Attitudes in Europe Toward Integration

By Robert Worcester and Roger Mortimore

If ever European electors should have taken seriously the task of electing Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), it was when they voted on June 9-12, 1994 to determine the Parliament's composition for the next five years. The recent ratification of the Maastricht Treaty by the member nations has resulted in a Europe moving towards greater unity through the strengthening of two intergovernmental pillars: one dealing with common foreign and security policy, the other with a further integrated domestic affairs and justice policy.

The Treaty's passage has also bolstered the power of the European Parliament. Since Maastricht, the legislative body has gained some limited power, for example, the right to approve each Commission and to dismiss it by a 'no confidence' vote, to veto applications to join the Union, to approve or deny trade and economic agreements with non-Union countries, and to reject the Council's budgetary proposals. This said, its powers are still very limited: It does not yet have the power to initiate legislation except by amendment to legislative proposals drafted by the Commission. However, in 1996 there will be a successor to Maastricht, which will inevitably move the European Parliament's agenda forward. Currently-elected Euro-MPs will therefore maintain a watching brief over the next round of power plays on the part of the Member states, now 12, likely to be 16 by then, to witness the next stage on the way to an increasingly federal European Union.

National Influences on EU Elections

Despite the Parliament's growing importance, it remains viewed by many as merely a "talking shop," and European elections tend to be decided on national rather than European issues. When British Prime Minister John Major stated, in opening his campaign, that the Euro-elections were not just some "trivial opinion poll," he was hoping to prevent the British public's negative verdict on his government from being translated into anti-Conservative votes. He failed. In the event, fifteen million British voters sent the government precisely the same message about its deep unpopularity as the polls have been conveying. The Conservative Party's standing has been below 30% in every one of MORI's monthly polls published in *The Times* since May 1993. The party secured only 28% of the EU vote in Great Britain on June 9th, their lowest share in any national election since the introduction of universal suffrage.

When a MORI exit poll across London on behalf of the Electoral Reform Society asked voters what they felt the election had been about, 70% said "mostly about the way the Government is running the country" and only 21% about "the parties' policies on Europe." This phenomenon is by no means restricted to Britain. Across Europe, except in Germany where Helmut Kohl's Christian Democrats seemed to overcome dissatisfaction with the government's domestic record, the popularity of the national governments seemed to play a major role in determining the EU election results.

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This is not to say that Europeans have no opinions on the EU. In a MORI survey conducted in April for *The European* newspaper, covering citizens of all 12 member states, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the Union's present state (see Public Opinion and Demographic Report, p. 110). Only in Ireland and Portugal are citizens more satisfied than dissatisfied with the way the EU is being run; in France, Germany and Greece more than 60% are dissatisfied. This, we believe, probably reflects a more general disillusionment with politicians and political institutions of all sorts, for in every one of the 12 Member states (apart from Luxembourg) a majority were also dissatisfied with the way the national government was running the country. Only in Denmark, Greece and Luxembourg did more say they were dissatisfied with the running of the EU than of their own country.

Further Integration?

Despite this dissatisfaction and apparent apathy, there is support among the European public for further development of the EU towards economic and, to a lesser degree, political integration. The MORI/*European* survey found that, overall, 58% of Europeans favor and a third (32%) oppose a single European currency. Slightly fewer, but still a majority (51%) favor a central bank of Europe (see data on p. 111). All countries' samples except Denmark and Britain show a majority supporting a central bank. In all but Denmark, Britain, and—importantly—Germany, a majority favor a single European currency. More controversial is the proposal for a "United States of Europe" with a federal government. The Belgians, the Greeks, the Italians, and narrowly the Spanish (with 34% in favor, 33% opposed and the remaining third undecided) support it. Across the 12, nearly half (49%) opposed, and a third (32%) were in favor of the idea of a "US of Europe" (see data on p. 111).

Combining these three positions, then testing for support of at least two out of three gives something of an idea of the general levels of support for further integration of the EU. The strongest supporters for moving forward with a federal Europe

with central financial instruments came from the Belgians, followed by the Italians, the Irish, the Greeks and then, more or less equally, the Dutch, French and Spaniards. Most strongly opposed are the Danes and the British, together, perhaps surprisingly, with the Germans and the Portuguese.

The MORI/*European* poll revealed fascinating insights into the way Europeans view one another, through the use of two survey questions: "Which country do you think is [respondent's country's] *most* reliable political ally within the European Union?" and its opposite, "Which country do you think is [respondent's country's] *least* reliable political ally within the European Union?" There is very strong affinity between the French and Germans—57% of the French consider Germany their most reliable ally within the EU, and 53% of Germans chose the French. The pariahs of Europe—chosen as "least reliable political ally" by the most respondents—are the British, being the most frequently so named in France (36%), Germany (27%), Italy (22%), Belgium (21%) and Holland (16%). However, historical animosities also survive, with 43% of Greeks most mistrusting the Germans, and 51% of Britons most mistrusting the French. These feelings will certainly play an important role in any further integration of the EU.

British Voting & The Euro-Parliament's Composition

While the dust still has not settled in the wheeling and dealing between the MEP factions, it now seems certain that the European Socialist Group will be the single largest alliance, with the augmented British Labour Party MEPs being the largest party within it—indeed, within the entire European Parliament. The dominance of the Socialist group arises, to a great degree, from the use in Britain of the "first-past-the-post" (single member plurality) electoral system, while the other 11 members use forms of proportional representation (PR). Consequently, the Labour party is sharply over-represented (winning 62 seats instead of the 38 that a strictly PR system would have given them), at the expense of the Liberal Democrats (who might have had 14 seats instead of the 2 they actually won), and Conservatives who won 18 seats instead of 24. This "advantage" must be a strong argument for those who wish Britain to fall into line with the rest of the EU (including Northern Ireland) and adopt PR, at least for European elections.

British voters seem divided on the issue. The MORI exit poll for the Electoral Reform Society offered London voters the chance to vote by Single Transferable Vote (STV)—a form of proportional representation—and then asked them which system they thought was "fairer." The voters split almost equally, with 45% opting for first-past-the-post and 44% preferring STV. Further, 58% of those who completed an STV ballot chose to vote only for candidates of their preferred party. The existing system has, of course, delivered the Conservatives a majority in Parliament in the last four General Elections, which they would not otherwise have secured. Not surprisingly, Conservative voters are more strongly in favor of the status quo than supporters of other parties.

There were signs in the voting patterns at the European elections that Labour's increasing strength in the South may, paradoxically, help the Tories to survive again under "first-past-the-post." The failure of Labour supporters across the South to vote tactically in significant numbers cost the Liberal Democrats several potential gains in the European elections and, by splitting the Opposition vote in the Tory heartlands, could do the same at a future general election.

Interestingly, there was little evidence that Liberal Democrats were voting tactically for Labour. In the London exit poll, only 7% said that the vote they had just cast was tactical and, even though the Liberal Democrats had no realistic chance of winning any of the London seats, more of those who had voted for the Liberal Democrats (11%) said this than of those who had voted for Labour (8%). What there was, interestingly, were signs of a new phenomenon of British political behavior. Our exit poll found that of the 26% of 1992 Conservative voters who defected during this election, 11% said they had cast their ballots for the Labour Party, not stopping at abstention, the Liberal Democrats or other parties on the way. Another nine percent switched to the Liberal Democrats and six percent to other parties.

Mr. Major's reaction to his party's defeat in the Euro-elections?

"I believe it has been clear for some years that many people are simply not frank when asked questions by opinion-pollsters. I suspect they resent the prying nature of the questions, and it seems that the answers are not always accurate. Perhaps a lower salience for opinion polls in the future would be welcomed by quite a lot of people."

There was little evidence for his contention in 1994. The MORI exit poll across the ten London Euro-Parliament seats was accurate to within one percent of the share for each party and to within one percent of the turnout in London. An ICM in-street poll the following day of those who said that they had voted was equally accurate nationally, and, while there were no true eve-of-poll surveys, all the pollsters' predictions were within a couple of points of the Conservative and Labour party vote shares.

But Mr. Major's attack on the opinion polls was not for their forecast of the share of the vote, but for the prediction of seats showing that the Conservatives might win as few as six. In reality they won 18, down 16 from the number they nationally held before the election, which in the context of the predictions seemed a triumph. However, they came perilously close to fulfilling the gloomiest predictions: a further two percent swing to the challenging party in each seat would have cost them another twelve, reducing them to just six seats. Such dramatic variations in seats for small changes in votes are the result of the "first-past-the-post" electoral system, not the fault of the pollsters.

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