

**The Europeans of tomorrow.  
Researching European identity among young Europeans.**

Work in progress

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## **Abstract**

After the rejection of the European Constitution in 2005, and more recently the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by the Irish, questions were raised about if and how European citizens feel connected to the European Union. What does it actually mean to feel European? Not much empirical study has yet been undertaken, especially in political science research, on this topic. This is due to the difficulty of dealing with identity questions. Not only are identities amorphous, contextually influenced and sometimes fluid, it is hard to get a full understanding of this concept by using just one methodological approach. This paper's analysis is based on the writings of M. Bruter (2005) who makes a conceptual distinction between a civic and a cultural European political identity, thus overcoming the often acclaimed theoretical deadlock that exists in literature on political identity. Theoretically, this paper thus elaborates on this framework as proposed by Bruter. Empirically, the paper focuses on the potential European political identity among young people, presenting a research framework that combines both a quantitative and a qualitative approach. It draws upon an in-depth case-study of a specific target group, namely young Europeans between the age of 17 and 24, in the European Union. As this group has grown up with the EU as an evident entity it could be expected that some form of European identity has arisen. However, the recent rejection of the Lisbon Treaty whereby young people predominantly voted no and the first results of our empirical research seem to indicate otherwise. The study highlights young people's perception of the EU on the one hand, and scrutinizes if and how they feel connected to the EU on the other.

Key words: European identity, civic, cultural, young people

## **Introduction**

How young people feel about the European Union (EU) and whether or not they think the EU is a good thing has become a bigger focus point for the EU over the last fifteen years. Especially the results of the referenda on the Constitutional Treaty and the Reform Treaty in the Netherlands, France and Ireland, where an alarming percentage of young voters have voted no, caused unrest in Brussels (Flash Eurobarometer 2005; 2008). The referenda results have given way to fierce debates in political and academic circles on whether or not the EU still has enough legitimacy and whether or not citizens and especially young people have turned their back on the EU. Talking about legitimacy and the EU has come to the forefront, in academic literature and elsewhere, ever since the rejection of the Maastricht Treaty by the Danes, due to the more political course the EU decided to take (Niedermayer 1995; Follesdal 2004; Liebert 2001).

The EU has since then been very eager to get its citizens back on board. In its attempt to consolidate the trust and support for its institutions, the EU gives special attention to its younger citizens and tries to awaken a sense of citizenship and identity in these young people. This paper explores both concepts and looks at the role of civic education in stimulating both. A methodological framework to research European identity is also presented.

## **Young people and the EU**

Young people (age 18-24) have voted predominantly no in the Dutch referendum (74%) on the Constitutional Treaty and in the Irish referendum (65%) on the Lisbon Treaty (Flash Eurobarometer 2005: 11; Flash Eurobarometer, 2008: 6). This percentage is a lot higher than those of other age groups. These numbers can be interpreted to indicate a disconnection with the EU as a political project or it can be seen as a signal of disagreement with the direction the EU is heading in. Both interpretations are two completely different things. The first one implies a lack of involvement and identity, the second one implies just the contrary. Rejections of treaties are often seen as a complete rejection of the EU and are claimed to be another proof of the EU's incapability of connecting with its citizens. This reaction stems from the idea that a democracy needs supportive citizens and that criticism and dissatisfaction create instability (Almond & Verba in Geissel 2008). This is, however, not necessarily true. Displaying a critical attitude can be interpreted as a sign of involvement and is as such good for democracy. Whether the no of the young Dutch and Irish can be interpreted as an outcry of criticism remains to be seen, however.

Eurobarometer results namely show that young people in the European Union (age 15-24) do not significantly feel more European than older generations (Eurobarometer 2005). About two thirds of young Europeans feel attached to Europe and about 56 per cent of these youngsters claim they feel connected to their own country and to Europe. These percentages are only slightly higher than what the rest of the EU

population states<sup>1</sup>. Attachment, however, is not the same as identity. At best it is a proxy for an affective component of identity (Bruter 2008). Although these percentages do not fully reflect feelings of identity, it does suggest that identification with the EU is not significantly higher than for older generations.

Higher percentages might have been expected, since this younger generation has grown up with the EU as an evident entity. One might have expected that if a European identity would arise, it would be among this younger generation.

Secondly, Eurobarometer results also show that only one third of young Europeans (age 18-24) participated in the European parliamentary elections of 2004. This is significantly below the 45.6 per cent average (Flash Eurobarometer 2004). This lack of participation signals feelings of apathy and lack of interest in politics, which is also confirmed by Eurobarometer results (Eurobarometer 2005:7). For the 2009 European elections, prospects are not much brighter. An upcoming Eurobarometer survey predicts a record low turnout, with a 66 per cent abstention rate (Special Eurobarometer 2009). The same survey also shows that 69 per cent of the young Europeans (15-24) do not know when the elections are. This age group also has the highest percentage of people who are definitely not going to vote (25%)<sup>2</sup>. The main reasons not to vote, indicated by people in general, are: not knowing enough about the role of the European Parliament (64%), thinking their vote will not make a difference (62%) and not feeling informed enough to vote (59%) (Special Eurobarometer 2009). Lack of information and feeling powerless are thus the two main reasons for people not to cast a vote.

As a result the EU has, over the last couple of years, done more effort to connect with its youngest citizens to raise interest and to stimulate participation. Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, for instance, mentions a focus in its communication strategy on young people and the importance of getting them involved (Commission of the European Communities 2006: 7). Initiatives, such as Spring Days and the European Youth Forum, try to get young people interested in European policies. A framework for cooperation in youth policies, based on an earlier White Paper, was developed in 2002 by the Council of the European Union (Commission of the European Communities 2001). This framework focuses on young people's active citizenship, social and occupational integration and on including a youth dimension in other policies (Commission of the European Communities n.d.). More recently, in 2006, a follow-up programme called the Youth in Action programme was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council for the period 2007-2013. This programme for young people, aged 15-28, has a budget of 887 million euros for these seven years and it focuses on stimulating a sense of active citizenship, solidarity and tolerance among young Europeans and wants to get them involved in shaping the EU's future (Commission of the European Communities n.d.). A very recent event to raise interest in European politics among young Europeans, is the 'Can you hear me Europe'

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<sup>1</sup> 66 per cent of EU population feels connected to the EU; 54 per cent of EU population feels attached to both their country and the EU.

<sup>2</sup> Although one has to take into account that part of this group has not yet reached an age where they are eligible to cast a vote.

initiative. This initiative, in cooperation with MTV, wants to give young people a forum to express their ideas on Europe and to make their voices heard. MTV has also aired three TV-spots specifically aimed at getting young people to vote (EU observer n.d.)<sup>3</sup>.

All these recent initiatives indicate that young people have become a more important target group for the EU. According to Tsafos, one of the main challenges for the EU is to make its youth feel European and to try to connect with a generation that has grown up with the EU and, presumably, takes this Union for granted (Tsafos 2006: 181). Most young Europeans do not reject the idea of the EU, in fact 59 percent of the 15-24 year olds think that their country's membership to the EU is a good thing, which is the highest percentage of all age groups (Eurobarometer 2008: 14). This does not result, however, as stated earlier, in a much stronger sense of belonging to the EU than older generations. One potential explanation may be that young people take a lot of benefits from the EU for granted without attaching any extra loyalty to it. As David Michael Green (2007: 69) puts it:

"Young Europeans, in sum, are probably considerably more comfortable than their parents and grandparents with Europe as a social and political space in which to exist, but they have not been drawn to identify with Europe more than previous generations (and may in fact do so less than their elders)".

Support or mere tolerance of the EU may, however, not be enough to sustain the development of the EU. It is an actual political identity that is the glue that holds a community together and ensures that a political entity can continue to exist even in times when it faces big challenges (war, financial crisis, unemployment, etc.).

Over the last couple of years several researchers have looked at European identity formation among young Europeans. An important point of reference here is the multidisciplinary and multiregional research project entitled: 'Orientations of Young Men and Women to Citizenship and European Identity' (Jamieson 2005). Based on predominantly survey research, young Europeans (18-24) from different regions in different countries (Spain, UK, Slovak Republic, Czech Republic, Germany and Austria) were asked about their 'orientations to European identity, their feelings of being European, and their sense of European citizenship' (Jamieson 2005: V). In addition, research on young people and European identity, done by Du Bois-Reymond (1998:37), suggests that qualitative research and focus groups, in particular, are well suited for the task of unfolding the different dimensions of a European identity. This paper will present a methodological framework that combines both approaches to measure European identity in an encompassing way.

### **European identity**

Identity and more specifically political identities, such as nationality and regional identity, have always fascinated academics, but researching European identity has,

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<sup>3</sup> The abstention rate at the 2004 European elections was the highest for the youngest age group (18-24); 67 per cent did not vote (54.3 per cent average).

however, only fairly recently become a hot topic to research in political sciences. Between 1961 and 1990 only one publication per decade dealt with the issue of European identity in the Social Citation Index, whereas in the nineties there was an increase with 46 publications. Since the beginning of the new millennium, already 77 European identity articles have been published (Boehnke & Fuss, 2008). This initial low salience of European identity debate in academic literature can be explained by three factors. First, identity questions are perhaps the most difficult questions in social sciences to deal with. Identities are contextually influenced, flexible, dynamic, and changeable and operate at a subconscious level for most people. Second, European identity has also been left unattended and largely underdeveloped by the European institutions in the first decades of European integration (Green, 2007) and third, not only is finding an acceptable definition of the concept a difficult task, it also poses a challenge to find a good measurement. Identity and especially European identity can, however, no longer be disregarded by academics due to several events. The Maastricht Treaty confirmed the more political course the EU was taking, with the introduction of a European citizenship and a common currency as its most obvious components. The rejection of several Treaties in different referenda in different countries also showed the end of the permissive consensus attitude (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970) of the European people. European identity and the creation of a sense of belonging to the EU soon became new buzz words not only in academic but also in political circles. The EU now fears it might completely lose its legitimacy if it cannot get its own citizens on board. Of course, a shared identity alone does not guarantee political legitimacy, but it does provide the kind of diffuse support (Easton and Dennis, 1969) that can sustain institutions even when these institutions do not always provide immediate utilitarian payoffs (Herrmann and Brewer, 2004). Substantial legitimacy should always, according to Cerutti, contain a political identity as a core condition (Cerutti 2008). As such political identity becomes a much sought after and highly wanted thing.

### **Defining the indefinable?**

Defining European identity is a risky business. Depending on the definition one can already exclude the potential existence of such a political identity. Indeed, if the point of departure for a definition is a primordialist vision as shared by Smith (1992) and Schlesinger (1993) whereby a shared culture, a common language, a shared set of myths and symbols or a shared pre-modern history are prerequisites for any political identity, than a European variant is not likely to arise any time soon. Primordialists often take national identities as a point of departure to claim that a European identity is an illusion. Social constructivists take the same point of departure but highlight the constructed nature of national identities. They point out that national identities are also fairly recent and that differences in language, religion or ethnicity can hardly be used as a reason to dismiss the notion of European identity, since those obstacles were also present at the time of the creation of national identities (Wintle 1996). Time is also of the essence for many constructivists. States may be born overnight, but identities grow more slowly. This paper shares the vision of social constructivists

such as Thomas Risse (2005), Michael Bruter (2005) and Eley and Suny (1996) who claim that political identities can be constructed and are the result of continuous interactions with people whereby differences in culture, language or ethnicity are no insurmountable obstacles that prevent the existence of a European identity. Political identities are social constructs that can exist side by side.

Recent research has confirmed that people can have multiple identities but that these identities are not always equally present. It is not something people 'have' or 'are' all of the time (Risse 2004; Caporaso and Kim 2009; Huyst 2008). This does not mean, however, that identities are something non-committal and loose, they provide people with a core element that gives meaning and structure to their everyday life (Widdicombe 1998). This dual nature of identities in general and political identities in particular is not a paradox as such, it only makes clear that people may have one core self but many aspects of self-identity (Jamieson 2005). These identities are all shaped by social processes and are the result of our everyday social interactions. Also our sense of continuity, past and future, is part of our present self in memories, habits, stocks of knowledge, feelings, expectations and aspirations. This phenomenological or social constructivist approach allows us to look at political identity as a reflexive feature, whereby a European political identity can be studied by asking questions to Europeans on how they see themselves and how they perceive the EU and also what they expect the EU to be and how they see its future evolution (Cerutti 2008; Bruter 2008).

This paper uses Tajfel's (1981:255) definition of a European identity, namely:

"European identity is that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership".

This definition is also reflected in the three components Risse (2001) ascribes to identities, namely a cognitive, affective, and evaluative component. The cognitive element refers to the knowledge the individual has of his membership of a social group. First, the individual should be aware of his membership and second, s/he should also have a basic understanding of what this membership encompasses and what the social group stands for. A lack of knowledge of what the EU does and what it stands for is often said to be one of the underlying reasons for the seemingly apathetic attitude of many citizens and young people in particular (Kurpas 2004; Eurobarometer 2007). It was, for instance, also the main reason for the Irish to reject the Lisbon Treaty (Flash Eurobarometer 2008). Empirical research from Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) shows the importance of knowledgeable citizens. Well-informed citizens are more likely to be more politically tolerant, they also participate at a higher rate than their counterparts, they are more likely to have stable opinions and those opinions are more likely to be structured along a liberal-conservative

continuum. They are also more likely to recognize their interests, bring their positions in line with their party identification and vote accordingly. People who are more knowledgeable find it also easier to gather and incorporate extra information given to them. Political ignorance also has an effect on policy attitudes and choice of vote (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Other research also shows that uninformed citizens would vote differently if they were fully informed (Bartels 1996).

The affective component refers to the emotional attachment Europeans might feel to the EU and how emotionally significant this is for them. The evaluative component is expressed in the definition by the value people attach to the EU and how they evaluate the EU in general and what it does for them. The three components and their relationship will be tested based on survey questions. One hypothesis might be that people who are well informed about the EU, also display a higher level of emotional involvement with the EU.

This basic definition of European identity is complemented in this paper with Bruter's definition who states that a European political identity can contain two components, namely a civic and a cultural component (Bruter 2004; 2005; 2008). This division allows a better insight in what forms the basis of European identity: civic or cultural references or both? The cultural component hereby refers to: "a citizen's sense of belonging to a human community, in casu the EU, with which s/he believes s/he shares a certain common culture, social similarities, ethics, values, religion, or even ethnicity, however defined" (Bruter 2008: 279). The civic component, on the other hand, refers to the identification of an individual with a certain political structure, in this case the European Union. Both elements can be present in one's European identity, but this is not strictly necessary according to Bruter.

This paper uses a social constructivist definition of European identity based on Tajfel and Bruter. The definition can be reduced to six dimensions to look at when researching European identity: level of knowledge, affective dimension, evaluative dimension, cultural based and/or civic based and a general or spontaneous self-assessment of the identity.

### **The importance of civic education**

The European Union has spent millions of euros over the last couple of years on education, training and youth programmes. One of the main objectives of these programmes is to stimulate participation and to develop a sense of European identity. The 'Citizenship policy; Europe for citizens' programme, for instance, clearly states it wants to "encourage citizens to become actively involved in the process of European integration" and "allow citizens to develop a sense of European identity" (Commission of the European Communities n.d.). The year 2005 was also proclaimed the 'European Year of Democratic Citizenship through Education'. Other Commission funded programmes, such as Leonardo, Socrates and Youth In Action, do not always have such explicit citizenship education objectives but they are opportunities to make rhetoric about European citizenship come to the forefront and



help put it into practice (Osler and Starkey 1999). Although the EU, but also the Council of Europe and even the national governments have done a considerable effort to stimulate the promotion of a European dimension in the teaching of civic education, a comparative study of citizenship education documents shows that, compared to the emphasis on national issues, the European dimension remains rather neglected (Eurydice, 2005).

The EU seems very deterrent to create an ideal European democratic citizen, but what does that look like? Based on academic research, five key factors can be discerned (Geissel 2008). Whatever form of democracy is envisioned, all theories consider participation a key element. This participation can range from simply casting your vote to active participation in daily politics. A second key element is a certain level of political knowledge. How knowledgeable one should be, is an often debated issue, but a minimum level is said to be necessary for a democracy in general. A third feature is a sense of democratic and political identification, which implies a level of identification with the political system. The ideal democratic citizen is not alienated from politics and the political system but identifies with it. Ideally, citizens should also have the skills to at least cast a ballot and are expected to have an acceptable level of political competence or skills (internal efficacy). A final feature, added by Geissel (2008) herself, is the willingness to defend democracy.

Although there is academic discussion on what civic education stands for and what its objectives are, it can play an important role in influencing the abovementioned criteria and it can contribute to the development of 'the ideal (European) democratic citizen' (Westheimer 2004). Teaching the European Union should thus focus on acquiring European literacy - that is the acquisition of the knowledge, understanding, critical thinking, and independent judgement that enables the individual to come to grips with what happens in public life on local, national, European and global levels (Du Bois-Reymond in Georgi 2008). Teaching the EU and civic education in general should, however, be more than just the transfer of knowledge, which is not always the case. Acquiring political literacy is obviously important, but a disregard of other dimensions (identities, participation, skills/competence and the willingness to defend democracy) can have an opposite effect and even disempower or alienate people (Osler & Starkey 1999). Very often the participative or 'citizenship as a practice' (Wiener 1998) dimension is lacking (Eurydice 2005). Research on citizenship education remains fairly rare. Two main points of reference should be mentioned here. First, the IEA Civic Education Study (CIVED 99), which was conducted between 1996 and 2000 and involved 28 countries worldwide and the more recent Eurydice survey (2005) that specifically focused on citizenship education in Europe. Those two studies have shown that although many European countries are including citizenship education in the formal school curriculum and many of them are aware of the importance of a European dimension in citizenship education, this dimension often remains underexposed (although progress is being made).

More empirically based evidence, however, is necessary to prove that citizenship education with a strong European notion is a significant factor in the making of citizens in Europe (Georgi 2008). This paper attempts to provide a modest contribution to the research on civic education in Europe.

### **Methodological framework**

Since the research is still in a preliminary phase, this paper will not yet offer concrete results but it will present the methodological outline that will be used to study European identity and to evaluate the role of civic education in stimulating it. A quantitative approach is often used to study European identity (Green 2007; Moes 2008). More specifically, the results of the European Value Study and Eurobarometer are often referred to when researchers try to capture the notion of European identity. These surveys have the advantage of generalization and the often longitudinal character allows researchers to make comparisons over time. Eurobarometer surveys have, however, also been criticized in terms of measurement (Sinnot 2005; Bruter 2008). Two main critics are offered here. First, both surveys often use the 'Moreno' question. This question, developed by Spanish sociologist Luis Moreno, aims to measure the duality of identities<sup>4</sup>. This question is, however, for several reasons (see Bruter 2008) not equipped to fully capture the notion of European identity, just because it presupposes a tension between national and European identities. Other extensive research has already shown that people can have multiple identities that can exist side by side without necessarily being in competition with each other (Risse 2004; Caporaso and Kim 2009; Huyst 2008).

Second, people are often asked to indicate their level of attachment to the EU, their nation, their region and their city/village. Attachment is, as mentioned earlier, not the same as identity (Bruter 2008). These critiques indicate that researchers should be very careful in how they ask people about their identities. This does not mean, however, that researching European identity based on survey analysis is being completely dismissed. Surveys do have the great advantage of generalization, but researchers have to be careful how they capture European identity in analytical terms. Complimentary qualitative research is therefore recommended (Cerutti 2008; Bruter 2008). Cerutti even goes on to state that qualitative research should prevail over quantitative research because the results of surveys and referenda cannot capture citizens' souls. Quantitative data can be used, but they need to be complemented with a more thorough, qualitative analysis (Cerutti 2008).

In this paper a combination of a qualitative (focus groups) and a quantitative (surveys) approach is proposed. The suggested research design looks at European identity as a reflexive feature. Identities are for most people not something factual, but something they need to think about and reflect on. A too rigid approach based on a too fixed questionnaire will lose a lot of the different layers of what political identity means to

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<sup>4</sup> 'in the near future, do you see yourself as – Nationality only, Nationality and European, European and Nationality, or European only.'

people. The research design used, allows this kind of reflexivity because of its mixed approach. The main focus points are the three dimensions of European identity (cognitive, evaluative, and affective), the civic and/or cultural nature of European identity, the spontaneous self assessment of identities, the five dimensions of the ideal democratic citizen and suggestions for teaching Europe.

More concretely, the design aims to answer the following questions: what is the profile of this young European who states s/he feels European (social economic features, gender, education, etc.), what basis does this European identity have (civic, cultural and/or both), is there a spontaneous self assessment of European identity, how is the EU perceived by these young people, how well do pupils with a European identity score on the 'ideal democratic citizen' scale (knowledge, identity, participation, internal efficacy and willingness to defend democracy), do ideal democratic citizens display more often a European identity and how can civic education contribute to the development of the ideal citizen criteria and European identity?

The research questions are of a general nature and are as such applicable for the whole of the EU. The research design will be, out of practical convenience, first used in Belgium.

The target group are young Belgians in their final year of high school (age 17-19). Belgium is an interesting case study because of its diversity in languages, cultures and thus potentially identities. The majority of the people are Flemish (approximately 60% of the population), 40% speak French (Wallonia and Brussels) and approximately 75000 people live in the border area with Germany and thus speak German. Brussels is the capital with around 1 million inhabitants where the official languages are Dutch and French, but where the majority speaks French (Portaal Belgium.be n.d).

So far there has been no research on European identity among young Belgians. Extensive research exists for several other countries and regions (Jamieson 2005), but Belgium in general has never been the subject of research when it comes to European identity. This seems a bit odd, considering Brussels is the capital of the EU.

For the quantitative research, based on surveys, a sample of young Belgians will be drawn from lists of schools who have or will participate(d) in a European project organised by the Representation of the Commission in Belgium. One half of the sample will be schools who have applied for a project but have not yet participated, the other half will be young people who just participated in a project organised by the Representation. This allows a comparison on all dimensions and may give an indication of what kind of impact these kind of projects have and the role civic education can play.

The first questions of the survey aim at gaining more insight into the personal backgrounds of the young pupils. Questions concerning age, gender, education, faith,

etc. will be asked. These facts allow a 'profiling' of what a European and non-European Belgian pupil looks like.

Second, to determine whether or not the pupils feel European, they will answer the therefore designed questions by Luhtanen and Crocker (1992), who have created an often tested scale (Collective Self Esteem scale), based on Tajfel's social identity theory, to measure the self evaluation of one's political identity. This scale is aimed at testing the evaluative, affective and rational (knowledge) dimensions of European identity. The same questions will be asked to measure other identities (national and regional) to allow comparison.

Third, to determine whether this European identity is rather cultural and/or civic based, questions as proposed by Bruter (2004, 2005, 2008) will be asked.

To measure what kind of perception young people have of the EU, a question based on metaphor analysis will be used (Schmitt 2005). This kind of analysis allows a better, more personal and deeper understanding of what image the EU has for these pupils. By letting them come up with metaphors to describe the EU, it is possible to uncover individual patterns of thought and action. These pupils will be asked to compare the EU to an animal and clarify their choice; this will elicit more personal and deeper accounts (Schmitt 2005: 363). The animals they refer to are not important as such, but the reason/motivation behind their choice reveals a great deal.

To measure the five dimensions of the ideal democratic citizen, questions that have already been used and tested in previous scientific surveys will be used (Geissel 2008).

Finally, the research design as such allows a partial evaluation of projects designed to educate young people. Civic education should, in theory, contribute to 'the creation of the ideal democratic citizen'. Specific questions will be asked to evaluate the project.

The survey results will be complemented with the results of follow-up focus groups with pupils who have filled in a survey. Focus groups permit in-depth research and they also make it possible to find out as much as possible about participants' experiences and feelings on a given topic, in this case European identity (Morgan, Krueger 1993: 7). The focus groups will also be particularly useful to get a feel of the spontaneous self-assessment of political identities and to find out what kind of future these people envision for the EU. It will also allow the participants to elaborate on and to explain their feelings on the topics discussed.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has drawn the attention to the importance of researching European identity among young Europeans. Seventy-five million Europeans are between 15 and 25 years old and they have become a more and more important target group for the EU, especially since last referenda show that a majority of the 18-24 year olds voted against the Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty. This does not mean, however, that these young people do not support or trust the EU (see Eurobarometer). Their no may perhaps therefore not be interpreted as a total rejection of the EU, but as an outcry for a different Europe. Criticism should not automatically be mistaken with

apathy and rejection. This young generation has grown up with the EU as an evident entity, but for now this does not seem to result in a substantially higher level of identification than older generations. Identity, however, matters. It is the glue that can hold a community together and it is a core element in the legitimacy of a political project. How young people feel about the EU and if they identify with it then becomes a core question. This paper departs from a social constructivist perspective on identity and identity formation. Political identities are the result of social interactions and reflect our sense of continuity, past and future. It is a part of our present self in memories, habits, stocks of knowledge, feelings, expectations and aspirations. People can have multiple selves but only one core self. Looking at European identity as a reflexive feature means asking questions on how Europeans see themselves, how they perceive the EU and also on how they see its future evolution.

The here presented research design, based on a combined quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (focus groups) approach, allows this kind of reflexivity. Based on the Tajfel and Bruter's combined definition of European identity the following questions are central in deepening the understanding of European identity among young people: what is the profile of these young people who state s/he feel European (social economic features, gender, education, etc.), what basis does this European identity have (civic, cultural and/or both), is there a spontaneous self assessment of European identity, how is the EU perceived by these young people, how well do pupils with a European identity score on the 'ideal democratic citizen' scale (knowledge, identity, participation, etc.), do ideal democratic citizens display more often a European identity and how does civic education contribute to the development of the ideal citizen criteria and European identity?

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