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UK Citizens Lack Simple, Objective Knowledge of the European Union

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Summary

Since 2002 the Eurobarometer surveys of public opinion in the EU provide data of 'objective knowledge of the European Union' through a series of true or false responses to factual statements about the EU. These questions are generally very simple, for example, how many EU member states are there? Taken together these surveys provide us with over 2 million data points on objective knowledge of the European Union.

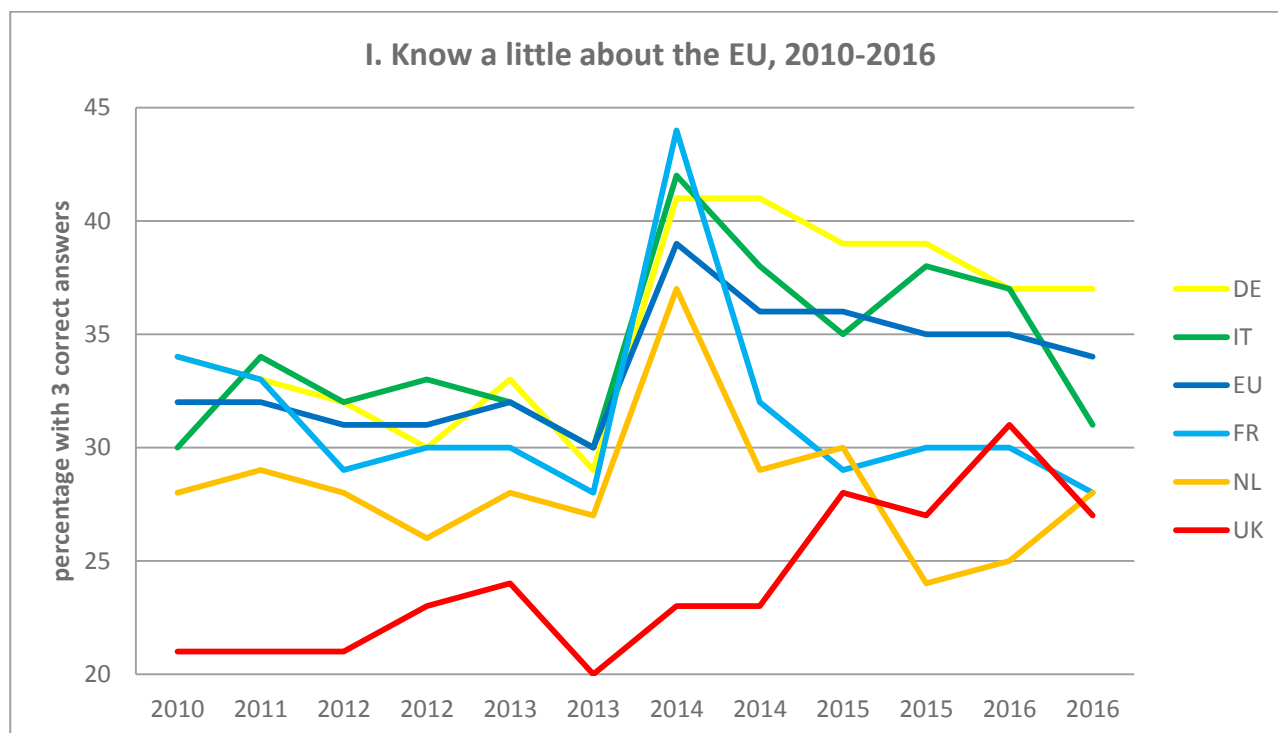
This data demonstrates that amongst older, larger member states surveyed UK citizens are the least knowledgeable, most incorrect, and most unable to answer questions on the EU. When asked three very simple questions about the EU during 2010-2016, 24% of UK respondents could answer three questions correctly, 17% could not answer any question correctly, and 45% answered at least one question 'don't know'. When asked simple questions about the EU during 2005-2010, 13% of UK respondents could answer three questions correctly, 30% could not answer any question correctly, and 60% answered at least one question 'don't know'. When asked the simplest question of how many EU member states are there? over the 14 year period 2002-2016, 46% of UK respondents could answer this question correctly.

Taking this evidence together, it is clear that in absolute terms UK respondents have very little objective knowledge of the EU. In relative terms compared to the EU average, UK respondents were 54-42% less likely to answer three questions correctly, they were 58-70% more likely to not answer any question correctly, and they were 30-33% more likely to answer at least one question 'don't know'.

The data leads to a further observation on UK objective knowledge of the EU. When asked a series of incorrect questions: 'The President of the European Council is directly elected by European citizens' (EBS 214); 'A direct European tax will be created' (EBS 214); 'National citizenship will disappear' (EBS 214); and 'Most of the European budget is spent on administrative and personnel costs' (EB65) UK respondents were far more likely to answer incorrectly that these were true. This is likely the result of disinformation in UK politics and media.

The data suggests that not only are UK respondents unable to answer simple questions about the EU, but that they are relatively more likely to answer incorrectly rather than admit they did not know, reflecting disinformation about the EU in the UK. This lack of simple, objective knowledge of the EU means there cannot and should not be a referendum on UK membership of the EU without significant long-term education, civic knowledge, and public information campaigns.

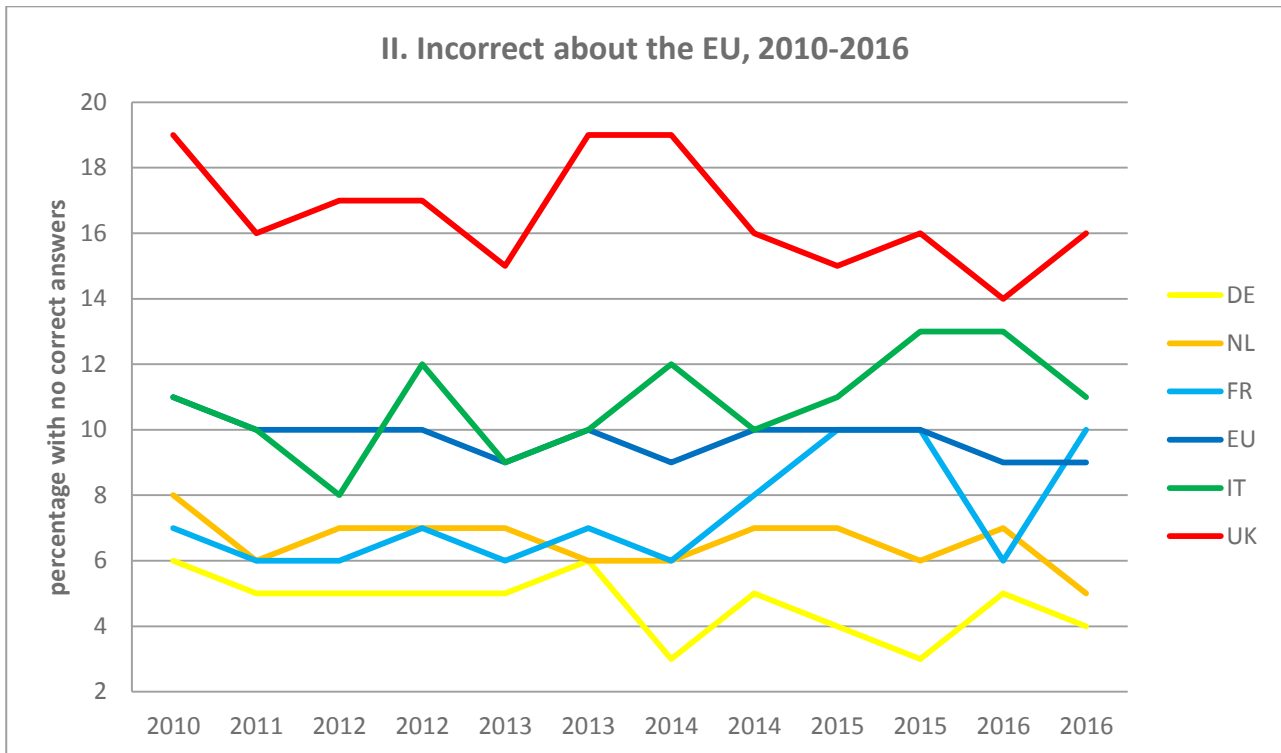
I. Three very simple questions about the EU, 2010-2016



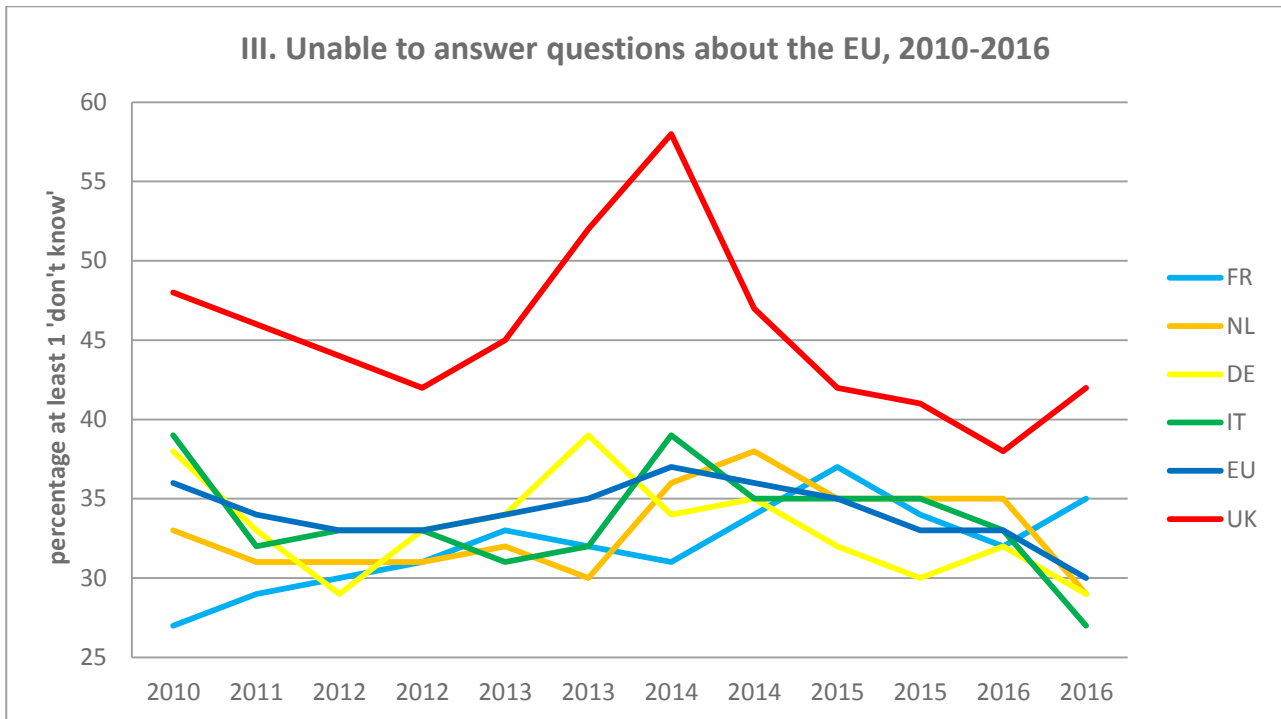
The Eurobarometer (EB) public opinion polls have asked three very simple true/false questions about the 'objective knowledge of the EU' since 2010: (1) The EU currently consists of 28 Member States? (2) The members of the European Parliament are directly elected by the citizens of each Member State? (3) Switzerland is a Member State of the EU?

These questions are very basic, the functional equivalent of asking UK citizens true/false questions such as: (1) The UK currently consists of 4 Home Countries? (2) The members of the House of Commons are directly elected by citizens of each Home Country? (3) The Republic of Ireland is a Home Country of the UK?

The 12 EB data polls, 2010-2016 show in chart I that the UK has the lowest average level of objective knowledge of the EU amongst older, larger member states. 24% of those surveyed in the UK can answer these three very simple questions correctly, compared to 34% for the EU 28 as a whole – a significant difference (42%) of the EU over the UK on average. The data also suggests that, unlike the rest of the EU, the 5-yearly European Parliament elections in 2014 had no effect on objective knowledge of the EU in the UK.



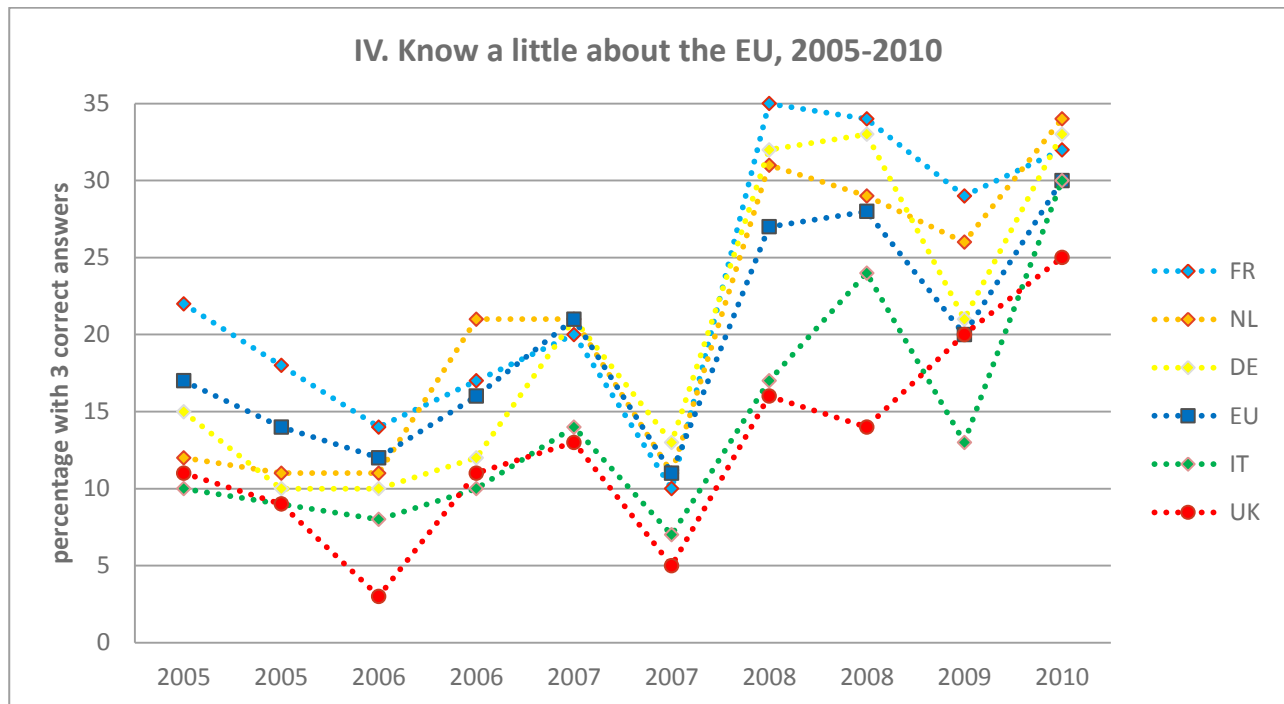
The 12 EB data polls show in chart II that the UK has highest number of incorrect answers on objective knowledge of the EU. 17% of those surveyed in the UK cannot answer any of the three very simple questions correctly, compared to 10% for the EU 28 as a whole – a large difference (70%) of the UK over the EU on average. The data suggests that not only are UK respondents the least knowledgeable in the EU, but that UK citizens are the most disinformed about the EU. As the probability of randomly guessing three incorrect answers is 12.5%, the UK average of 17% with no correct answers is the result of disinformation in UK politics and media.



The 12 EB data polls show in chart III that the UK has the highest number of ‘don’t know’ responses on objective knowledge about the EU. 45% of those surveyed in the UK answered ‘don’t know’ to at least one of three simple questions, compared to 34% for the EU 28 as a whole – a significant difference (33%) on average. The data suggests that not only are UK respondents the least knowledgeable and most disinformed about the EU, but that UK citizens are also the most unable to answer simple questions about the EU.

Taken together, charts I, II, and III suggest that amongst UK respondents, 24% can answer three questions correctly, 17% cannot answer any question correctly, and 45% answered at least one question ‘don’t know’.

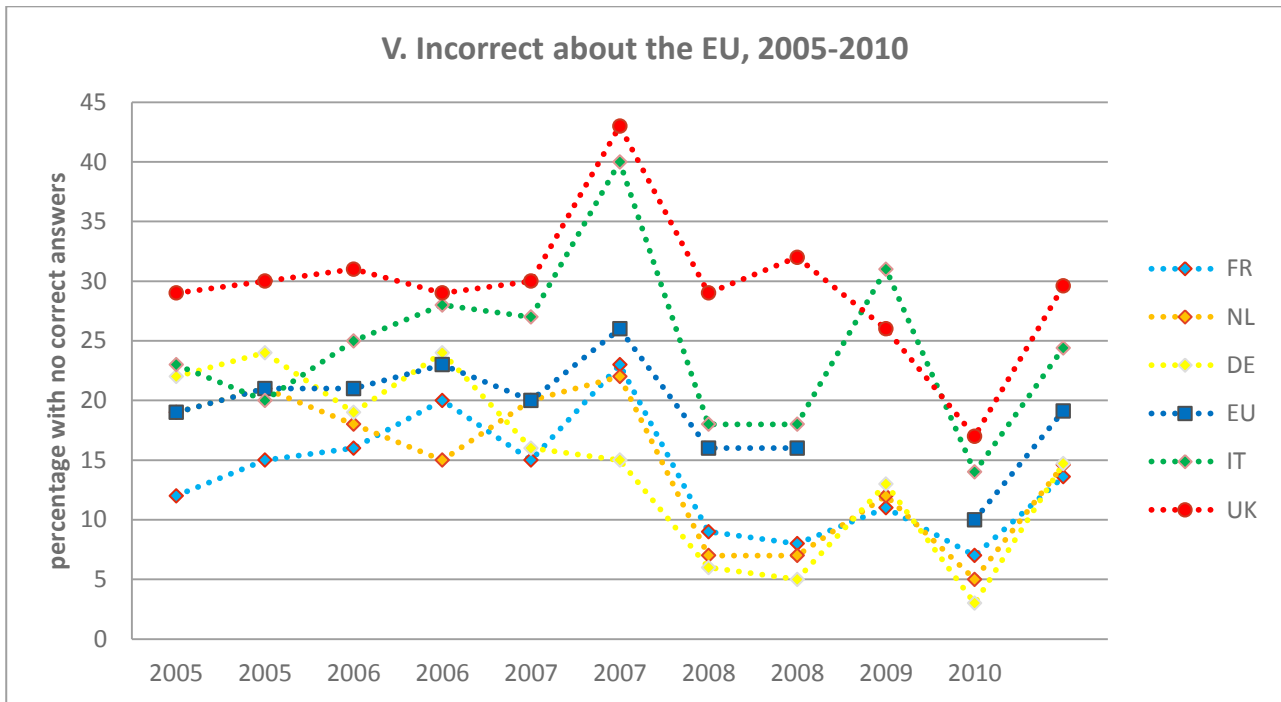
II. Four simple questions about the EU, 2005-2010



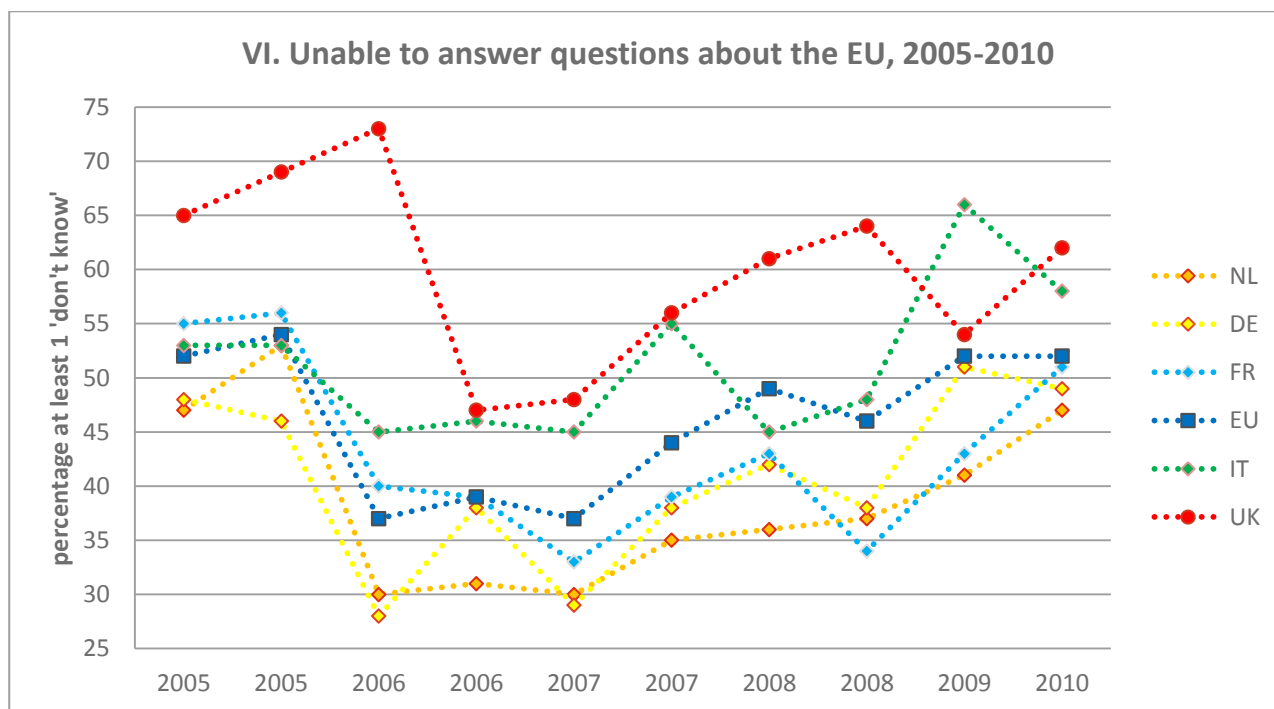
Between 2005-2010 the Eurobarometer public opinion polls asked three or four simple true/false questions about the 'objective knowledge of the EU with varying content, including: (1) The EU currently consists of [15/25/27] Member States? (2) The members of the European Parliament are directly elected by the citizens of each Member State? (3) Every six months, a different Member State becomes the President of the Council of the European Union? (4) The euro area currently consists of 12 Member States? (5) Switzerland is a Member State of the EU?

The 10 EB data polls show in chart IV that the UK had the lowest average level of objective knowledge of the EU amongst older, larger member states between 2005-2010. 13% of those surveyed in the UK could answer three simple questions correctly, compared to 20% for the EU as a whole during this period – a large difference (54%) of the EU over the UK on average.

The lines are dashed because the questions were of varying number and content, making comparison over time difficult. For example, four questions were asked in Autumn 2005 and during 2008-2010, while 3 questions were asked from 2006-2007. In the Autumn 2007 the question of whether the euro area consisted of 12 member states was introduced soon after Slovenia had adopted the euro, increasing the Eurozone to 13 members. Furthermore, it is noticeable that the UK's lowest correct answers (3%) were in Spring 2006, due to the question 'Most of the European budget is spent on administrative and personnel costs' which only 28% of UK respondents answered correctly ('false') while 47% of UK respondents answered incorrectly ('true').



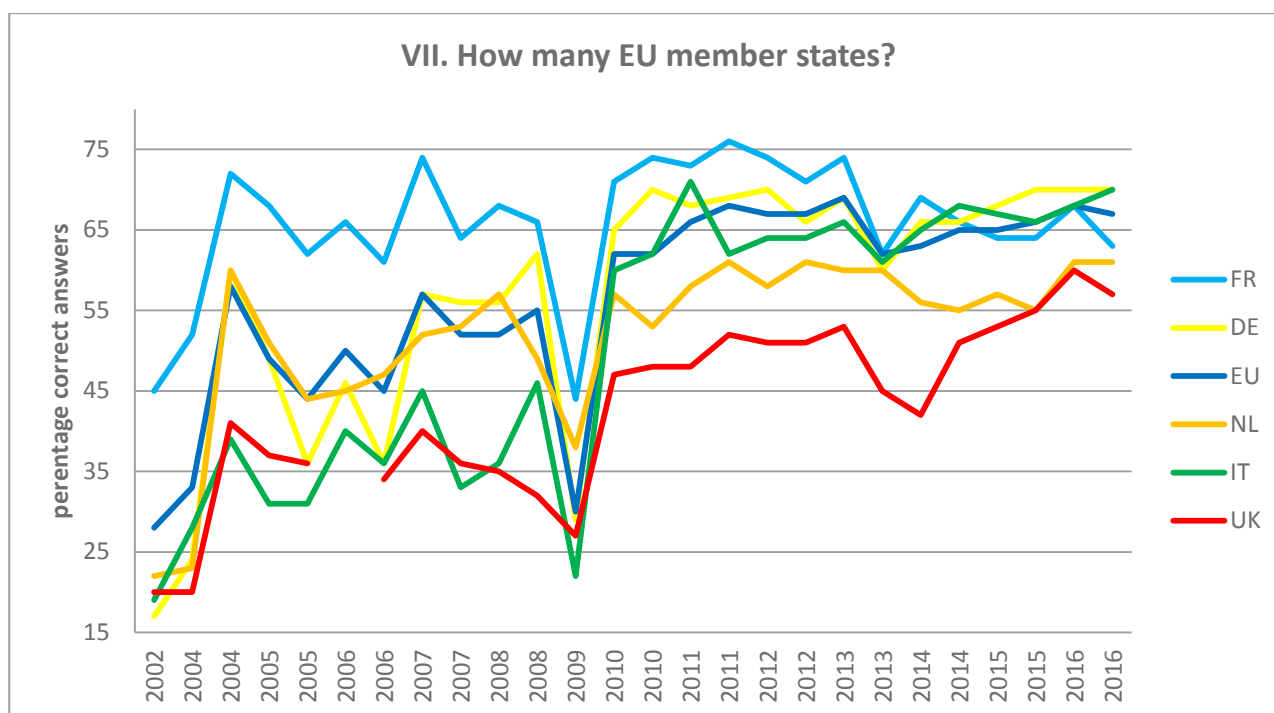
The 10 EB data polls show in chart V that the UK has the highest number of incorrect answers on objective knowledge of the EU amongst older, larger member states between 2005-2010. 30% of those surveyed in the UK could not answer any of the questions correctly, compared to 19% for the EU as a whole – a large difference (58%) of the UK over the EU on average. An interesting contrast is found with a question asked only in 2009: ‘The Irish voted “yes” to the second referendum on the Lisbon Treaty held on October 2nd, 2009’. Only 29% of Italian respondents answered correctly (‘true’), while 54% of UK respondents answered correctly. However, similar to the 2010-2016 data, this evidence reinforces that observation that not only are UK respondents the least knowledgeable in the EU, but that UK citizens are the most disinformed about the EU.



The 10 EB data polls show in chart VI. that the UK has the highest number of 'don't know' responses on objective knowledge about the EU between 2005-2010. 60% of those surveyed in the UK answered 'don't know' to at least one of three or four questions, compared to 46% for the EU as a whole – a significant difference (30%) of the UK over the EU on average.

Taken together, charts IV, V, and VI suggest that amongst UK respondents, 13% can answer three questions correctly, 30% cannot answer any question correctly, and 60% answered at least one question 'don't know'. Similar to the period 2010-2016, UK respondents were the most unable to answer simple questions about the EU.

III. How many EU member states are there? 2005-2016

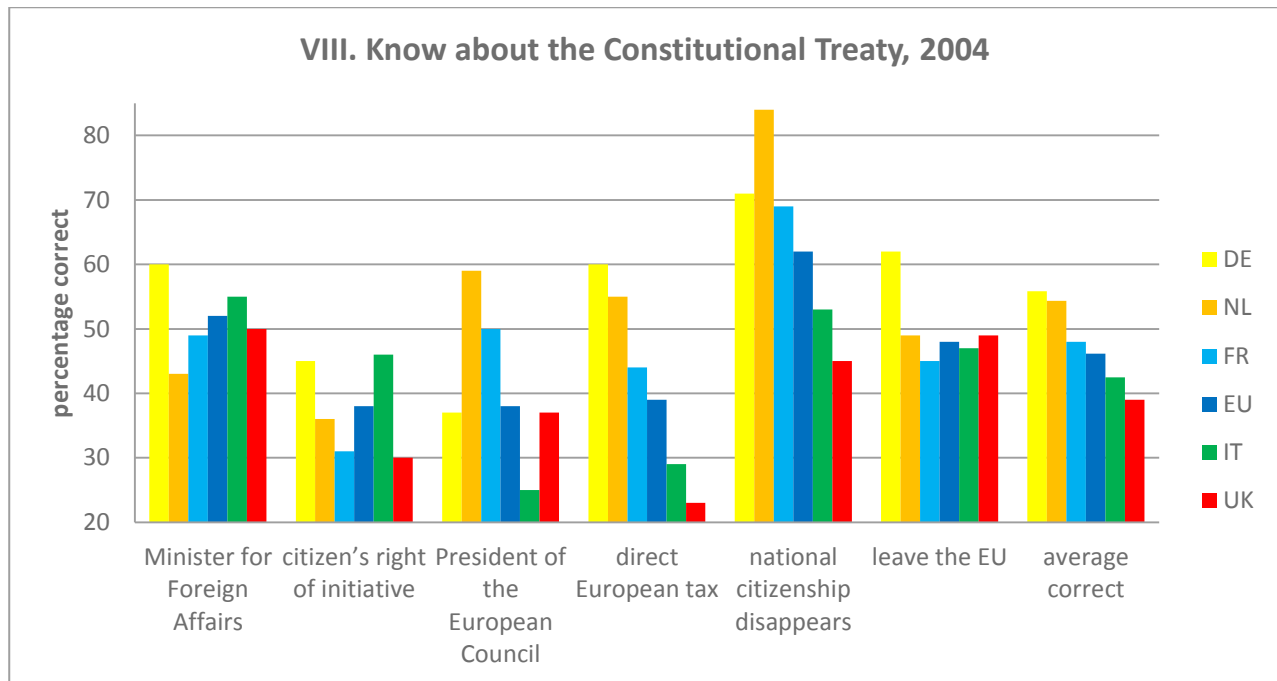


Because of the different number and content of questions asked in Eurobarometer, it is not possible to compare the periods 2005-2010 and 2010-2016 directly. However, there is one question that has been asked in a similar way over the whole period: 'The EU currently consists of [12/15/25/27/28] Member States' - true or false? As chart VII 'How many member states?' illustrates above, amongst older, larger member states UK respondents have remained the least able to answer such a very simple question correctly during the period 2002-2016. Over the 14 year period, 46% of UK respondents could answer this question correctly, while 57% of EU respondents could answer correctly. On average, EU respondents were 24% more likely to answer this question correctly over UK respondents.

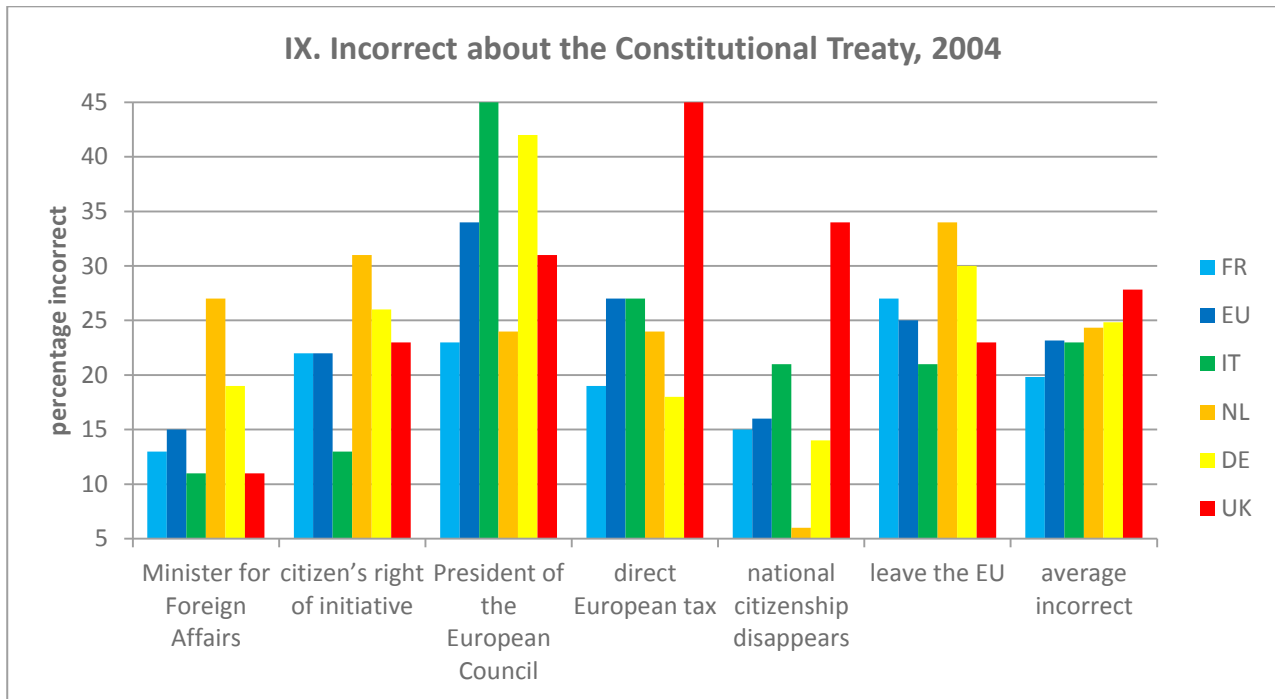
The one remarkable survey was in Autumn 2009 where instead of asking whether there were 15 member states (incorrect since the 2004 enlargement), the survey asked if there were 25 member states. Most respondents appeared to have assumed that the 2000's enlargement(s) had added 10 new member states and thus 25 would be 'true', when in fact it was 27. In Spring 2010 and onwards the survey asked if there were 27 member states, which most respondents said was correct, hence the improvement in correct answers since 2010.

IV. Six questions about the Constitutional Treaty, 2004

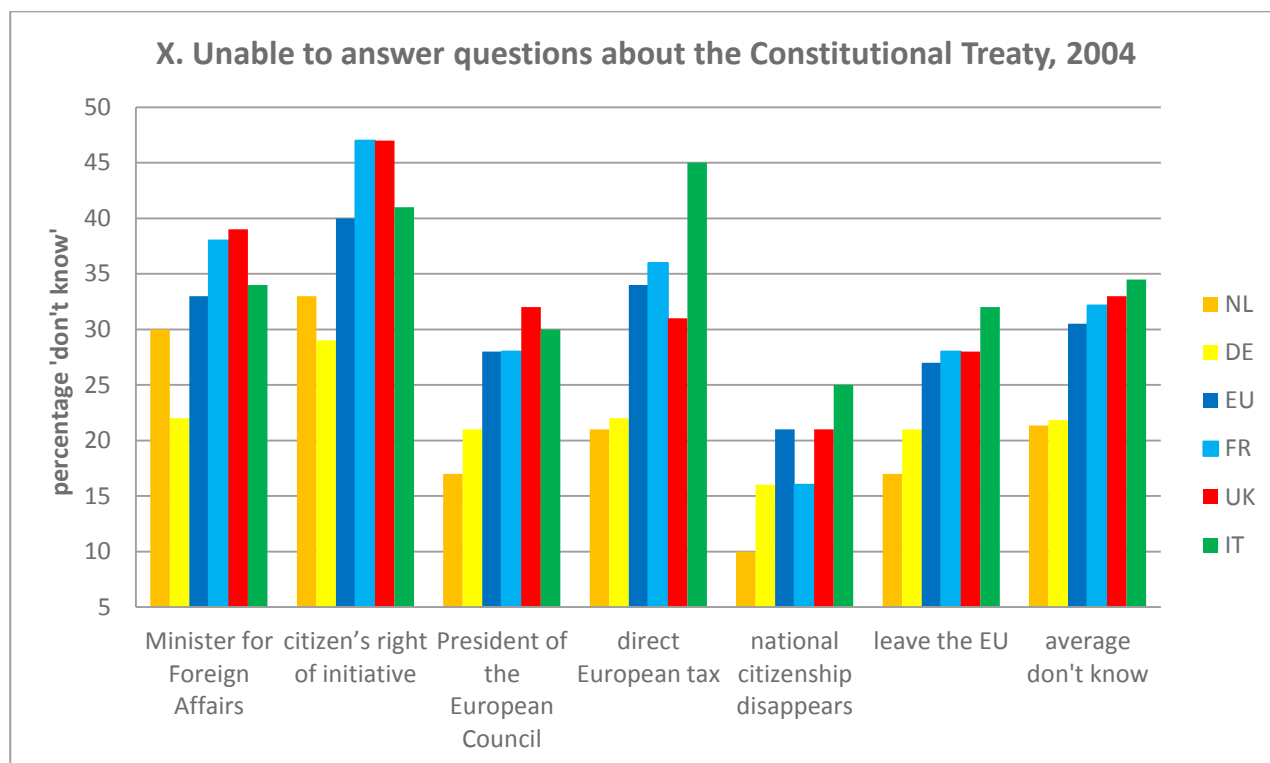
The 2005 Special Eurobarometer asked six true/false questions about the future Constitutional Treaty: (1) The position of a Foreign Affairs Minister of the European Union will be created? (2) At least one million citizens of the European Union can request the adoption of a European law? (3) The President of the European Council is directly elected by European citizens? (4) A direct European tax will be created? (5) National citizenship will disappear? (6) A member state can leave the European Union if it wishes to do so?



The 2005 Special Eurobarometer data poll shows in chart VIII that the UK had the lowest average level of objective knowledge of the Constitutional Treaty of all the older, larger member states. Out of those surveyed in the UK, on average 39% could answer the six questions correctly, compared to 46% for the EU 25 as a whole – a relative difference of 18% on average. The data also suggests that UK respondents were significantly less likely to answer the ‘false’ questions (President of the European Council; direct European tax; and national citizenship disappears) correctly – UK respondents averaged 35% correct, compared to 46% for the EU 25 as a whole – a significant relative difference of 31%.



The 2005 Special Eurobarometer data poll shows in chart IX that the UK had the highest percentage of incorrect answers on objective knowledge of the Constitutional Treaty of all the older, larger member states. Out of those surveyed in the UK, on average 28% had incorrect answers to the six questions, compared to 23% for the EU 25 as a whole – a relative difference of 22% on average. The data also suggests that UK respondents were significantly more likely to answer the ‘false’ questions (President of the European Council; direct European tax; and national citizenship disappears) incorrectly – UK respondents averaged 37% incorrect, compared to 27% for the EU 25 as a whole – a significant relative difference of 37%.



The 2005 Special Eurobarometer data poll shows in chart X that the UK had the second highest percentage of 'don't know' responses on objective knowledge of the Constitutional Treaty of all the older, larger member states. Out of those surveyed in the UK, on average 33% answered 'don't know' to the six questions, compared to 30% for the EU 25 as a whole – a relative difference of 10% on average.

Resources

[Eurobarometer Public Opinion, European Commission](http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/General/index) - <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/General/index>

[Ian Manners, Where does the Brexit debate stand in the United Kingdom right now? Presentation to the European Affairs Committee of the Danish Parliament, 14th October 2016](http://static-curis.ku.dk/portal/files/169284855/Ian_Manners_Where_does_the_Brexit_debate_stand_in_the_United_Kingdom_7_November_2016.pdf) - http://static-curis.ku.dk/portal/files/169284855/Ian_Manners_Where_does_the_Brexit_debate_stand_in_the_United_Kingdom_7_November_2016.pdf

[Ian Manners, UK Citizens Lack Simple, Objective Knowledge of the European Union, 4th September 2017](http://politicalscience.ku.dk/staff/Academic_staff/?pure=en%2Fpublications%2Fuk-citizens-lack-simple-objective-knowledge-of-the-european-union(8e13d5d1-2314-405c-ac96-461ddb429642).html) - [http://politicalscience.ku.dk/staff/Academic_staff/?pure=en%2Fpublications%2Fuk-citizens-lack-simple-objective-knowledge-of-the-european-union\(8e13d5d1-2314-405c-ac96-461ddb429642\).html](http://politicalscience.ku.dk/staff/Academic_staff/?pure=en%2Fpublications%2Fuk-citizens-lack-simple-objective-knowledge-of-the-european-union(8e13d5d1-2314-405c-ac96-461ddb429642).html)