

Citizens' Trust in the EU: The Impact of the Constitutional and the Eurozone Crises*

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Abstract

Trust in political institutions is vital to the normal functioning of the political system. The EU is a political system in the making, thus the levels of trust in EU institutions and in the EU as a whole could be an important indicator of the 'health' of this emerging polity. Trust is influenced by the social, economic and social environment, which means that periods of crisis could have an impact on trust. In this paper, we analyse the levels of trust during two different EU crises – the rejection of the constitutional treaty and the current Eurozone crisis. The purpose of the analysis is to establish how different types of crises, with different degrees of salience for Europeans and with different outcomes in terms of problem-solving efficiency, affect trust in the EU and confidence in its future.

Keywords: trust; confidence; EU; crisis; issue salience

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1. Introductory remarks

A high level of social trust inspires a more inclusive and open society, stimulates economic development (Fukuyama 1995; Knack and Keefer 1997; Zak and Knack 2001), increases confidence in the future, and promotes a sense of social achievement and satisfaction (Freitag, Buhlmann 2009: 1537). Furthermore, it helps to foster cooperation among people (OECD 2007: 112) regarding the achievement of common goals and even the sacrifices that may be

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needed to reach those goals. For its part, trust in political institutions is vital for the normal functioning of the political system.

The European Union (EU) is not a state, but a significant number of scholars agree that, at least after the Treaty of the European Union (1993), the organisation has come closer to being considered a political system in its own right, with a clear capacity for governance (Chrysochoou 2009; Hix 1994; 2005). The EU is a 'polity in formation' (Schmitter 2010), so the levels of trust in the EU's institutions and more generally in the EU could be important indicators of the 'health' of this new political system, particularly with regard to its legitimacy. In fact, the literature normally acknowledges that a certain level of political trust in an institution is crucial for the legitimacy of that institution (Kaltenthaler et al. 2010: 1262; Roth et al. 2013: 4). Furthermore, if a large number of citizens distrust the institution, they might begin to question its authority and even its usefulness.

Thus, as Scharpf (2003) notes, in modern times legitimacy (at least in the West) has come to rest mainly on *trust* in institutional structures thought to ensure that the manifested preferences of the governed are normally respected by the government (*input* legitimacy, i.e. government *by* the people) and/or that the policies adopted represent satisfactory solutions to citizens' problems (*output* legitimacy, i.e. government *for* the people).¹ Consequently, governors may be penalized for policy choices that do not respect citizens' politically salient preferences (input dimension), as well as for outcomes, perceived as resulting from a government policy, that are seen to violate the politically salient concerns of the governed (Scharpf 2011: 4). Legitimacy, then, involves the capacity of the political system to develop and maintain the belief that its institutions are capable of resolving the major problems facing society (Lipset 1963). Political trust is therefore strongly interrelated to the issue of political legitimacy and the question of political support.

Indeed, in the literature on political trust in the EU is frequently addressed in relation to the broader issue of political support. In their seminal book *Europe's Would-Be Polity: Patterns of Change in the European Community* (1970) Leon N. Lindberg and Stuart A. Scheingold developed a matrix of support adapted to the European experience² with 'four basic categories divided into two cross-cutting pairs' (Lindberg, Scheingold 1970: 39–41). The first pair relates to levels of interaction and is composed of *identitive* and *systemic* support.³ The second pair, introduces two bases of response: *affective* support, based on a diffuse and eventually emotional response to the vague ideals embodied in the notion of European unity; and *utilitarian* support, based on rational calculations of material costs and benefits of membership in the EU.

Being an indicator of political support, trust in EU institutions may therefore be influenced by identity but also by performance. Thus trust might depend on the level of citizen attachment to the EU, but could equally originate from rational evaluations of the performance of the EU. Trust in political institutions is also affected by the social, economic and institutional environment (Zak and Knack 2001). Crises disrupt the normal functioning of a political system. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that crises have an impact on levels of political trust. Crisis is no stranger to the European construction. Actually, common wisdom normally acknowledges that European integration has triumphed despite (or because of) severe setbacks and crises. Some studies focus on the impact of the economic and financial crisis in the levels of trust in the EU's institutions (Kaltenthaler et al. 2010; Roth et al. 2013). But how different

types of crisis (with different degrees of salience for EU citizens) influence the levels of trust in the European institutions and the level of confidence in the future of the European project remains a topic largely unexplored. In order to fill this lacuna, this paper analyses the levels of trust in European institutions and confidence in the future of the EU in constitutional crises of two different types: the 2005–2007 constitutional crisis and the current Eurozone crisis (in the period 2008–2012). Both events were referred in the media as *crises*. However, each a different salience for citizens. In fact, some issues, such as EU institutional reform or more broadly, EU treaty reform, are still very much considered technical issues, and therefore an ‘EU’s problem’. Consequently, this type of issue is normally not as important to the majority of citizens as issues read as ‘domestic problems’. Actually, when issues are perceived as ‘problems’ or even the ‘most important problem’ not only at the European level, but also for the country, as was the case with the financial and economic crisis, citizens’ awareness tends to increase. What is more, citizens’ assessment of how political leaders are coping with the situation (and how well they address the politically salient concerns of citizens) directly impacts on the level of trust and confidence in the organization as a whole. Particularly, it seems reasonable to argue that if leaders’ decisions turn out to be ineffective in the long run, this may ultimately result in public distrust in the value of the political institutions they head.

We aim to establish the extent to which different types of crises, with differing degrees of salience for Europeans — in one case, an issue perceived as European, in the other, a domestic issue — and with differing outcomes as concerns the ability to solve the perceived problem, affect levels of trust in the EU and confidence in its future. Hence we answer the following questions:

- 1) Do different crises, arguably with different levels of salience for citizens, affect the level of trust in political institutions differently?
- 2) Does finding a solution for the crisis (i.e. efficient problem solving by European leaders) help to foster the level of trust in political institutions?
- 3) How do different crises affect the level of confidence in the future of the political system?

Our emphasis will be on crisis salience and leadership efficiency (i.e. the ability to resolve the crisis). We acknowledge that other variables (such as the international context, the domestic situation and the traits and style of the leader) could influence trust and confidence in a given period. Throughout the paper, we provide insights on these factors, but we will not address them systematically.

2. Data and operational definitions

The data used in this article is from the public opinion monitoring unit of the European Commission (Eurobarometer surveys, hereafter referred to as EB) conducted between 2005–2007 and 2008–2012. To establish how citizens perceived the relevance of the two crises analysed in this paper, we used data on the key issue. To analyse the levels of trust and confidence in the EU, we chose EB questions related to trust in the EU and in European institutions, the image of the EU, the current path of the EU, and confidence in the future of the EU. In selecting data, we took no account of differences by age group, gender, education, or country. Our analysis is thus confined to the ‘EU 27’ results in the EB surveys.

Trust and confidence Trust in political institutions (or political trust) measures the extent to which individuals have a high degree of confidence in the institutions of the political system (OECD 2007: 112). Trust creates the ‘collective power’ that enables government to make decisions and to allocate resources without obtaining the explicit consent of citizens for each decision or resorting to force (Mishler, Rose 1997: 418). Therefore, even though there is no such thing as absolute trust, a ‘reasonable’ degree of trust is needed to guarantee the maintenance and stability of the political, social and economic system and its legitimacy: ‘When trust beaks down, the social system is threatened with unrest, the democratic legitimacy of the political system is endangered and the legitimacy of the market-based economy is called into question’ (Roth 2009: 2003). Not surprisingly, trust is considered vital to the functioning of democracy and for the stability of society (Inglehart 1999). Confidence and trust are frequently used interchangeably in the literature, since both refer to expectations. However, as Luhmann (2000: 3) notes, the two concepts have a fundamental difference: unlike confidence, trust presupposes a degree of risk and therefore requires a level of engagement.

Crisis Essentially, crisis could be described as a handful, disruptive event that represents a disordered phase in the regular development of a system. There are, in fact, a variety of acute occurrences that could be classified as crises — international confrontations, acts of terrorism, natural disasters, severe economic or financial breakdowns, environmental threats, among others — but generally they all share certain key characteristics: severe threat, high uncertainty, and time pressure (’t Hart et al. 1993: 2). In today’s interdependent world, crises have become an increasingly long and *complex* phenomenon, since they are not spatially restricted by physical boundaries; they rapidly intertwine with other high-politics issues, and their impact is extended in time (Boin, ’t Hart 2003: 545).

Whatever the type of crisis, it is a high salience context (Williams et al 2011, 2) that raises the stakes for political leaders, since it cannot be dealt with by standard operational procedures and norms (Bass, Bass 2008: 836–837; Boin et al. 2011: 2–7; ’t Hart et al. 1993: 13). Thus, crisis could trigger an opportunity for major policy and institutional changes politically infeasible in ‘normal’ times. However, despite the exceptional nature of the situation, these reforms must be sanctioned by public support.

Issue Salience The concept of salience is often used in political science research, particularly in electoral studies. Normally, the word designates the importance of an issue to voters (Wlezien 2005: 556). Hence, salience is really a synonym for importance. Issue salience affects the responsiveness of the public to a policy or measure. The public pays more attention to what politicians do if and when it considers the issue important. Besides the importance of issues, an additional criterion could be added, that is, the degree to which the issue is considered a ‘problem’ or ‘the most important problem’ (Wlezien 2005: 556). Accordingly, changes in the salience of issues can influence (and explain) the public’s responsiveness to a policy or a proposal. Also, citizens base their evaluations of political leaders at least in part on how leaders respond to their concerns (Epstein, Segal 2000: 66). Arguably, leaders’ inability to find a solution for citizens’ ‘most important problem’ might cause the public to distrust the value of political institutions those leaders head and in decreased legitimacy for the institutions.

Yet, as in the domestic arena, not all European issues or crises have the same relevance for European citizens. In the sections that follow, we will consider two different situations widely

portrayed as *crises* in the EU — the constitutional crisis (2005–2007) and the Eurozone crisis (between 2008–2012) — to establish how (and why) trust and confidence in the EU varied between the two.

3. The Constitutional Crisis

3.1. Type of crisis: was it really a crisis?

After a long negotiation process (first within the Convention on the Future of Europe and afterwards in the IGC), the Constitutional Treaty (CT) was signed in Rome on 29 October 2004. In accordance with its own dispositions, all Member States were obliged to ratify the treaty by October 2006 at the latest. Unlike other EU treaties, a parliamentary vote was not required in this ratification process. In fact, almost half the Member States announced a referendum on the CT, due to the perceived symbolic importance of the treaty, which fostered domestic political pressure for public consultation. A referendum, however, is much more unpredictable than a parliamentary vote. First, it is more likely that citizens will take a view contrary to that of the government on the issue at stake (Nugent 2006: 126); second referendums on European questions are frequently used as a form of penalizing governments for unsuccessful domestic policies. Both of these problems occurred in the referendums held in France on 29 May 2005 and in the Netherlands three days later. In the course of the referendum campaigns, it became clear that many citizens had doubts regarding the ‘constitutional’ form and the perceived ‘new’ values of the CT. Also, the campaigns in both countries were dominated mostly by non-Treaty related issues, such as political opposition to the governments in office, insecurities resulting from the May 2004 massive enlargement as well as from the possible Turkish accession (Nugent 2006: 126; Dinan 2006: 6). As a result, in both countries the outcomes of the referendums were clear rejections of the CT (the percentage of voters that rejected the CT was 54.9 per cent (on 69.7 per cent turnout) in France and 61.6 per cent (on 62.8 per cent turnout) in Netherlands).

Following the referendums in France and the Netherlands, the situation in the EU was largely portrayed as a *crisis*. The word was used by the media, commentators, and by several European politicians. The general opinion was that the EU had been plunged into a serious crisis corollary to a much deeper crisis of legitimacy and orientation. Some authors, however, are reluctant to classify the rejection of a treaty as a crisis. For instance, Desmond Dinan (2006: 6) notes that the demise of the CT did not set off an economic shock, monetary collapse or political upheaval. Therefore, for the author, the ‘noes’ to the CT and its resulting ‘death’ was not a crisis.

If we considered the definition of a crisis (cf. *supra* section 2), and particularly the idea of a rupture in the normal functioning of a system, we must acknowledge that in 2005 the EU was not in a fundamental crisis. The results of the referendums in France and the Netherlands did not stop the normal functioning of the decision-making process. Plus, the European leaders did not urge the solution (since they postponed it for more than one year). Also, although the ‘no’ votes were a surprise to some, they were not completely unexpected considering the tone of the national campaigns. So, ‘time pressure’ was not as stressing as with other types of crisis, and the referendums’ results did not truly amount to an ‘unanticipated event’.

However, if from a theoretical point of view the CT rejection could not rigorously be considered a crisis, it represented a substantial problem that raised the stakes for European leaders, especially considering the EU's urgent need for institutional reform. The EU's capacity to function depends on how well it is balanced. It was evident that the institutional architecture designed for six was ill adapted for facilitating an agreement among 25 or 27 Member States. What is more, the CT setback revealed a serious clash between two visions of Europe: one that favoured the deepening of political integration and another that preferred the intergovernmental dimension of the project. In fact, the CT was widely regarded as a turning point in the process of European integration in terms of democratic mobilization and constitutional deepening. It recast the values and principles that formed the base of European unification, consolidated the competences of the Union, clarified the powers of the EU institutions, simplified the decision-making process, rationalised instruments and codified jurisprudence (Duff 2009: 8). So, although it was possible to continue operating on the basis of the Nice Treaty, most EU experts (recalling Nice's shortfalls) reckoned that the failure to resolve the problem would affect the EU's ability to act (Dinan 2006: 2).

As for European citizens, when asked, the majority favoured the idea of a Constitution. Specifically, they reckoned the Constitution would make the way the EU functions more democratic (64%), more efficient (63%) and more transparent (56%) (EB 63 Spring 2005: 150). But the rejection of the CT, even for people who favoured the idea of a Constitution, was not perceived as a genuine problem. In fact, unlike the current Euro crisis, the rejection of the CT did not have an immediate (and pungent) negative impact on citizens' daily lives. Whereas the present economic and financial crisis resulted in almost immediate costs and penalties felt by the majority of citizens (thus having the standards not only of an *important issue* but a truly *major problem*), the constitutional crisis (if not solved) would bring what were essentially medium/long term costs.

3.2. The solution to the crisis

After a period of reflexion, in June 2006, the European Council instructed the future German Presidency of the EU to present a Report with possible solutions for the constitutional crisis during the first semester of 2007, based on extensive consultations with the Member States (European Council 2006, 16–17). Accordingly, the German Presidency organized bilateral meetings (with the participation of the Council's Secretariat) with each of the other Member States' representatives. These bilateral meetings occurred at least twice with each member state, but more often with states whose demands were legally delicate (the so-called 'difficult' states: France, Netherlands, UK, and Denmark) (Piris 2010: 33). In addition, there were two plenary meetings of the 27 Member States in Berlin (at the level of senior civil servants or secretaries of state – the so-called focal points group). At the same time, Angela Merkel's advisers continued to work with the Council's Legal Service in order to get a precise legal text (Piris 2010: 33).

At the end of its six-month presidential term, the German Presidency had brokered a deal. Having followed a well-planned preparatory process, Merkel succeeded in getting other European leaders to commit to her 'roadmap' on the way out of the crisis that included a precise mandate for an IGC to be convened immediately afterwards (under the Portuguese

Presidency). The strict character of the mandate and the consequent confined manoeuvring space given to the Portuguese Presidency were widely reported by the media. In fact, considering the tight calendar established for solving the constitutional deadlock, the mandate was thought to be as exhaustive as possible, describing the legal solution to be applied to almost all substantive issues.

European leaders converged on a proposal to maintain the substantive core of the CT, but dropped features assumed to have generated the most controversy and opposition, that is, the overtly 'constitutional' dimensions of the CT. The solution was then to go back to the reform treaty formula, a formally 'deconstitutionalized' text that would permit them to 'move quickly, silently and without debate', even though the treaty comprised the bulk of the reforms contained in the CT (Búrca 2008: 6–7). Accordingly, the 21–22 June 2007 European Council invited the incoming Portuguese Presidency to 'draw up a draft treaty text in line with the terms of the mandate and to submit this to the IGC as soon as it opens' (European Council 2007: 2). The IGC was due to complete its work 'as quickly as possible, and in any case before the end of 2007' (European Council 2007: 2). The mandate which was presented as the 'exclusive basis and framework for the work of the IGC' was annexed to the Presidency Conclusions and included the adoption of a 'Reform Treaty' that amended the existing treaties with all the reforms agreed to in the draft text. The 'constitutional concept' was abandoned and the mandate explicitly stated that the Treaty on the European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union 'will not have a constitutional character'.

With the precise mandate inherited from its predecessor, the Portuguese Presidency convened an IGC, which began on 23 July 2007. After a short period of negotiations led by Portuguese diplomats to resolve the few issues still open and the new demands of some Member States, the European leaders reached an agreement on the text of the new Treaty, which was formally signed on 13 December in Lisbon. The Treaty of Lisbon entered into force on 1 December 2009, putting a definitive end to the constitutional crisis.

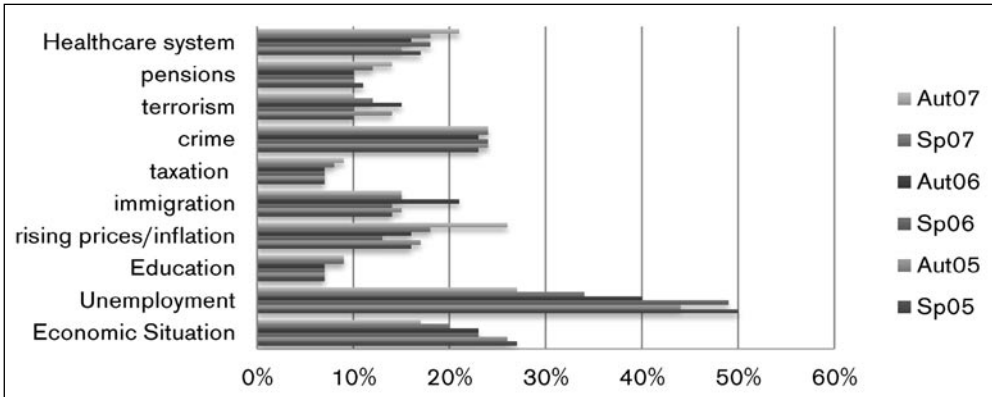
3.3. Citizens' attitudes (2005–2007)

a) Citizens' perceptions of the importance of the issue In Spring 2005, the most important issue for European citizens was *unemployment* (50%) followed by the *economic situation* (27%) and *crime* (23%). In Autumn 2005, after the referendums in France and the Netherlands, the answers were fairly identical: *unemployment* was the most important issue (44%) followed by the *economic situation* (26%). This trend, although with variations in terms of percentages, remained stable during the period under review (See Chart 1).

Even though the question was 'what do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?' (to be picked from a list of items, thus ruling out reference to the CT crisis, although in some surveys, half the sample answered with no answer options available), specific questions on the CT (such as knowledge of the CT's content or the likelihood of voting in possible referendums on the CT) that were included in the surveys could help establish the issue's relevance for European citizens. According to EB 63 (2005: 137), in response to the question 'Have you personally heard about the European Constitution', 81% of EU citizens answered affirmatively, but only 13% affirmed knowing its content (See Chart 2).

Chart 1: Most important Issue

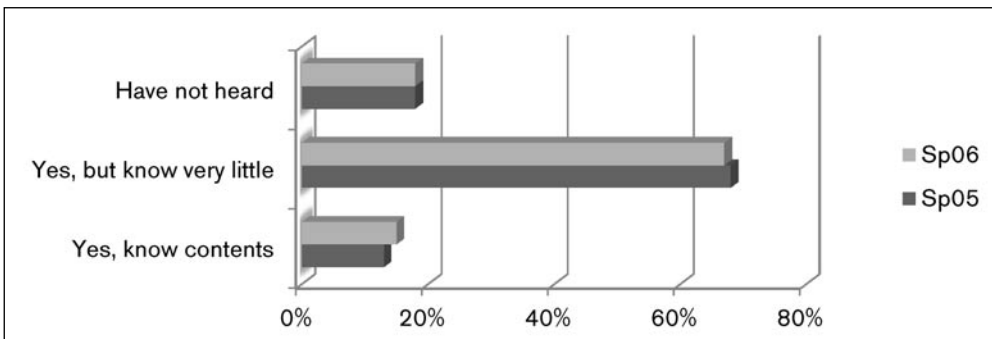
Q: 'What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?'



Source: Eurobarometer 63, Spring 2005: 25; Eurobarometer 64, Autumn 2005: 2; Eurobarometer 66, Autumn 2006: 26; Eurobarometer 68, Autumn 2007: 27.

Chart 2: Awareness of the Constitutional Treaty

Q: 'Have you personally heard about the European Constitution?'



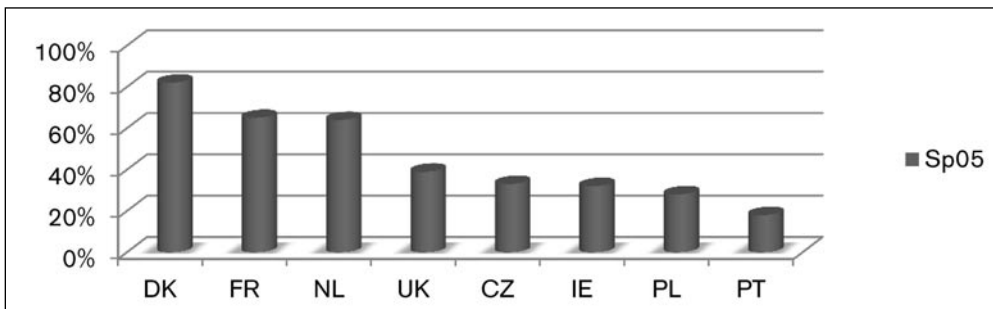
Source: Eurobarometer 65 Spring 2006: 145.

This trend was confirmed by the results of EB 65, Spring 2006 (2006, 144). As in Spring 2005, a large majority of European citizens (82%) claimed to have heard about the European Constitution, but knowledge of the content of the CT remained very low (15%). Still, it must be noted that the percentage of people who asserted that overall they knew the content of the CT was much higher in some of the countries that organized a referendum, such as France (27%), the Netherlands (34%) and Luxembourg (24%) (EB 63 2005: 138). Therefore, although during the period under analysis (2005–2007) the survey did not include a specific question regarding the relevance of the CT for European citizens' daily life, we believe it is reasonable to suppose the constitutional treaty was not the most important issue for the majority of EU citizens. EB 63, 65, and 66 did include a question about the support for a Constitution for the EU. The majority of European Union Citizens supported the *idea* of a Constitution.

However, this result must not be seen as an indication of the relevance attributed to the CT. In fact, it only reflected the extent to which respondents agreed to the ideal of a Constitution, excluding any evaluation of its content or how that content would affect their daily lives. The same conclusion could be reached if we consider the likely voter turnout in eight of the ten countries that, at the time, opted for the referendum to ratify the CT. In fact, only in three of these countries did the percentage of persons declaring they were ‘certain to vote’ exceed 50% (See Chart 3).

Chart 3: Likelihood of voting in a referendum on the CT⁴

Q. ‘We would like to know the likelihood of you voting in a referendum in (OUR COUNTRY) to ratify the text of the European Constitution.’

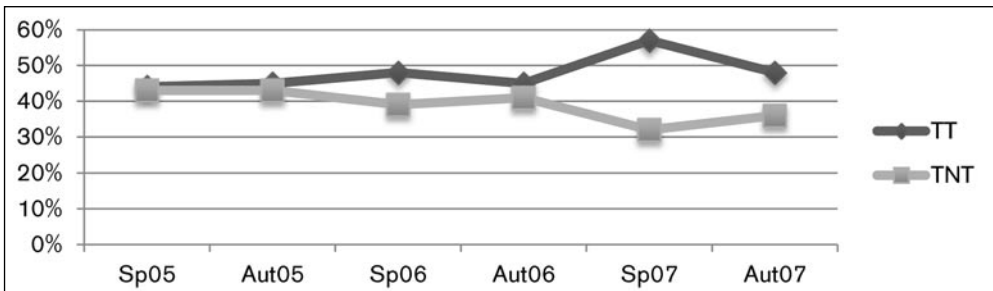


Source: Eurobarometer 63, Spring 2005: 149.

b) Trust in the EU and European Institutions during the constitutional crisis, slightly different levels of trust were shown for the EU as a whole versus the EU institutions. However, this variation does not appear to have been triggered by the constitutional setback. In fact, the data shows a slight increase in trust in the EU during Autumn 2005 (See Chart 4 and Chart 5).

Chart 4: Trust in the EU

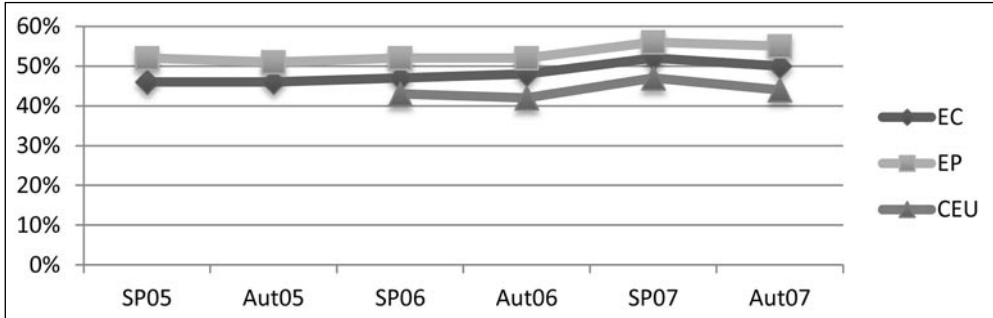
Q: ‘For each of the following institutions please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it...’
The European Union.



Source: Eurobarometer 68, Autumn 2007: 99.

Chart 5: Trust in European Institutions

Q: 'And, for each of them, tell me if you tend to trust it, or not to trust it...?' [Trust it...] European Commission; European Parliament; Council of the European Union.

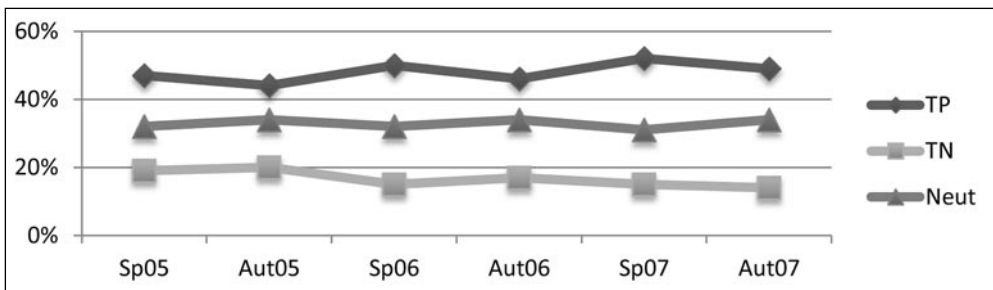


Source: Eurobarometer 68, Autumn 2007: 95.

c) Image of the EU During the period under analysis, a relative majority of Europeans had a positive image of the EU (See Chart 6). It should be noted that the percentage of respondents opting for a positive image varied slightly during the constitutional deadlock. However, the percentage of respondents seeing the EU to have a negative image decreased consistently during the period under review, after a slight increase at the peak of the crisis (Autumn 2005) and in Autumn 2006.

Chart 6: Image of the EU

Q: 'In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?'



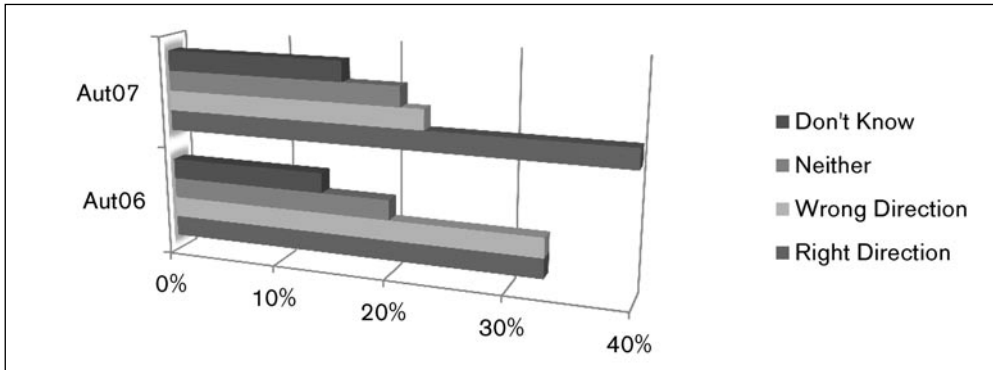
Source: Eurobarometer 66 Autumn 2006: 129; Eurobarometer 78 Autumn 2012: 15.

d) Perception regarding the current path and confidence in the future of the EU The uncertainty typical of a crisis could affect the confidence of the citizens in the future of the political system. Therefore, being able to efficiently resolve a crisis situation could boost citizens' confidence in the capacity of the institution and of the leaders to deliver. After a period of some hesitation and vagueness regarding the solution to the constitutional stalemate, European leaders (and particularly the German Presidency under Angela Merkel) did manage to come up with a consensual solution for the crisis. This appears to have increased citizens' degree of trust and optimism regarding the (at that time) current path as well as the future of

the European project. In effect, whereas in Autumn 2006 (during the period of uncertainty) the percentage of respondents who thought things were going in the right direction and the percentage that thought things were going in the wrong direction were the same, in the Autumn 2007 the number of positive answers sharply increased (See Chart 7).

Chart 7: Current path of the EU

Q: 'At the present time, would you say that in general things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction in the EU?'

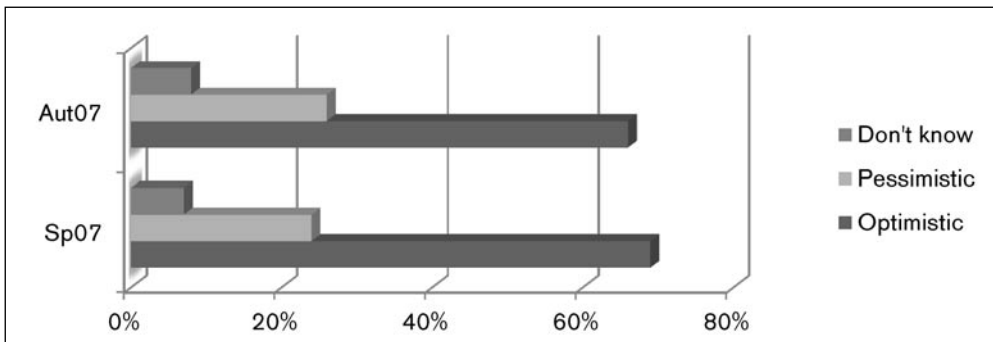


Source: Eurobarometer 68, Autumn 2007: 47.

As for confidence in the EU's future, even though there is a slight dip in optimism in Autumn 2007, an absolute majority of EU citizens (66%) considered themselves very optimistic about the future of the Union (See Chart 8).

Chart 8: Confidence in the Future of the EU

Q: 'Would you say you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the EU?'



Source: Eurobarometer 78 Autumn 2012: 96.

4. The Eurozone crisis

4.1. Type of crisis

The so-called subprime crisis, initially assessed as an American problem, rapidly escalated into a financial and economic crisis with severe repercussions in the rest of the world. In fact, the bursting of the U.S. housing bubble and the associated financial market turmoil of 2007 and 2008 culminated in the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression (Brunnermeier, Oehmke 2012: 11). Europe, according to the World Bank (2010), has been hit by a crisis on multiple fronts, with countries facing major external macro-financial shocks. In the EU, economic activity has declined at a fast pace. Combined with a slowdown in global growth, this has resulted in falling export demand, endangering European exports. Major banks and other financial institutions in developed countries have also markedly reduced the availability, and increased the cost, of external finance across the public and private sectors. The loss of competitiveness, fiscal deficits and the repercussions from the great financial crisis of 2008 had a severe negative impact on the economies of several Euro countries, such as Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Italy and Spain. As a result, the EU has been dealing with a major sovereign debt crisis.

Unlike the constitutional crisis, the so-called Euro area crisis meets all the criteria of a crisis. It represents a severe economic and financial breakdown whose impact has spread quickly to other high-level political issues. But the crisis has some peculiarities that should be highlighted. Its impact has been neither spatially nor temporally confined. Specifically, an *economic* crisis refers specifically to an ‘interval of decline in a long period of steady growth and development’ (Boin et al. 2011: 2). This type of crisis begins with a trigger event that acts as catalyst. However, such an event need not have major economic significance by itself. According to Brunnermeier and Oehmke (2012: 4) ‘the subprime mortgage market that triggered the recent financial crisis made up only about four percent of the of the overall mortgage market’. Actually, a small trigger event can lead to major financial crises and recessions, due to ‘amplification effects’, i.e., mechanisms that can either be direct (resulting from direct contractual links) or indirect (resulting from spillovers or externalities caused by common exposure or the endogenous response of various market players) (Brunnermeier and Oehmke 2012: 4–5). Plus, the main problem with economic (and financial) crises is that while its eruption may be sudden, recovery will probably be protracted (Brunnermeier and Oehmke 2012: 5).

The economic crisis and particularly the so-called sovereign debt crisis that dramatically hit some of the Eurozone states made it obvious that the EU needed reform. The struggles of Greece, Ireland and Portugal, and the menace pending to do with other euro economies, including the large economies of Spain and Italy, laid bare the fragile nature of the EMU, namely the lack of ‘institutions being established at the European level capable of effectively coordinating the economic policies of the Member States’ (Habermas 2012: 121). Confronted with the crisis’ escalation, European leaders came to agree on the need to reform some of the dispositions of the (still new) TL, to accommodate new rescue mechanisms and enforce tougher supervision rules and stricter budget discipline in the Eurozone.

4.2. Solution to the crisis

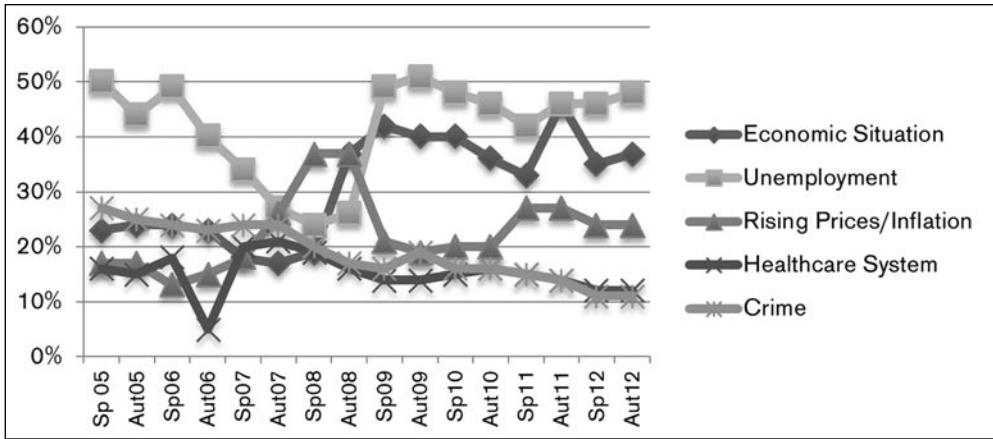
Despite many criticisms regarding European leaders' response to the economic and financial crisis,⁵ several measures have been decided at the European level, the most noteworthy being: the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG), and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). The Council and the European Parliament also adopted legislative packs⁶ proposed by the Commission. But the solutions for tackling the crisis fell far short of producing positive results in the short run. As Jürgen Habermas (2012: 121) asserts, imposing tougher sanctions on states in default will not counterbalance the unwanted outcome of purposeful 'asymmetry between the complete economic and the incomplete political unification of Europe'. In effect, the strict rescue programmes designed for states that are economically fragile appear insufficient for solving the crisis (and in some cases appear to aggravate it). This incapacity to halt the crisis has triggered strong criticisms from European citizens (leading to strikes and other outbreaks of social protest in several EU countries). According to a study by the Publicis Groupe produced by Ipsos/CGI and Free Thinking, the results of interviews conducted in six EU countries (France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Spain and Poland) between March and April 2013 show 'more than half [58%] of Europeans surveyed believed the crisis is leading to reforms which will have negative repercussions on the economic and social situation of their fellow citizens' (Lévy 2013: 18).⁷ The austerity measures were criticized as well by renowned experts (such as Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman). The recession and the dangerously high unemployment rates (particularly among younger workers) in several EU countries fuelled public distrust in the capacity of the leaders to halt the pernicious social effects of the crisis. The number of strikes and social protests increased particularly in more indebted countries. From a reform centred on austerity measures, speeches by European leaders have gradually moved towards emphasising the need to refocus on growth and employment.

4.3. Citizens' attitudes (2008–2012)

a) Citizens' perception of the importance of the issue During the period under review, the issues directly related to the economic crisis were consistently rated as the 'most important issue' for respondents to EB surveys. It is true the economic situation, as well as unemployment and other related topics were already rated as the 'most important issue' in the 2005–2008 period and, in fact, are consistently among the five most frequently mentioned items. Comparing the two periods, however, highlights a substantial increase in the percentage of respondents who chose the *economic situation* and *unemployment* as the most important issues after spring 2008 (See Chart 9). Therefore, we find it reasonable to argue that this particular crisis is perceived to be very relevant for European citizens.

Chart 9: Main concerns at the national level: trend (5 most frequently mentioned items)

Q: 'What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?'

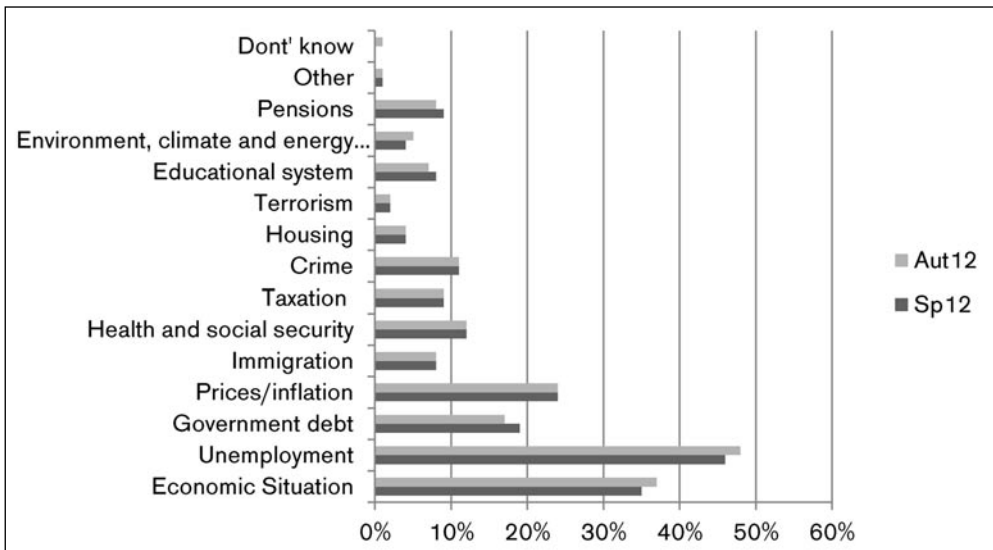


Source: Eurobarometer 76 Autumn 2011: 10, and Eurobarometer 78 Autumn 2012: 27.

By 2012, the two main concerns of Europeans were still *unemployment* and the *economic situation*, followed by *rising prices/inflation*. Even though the percentage of respondents who chose the economic situation item decreased, the percentage of people answering unemployment increased (See Chart 10).

Chart 10: Most important issue facing our country

Q: 'What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?'

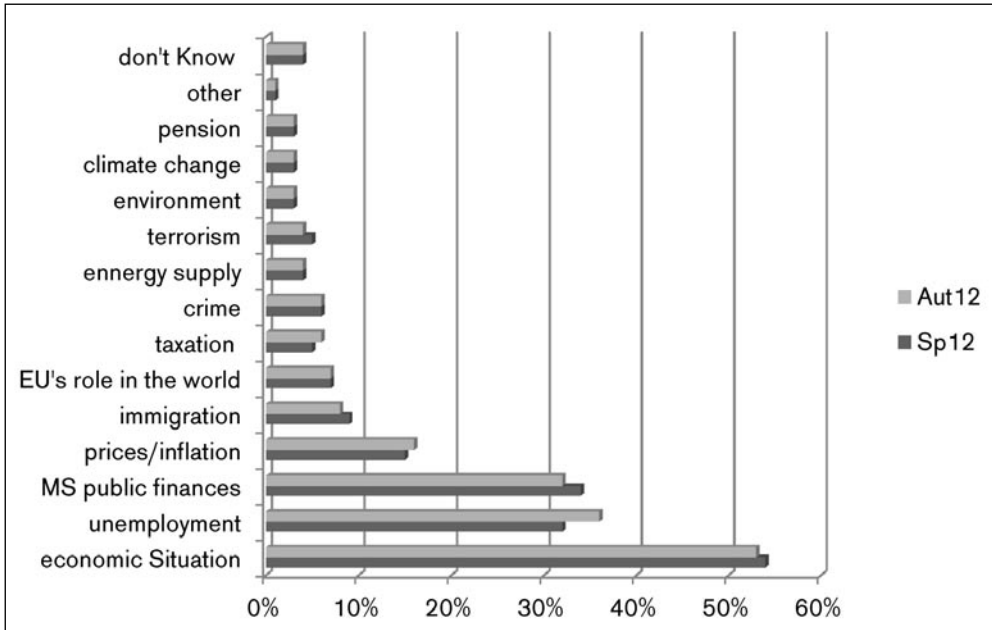


Source: Eurobarometer 78, Autumn 2012: 25.

In the same period, respondents considered the *economic situation* the ‘most important issue’ the EU was facing, followed by *unemployment*, *the condition of Member States’ public finances*, and *rising prices/inflation* (See Chart 11). These answers show the ranking of concerns in the period under review remain more or less unchanged regarding what was the ‘most important issue’ for citizens.

Chart 11: Most important issue the EU is facing

Q: ‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?’



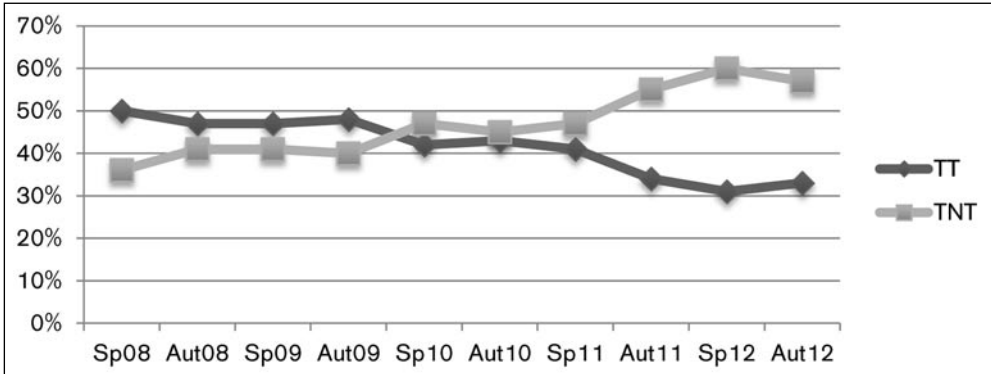
Source: Eurobarometer 78 Autumn 2012: 31.

b) Trust in the EU and in the European Institutions After a period of relative stability, as the crisis escalated, the data shows a continuous deterioration of trust (and a concomitant growth of distrust) in the EU. This downward trend began in Autumn 2010 ceased in Autumn 2012, even though the surveys show the EU has far from regained the ground lost since the peak of the economic and financial crisis (See Chart 12).

As with the degree of trust in the EU as a whole, the level of trust in the EU institutions appears to have been negatively affected by the perceived (mis)management of the Euro crisis. Since Autumn 2010, there has been a continued erosion of trust in the European institutions, a trend that finally turned in Autumn 2012. But the level of trust in the European institutions is still far from its levels before the crisis (See Chart 13).

Chart 12: Trust in the EU

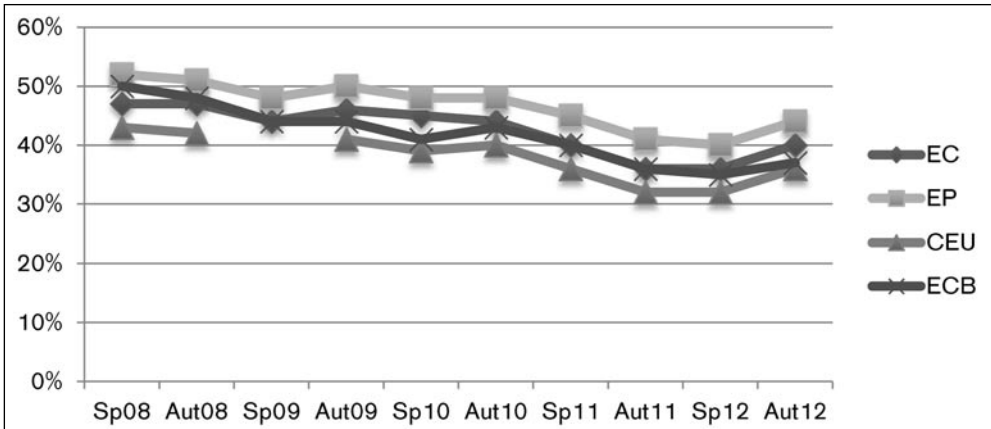
Q: 'For each of the following institutions please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it...'
The European Union.



Source: Eurobarometer 78 Autumn 2012: 75.

Chart 13: Trust in the EU institutions

Q: 'And, for each of them, tell me if you tend to trust it, or not to trust it...?' [Trust it...]
European Commission; European Parliament; Council of the European Union; European Central Bank.

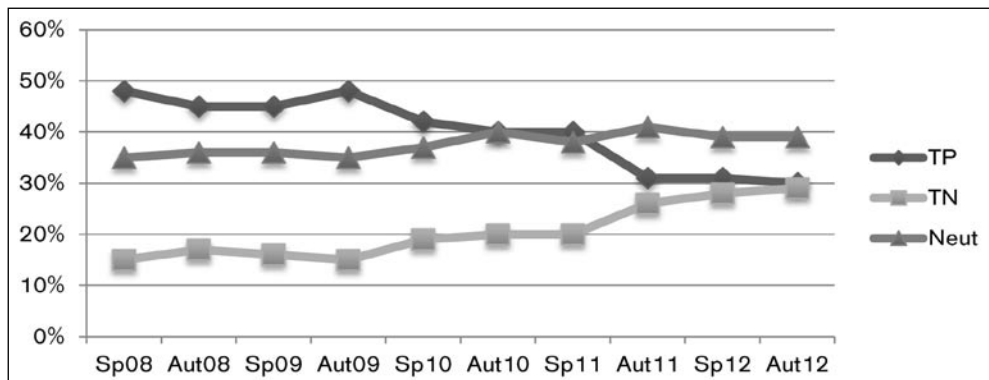


Source: Eurobarometer 78, Autumn 2012: 69.

c) Image of the EU The fact that European leaders were not able to present a timely and effective response to the Euro crisis contributed to the deterioration of the EU's image in public opinion. Contrary to what occurred with the level of trust in the EU and in the European institutions, this downward trend was not halted in the Autumn 2012 survey, even though the percentage of respondents that considered the EU's image to be positive remained unchanged (See Chart 14).

Chart 14: Image of the EU

Q: 'In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?'

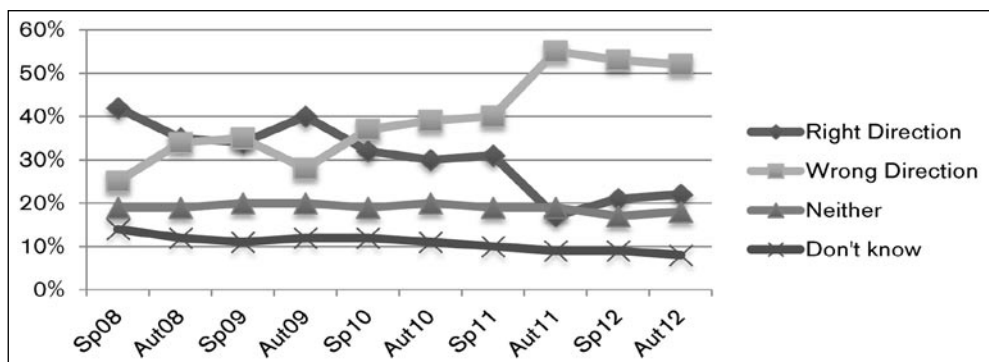


Source: Eurobarometer 78 Autumn 2012: 77.

d) Perception regarding the present path and confidence in the future of the EU The incapacity of European leadership to adopt measures capable of rapidly ending the crisis and the pernicious 'domino' effects of this type of crisis (that have economic, financial, but also social and political repercussions) greatly affected citizen confidence in the current course of the EU. Therefore, with the exception of 2009, negative opinions of the direction in which things are going have hardened since the beginning of the crisis. This trend significantly increased in autumn 2011 (with only 17% of those interviewed positive on the direction of the EU versus 55% who thought things were moving in the wrong direction), but began to fall in spring 2012 (EB 78). Notwithstanding, in the Autumn 2012, a majority of European citizens still believed things were going in the wrong direction (52%), whereas only 22% had a positive opinion (See Chart 15).

Chart 15: Current path of the EU

Q: 'At the present time, would you say that in general things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction in the EU?'

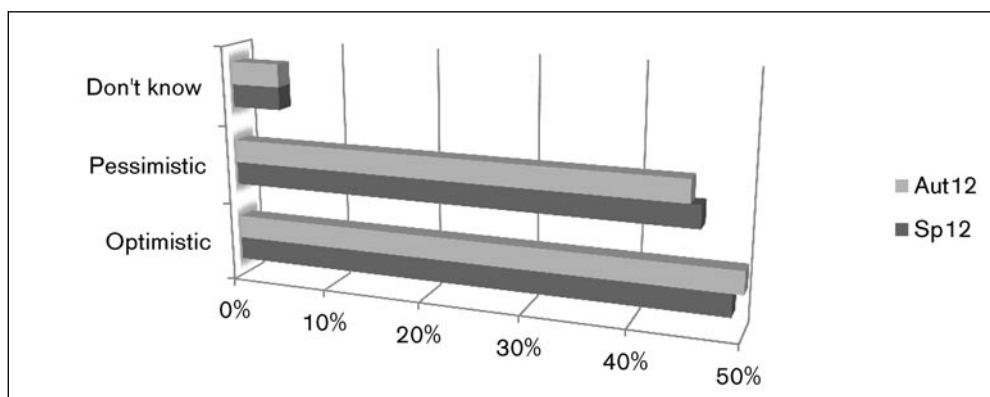


Source: Eurobarometer 78 Autumn 2012: 39.

As for confidence in the future of the EU, somewhat surprisingly considering the above-mentioned results, half of the respondents (50%) considered themselves optimistic regarding the future of the EU. It should be noted, however, that during the period under review, the EB survey data shows a sharp decline in optimism between spring 2010 and autumn 2011. Also, although EB 77 (spring 2012) indicates a slightly recovery of optimism, (confirmed by EB 78, autumn 2012) the number of respondents that are pessimistic is still very high (46% and 45% respectively) (See Chart 16).

Chart 16: Confidence in the Future of the EU

Q: 'Would you say you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the EU?'



Source: Eurobarometer 78, Autumn 2012: 96.

5. Discussion of the results and final remarks

In this paper we have looked at two different types of EU crises – the constitutional crisis and the Euro crisis – to analyse how they have affected the public's trust and confidence in the EU. Each was widely referred to as a 'crisis'. However, whereas the first was perceived as a European problem, important to the normal functioning of the institutions but with no immediate impact on the lives of citizens, the second was (and still is) perceived as the most important problem faced that only by the EU (at the European level) but 'our country' (at the domestic level) as well. What is more, the first was successfully resolved through the adoption of a new reform treaty that recovered a substantial part of the rejected constitutional treaty, without carrying the more delicate (and more controversial) symbolic weight of a constitution. The second is still ongoing. Some important reforms, mainly in the EMU, were put into place, but deeper structural reform remains to be completed. In addition, the economic, financial and social situation of some of the more indebted countries has not yet improved significantly.

Considering the analysis of the EB surveys, the data shows the constitutional crisis did not affect significantly trust in the EU institutions or in the UE. In spring 2007, EB 67 shows almost 57% of European citizens trusted the EU (whereas only roughly 40% trusted their

national governments). What is more, 52% of European citizens considered the EU to have a totally positive image (against only 15% answering totally negative) (EB 76 2011: 19–20). Also, in the spring, an absolute majority of Europeans (69%) considered themselves optimistic about the future of the EU.

During the Euro crisis, the successful image of the EU and the EU institutions gradually began to fade (especially within some of the EU Member States). By 2011, polls showed a sharp erosion of trust in political institutions in general, but specifically in the EU (with only 34% of the interviewed trusting the EU). Plus, the percentage of European citizens who thought the EU evoked a positive image suffered a clear decline (with only 31% of the interviewed responding affirmatively) (EB 76 2011: 19–20). Also, the inability of the European leadership to prevent and revert the negative economic, financial, social and political effects of the crisis significantly affected citizen confidence in the EU's direction. As a result, negative opinions on the 'direction in which things are going' have hardened since the beginning of the crisis (with a slight recovery in 2009). This downward trend peaked in autumn 2011 (with only 17% of the interviewed having a positive opinion on the direction of the EU versus 55% who thought things were going in the wrong direction), but began to decrease in spring 2012 (EB 78). Notwithstanding, in Autumn 2012, a majority of European citizens still considered things were going in the wrong direction (52%), whereas only 22% had a positive opinion. As for confidence in the future of the EU, albeit half of European citizens (50%) considered themselves optimistic regarding the future of the EU, this number is far from the absolute majority prior to the beginning of the crisis.

A note must be added about the recovery in citizen support that took place in Autumn 2012 (EB 78 Autumn 2012) (this trend was confirmed by EB 79, Spring 2013). Indeed, the general trend that showed a continued erosion of trust in the European institutions and in the EU turned around in this survey, with a significant rise in trust for all European institutions tested (the European Commission, EP, The Council of the EU, the ECB, and the Court of Justice of the European Union). Although it is still too soon to draw conclusions from these results, it is not unreasonable to assume that this recovery was related to gradual improvement in some economic indicators. We should stress, however, that these institutions have not regained, at least to this point, the trust they enjoyed before the crisis. Also, trust levels remain very low in some countries harder hit by the debt crisis (such as Greece, Cyprus, and Spain), although there has been visible recovery in Portugal and Italy (EB 78 2012, 68–74).

In sum, comparing the two periods shows that though they are both designated *crises*, the first was not perceived as such by the majority of European citizens and was efficiently resolved (i.e., a definitive solution for the crisis was agreed). Thus, although extended in time (two years) it did not significantly influence citizen attitudes towards the EU. In contrast, the second was clearly perceived not only as a crisis situation, but also as the most important problem. Additionally, European leaders failed to adopt timely measures to stop the escalation of the crisis and the measures they did initially adopt failed to acknowledge citizens' preferences and concerns. Thus, the data seems to indicate that European leaders' inability to promptly resolve a crisis perceived as highly salient resulted in the penalisation of the EU's institutions and the EU as a whole. In effect, a negative assessment of European leadership is reflected in decreased trust in European institutions and the EU, as well as heightened negativity for the EU's image. What seems to be at stake is political support for the EU's institutions. However,

since political trust is intrinsically connected to the issue of legitimacy, ultimately a long-lasting pattern of distrust in the EU's institutions could undermine the democratic legitimacy of the EU. That being said, further research is needed to confirm these preliminary conclusions. In particular, research on the perceived legitimacy of EU politics and policies during the economic and financial crisis is needed to fully grasp how distrust in the EU's institutions impacts on the broader problem of the EU's legitimacy deficit. Also, additional research is necessary to determine whether this downward trend in trust is essentially a reaction to perceived inefficient performance by the EU (which could therefore be turned around if and when EU policies produce positive outcomes) or, on the contrary, is a long-term trend denoting increasing citizen detachment regarding European unity.

As to confidence in the future of the EU, although the degree of optimism has decreased (and the level of pessimism has concomitantly increased), confidence is still higher than what would be expected taking into consideration the very negative reactions towards the 'current path of the EU'. Arguably, an indicator that European citizens continue to have confidence in the durability of the European project, even when they are not experiencing a high level of engagement with the EU.

Notes:

1. These two sides of legitimacy are not mutually exclusive, but some authors consider that in practice, trade-offs are frequently evident between output and input legitimacy (Hage, Kaeding 2007: 3).
2. This matrix of support was inspired by David Easton's conceptualizations of political support. In fact, Lindberg and Scheingold, when explaining their matrix, explicitly refer to David Easton's empirical political theory (Lindberg, Scheingold 1975: 40). Also, as regards the modes of political support, the two models could also be related to Fritz Scharpf's (1999) distinction between *input* and *output* legitimization of the EU: the first concerns diffuse and affective political support, whereas the second is related to problem-solving and specific interests (Boomgaarden et al 2011: 244). For Scharpf, the EU cannot secure adequately input legitimacy, since it involves the traditional democratic notions of influencing through voting, party activity, citizens' participation, etc. (Newman 2006: 388). However, it can achieve output legitimacy through policies and activities in domains where Member States are not as efficient.
3. It aims at making a distinction between the development of links among the peoples of the Community (identitive) and the development of links with the system itself (systemic). The last category is further subdivided among the possible *objects* of that support, namely the *community* and the *regime*.
4. People answer 10, certain to vote; the interviewed were asked to place themselves on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 meant that they would be certain of not going to vote and 10 meant that they would be certain of going to vote in this referendum.
5. The criticisms regarding Merkel's 'monopoly' of leadership (initially in tandem with Sarkozy) were profusely conveyed by the media and were endorsed by many former politicians, academics and analysts. There was a widespread feeling that Germany had gradually become the overtly dominant partner (even within the Franco-German engine). Some analysts, in particular Charles Grant (2011), have made the case that the euro crisis was changing the balance of power in Europe, leading to a German 'hegemony'. As the crisis evolved (and the Franco-German alliance was dissolved following the defeat of Sarkozy in the Presidential elections) this perception became stronger, turning the spotlight almost exclusively to Chancellor Merkel. The criticisms also targeted the minor role played by EU institutions, especially the Commission's 'quiet diplomacy'.

6. The so-called ‘Six-Pack’, afterwards complemented by the ‘Two-Pack’.
7. Also, considering for example the Portuguese situation, the numbers presented by the EU Employment and Social Situation Quarterly Review (June 2012) showed the labour market and social situation for many Portuguese citizens was deteriorating. The unemployment rate had risen dramatically (from 15.5 in May 2012 to 17.5 in April 2013, with even darker numbers when considering the youth unemployment rate), the GDP per capita in PPS had decreased, the real growth rate was still negative in 2013 (-2.3), and the percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion had also increased. These trends were confirmed by the Eurostat data, and in fact, this reality was far from being exclusively Portuguese.

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