

# Spotlight on...



On the web: <http://eudo-publicopinion.eui.eu>

EUDO Spotlight 2013/06 • November 2013

## How Elections for the European Parliament Depress Support for Europe

*Authors: Laurie Beaudonnet and Mark N. Franklin*

Do elections to the European Parliament (EP) contribute to public support for the European Project? Since these elections were instituted primarily in order to involve European citizens in the development and governance of the European Economic Community (later to become the European Union), it seems likely that the politicians who negotiated the institution of these elections will have seen them as a link between citizens and the EEC, increasing citizens' sense of belonging to that supra-national entity. The institution of EP elections could thus be seen as arising from the same motivations as led to the creation of the European Passport issued to citizens of all the member states – something that Europeans would hold in common, perhaps helping to give them a common identity and increasing support for Europe.

Were these supposed objectives fulfilled? Do elections to the European Parliament increase or at least sustain a higher level of support for Europe? Existing research suggests that the answer will be “no”. Turnout at these elections is low, and this is generally presumed to be because the elections stimulate little interest among European publics who have a hard time discerning what they are for or how to cast a meaningful vote (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Franklin 2005). It is a small step from there to an assumption that people find these elections to be a waste of time.

We have no specific evidence on this. The question “Are European Parliament elections a waste of time?” has never been asked to the best of our knowledge. But there are reasons to think that many people would answer “yes” if such a question were to be asked. There is considerable evidence that voters dislike being subjected to unnecessary elections (van der Eijk and Franklin 2009: 46). Perhaps these apparently pointless exercises of supposed popular sovereignty also result in lower support for the European Project.

How can we tell whether this is the case?

In a recent Spotlight (No 5) I and my co-authors pointed out that, if support for the European Project is measured by the series of questions asked every six months in the EU's Eurobarometer “Is membership in the EU by your country a good thing?” replies to this question showed an equilibrium level of support that, over the years, has stood at about 60% for the twelve countries that were members of the EU from the late 1980s onwards - the original six plus Britain, Ireland, Denmark, Greece,



*The Observatory on Public Opinion, Political Elites and the Media focuses on the analysis of the attitudes and preferences of electorates, the media and elites.*

*The Observatory is part of the European Union Democracy Observatory (EUDO), which is an independent and interdisciplinary academic organization fully-integrated within the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS).*

EUDO Public Opinion  
<http://eudo-publicopinion.eui.eu>  
RSCAS, EUI  
Via delle Fontanelle 19  
50014 Fiesole - Italy

Contacts:  
EUDOsecr@eui.eu

Portugal and Spain. This is the group of countries known as the EU12, and for these countries support for Europe measured by this question moves up or down in response to “shocks to the system” - upward for positive shocks such as the completion of the Single Market in the years leading up to 1992, downward for negative shocks such as Mad Cow Disease in 1996. The recent Eurozone crisis has provided another negative shock, perhaps better seen as a series of negative shocks.

But after each shock the extent of support for Europe tends to move back towards the 60% equilibrium point, which seems to provide a natural “home base” to which support for Europe keeps returning. Using the language we used in that Spotlight, shocks can be said to “decay” back towards equilibrium, with each shock taking about five years to be completely forgotten.

**Figure 1 Shocks and their decay for various events, 1986-2012**

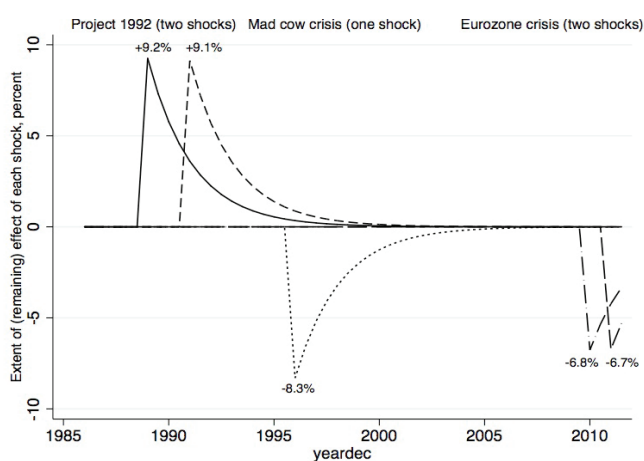
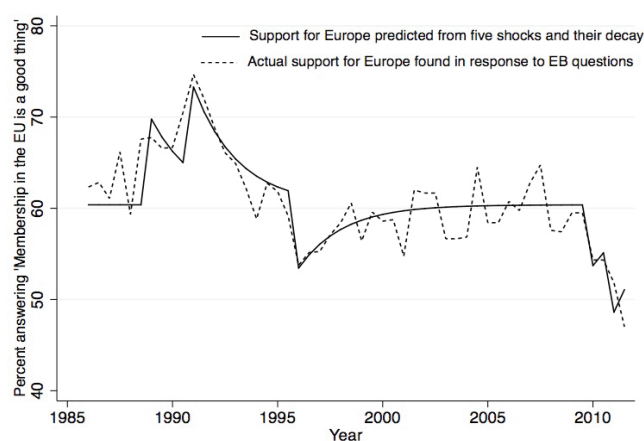


Figure 1, adapted from Spotlight #5, shows the extent to which each shock investigated in that Spotlight added to or subtracted from support for Europe, upward for positive shocks and downward for negative shocks, with each shock being followed by its decay - a sort of tailing off of the shock over succeeding six-monthly periods towards the point at which it no longer had any effect. The graph shows five shocks: two positive ones from Project 1992, as the most successful public relations exercise in EU history focused attention on what was then assumed to be the imminent completion of the European Project, two negative ones from the Eurozone crisis of 2010 and 2011, and one additional negative shock from the “mad cow disease” crisis of the mid-1990s, when the specter of contaminated beef moving freely across Europe’s borders caused a panic in many countries.

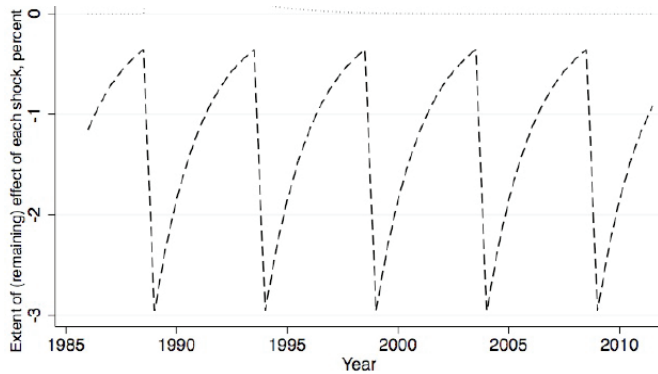
These shocks shift public support for Europe up or down by the percentage shown against each shock, moving the baseline from which the next shock takes off by an equivalent amount. A shock can accentuate an existing trend or reverse a trend. Figure 2, also adapted from the earlier spotlight, shows with a solid line the level of support for Europe found by simply adding up the total of positive and negative (remaining) effect of each shock. With a dashed line the same Graph shows the extent of support measured every six months by the Eurobarometer question about support for Europe. As can be seen, the solid line constitutes a smoothed version of the dashed line - the same pattern but without the small peaks and troughs that clearly must be either random perturbations or the consequence of additional (smaller) shocks to the system.

**Figure 2: Actual support for Europe compared with support predicted by shocks and their decay**



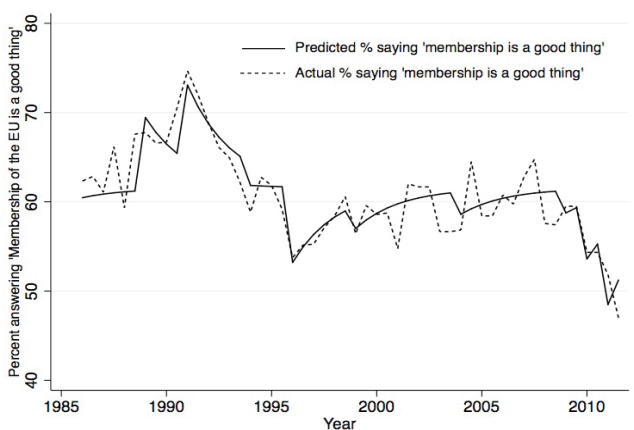
What about elections to the European Parliament? Might they be responsible for some of the smaller peaks and troughs? Not investigated in that previous Spotlight was the question whether these can also be treated as shocks to the system, creating a downward movement in support for the European project each time an EP election arrives – a shock that then tails off over the succeeding years until the next such election. Because elections to the European Parliament arrive every five years the shock from the previous election would not quite have completely decayed by the time the next shock arrived. The series of shocks would look as illustrated in Figure 3, with a negative impact on public opinion of just under 3 percent (estimated from an analysis in Beaudonnet et al. forthcoming) in the year of each election that then decays over the following years, never quite getting back to zero before the next shock.

**Figure 3 What shocks to the system from EP elections would look like**



Evidently, if there were any such shocks they would need to be hidden within the pattern of peaks and troughs that we saw around the predicted support for Europe in Figure 2, so the EP election shocks would need to be quite small – indeed small enough that they would be hard to identify were it not for their regular five-year pattern. If we look closely at Figure 2, above, we can see that among the troughs below the solid line, there are indeed some that occur in EP election years. And when we elaborate that graph to take account of our expectations for effects of EP election shocks, shown in Figure 3, we find in Figure 4 that the negative shocks associated with EP elections do in fact improve the extent to which the solid line (predicted support for Europe) fits the dashed line (actual support), with the correlation between the two lines rising slightly but significantly from 0.86 (the correlation between the two lines in Figure 2) to 0.88 (the correlation between the two lines in Figure 4).

**Figure 4 Better fit of predicted to actual support when EP election shocks contribute to predictions**



The improvement we get from taking account of negative shocks from EP elections and their decay is particularly evident during the period from 1995 to 2010 where what was a smooth predicted return towards equilibrium becomes punctuated with the effects (roughly three percent each time) of the occurrence of EP elections. The effect of the EP election is not evident in 1989 and can be barely discerned in 1994 because on these occasions the effect is to change the position of a line whose position was in the process of changing dramatically for other reasons. The negative effect on support for the European Project, as measured by the “Membership a good thing” question, goes from a maximum of 2.96 in the year of each EP election to a minimum of 0.36 percent in the year before the next EP election, averaging 1.3 percentage points over the entire electoral cycle from one EP election to the next.

So European Parliament elections are apparently bad for the European project, at least if we measure the success of that project in terms of the extent to which people believe that membership by their country in the EU is a good thing. The effect is not particularly large, but it is an effect in the wrong direction. European Parliament elections should be having a positive effect, not a negative effect on people’s satisfaction with membership in the EU.

Why is support for the European project lowest, other things being equal, in the years when EP elections are held? An answer is not hard to find. These elections have no discernible consequences for the governance of Europe as is well known among academics, commentators and politicians. Ordinary members of the European Public, however, seem not all of them to be aware of this – or perhaps (more in line with our findings about the dynamics of support for the European project) their memories decay during the years between EP elections. Yet once every five years everyone is reminded of the apparently pointless waste of time that EP election years bring. By the end of an EP election year it has become clear that no government has been thrown out, no new policies have been instituted that are salient to European publics, and no new figures have arrived on the European stage that are visible to European publics. European political life would appear, in the aftermath of an EP election, to be proceeding just as though no election had taken place.

The solution is evident: make these into real elections with real functions in terms of EU policy-making and real consequences in terms of who are the actors that make those policies. Real

elections would engage the European publics by giving them a role to play in the governance of Europe. Giving European voters a genuine role to play, instead of asking them to act in the apparent charade that EP elections currently constitute, would stand some chance of engaging them in the European project and perhaps even of enhancing the level of satisfaction with that project, just as presumably was intended by those long-ago policymakers who instituted elections to the European Parliament. Recommendations from the European Commission (March 12th 2013) that political parties nominate their candidate for Commission President in the next European Parliament elections, if followed up in practice, would represent a good step in this direction if those candidates were to campaign effectively for support on the basis of contrasting policy proposals, thus presenting European voters with meaningful choices in policy terms.

This Spotlight provides us with a method that we can employ in order to measure the consequences.

## References

Beaudonnet, Laurie, Mark Franklin and Christopher Wlezien. Forthcoming. "The Negative Effect of Elections to the European Parliament on Diffuse Support for the European Project". Chapter for *(Un)intended Consequences of European Parliament Elections*, eds. Wouter van der Brug and Claes de Vreese (under review).

Eijk, Cees van der and Mark Franklin. 1996. *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union*. Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press.

Eijk, Cees van der and Mark Franklin. 2009. *Elections and Voters*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Franklin, Mark. 2005. "European Elections and the European Voter" in Jeremy Richardson (ed.) *European Union: Power and Policy-Making*, 3rd Edition. London: Longman.