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The results of a public opinion poll reveal that Germans feel ill-informed about the European Union – and in fact know relatively little about EU institutions, decision-making processes, and the EU constitutional treaty. Whereas Germans exhibit some “skepticism and reservations” toward the EU, their attitude toward “Europe” in general is largely positive, and the majority of them are proud to be European. The poll results show that approval of European integration rises with a person’s level of education.

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### **Europe Remains a Project of the Elites**

*The higher the level of education, the greater the approval of the EU; the Germans are still Europe-friendly, however.*

Germans feel ill-informed about the European Union and display large gaps in their knowledge of Europe. But still, the majority of German citizens are committed to Europe – even when it comes to the more controversial issues of the past years, such as Eastern enlargement and the EU constitution. This emerged from a representative public opinion poll whose results will be presented this Wednesday by the Association of German Banks (BdB) on the occasion of its “Schönhauser Talks” series in Berlin.

The poll revealed great pessimism among Germans when it comes to Europe’s economic future. Seventy-one percent of those polled do not think that the EU can become the strongest economic region within the next ten to fifteen years. The ambivalent position of German citizens toward the EU is revealed, for example, by the survey’s findings on attitudes toward a European constitution. A majority of 56 percent thinks there should be a joint constitution of this sort, and only 7 percent are opposed; the rest said they are indifferent. Forty percent, however, said they had never heard of the concrete draft of the EU constitutional treaty, which has been on hold since it was rejected in referendums in France and the Netherlands. Fifty-three percent said that while they had heard of it, they know “nothing” or “little” about it. Only seven percent appeared to be well-informed about the treaty.

Despite a widespread lack of knowledge regarding the content of the treaty, general opinions about it were positive. Of those polled who had heard of the European constitution, fifty percent said they would have supported it in a referendum had they been given the opportunity. Fourteen percent would have rejected it. A majority of German citizens (59 percent) bemoaned

their insufficient knowledge of the EU. The actual gaps in knowledge confirmed their assessment. When asked about the number of member states, only 12 percent responded correctly; 67 percent responded incorrectly; and 21 percent said they didn't know the answer. In addition, 85 percent didn't know that Germany will hold the EU Council Presidency in the first half of 2007. The respondents knew even less about decision-making structures in "Europe." When asked who in the EU has the greatest decision-making power, fifty-one percent said they didn't know. Only eight percent named what is arguably the most important decision-making body, the Council of Ministers, which is comprised of the governments of all the member states. Twenty-five percent mentioned the European Parliament, which does not have decision-making authority in many matters, and twelve percent named the European Commission, which is authorized to make direct decisions only in very few areas.

Manfred Weber, CEO of the Association of German Banks, believes that the knowledge gap is one of the essential causes of the "skepticism and reservations" that Germans have toward the EU. "This lack of knowledge leads to vague ideas and equally vague fears," Weber told this newspaper. Germans' opinions of "Europe" in general were predominantly positive, however. Roughly 80 percent expressed pride in being European – almost as many were proud of being German. German citizens also appreciated the economic value of the Single Market and its contribution to prosperity in Germany. They were more cautious, however, regarding concrete EU institutions. Positive and negative attitudes toward "the EU" were almost always on balance, for instance, when questions focused on the advantages and disadvantages of Germany's EU membership and the merits of the introduction of the Euro.

The public opinion poll confirms the thesis that European integration is a "project of the elites," or at least that there is greater interest and approval in population groups with a high level of education. Only 36 percent of respondents with only a high school diploma believed in a "common European culture," whereas 64 percent of college graduates believed in it. The overall opinion of the EU also rose with the education level of the interviewees. The notion that EU membership is disadvantageous for Germany overall was supported by 40 percent of those with only a high school diploma, whereas only 17 percent of college graduates shared this opinion. There was a similar discrepancy in perceptions of the Euro's ability to advance integration; fifty-seven percent of college graduates thought that the introduction of the Euro strengthened the feeling of a common bond in Europe. Only 29 percent of high school graduates agreed.

Source: "Europa bleibt ein Projekt der Eliten" ["Europe Remains a Project of the Elites"], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 22, 2006.

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