



# EUROBAROMETER 60.1

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

## AUTUMN 2003

NATIONAL REPORT  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
IRELAND

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

- This is the fourth in a series of six-monthly reports on Irish attitudes to European integration. Each report is based on evidence from the most recent Eurobarometer survey of European public opinion. Eurobarometer surveys are conducted bi-annually in each of the member states using nationally representative samples. The present report is based on Eurobarometer 60, which was conducted in autumn 2003. Executive summaries of the three previous Irish reports are reproduced in Appendix 3 of the main report.
- This summary of the current Irish Eurobarometer report begins by placing Irish attitudes in the context of long-term trends in attitudes to integration. It then considers attitudes to the European constitution, to enlargement and to the role of the United States and of the European Union in relation to peace in the world. In this context, it briefly considers the issue of a European defence and concludes with an examination of the evidence relating to the possible emergence of a sense of European identity.

## Overall support for integration

- In comparison to the other member-states, Irish support for membership of the European Union shows up very well in the most recent Eurobarometer survey (EB60). This is so in two senses. First of all, Ireland is second only to Luxembourg in overall level of support for the country's membership of the European Union. Secondly, and somewhat dramatically, Ireland is the only country to show an increase in support for membership between spring and autumn 2003, a period in which the majority of member states showed significant falls in support for membership. Irish support for membership went up by six percentage points while average support in the EU went down by six points. Particularly sharp falls were experienced in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium.
- In order to place current Irish attitudes to European integration in context, it is necessary consider how such attitudes have evolved in recent decades. Having lagged behind the European average in the early to mid-1980s, Irish support for membership of the European Community/European Union climbed steadily in the late 1980s, moving ahead of the level of support in the Union as a whole by 1987 and continuing to climb to a peak of close to 80 per cent support in the mid-1990s.
- Irish support for membership of the Union remained at a very high level throughout the 1990s, at a time when support for membership in the Union as a whole had fallen quite dramatically. As of the spring of 2003, however, it looked as if Irish support for membership of the Union might be following the downward path in support for membership in the most of the other member-states. The most recent Eurobarometer (autumn 2003) shows a decisive halt to that downward trend Ireland and, indeed, shows a significant increase in support for membership of the Union in contrast to a further dip in such support in the majority of the other member states.
- On the other hand, Irish enthusiasm for integration did decline in the early 1990s and was at a low of 43 per cent in the period immediately prior to the first referendum on the Nice treaty. However, in autumn 2003, enthusiasm has edged ahead of indifference, albeit by a small margin.

- As the country currently holding the presidency of the European Union, Ireland must bear in mind that it is dealing with a set of countries in which, for the most part, public support for European integration is markedly lower than in Ireland. The contrast with Ireland is particularly strong in the case of the countries that have recently joined the Union and the contrast is substantial also in the case of the two member-states that are the protagonists on one side of the current constitutional impasse, namely Germany and France.

### **Reactions to the speed of integration**

- When it comes to the speed of integration, however, Ireland is located at the less integrationist rather than at the more integrationist end of the spectrum. It is true that one-third of Irish people would like things to speed up, at least a bit. However, 47 per cent believe that the speed of building Europe is about right. This represents the highest level of support for the status quo in any of the 15 countries.
- In regard to the speed of integration, the overall EU 15 numbers are: 49 per cent believing that things are going either a little too slowly or more than a little too slowly, 29 per cent believing that things are about right and 22 per cent believing that it is all going a little too fast or more than a little too fast. France and Germany, the countries that have tended to be most vocal in regard to the idea of a two-speed Europe, are located closer to the EU average position on this scale (50 per cent in favour of faster integration) than to the fast-track end of the scale.

### **The constitutional issue**

- Presumably related to this tendency to prefer the status quo, Irish people also figure among those who are least supportive of the idea that the EU should have a constitution. A majority but only a bare one (53 per cent) believe that the EU should have a constitution; a tiny minority (six per cent) believe it should not. Irish support for a European constitution is the fourth lowest, ranking just above the level of support in Denmark, the UK and Finland. The Irish combination of relatively low support and very low opposition is a reflection of the fact that a very substantial proportion (40 per cent -- the largest of all the 15 countries) simply don't know what to think on the matter (see Figure 6).
- If the potential for the Irish Presidency to broker a deal on the European constitution is realised in the coming months, one of the side effects of the accompanying publicity in Ireland may well be to reduce this level of don't know responses. In any event, whenever the constitution is agreed, there will be an urgent need to help people get off the fence on this issue in advance of the ensuing referendum.
- When asked what you think are the two most important issues facing Ireland at the moment, Irish people show a rather different set of preoccupations compared with people in the EU 15 as a whole. The three most important issues for Irish people in autumn 2003 were crime (41 per cent), the health care system (38 per cent), and, at a slightly lower level, rising prices/inflation (31 per cent). Only one of these issues (crime) was found among the three most important issues as articulated by the citizens of the European Union as a whole.
- The problem this poses for Irish attitudes to the European Union is that highly positive evaluations of the performance of the EU relate to issues that are of

low salience in the eyes of the mass of the citizens while the issues on which evaluations of the EU are less positive or in relation to which the EU plays a minor role tend to be the issues that actually preoccupy Irish respondents.

- The single exception to this generalisation is the issue of crime, which is at the top of the Irish respondents' list of most important issues and in relation to which there is a moderately high perception (37 per cent) that the European Union is playing a positive role.

### **Knowledge and the media**

- Low levels of engagement with European issues are reflected in low subjectively assessed levels of knowledge of the European Union and of its policies and institutions. The prevalence of a low level of subjectively assessed knowledge has been a persistent feature of Irish orientations to the EU over the entire period during which the Eurobarometer has analysed this aspect of attitudes to integration.
- The low level of (subjectively assessed) knowledge is in part at least a product of a distinctly lower level of uptake or usage of the main available channels of information about the European Union. For example, 66 per cent of citizens in the Union as a whole referred to television as a source of information; the corresponding figure in Ireland is 50 per cent.
- In similar vein, most Irish people are either satisfied with how the media present the European Union (in terms of the amount of coverage and the objectivity of that coverage) or they have no opinion on the matter. There is little or no appetite in Ireland for either greater coverage of the EU affairs in the media or for any radical change in the tone and direction of that coverage.

### **Welcoming new members**

- In terms of Irish public opinion, the Taoiseach can confidently and credibly host a welcoming ceremony for the new members of the Union on 1 May 2004 . Irish support for the enlargement of the EU has always been substantial and, in the most recent Eurobarometer, it is significantly ahead of the average level of support across the 15 member states. It stands in particularly strong contrast to the level of support in the three largest member states - France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

### **Public opinion and the trans-Atlantic relationship**

- Many have argued that the transatlantic relationship - - in some disrepair as a result of the Iraq war and its aftermath - - might figure as an item on the agenda of the Irish presidency. Part of this argument is that Ireland is seen by some to be in a good position to broker a rapprochement between Europe and the United States.
- Two features of the public opinion background to this suggestion are worth noting. The average EU assessment of the role of the United States in relation to peace in the world in autumn 2003 was quite negative. However, this average conceals a very wide spread of opinion on this matter -- from an 11 percentage point positive assessment in the Netherlands to a minus 80 percentage point negative assessment in Greece. In short, European public

opinion is quite divided regarding the role of the United States in relation to peace in the world.

- Evaluation of the role of the US improved by a small but significant margin (nine percentage points) between the spring of 2003 and autumn 2003. The improvement was particularly noticeable in France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. Irish net evaluation of the role of the US went from a deficit of five percentage points to zero, in other words, to an exact balance between the proportion assessing the role of positively and the proportion assessing the role negatively. This finely balanced conflict in Irish public opinion might be seen as placing the Irish government in a good position to play the role of an honest broker with a capacity to understand both sides of the issue.
- While, in autumn 2003, all but three member states (the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Ireland) showed a negative net assessment of the role of the United States in relation to peace in the world, all 15 member states showed a positive net assessment of the role of the European Union in regard to the same issue. There are, admittedly, some gradations, ranging from plus 28 percentage points in the United Kingdom to in excess of 60 percentage points in Germany and the Netherlands.

#### **A European defence?**

- Despite the overwhelmingly positive assessments of the role of the European Union in relation to peace in the world (and the predominantly negative assessment of the role of the US), European public opinion fails to produce a majority in favour of European Union decision-making on defence policy. It is on this issue that Irish public opinion appears at its least integrationist. Ireland is located alongside Denmark and the United Kingdom in registering a low level of support for European defence integration.

#### **A European identity?**

- In attempting to match the complexity of the layering of European, national and sub-national identities, the Eurobarometer has developed a variety of scales and measures, several of which are deployed in the Eurobarometer 60.
- On average, 51 per cent of people across the EU15 show a strong sense of attachment to their country. In Ireland, 65 per cent show such attachment. The corresponding figure for attachment to Europe in both the EU15 and in Ireland is only 14 per cent.
- Other data in EB60 indicate that, in the Union as a whole, 57 per cent of the citizens have **some degree** of European identity. The corresponding figure in Ireland is 47 per cent. On the other side of the scale, 40 per cent of Europeans identify exclusively with their nationality while 49 per cent of Irish people identify themselves exclusively as Irish. Ireland is fourth from the bottom in terms of the possession of any degree of European identity.
- Ireland behaves somewhat differently on a measure of pride in being European, having the second highest level of pride in this respect. The two countries with the lowest levels of sense of pride in being European are Germany and the United Kingdom.
- Finally, confirming the evidence of the importance of national identity in the Irish case, Ireland is ranked second highest in terms of the overall level of

national pride -- 71 per cent of Irish people feel very proud to be Irish and a further 25 per cent feel fairly proud. Ireland is second only to Greece in prevalence of a sense of national pride.

- At the other end of the scale, Germany stands out as having very low levels of strong national pride (just under 20 per cent), a finding that may reflect the different views of national identity and national pride that are a legacy of German history. Other countries that show relatively low levels of strong national pride include the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Portugal.
- The exceptional strength of Irish people's sense of Irish identity and, in particular, the exceptional strength of their sense of national pride is a significant factor that must be taken into account in any overall interpretation of the Irish attitude to integration. It must be emphasised, however, that this strong sense of national identity and national pride are compatible with high levels of approval of integration. They may also, however, account for relatively low levels of enthusiasm for the project and for a preference for the status quo in relation to the speed of building Europe.

### **Implications of the Irish presidency of the EU**

- The evidence of Irish people's exceptionally high level of national identity and national pride may also have some relevance in the context of the current Irish presidency of the Union. This is because the challenges involved in managing the presidency of the Union tend to put national pride on the line. In this sense the presidency provides an opportunity to hitch the Irish European integration project to the engine of national pride and national identity. Whether this opportunity is realised or not depends on how the presidency performs.
- The performance of the presidency, indeed the very fact of an Irish presidency of the Union, may also have an impact on people's familiarity with EU institutions and policies and with their subjective sense of knowing at least something about the process. This would presumably be especially true if the presidency succeeded in securing agreement on an EU constitution. Accordingly, the next and subsequent reports in this series will closely monitor trends in awareness and knowledge of EU policies and institutions in order to assess the extent and the durability of any gains in understanding that may be achieved in the first half of 2004.