

# The quality of political institutions within a member state can influence the extent to which citizens perceive the EU as being democratic.

by Blog Admin

*Opinions on the EU's democratic performance vary widely across the 27 member states. While citizens in some states are highly critical of the EU's institutions, others view them much more positively. **Pieterjan Desmet and Claes de Vreese** argue that public opinion toward the EU's institutions can be shaped significantly by the quality of national political institutions within a member state. In those states with well regarded political institutions, the EU is likely to seem less democratic than it does to citizens living in a state with lower quality institutions.*



How satisfied are European citizens with the democratic performance of European institutions? The answer is: it depends. Research suggests that opinion formation on the performance of a democratic regime is contingent on a cost-benefit assessment people make about the regime. These individual cost-benefit assessments can be based on various considerations, such as evaluations of political performance, economic performance, and expectations of governance in the near future.



The European supranational polity is different from national democratic systems in many ways and the formation of opinions at the European level is therefore likely to be different from the national level. European decision-making becomes attractive when benefits can be generated, or when the difference between the performance of national and European institutions is unfavourable for the nation-state. The balance between perceptions of supranational and national institutions may be crucial for evaluations of the EU's democratic performance. Therefore, we need to take the characteristics of national institutions into account to further our understanding of citizens' evaluations of the quality of the EU's democratic process.

## National institutional quality as a yardstick

Many authors agree that institutional quality matters for democratic evaluation. Not surprisingly there tends to a positive correlation between high-quality institutions and satisfaction with national democracy. EU support depends on the interplay between national and supranational politics, which in the words of Sanchez-Cuenca, is "based on the effect of popular perceptions about national and supranational institutions: the worse citizens' opinions of national institutions and the better their opinion of supranational ones, the stronger their support for European integration".

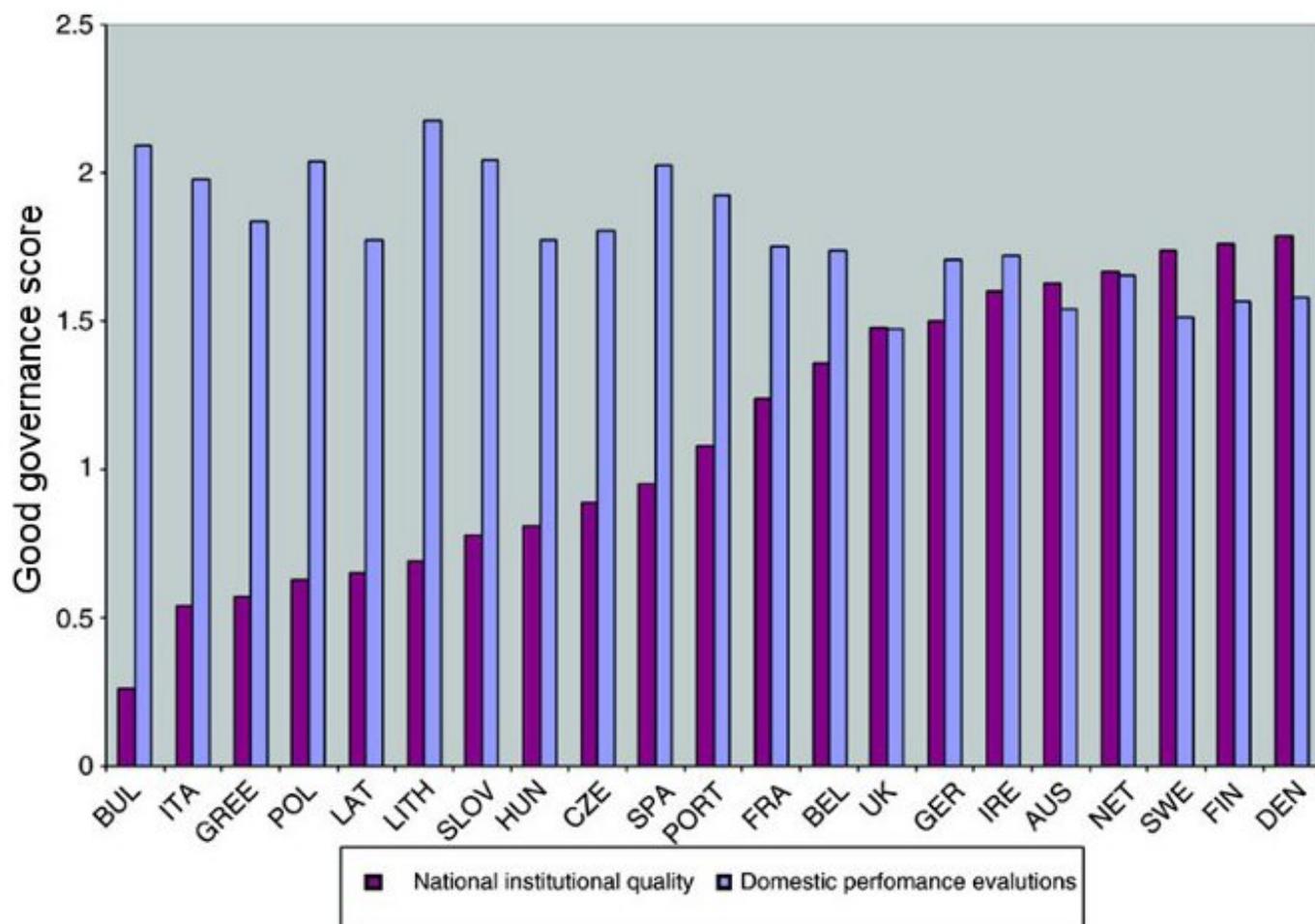
We expect a similar effect on the evaluation of European democratic performance. The institutional quality within a country provides a framework that is unique for every country. National institutions then function as a yardstick for democratic evaluation at a higher level. In countries with high-quality institutions, the contrast in institutional quality between the two levels increases the salience of the EU's democratic deficit, which in turn increases the probability that this issue would influence citizens' evaluations of the democratic performance of the EU. In countries where the difference in institutional quality is balanced in favour of the EU, the structures of the EU can be perceived as an asset, rather than a liability.

Is it reasonable to assume that this goes for all individuals? No, we suggest looking deeper at the role of political knowledge. The main effect of political knowledge on EU evaluations has been studied by many scholars, yielding mixed results. To date, no attempt has been made to study the impact of political knowledge as a moderator of the effect of national institutional quality on EU evaluations. We suggest that higher levels of domestic political knowledge can strengthen the effect of this relationship between the

national and supranational level.

Using data from a [CAWI](#) voter survey conducted in the context of the European Parliament elections of 2009 in 21 member states (including a number of items measuring individual perceptions and evaluations concerning democratic satisfaction, political trust, efficacy, knowledge, interest and participation), we assessed whether institutional quality at the national level affects democratic performance evaluations of the EU. We additionally used country-level data as governance indicators.

**Figure 1 - Quality of institutions and satisfaction with European democracy, per country**



**Note: Scoring is derived from average of six indicators of good governance: ‘Voice and accountability’, ‘Political instability and violence’, ‘Government effectiveness’, ‘Regulatory burden’, ‘Rule of law’ and ‘Control for corruption’.**

As shown in Figure 1, we found strong evidence for a negative relationship between national institutional quality and democratic performance evaluation of the EU. Higher institutional quality at the national level has a negative effect on the evaluation of European governance. Danish citizens, for instance, are in general more critical towards EU performance than, say, Bulgarians. Being confronted with low-quality institutions at the national level makes citizens more positive about European institutions. People might be more willing to adopt supranational policy when the difference between the performance of national and European institutions is unfavourable for the nation-state. By using an objective indicator, accounting for a wide range of institutional characteristics, we established a linkage between contextual factors at the national level and citizens’ perceptions of EU governance.

These results also indicate the existence of different perceptions across countries, both on the actual performance of European institutions, and on the expectations citizens have towards those institutions. This finding is important, as it demonstrates that legitimacy concerns should also be acknowledged

differentially across countries. The overall pattern of these country differences can be perceived as a division between East and West, or as a division between new and old members, because of differential familiarity levels with the EU, stemming from a (lack of a) socialization process. We controlled for both categorizations, but neither the East-West divide, nor the old-new categorization was significant. Still, the fact that Eastern Europeans appear more satisfied with EU democratic performance leaves us with some questions this study cannot answer. Is this only temporal? Will this pattern (from 2009) persist when citizens in the new member states get more acquainted with the European institutions? Only future research can provide answers on these questions.

A second aim of this study was to explore the moderating effect of political knowledge on the effect of institutional quality on democratic performance evaluations of the EU. Our multilevel dataset enabled us to explore this linkage for the first time. The results support the hypothesis that the effect of national institutional quality on EU evaluation is moderated by domestic political knowledge. The negative effect of national institutional quality increases as levels of domestic political knowledge increase. These findings have several implications. First, it strengthens the support for our first hypothesis, that national institutional quality has a stronger effect for those who know more about national politics. The more citizens know about their own national politics, the more they use this knowledge as a yardstick for evaluation at supranational level. Apart from a differential approach across countries, one should also differentiate within each country in attempting to deal with legitimacy issues. Furthermore, these results confirm the importance of distinguishing between different types of knowledge. Further research should incorporate a direct assessment of political knowledge in the specific domain of EU-level politics.

*This is a summary of the article: Desmet, Pieterjan, Claes de Vreese and Joost van Spanje (2012) “Second-order’ institutions: national institutional quality as a yardstick for EU evaluation” Journal of European Public Policy 19(7): 1071-1088.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the authors

### **Pieterjan Desmet** – *University of Amsterdam*

Pieterjan Desmet is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research. His research focuses on citizens’ evaluations of the democratic performance of the European Union. It is part of the [ELECDEM](#) project which takes a comprehensive approach to the study of electoral democracy.



### **Claes de Vreese** – *University of Amsterdam*

Claes de Vreese is Professor and Chair of Political Communication and Scientific Director of The Amsterdam School of Communication Research at the Department of Communication Science at the University of Amsterdam. He is also Director of the Netherlands School of Communication Research, the national research school in communication science, recognized by the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences KNAW. Finally, he is Adjunct Professor of Political Science and Journalism at the University of Southern Denmark. His research interests include comparative journalism research, the effects of news, public opinion and European integration, effects of information and campaigning on elections, referendums and direct democracy.



