Charlemagne

How the EU is trying to find out what on Earth Europeans want

Long chats with ordinary voters yield interesting results
EUROPE DAY, an occasion known only to employees of the European Union, who get the day off, was spoiled this year by an ill wind from the west. Donald Trump’s decision on May 8th, a day before the festivities, to withdraw America from the nuclear deal with Iran cast a shadow over the EU’s proudest foreign-policy achievement and further widened the transatlantic gulf (see article [https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21742136-donald-trumps-decision-pull-out-nuclear-deal-iran-ripping] ). Rather than belting out Beethoven and settling down to reread the Schuman Declaration, European politicians were forced to spend the day mulling euro-denominated credit lines and the dangers of secondary sanctions.

But there was a small glint of sunshine for Eurocrats amid the gathering clouds. Europe Day was also the occasion for a curious experiment, launched with little fanfare in the form of an online questionnaire for European citizens. This was the fruit of a “Citizens’ Panel” conducted the previous weekend. Nearly 100 ordinary Europeans, selected for characteristics that roughly matched the demographic profile of the EU, had assembled in Brussels to thrash out a list of priorities for EU decision-makers. Finnish social workers rubbed shoulders with Greek tourist agents, Romanian builders and Maltese housewives.

Charlemagne attended part of the exercise, and encountered a lively and engaged set of discussions. The participants were told that no topic was off-limits, and some took that instruction to heart: one Slovene urged
the EU to resolve the confusion caused by the existence of two rival European basketball federations. But on the whole the themes that emerged—migration, security, climate change—would not have been out of place at an EU summit. It was a scrappy and rushed affair, but on its own terms probably counted as a moderate success. Most participants, at least, left Brussels declaring that they had had a jolly good time.

**We have built Europe. Now we must build Europeans**

Yet some also wondered, aloud, what would happen next. The answer is vintage Brussels. The questionnaire published this week will form a basis for Europe-wide “citizens’ consultations” designed in turn to inform meetings of EU leaders later this year and next. Meanwhile, each government will hold its own form of consultation on European matters. Nathalie Loiseau, Emmanuel Macron’s Europe minister, says France’s debates have been lively affairs. Yet none of these worthy endeavours will yield specific policy results, which makes it hard to see how they will generate real enthusiasm. “People don’t see the meaning if there’s no bite,” says Claudia Chwalisz, a Paris-based analyst.

Contemporary attempts to foster a common European spirit do indeed often seem to flounder. Luuk Van Middelaar, a Dutch author, charts an example in “The Passage to Europe”, his history of European integration. In the wake of a worryingly low turnout in the 1984 European elections, the leaders of what was then the European Economic Community agreed that their faltering club needed a flag to rally round.
But when it was time to sign off on the plan, some leaders feared it might look like a Brussels sovereignty grab. And so a compromise emerged: the governments agreed to call the 12 stars on a blue background that now flutter from government buildings across Europe not a flag but a logo. This ambivalence is often to be seen in the EU. The club fears a loss of legitimacy, and so tries to assemble it from the top down. But resistance or hesitation forces an awkward compromise.

Why is this? Partly because the much-maligned distance between the EU and its voters is a feature, not a bug. National governments have by and large preserved their rights to legislate on matters that most exercise citizens, such as the appropriate level of taxation or the management of public services. Wheezes like direct elections to the European Parliament, or the Spitzenkandidaten system for choosing the president of the European Commission by respecting the result of the European Parliament’s election, are presented as injections of democratic adrenalin into Europe’s flabby body politic. But they have signally failed to budge voters from their national silos. Participation in European elections has steadily fallen since their introduction in 1979, even as the parliament has accumulated powers.

That has only made the EU more vulnerable to the barbs of sceptics. National governments are partly to blame; many take credit for successes and are happy to condemn Brussels when things go wrong. But how can discussions on the EU accommodate citizens who distrust the whole enterprise? Mr Macron thinks honest debate will disarm many; he blames pro-Europeans for yielding ground to their opponents. When the EU’s 27 governments signed off on Mr Macron’s plan to create
a system of citizens’ consultations in April, they urged special attention to be paid to the EU’s critics. They also insisted that the consultations retain a national character.

Such pressures make it easy to assume that Europolis will remain for ever out of reach. But common threats and the risks of leaving projects half-built force countries and voters together, too. In “Democracy When The People Are Thinking”, a forthcoming book, James Fishkin, a political scientist at Stanford, argues that Europeans can overcome national and linguistic divides to conduct a common conversation under the right conditions. Plenty of the participants in Brussels noted with delight the curiosity of encountering people from strange countries who shared their values and concerns.

Their leaders should take note, for this spirit will prove useful. The euro zone needs better systems for pooling risk, and more resilience to external shocks. The EU needs a stronger asylum system to weather the next refugee crisis. But mistrust between governments is hampering agreement. Both issues may come to a head at a summit in June. The EU will always rely on dealmaking to overcome its divisions, but a sense of common purpose can be useful. Not Europolis, then, but a step or two towards it.

*This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline “What do Europeans want?”*