Final Meeting  
June 5, 2012, Brussels  

DECISION-MAKING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION BEFORE AND AFTER LISBON (DEUBAL)  

Policy Brief  

Public Opinion and EU Institutions  

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Executive summary  
Trust in political institutions is instrumental to the functioning of representative democracies. It confers legitimacy to democratic governments and enables them to implement their policies without hindrance. At a time when Europe is facing the consequences of the global financial and economic crisis and the challenges of the institutional reforms provided by the Lisbon Treaty, we ask what drives the public trust (or mistrust) in the institutions of the EU and particularly how much does the national context account for this. Our statistical research, based on surveys and aggregate data from 2005 to 2010 comprising information regarding the European Parliament, the Commission, the Council, the European Court of Justice and the European Central Bank, leads to the conclusion that country-level corruption as well as other individual-level predictors (i.e. education, occupation, interest in politics, welfare, gender, age etc.) are key elements in shaping the trust in the EU institutions. In light of these findings, we believe that reducing the perceived distance between the regular citizen and the Union is a primary solution to increasing and strengthening support for the EU and its bodies.

The issue of trust in the European context  
Trust in political institutions stands at the very core of the functioning of a polity. It is the ‘social glue’ that makes democracies work, linking the citizens to their respective representative forums of decision-making. Trust is also a veritable source of legitimacy, notably for governments which rely on the public support for the implementation of their agendas. At the same time, it can be seen as a barometer measuring the appropriateness and efficacy of particular policies.

A decrease of public trust in political institutions has been registered in the last decades in both new and consolidated democracies (Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Dalton 2004). The recent global financial and economic crisis augmented this tendency, seriously affecting the credibility of many national institutions across Europe (Roth, Nowak-Lehmann and Otter 2011). In the EU framework particularly, the situation appears to be even worse. Whereas at state level norms, procedures and institutions acquired general acceptance due their success in practice over a considerable period of time, this is not the case with the institutions of the European Union which are relatively new in the political landscape and, most importantly, are being constantly refashioned.

Public opinion trust in EU institutions
The evaluation of attitudes towards European integration has so far been conducted mainly in terms of people’s general support for EU membership rather than their perception of the institutions that make the EU political system. Where such studies exist, the focus was almost entirely on the European Parliament and the European Central Bank, leaving out from the analysis other institutions of capital significance to the EU policy-making process.

Our quantitative analysis concentrates on five EU institutions (the European Parliament, the Commission, the Council, the European Court of Justice and the European Central Bank), is based on both surveys and aggregate data (Eurobarometers from 2005 to 2010) and operates with five variables (trust in domestic institutions, the level of political corruption, political capital, ideology, and socio-economic status and pre-disposing characteristics). Aiming at reconciling the debate over the relationship between national and EU contexts by answering how trust in national institutions relates to that in the EU institutions, we arrived at the following results:

Firstly, our findings suggest that country-level corruption plays an important role in shaping this relationship. Citizens originating from Member States with high level of perceived corruption who nevertheless trust their own institutions are more likely to trust the EU institutions than citizens of Member States with lower levels of corruption who trust their national institutions. The apparent logic is that, in an act of disappointment, citizens will turn to supranational (external) actors for viable alternatives. Moreover, it was observed that people from countries with high levels of corruption place their trust more in the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council of Ministers, whereas people living in countries with lower such rates had more confidence in the other two – non-political – institutions: the Central Bank and the Court of Justice.

Secondly, education appears to be also significant; however, not in the manner it is generally presumed. Contrary to many beliefs that “knowledge breeds support”, it was found that highly educated individuals actually mistrust European institutions. A possible explanation accounting for this result could be the fact that greater knowledge of the EU workings can help in mapping out the structural deficiencies and in raising the awareness over shortcomings such as democratic deficit, lack of transparency, lack of representativeness and so on and so forth (Karp, Banducci and Bowler 2003). On the other hand, interest in politics and higher occupational status tend to generate more support for EU institutions.

Thirdly, in contrast to many expectations, we noted that living in developed welfare states does not decrease the support for the EU, but the opposite: citizens from states with generous social spending tend to favour more the EU, possible because of an already established mentality of crediting institutions to provide them with satisfactory outcomes.

Fourthly, our findings confirmed earlier studies suggesting that age and gender hold some influence, with women and older persons having less confidence in the EU institutions than men and younger individuals respectively.

Fifthly, we also concluded that it is easier for citizens to evaluate EU institutions which have a clear domestic equivalent. For instance, the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice function to a certain extent in the same nature as their national counterparts. The Commission, on the other hand, does not have a direct correspondent in the national political system. Neither is the case with the Council of Ministers (except for a small minority of Member States – notably Austria and Germany – which function on a federal basis). Moreover, it appears that, in the collective mentality, there is no rigorous differentiation between the EU institutions. They are seen similarly, as one and the same thing. Consequently, they are either collectively blamed or collectively praised.

As a final remark, our study confirmed that utilitarian satisfaction with both domestic democracy and EU membership result in more trust in the institutional bodies of the Union. People who are generally content of how democracy functions in their own country as well as those who perceive their
country’s membership in the EU as beneficial and advantageous are likely to evaluate positively the EU and to support its institutions.

**Recommendations**

- The European Union should develop more instruments to **fight corruption** at both Union and national levels. As previously seen, corruption erodes trust in the domestic political systems, lowers the costs of ceding sovereignty and increases citizen’s willingness to turn to the EU for alternatives. By responding to this expectation with success, the EU could further increase its support among the public opinion and thus strengthen its consequential legitimacy (that is, legitimacy through long-term effects).

- This brings us to the point of **increasing the performance** of the EU institutions. Support will come if the EU will demonstrate an efficient capacity to deliver. This should not be understood necessarily as more treaty reforms – since the ones operated so far have not led to a differentiation between the EU institutions in people’s minds – but rather as an ability to address specific issues signaled by the citizens.

- EU institutions should also focus on **raising the level of information** of the public opinion regarding their activity, structure and competencies, thus seeking for a greater participation of the regular citizen in EU politics and affairs. This can be done particularly via a well designed communication strategy that could potentially comprise decentralized representative branches of the European Parliament or the Commission in the Member States (i.e. the Europe Direct network).

- In general, the EU should put efforts in reducing the perceived gap between itself and the citizen. The very fact that the people cannot clearly distinguish the features of certain institutions functioning in the EU framework stands as an evident proof of how distant the EU appears to them. And this is particularly problematic since a large majority of rules and norms comes nowadays from Brussels. Some steps towards reducing this gap were taken recently with the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty which, among other innovations, creates the premise of direct involvement of EU citizens in EU-related affairs by making room in its provisions for the ‘civil initiative’ based on the participation of at least one million signatories. Nevertheless, this has not yet solved the problem as our study suggests and therefore further measures are required.

**Acknowledgments:** This policy brief is based on research done in collaboration with Eliyahu Sapir and Galina Zapryanova. Moreover, research assistance by Vlad Badea (Master International Relations and Diplomacy program, Leiden University) is gratefully acknowledged.

**REFERENCES**


