

European Issues
n°333
18th November 2014

Overcoming democratic breakdown in the European Union

Julien Zalc

Summary :

Summary: The European Union is currently undergoing a crisis in democratic legitimacy. Confidence in the European Union and its institutions is at its lowest ebb and many Europeans criticise the way in which democracy works in the Union. For several years now, the distance between community institutions and European citizens would appear to have widened. Citizens believe that their voices are not taken into account by the European Union, which they consider to be removed from their concerns and lacking in transparency. To regain any kind of legitimacy, the Union must reduce its democratic breakdown and recreate a link with Europeans. Some initiatives have been implemented to this end, but they would appear insufficient. Other action must be taken, and that is one of the challenges facing the new Commission for the next five years.

“Democracy” is one of those words for which the etymology is generally well known: it comes from the Greek *dêmos*, the people, and *krátos*, power. So, power to the people. However the word can have considerably different meanings. Sometimes, it is used to indicate a type of society, at others, a political system. In the first case it indicates a society based on the values of freedom and equality. Such is the usage made by Tocqueville, for example, who uses the social meaning of the word. In the second case, democracy indicates a political regime, where the people are sovereign. Here one is closed to Lincoln’s definition: “Government of the people, by the people, for the people”. This is an important distinction at a time when we are analysing the way in which European citizens perceive democracy in the European Union.

Is the European Union democratic? If one compares it to the rest of the world the answer would appear to be clear: yes, of course! The values of freedom and equality are essential in the Union and moreover, they are included in the introduction to the Treaty on the European Union [1]: “(...) Inspired by the cultural, religious and humanist heritages of Europe, based on which the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person have developed, together with freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law.”

For their part, community institutions benefit from an institutional legitimacy of a democratic nature, although in different forms: for example, the democratic legitimacy of the ministers who sit on the Council, as well as of members of the European Commission, put forward by governments after a democratic process and also invested by MEPs, who have been elected by universal suffrage.

And yet, as shown by analyses of European public opinion, this democratic legitimacy is not sufficient. Our analysis will first draw up an inventory of public opinion’s perception of democracy in the European Union, highlighting results that may appear paradoxical: the European Union is perceived as being democratic, but there is disagreement as to the way in which democracy works; in addition to the very strong mistrust currently amongst public opinion in terms of the European Union and its institutions, there is the question of their democratic legitimacy.

Secondly, we will attempt to understand the reasons for this paradox, and notably for the mixed feelings on the part of Europeans with regard to the way in which democracy works in the European Union. We will see that citizens, who are ill informed with regard to European issues, have the feeling that the European Union does not listen to them and is too distant and lacking in transparency.

1. Treaty on the European Union

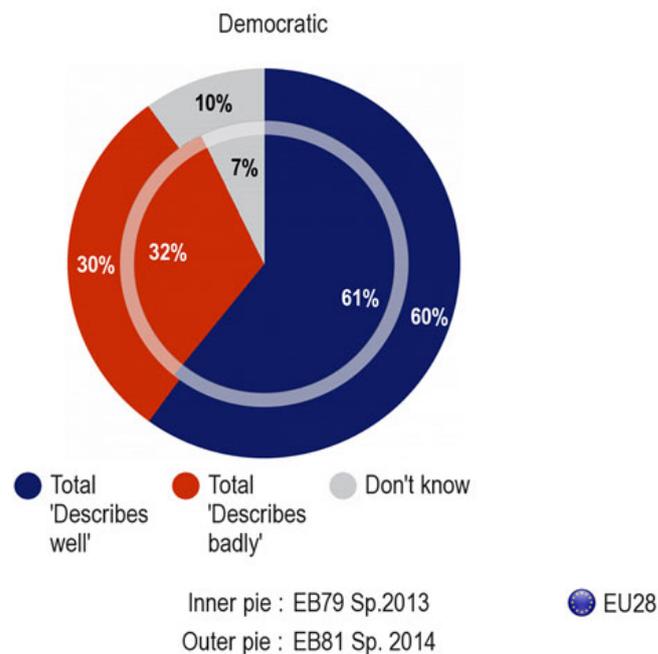
Finally, we will look at certain initiatives that have been implemented by community institutions to reinforce democracy in the European Union, by getting citizens more involved in decision-making. Well perceived but little known, these initiatives would be more efficient if they were explained better. Finally, other ways in which the democratic breakdown in the European Union could be reduced will be suggested.

**1. DEMOCRACY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION:
CURRENT POSITION**

a. As a place of values, the European Union is perceived to be democratic

Europeans see the European Union as “democratic”. The word applies to it for a big majority of citizens (60%) in the Eurobarometer Standard poll carried out in spring 2014 [2].

Please tell me for each of the following words if it describes very well, fairly well, fairly badly or very badly the idea you might have of the EU.

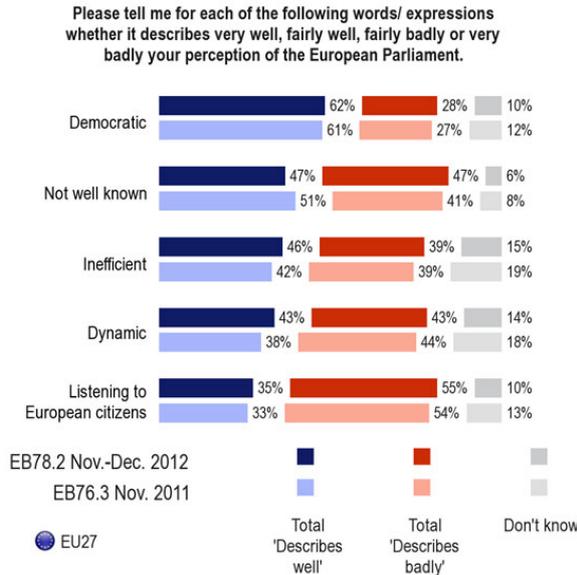


When one analyses the various “images” of the European Union, “democratic” is even seen as the positive term that best applies to the Union, ahead of “modern” (58%), “protective” (45%) and “efficient” (31%). In 26 member States, a majority of the people asked believed that the word “democratic” is a good description of the European Union, with Greece and Portugal being the sole exceptions.

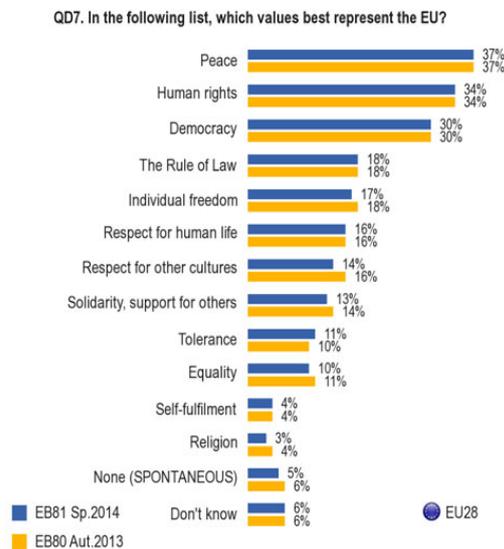
When this question is asked about the European

Parliament, a comparable result is obtained: in a Eurobarometer poll carried out in November-December 2012 [3], 62% of Europeans believed that the word “democratic” applies well to it. There again, Portugal and Greece were the only Member States to go against the majority opinion. And, as is the case for the European Union, “democratic” is the positive word that best applies to the European Parliament, ahead of “dynamic” and “listens to European citizens”.

2. Standard Eurobarometer for spring 2014, June 2014: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb81/eb81_publ_en.pdf
3. Special Eurobarometer “Parlemeter”, November-December 2012: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00191b53ff/Eurobarometer.html?tab=2013_1



Moreover, when one asks them which are the values that best represent the European Union, European citizens put democracy in third place (30%), not very far behind peace (37%) and Human Rights (34%).



European citizens would therefore appear to be in step with article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union: "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for Human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities". The democracy value is very strongly associated with the Union, perhaps because European society

Overcoming democratic breakdown in the European Union

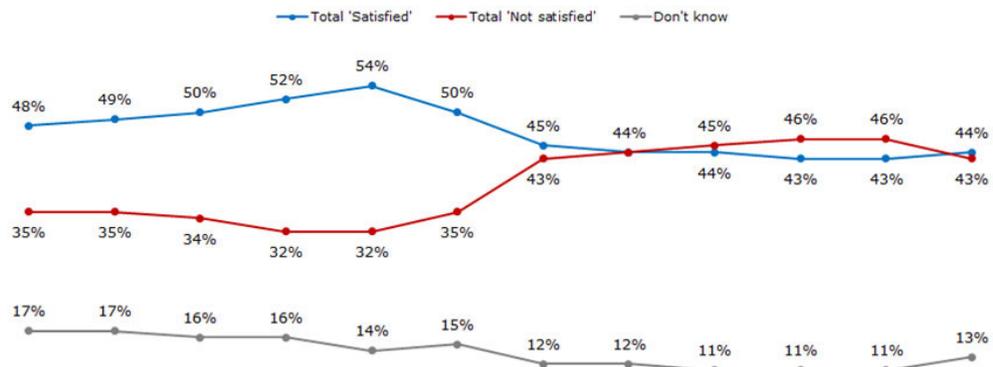
is perceived as democratic, particularly when compared to the rest of the world.

b. On the other hand, there is disagreement as to the way in which democracy works

Although the very narrowest of majorities said, in spring 2014 that it was satisfied with the way in which democracy works in the European Union (44%), over four Europeans in ten are not satisfied with it

(43%), with 13% saying that they had no opinion on this question. European public opinion is almost completely split in half on this question. It should also be noted that satisfaction in this regard is considerably less than satisfaction felt in terms of the functioning of democracy in their own country, even though this results mainly from a larger “does not know” rate: 50% of Europeans are satisfied with the way in which democracy works in their own country, compared with 48% “dissatisfied” and 2% “does not know”.

QA18b. On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU? - % EU



- 4. Poland, Malta, Lithuania, Denmark, Estonia, Romania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Belgium, Luxembourg, Croatia, Ireland, Finland, Sweden, Slovenia, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Hungary.

- 5. EU Member States before 2004: Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Denmark, Ireland, the UK, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Finland and Sweden.

- 6. Member States that have joined the EU since 2004: Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia.

7. Thierry Chopin, "L'Union européenne : une démocratie sans territoire?", Seminar "Démocratie: déterritorialisation et reterritorialisation" Sorbonne Paris Cité/Cévipof, Sciences Po, 14th February 2014; to be published in the journal *Cités*, PUF.

Aut.2004	Sp.2005	Sp.2006	Aut.2007	Aut.2009	Sp.2010	Aut.2011	Sp.2012	Aut.2012	Sp.2013	Aut.2013	Sp.2014
EB62	EB63	EB65	EB68	EB72	EB73	EB76	EB77	EB78	EB79	EB80	EB81

An analysis over time shows that this judgement as to the way in which democracy works in the European Union deteriorated massively as from autumn 2009 (as is the case for most of the indicators in support of the Union).

In 18 Member States [4], there is a majority of satisfaction with the way in which democracy works in the European Union, whilst dissatisfaction is higher in the remaining 10 Member States.

In this respect one notes strong variations depending on the date on which Member States joined the EU: thus, in the oldest Member States [5], the way in which democracy works in the European Union is

judged more severely than in individual countries, where satisfaction wins through. The reverse is true in more recent Member States [6], very probably because many of them have experienced totalitarian regimes in a recent past: membership of the European Union has doubtless represented a definite break away from their Soviet past and a lasting adhesion to democratic principles: "The enlargement dynamic was founded on the diffusion of democratic principles and the rule of law as well as on Western constitutional democratic practices resulting from the membership conditions set forth in treaties." [7]

On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with:

	the way democracy works in (OUR COUNTRY)*		the way democracy works in the EU	
	Total 'Satisfied'	Total 'Not satisfied'	Total 'Satisfied'	Total 'Not satisfied'
EU28	50%	48%	44%	43%
EU15	53%	45%	40%	47%
NMS13	38%	59%	56%	30%

(OUR COUNTRY) was replaced by the name of the country.

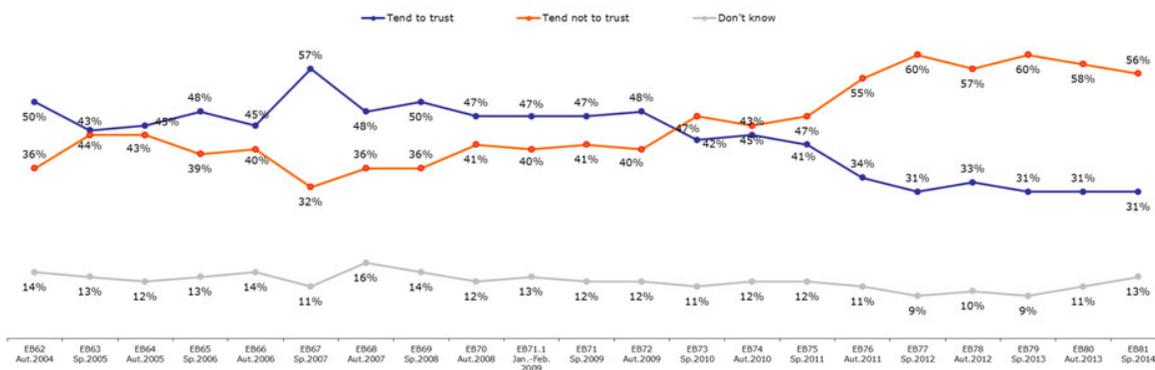
Source: Standard Eurobarometer EB81, Spring 2014

c. Confidence in the European Union and all its institutions has never been as weak as it is currently

Looking at democracy in the European Union involves an analysis of the confidence of European citizens and its institutions. Indeed, as Bruno Cautrès said, support and the legitimacy of political

systems are linked [8]: a political system must have the support of a sufficiently large fringe of citizens for its action to be perceived as legitimate. And yet this confidence has recently reached its lowest ebb: only slightly less than one third of citizens only have confidence in the Union (31% in spring 2014). This is the lowest level ever reached by this indicator.

QA9.4 For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.* The European Union - % EU



* Other institutions tested: Political parties; The (NATIONALITY) Government; The (NATIONALITY PARLIAMENT); The United Nations; Regional or local public authorities

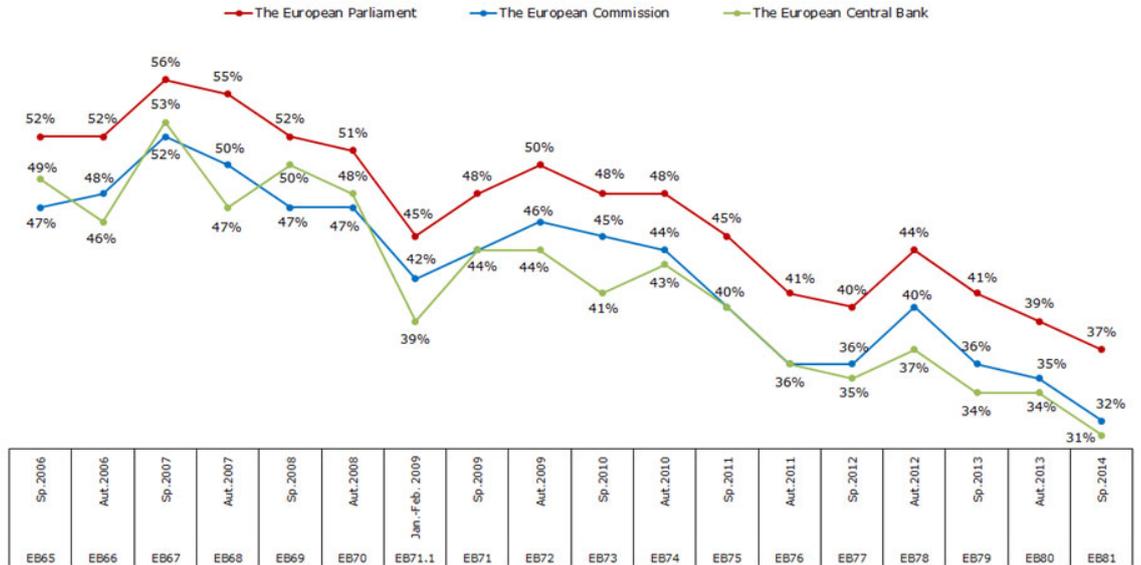
In the same way, in spring 2014, confidence in European institutions was the lowest ever measured in the history

of the Eurobarometer: 32% for the Commission, 31% for the Central Bank and 37% for the Parliament.

8. Bruno Cautrès, *Les Européens aiment-ils (toujours) l'Europe ?* Réflexeurope, La documentation française, 2014.

6

QA15. For each of the following European bodies, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. Answer 'Tend to trust' - %EU

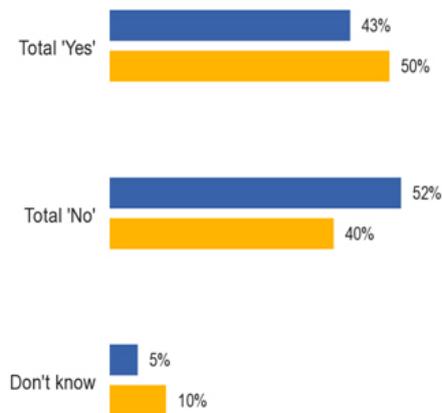


A question on confidence in the European institutions in general, asked just after the European elections held in 2009 and 2014 [9], summarises well the increase in this mistrust over recent years: in the 2009 post-electoral survey, one in two Europeans said they trusted

the Union's institutions (50%, compared with 40% who did not trust them). Over a five year period the situation has been reversed, and there is now an absolute majority of Europeans who do not have any confidence in European institutions (52%, compared with 43%).

QP6.2. For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion.

You trust the institutions of the EU



■ EU post-election 2014
■ EU post-election 2009

● EU28

9. Post-electoral survey 2014, June 2014. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/post/post_2014_survey_analytical_overview_en.pdf

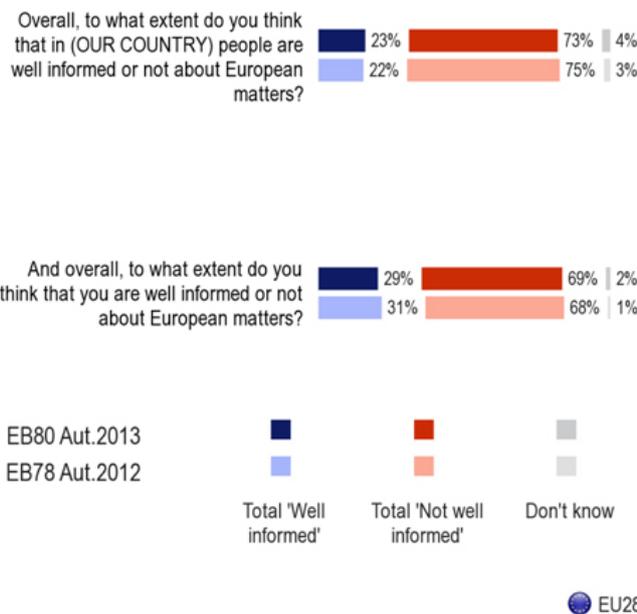
With these confidence levels, the very legitimacy and democratic functioning of the European Union as a political system are called into question.

There is therefore a certain paradox between, on the one hand, the European Union perceived as being democratic and, on the other, the way in which democracy works in Europe dividing public opinion, with confidence levels that pose the question of the democratic legitimacy of the European Union. How can such results be explained?

2. THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS CITIZENS: A LACK OF INFORMATION, THE FEELING THAT THEIR VOICE DOES NOT COUNT AND A GAP THAT IS WIDENING

Several reasons contribute to explaining this division in European public opinion regarding the way in which democracy works within the European Union.

a. The poor level of information on European issues contributes to the feeling that democracy is not working well



Europeans feel that they are very badly informed about European issues: in autumn 2013 [10], 73% believed that in their own country people are not well informed about European issues (compared with 23% "well informed"); over two thirds even considered themselves personally to be ill informed (69% compared with 29%). And

yet, the better informed one is the more satisfied one is with how democracy works in the European Union, as shown in the following table. The low level of citizen information on European issues contributes to the feeling that the way in which democracy works in the European Union is not satisfactory.

10. Standard Eurobarometer of autumn 2013: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb80/eb80_publ_en.pdf

QA18b On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU?

	Total 'Satisfied'	Total 'Not satisfied'	DK
EU28	44%	43%	13%

Informed about European affairs			
Well informed	60%	36%	4%
Not well informed	36%	51%	13%

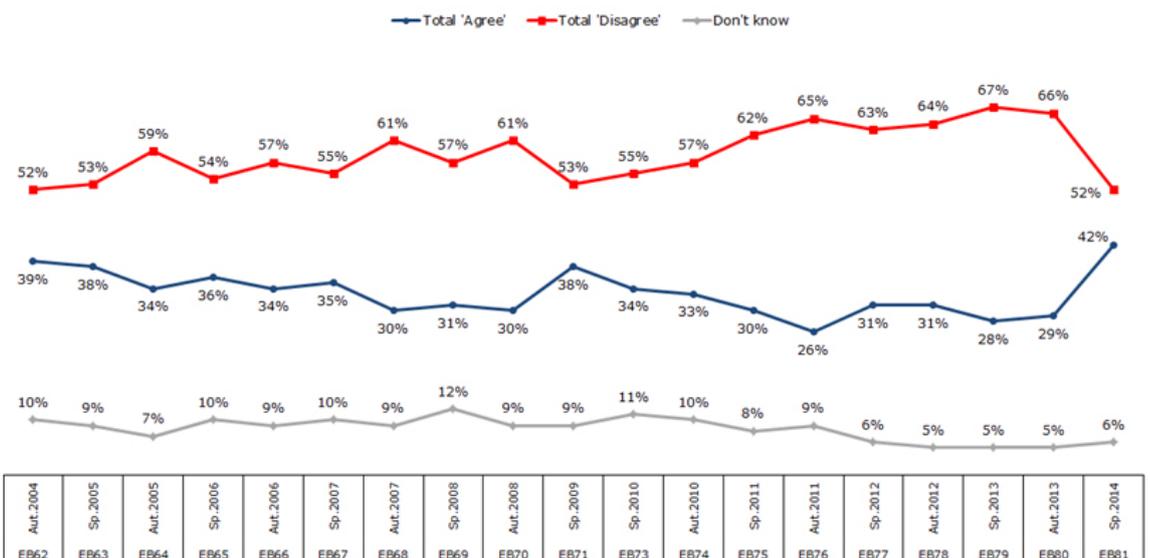
Source : Standard Eurobarometer EB80, Autumn 2013

b. A majority of Europeans believe that their voice does not count in the EU

Despite a very strong reduction in this proportion, which is the expected consequence of the latest European elections held on 22nd-25th May 2014 (-14 percentage points in the Eurobarometer Standard of spring 2014 carried out a few days after the European voice), over half of all

Europeans believe that their voice does not count (52%, compared with 42% who believe that their voice is taken into account). If one puts to one side this latest measure taken in spring 2014, which is strongly influenced by the proximity of the elections, it is about two thirds of Europeans who believe that their voice is not taken into account (proportions varying between 63% and 66% between autumn 2011 and autumn 2013).

D72a.2. Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. My voice counts in the EU - %EU



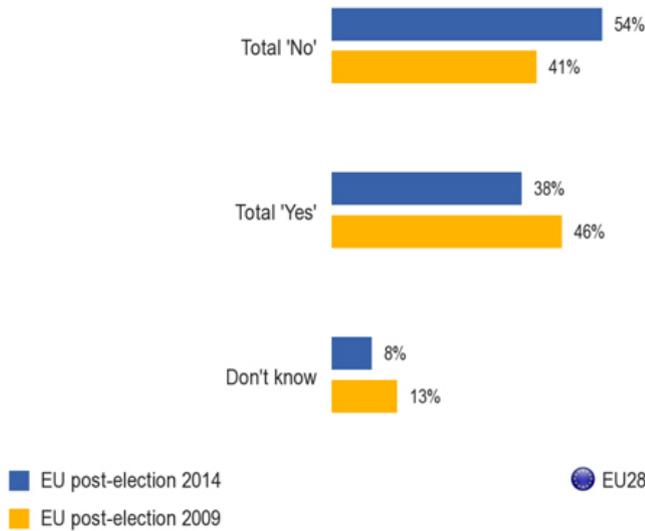
This opinion varies massively from one country to another: in 16 Member States [11], a majority of people questioned believe that their voice does not count. The opposite opinion is in the majority in 12 countries.

The European Parliament, although perceived to be “democratic” is considered to “listen to European citizens” by only slightly more than one third of Europeans (35% in November-December 2012), whilst a absolute majority of them does not agree with this statement (55%).

This perception by citizens of the way in which they are listened to by the European Parliament has deteriorated greatly over recent years: in the post-electoral survey held in 2014, 54% of people questioned thought that the Parliament does not “take the concerns of European citizens well into account” (compared with 38%). The position has reversed since 2009, when a majority of citizens thought that the European Parliament did take their concerns well into account (46% compared to 41%).

QP6.4. For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion.

The European Parliament takes into consideration the concerns of European citizens



This feeling of not being listened to by the European Union and its institutions is shared by over half of all Europeans. It is certainly one of the major factors that explains the high level of scepticism amongst European public opinion in terms of democracy in the Union. Not feeling to be listened to, citizens feel that decisions are being taken without them, or even against them.

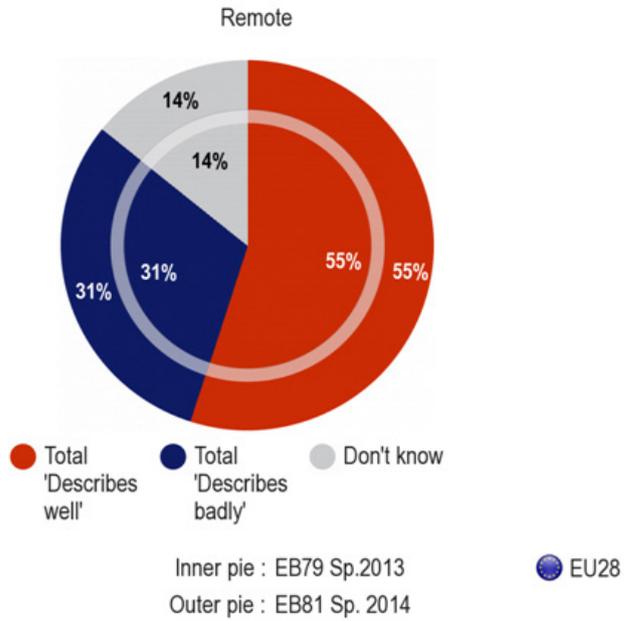
b. The European Union is perceived to be distant, removed from its citizens

As a corollary to this perception of a Europe that is deaf to the concerns and aspirations of Europeans, appears the perception of a Europe that is disconnected from its citizens. Over half of them believe, in fact, that the term “distant” is a good description of the European Union (55% in the Standard Eurobarometer of spring 2014, compared with 31% who thought the opposite).

11. Cyprus, Greece, Czech Republic, Latvia, Italy, Estonia, Spain, the UK, Portugal, Ireland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Lithuania, Poland.

10

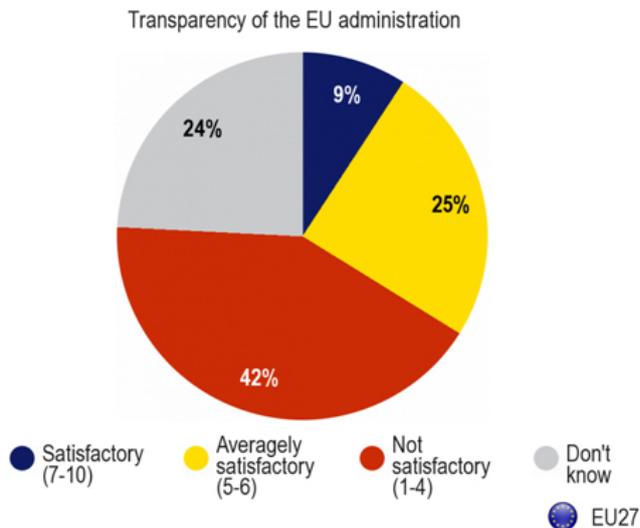
Please tell me for each of the following words if it describes very well, fairly well, fairly badly or very badly the idea you might have of the EU.



This impression of distance is reinforced further by the idea that the way in which the European Union works is lacking in transparency: in 2011, when asked this question [12], only

9% of Europeans considered to be "satisfactory" the transparency of Union administration, 25% considered it to be "averagely satisfactory" and 42% "not at all satisfactory".

Based on what you know and using a scale from 1 to 10, how would you judge the performance of the EU administration in each of the following areas? '1' means that the EU administration's performance in a specific area is "not at all satisfactory" and '10' means that its performance is "very satisfactory".



12. Special Eurobarometer "The European Ombudsman", February 2011: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2011/ombudsman/rapport_en.pdf

Source : Special Eurobarometer "The European Ombudsman", February 2011

European citizens have the feeling that they are not heard by the European Union, because they see it as distant from them and their concerns, and that the way in which it works is lacking in transparency. Within this context, it is logical that they hesitate to give a good mark to the way in which European democracy works.

3. SOME WAYS IN WHICH TO OVERCOME THE GAP WITH CITIZENS

a. Initiatives that go in the right direction but which are not very well known

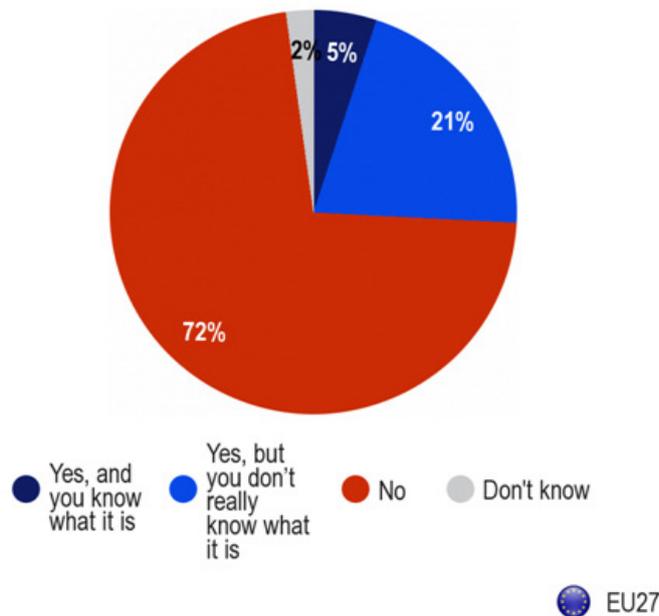
European institutions would appear to have decided to overcome the currently wide gap with citizens. This is a necessary condition to ensure that their decisions are better understood and accepted by the European population. Several initiatives have been implemented over recent

years, acting as bridges by which to bring citizens closer to their institutions. We will look at three of these: the European citizens' initiative, citizen dialogues and the new ways in which the President of the European Commission is appointed.

The European citizens' initiative, introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, enables a million European citizens to call on the Commission to submit a proposal on a topic that falls within the fields of competence of the European Union. This proposal aims to put citizens at the heart of the decision-making process: by grouping together, they can influence European legislation.

The problem is that this "citizens' initiative" is not well known amongst Europeans. In June 2012, just a few months after it came into force, only slightly more than a quarter of Europeans had already heard of it (26%) [13]. When asked for details only 5% knew what it is and 21% really had no idea what it is.

QP16. Have you already heard of the European Citizens' Initiative?



Source : Special Eurobarometer : "Two years to go to the 2014 European elections", June 2012

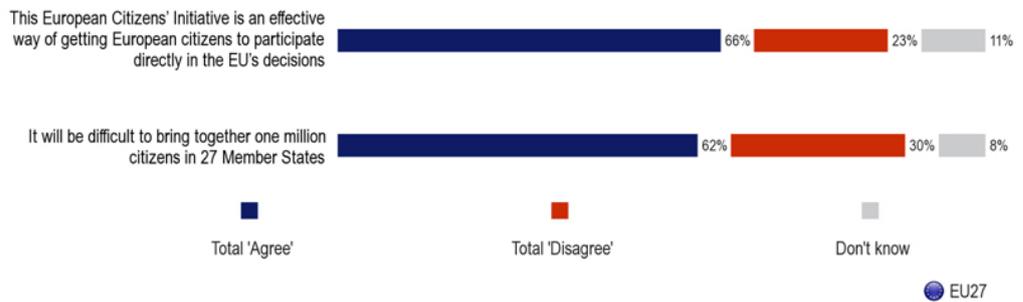
13. Special Eurobarometer: "Two years to go to the 2014 European elections", June 2012: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00191b53ff/Eurobarom%F8tre.html?tab=2012_4

Overcoming democratic breakdown in the European Union

And yet, after explanation, it is seen in a positive light by European public opinion: two thirds of Europeans believe that this is an efficient way in which to get European citizens to participate directly in European decisions

(66% compared with 23% in June 2012), although they think it would be difficult to implement (it will be difficult to get 1 million citizens together in Member States, 62% compared with 30%).

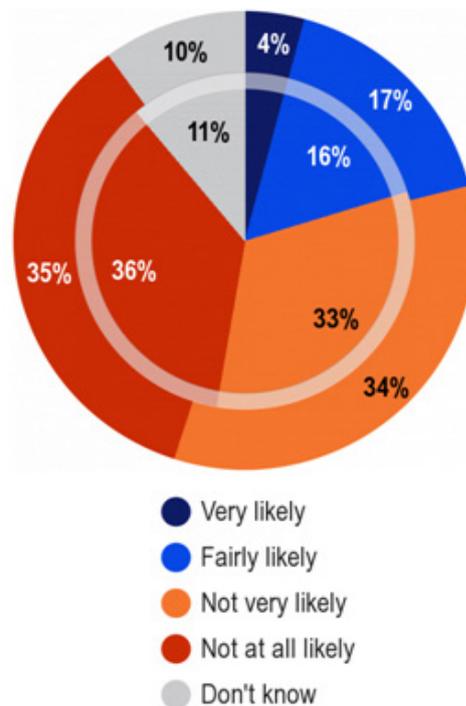
QP17. Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements about the European Citizens' Initiative.



Source : Eurobarometer «Two years to go to the 2014 European elections», June 2012

Is it this perceived difficulty that is discouraging them? Standard Eurobarometer of autumn 2013, to make Only 21% of Europeans believe it probable, in the use of the citizens' initiative (compared with 69%).

QD11. How likely or not do you think you would make use of this European Citizens' initiative?



Inner pie : EB79 Sp.2013
Outer pie : EB80 Aut.2013

EU28

Citizen dialogues were launched by the European Commission for the European Citizens' Year in 2013. For a year and a half, 51 events were organised in every country in the Union: citizens were invited to discuss with politicians about measures to take to "reinforce the Union's democratic structures". The European Commission website [14] presents the event in the following way: "dialogues with citizens – your voice counts in Europe"; the Union would thus appear to have

decided to show Europeans that it is listening to them.

When questioned recently about these citizen dialogues, during a qualitative survey [15], a big majority of participants said that they had never heard of them. They were, however, generally positive with regard to the project, notably because they believe it is a good way of reinforcing proximity with the Union, as illustrated by this quote taken from a discussion group [16].

**"If there would be more possibilities to influence it, [the EU] would feel closer."
(Finland, 35+, neutral)**

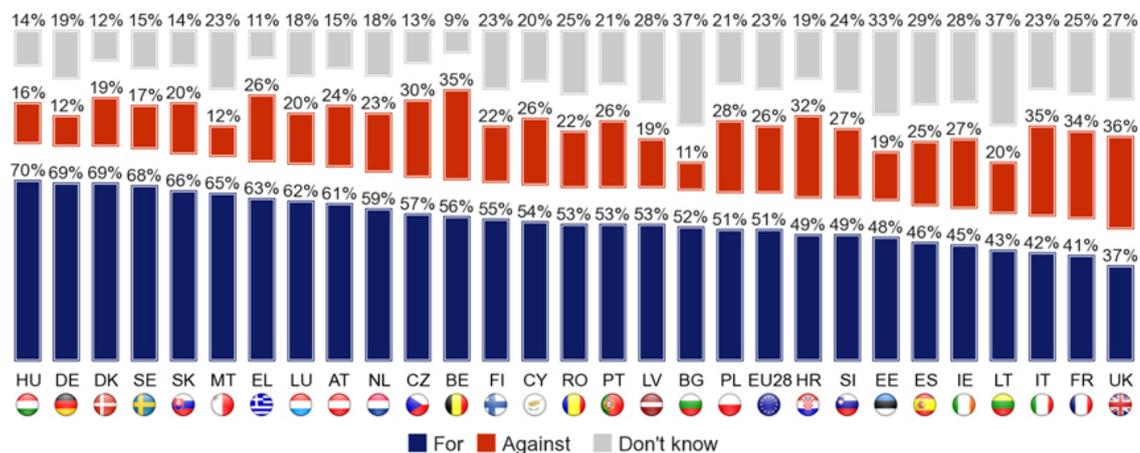
The process by which the Commission President is appointed was changed during the last European elections: for the first time citizens could, by their vote, participate indirectly in the appointment of the European Commission President. The European Parliament advertising campaign prior to the elections focussed on this institutional change, "this time, it's

different".

After receiving an explanation of what was going to change, Europeans were here again enthusiastic with regard to this change: in March 2014 [17], just before the elections, over half of them were favourable to it (51%, compared with 26% against), and this opinion was in the majority in all Member States.

QA11.2. What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it.

European political parties to present their candidate for the post of European Commission President at the next European Parliament elections



Source : Special Eurobarometer «Europeans in 2014», March 2014

14. http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe/index_fr.htm

15. Qualitative survey: "Promise of the EU": all quotes used in this analysis are taken from this survey.

16. "Finland, 35+, neutral": means that this quote is taken from a group held in Finland, that the participant was aged over 35 and that he had a neutral attitude with regard to the EU.

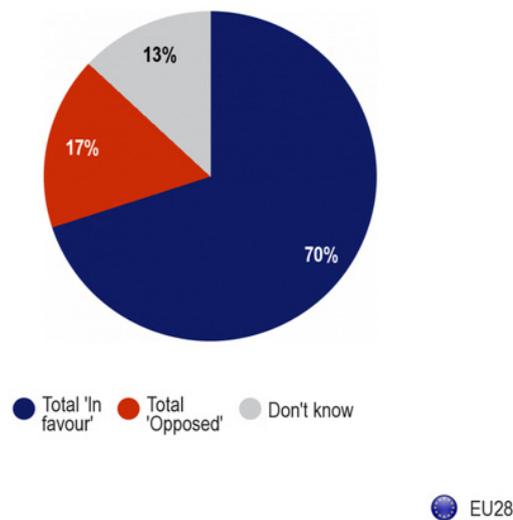
17. Special Eurobarometer "Europeans in 2014", March 2014: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_415_en.pdf

Overcoming democratic breakdown in the European Union

In a Eurobarometer dated June 2013 [18], the reasons given to justify this support indicated that this initiative is perceived to reinforce democracy in the European Union: "European decisions would be more legitimate in the eyes of Europeans" (32%), and "it would reinforce democracy within

the Union" (30%) are the top two answers given. In this same survey, Europeans even wanted things to go further still and to see, in the near future, the President of the European Commission elected directly by European citizens (70%, compared with 17%).

Q32. Would you be in favour or opposed to the President of the European Commission being elected directly by the European citizens in a near future?



Source : Special Eurobarometer «One year to go to the 2014 European elections», June 2013

With these various initiatives, the European Union is trying to get citizens involved more in European political life and to increase their role in decision making. By developing participatory democracy, it seeks to respond to the demand of Europeans to be heard more.

b. How to respond to expectations in terms of improvement in the way in which democracy works in the European Union?

These various European initiatives are going in the right direction for citizens, who perceive them in a rather positive way. They remain, however, relatively unknown, which has a negative effect on their efficiency.

This brings us back to the issue of a lack of information about European issues referred to earlier. It is the first matter to tackle in order to reduce the gap between the Union and its citizens.

Clearer, more efficient information

Inform and communicate, then. More? Maybe. But, above all, differently, more efficiently. The various Eurobarometer surveys are clear in this respect: a very big majority of Europeans believe that "the European Union needs a clearer message" (79% in spring 2014) [19]. This demand for clarity and simplification also comes out of the qualitative survey "Promise of the EU".

18. Special Eurobarometer "One year to go to the 2014 European elections", June 2013: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00191b53ff/Eurobarom%20tre.html?tab=2013_3 In this survey, support for the appointment of a candidate by political groups for the European elections was 55% (compared with 36%).

19. Standard, Eurobarometer of spring 2014, EB81

“The way things are publicised often leaves people with the impression that the message is directed at certain elites” (Portugal, 35+, neutral)

The choice of media used is also important: television is often preferred because it is the best way in which to reach the largest number. But is it the most relevant media? Some of those who took part in the qualitative survey want the European Union to communicate more on internet.

“I think that the web is the right medium – fast, direct, you don’t waste time” (Italy, 35-, neutral)

More interaction with citizens

Thanks in particular to social networks, internet can also respond to one of the demands made in the discussion groups: more interaction with Europe. Some of those who took part believe that internet discussion forums should be used to communicate certain important decisions. Others also want their MEPs to be more visible, more present.

“I believe that, if we elect MEPs, they have the responsibility of listening to the people who elected them. So, they should interact more with the population in order to best represent us.” (Portugal, 35-, pro-EU)

This demand for interaction leads to another important element for reinforcing European democracy: the need for a stronger incarnation of the Union.

Giving a face to the European Union

We do not have quantitative data available to measure it, but it is clear that the difficulty citizens have in “putting faces to Europe” is also a major factor in this image of a distant, complex, even obscure Union. A new team has just been appointed at the European Commission: a new President (Jean-Claude Juncker), a new High representative for foreign affairs and the security policy (Federica Mogherini), and new Commissioners proposed by most Member States. This creates a real opportunity for introducing European leaders to citizens. Why not a “European tour” for Jean-Claude Juncker, Frans Timmermans (first Vice-president) and Federica Mogherini? This would enable many Europeans to finally put a face to their European leaders.

Keeping to commitments made and increasing transparency

To be credible, European initiatives aimed at increasing participatory democracy should apply systematically, whether or not they are in the interests of European institutions and Member States. Two examples can be given in this regard: the European Commission recently rejected a European citizens' initiative in terms of transatlantic trade and investment partnership (TTIP). Even though it justifies its decision with institutional reasons, this may have given the impression that, in order to have the chance of succeeding, it was preferable for a European citizens' initiative to be in the direction of the policies of European institutions.

Another example: after the European elections held in May 2014, it appeared to be accepted that Jean-Claude Juncker, the candidate put forward by the party that came top (PPE), would be the next President of the European Commission. And yet, notably due to the frank opposition of the United Kingdom, for a few days his appointment seemed to be uncertain. Here again, this prevarication may have given the image of a Union that is not very transparent, a place where decisions are taken according to Member States' interests, without any account being taken of citizen votes.

The examples of the 2005 referendums held in France and the Netherlands are often used by Eurosceptics and even Europhobes, to stigmatise a Europe which is being built, in their opinion, without, or even against, its citizens. To combat this opinion, the European Union must be exemplary and keep all the commitments it makes.

CONCLUSION

Although the majority of Europeans believe that the European Union is "democratic", they are divided when they judge the way in

which democracy works in the Union. It is as if citizens, although convinced that European society is democratic, were much less sure of the democratic nature of the Union as a political system. Moreover, the low levels of confidence of Europeans in the Union and its institutions pose the question of their democratic legitimacy. For many Europeans, the European Union is disconnected from its population: they believe that their voice does not count in the Union, they see it as distant and not very transparent. This would appear to confirm the existence of a democratic breakdown within the European Union. A breakdown that it is important to overcome, or at least reduce: the Union needs to recreate links with its citizens and regain a democratic legitimacy to ensure that its decisions are better understood, accepted and supported by the population.

For this purpose, over recent years community institutions have put a number of initiatives in place. When they are explained to Europeans these actions generally receive a favourable welcome. They are going in the right direction, but suffer from a lack of notoriety, which has a negative effect on their efficiency. Explanatory work is therefore needed and information and communication have an important role to play in this respect.

However, it would appear to be necessary to change the way in which information and communication takes place. Messages must be simplified and clarified to ensure that they are understood by as many people as possible and to avoid giving the impression that the Union is for the elite only. More use must also be made of media that enables citizens to interact with their institutions. Provide information, yes, but also show that Europeans are being heard.

This work on communication and information is essential, but not sufficient. The European Union must also demonstrate that it keeps its promises and commitments, and that its

decisions apply in the same way to all, and in all cases. However, above all the Union must be embodied. It must be given a face. This will result in many benefits: the mysterious Union will be challenged and the strength and scope of the European message will be increased.

The new Commission presided by Jean-Claude Juncker would appear to be aware of these challenges: his programme is entitled "A new

start for Europe: my Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change". This change of team is a real opportunity for changing things, putting the citizen still more firmly at the heart of the Union. The opportunity must be seized in order to reduce European democratic breakdown lastingly.

Julien Zalc,
consultant for TNS opinion

You can read all of our publications on our site:

www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing Director : Pascale JOANNIN

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France , Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.