

EUROBAROMETER 62

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

AUTUMN 2004

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IRELAND

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Introduction

For the first six months of 2004, the Irish government held the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. During this period, enlargement of the European Union took place and agreement was reached on the draft European Constitution. In June, elections were held for a new European Parliament.

This is the sixth report in a series of six-monthly reports on Irish attitudes to the European Union. Each report is based on evidence from the most recent Eurobarometer survey of public opinion. While this report is based mainly on *Eurobarometer 62.0* (autumn 2004), we also examine *Eurobarometer 62.1* (November 2004) because it focused on the issue of the draft Constitution.

Attitudes Towards European Integration

The European Union continues to enjoy widespread support amongst Irish people.

Over three-quarters of Irish people (77 percent) regard Ireland's membership of the European Union as 'a good thing'.

Eighty-seven percent of Irish people believe Ireland has benefited from membership of the European Union.

It would appear that the downward trend in Irish approval of the European Union that began around the time of the first Nice Treaty referendum has been substantially reversed.

Levels of European and National Identity

The question of identity is relevant to the issue of a new constitutional treaty. Constitutions are more than legal texts they can be seen as expressions of a political identity and of the values that a society holds to be important.

Irish people are more likely to feel close to their own country than they are to Europe (80 percent feel 'very attached' to their own country while only 23 percent say that they are 'very attached' to Europe).

When we include the next highest level of proximity ('fairly attached'), 72 percent of Irish people feel at least 'fairly attached' to Europe.

Amongst Irish respondents, more than twice as many people are 'very proud' of their own nationality than are 'very proud' of their identity as Europeans. However, when we include the second strongest level of pride, 'fairly proud', 82 percent say they are at least 'fairly proud' to be European.

Fifty-six percent of Irish respondents are afraid that the building of Europe will result in a loss of national identity and culture (37 percent of Irish respondents are not afraid of this).

The vast majority of Irish respondents report that having seen the European flag (92 percent) and most are able to identify it as representing Europe (91 percent). Most Irish people regard the European flag as 'a good symbol for Europe' (82 percent).

Two-thirds of Irish respondents say they identify with the European flag (a fifth state that they do not). Sixty percent of respondents agree that the European flag should be beside the national flag on public buildings (19 percent disagree).

Seventy-five percent of Irish respondents report that the European Union conjures up a positive image (four percent say it has a negative image).

In Ireland, 59 percent of respondents say the European Union gives them a feeling of 'hope', 23 percent a feeling of 'enthusiasm' (23 percent) and 17 percent a feeling of 'trust'. With regard to 'negative' feelings, the most salient is 'indifference' (19 percent) with just seven percent having feelings of 'anxiety' and four percent feelings of 'mistrust'.

Three-quarters of Irish people tend to agree that 'we are more stable economically because Ireland is a member of the European Union'. However, 74 percent of respondents in Ireland fear that the 'the building of Europe' will involve 'the transfer of jobs to other member countries which have lower production costs'.

The other salient fear about the integration process amongst Irish respondents is 'an increase in drug trafficking and international organised crime' (70 percent).

Most people are willing to allow for joint decision-making when there is an international dimension to the policy area (the fight against international terrorism, organised crime, trade and exploitation of people and drugs, the currency, support for regions in economic difficulties, protection of the environment, foreign policy, humanitarian aid and scientific and technological research).

People are concerned that decision-making with regard to other issues should remain within domestic decision-making structures (law and order within their own country and policy areas such as health and social welfare, education, culture and regulation of the media).

Public opinion in Ireland diverges from that in the 25 Member States on a number of other issues. Amongst Irish respondents 59 percent believe that the Irish government should make decisions on defence policy, decisions in relation to immigration (53 percent) and accepting refugees (60 percent).

Salience of the European Parliament and Other European Institutions

The European Parliament remains the most familiar European institution to Irish respondents. Almost all Irish respondents (97 percent) report that they have heard of the European Parliament.

With regard to the other European Union institutions, the next most familiar is the European Commission (92 percent) followed by the European Central Bank (82 percent), the Court of Justice of the European Union (76 percent) and the Council of Ministers of the European Union (71 percent).

A Constitution for the European Union

In June 2004, the Member States agreed the text of the draft European Constitution.

The evidence of *Eurobarometer 62.0* suggests that 61 percent of Irish people are in favour of ‘a constitution for the European Union’ while 13 percent are against. However, the percentage of Irish people in favour of ‘a constitution’ is less than that amongst respondents in the 25 Member States (68 percent).

A quarter of Irish people have yet to make up their minds as to whether they are for or against ‘a constitution’.

The question in *Eurobarometer 62.0* is a very general question (‘a constitution for the European Union’) and does not refer to agreement on a draft European Constitution nor to the content of the Constitution.

In *Eurobarometer 62.1*, 28 percent of Irish respondents are in ‘in favour’ of the draft European Constitution and 5 percent are ‘against’ while a big majority, 67 percent, ‘don’t know’.

The reason for the large number of ‘don’t knows’ may lie in the preceding question which asks respondents ‘have you personally heard about the draft European Constitution?’ This question establishes the context for the ‘in favour/against’ question. In order to remain consistent, respondents are unlikely to articulate an attitude to something they have already admitted to not having ‘heard about’.

Amongst Irish respondents, 55 percent say ‘yes’ they have ‘heard about’ the draft European Constitution. However, the vast majority of these admit to knowing ‘very little about its contents’.

Of the 45 percent of Irish respondents who say they ‘know very little’, just less than half of these are in favour of the Constitution while almost half opt for the ‘don’t know’ response.

Of the 10 percent of Irish respondents who say they ‘know its contents’, a large majority of these are ‘in favour’ of the Constitution while about a fifth opt for the ‘don’t know’ response.

Given the context in which the draft European Constitution was agreed, it is somewhat curious that only 55 percent of Irish respondents say that they have ‘heard about’ the draft European Constitution. The reason why may have to do with the wording of the question. To have ‘heard about’ something suggests that someone has provided you with information about a particular object. The widespread media coverage of the agreement on the text of the Constitution in May and June 2004 suggests that people may have ‘heard *of*’ the Constitution but not *about* it. That is, they know of the Constitution’s existence but know nothing of its details.

A number of knowledge questions are asked in *Eurobarometers 62.0* and *62.1* (general knowledge about the European Union in the former and specific knowledge of the details of the draft European Constitution in the latter). While Irish people know few specific facts about the European Union, they know even less about the draft European Constitution.

Three percent of Irish people in *Eurobarometer 62.0* answer all six questions correctly while 13 percent fail to answer any question correctly.

In *Eurobarometer 62.1*, one percent of Irish people answer all six questions correctly while 34 percent fail to answer any question correctly.

Of the 45 percent of respondents who had not heard about the Constitution, 60 percent fail to answer a single question correctly, while 30 percent answer no more than three questions correctly.

Amongst those who feel they know the contents of the Constitution, only about half of these answer four or more questions correctly.

In the group that is more modest about its knowledge, that is those who feel they know ‘very little’, just over a third answer four or more questions correctly. Amongst this group of respondents, 16 percent fail to answer any question correctly.

These measures also allow us to examine the relationship between people’s knowledge and their attitudes towards a European Constitution.

The greater people’s overall knowledge of the European Union, the more likely they are to be in favour of ‘a constitution’ and the less likely they are to be unable to articulate an attitude.

A similar pattern is evident when we look at people’s specific knowledge of the provisions of the draft text and whether they tend to be in favour or against ‘the draft European Constitution’. The greater people’s knowledge of the draft text, the more likely they are to be in favour of ‘the draft European Constitution’ and the less likely they are to be unable to articulate an attitude.

Conclusion

Over the next couple of years, a number of countries, including Ireland, will be holding referendums as part of their ratification of the Constitution of the European Union.

While people may feel that they know little about how the European Union works, there is a general sense of good will towards the European project.

Analysis of the knowledge items in *Eurobarometers 62.0* and *62.1* also shows that there is a close relationship between knowledge and positive responses (either to the notion of a constitution in principle or to the draft Constitution itself).

It is clear that the higher the level of knowledge the greater the support for the Constitution.

This reinforces one of the main findings of the analysis of the Nice referendum, namely that low levels of knowledge were associated with both abstention and with voting 'no'.

The overall lesson of the Irish referendums on Nice is the need for elites to inform and engage with their citizens. Favourable attitudes to the European Union cannot be taken for granted as indicating a willingness to participate in a referendum, or to vote 'yes'. Failure to engage people, to communicate with them and to mobilise them to vote may have serious consequences for the ratification process.