survey’ (in French, ‘pacte de sondage’) whereby ‘the pollee poses and conforms to the duty of opinion’ and ‘pollsters first have to reconcile hardly compatible constraints: ask questions that the authors of the poll ask themselves to pollees that might not have considered these questions’ (Garrigou 2006: 47).
11. Strictly speaking, confidence intervals are only valid within the framework of the probabilistic method, i.e. for strictly random samples. Yet, the EB initially worked with ‘national representative samples drawn up by quota’ (EB 1, 1974), and now relies on a sample design with several levels of weighting, presented as a ‘multi-stage, random (probability) one’ (EB 69, 2008), but which departs from the probabilistic method.
12. Arthur Bowley, the inventor of the measure of confidence intervals, ‘has made of imprecision, of the margin of error, a respectable, clean object, no longer shamefully hidden in the bashful silence of error’ (Desrosières 1993: 275).

13. The term literacy emphasises the evaluative dimension – testing the level of academic knowledge – of such a set-up (Cheveigné 2004).
14. Without, however, dissipating the ambiguity of the question: for French respondents, the phrase ‘two speed’ has rather negative connotations and is likely to be perceived as a metaphor of *de facto* inequality in the access to certain rights and services.
15. Such simplification can amount to euphemising or even denying the political controversies related to a European issue by offering a depoliticised vision of the issue.
16. Nothing tells us that the respondents who have chosen the correct answer to the first or the third question actually know the accurate answer.
17. To evaluate their own knowledge of a given subject, interviewees always refer to what they think is a sufficient level of knowledge. yet, the respondents also have different yardsticks according to their social properties, nationality, or to their country’s date of accession to the EU.
18. This number is obtained by adding up the proportions of respondents who evaluate their own knowledge between 1 and 5 (see Excerpt 8).
19. On the problem of the reliability of data from international surveys see Adam 2008.
20. Responses to a question on positive or negative feelings towards Europe are taken as indicators of support for political unification; those on the modalities of election of MEPs as indicators of attachment to European Parliament.
21. Most of the nearly seven hundred EB surveys (including seventy-one Standard EBs, 231 Special EBs, 281 Flash EBs and fourteen qualitative studies) are available on the EU’s official website (europa.eu). Questionnaires and part of the raw data are available on the website of the Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung (<http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de>) and the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (Ann Arbor, Michigan).
22. A report from the Bureau of European Political Advisers to the President of the Commission, based on EB and Eurostat data, is significantly entitled ‘Europe’s social reality’.
23. MEPs asked for regular trans-Community polls in the February 1972 Schuijt Report.
24. Formerly Jean Monnet’s Head of Cabinet at the High Authority of the ESCS, he was forced in January 1973 to surrender his position as Director-General of the Press and Information Service to an Irish official. He was put in charge of the conception of a European polling programme as ‘adviser’ (which did not entail managing an administrative service or implementing policy).
25. However, the questionnaires’ ‘contamination’ effects (Lau *et al.* 1990) – personalisation or politicisation introduced by the enumeration of ‘political’ questions and questions related to the social and economic context – remained numerous in the EB after this initial period.
26. According to a senior DG Communication official (interview with the author, May 2007).
27. This evolution matches the end of the EB’s ‘Stoetzelian’ period; since its inception, it had been managed by the IFOP and Faits et Opinions polling institutes. In 1989, INRA, a European consortium of opinion research and polling institutes, won the framework contract for the Commission’s opinion polls.

28. The EU is at the bottom of the list of subjects treated in the media to which respondents 'pay attention' (EB 52, 2000).
29. A majority of respondents consider that the press (51 per cent) and television (50 per cent) give 'sufficient' and 'objective coverage'.
30. The Commission's White Paper on European Governance (2001), which itself involved an EB survey, emphasises continuous polling as a governance instrument.
31. According to Max Weber, in democracy, more than in other types of government, 'the fact that the chief and his administrative staff often appear formally as servants or agents of those they rule, naturally does nothing whatever to disprove the quality of dominance' (Weber 1978).
32. Not to mention the orientation of questions such as 'The nine countries of the EEC are together dealing with a number of shared problems. Here is a list of them. Could you please tell me which one of these problems is the most important at the present time? And which is the next most important problem?' (EB 1).
33. See the European Parliament's report on the period of reflection (A6-0414/2005), 2005.
34. The random sampling technique relies on the ability of the people drawn at random to respond to the pollsters, but members of some segments of the population (single, elderly, less-educated, unemployed persons, etc.) more rarely agree to participate in surveys (Bon 1991: 193). The reputedly significant proportion and the social profiles of those who refuse to participate in EB surveys are never made public or discussed.
35. Symptomatically, in their insightful synthesis of studies on European opinion, Céline Bélot and Bruno Cautrès only mention this in the first footnote: 'The idea that there is such a thing as a 'European public opinion' is eminently problematic. [...] Nevertheless, since European institutions consider Eurobarometer data to be the expression of a European public opinion, and since they take into account their results when they define policies, it ensues that European public opinion actually exists' (Belét and Cautrès 2008: 153).
36. Jacques-René Rabier's successors, Anna Melich and Karlheinz Reif, were academics specialised in public opinion.
37. See the conference '35th anniversary of Eurobarometer. Understanding European public opinion', organised in November 2008 by the Commission's DG Communication (www.eurobarometer-conference2008.ec.europa.eu).

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