

Europolity? Seven Paradoxes about European Identity

Michael Bruter

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Michael Bruter is researcher at the London School of Economics (LSE).

Contact: M.Bruter@lse.ac.uk

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Salzburg Centre of European Union Studies/
Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence
University of Salzburg
Mönchsberg 2
A-5020 Salzburg
Tel: 0043 662 8044 7600
E-Mail: sceus@sbg.ac.at

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Europolity?

Seven Paradoxes about European identity

Michael Bruter

Department of Government, LSE

Introducing the Paradoxes of Identity

Do you remember May 2005? Within a week, French and Dutch citizens voted against the ratification of the treaty which was supposed to 'establish a Constitution for the European Union'. The interpretations of the press (and particularly the British press) were remarkably severe: there was a divorce between Europe and its citizens, Europeans wanted less Europe, not more, people simply did not feel Europeans. The reactions of politicians – including Eurocrats – followed the same logic, President Barroso suggested that citizens wanted a more 'technical' Europe that would deal with the economy and not with politics, we should get rid of the symbols of the European Union because citizens did not identify with the EU. Interesting interpretation of the democratic earthquake of the Spring of 2005, but one that did not seem to rely on any serious empirical assessment of European identity whatsoever.

Systematically and academically assessing and mapping European identity is precisely what a recent study that I have conducted has tried to achieve. In the days that followed the 2009 European Parliament elections, we ran the largest ever mass survey specifically dedicated to understanding whether citizens feel European, what it means to them, and what are their attitudes towards EU citizenship in its present shape but also in terms of its possible future evolutions. The project has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and will include a second wave ran in 8 countries in the Spring of 2010. The survey, conducted on our behalf by Opinium Ltd, was a rather gigantic

enterprise with over 30,000 people interviews all over the 27 member states of the European Union.

Before a series of launches organised by Lansons, a leading public relations company, give Sarah Harrison and myself the opportunity to unveil the first results of the study to practitioners in several world capitals, the first results of the projects have been presented at the Centre for European Union Studies at Salzburg University, outlining our key findings. In the next few paragraphs, I propose to briefly highlight the context of changing European identity and the problematic of popular legitimacy before highlighting seven of the many paradoxical conclusions that our findings reveal empirically.

Down or Up?

In June 2009, Europeans voted in the seventh direct European Parliament elections. On this occasion, the average turnout across the whole of the European Union reached a record low previously set 5 years earlier in June 2004. Journalists and politicians alike deducted that the democratic crisis of the European Union must therefore be symmetrically reaching an all time high, and hastened to conclude that Europeans are not interested in the European Union, that they do not trust their European institutions, and that by and large, they simply do not feel European. The starting point of this argument was rather dubious in the first place. When comparing turnout in the 25 member states that voted in both 2004 and 2009, turnout was by and large stable, and similarly, while

the overall European turnout seemed to have dramatically declined between the 1999 elections and the 2004 ones, when comparing the fifteen ‘old’ member states which alone voted on both occasions, turnout had in fact increased.

In the context of studying the relationship between the emergence of a European public sphere and that of a mass European identity, this hasty interpretation of an apparently ‘obvious’ public opinion measure (whereby one conveniently ignores that completely different countries are voting in the three elections being compared) has a major symbolic purpose. Journalists largely explain their lack of coverage of European news by the fact that EU citizens would not be interested in them. Conversely, politicians explain the vastly domestic focus of their European Parliament campaigns by the suggestion that voters would be more interested in them than in European issues, despite the fact that European Elections Studies show time and again that a dominant and increasing proportion of voters would like to hear more about Europe (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996) and that the French 2005 referendum on an EU constitution saw – literally – several millions of citizens effectively reading the incredibly obscure and fairly long document and buying books detailing and interpreting its most minute details.

There is therefore a triangle of legitimacy crisis associating citizens, the media, and the European project, whereby the media are claiming to not be in a position to force citizens to get interested in something which they do not like (Bain and Holland, 2007) let alone influence them, while citizens are claiming that they are poorly and inadequately informed about the European Union. This apparently obscure causality between the

meagre progress of a European public sphere and the lack of democratic engagement of citizens (see for instance Herrmann, Risse et al., 2004) could however possibly be partly sorted out if we better understand the extent to which the media *can* indeed influence citizens' European identity through the way they inform them about Europe. After outlining the legitimacy paradox of the European Union and models of potential influence, this chapter will provide the results of a 2 ½ year long panel study experiment on the impact of news on Europe on citizens' identity.

Paradoxes of Popular Legitimacy

As we have seen, the bulk of popular elite interpretations – from the mass media to many political parties and through to EU institutions themselves, is that EU citizens don't feel European, that Euroscepticism is paradoxically on the rise and has led to a recent string of 'no votes' in referenda on EU questions, that turnout in European Parliament elections keeps declining and betrays a disaffection of citizens for a European Union which is, consequently, supposed to face a widespread and dangerous crisis of legitimacy at the moment. In fact, a significant number of quality academic publications accept this interpretation (Hix, 2008, Cederman, 2001).

While not questioning the fact that European integration is indeed facing a crisis of legitimacy in the sense that there is a mismatch between public preferences in terms of European integration and what is actually proposed to them by their elites, the assumption that this must mean a rise in anti-EU sentiment and a lack of European

identity of citizens is less than obvious. In fact, there are as many signs pointing out to a rise in general support for the European project, civic engagement, and European identity alike as there are signs of dissatisfaction with specific aspects of integration. Our suggestion here is that European identity is in fact growing, but that because an increasing number of EU citizens precisely feel European, they now judge the various policies and institutional reforms of the EU 'from the inside', as citizens, and thus on their own merits, rather than the principle of integration. Thus, we would not be witnessing a lack of European identity and rise in Euroscepticism, but an increasing European identity and switch from an 'outside' Euroscepticism that targets the principles of integration to an 'inside' Euroscepticism that takes the principle of durable, continuing integration for granted but targets specific policies and reforms. This would explain some paradoxical evolution in European opinion.

As mentioned earlier, turnout between 1999 and 2004 among the member states that voted on both occasions went up, and similarly, the overall decline in turnout in European Parliament elections since the 1970s seems in no way sharper or more worrying than the parallel participation decline in the context of national level elections in the same countries.

The argument of the recent victory of the 'no' in a number of referenda on questions relating to the European Union is equally weak. The most emblematic of these 'no's', that of the French population in May 2005 occurred at a time when support for European integration was at its peak. Similarly, for the first time in the history of French referenda

on EU questions, the dominant argument of the ‘no’ camp, regardless of its (lack of) credibility was based not on a rejection of integration – or a claim for slower integration – but instead, on a claim for faster and more generalised integration that would be increasingly social and political.

Finally, the question of popular legitimacy is hard to disconnect from the question of institutional trust. There again, the evolution of public opinion when it comes to trust in EU institution since the early 1980s is highly symptomatic. Twenty-five years ago, there was no EU country where European Union institutions were globally more trusted than their national equivalent. By the mid-2000s, however, almost all of the ‘old’ member states and a large majority of the new ones trust the European Commission more than their national government, and the European Parliament more than their national one (tables 1 and 2). The only exceptions tend to be Sweden and, to a lesser extent, Denmark (Parliament only) and Finland (where the scores for national Parliament and the European Commission are tied). For the tenants of wide-spread Euroscepticism, this is a shocking truth. Who would think that in thirteen of the fifteen old member states, including the United Kingdom, the European Commission is in fact significantly more trusted than the national government? And how can we reconcile these findings with suspicion of declining popular legitimacy and never emerging identity?

Tables 1 and 2 about here

The argument of this chapter is therefore that it is exceedingly simplistic to start from the assumption that Europeans ‘don’t care’ about the European Union and don’t feel European, and that it is because of this presumed lack of interest or indeed supposed lack of European identity that powerless media would not be in a position to participate in the strengthening of a European public sphere. We will therefore use findings from a long-term panel study experiment on the impact of news on European identity to show that the media, far from simply ‘following’ citizens’ news demand do participate in shaping their identity over time.

Seven Paradoxes of European identity

Let us now detail seven of the paradoxes that our mass survey on European identity empirically unveil.

First paradox: on the whole, across Europe, European identity is much stronger than what anyone seems to think – and further strengthening now:

Commentators and academics alike have often been quick to jump to the conclusion that if an increasing proportion of Europeans are critical of the current form and shape of European integration, then European identity must be weak or even weakening. To put it simply, nothing could be further from the truth. Levels of European identity are high and they are strengthening.

Indeed, on a 10-point scale, the level of self-perceived general European identity of the average EU citizen is 7.09. Even in the Europe's most Eurosceptic countries, a majority of citizens feel European. For instance, in the UK, 55.2% of Britons and 68% of Northern Irishmen have an identity score of 5 out of 10 or above.

Using our data, we can create statistical instruments that enable us to evaluate the evolution of European identity over time. This way, we can show that level identity is constantly progressing at the very time support for European integration is stagnating and perceived benefits of European integration altogether declining.

Second paradox: European identity is completely different from support for integration, support for policies, and perceived benefits of European integration

Our findings show that feeling European is completely different from assessing various European Union policies, institutions, or even the perceived benefits or principle of European integration in general.

Still using statistical instruments and recreating time series data, we can see that increasingly, a large proportion of citizens feel European without having the impression that European integration is beneficial to themselves or to their countries. These citizens tend to support European integration despite not perceiving it as beneficial, precisely

because they identify with 'Europe' as a political and human community. At a time when the limits of European identity have been tested by the need for the EU to prove its solidarity with near-bankrupt Greece, this finding is essential. Indeed, it may well explain why citizens from the rest of the Eurozone are in no way rebelling against the gesture of financial solidarity that some countries that face economic difficulties have shown towards each other.

Third paradox: European identity can mean two very different things to different people – the civic and cultural dimensions of Europeanness

Our findings show that there are essentially two separate dimensions of European identity that are very distinct – a civic dimension (whereby individuals politically 'feel' like citizens of the European Union) and a cultural dimension (which means that individuals feel part of a European human and cultural community).

While cultural identity highlights a certain success of European integration when it comes to making Europeans feel closer together, it has little 'institutional' value. By contrast, civic identity can work as a 'reservoir of good will' that leads citizens to tolerate policy decisions they find far from perfect.

On the whole, a majority of citizens tend to feel more 'civically' than 'culturally' European (the average 'civic' score from is 7.15 on a scale from 0-10, while the average

‘cultural’ score is 6.05), however, this situation hides some important differences across EU member states.

Indeed, while obviously inter-related, these two dimensions are clearly distinct and their respective advancement varies from country to country. To simplify, in general terms, European identity tends to be higher in Western Europe and cultural identity in Central and Eastern Europe.

Fourth paradox: the more citizens criticise the EU, the more they favour further increased EU citizenship rights

We know how critical citizens are of certain EU policies. Yet, our findings show that there is overwhelming support for all current aspects of EU citizenship, and equally high demand for a furthering of EU citizens rights, even when they mean that we would grant more rights to (European) ‘foreigners’ on our soil.

When it comes to the assessment of current rights associated with EU citizenship, 89% of citizens approve the rights for all Europeans to live anywhere they want in the European Union, 85.6% are happy for foreign EU citizens to vote in local elections in their country and 87.8% are happy with the borderless environment created by the Schengen agreements.

Similarly, when it comes to possible future extensions of EU citizenship rights, 88.6% of citizens would recommend that new treaties be adopted by EU-wide referenda such as those held in federal systems, and 84.4% would support a direct election of the EU president by citizens, a measure largely refused by heads of states and governments because it is considered far too federalist. Majorities of citizens across the member states would also support a controversial right of EU citizens to vote in general elections in their country.

Fifth paradox: the more you experience Europe, the more European you feel

The European experience of citizens is one of the best predictors of their level of European identity. As increasing proportions of younger (and less young) Europeans get a chance to travel, speak foreign languages, or live or study in other European countries, this can only result in interesting transformations of the meaning of European identity.

Travelling, speaking languages, living in another European nation or indeed having some family doing so means that citizens get more and more chances to ‘experience’ European integration in their daily life. This direct experience of the EU proves to have a major impact on citizens’ identity. Figure 1 shows how European identity progresses as citizens’ level of European experience increases.

Figure 1 about here

Sixth paradox: European identity – a tale of two stories?

Not everyone feels equally European. For instance, the UK has the largest proportion of citizens who do not feel European at all, but also one of the largest proportions of people feeling very European across the whole European Union. There are proportionally more people very strongly European in Northern Ireland than in Belgium, France or Germany.

Of course, this begs the question of what sort of social and demographic characteristics are most highly related to the level of European identity of citizens. A survey of the impact of major social and demographic variables proves very telling.

For instance, education is strongly correlated with European identity but wealth is not. Younger citizens feel significantly more ‘civically’ European than older ones but cultural identity is not related to age. Similarly, while centre-left voters are more ‘civically’ European than centre-right ones, and more supportive of EU citizenship rights, cultural identity is not strongly related to ideological preferences.

Finally, women tend to feel more European than men in general terms and in terms of support for EU citizenship rights, but men have higher levels of civic identity than their female counterparts. Even more paradoxical, the impact of gender on European identity is

not the case across all countries. For instance, women tend to feel more European than men in Austria, Germany or the UK, but it is exactly the opposite in France, Spain, or the Czech Republic.

Seventh paradox: European identity, present and future

Last but not certainly least paradox in our findings, even the people who feel least European tend to think that their children and grandchildren will feel far more European than them. In fact, at a time when many academics and citizens alike do not hesitate to claim that the EU is facing one of its worst democratic crises and could even be ‘endangered’, well over 90% of Europeans remain persuaded that their children and grand-children will feel more European than them, and even in countries such as the UK, this proportion is above 80%.

All in all, it is as though European integration was still seen as a process, a pioneering adventure which had left part of the current generations on the side but would not fail to gain the hearts and minds of their descendants.

This results, as the other elements that we have mentioned in this article (and many other similar findings that we have come up with) also seem to contradict ‘common knowledge’ about European identity. Indeed, while we have established that on the whole, citizens feel far more European on average than what many would expect, and

feel increasingly European were many claimed that identification with Europe was on the decline, it would be wrong to assume that such a growing European identity necessarily means that heads of states and governments have a 'blank cheque' to do whatever they want with European integration.

On the contrary, when interpreting our findings one should bear in mind that citizens' cynicism and dissatisfaction is not EU-specific but related to the way we 'do' politics in general. In fact, in 14 of the 15 'old' member states, citizens trust the European Commission more than their national government, and in 13 out of 15, they trust the European Parliament more than its national counterparts. In the UK, both EU institutions are trusted more than their British equivalent, and this was the case well before expense scandals further damaged the confidence of British citizens in the Westminster system.

In fact, what our findings suggest is that in many ways, the growing level of European identity of citizens may largely be responsible for what many have seen as a surge in Eurosceptic attitudes. Indeed, as citizens feel more and more European, as they appropriate the EU as their political system, they are also less and less willing to accept its institutional and policy shortcomings. In particular, the quasi-unanimous demand for greater mechanisms of direct democracy (pan-European referenda, direct election of the EU president) suggests that citizens are simply no longer ready to tolerate the best efforts of heads of states and governments to keep the EU institutional system far less democratic than it should be. In a context of increasing cynicism of citizens towards their politicians and their elites in general, European citizens are simply no longer willing to

accept that their politicians know what is best for them. While they feel largely and increasingly European, they are also telling us that they have the right to see the European Union develop into a better, more democratic, more transparent, and more engaging political system than what it is and what national institutions are.

Table 1: Compared Trust in the European Commission and National Government

COUNTRY	EUROPEAN COMMISSION	NATIONAL GOVERNMENT	DIFFERENCE
Poland	49	7	+42
Italy	63	26	+37
Slovakia	54	17	+37
Belgium	63	34	+29
Hungary	58	31	+27
Slovenia	52	27	+25
France	52	29	+23
Ireland	61	39	+22
Portugal	56	34	+22
Germany	39	23	+16
Netherlands	54	39	+15
Lithuania	45	31	+14
Spain	53	42	+11
Czech Republic	35	25	+10
Greece	63	55	+ 8
Austria	47	39	+ 8
United Kingdom	26	19	+7
Luxembourg	66	61	+ 5
Latvia	32	28	+4
Denmark	47	44	+ 3
Malta	50	49	+1
Sweden	48	48	0
Finland	59	59	0
Estonia	44	45	-1
Cyprus	49	75	-26

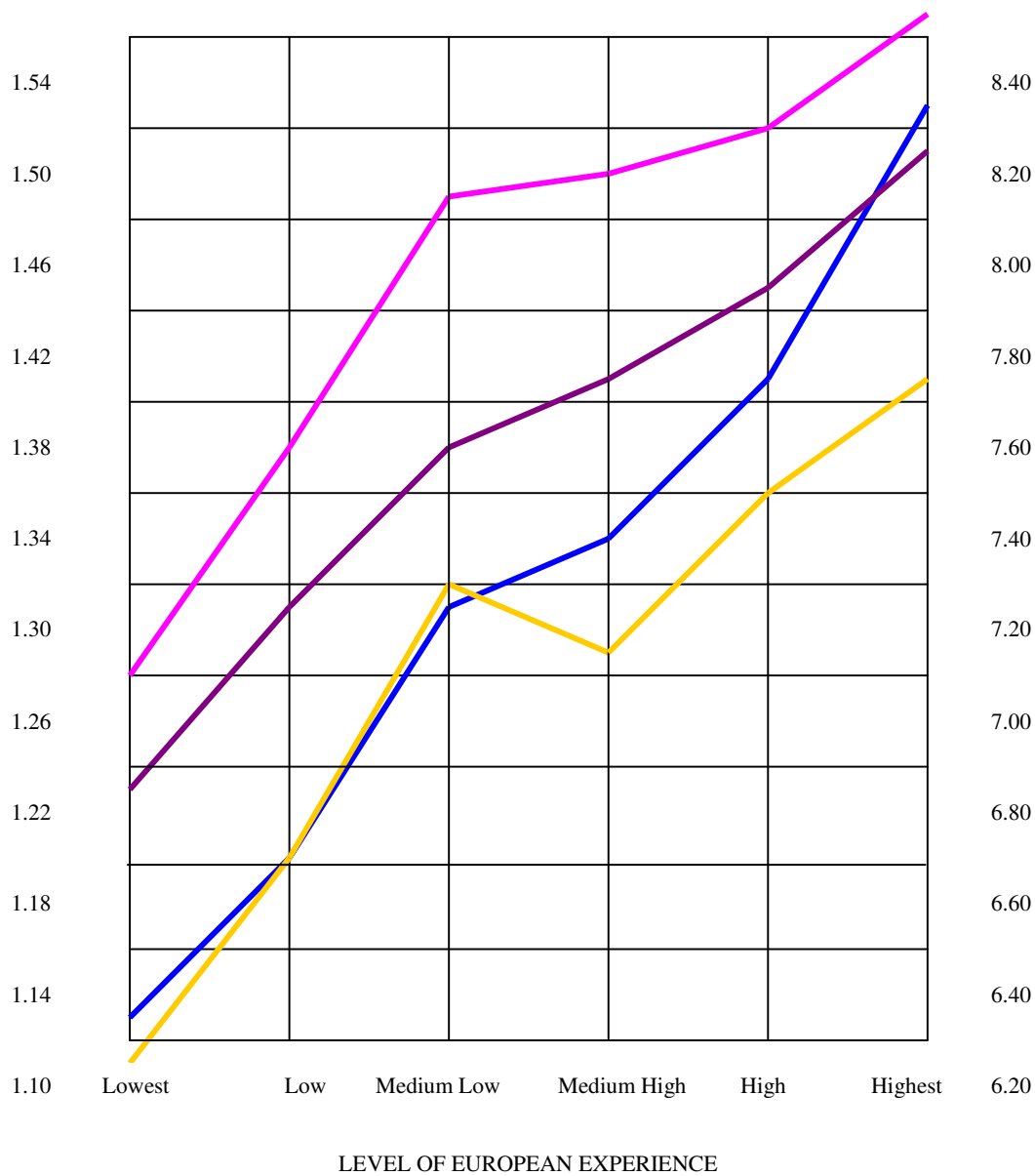
Figures in the first two columns correspond to the proportion of citizens who tend to trust the institution. Figures in column 3 correspond to the trust advantage (+) or disadvantage (-) of the European Commission when compared to the national government. Source: Compiled by the author from Eurobarometer 61 data, tables 4.1b and 8.4.

Table 2: Compared Trust in the European Parliament and National Parliament

COUNTRY	EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT	NATIONAL PARLIAMENT	DIFFERENCE
Poland	53	8	+45
Slovakia	59	19	+40
Italy	68	32	+36
Hungary	64	29	+35
Slovenia	59	25	+34
Lithuania	52	19	+33
Belgium	64	38	+ 26
Czech Republic	44	18	+26
Ireland	64	40	+24
France	57	35	+22
Germany	51	29	+22
Portugal	58	37	+21
Spain	62	42	+20
Latvia	40	20	+20
Netherlands	57	43	+14
Estonia	49	35	+14
Luxembourg	67	56	+11
Malta	55	47	+8
Greece	70	63	+7
United Kingdom	30	25	+5
Finland	61	58	+3
Austria	43	41	+2
Sweden	55	58	-3
Denmark	55	63	-8
Cyprus	55	74	-19

Figures in the first two columns correspond to the proportion of citizens who tend to trust the institution. Figures in column 3 correspond to the trust advantage (+) or disadvantage (-) of the European Commission when compared to the national government. Source: Compiled by the author from Eurobarometer 61 data, tables 4.1b and 8.4.

Figure 1: European identity by level of European experience



- General identity (right scale)
- Civic identity (left scale)
- Cultural identity (left scale)
- Support for EU citizenship (right scale)

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