

## Is local civil society conducive to European participatory engineering?

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# Chapter 10

## Is Local Civil Society Conducive to European Participatory Engineering?

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### A View from Below

The EU White Paper on Governance (COM [2001] 428 final) outlined the need to stimulate a more engaged and vibrant European civil society.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, civil society is now at the core of EU thinking on bridging the ‘democratic deficit’.<sup>2</sup> The European Commission increasingly refers to civil society and social capital in order to promote good governance in terms of democracy, accountability, and efficiency. As Saurugger (2007: 388) reminds us, organized civil society is attractive to policymakers because it a ‘product of the right of free association’ and these bodies are primarily seen ‘... as

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<sup>1</sup> The Commission perceives civil society as including: ‘trade unions and employers’ organisations (“social partners”); non-governmental organisations; professional associations; charities; grass-roots organisations; organisations that involve citizens in local and municipal life with a particular contribution from churches and religious communities (COM [2001] 428 final, 25.7.2001; see also OJ C329, 17.11.99: 30).

<sup>2</sup> It is also worth noting that the notion of a democratic deficit is a relatively recent phenomenon. As Majone (1998: 12) highlights, the prevailing view (i.e. before the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty) was that ‘... the integration process derives its legitimation from the democratic character of the (sovereign democratic) Member States’.

bottom-up, citizen-initiated phenomena, part of the voluntary process of people's coming together to govern themselves'. Civil society is seen as comprising a vast amount of associations, such as interest groups, voluntary associations, social movements, social movement organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), clubs, political initiatives, foundations, etcetera. At the EU level, many of these associations are large, more crucially however, they are also 'supposed' to be encompassing and representative with grass-roots involvement and an accountable leadership (Saurugger 2007: 388). The EU believes that such a 'civil society' could and should play a major role in increasing the density, diversity, breadth and depth of the links between citizens and decision-makers in Europe.<sup>3</sup> As Warleigh (2001: 620) notes, 'Civil society has been championed by both right and left' as a means to either 'defeat "big government"' or bring citizens back in, and there is a broad consensus among EU policy-makers '... that a greater role for civil society must be a central feature of European governance in the future'.

Accordingly, the EU White Paper on Governance (CEC, 2001) issued a rallying call for a more engaged and vibrant European civil society, not as a desirable add-on, but as an urgent and immediate necessity. In its decision to establish a 'Community action programme to promote active European citizenship (civic participation)', the Council of the European Union stated as one of the most important objectives it seeks to realize '... to bring citizens closer to the European Union and its institutions and to encourage them to engage more frequently with its institutions'. Besides, all kind of 'civil society bodies' are invited to specify their needs for support in order to become actively involved in reaching these goals.<sup>4</sup> These formulations reflect the more general goals presented in the White Paper. The policymaking process

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<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the civil society concept is very flexible. For a detailed analysis see Zimmer and Freise (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Council Decision of 26 January 2004 (2004/100/EC) Art. 1 (b).

is to be made more open, transparent, participatory and it is supposed to involve a wider range of actors, from varying institutional and territorial levels – *i.e.* from Eurogroups to local groups. The Commission believes that the legitimacy of the EU would be greatly enhanced through the encouragement of greater and more meaningful citizen involvement (SEC [2004] 1153, 22.09.2004: 12) – and it has idealistic (strong democracy-type, [Barber 1984]) expectations. Accordingly, civil society associations are expected to play a key role in the various links between the local and national levels, and the trans-national level. In short, the EU has joined the emerging consensus that a revival of patterns of civic engagement and citizenship will compensate for the assumed deficiencies of modern democracies.

The EU White Paper on Governance (CEC, 2001) should also be set in the context of the post-Putnam social capital debate that (re-)emphasised the importance of the internal aspects of associational life for the proper functioning of democracies and societal integration. In the spirit of Alexis de Tocqueville, many authors have stressed the importance of civil society for the proper functioning of democratic political systems. It is now widely accepted that modern democracies are dependent on an active and vibrant civil society and a healthy stock of social capital. Currently (and from the Commission's, perspective), the various groups are seen as contributing to democracy in two main (and several other subsidiary, but important) ways. First, they are perceived as (effective) representative vehicles delivering public policy outcomes that match citizens' preferences. Second, the internal social capital experiences within groups are seen as crucial for democracy. In general, groups are seen as generating the pro-democratic values that bolster democracy and, in the specific EU context, they have the potential to enhance the quality of the political linkage between citizens and decision-makers, and possibly even to increase citizens' attachment to, trust and

confidence in, and identification with, the EU and European institutions across Europe (cf. Noll and Scheuer 2006).

Whereas much of the contemporary focus is on the (alleged) impact of associations on members, there is a paucity of research that actually links the citizen to the association, and of course, the local associations or local activists to the EU. In order to obtain empirically based information to fill this gap, we summarize the results from a comparative study of associational life in Aberdeen (UK) and Mannheim (Germany). The analyses include extensive mapping of all voluntary associations in these two cities, and interviews with selected activists and volunteers,<sup>5</sup> in order to study the impact of organisational size and levels of membership involvement on attachment to, and interest in, the EU. Drawing on a typology of attachment to various political objects, we demonstrate that German respondents are more pro-European than their British counterparts – which accords with the commonplace notions of the Euro-sceptic British. In addition to this, associational size and levels of involvement appear to be irrelevant for European attitudes, but associational type matters. In Aberdeen, family and general welfare groups are the most committed to Europe; religious, culture, sports and groups-specific welfare the least. The pattern in Mannheim shows some similarity, but not symmetry. Finally, we hypothesise – on the basis of the social capital model – that citizens affiliated to associations should exhibit a greater *attachment* to, a higher level of *political engagement* with, and a higher level of *confidence* in Europe and European institutions. The findings for the civil society activists are compared (in an illustrative way) with the general populations. The tentative conclusion is that, in general, attitudes towards Europe and European institutions among activists are not much more positive

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<sup>5</sup> This study has been developed as part of the international “Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy” project (see [www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte/cid](http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte/cid), Maloney and Rossteutscher (2005), and Maloney, van Deth, Rossteutscher (2008) for further information).

than those found among the populations. This result clearly restricts the opportunities for European participatory engineering.

## **Research Design and Samples**

Detailed mapping was undertaken in Aberdeen and Mannheim in an attempt to identify as many voluntary associations as possible and to uncover a wide variety of organizational-types in terms of relevant characteristics (*i.e.* size, internal participation structures, income, source of income, level of institutionalisation, etc.).<sup>6</sup> A large number of organizations were discovered in these areas: 5,002 in Mannheim and 1,907 in Aberdeen. Once mapping was completed, all organizations received a short questionnaire in order to collect all relevant data about the major organizational features of associations, and to enable the identification of organizations for the membership survey. Following the organizational survey, a sample for the membership survey was drawn. The final organizational samples for the study on activists and volunteers consisted of 272 associations in Aberdeen and 257 in Mannheim. The total numbers of activists and volunteers who were successfully interviewed was 872 and 1,868 in Aberdeen and Mannheim, respectively. It is important to note that the methodology does not follow the regular design of selecting people randomly and asking them about their organizational experiences, but starts by locating individuals within ‘their’ specific associational contexts. While there are many studies of voluntary organizations (usually focused on ‘big players’), and numerous (representative) surveys of members and activists, few, if any, combine these approaches and tailor empirical data on organizations to that on individuals.

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<sup>6</sup> This study has been developed as part of the international “Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy” project (see [www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte/CID](http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte/CID) and Maloney and Roßteutscher (2005) for further information). The financial support for this research was provided by the Anglo-German Foundation for the Study of Industrial Society. Furthermore, we especially like to thank Sigrid Roßteutscher, Marina Berton, and Linda Stevenson for organizing much of the fieldwork and data coding.

The respondents in both cities are – on average – remarkably similar. People in their early to mid-50s comprise the majority of activists and volunteers, with a clear overrepresentation of women in Aberdeen. In the two cities, citizens with organizational affiliations have almost identical educational attainment levels and comparable incomes, and approximately half of them are employed. Two-thirds of the respondents are married or live with their partner and a large majority consider themselves religious. In both cities the average length of membership or affiliation to the association is about 14 years.<sup>7</sup> Somewhat more people in Aberdeen are ‘very committed’ to the association than in Mannheim, but in both cities about three quarters consider the actual organization the most important one in their lives. Apparently, the ‘typical’ activist and volunteer is easy to identify.

### **Attitudes towards Europe**

Following the fashionable interpretations of the communitarian or social capital perspectives, we expect to find positive attitudes towards Europe among the citizens with associational affiliations in both cities. Does active involvement in voluntary associations generate positive attitudes towards Europe? The scant empirical evidence points in the opposite direction. For example, Erlach (2005: 199) reported a negative correlation between active involvement in voluntary associations and interest in international political affairs. The findings from our two cities can be summarized as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> The average age of the population in Mannheim is 41.2 years, just over 23 percent are non-religious (and those who are religious are divided between Protestantism and Catholicism), about half of them are employed (unemployment is currently 10 percent) and ethnic minorities comprise some 16 percent of the population ([www.mannheim.de](http://www.mannheim.de)). In Aberdeen, the corresponding figures are 38.5 years of age, 42 percent non-religious (and among those who are religious, Protestantism is dominant), 55 percent employed (unemployment is 2 percent) and ethnic minorities are only 2 percent of the population (Registrar General for Scotland 2003).

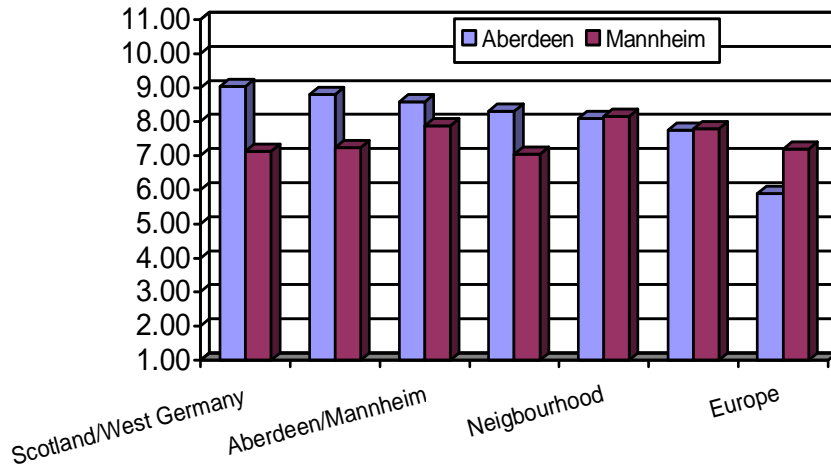
1. *Attachment:* The levels of attachment to various political objects differ significantly. Generally, the Scottish respondents exhibit high levels of attachments with all of the objects, with the clear exception of Europe. In Mannheim, there is a clear split between city, neighbourhood and Germany on the one hand, and the other items including Europe, on the other. In short, in both cities Europe comes out at, or close to, the bottom (Figure 1). The difference between the level of attachment to Europe of supporters/members/ activists/volunteers in Aberdeen and Mannheim is particularly noteworthy – one full point on an eleven point scale. There are two basic explanations for this. First, geographical location: Aberdeen is very much on the European periphery and the physical distance from the political institutions may depress attachment levels. Secondly, UK citizens have consistently exhibited higher levels of Euro-scepticism than their continental neighbours, including Germany. For example, European Commission data from 2000 found that 58 per cent of Germans were very/fairly attached to the EU, whereas the UK figure was 37 per cent, and Pattie *et al.*'s (2004: 35) 2001 UK population survey reported that the mean attachment score of UK citizens to the EU was 3.96 (on an eleven point scale). However, according to Pattie *et al.* (2004), UK citizens with organizational affiliations exhibited greater levels of attachment to the EU than the general population.

2. *Political Engagement:* Although the levels vary in both cities, the patterns are broadly similar: interest is lowest in EU and international politics and highest in local and national politics. Given that our samples are drawn from the local associational universe, it is not surprising that interest in local (and national) politics is relatively high. To these citizens, local and national policy-making will be more visible and have greater relevance. In Aberdeen interest in EU politics ranked below international politics. (Figure 2)



3. *Political Confidence:* The average levels of political confidence are broadly similar. In both locales, the highest levels of confidence are shown in institutions of the executive branch (police, the courts, and to a somewhat lesser degree the civil service) and the lowest in political institutions, parties, politicians and the European Union. The low position of the European Union is once again quite remarkable and is clearly a major cause for concern for European civil society architects (Figure 3).

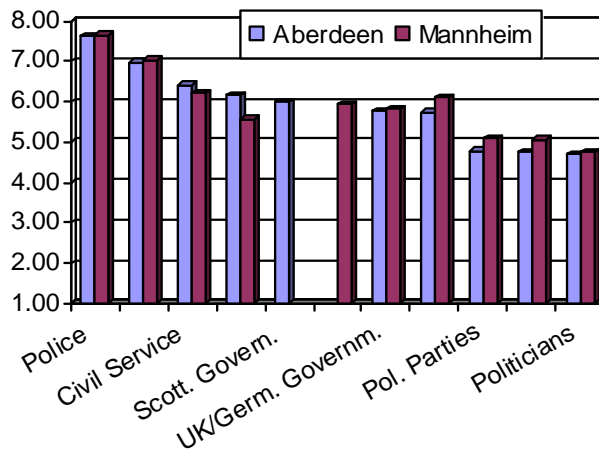
**Figure 1: Attachments towards Various Objects Among Respondents in Aberdeen and Mannheim (means 1-11)**



**Figure 2: Interest in Politics at various Levels among Respondents in Aberdeen and Mannheim (means 1-4; reversed scales)**



**Figure 3: Confidence in political institutions among respondents in Aberdeen and Mannheim (means 1-11)**



In fact, the results in Figures 1, 2, and 3 are somewhat disquieting, as attachment, levels of interest and confidence are low. However, there is some comfort in the fact that supporters/members/activists/volunteers display higher levels of confidence than the general population. In addition to this, if one takes a more critical stance in the social capital debate, relatively low levels of confidence in political office holders and parties can be presented as healthy for democracy – citizens should be attentive and critical. Of course, it is important, however, that citizens maintain confidence in fundamental state/political institutions (courts, police, legislatures, the EU etc.).

The three orientations are clearly related to the individual-level in a meaningful way (significant correlations): in both cities, those who are more attached have higher levels of interest and trust, – and *vice versa*. This finding suggests that we do not necessarily have to use all three indicators to characterize the orientations towards Europe. Since confidence is specified for the European Union as a political institution and attachment and interest refers to Europe in general, we construct a typology based on these last two indicators only. This simple four-fold typology categorizes supporters/members/activists/volunteers according to their orientations towards Europe. The most positive respondents, who show both, a high level of attachment and a high level of interest, are labelled *Committed*. The least positive – individuals who are neither attached nor interested in what is going on in Europe – receive the neologism *Aloof*. Those that have a high level of interest in European politics, but have low attachment are labelled *Interested*, and individuals who are more strongly attached to Europe, but have a low interest in European politics, are referred to as *Attached*.

It is of little surprise, given the evidence presented thus far, that the *Committed* are much more prevalent in Mannheim and the *Aloof* is the largest group in Aberdeen (see Table 1). In Mannheim, 43 per cent of the

respondents can be characterized as *Committed*, the corresponding figure is less than half in Aberdeen (21 percent). While the distribution of the *Aloof* moves in the opposite direction: 36 per cent in Aberdeen and 22 per cent in Mannheim. The *Interested* and the *Attached* are roughly the same size in each city.

**Table 1: Distribution of Types of European Attachment (percentages)**

	Aberdeen	Mannheim
Committed	21	43
Attached	20	17
Interested	24	18
Aloof	36	22
N (100%)	801	1732

## **The Impact of Associational Life on Attitudes Towards Europe**

Many social capital approaches stress the Tocquevillian interpretation of voluntary associations as ‘schools of democracy’. In this section we focus on the possible impact associational activities have on political orientations. Since all our respondents belong to at least one association, we cannot analyse the impacts of associational activities in general. Instead, we focus on the question whether different associations have different consequences for the attitudes towards Europe among their activists and volunteers.

1. *Different Types of Associations*: Do various associations have a different impact on attachments towards Europe? In summary, the answer is yes. There are clear differences in the patterns between Aberdeen and Mannheim. In Aberdeen ‘family’, ‘general welfare’ and ‘politics’ groups have greater

levels of commitment and 'religious', 'culture', 'sports' and 'group specific welfare' are the most aloof. In Mannheim, 'community concerns', 'politics' and 'general welfare' are heavily committed and 'new politics', 'religious' and 'family' are more aloof. It is interesting that in both cities religious groups are amongst the weakest identifiers with the European project and that there is a similar attitudinal division between 'general welfare' and 'group specific welfare' organizations. Moreover, we might have expected that those groups concerned with politics in both cities would be the most committed Europeans. This is the case in Mannheim, but not in Aberdeen (Table 2). This is slightly surprising for two main reasons: (1) Given the direct political content of much of the activities of these groups, we might expect political interest and attachment to be high; and (2) the European Union has been heavily involved in developing policy in areas, such as the environment and human rights etc., and the Commission has been highly active in harmonizing policy and regulation across Europe. Thus, we might have expected new politics groups to identify more closely with the EU. Of course, it could be the case that the rate of progress is too slow for many new politics groups who would rather see more radical changes, as opposed to negotiated and bargained incremental ones. In addition to this, there may be some anti-system sentiment among 'new politics groups' that would see them distance themselves from all governing institutions.

2. *Different Sizes of Associations:* Do activists and volunteers of small and large associations have different attitudes towards Europe? Are these small and more intimate associations more cosy sites for the generation of positive European attitudes? Or are larger associations that may be more likely to have wider political contacts and links (possibly even to the EU level) the most optimistic Europeans? The results show that organizational size has no impact. There is little variation between groups with no members and the

largest membership organizations. This is the case in both cities, but it is clearest in Mannheim: 47 per cent of those affiliated to small groups and 45 per cent of large groups are committed; and 22 per cent of small groups and 20 per cent of large groups are aloof (Table 3).

3. *Different Levels of Associational Engagement:* Do activists and volunteers that spend a lot of time in their organisations have different attitudes towards Europe? Is greater involvement generating greater levels of commitment? The findings here replicate those above on the associational size dimension. There is little variation between the inactive and the super-active in both cities. Once again, the variations in Mannheim are narrow, but they are not particularly large in Aberdeen either: 47 per cent of those who participate less than one hour per month in organizations in Mannheim are committed; the corresponding figure for the super-active (+20 hours) is 46 per cent. In Aberdeen, 43 per cent of the least active and 37 per cent of the most active are committed (Table 4).

**Table 2: Distributions of Different Types among Various Associations in Aberdeen and Mannheim (row percentages)**

<i>Aberdeen</i>	Committed	Attached	Interested	Aloof	N (100%)
family	43	29	-	29	7
sports	22	25	16	37	73
culture	18	15	27	39	33
community concerns	-	-	50	50	2
politics	33	-	44	22	9
“new” politics	-	-	-	-	-
general welfare	41	26	15	17	46
group specific welfare	18	30	16	36	89
religion	17	19	23	40	192
other concerns	18	16	29	37	200
overall	20	20	23	36	651

Chi-Square: 21.148; df: 8; significance: .007 (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

<i>Mannheim</i>					
	Committed	Attached	Interested	Aloof	N (100%)
family	34	22	14	31	140
sports	32	20	18	29	139
culture	41	24	17	18	122
community concerns	53	14	20	13	123
politics	59	14	16	10	49
“new” politics	38	-	25	38	8
general welfare	53	17	15	15	130
group specific welfare	36	14	21	29	151
economic interest	36	14	21	29	48
religion	32	20	15	33	75
other concerns	45	18	18	19	573
overall	43	18	18	22	1558

Chi-Square: 44.335; df: 10; significance: .000 (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

**Table 3: Distributions of Different Types among Associations of Various Size in Aberdeen and Mannheim (row percentages)**

<i>Aberdeen</i>					
	Committed	Attached	Interested	Aloof	N (100%)
no members	17	26	25	32	134
small (1-55)	20	24	21	35	149
medium (56-225)	24	14	28	34	148
large (>225)	17	19	22	42	158
overall	20	21	24	36	589

Chi-Square: 3.232; df: 3; significance: .357 (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

<i>Mannheim</i>					
	Committed	Attached	Interested	Aloof	N (100%)
no members	44	14	20	22	94
small (1-55)	47	14	17	22	430
medium (56-225)	43	17	18	23	471
large (>225)	45	18	17	20	347
overall	43	18	18	22	1342

Chi-Square: 1.193; df: 3; significance: .755 (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

**Table 4: Distributions of Different Types among Various Levels of Associational Involvement in Aberdeen and Mannheim (row percentages)**

<i>Aberdeen</i>					
	Committed	Attached	Interested	Aloof	N (100%)
less than 1 hour	17	15	24	43	46
1-4 hours	23	25	21	30	183
5-10 hours	21	19	21	40	224
11-20 hours	20	18	30	32	181
more than 20 hours	21	21	21	37	158
overall	21	20	23	36	792

Chi-Square: 5.606; df: 4; significance: .231 (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

<i>Mannheim</i>					
	Committed	Attached	Interested	Aloof	N (100%)
less than 1 hour	47	16	17	20	159
1-4 hours	44	14	20	22	413
5-10 hours	41	19	17	23	485
11-20 hours	41	17	19	23	366
more than 20 hours	46	19	15	19	298
Overall	43	17	18	22	1721

Chi-Square: 4.289; df: 4; significance: .368 (Kruskal-Wallis Test)

## The Prospects for European Participatory Engineering

The empirical findings about local civil society associations in Mannheim and Aberdeen provide a multi-faced and complex picture that makes unequivocal conclusion drawing difficult, if not hazardous. Nevertheless, our research has uncovered two main aspects that are highly relevant with regard to the prospects for European participatory engineering.

First, it is clear that people involved in local voluntary associations establish a rather atypical section of the total population. The ‘typical activist and volunteer’ is about 52-55 years old, married, has a middle-level education and income, and is active in the particular groups for about 14 years. These characteristics deviate clearly from the ‘typical citizen’ in Mannheim and



Aberdeen (see footnote 7). Apparently, being involved in voluntary activities is a matter of a specific category of the population – irrespective of the specific circumstances and traditions in the two cities concerned. The EU is just as likely to face the same problem of skewed participation and representation distortion (Verba *et al.* 1995) as national and regional governments. Widening the participation and involvement of the hitherto uninvolved citizens presents a significant challenge.

*1. The mobilization of voluntary associations is likely to result in continued biased representation. Participatory engineering should seek to mobilize citizens that fall outside the 'usual suspects' category – i.e. the young and the old, those with low and higher levels of educational attainment and income, etc.*

The second part of our analysis assesses the impact of organizational size and levels of membership involvement on attachment to, and interest in, the EU among supporters/members/ activists/volunteers of local voluntary associations. The German respondents appear to be more pro-European than their British counterparts – which accords with the commonplace notion that the British are more Euro-sceptic than many of their European neighbours. Beyond this we examined the impact of associational type, size and involvement levels. The results were clear. Associational size and levels of involvement are irrelevant. This could be seen as slightly surprising. For example, small and more intimate associations could have been seen as potentially more cosy sites for the generation of positive European attitudes. Or alternatively, larger associations – that may be more likely to have wider political contacts and links (possibly even to the EU level) – might have been expected to generate a group of more positive/optimistic Europeans. On the involvement dimension we might have expected activists who spend a lot of time in their organisations to possibly generate more positive attitudes towards various political objects, including Europe. However, it was only

associational type that mattered. In Aberdeen, family and general welfare groups were the most committed, religious, culture, sports and groups specific welfare were the least. The pattern in Mannheim showed some similarity, but not symmetry – community concerns, general welfare and politics groups being the most enthusiastic and new politics and religious groups having the weakest attachments. However, there is not much comfort for EU architects because the levels of attachment and confidence in European institutions are relatively low. This finding is also supported by (population) research by Blondel *et al.* (1998), Cautrès (2001) and Cautrès and Reynié (2001) who show that the directly elected European Parliament fails to promote feelings of European/EU identification among the European citizenry (all cited in Saurugger, forthcoming 2009).

*2. Local voluntary associations have a very limited impact on the attitudes towards Europe among their members and activists. Group type matters and participatory engineering appeals should be broadened to draw in a wider range of interests .*

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