

Andrew Moravcsik

ANOTHER ANGLE

The most important political fact about Europe's current crisis is simply this: very few voters know or care about the European Union.

Despite all the hand-wringing about globalisation, what the EU does – liberalising trade, regulating business, haggling with Morocco, stabilising Macedonia, and so on – is of little interest to the average European. Even in Britain, where Europe is debated more hotly than anywhere else, only four percent of citizens consider anything connected with the EU “important”. The issues voters find most compelling – tax, labour policy, welfare, healthcare, pensions, education, transport, defence and immigration – remain national.

European voters are not stupid. They focus on what interests them. They resolutely refuse to vote in large numbers in European Parliamentary elections, even though polls show that they believe doing so could influence EU policies. They refuse to debate EU issues in any election, European or national. There has been no self-generating pro- or anti-European politics of importance in Europe since the 1950s. Democratic life in EU countries remains almost exclusively national.

Traditionally voters' apathy and ignorance about Europe mattered little. People voted for parties on the basis of core issues of essential concern to them, and those parties represented them in Brussels – precisely as happens with secondary issues in domestic political life.

This system worked well, for – though neither Euro-federalists nor Eurosceptics like to admit it – the EU is dominated by member state governments, which rule by consensus. On issue after issue – services deregulation, genetically modified foods, trade liberalisation and global warming – ministers make EU policy in a manner minutely sensitive to domestic public opinion. And voters accept the result: to this day, polls show that Europeans trust and approve of EU institutions roughly at the same level as their national governments, and considerably more than their own national politicians and parliaments.

This system broke down earlier in this decade with the promulgation of the European constitution. Politicians decided to appeal directly to voters with a high-profile, idealistic document. Yet they forgot that such a document would have to be debated and ratified – in many countries by referendum – and that voters, unlike the Euro-policy wonks and parliamentarians who concocted the scheme, had an incentive neither to learn about the EU, nor to behave responsibly. The tiny Eurosceptic minority, excluded from politics for a half century, saw the chance of a generation and took it.

We are still reaping the consequences. In every referendum on an EU treaty, voters – quite rationally from their perspective – refuse to focus on the treaty's content. European elites are often mesmerised by wonderful debates in the elite press. Yet little of this trickles down to the normal citizen.

Look at the recent Irish vote. Nearly a third of “no” voters told pollsters that they opposed the treaty because they were ignorant of its content. The popular slogan ran: “If you don't know, vote no!” Another large swathe of Irish “no” voters were misled.

Consider the extraordinary success of Libertas, the anti-treaty group funded by anti-tax millionaire Declan Ganley – a militant opponent of the Common Agricultural Policy who posed as a friend to Irish farmers long enough to secure half their votes for his campaign. Libertas and like-minded groups specialise in spreading untruths by internet faster than they can be refuted: the EU would be able to imprison three-year-olds for educational purposes, reinstate the death penalty, legalise abortion, conscript the Irish into a European army, impose taxes by majority vote, force in floods of immigrants, undermine workers' rights. Libertas is now multinationalising its enterprise.



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Perhaps worst of all, the result of apathy and confusion is to turn the debate over to extremists. The only people who really care about Europe are ideologues, whether of a Euro-enthusiast or Eurosceptical variety. Every politician is, in the end, dependent on them. The result is, in most countries, a debate dominated by believers in a centralised “ever closer union” on the one hand, and opponents of such a conception on the other. What falls by the wayside is the pragmatic middle, favoured by most Europeans.

In the wake of the Irish, French and Dutch votes, commentators and politicians have lined up to repeat that “the people have spoken.” Yet such ignorant, ideological demagoguery is in fact a debased mode of democratic deliberation few Europeans would consider desirable in their domestic politics, where referenda are rarely held and are sometimes unconstitutional. It is time for Europe to return to politics as usual.

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