

The European Union in touch with its citizens: the analytical tools of public opinion



Salvatore Signorelli

Salvatore Signorelli graduated in political sciences and holds a PhD. on the origins of the French parliamentarism in the 19th century. His thesis was published by *il Mulino* (Bologna) in 2008. In 2009 he studied at the European College of Parma Foundation. He then worked at the European Commission and in the “Public Opinion Monitoring Unit” at the European Parliament.

Introduction

Despite the multiple causes of the current crisis within the European Union, it is, without doubt, possible to affirm that one of the criticisms frequently addressed to it concerns its remoteness from the concerns of ordinary people and its status as an “autistic” political body incapable of listening to its citizens. Given this context, it seems all the more useful to review the survey tools of European public opinion available to community decision-makers, with the purpose of indicating that right from the beginning of its history, the EU has sounded out its citizens and created original tools for this very purpose.

Indeed, no one can deny that the creation of Eurobarometers by the European Commission and the European Parliament mobilises considerable resources and is given special attention by decision-makers¹. The very idea of a “European public opinion” is closely correlated to the Eurobarometer (EB), the instrument which is almost unanimously considered to be its “creator”: it is the only tool

which regularly measures public opinion, and has become a kind of European “institution” which has contributed to research and progress of European political integration².

The analysis of public opinion is certainly not the “primary source” of political inspiration behind the actions of the European Commission or other EU institutions, provided it is fully integrated by them. Political positions expressed in the European Parliament, the Council and the European Council are naturally determining elements in the treatment of public problems, as they are undoubtedly more “immediate”.

However, it remains essential to have a better grasp of the diversity of the analytical tools used in assessing public opinion liable to guide European institutions in their choices, by distinguishing European quantitative polls (part 1) from other types of surveys (part 2).

1. See Salvatore Signorelli, “The analysis work of public opinion in the EU”, *Studies and Reports, Notre Europe* (to be published), for the history of the conception of the Eurobarometer, detailed analysis of its functioning and that of other monitoring tools relating to public opinion.

2. Anne Melich, “Les enquêtes Eurobaromètres et la construction européenne”, in Pierre Bréchon and Bruno Cautrès (dir), *Les enquêtes Eurobaromètres. Analyse comparée des données socio-politiques*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1998, p. 23.

I. The quantitative poll on a European scale: a regular monitoring of opinions

The Eurobarometer quantitative poll is characterised by a broad sample of interviewees from the

general public, put together in order to ensure they are as representative as possible (*see Box 1*).

Box 1. THE EUROBAROMETER SAMPLING PRINCIPLE

SINCE OCTOBER 1989 (EB 32), THE SAMPLING PRINCIPLE APPLIED IN PARTICIPATING STATES – ACCESSION COUNTRIES ARE THE MOST OFTEN POLLED – IS A RANDOM SELECTION (PROBABILISTIC) IN MULTIPLE PHASES. IN EACH COUNTRY, DIFFERENT AREAS ARE IDENTIFIED, WITH A PROBABILITY PROPORTIONAL TO THE SIZE OF THE POPULATION (IN ORDER TO COVER THE WHOLE COUNTRY) AND ITS DENSITY. THEN, THE SAMPLE IS COMPARED TO THE ENTIRE COUNTRY, WHOSE DESCRIPTION IS BASED ON EUROSTAT DATA OR COMES FROM NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF STATISTICS. ONLY ONE INTERVIEW PER HOUSEHOLD IS SELECTED.

The questions are essentially “closed” questions to enable the answers to be classified: these “closed” questions require the interviewee to choose an answer from a pre-established list. Each country possesses a survey institute which takes part in the survey. All the results are subsequently sent to the European Coordination Office (currently *TNS Opinion & Social*), which coordinates the compiling of questionnaires, translations, field surveys, the treatment and analysis of the answers to the 27 national surveys, the weighting of the results, etc. Following the survey, a global analysis report is published on the Eurobarometer website: the same procedure is applied to all types of survey dependent on Eurobarometer, of which none is destined to remain confidential.

Eurobarometer would appear not to be alone in the panorama of vast transnational surveys carried out on a regular basis, in particular European ones. For example, since 1981, the “**European Value Study**” carries out surveys on what Europeans think about life, the family, work, religion, politics and society³. However, the European Value Study cannot be compared to the EB for various reasons, of which the most important are the following:

- **the frequency of surveys:** half-yearly for the EB as opposed to every nine years for the EVS;
- **the countries concerned:** the EB conducts surveys only in member states or in accession countries wishing to become members, whereas 47 countries took part in the last EVS survey;
- and above all, **the mission that they have assigned themselves:** the EB remains the only public opinion analysis instrument which seeks to contribute to the better knowing of the progress of European construction, even if the themes it deals with go far beyond opinions on European integration alone⁴.

In this perspective, three types of quantitative survey are carried out at European level under the label “Eurobarometer”: the “Standard EB”, the “Special EB” and the “Flash EB”.

1.1. The “Standard EB”: the regular tracking of public opinion

The “Standard Eurobarometer” is defined by surveys of approximately 1,000 interviews per country (with the exception of Luxembourg, Malta and Cyprus which have 500), carried out in the spring and the autumn, in order to be able to compare the results over time. The interviews are conducted in people’s homes and face-to-face. Initially the questionnaires are compiled in English and in French and then translated by the national survey institutes in the other official languages of the EU.

The questionnaires contain a minimum of one hundred and fifty questions, and are constructed around the same scheme which comprises⁵:

- questions relating to general attitudes with regard to life and society *lato sensu*;
- questions relating to European construction, its institutions, its politics, etc;
- questions on a particular theme relating to current European social, economic or political events; these questions normally correspond to the “Special EB” carried out during the same polling wave and published separately (*see 1.2*);
- a socio-demographic description of interviewees, with the questions always situated at the end of the questionnaire.

The regular repetition of the same questions over time – “Trends” questions – enables the constitution of an historical cartography of public opinion and constitutes a major attribute of the Eurobarometer,

3. See <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/evs/about-evs/>

4. Anna Melich, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

5. Cf. Philippe Caillot and Bernard Denni, “La qualité des données Eurobaromètres”, in Pierre Bréchon and Bruno Cautrès (dir.), *op. cit.*, pp. 71-87 and pp. 81-82.

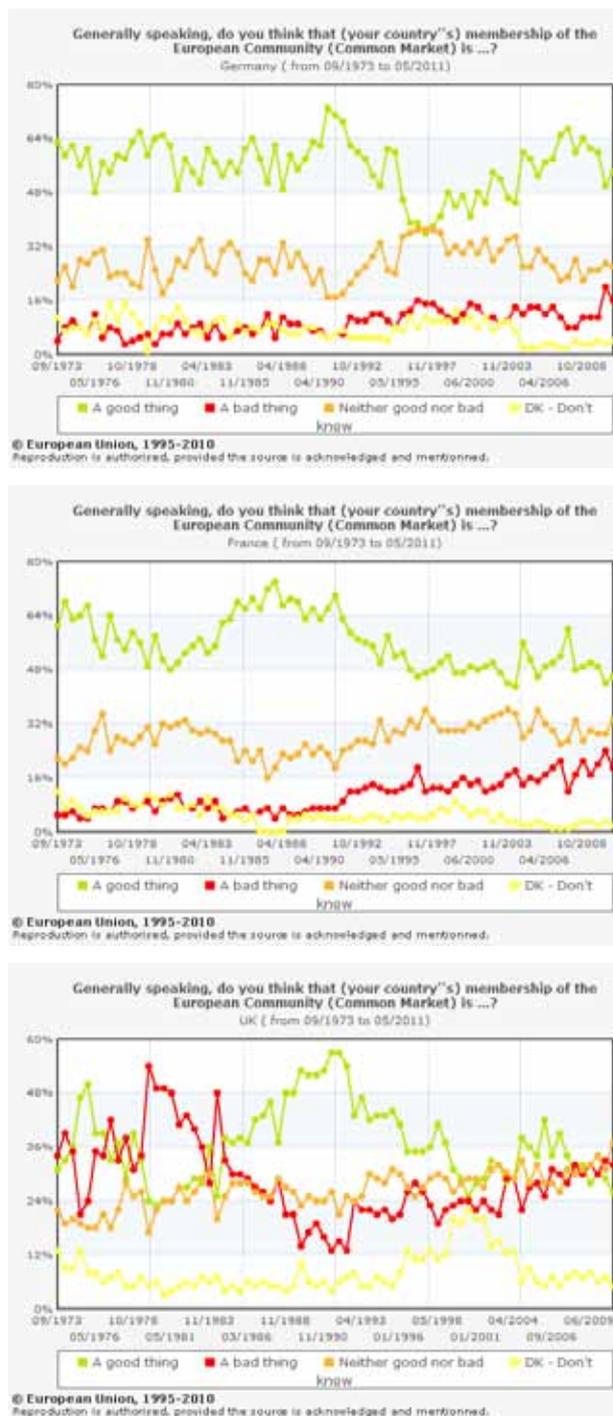
which is compiling a unique set of data. The “Standard EB” has, of course, seen certain “Trends” questions removed, but has also introduced others.⁶

Amongst the questions asked, we can distinguish **questions called “Trend-Trend”**. They were thus named because they have been asked since the beginning of the Eurobarometer programme. These questions are very important because they enable us to measure the opinion of European citizens over a large period of time. Consequently, it is not a surprise if, **amongst the latter we find**

questions designed to measure support for the EU. Because of this, one of the questions present since 1973 with an identical formulation⁷ from one wave of surveys to another is: “Generally speaking, do you think that our membership of the European Community is: a good thing / a bad thing / neither good nor bad?”

Response curves obtained in Germany, France and the UK between 1973 and 2010⁸ enable an overview of the results recorded by such surveys (see *Graph1*).

GRAPH1. ADHESION TO THE EU



6. For example, the indicator named “Unification” was suppressed after EB 44 (autumn 1995) because the term “Unification” is not used anymore in Community bodies; henceforth we are concerned with “building” a Europe that respects diversity. Anna Melich, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

7. With the exception of the change in denomination from “European Community” to “European Union”.

8. See http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm. To read the graphs, refer to the date indicated next to the name of the country (from 09/1973 to 06/2010).

The “Eurobarometer Interactive Search System”⁹ lists 55 “Trends” questions. This system enables search to be carried out by country or by range of countries, in the entire “Trends” questions database. Not only is it possible to compare the results of several countries, but also to analyse the trends. Different display modes are available: graphs, pie charts, etc.

1.2. The “Special EB”: in-depth thematical surveys

Special Eurobarometer reports are based on in-depth thematical studies, for the major part under-

taken for various services of the Commission, and to a more limited extent for other EU institutions. These surveys are carried out face-to-face or by telephone and integrated in Standard Eurobarometer polling waves.

The constant increase in this type of survey (see Table 1) reflects the increase in community competences. Between 1970, date of the first “Special EB” (“Europeans and European Unification”) and 2002, 166 surveys were commissioned; between 2002 and 2011 there were 198, that is, on average, 20 per year, as opposed to a little more than 5 per year during previous periods.

TABLE 1. THE ORDER OF AN “EB SPECIAL” BY THE SERVICES OF THE COMMISSION (1972-SEPT. 2011)¹⁰

DG	Functions	1972-84	1985-96	1997-2009	2009-Sept. 2011	Total
II	Economy and Finance		6	3		9
V	Employment, Social Affairs, Education	6	8	24	10	48
VI	Agriculture	0.5	4	7	1	12.5
VII	Transport		7	1	1	9
VIII	Development	1	3	9	4	17
X	Information / Communication	7	0	10	6	23
XI	Environment	1	7	6	2	16
XII	Science / Research	2	42	9	2	55
XV	Commercial Law/ Internal Market	2	7	4		13
XVI	Regional Politics	1.5	2			3.5
XVII	Energy	1	9	8	2	20
-	Health & Consumers		2	50	11	63
-	Home Affairs			8	2	10
-	External Action			2		2
XXII	Education, Youth and Culture			10	1	11
XXIII	Enterprise			4		4
-	Trade			1	1	2
-	Information Society and Media			6	4	10
-	Miscellaneous	1	1	25	1	28
Total		23	98	187	48	356
Average per year		1.9	8.1	15.5	24	9.2

SOURCE: EUROPEAN COMMISSION DATA, CALCULATIONS BY SALVATORE SIGNORELLI

The “Special EB” commissioned by the European Parliament must be mentioned separately. These surveys, which bear the title “Parlemeter”, began in 2008 (Special EB 288 / EB 68). Despite their cohabitation in the Web space dedicated to special surveys¹¹, the “Parlemeters” appear every six months and include “Trend” questions, which are

repeated in every survey. Added to these “Trends” questions are survey subjects, which subsequently are designed to mark the emancipation of the institution with regard to the Commission: Europeans and the Crisis (2010/EB 74.1), the European Union and energy (2011/EB 74.3) or Fighting against gender discrimination (2011/EB 75.1).

9. See http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/index.cfm?lang=en
 10. Table 1 was compiled with data until 1996, on Andy Smith’s data in 1998 (“The European Commission and the ‘People’”. The example of political use of Eurobarometers”, in Pierre Bréchon and Bruno Cautrès (dir), *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62), who, to do so, used the list from “Research on European attitudes in the Eurobarometer”, annex D of EB 45, 1996. For data from 1997 until 2011, we based our work on the list available on the Special Eurobarometer surveys Web page: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_special_

[en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_special_en.htm). Note that the names given to the DG of the Commission tend to change over time. Also note that the Economy and Finance DG commissioned “Special EB” for each country adopting the Euro or wishing to adopt it. However, given the “automatic” nature of such orders, we have decided not to take them into account when compiling the table.

11. See http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_special_en.htm

1.3. The “Flash EB”: rapid thematic surveys

The “Flash Eurobarometers”, as the name suggests, are *ad hoc* thematic opinion polls carried out with the purpose of obtaining rapid results. They allow, if necessary, to concentrate on targeted groups. The “Flash EB” normally concentrate on all member states of the EU but, occasionally, and depending on the subject they are dealing with, on one country which can be a candidate country to the EU, or even a country member of the European Economic Area, or indeed the United States of America (this is especially relevant for surveys concerning enterprises).

The “Flash EB” are characterised by short questionnaires (5-20 minutes) mainly carried out by telephone. They cover all subjects related to European society and principally those with “economic” connotations: entrepreneurial spirit,

citizenship, the economic crisis, the digital revolution, the single currency, innovation and research, etc. They began at the end of the nineties: since then there have been **339 reports published, with on average a frequency of 15 reports per year.**

The group of main interviewees is composed of managers of small and medium-sized enterprises, representatives of specific professional groups, decision-makers, young people or other social sub-groups. The samples, as for the “Standard EB” and “Special EB” are selected at random (probabilistic). In the case of surveys on “managers”, the sample is defined according to the size of the enterprise and the type of activity. Once this criterion has been defined, the selection of the sample is made at random from the list of enterprises eligible to be interviewed, provided by Dun & Bradstreet¹².

II. Other public opinion analytical tools: Eurobarometer qualitative surveys, deliberative polling, and national surveys

Although Eurobarometer’s quantitative polling remains a reference tool, European institutions also use other instruments capable of “taking the pulse” of public opinion in the EU. In particular, the qualitative analyses, principally ordered by the services of the Commission, new experiences which combine classic polling with the deliberative polling technique and finally the quantitative polling carried out on a national scale (essentially by media agencies) deserve our attention.

2.1. The “Qualitative EB”: the analysis of citizens’ reactions and motivations

Qualitative studies are characterised by an in-depth investigation into the motivations, feelings or reactions of citizens or certain social groups with regard to a particular European thematic area or topic. These studies allow us to understand the way in which motivations, opinions, attitudes or behaviour are formed and structured in the minds

of the public targeted; to up-date their expectations in depth; and finally identify the origins which would allow us to change the mentalities of the relevant public faced with a given issue.

These studies are notably used to explore perceptions of success and failure of a European project or a Community policy, better understand a new issue, identify the thinking process, test propositions for slogans or go into greater depth in a quantitative survey. The “Qualitative EB” use:

- **specific information collecting techniques used in the field of psycho-sociology**, which facilitate in-depth expression of individuals or groups questioned (*see Box 2*);
- **rigorous content-analysis techniques** enabling the clarification, on the basis of individuals’ responses and the way they structure them, of all the topics addressed, their internal articulations, and by default, the topics possibly concealed.

12. Dun & Bradstreet (D&B) is the world leader in market intelligence. Its database contains more than 195 million registered enterprises: <http://www.dnb.com/>

FOCUS GROUPS

THESE MEETINGS OF AN AVERAGE DURATION OF 2 HOURS ARE RUN BY A PSYCHO-SOCIOLOGIST EXPERIENCED IN GROUP LEADERSHIP AND INFORMATION-GATHERING TECHNIQUES, ABLE TO HELP TO GO BEYOND SUPERFICIAL REACTIONS TO REACH THE GENUINE REPRESENTATION AND OPINION STRUCTURING SYSTEMS.

SEMI- OR NON-DIRECTIVE INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

THESE INTERVIEWS LAST, ON AVERAGE, ONE HOUR AND ARE CARRIED OUT BY PSYCHO-SOCIOLOGISTS, BASED ON AN INTERVIEW GUIDE.

THE LATTER IS CONCEIVED ACCORDING TO THE FUNNEL TECHNIQUE: THE INTERVIEW BEGINS ON GENERAL GUIDELINES AND PROGRESSES WITH QUESTIONS BECOMING MORE AND MORE PRECISE.

The objectives of this type of Eurobarometer are principally:

- the analysis of the image of Europe, the EU, its institutions or its policies (the internal market has been the object of a great number of surveys);
- the orientation of information and the way it is communicated;
- the orientation of Community policies or action programmes;
- the evaluation of actions already accomplished.

Since the end of the 1980s, driven by President Delors' head of cabinet, Pascal Lamy, the Commission has ordered roughly a hundred qualitative surveys¹³. **Some of them were published in 2001¹⁴. Since then, there have been 23 surveys, on average 2 surveys per year,** on various subjects such as the future of Europe, Internet and children, the internal market, consumers, etc.

2.2. Deliberative Polling®

Deliberative Polling® is a registered technique conceived by the American professors James S. Fishkin (Stanford University) and Robert Luskin (Austin University) during the second half of the 1990s. Tried and tested more than twenty times on a national scale, this method consists in balancing polling techniques with the following deliberation model: poll – deliberation – post-deliberation poll¹⁵. It is thus possible not only to obtain a nuanced opinion from a sample of the population defined scientifically, but also, to identify and to measure evolutions in opinion occurring after information and deliberation phases.

Despite the fact that the procedure is relatively heavy from the operational point of view, deliberative polling presents two advantages in compari-

son to other techniques regarding citizen participation or consultation:

- It favours a qualitatively rich and nuanced result, allowing seasoned opinions to be gathered based on diversified and contradictory arguments exchanged over time, rather than fixed views (snapshot opinions).
- By not seeking a consensual result, it enables the principal bias affecting the deliberation value to be avoided, namely the effect of polarisation which creates majority dynamics independently of individuals' real opinions¹⁶.

At the European level, this method has been used

twice: the first experiment took place between August and October 2007, within the framework of the project **"Tomorrow's Europe"**¹⁷, organised by *Notre Europe* with the support of 23 think tanks, research institutes and NGOs from 18 countries concerning the content¹⁸. Moreover, the project benefited from the help of a sponsoring committee chaired by Jacques Delors, from the support of a network of 30 researchers based throughout the EU and from the contribution of *TNS Sofres*, which carried out the polling operations and recruited the participants.

The slogan of the project, "All Europe in One Room", led 362 citizens from the 27 member states of the EU to congregate in the European Parliament in Brussels to deliberate for two days, before being called upon to give their opinions on the principal social and foreign policy issues which the EU has to face. The participants were required to answer a series of questions, before and after discussions, which sometimes led them to change their opinion, for example concerning EU enlargement or employer-employee relations (*see Table 2*).

13. Daniel Debomy, "Public opinion and the European Union: analysis of the attitudes and expectations of the citizens of the EU member states since a quarter century", *Studies and Reports, Notre Europe* (to be published).
 14. "Perception of the European Union. Attitudes to and expectations of the European Union in the 15 member states and in 9 candidate countries", 2001: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/quali/ql_perceptions_summary_en.pdf
 15. For the argument see Salvatore Signorelli. *op. cit.*, pp. 31-35.

16. "Final report of the project 'Tomorrow's Europe'", *Notre Europe*, 29 February 2008.
 17. See <http://www.notre-europe.eu/en/axes/european-democracy-in-action/works/publication/transnational-deliberative-democracy/>
 18. The project, "Tomorrow's Europe" benefited from material support from the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and from several private sponsors (of which Allianz).

TABLE 2
OPINION BEFORE AND AFTER DELIBERATION: A FEW EXAMPLES

Q16J THE EU IS ADDING TOO MANY COUNTRIES TOO FAST

	Before Deliberation	After Deliberation
Strongly Disagree	10.4	10.8
Somewhat Disagree	15.5	17.0
Neither Agree or Disagree	28.2	19.3
Somewhat Agree	25.9	29.5
Strongly Agree	20.1	23.3

QUESTION 16J FROM DELIBERATIVE POLLING IN “TOMORROW’S EUROPE” (2007)

Q16G ADDING MORE COUNTRIES TO THE EU WOULD HELP OUR ECONOMY

	Before Deliberation	After Deliberation
Strongly Disagree	10.8	11.5
Somewhat Disagree	21.3	23.1
Neither Agree or Disagree	27.2	28.2
Somewhat Agree	27.9	25.9
Strongly Agree	12.8	11.2

QUESTION 16G FROM DELIBERATIVE POLLING IN “TOMORROW’S EUROPE” (2007)

Q3E EMPLOYERS HAVE THE RIGHT TO FIRE PEOPLE IF THAT IS WHAT THEY SEE AS BEST FOR THE BUSINESS

	Before Deliberation	After Deliberation
Strongly Disagree	10.8	11.1
Somewhat Disagree	24.1	21.7
Neither Agree or Disagree	13.9	18.8
Somewhat Agree	33.7	34.8
Strongly Agree	17.3	13.7

QUESTION 3E FROM DELIBERATIVE POLLING IN “TOMORROW’S EUROPE” (2007)

Q3D EMPLOYEES HAVE THE RIGHT TO JOB SECURITY

	Before Deliberation	After Deliberation
Strongly Disagree	4.1	5.7
Somewhat Disagree	9.1	8.0
Neither Agree or Disagree	11.9	12.5
Somewhat Agree	30.3	34.4
Strongly Agree	44.7	39.5

QUESTION 3D FROM DELIBERATIVE POLLING IN “TOMORROW’S EUROPE” (2007)

The second experiment, “Europolis”¹⁹, took place in May 2009 (just prior to the European elections) and was carried out under the auspices of Sienna University. As was the case for “Tomorrow’s Europe”, the survey proceeded in three phases: poll – deliberation – post-deliberation poll. The interviewees consisted of 348 citizens from the 27 EU countries, who debated for three con-

secutive days with experts and elected representatives, in small groups then in plenary sessions on decision-making, the environment and immigration-related issues.

This experience demonstrates just how far social and political attitudes towards the EU change following citizens’ exposure to information, and the implications this can have regarding political participation. For example, **before deliberation, only 37% of participants considered membership of their country to be a “very good thing”. After deliberation, they were 52%**. Yet another example, before deliberation, 46% considered voting in the European elections to be their duty; after, the figure was 56%.

2.3. The use of “national” polls ordered in member states

To conclude the review of public opinion survey tools available to Community institutions, attention must be drawn to nationwide quantitative surveys, that is to say “classic” opinion polls, of which many are published regularly in the media. Most of these surveys are exclusively commissioned in a member state by a national public institution or a national private entity and principally the media (newspapers, televisions, blogs, etc.), national authorities or political parties/movements.

These national surveys are taken into account by Community institutions especially when they concern voting intentions at the time of political elections in member states or when they deal with sensitive subjects for the EU, such as **questions designed to measure the level of citizen support for one or other of its policies or institutions.**

In order to decipher “the” public opinions in member states, the Commission can rely on the **Media Monitoring and Analysis Unit** (COMM. A. 3), but also on its **Representations** in EU countries, which represent the liaison between the Brussels executive, national and local public institutions and the general public. The Representations’ approach in this context is very **heterogeneous** and largely depends on the “sensitivity” of the civil servants in charge of the questions linked to the opinion polls (generally a political analyst). However, despite elements dependent on the human context of each Representation, there are actions which may be defined as “common” (see Box 3). It is not, of course, easy to evaluate to what extent the Commission DGs, the Commissioners and their cabinet integrate in their analyses and decisions all of the elements of analysis transmitted by the Representations.

19. See <http://europolis-project.eu/>

Box 3. ACTIONS OF THE COMMISSION'S REPRESENTATIONS CONCERNING NATIONAL POLLS

MONITORING ROLE: WHEN A NATIONAL POLL IS LIKELY TO AROUSE THE INTEREST OF THE COMMISSION, IT IS THE DUTY OF THE REPRESENTATION TO TRANSMIT IT TO THE UNIT MANAGING PUBLIC OPINION OR, DEPENDING ON THE CASE, DIRECTLY TO THE COMMISSIONER'S CABINET, ALWAYS ACCOMPANIED BY A SMALL COMMENTARY.

WARNING ROLE: IF THE REPRESENTATION PERCEIVES SIGNS THAT CAN INDICATE THAT NATIONAL OPINION, CONCERNING THE DEBATE ON EUROPE, DIFFERS FROM THAT WISHED BY THE COMMISSION, IT IS NATURALLY LED TO WARN BRUSSELS HEADQUARTERS.

NATIONAL PRESS REVIEW: COMPILED BY A CONTRACTOR EXTERNAL TO THE COMMISSION, IT IS ENRICHED BY POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS BY THE CIVIL SERVANTS OF THE REPRESENTATION AND SENT TO BRUSSELS.

Conclusion

The creation of the Eurobarometer has granted Community institutions, and more generally speaking, national and European public authorities, with an efficient public opinion analysis tool. Europeans' opinions can now be taken into account by European opinion leaders who have a vast database available capable of mapping them out, even if it is little known. The regular publication of EB polls can even have contributed to giving life to the "idea" that a "European opinion" exists.

Besides the predominantly quantitative data and the regular EB publications, Community institu-

tions can make a conscious effort to read public opinions recorded in the *verbatim* of qualitative surveys, or innovative experiments such as deliberative polling. This does not, of course, mean that decisions taken in Brussels are the result of public consultation via opinion polls, which would complement the messages expressed by citizen and member states' representatives within the European Parliament and Council. Nevertheless, it can certainly contribute to challenging the notion that European institutions are entirely deaf to public opinion during decision-making and the implementation of their actions.

All other *Notre Europe's* publications are available in French and English on our Website (www.notre-europe.eu), Facebook and Twitter.