Political Identity and European Elections

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The Concept of Political Identity

The concept of identity has been of interest to philosophers and psychologists long before it started to attract the attention of social scientists. Since the Ancient times, scholarly attention has been devoted as to how and why a given individual defines him/herself in a certain way. However, the emergence of holistic social sciences in the late 19th century inspired a new wave of interest in the phenomenon of 'collective identities'. Anthropologists, sociologists, and historians in particular started to try and understand hypothetical 'common' identities of groups belonging to a common nation, race, or religion. This created some level of scholarly tension between the tenants of an individual perspective of identity and those who focused on broader mass or collective identities instead.

In academic terms, efforts were made to try and unify these two perspectives by defining two possible forms or components of identities usually known in the social psychological literature as 'personal' and 'social' identities. A 'personal' identity is expected to address specifically the individual characteristics of a being, to be inductively derived from his/her perception of him/herself, and result in more emotional identity reactions. Conversely, a 'social' identity emerges from the ex-ante consciousness of a pre-existing group with which number of individuals will 'identify', and which they will together define.

However, in recent years, psychologists such as Breakwell (2004) have questioned the relevance of the distinction between social and personal identities. Moreover, if one believes in such dualism, it can be argued that political identities, far from being a mere component of social identities, transcend this distinction to create a category in its own right. Political identities will often lead to the same emotional reactions as personal identities, and may assume such a variety of self-perceptions, definitions, and emotions, that the concept of collective political identities can easily be challenged.

Despite a growing interest in ethnic and gender identity studies, political identities are often primarily conceived in reference to territorial politics and citizens' attachment to their town, region, nation, continent, etc. It is usually admitted that these attachments may affect citizens' attitudes and political behaviour. Despite what is usually believed, the primary level of territorial identification of citizens remains small communities such as their town or region, as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Citizens' Primary Territorial Identity in Europe

COUNTRY	NATION	TOWN	REGION	EUROPE/ OTHER
Poland	**47.3**	29.7	13.3	9.6
Slovenia	39.3	**44.8**	8.6	7.3
Finland	**39.2**	35.7	12.3	12.7
Czech Republic	**36.0**	28.8	20.2	14.9
Ireland	31.4	**47.4**	13.6	7.5
Britain	31.3	**37.7**	16.6	14.5
Netherlands	31.0	**44.2**	7.7	17.2
Denmark	29.2	**45.7**	16.4	8.7
Spain	29.1	**45.2**	16.1	9.5
France	28.1	**37.7**	15.6	18.5
Austria	27.3	**34.5**	31.4	6.9
Hungary	26.8	**56.8**	5.7	10.7
Latvia	26.2	30.0	**30.7**	13.2
Portugal	25.9	**39.2**	18.5	16.4
Italy	25.5	**41.1**	9.6	23.9
Sweden	24.8	**57.0**	11.7	6.4
Slovakia	23.0	**36.9**	30.7	9.4
Lithuania	22.1	32.5	**36.2**	9.2
West Germany	20.9	**39.7**	20.4	18.9
Belgium	19.9	**52.8**	9.5	17.7
Northern Ireland	19.4	**44.5**	29.1	7.0
East Germany	15.8	**36.6**	24.0	23.6
Estonia	14.8	**36.6**	36.0	12.6
EU AVERAGE	*27.6*	***40.7***	*18.9*	*12.9*

Notes:

➢ *Figures are computed from the World Value Surveys 1981-1997*

➢ *Countries are ranked by the proportion of respondents quoting the nation as their dominant community of reference*

➢ *Europe/Other is the sum of Europe, world, and other communities*

➢ *Figures in bold represent the primary community of reference for each country*

The Concept of European Identity

'Common knowledge' and the media usually assume that there is no such thing as a European identity. This may be partly because the concept of European identity, as a potential emerging political identity, has only been of interest to scholars of the social sciences in the last few years.

Two main approaches have been used by those who have wanted to study or characterise this new European identity. Firstly, a 'top down' approach – close to the socio-historical collective identity tradition, which has attempted to identify common objective characteristics or a 'shared heritage' (values, history, ethnicity, etc) between Europeans. Secondly, a 'bottom up' approach, yet more recent, which, in the political psychology tradition, has been more concerned with which – and how many – individuals actually define themselves as European and what they mean by this.

The top-down approach has been used by a number of scholars. Wintle et al. (1996), who are primarily concerned with the existence of a shared historical heritage between Europeans, point out to the existence of shared images and, to an extent, the impact of a common series of historical traditions, including Judeo-Christendom, the Renaissance, and the Greek and Roman antiquities. Instead, Van Deth and Scarborough (1995) prefer to focus on the existence of shared values, which, according to them, unify Europeans, and distinguish them from the social norms in other parts of the world. Finally, Shore

(1993) and Abeles, Bellier, and McDonald (1993), looked at the existence of collective social images, particularly amongst the European elites.

However, in contrast, the bottom up approach to the emergence of a European identity is of primary interest in understanding citizens' behaviour in the context of the 2004 European Parliament Elections. Indeed, the bottom up approach seeks to study the progressive emergence of a mass European identity, differences among Europeans' perceptions of their own Europeanness, and the impact of feeling European on citizens' political behaviour in general - and behaviour in European elections in particular.

Theorising the Emergence of a European Identity

One of the main questions faced by scholars during the past ten years has concerned the compatibility of European and sub-European (particularly national) identities.

Traditionally, post-materialists and particularly Inglehart (1977) have conceived support for European integration and European identity as similar concepts, and European identity as a virtual 'non-identity' based on cosmopolitanism and emerging in opposition to national feelings. However, other scholars believe, on the contrary, that European and other identities are both compatible and even positively correlated. Risse (2004) proposes several conceptions of the compatibility and interaction between various identities, such as the 'marble cake' and the 'Russian doll' models. The 'Russian doll' model suggests

multi-layered identities, which superimpose and include each other. Any change in one layer will in effect modify the definition of the other. By contrast, the 'marble cake' model of nested identities implies a yet less straightforward interaction between multiple intertwined political identities.

In this context, Bruter (2003) goes even further, and shows that not only are multiple identities compatible for most citizens, but they are also positively correlated. In other words, far from being a 'natural tension' between national and European identities, it is generally true that the more 'Belgian' or 'Italian' a citizen feels, the more (and not the less) likely he is to feel European as well. The same positive correlations exist between European identity and regional and local identities respectively. In the same piece, Bruter claims that European identity – like any other political identity – can be divided into two components: a 'civic' identity (identification with one's image of the European Union as a political system), and a 'cultural' identity (identification with one's image of Europe as a human community, perceived, in whatever way, rational or irrational, to share 'something', be it defined by some ethnic, cultural, value-related, human-related or any other feature).

Recent work by Herrmann, Risse et al (2004) and Bruter (forthcoming) suggests that a European identity has largely progressed in the Europe Union since the early 1970's. The research suggests that the emergence of a mass European identity is what explains the paradox, since the mid-1990's, between a continuing support of citizens for European integration (and indeed demands for faster and faster political integration) on the one hand, and a decreasing sense amongst the European citizenry that integration is actually beneficial to their individual country on the other hand.

While large comparative differences remain between countries, this progression has concerned, at different levels, all fifteen pre-2004 member states, including the most Eurosceptic. On a scale from 0-1, the level of European identity in Great Britain was in the low 0.20 in the early 1970's and reached the high 0.40's by the turn of the century. Similarly, European identity scores did not surpass the low 0.50's in the 1970's in France and the Netherlands but were consistently between 0.70 and 0.75 in the late 1990's. Finally, in Italy, the level of European identity in the country was in the high 0.50's in the mid-1970's and above 0.80 in throughout the late 1990's. The only exception to the upwards trend was Germany, where levels of European identity declined in the 1990's, but the country's integration of largely Eurosceptic East Germans certainly largely explains this trend.

Table 2 confirms the same progressive increase of levels of attachment to Europe in the shorter term. It shows that over the past five years, levels of attachment to Europe have increased in 13 of the 15 member states and in the European Union as a whole. It is only in the Netherlands and Luxembourg (in this last case, starting levels were particularly high) that attachment to Europe decreased over the same period of time.

At the individual level, research has shown that young people, citizens with a relatively high level of education, and those who have had opportunities to live or travel abroad tend to have a higher level of European identity, and that, except in countries such as the United Kingdom, the European identity of citizens tends to be primarily civic rather than cultural.

Table 2: Evolution of Citizens' Attachment to Europe: 1999-2003

COUNTRY	1999	2000	2003	CHANGE 2003/1999
EU TOTAL	*56*	*58*	*58*	*+2*
Luxembourg	78	82	76	-2
Denmark	71	66	73	+2
Sweden	71	74	72	+1
Italy	65	66	68	+3
Spain	68	72	67	-1
Belgium	63	63	67	+4
Austria	62	64	66	+4
Portugal	61	61	63	+2
Germany	58	58	62	+4
Finland	53	56	62	+9
Ireland	57	52	58	+1
France	53	56	57	+4
Greece	41	43	52	+11
UK	37	41	41	+4
Netherlands	49	53	29	-20

Notes:

➤ *Figures are % of citizens claiming to be very or fairly attached to Europe according to Eurobarometer survey 51, 54 and 60.*

➤ *Figures in the last column (change 2003/1999) are in bold if attachment to Europe increased during the period, in plain font otherwise.*

European Citizens and European Institutions

This growth in citizens' levels of European identity has been accompanied by a significant change in citizens' attitudes towards their European Union institutions. According to recent Eurobarometer data, in 23 of the 25 member states, citizens trust the European Commission more than their national government, and the same is true of the European Parliament compared to the national legislature in 22 out of 25 member states. This higher popularity of European institutions extends to such surprising countries as the United Kingdom and shed a new light on citizens' attitudes towards European institutions, and the legitimacy of the latter. The results of this analysis are summarised in tables 3 and 4.

Does European Identity Impact Citizens' Behaviour in the European Parliament Elections?

Many journalists have attributed the relatively low turnout in European elections to a lack of European demos and absence of a widespread European identity. The state of political science tends to invalidate their point and suggest that decreasing levels of turnout must be explained by other factors than by the level of European identity of citizens, which has increased, on average, over the years whilst turnout was in decline. If anything, it is likely that the increasing level of European identity of citizens may partly explain why turnout for European Parliament elections is not lower given the very limited powers of the European Parliament, the absence of impact of party politics on the behaviour of the

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MEPs, and the absence of campaign, in most member states, on European politics and policy making.

Table 3: Compared Trust in the European Commission and National Government

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

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

Table 3: Compared Trust in the European Parliament and National Parliament

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

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

However, existing research clearly suggests that greater involvement in European integration increases the likeliness of a given voter to participate in the European Parliament elections regardless of his/her perceptions of the campaign, offering of the various candidates, and powers of the European Parliament. Similarly, van der Eijk, Franklin et al. 1996 show that in Italy, the proportion of citizens deciding on who to vote for on the basis of parties' stances on European rather than national issues had quite significantly increased between 1989 and 1994.

Conclusion: European Elections and European Identity

Clearer than the effect of European identity on the vote of citizens, is the fact that the European elections themselves have not been foreign to the progressive emergence of a mass European identity. Bruter (forthcoming) shows that all symbols of European integration – including European Parliament Elections held at the same time throughout the European Union, have had a strong impact on citizens' European identity. Researchers on the emergence of a European Public Sphere, such as Risse, Neveu, and Mokre also point to the lack of emergence, so far, of a European Public Sphere (see related article) and the fact that, in the long term, European Parliament Elections, if they become increasingly important, will be the natural emerging space for such a public sphere. Indeed, political identities, particularly in their 'civic' component, while individual and subjective are more likely to grow on the fertile grounds of a pre-existing

and significant political system and citizenship, which, in themselves, give its reality to the common status and citizenship Europeans may identify with over time.

At the same time, however, despite the claim that European Parliament elections are second order national elections, it also seems clear that European identity has an impact on the likeliness of some citizens to vote and on their specific electoral choice. In several cases, in 2004 as in 1999, political parties fighting on European issues have done better than expected while those focusing on national ones were punished by the electorate. In that sense, the Eurosceptic UKIP in the UK or extreme right in France do better in European Parliament elections than in many other elections. Similarly, the involved pro-Europeans of the Liberal-Democrats in the UK or the UDF in France did better than expected on their Euro-centred campaign. This suggests that citizens are partly compensating for the non-emergence of a European public sphere and the nationalisation of political campaigns. It also suggests that in reaction to a growing form of politically organised euroscepticism, a significant part of the population takes part in European Parliament elections not so much to express a particular partisan preference as to express a direct support to the European integration project, and perhaps the strength of their European identity. It is, perhaps, these citizens who keep turnout in European Parliament elections much higher than what could be expected of traditional second order elections for a legislature where the influence of partisan choices was not clear to the public until the last few months, and higher than participation in national elections in such democracies as Switzerland or the USA.

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World Values Survey (Available on-line at www.worldvaluesurvey.org)