

# EUROBAROMETER 60.1

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

UNITED KINGDOM

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## Executive Summary

### Editorial Highlights

Amongst a regular review of attitudes on a wide range of subjects, Eurobarometer reports have consistently shown that the level of interest in the UK towards EU affairs is usually the lowest in the Union.

There is a steady flow of evidence that this lack of interest has as one of its primary causes a basic lack of knowledge on EU affairs. This has earned the UK the title of the "don't know, don't care" capital of Europe.

This fundamental lack of knowledge and lack of interest also combine to generate high levels of distrust in such EU Institutions as the European Parliament and the European Commission.

In Q26, people's trust in the European Commission (as distinct from trust in the European Union in general) is reviewed.

The U.K. figures show that only 26% of those polled tend to trust the European Commission compared with figures of 60% or more in Greece, Italy, Ireland and Luxembourg and an EU15 average of 46%. A further 30% of the UK sample expressed no opinion.

There are therefore 44% of the U.K. who do not trust the EC. This is the highest percentage in the Union and not just substantially above the EU15 average of 28% but isolates the UK as being the only EU15 member where there are **more** people not trusting rather than trusting the European Commission.

On an historical basis the UK has had a "net distrust" of the European Commission in Eurobarometer Surveys since 1999 - the only time this did not occur was in the Autumn of 2001 after the events of "9/11" when 35% of those polled tended to trust and 33% tended not to trust the European Commission.

It is also interesting to put these figures in a wider context. Although in this latest poll only 26% of the UK trust the European Commission, this is still a noticeably greater confidence level than that accorded to the British press where, as has been seen earlier in this report, only 17% of the sample tend to trust this medium.

There are, however, some signs that although still at the lower end of the scale, the UK is closing the gap between its knowledge level compared with that of other EU countries as shown by the EU average.

For example, while, in 2000, 25% of UK citizens said they knew nothing at all about the European Union, by Autumn 2003, this figure has almost halved to 14%. Although still twice as large as the EU average, it is a major step in the right direction.

As a spin-off, there has also been a major increase in the UK's support for joint action within the EU on a number of important issues.

As will also be seen within the main report, there is also substantial and growing evidence that higher levels of education are bringing more awareness of the work and function of the European Union.

It would appear that a spin-off of increased education and awareness also leads to a better appreciation of European affairs.

Other hopeful portents include the fact that 34% of UK citizens feel that there is too little media coverage of the European Union, while only 17% consider it to be too much.

Perhaps as importantly, more than a quarter of the UK poll (27%) think that such media coverage as there is presents a 'too negative' picture of EU affairs.

Younger people are also, generally, more open to both receiving information on the Union and have a more favourable view on the subject.

It is also encouraging to note the very strong approval in the UK on the issue of teaching school children about Union matters which gains the support of more than two-thirds (68%) of the UK poll.

The key for the future would seem to be based upon continuing to increase the level of knowledge of UK citizens on EU affairs focusing both on the methods of communication and the main target groups concerned.

The press continues to generate little trust amongst readers which negates the popularity of this medium, while television and radio continue to generate high levels of trust.

The Internet (trust in which has yet to be analysed) is rapidly becoming an important source of information and it is relevant to note its high adoption rate among both younger people and those with a higher level of education.

The major problem area in terms of target market remains a rump of older people, house persons, as well as those with less education.

In the short term, the practical solution would appear to be a more focused approach on the means of communicating news and information on the EU with emphasis being placed on media which not only have reach but are 'trusted'.

This would tend to the use of TV, radio and the rapidly growing Internet rather than methods such as information leaflets, brochures and EU information networks where usage has remained at minimal levels for a number of years.

The continuing programme of educating children on EU affairs is a crucial part of a long-term strategy that should be continued and developed.

The question of how to get information to older and less well-educated people still remains a stumbling block in this total process but, overall, the situation in the UK as regards knowledge of and attitude towards the European Union is perhaps showing early signs of improving.

### **Summary of main points**

The report looks at UK citizens' views about various aspects of the European Union and compares them with typical attitudes held across the Union (EU15 averages) and also highlights major differences with other individual member states.

Views are assessed across the European Union and results are based on both a country-by-country view and a socio-demographic analysis which attempts to highlight both the similarities and differences by such varied factors as age, education, occupation, etc.

The data making up this report were gathered between 1 October and 7 November 2003. They are part of wave 60.1 of the Standard Eurobarometer which involved 1370 citizens.

The key findings of this report were:

- **Important issues**

48% of the UK poll viewed **crime** as being one of the two most important issues facing the country at the present time – substantially more than the 28% EU15 average and ranked only second to the 52% recorded in the Netherlands. This 48% figure shows a substantial increase over the 39% recorded eight months before, in March 2003 (EB 59.1).

The second most widely cited issue facing the UK was seen to be **immigration** - quoted by 32% of those polled and more than twice as high as the EU15 average of 14%. This 32% is the same as in March 2003.

**Unemployment** – the most important issue in the view of 42% of EU15 citizens – was only rated important by 12% of the UK poll but is markedly up from the 5% seen in EB 59.1.

- **Trust in institutions**

The level of trust that UK citizens have for the **press** is particularly low. At 17%, it is less than half that seen in any other EU15 nation with the next lowest figure (Sweden) at 40%. This UK figure is also noticeably lower than the 20% noted in March 2003

While the EU15 average of those tending to trust the press is 44% (down from the 47% seen in March 2003), this figure reaches 58% in France and Spain, 56% in Belgium and 55% in the Netherlands.

Overall, however, Union citizens tend not to trust the press and, while 7% of their number have no opinion on this, 49% are in the 'tend not to trust' camp.

The oldest electronic medium – **radio** – has a relatively high level of trust across the EU with 62% of those polled tending to trust it, although this figure is down from the 65% recorded in March 2003 (EB 59.1).

This figure rises to more than three-quarters of Finns, Danes and Irish, as well as 60% of the UK poll – a figure showing a two percentage point fall since the previous survey.

More than half (54%) of UK and EU15 citizens tended to trust **television**, although these figures show a decrease from the 58% and 57% respectively earlier in the same year. In Ireland and Finland, these figures exceeded 70%.

While virtually two-thirds (64%) of EU citizens tended to trust the **police** this figure conceals variations as extreme as the 89% and 90% figures noted in Finland and Denmark and 55% in France and 52% in Belgium. The UK figure at 60% was slightly less than the EU15 average.

Three-quarters of EU15 citizens (77%) tend not to trust **political parties** and, in France, this figure reaches 82%. The UK figure is broadly in line with the Union average at 79%.

Only a quarter (24%) of UK citizens trusted their **government** – the lowest figure in the EU and a figure seven percentage points over than the EU15 average figure of 31%.

In fact, the UK and EU15 average figures have shown a substantial fall over the past two years. In the autumn of 2001, 43% of the UK poll and 48% of the EU15 trusted their governments. These were historically high figures caused perhaps by the after-effects of 9/11. By the Spring of 2003, these figures had fallen to 33% and 37% respectively and were to tumble even further to just 24% and 31% by the autumn.

There was a high level of 'don't knows' in the data making up the EU15 results with 17% of respondents not knowing whether or not they trusted the **European Union**. Particularly high figures were noted in Germany (23%), the UK (22%) and Ireland (21%).

There was a virtually even divide between the 41% of EU15 poll that tended to trust the European Union compared with 42% taking the contrary view. However, within these almost identical figures are concealed substantial variations.

For example, amongst the EU15 average of 41% who tended to trust the EU were figures as high as 65% in Greece and 61% in Portugal compared with just 20% in the UK and 28% in Sweden.

More than half (51%) of the UK poll tended to trust the **United Nations** – a figure close to the 48% EU15 average and a number showing a five percentage point increase over

the figures earlier in the year, although lower than the historical high at 59% in the Autumn of 2001.

- **Membership of the EU**

Opinion in the UK was virtually equally divided on this issue with 28% believing membership was a good thing, 29% believing it to be a bad thing and 30% seeing it as neither a good nor a bad thing.

These UK figures show a decline from the last survey with those believing membership to be a good thing falling from 30% to 28%. Across the EU, the fall was even greater with figures dropping since the Spring of 2003 from 54% to 48% - the lowest level since May 2001.

The UK 'don't know' figure on this issue, at 13%, although more than twice as large as the EU15 average of 6% has shown a steady decline from the 22% seen in May 2000. It appears that as this 'don't know' factor declines, opinions become polarized.

Marked differences were also apparent by age with 41% of those aged 15 to 24 believing the country had benefited. Only 25% of people in the oldest age bracket (55 or more) took this positive view.

Substantial variations were also noted based upon educational level. While just 22% of those who had left school at the earliest opportunity believed the UK's membership of the EU had been beneficial, substantially more than twice this number (52%) of those who had received education to age 20 or more held this positive view.

- **Important issues**

The most important issue was seen to be the **freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the European Union**. This was cited by virtually half (49%) of EU15 citizens and 41% of the poll in the UK.

The UK figures have risen steadily from 35% in 2002 to 38% (Spring 2003) to 41% in this latest poll while the average EU figures have stayed flat.

48% of EU15 citizens cited the **euro** as what the European Union meant to them. In the UK, however, this figure reached only 29% - similar to the 28% in Denmark and 24% in Sweden. The UK figure is up from the 24% earlier in 2003.

**Peace** was cited by 32% of EU15 citizens and 46% of Germans. In the UK, however, the figure falls to just 19% - the lowest in the European Union. Again, however, this figure is up from the 16% in April 2003.

- **Negative reaction to the EU**

27% of the UK sample and 24% of the EU15 said that the European Union meant a **waste of money** to them. These figures are, however, dwarfed by the 49% of Swedes who felt this way.

31% of the UK poll thought that the European Union represented **bureaucracy** - a sentiment even more strongly held by 49% of Swedes and 39% of Danes.

The UK was the country most sensitive to the **loss of its cultural identity** in this context and 30% of its poll said this was what the European Union meant to them. The EU15 average was 15%.

More than a third of the UK poll (34%) had a feeling of **indifference** when it came to their views on the European Union and, in fact, this was a view expressed by 21% of all EU15 citizens. This UK figure is down slightly from the 32% in Spring 2002/

26% of UK citizens (compared with 20% in 2002) admitted to having a feeling of **mistrust** with regard to the European Union. This figure is exceeded, however, by France (27%), Austria (27%), Finland (28%) and a particularly high figure of 35% in Sweden. The EU15 average was 19%.

- **If the EU were to be scrapped.....**

Slightly more than one in three (37%) of EU15 citizens were **indifferent** to this hypothetical scenario and in the UK this figure was one of the larger recorded at 45%.

On the other hand, while 37% of EU15 citizens would be **very sorry** about the demise of the European Union with constituent figures as high as 63% in Luxembourg and 51% in Ireland and Italy, only one in six (17%) of UK citizens shared this emotion.

Turning to those EU citizens who would be **very relieved** if this scenario were realized, while this sentiment was felt by 6% or less of Portuguese, Luxembourgers, Greeks and Irish, figures of 28% from Sweden, 29% from the UK and 30% from Finland, at the other end of the opinion spectrum, made up the 15% EU15 average.

- **Teaching children about the EU**

An issue which found very strong support in the UK was that **children should be taught about the way the European Institutions worked**. This found favour with more than two out of three (68%) of the UK poll, although this figure is down from the 72% noted in the April 2003 poll.

- **Effective EU action**

The most effective area of action was seen to be the **maintenance of peace and security** in Europe – a view held by 54% of the UK poll and more than two-thirds (68%) of the EU15 average. These figures are, however, slightly down from the 58% and 69% seen a year previously.

In the wake of a number of food scares over the past years, 52% of the UK poll and 56% of that across the Union believed that action taken is effective in the area of **guaranteeing the quality of food products**. These figures compare with 57% seen in both the UK and EU15 twelve months before.

- **Joint actions by EU Member States**

The need for EU Member States to **agree a common position when faced with an international crisis** met with the agreement of eight out of ten (81%) of all EU citizens and was also the most widely accepted ideal amongst UK citizens where 71% tended to agree with the statement. Figures as high as 89% were observed in Italy.

The need for the EU to have a **rapid military reaction force** was accepted by more than two-thirds (68%) of UK and EU (69%) citizens. This was most welcomed by the Greeks and Italians (75%), while it was least popular amongst the Finns (53%).

81% of Greeks were the most enthusiastic EU Member State tending to agree that the Union should have a **common policy towards asylum seekers** and, while this was a view held by just 62% of Danes and 65% of UK citizens, the average EU15 figure was 71% taking this positive view.

- **Enlargement option**

The most popular option in this question on an EU15 basis was that the EU should be **enlarged to include only some of the countries wishing to join**. This average figure of 37% was considerably higher in the Netherlands (50%), Greece (57%) and Denmark (58%), while, in the UK, it was relatively low at 28%.

This 28% was also the number of UK citizens who believed in an 'open door' policy which **would allow all countries who wished to join the EU being admitted**. This policy was particularly popular in Spain (38%) and Italy and Sweden (37% each), while the EU15 average was one in four of those polled at 25%.

23% of EU15 citizens favoured the 'shut door' policy whereby the EU **should not be enlarged to any additional countries**. This view found particular favour in France (41%), Belgium (33%) and Luxembourg (32%), while the figure in the UK was slightly less than the EU15 average at 21%.

A substantial 19% of the Irish, 18% of the UK and 17% of the Spanish polls were unable to express an opinion. The UK figures show a polarisation of attitude as the 'don't know' figures are down slightly from the 21% earlier in the year and well below the 31% seen in 2001.

- **Should the EU have a constitution?**

62% of the EU thought that the European Union should have a constitution and this figure rises to 74% in both Greece and Italy. EU15 figures in this report have remained relatively stable in surveys since 2001 at which point they were also 62%.

In the UK, support runs at just 48%, ahead of the 46% in Denmark and just behind the 49% in Finland. The UK figures have risen from 44% in 2001, although they are lower than the 52% noted in April 2003.

The level of 'don't knows' on this issue was very high with individual figures of as much as 40% from Ireland, 38% from the UK and 36% from Portugal all contributing to the EU15 average of 28%.

Even in France – the cradle of modern European constitutions – the 'don't know' factor reaches almost one in three of those polled – at 32%.

- **Election of the President of the Commission**

A third of EU15 citizens (34%) and a slightly higher percentage (37%) of UK citizens made the **direct election of the President of the Commission by the citizens of the European Union** their most popular choice. In the previous survey, in April 2003, the figures in both the UK and EU15 were 33%.



This figure rises as high as 40% in Greece, 43% in Belgium and 50% in Luxembourg, while figures at the opposite end of the scale are noted in Finland (19%) and Sweden (26%).

- **Term of office of the President of the Council**

Virtually half (49%) of the individual UK poll and the EU15 average believed that the period of the Presidency should be **extended beyond six months in order to achieve significant results**. These figures are very similar to the 51% of the EU and 50% of the UK poll of April 2003. This view appealed to as many as 60% of the Dutch and 59% of the French in the poll.

Noticeably less support for this extended period was given by the Irish (34%) and the Austrian and Spanish polls where a figure of 36% was noted.

27% of EU15 citizens, however, took a contrary view and believed **the six-month period should be retained as it gives each Member State the chance to hold the Presidency on a regular basis**.

A number of countries were particularly keen for the current system to be continued and noticeably high figures in this respect were seen in Denmark (48%), Finland (46%) and Austria (44%). The UK figure in support of this was the lowest in the Union at just 18%.

- **The right of veto in the Council**

40% of UK citizens and a similar 41% of EU15 citizens believed that the right of veto should **be retained in order to preserve essential national interests**. While the UK figure has not changed since earlier in 2003, the EU15 average has fallen sharply from 47% reflected in part by an increase of three percentage points among the 'don't knows'.

This view met with considerable favour amongst an absolute majority of Greeks (65%), Austrians (61%), Luxembourgers (54%) and Danes (53%).

- **Knowledge of the European Union**

This question uses a subjective view of respondents' feelings as to their level of knowledge about the European Union with the figure one being allocated to those who considered they **knew nothing at all** on this subject rising to ten for those who considered they **knew a great deal**.

The statistic that emerges most strongly is that, compared with the EU15 average of 7% who claim to **know nothing at all** about this subject, the figure for the UK is twice as large at 14%. However, this is a radical improvement as the response to this question was 22% earlier in the year and at the turn of the century was 25%.

- **Actual sources of information about the European Union**

In this multiple choice question, **television** was cited by two-thirds of the EU15 poll (66%) as being a source of information about the European Union.

**Daily newspapers** were one of the sources of information on the European Union for 44% of the UK sample and a similar 46% across the European Union. The press, however, suffers from being one of the least trusted sources of information.

**Radio** – one of the UK's more trusted sources of information – was cited by 28% of UK citizens and 31% of the EU15 poll as a source of information on the EU.

A quarter (25%) of the UK sample **never looks for such information or were not interested** compared with an EU15 average of 17%.

As a method of looking for this information, the **Internet** was selected by 18% of UK citizens and 16% of people across the European Union. The UK figures have doubled from the 8% figure of November 1999 and the EU15 average has also grown strongly from the 6% noted at the same time.

Noticeably higher figures involving more than a quarter of those countries' polls were seen in the Netherlands (27%), Sweden (27%), Denmark (27%) and Finland (26%).

There were also noticeable variations by age and education. 33% of people aged between 15 and 24 selected the medium compared to just 7% of those aged 55 or more.

Also, while only 5% of those educated to age 15 or less were in this category, more than seven times this number (37%) was observed among those educated until age 20 or more.

- **Preferred sources of information about the European Union**

**Television** was the preferred source of information about the European Union by both the domestic UK (48%) and EU15 (60%) polls.

In fact, compared with the other Union countries, the UK had the lowest figure while, in Portugal, the figure rises to 74%.

39% of EU15 and 37% of UK citizens would like to get information on the European Union from their **daily newspapers**. On looking at the EU15 as a whole, this was the medium selected by 54% of the Dutch poll but only 23% of the Portuguese.

In the UK, this figure has risen (if somewhat erratically) from 26% in 1999, while, across the EU, the figures have remained relatively flat.

**Radio** was given as one of the preferred options for this purpose by 25% of UK and 28% of EU15 citizens. Again, in the UK, this figure shows a steady increase virtually doubling from 13% in 1999, while EU15 figures again remain fairly steady.

Across the European Union, the medium was most selected for this purpose by the Danes (49%) while it was one of the choices of just 17% of the Italian sample.

- **Level of coverage by media of the EU**

The largest proportion of UK respondents (35%) felt that the level of media coverage of the EU was **about the right amount**. This feeling was held by 44% of the EU15 average and particularly high figures were noted in Denmark (70%), Finland (63%), Austria and Sweden (56%) and Ireland (53%).

However, 34% of UK citizens and 37% across the Union feel that there is **too little** media coverage compared with figures of just 17% and 11% respectively for those believing in media coverage being **too much**.

There appears to be a media vacuum that should be filled.

- **Attitude of the media towards the EU**

The key result of this question is that more than a quarter (27%) of UK citizens believe that the UK media present the European Union too negatively compared with less than half (12%) this number who think it is presented too positively.

This 27% of UK citizens believing that the media paint too gloomy a picture is more than twice the EU15 average and substantially ahead of the country with the next highest score (France with 16%).

The UK 'don't know' figure is 27% - slightly ahead of an unusually high EU15 average figure of 24%.