

# **European Public Opinion and the European Union: The Knowledge Gap**

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## Introduction

In contrast to the situation just a few years ago, it is now well established, both in theory and in practice, that public opinion is a significant factor in the process of European integration<sup>1</sup>. This significance will almost certainly continue; it may even increase. Although there has also been considerable growth in research in this area, most of the research has focused on *evaluations* of European integration and has tended to pay less attention to how much people actually *know* about the European Community or European Union. In fairness, the neglect of the knowledge factor has been due in the main to a dearth of data. Thus, Wessels, in a comprehensive analysis of the development of support for integration, attempted to deal with the cognitive dimension but had to recognize that, given the available data, this could only be tackled indirectly: "One possibility might be to use direct measures of knowledge or perception. Another possibility is to tackle the question indirectly by asking whether people have developed an orientation towards the EC. For practical purposes we choose the second method". (Wessels, 1995, p.110). In the same volume Niedermayer and Sinnott analysed measures of knowledge but only in relation to the one European institution for which such measures were then available, namely, the European Parliament. In short, data availability has greatly hampered research on the cognitive dimension of attitudes to the European Union<sup>2</sup>.

It can be argued that the lack of detailed research of this kind is more serious in this instance than it might be in other contexts. The probability is that, given the remoteness and the embryonic nature of the European political system, attitudes to it are likely to be less well informed and less well structured than attitudes to national politics. Consequently, a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the knowledge or lack of knowledge underlying attitudes to European integration is essential in any attempt at a fuller understanding of the nature of European public opinion.

Against this background, the paper begins with a brief consideration of the quality of the data on how much the public knows about the European Community or European Union<sup>3</sup>. It then explores the criteria that ought to be applied in assessing the adequacy of whatever level of knowledge is found to exist. This is followed by a description of how much people actually know about the European Union, focusing mainly on the situation in the spring of 1993 and paying particular attention to perceptions of decision-making and representation. This account is supplemented by consideration of some evidence from the spring of 1995 on knowledge of European and national decision-making in three

particular policy areas. The paper then turns to the “so what?” issue, examining some empirical evidence regarding the effects that variations in levels of knowledge appear to have on attitudes to integration. Having shown that knowledge matters, the paper attempts to determine why people have different levels of knowledge. Some indication of this can be found in the public’s perception and evaluation of the available sources of EU information; if people do not know where to find the information or if they tend to seek it from sub-optimal sources or if they lack confidence in the sources, the end result is likely to be low levels of information. It may well be, however, that the public’s knowledge is conditioned by more fundamental socio-demographic and political factors; it may also be conditioned by the domestic political and institutional context within which people learn about and react to European developments. Accordingly, the paper presents a multivariate analysis of the sources of differences in levels of knowledge, taking into account not just communication variables and socio-demographic factors but also variables that seek to capture some of the variation in the way in which the European Union is experienced across the member states. A brief concluding section provides a summary and some reflections on the findings.

### **The available data**

The main body of data in this area is the series of Eurobarometer surveys conducted for the European Commission. Over a long number of years these have asked repeatedly about levels of awareness of various Community institutions. With rare exceptions, the examination of the cognitive aspect of orientations towards the Union in the Eurobarometer series did not in the past go beyond this rather vague and intangible notion. More recently, the quality of Eurobarometer data on knowledge of the European Union has improved substantially. Specifically, Eurobarometer 39 and 40 (spring and autumn 1993) have considerable data on this topic and subsequent Eurobarometers have extended these detailed investigations by examining knowledge of additional aspects of EU institutions or policies. The analysis that follows focuses mainly on the data from Eurobarometer 39 and introduces evidence from later Eurobarometers where this throws further light on the matter. Before proceeding to examine this evidence, however, it is necessary to consider the criteria by which the levels of knowledge which prevail might be assessed.

### **How much is enough?**

One way of attempting to answer this question is to take account of how European citizens themselves judge their level of knowledge. According to the spring 1993 Eurobarometer, a very substantial majority (71 per cent) of Europeans felt that they were not well informed about the European Community as compared with 27 per cent who felt they were well informed. The range runs from the 54 per cent feeling not well informed in the Netherlands to 79 per cent in Italy (Eurobarometer, 1993a, p. A30). Before leaping to the conclusion that there is a great hunger out there among the public for more Euro-information, however, it should be noted from Eurobarometer 40 that only 23 per cent agreed with the statement "I really need to know a lot more about the European Community"; whereas 38 per cent chose the response "I would like to have some more information about the European Community" and 28 per cent opted for "As far as I am concerned, I am happy with what I already know" (Eurobarometer, 1993b, p. A37).

A more important yardstick in assessing levels of EU knowledge is the level of knowledge of national politics and the national political system. This is a useful corrective to the danger of taking low levels of EU knowledge out of context and drawing dire conclusions. Perhaps knowledge of the national political system is just as low and the problem really lies with knowledge of politics and of political institutions as such. Accordingly, the presentation of the data on levels of knowledge of the European Union that follows will be accompanied by consideration of some evidence of knowledge of national politics.

Finally, if one were to take a normative perspective, either one derived from democratic theory or from a commitment to European integration, one could perhaps establish a yardstick by which to evaluate the existing state of knowledge among the public. For example, from an integrationist perspective it could be argued that, given the nature of the issues raised by the current phase of integration, the successful completion of the European project requires a high level of public knowledge and understanding of the process and of the issues involved on the part of the European public. How else is support for complex and far-reaching developments such as European Monetary Union to be assured? The problem is that it would be extremely difficult to quantify what either the minimum or the desirable level of knowledge should be. Accordingly, this paper will confine itself to examining this aspect of the matter from an empirical perspective by investigating the relationship between levels of knowledge and support for integration.

## Knowledge of European affairs

A comprehensive account of prevailing levels of knowledge would require a survey dedicated to this topic and any small set of questions will have certain limitations. The knowledge questions in Eurobarometer 39 have a strong institutional bias: they ask about the membership of the Community, the location of the Commission, the name of its president, the names of incumbent Commissioners, which is its most powerful institution (in the sense of having the final say on legislation) and who elects the MEPs<sup>4</sup>. Despite this institutional orientation, however, these questions can probably be treated as indicative of more general levels of knowledge and understanding. In any event, knowledge of how the Union functions is one of the key aspects of an adequate public understanding of European affairs and has a particularly important bearing on the problem of the democratic deficit and on the legitimacy of the Union.

A series of eight questions dealing with knowledge of the above topics can be used to form an index of knowledge of the EU; scores on the index cover a thirty point range (from 0 to 29)<sup>5</sup>. Dividing such a scale up into discrete levels evaluating the significance of each level is difficult and inevitably somewhat arbitrary. Two considerations should be borne in mind in this regard. First, most of the questions are very simple, indeed it might be argued that some are simplistic, and they might be regarded as no more than the minimum that a reasonably well informed European citizen ought to know about the Union (the exception to this is the question about the membership of the Commission). The second point to bear in mind in interpreting scores on such an index is that, with several of the questions offering only two alternatives, guessing is easy and relatively rewarding. This results in an inflation of the scores relative to the real level of knowledge. Bearing this in mind, the scores are divided as follows in Figure 1: 0-5: "no knowledge"; 6-11: "very little knowledge"; 12-17: "some but not much knowledge"; 18-23: "moderately well-informed" and 24-29: "very well informed". On this interpretation of the scale, 10 per cent of the citizens of the European Union are very well informed and a further 24 per cent are moderately well informed. This means, however, that two-thirds (65 per cent) emerge, with "some but not much knowledge" or less. This less well informed majority of the European citizenry comprises three groups: 26 per cent with "some but not much knowledge", 24 per cent with "very little knowledge" and 15 per cent with "no knowledge" at all. If the countries are ranked on the basis of the *combination* of the proportions who are very well informed and moderately well informed, Denmark and Luxembourg have the most knowledgeable publics, followed by

Belgium, Greece and France. The least knowledgeable are Italy and the former East Germany, followed by Northern Ireland, Britain and West Germany<sup>6</sup>.

It was suggested above that, before any hard and fast conclusions are drawn about levels of knowledge of the EU, such levels need to be seen in the context of how much people know about the national political system. It is extremely difficult to devise precisely comparable scales of knowledge at the national and supranational levels and this difficulty is reflected in the fact that the scale used in the Eurobarometer 39 report to measure national knowledge is based on only four questions, compared to seven questions in the European knowledge scale in the same report. The four items cover the name of the capital of the country, the name of the prime minister, the institution having the final say on legislation and the identity and role of the head of state. Accepting that a scale based on such questions provides only an approximate basis for comparison of national and European levels of knowledge, the contrasts are still striking. Across the twelve member states in spring 1993, 78 per cent showed high to very high levels of knowledge of the national political system in comparison to only 38 per cent showing such levels in relation to the European system<sup>7</sup> (Eurobarometer, 1993a, p. 55-59).

More detailed examination of the responses to two of the individual questions that go to make up the index of European knowledge reveals particular problems in regard to knowledge of key aspects of the functioning of the institutions of the European Union. The first of these two questions deals with which of the European institutions is seen to be most powerful «in terms of having the final say on European Community legislation». Across the Union, one quarter of the citizens have no opinion on this matter. A plurality (35 per cent) attribute decisive power (erroneously) to the European Parliament (see Table 1). A further 20 per cent express the stereotypical view that the bureaucrats in Brussels (i.e. the Commission) decide everything; the correct answer (the Council of Ministers) was chosen by one-in-five. The only countries with a significantly above average correct response are Denmark, Luxembourg and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the Netherlands. Given the novelty of their accession to the Community and indeed the novelty of their experience of democracy, it is perhaps not surprising that it is the people of former East Germany who are most prone to exaggerate the role of the European Parliament. Likewise, given the stereotypes prevalent in the British debate about European integration, it comes as no surprise that the greatest tendency to exaggerate the role of the Commission is found in the United Kingdom (see Table 1). The most important feature of all of this, however, is the lack of awareness of the role of the Council

of Ministers: 79 per cent either don't know who decides or don't realise that the power of decision lies with the representatives of the national governments. This suggests that the subtleties of elite debates about intergovernmentalism versus supranationalism and about the intricacies of qualified majority voting in the Council of Ministers do not have much resonance in public opinion.

It might be argued that, erroneous though the notion that the European Parliament has the final say in legislation is, it establishes some degree of legitimacy for the European policy process. However, other considerations aside, the degree of legitimacy that might be regarded as being conferred in this way must be seen as highly attenuated in virtue of answers to the second of the questions singled out above. Asked the apparently simple question «who elects the members of the European Parliament?» and presented with a card showing two incorrect and one correct option, only two out of five respondents chose the correct response (see Table 2); this was after three rounds of direct elections and a mere year or so before a fourth round. Again quite understandably, former East Germany shows the lowest rate of correct response (27 per cent). It is also notable that three of the four countries with reasonably high levels of correct response (Belgium, Luxembourg and Greece) have compulsory or at least quasi-compulsory voting which results in very large proportions of the adult populations in these countries participating in the very process referred to in the question “who elects the members of the European Parliament?”. On the other hand, Italy, which had compulsory voting until 1993 and continues to have very high turnout in European elections, has a lower than average level of correct response (35 per cent) to the question and Denmark, which has relatively low levels of turnout in European Parliament elections, is among the countries with the highest levels of knowledge of who elects the European Parliament. Mention of Denmark draws attention to another institutional or contextual variable that may affect the level of popular involvement with European issues and that may therefore lead to increased levels of knowledge, namely, the holding of referendums on EU issues. Of course, knowledge could also be increased by institutional factors having little or nothing to do with participation, for example, the mere presence of a major European institution in a country. These and other contextual variables will be considered in exploring the origins of differences in levels of knowledge later in this paper.

In order to fill out this account of the state of knowledge of European affairs among the European public, it is worth noting some data from a more recent Eurobarometer which provide evidence on knowledge in relation to certain key policy sectors. In Eurobarometer 43 respondents were asked about their

perception of the allocation of decision-making power over a wide range of policies between national governments and “the European Union level”. The question wording was as follows:

“In fact the (nationality) government together with those of the other countries in the European Union, have agreed that a number of policy areas will be decided jointly within the European Union, and not by each country separately. Can you tell me which areas of policy are already, at least to some extent, decided at the European Union level?”

Among the 22 issues listed in the question were three which provide a particularly telling test of public awareness of what is arguably the key to the whole integration process, i.e. the sharing of decision-making power between the national and supra-national levels. The three issues were: ‘agriculture’, ‘foreign policy towards countries outside the EU’ and ‘defence’. Since it became fully established in the late 1960s, the Common Agricultural Policy has been the pre-eminent common policy of the Community and one of the clearest examples of the transfer of decision-making to the European level. One would presume that after some twenty five years of the CAP, much of it marked by controversy and frequently punctuated by all-night negotiating sessions in Brussels, the fact that that agricultural policy is “at least to some extent decided jointly within the European Union/decided at the European Union level” would be widely recognised by the mass public. Given that two treaty changes and a good deal of recent debate about European integration have focused on the development of a common foreign policy, one would also expect a reasonably widespread public perception of the actual decision-making process in regard to foreign and defence policy, i.e. that the former is decided “at least to some extent” at EU level and the latter is not<sup>8</sup>.

Despite the assumed salience of the CAP, in only five of the fifteen member states do majorities of the citizens realize that agricultural policy is decided “at least to some extent” at European level. The realization is most widespread in Finland (69 per cent) and Denmark (64 per cent), followed by Sweden (58 per cent), the Netherlands (56 per cent) and Luxembourg (56 per cent). At the other end of the scale one finds the four Mediterranean countries (Portugal 26 per cent; Italy 27 per cent; and Greece and Spain 34 per cent). While some of the dearth of knowledge in these latter countries might be put down to the northern European orientation of the CAP over the years, the fact remains that only 35 per cent of people in the main paymaster-country (Germany) realize that agricultural policy is made at European level and the



realization remains a minority one in two of the main beneficiaries -Ireland (42 per cent) and France (48 per cent) (see Figure 2).

Turning to perceptions of foreign and defence policy, the bar-chart in Figure 3 presents two bars for each member state, the first one showing the perceived attribution of defence matters and the second showing the perceived attribution of foreign policy to the European Union. In a well-informed public, the first bar should be quite low and the second should be quite high. *This correct configuration of perceptions is not in fact found in any member state.* Finland comes closest: there only 12 per cent see defence decisions being made at European Union level; on foreign policy, however, only 46 per cent of Finns get it right. After Finland, the next most informed in regard to defence policy are Sweden, Ireland, Austria and Greece but, even more than Finland, all of these are marked by a serious under-estimation of the European input into foreign policy-making. Denmark is the best informed in regard to the European dimension of foreign policy formulation but a very substantial minority of Danes erroneously attribute decision-making on defence to the European Union. At the other end of the scale in terms of perception of joint decision-making on defence, the outcome is equally if not more surprising: over 40 per cent of people in France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg believe that defence issues are decided “at least to some extent” at EU level; furthermore, the publics in these countries see no difference in European Union involvement in decision-making on foreign policy and decision-making on defence<sup>9</sup>.

In summary, whether measured by means of some composite index of knowledge or by individual items such as those relating to legislative power in the European Union or to the mode of election to the European Parliament or to the decision-making process in key areas such as agricultural policy, and foreign and defence policy, the level of knowledge of Europe and European affairs among the mass public seems lamentable. But lamentable in what sense? In other words, do low levels of knowledge have any practical political consequences?

### **The implications of ignorance**

There is indeed no guarantee that increased knowledge of the workings of the European Union would lead to increased support for it. Eurosceptics would no doubt argue that the contrary outcome is the more likely and the evidence does indicate that there are some very well informed opponents of European integration. However, an examination of the relationship between levels of

knowledge of the EU and attitudes to European integration in general and to the Maastricht Treaty and the issue of a common currency in particular indicates that variations in levels of knowledge do have substantial political consequences.

Table 3 presents data on the relationship between level of knowledge and attitudes to integration which show clearly that attitudes to integration as measured by approval of a country's membership of the Union, by belief that the country has benefited from membership of the Union and by a feeling of enthusiasm for the Union (feeling very sorry if the Union were to be scrapped), are closely related to knowledge. For example, enthusiasm for the Union goes from 22 per cent among the least informed to 67 per cent among the best informed, an increase of 45 percentage points; in fact enthusiasm rises by about 10 percentage points with each step up the knowledge scale. Consideration of attitudes to the Maastricht Treaty throws further light on the matter. If we take as a measure of support for the Treaty on European Union how people would have voted in a hypothetical referendum in 1993 to decide its fate, the proportion who would have voted yes goes from 23 per cent among those with no or almost no knowledge to 65 per cent among the very knowledgeable (the question was: 'if there were a referendum (in Denmark, France and Ireland: another referendum) on whether or not to agree with the Maastricht Treaty, would you vote for or against?'). The main effect of low levels of knowledge on attitude to the Treaty is to increase indecision and ambivalence rather than opposition. Across the Community as a whole, levels of indecision regarding Maastricht increase from 15 per cent to 55 per cent as one goes from the top to the bottom of the knowledge scale. The final section of Table 3 suggests, however, that the negative effects of low levels of knowledge on support for integration are not always confined to indecision. When the issue is that of the move to a common currency, support increases with knowledge (from a low of 31 to a high of 66 per cent) but the least knowledgeable are both more indecisive *and* more opposed (see Table 3). It must, of course be acknowledged that the relationship between knowledge and attitude to integration is a complex one and cannot be reduced to a simple one-way causal process by which knowledge leads to support. But, just as it is unlikely that the influence is entirely one way from knowledge to support, it is equally unlikely that it is one-way in the opposite direction. In short it is highly probable that the influence is mutual: more positive attitudes lead an individual to acquire and retain more information and more information in itself leads to more positive evaluation<sup>10</sup>. With this qualification and in this sense, knowledge matters at a practical political level. The pressing question then is: why is the level of knowledge of the European Union so low among so many?

## **Information sources: takeup and credibility**

Eurobarometers 39 and 40 asked respondents “When you are looking for more information about the European Community (the EC), its policies, its institutions, where do you look first?”. In asking the question the interviewer handed the respondent a card with a list of possible sources of information. The list was not identical in the two surveys: the first version of the question (EB 39) took quite literally the notion of ‘looking for more information’ and, presumably on the grounds that one does not, as such, go to television and radio to seek specific information, did not include them as a possible source. In the following Eurobarometer, this assumption was relaxed and TV and radio were included<sup>11</sup>. Taking account of the results of both questions, it is clear that the mass media are the dominant perceived sources of information about the European Union. In the first form of the question a substantial plurality (46 per cent) referred to daily newspapers as their first port of call for EU information. When television and radio were added to the list in the second version of the question, these media displaced daily newspapers at the head of the list but newspapers still remained a substantial source (television and radio, 51 per cent; daily newspapers, 42 per cent). In both surveys, the mass media were followed, though at some considerable distance, by the category of other newspapers and magazines and by discussion with relatives, friends and colleagues (see Table 4). What is perhaps most striking in Table 4 is the paucity of resort to official sources of information: information on noticeboards in town halls, post offices, railway stations or libraries attracts about one in twenty; more or less the same can be said for EC-information offices, Euro-information centres and Euro-libraries and for specialised government information offices. A major obstacle in the way of the effectiveness of such official sources of information is the sheer lack of awareness of their existence: when told that “Various institutions and organizations have specialised departments offering detailed information about the European Community or about specific European Community issues” and then asked “Have you heard about any such information services before today?”, 82 per cent in the Union as a whole said they had “never heard about such information services” (Eurobarometer, 1993b, p. A41). With one notable exception, there is little or no variation between the member states in this overwhelming lack of awareness of official EU information services. The exception is Denmark, where lack of awareness of such information sources falls to 58 per cent; Denmark is also, as noted above, one of the countries with the best informed public.

The question underlying the data just discussed is somewhat hypothetical. The question *assumes* that the respondent actively seeks out information about the European Union. Since many respondents may never have actually sought such information, the data in Table 4 are best taken as indicating a propensity to consult various potential sources if the need were to arise<sup>12</sup>. There is, however, a second subjective measure that helps to fill out the picture of public reaction to different channels of communication. Respondents were asked whether they trusted or did not trust each of a given list of sources 'from which information about the European Community, its policies, and its institutions can come'. This assumes only that the citizen is a more or less passive recipient of information rather than an active seeker of it. It also has the advantage of allowing for the assessment of the credibility of a number of sources which are not often consulted for EC information but which may carry such information. The frequency of trust in eleven such sources is set out in Table 5.

Across the European Union as a whole, there are three sets of sources with significantly different levels of trustworthiness. With a level of trust of about 60 per cent, the four most trusted are educational establishments (i.e. universities and schools), radio, television, and the European institutions themselves. Next, at about the 50 per cent level, come the press and the domestic political authorities (national, regional and local). The third and last group (ranging from 41 down to 32 per cent) consist of (in descending order) trade unions/professional associations, the church and business.

In regard to trust in sources of information, the former East Germany stands out as a case apart. It is significantly below the European average on trust in all sources except three: the national authorities, the European institutions and trade unions/professional associations. Some strong contrasts in trust in particular sources are also, however, evident between the other countries: trust in television as a source is particularly high in the Netherlands (76 per cent) and particularly low in France (49 per cent); trust in the church is particularly high in Ireland (64 per cent) and Northern Ireland (67 per cent) and quite high in Portugal and Greece (57 and 51 per cent respectively) but particularly low in, once again, France (22 per cent); trust in the national authorities is highest in the Netherlands (76 per cent) and lowest in Italy and Spain (39 per cent in both cases). Some of these contrasts are indeed quite striking; whether they affect the absorption of information about Europe is, however, another question and one that requires a systematic analysis of what determines people's level of knowledge of the European Union.

## **The determinants of levels of knowledge of European affairs**

The range of potential influences on people's knowledge of European affairs is considerable. First there are the obvious socio-demographic factors of age, occupation, education and gender. Education may be thought to be of special importance because it makes various channels of communication accessible and facilitates the processing and organisation of information. But, apart from such differences, people vary in the extent to which they avail of different channels of communication and sources of information. Accordingly, interest in EU politics, general media consumption and frequency of political discussion are potentially independent influences on levels of knowledge whose effects need to be taken into account. Party politics is another potential channel of communication, the expectation being that individuals with a stronger and more enduring relationship to a political party (usually referred to as party attachment) will have higher levels of knowledge. The acquisition and retention of information is presumably also affected by awareness of appropriate sources and by degrees of trust and mistrust that may be vested in them. In addition to these individual-level variables, however, learning about the European Union and European affairs takes place in different national political contexts. Mention has already been made of the possible effects on knowledge and awareness of the EU of the holding of referendums on EC/EU membership, being host to a major EU institution or having high turnout in European Parliament elections. One other variable should perhaps be added to these: duration of membership of the Community. It might be expected that the longer a country has been a member, the greater the opportunity for successive generations of its citizens to become thoroughly familiar with the main institutional features of the Community. Of course, an opposite argument could also be made: as the event of joining the Community recedes into history, the dimmer the recollection of particular features of the Community becomes. On the latter interpretation, duration of membership would be inversely related to level of knowledge.

The range of potential determinants and the possible overlaps between them give rise to obvious difficulties in teasing out the impact of any individual factor. To take a simple example, suppose it is found that older people are less well informed about European affairs and also that those with less education are less well-informed. The question then becomes: is the age contrast simply due to the fact that older people on the whole tend to have had fewer years of formal schooling or is there a genuine age effect? Questions about overlapping causation could be multiplied at will. What is required is a means of assessing

the impact of each of the various factors mentioned while holding the other factors constant; in short, the approach to the problem must be multivariate.

Table 6 shows the results of a multiple regression, with the index of knowledge of the EU as the dependent variable and six sets of independent variables which measure various aspects of (a) the institutional and political context in which individuals experience the EU, (b) the socio-demographic characteristics of the individuals themselves and (c) their response to various potential channels of communication.

The regression 'equation' (i.e., all the independent variables taken together) explains 37 per cent of the variation in levels of knowledge. Though at first sight this may seem to leave a very large amount of unexplained variance, it is in fact quite a good outcome for data of this sort. The relative impact of each variable is indicated by the beta coefficient for that variable in the first column of numbers in Table 6 and the direction of influence is indicated by whether the coefficient is positive or negative<sup>13</sup>.

Among the hypothesised contextual variables, the level of turnout in European Parliament elections has the strongest positive effect on the level of knowledge of the European Union (beta 0.211). The duration of a country's membership has a substantial effect but *in the opposite direction*: the longer the length of membership, the less well-informed the public (beta -0.159). The presence of a major European institution also raises the level of knowledge (0.134) and the final contextual variable, the experience of holding referendums on EU issues has a positive but more modest effect (0.087).

Allowing for these contextual effects, the most important individual characteristic is, not surprisingly, education (beta 0.169); years spent in formal education either directly impart more knowledge of European affairs or, more probably, provide the means of acquiring it. Obviously, social class and education are related to one another. However, even taking this relationship into account and allowing for the direct effect of education just noted, social class has an independent effect on knowledge of the European Union: irrespective of educational differences, being a manual worker has a substantial negative effect (-0.105). Other less important but still significant negative factors are increasing old age<sup>14</sup> (-0.051) and being a farmer (-0.048). The effect of the age variable is not surprising and may be due to a combination of generational and life-cycle effects: European integration has simply not loomed as large or for as long in the lives of older people and, even if it had, their powers of attention and recall may

be diminishing. The negative farmer effect is more surprising: surely, it might be thought, farmers would be particularly attentive to and well informed about EU affairs, since the EU is the direct source of a good deal of their material welfare. Apparently not, or, to be more precise, while they may know all about headage payments and grants for suckler cows they are not so well informed about the political process that delivers these benefits.

The results reported in Table 6 indicate that there is a substantial gender factor in levels of knowledge of European affairs: allowing for differences in education, interest in politics, propensity to discuss politics, media consumption, etc., women remain significantly less well informed about the EU (coefficient -0.135). What lies behind the difference is a matter of conjecture: women could be less well informed because the burden of looking after young children falls mainly on them and leaves them with less time and resources for paying attention to European affairs; alternatively, perhaps it is not current responsibility for young children that inhibits the acquisition of information about Europe but the fact of rearing or ever having reared children, with the inhibiting effect increasing with the number of children involved. Variables measuring both of these factors (being a woman with young children and the total number of children born to a woman) were included in the equation; as shown in Table 6, each has a significant effect in the predicted direction (beta for number of children: -0.033 and for being a mother with young children: -0.028). The effects are, however, small compared to the dominant effect of gender as such. In short, differences in level of knowledge between men and women cannot be explained in terms of differential parenting responsibilities. It is possible that some other gender-related variable may play a role and the matter deserves further investigation. In the meantime, however, the finding of a significant gender effect on knowledge of European affairs stands.

So far the analysis has made it clear that contextual and socio-demographic factors have substantial effects on how much people know about the EU. Over and above these effects, however, knowledge is also affected by the extent of which individuals are “plugged in”, literally or metaphorically, to various channels of communication. At the most general level, there is the question of whether people are interested in European politics or not. It may even be that this is the beginning and end of the matter: those who are interested will be well informed; those who are not interested will know little or nothing. Accordingly, the first step beyond the analysis of political context and the socio-demographic characteristics of individuals is to look at interest in European politics or, as this was defined in the question, in “matters related to the European Community”. Not surprisingly, interest in European politics in this

sense has a very substantial positive effect on levels of knowledge (beta 0.194). But it is by no means the end of the story: even among people with the same high or low degree of interest in European politics, level of knowledge is affected by their access to a whole range channels of communication.

The most obvious and most effective channel of communication is overall media consumption: whatever the level of interest, the greater the media consumption, the higher the level of knowledge (beta 0.123). Discussion of politics reinforces this effect (0.081), as does a sense of attachment to a political party (0.034). It is true that party attachment ("feeling close to a political party") does not appear to have as strong an effect as media consumption or political discussion; nonetheless it does seem to act to some degree as a channel of communication which links the individual citizen to the wider political world and enhances knowledge of that world.

Apart from these general channels of political communication, level of knowledge is also affected by orientation to specific sources of knowledge about the EU. These orientations or tendencies to resort to and to trust various sources of information have been described in some detail above. A difficulty in dealing with the data in Tables 3 and 4 was that there were so many discreet items of information; this difficulty is compounded if one is seeking to assess the effects of these various orientations. In an attempt to deal with this problem, factor analyses of the responses to the questions on source of information and trust in sources were carried out. These showed that there are indeed clear patterns underlying the individual items. Four factors emerge from the factor analysis of responses to the question "when you are looking for more information about the European Community, its policies, its institutions, where do you look first?". The four factors are: a current affairs source-orientation, an official source-orientation, a collective/corporatist source-orientation and, finally, the absence of any source-orientation. Three factors (trust-distrust of the media, trust-distrust of collective or corporatist sources and trust-distrust of official sources) emerge from the analysis of the trust-in-sources items<sup>15</sup>. The question is: do these source-orientations and source-evaluations affect knowledge of the EU?

The situation seems to be that having an orientation to consult various sources of information can make a difference and that the degree of difference depends on the nature of the orientation. A current affairs source-orientation (looking both to newspapers and magazines and to discussions with family, friends and colleagues as sources of information) has a substantial positive effect on knowledge (beta 0.115); a tendency to look to official sources has a slightly



less but still quite positive impact (0.093); a collective/corporatist source orientation (expecting to acquire information at meetings, or from trade union, professional or consumer associations) has a much smaller impact on level of knowledge. Not surprisingly, the absence of any source-orientation (literally not knowing where to look for information) has a significant negative effect. The effects of trust in various sources is more complex. Distrust of official sources has no effect one way or the other. Distrust in the media, however, is associated with lower levels of knowledge, though the effect is slight (beta -0.015 with a significance level (0.062) just above the conventional cut-off point). In the case of collective or corporatist sources, there seems in fact to be such a thing as a healthy scepticism: a syndrome of distrust in trade unions or professional associations, churches, business, and schools and universities as sources of information about the European Union<sup>16</sup> actually has a small but significant *positive* effect on the respondent's level of knowledge (beta 0.033).

Overall then the evidence suggests that considerable progress can be made in identifying the sources of low levels of knowledge of European affairs. We know that, irrespective of individual-level characteristics, if a person comes from a country which has high turnout in European Parliament elections, which hosts a major EU institution, which has joined the Community in one of the later waves of accession, and, or which holds referendums on EU issues, that person's knowledge of the EU is likely to be higher than it would otherwise be. In addition, knowledge is adversely affected by a range of socio-demographic variables: low levels of education, a manual occupation, and advancing years. Less predictable but quite striking is the impact of gender: other things being equal, women are less informed than men<sup>17</sup>. The tendency for farming as an occupation to reduce levels of knowledge may also be regarded as surprising in view the dependence of most farmers on the European Union for much of their income. In terms of attitudes and orientations, interest in EU affairs plays an important but not an overriding role. Media use, political discussion and party attachment also help; their impact is consistent with the fact that a tendency to look to current affairs sources has a greater positive effect on knowledge than a tendency to look to collective or corporatist sources. Finally, scepticism as to the trustworthiness of various sources is either neutral in the case of official sources, negative if it is directed at media sources and actually positive, that is associated with a higher level of knowledge, if it relates to collective or corporatist sources.

## **Conclusion**

Impending political developments and the overall challenges facing the European Union suggest that a fairly rigorous yardstick should be applied in assessing the adequacy of the public's knowledge of European affairs. By any standards, however, the level of European knowledge is low. Lack of knowledge relates to a range of institutional and policy areas and involves in particular an overestimation of the power of the Commission and of the Parliament and an underestimation of the role of the Council of Ministers. Furthermore, a large segment of public opinion seems unaware of the Parliament's representative character. All of this may contribute to a feeling that 'Europe' is something out there that imposes its decision on 'us' and to an underestimation of the degree of accountability that actually exists. The evidence certainly suggests that low levels of knowledge diminish support for the European Union, for the Maastricht Treaty and for further developments in integration. For the most part this is because the ill-informed are indecisive or ambivalent but there is also some evidence that ignorance can generate opposition.

The findings regarding the origins of ignorance of the European Union and European affairs have been summarized in some detail in the section immediately preceding this conclusion and need not be rehearsed again here. What is perhaps worth dwelling on, however, is not so much this or that particular finding as an overall impression that emerges from a number of the findings: knowledge is lower if one lives in a country in which accession to the Community took place a long time ago and at a stage when there was little or no controversy about membership; conversely, as well as being higher in countries that have joined more recently, it is higher in countries which have publicly debated integration issues and decided on them in referendums; it tends to be higher also in countries which have high turnout in European Parliament elections; at the individual level, knowledge increases with interest in European politics, frequency of political discussion, feeling close to a political party and tending to look to current affairs coverage and discussions as sources of EU information. This adds up to an overall picture in which politics and the politicization of European issues enhances knowledge. Since European issues are constantly becoming more politicised, this may be taken as an encouraging sign from an integrationist perspective. It also, however, implies a dilemma: the politicization of issues may increase knowledge, which may in turn lead to greater levels of support for integration; on the other hand, politicization may also generate opposition. The question is which tendency will predominate? The answer to this question will determine whether the outcome of the politicization of European issues will be a public opinion that is increasingly informed and supportive or one that remains ill-informed and increasingly opposed.

## Appendix1

### **Appendix 1 Components of index of knowledge of the European Community Questions wording and scores**

**Question 8 : Is (Our country) a member of the European Community or not?**

Yes = 1

No = 0

**Question 9 : Here is a map and a list of the countries of Europe as a whole. Please give me the numbers or the names of all countries which are members of the European Community**

Twelve correct = 4

Eleven correct = 3

Ten correct = 2

Nine correct = 1

Eight correct or less = 0

**Question 41 : How many countries are Members of the European Community?**

Correct (twelve) = 4

Incorrect = 0

**Question 43 : What is the capital where the European Commission and several other European Community institutions are located?**

Correct (brussels) = 4

Incorrect = 0

**Question 45 : What is the name of the President of the European Commission in Brussels?**

Correct (Jacques Delors) = 4

Incorrect = 0

**Question 47 : Which of the following personalities are according to you, a member of the European Commission?**

Five or more correct = 4

Three or four correct = 3

Two correct = 2

One correct = 1

None correct = 0

**Question 49 : Which one of the following institutions of the European Community is, in your opinion, the most powerful, in terms of having the final say on European Community legislation?**

Correct (council of ministers) = 4

Incorrect = 0

**Question 59 : Who elects the members of the European parliament?**

Correct (Ourself es, by direct elections) = 4

Incorrect = 0

**Source : Eurobarometer 39**

## Appendix2

### Appendix 2: Factor analysis of orientations towards sources of EC knowledge and trust in sources March-April 1993

<b>(a) Sources of information</b>				
Variable	Factor 1 Current affairs source orientation	Factor 2 Official source orientation	Factor 3 Collective source orientation	Factor 4 No source orientation
<b>Source of information about the EC:</b>				
At meeting	0.06	-0.02	0.68	0.03
Discussion with friends, relatives, etc.	0.42	-0.17	0.30	0.07
Daily newspapers	0.76	-0.08	-0.14	0.11
Other newspapers, magazines	0.59	-0.01	-0.01	0.14
Books, brochures, information leaflets	0.32	0.31	0.18	0.11
Euro info on noticeboards in post offices, etc.	0.04	0.54	0.05	0.02
EC information offices, etc.	-0.06	0.73	-0.06	0.00
Specialised information offices	-0.05	0.62	0.13	0.01
Trade unions or professional associations	0.02	0.09	0.55	0.01
Other organisations	-0.03	0.08	0.50	-0.02
Never look	-0.76	-0.26	-0.11	0.46
Don't know	-0.21	-0.11	-0.05	-0.93
% of total variance	16.40	12.00	9.30	8.90
Eigenvalue	1.97	1.44	1.12	1.07
<b>(b) Trust in sources of information</b>				
Variable	Factor 1 Trust/distrust official sources	Factor 2 Trust/distrust media sources	Factor 3 Trust/distrust collective sources	
<b>Trust EC information from:</b>				
Local authorities	0.75	0.02	0.25	
Regional authorities	0.84	0.03	0.20	
National authorities	0.75	0.15	0.07	
EC institutions	0.55	0.20	0.17	
The press	0.09	0.81	0.14	
Radio	0.11	0.87	0.17	
Television	0.15	0.83	0.15	
Trade unions, professional associations	0.14	0.14	0.68	
The Church	0.11	0.08	0.73	
Business	0.19	0.11	0.69	
Universities/schools	0.18	0.16	0.61	
% of total variance	34.40	15.00	10.50	
Eigenvalue	3.79	1.65	1.15	
Data source: Eurobarometer 39				

**Table 1**

[illegible]

### Table 2

	B	DK	West	D	East	GR	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	P	GB	UK	NI	EC12
The national parliaments of the member states	10	26	17	18	23	9	13	12	15	18	10	18	11	18	18	12	16
Ourselves, by direct elections	60	58	43	38	27	55	44	40	48	35	57	47	48	42	42	48	41
The members of the European Council	9	8	15	16	19	11	15	24	15	15	11	20	12	20	19	16	17
Don't know	21	9	25	28	32	25	28	24	23	32	21	15	29	20	21	24	26
TOTAL	100	101	100	100	101	100	100	100	101	100	99	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	1016	995	1031	2000	1063	1003	1022	1019	1008	1039	513	1004	1000	1064	1300	306	13083

Question wording: Who elects the members of the European Parliament?  
Data source: Eurobarometer 39



**Table3**

**Table 3 Attitudes to European integration, the Maastricht Treaty and a common European currency by levels of knowledge of European affairs, March-April, 1993**

	Levels of knowledge of European affairs				
	None	Very little	Some, but not much	Moderate	Well informed
	(0-5)	(6-11)	(12-17)	(18-23)	(24-29)
<b>Attitudes to integration</b>					
EC membership <<a good thing>>	47	58	65	72	80
<b>Country has benefited from</b>					
EC membership	39	51	57	67	78
Very sorry if EC were dissolved	22	37	45	55	67
<b>Attitude towards Maastricht Treaty</b>					
For	23	39	47	55	65
Against	22	22	24	23	20
Undecided (spontaneous)	55	39	29	23	15
<b>Attitude towards a common currency</b>					
In favour	31	44	52	58	66
Not in favour	45	43	38	34	29
Don't know	24	14	11	8	6
N	1810	2970	3211	2937	1275

**Question wordings:**

**Question 16: Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY'S) membership is a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?**

**Question 17: Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (OUR COUNTRY) has on balance benefitted or not from being a member of the European Community?**

**Question 18: If you were told tomorrow that the European Community had been scrapped, would you be very sorry about it, indifferent or very relieved?**

**Question 29: If there were a referendum (DENMARK: AT THE NEXT REFERENDUM)**

**(FRANCE&IRELAND: ANOTHER REFERENDUM) on whether or not to agree to the Maastricht Treaty (DENMARK&UK: as reexamined at the EDINBURGH <<summit>>, would you vote for or against?**

**Question 32: The European Community plans to introduce a common currency by 1999 at the latest, the ECU. Are you in favour of replacing the (OWN CURRENCY) in (YOUR COUNTRY) or are you not in favour?**

**Data source: Eurobarometer 39**

**Table4**

Table 4		
Sources of information about the European Community, March-April and October-November, 1993		
	March-April	October-November
At a meeting	4	3
Discussion with relatives, friends, etc.	22	17
Daily newspapers	46	42
Other newspapers, magazines	23	18
Books, brochures, information leaflets	16	10
Euro info on noticeboards in town halls, post offices, etc.	6	6
EC information offices, Euro-info centres, etc.	8	4
Specialised government information offices	5	3
Trade unions or professional associations	3	3
Other organisations (of consumers, etc.)	3	2
TV, radio	n.a.	51
Contact MEP or member of national parliament	n.a.	1
Others	n.a.	3
Never look for such information/ not interested (spontaneous)	20	15
Don't know	7	8
N	12161	12800
Question wording: When you are looking for more information about the European Community (the EC), its policies, its institutions, where do you look first? Data source: Eurobarometer 39, 40		



### Table 5

**Table 5**  
**Trust in sources of information, March-April 1993**

	B	DK	West	D	East	GR	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	P	GB	UK	NI	EC12
Local authorities	51	63	55	52	36	56	38	48	62	32	61	59	60	56	56	51	52
Regional authorities	53	63	58	56	46	55	42	55	60	34	n.a.	60	61	58	58	51	51
National authorities	57	62	57	57	55	55	39	56	57	39	67	76	61	46	46	48	55
EC Institutions	68	52	58	58	61	71	52	58	60	68	59	68	61	50	51	54	60
The press	60	39	53	48	33	57	59	51	45	61	60	55	57	32	32	28	50
Radio	67	58	66	62	46	57	66	53	67	58	61	71	64	67	67	54	61
Television	68	56	70	67	55	58	56	49	68	66	62	76	65	68	68	61	63
Trade unions, professional assoc.	35	34	47	44	40	52	35	35	52	36	47	47	43	36	36	42	41
The Church	26	34	35	33	19	51	30	22	64	44	32	29	57	47	47	67	39
Business	36	38	26	23	12	39	26	32	38	29	34	30	40	36	36	44	32
Universities, schools	68	55	63	61	51	70	58	57	79	62	59	68	69	67	67	75	64
N	1007	999	1009	1960	1047	1003	1022	1019	1008	1039	513	1004	1000	1069	1300	306	13045

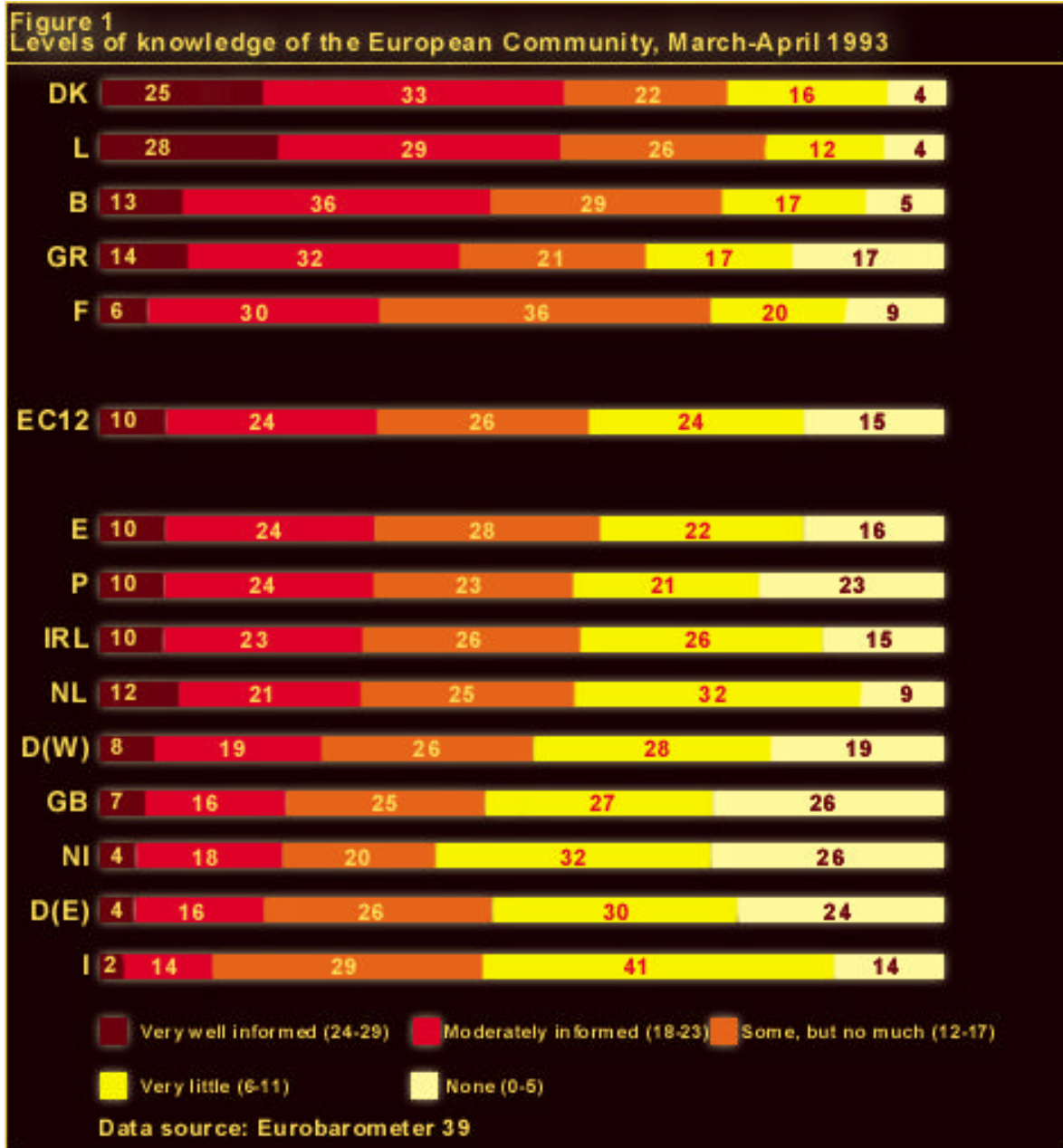
Question wording: Information about the European Community, its policies, and its institutions can come from different sources. For each of the following sources, could you tell me whether you tend to trust it or not to trust it, regarding information about the European Community?

Data source: Eurobarometer 39

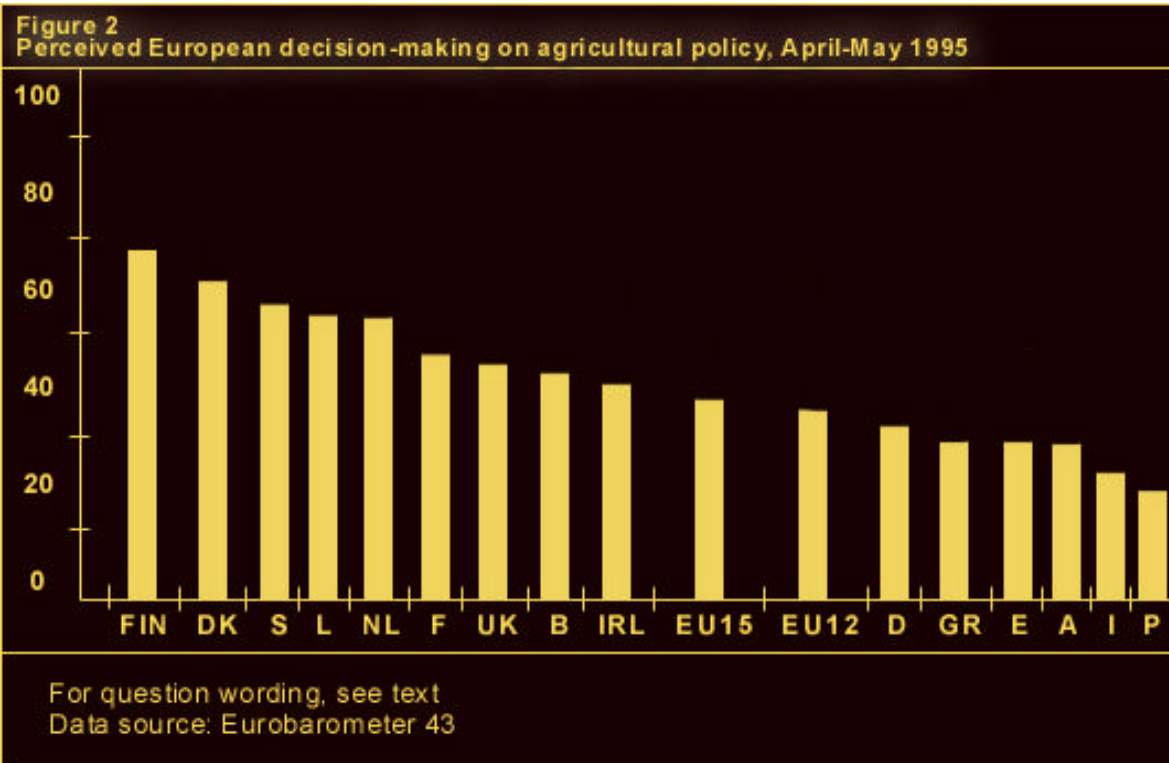
**Table6**

Table 6 Regression analysis of index of knowledge of the European Community, March-April, 1993			
	Beta	T	Sig T
<u>Institutional variables</u>			
Presence of a major EU institution	0.1343	14.582	0
Mean turnout in EP elections	0.2114	22.644	0
Duration of membership	-0.1590	-15902	0
EC/EU referendums	0.0872	10.722	0
<u>Socio-demographic variables</u>			
Number of years of education	0.1686	18.560	0
Manual occupation	-0.1050	-12.392	0
Old age	-0.0510	-6.405	0
Farming occupation	-0.0480	-5.891	0
<u>Gender variables</u>			
Female	-0.1350	-13.951	0
Number of children borne	-0.0330	-3.380	0.0007
Mother of young family	-0.0280	-3.380	0.0007
<u>Communication channels</u>			
Interest in EC politics	0.1973	21.708	0
Index of media use	0.1226	14.320	
Frequency of political discussion	0.0807	9.207	0
Party attachment	0.0345	4.251	0
<u>Orientation to sources of EC information</u>			
Current affairs source-orientation	0.1146	13.223	0
Official source-orientation	0.0931	11.556	0
Collective source-orientation	0.0241	3.072	0.0021
No source-orientation	-0.0460	-5.932	0
<u>Trust/distust in sources of EC information</u>			
Distrust official sources	0.0023	0.300	0.7644
Distrust media sources	-0.0150	-1.863	0.0624
Distrust collective sources	0.0326	4.137	0
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.37062		
Data Source: Eurobarometer 39			

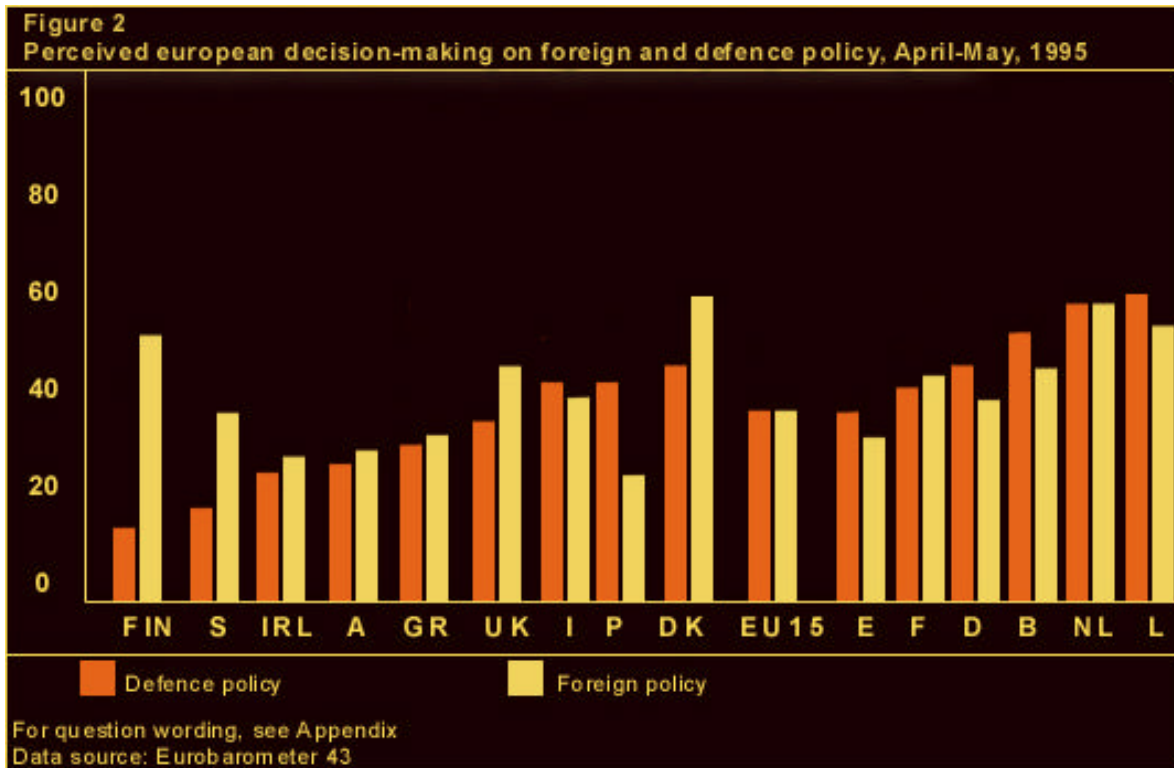
**Figure1**



***Figure2***



**Figure3**



## NOTES

1. Though the received image of integration theory (neo-functionalism and all that) is exclusively elite-centred, already in the early 1970s theories of political integration were emphasising the role of public opinion and especially the point that, if integration were to begin to make inroads on the basic functions of states, public opinion would assume a greatly enhanced role. For a discussion of the role accorded to public opinion in theories of European integration, see Sinnott, 1995.
2. This is in striking contrast to the situation in the United States where knowledge of politics has become an increasingly prominent topic in research on public opinion (see, for example, Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996).
3. The change of name from European Community to European Union might be seen as a reflection of the insouciance of the Maastricht decision-makers regarding public opinion; it has certainly created problems of style and usage for those who write about European integration. European Union will be used here despite the fact that most of the data, dating as it does from spring 1993, relates to knowledge of the European Community. European Community will be used where precision of reference is required, for example in the headings of the tables and figures and occasionally in the text.
4. The questions are listed in full in Appendix 1.
5. Details of the scoring of each question are given in Appendix 1.
6. The Eurobarometer uses separate samples for the former East and West Germanies in its studies of German public opinion. From the point of view of the present research, the opportunity of comparing levels of knowledge among two populations with such different experiences is quite valuable and will be availed of in this paper. Separate samples are also taken in Great Britain and Northern Ireland; although sample size in the latter case is very small (300), it too is presented separately where appropriate.
7. The scale of European knowledge used in the Eurobarometer report was based on a slightly different subset of items from the survey. The Eurobarometer scale produces only 2 per cent in the very well informed category but otherwise more or less confirms the finding of the present study that slightly more than one-third are reasonably well informed and that a large majority are poorly informed. The differences in scale construction can be identified by comparing Appendix 1 in this paper to the relevant methodological discussion in the Eurobarometer report (Eurobarometer, 1993a, p. 58-59).
8. As tortuously specified in Article J4 of the Maastricht Treaty, joint decision making on defence is a matter for the future: "The common foreign and security policy shall include all question related to the security of the Union, including the eventual framing of a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence".
9. The German public does see a difference but in the wrong direction: 45 per cent see defence as a matter subject to joint decision and only 38 per cent say the same for foreign policy. The evidence of low levels of knowledge of the respective competences of national and EU authorities is consistent with other recent data on preferences regarding attribution of policy responsibility. The standard Eurobarometer question in this area produces very low levels of "don't know" responses (an average of about 6 per cent). However, when the question is posed in more exploratory way and when the response categories specifically allow for a non-committal response, more than one-third of respondents have no opinion on the matter (Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson, 1996, p. 23).
10. With a view to quantifying the extent of the influence in each direction, further statistical analyses of the data are in hand.
11. Note that only the categories changed; the wording of the basic question remained the same (see question wording at foot of Table 9). As well as the addition of TV and radio, other less significant changes were made to the set of response categories (see Table 4).
12. Note that in Table 4 about one-quarter of respondents either say they don't know where they look first for EU information or they never look for such information or are not interested. Thus one quarter lack any connection, however tenuous to any EU information network. The proportion who have never actually sought out EU information is probably much higher.
13. The other two columns of numbers give the t statistic and the significance of t.

14. The age variable was defined in quite specific terms in order to capture the effect of ageing: an individual's score was zero if he or she was under 65; from 65 on the value of the variable was the respondent's actual age.
15. The details of the factor analyses are presented in Appendix 2.
16. See factor 3 in the second factor analysis in Appendix 2.
17. It is worth emphasising again that the gender effect obtains even after controlling for differences in level of interest and involvement in politics, different levels of education and differential parenting responsibilities.

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