

EUROBAROMETER 63.4

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

SPRING 2005

NATIONAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY IRELAND

Standard Eurobarometer 63.4 / Spring 2005 – TNS Opinion & Social

The survey was requested and coordinated by the Directorate General Press and Communication.

This report was produced for the European Commission's Representation in Ireland.

This document does not represent the point of view of the European Commission.
The interpretations and opinions contained in it are solely those of the authors.

Introduction

- The Member States entered a ‘period of reflection’ after French and Dutch voters rejected the European Constitution.
- In Ireland, the government deferred setting a date for a referendum on the European Constitution.
- This is the seventh report on Irish attitudes to the European Union. This report is on Eurobarometer 63.4, fielded in Spring 2005.

Ireland and the European Union: Membership, Institutions, Issues and Knowledge

- Twenty-one percent of Irish respondents report that they have a ‘very positive’ image of the European Union and 47 percent say that they have a ‘fairly positive’ image.
- Eighty-seven percent of Irish people believe that Ireland has benefited from membership of the European Union.
- Three-quarters of Irish people believe that membership of the European Union is a ‘good thing’.
- Just over half of Irish respondents are ‘for’ developments towards political union while 16 percent are ‘against’ and 33 percent are undecided.
- For Irish respondents there is a tension between what role they would like the European Union to play and what role they expect it to play.
- Firstly, 34 percent of Irish respondents would like the European Union to play a more important role but 42 percent of people expect it to play a more important role.
- Secondly, 16 percent of Irish respondents would like the European Union to play a less important role but 10 percent expect it to play a less important role.

- For 35 percent of Irish respondents there is a tension between preferences and expectations about the future role of the European Union.

Awareness of European Institutions

- Irish respondents are more likely to have heard of an institution than respondents in the 25 Member States.
- Ninety-seven percent of Irish respondents report that they have heard of the European Parliament.
- Ninety-one percent of Irish respondents say they have heard of the European Commission.
- Eighty-four percent of Irish respondents say they have heard of the European Central Bank.
- Over 70 percent of Irish people have heard of the Court of Justice and the Council of the European Union.
- A significant majority of respondents in Ireland think each of the institutions plays an important role in the life of the European Union.
- Eighty-two percent of people think the European Parliament plays an important role.
- Sixty-two percent of people think the Council of the European Union plays an important role.

Issue Salience and EU Performance

- Fighting poverty/social exclusion is the action that most Irish people feel the European Union should prioritise (42 percent).
- Thirty-four percent of Irish respondents believe that the European Union should prioritise fighting organised crime/drug trafficking.

- Twenty-six percent of Irish people believe that the European Union should prioritise protecting the environment.
- Twenty percent of Irish people feel that the European Union should prioritise the fight against illegal immigration.
- By far the most salient issues for Irish people are crime (51 percent) and the healthcare system (49 percent). The next most salient issues are inflation (28 percent), immigration (12 percent) and housing (11 percent).
- The least salient of the issues facing Ireland are protecting the environment (five percent), terrorism (four percent) and defence/foreign affairs (one percent).
- Irish people feel the European Union is playing a positive role with regard to the economic situation (+50), protecting the environment (+39), terrorism (+30), public transport (+26) and defence/foreign affairs (+25).
- Irish people regard the European Union as playing a negative role in policy areas such as the healthcare system (-18), inflation (-11) and taxation (-8).

Sources of Information and Knowledge of the European Union

- In Ireland television is the most popular media source of information on the European Union followed by print media and then radio.
- About a fifth of people learn about the European Union through discussions with family, friends and colleagues.
- About a tenth of respondents in Ireland turn to books, brochures and information leaflets.
- People's usage of the internet as a source of information has increased over the last year to 17 percent from nine percent. Ireland has the fifth lowest usage of the internet for sourcing information on the European Union.

- Sixteen percent of Irish people say that they never look for information about the European Union or are not interested.
- Most people in Ireland feel that the European Union gets ‘enough’ coverage in their national media.
- People in Ireland tend to regard the media’s coverage of the European Union as objective (about 55 percent of respondents).
- A majority of Irish people (61 percent) talk about political matters with their friends at least occasionally.
- About a quarter of Irish people are informed about the European Union; they answer at least three of four questions correctly.

Irish Attitudes Towards the European Constitution

- In Ireland, 77 percent of people are aware of the European Constitution: 15 percent say that they have heard of the European Constitution and know its contents and 62 percent say they have heard of it but know very little of its contents. In Autumn 2004, only 57 percent of Irish people reported that they had heard of the European Constitution.
- Irish people are undecided about the European Constitution: half say that they do not have an opinion on the Constitution. Of those who do, the balance of opinion is for the Constitution (37 percent in favour and 13 percent opposed).
- The most salient reason Irish people have for supporting the Constitution is that it is seen as ‘essential for the smooth running of the European institutions’ (38 percent).
- Twenty-nine percent of Irish respondents support the Constitution because it ‘strengthens the feeling of European identity’.

- Twenty-six percent of Irish respondents support the Constitution because it ‘strengthens democracy in Europe/consults citizens’.
- Twenty-seven percent of Irish people support the Constitution because it ‘creates a true European citizenship’ and 25 percent support it because it is seen as ‘essential in order to manage the integration of the new Member States of the European Union.’
- Forty-one percent of Irish people are opposed to the European Constitution because they associate it with a ‘loss of national sovereignty’.
- In Ireland, 40 percent of people say that ‘lack of information’ is a reason for their opposition. About a quarter of Irish respondents answer at least four of six questions on the European Constitution correctly.
- The other salient reason offered by Irish people for their opposition to the Constitution is that it is ‘too complex’ (20 percent).
- Nine percent of respondents oppose the Constitution because it is too liberal with regard to the economy.
- Ten percent of people cite the absence of references to the Christian roots of Europe as a reason for opposing the Constitution.
- Three percent of Irish respondents say that ‘the Constitution does not go far enough’.
- The percentage of Irish people satisfied with democracy in the European Union (61 percent) is less than the percentage of people who are satisfied with democracy in Ireland (77 percent). Yet, concerns about democracy in the European Union are salient for 18 percent of Irish respondents who are opposed to the Constitution.
- Fifty-seven percent of Irish people agree that the Constitution will make the European Union ‘more democratic’, 53 percent agree that it will make the Union ‘more efficient’ while 45 percent agree that the Constitution will make the European Union ‘more transparent’.

- Sixty-eight percent of Irish people agree that the Constitution will make the European Union ‘stronger in the world’, 62 percent of Irish people agree that the Constitution will make the European Union ‘more competitive economically’ and 53 percent believe that the European Constitution will make the European Union ‘more socially-minded’.
- In Ireland, only a third of respondents say they ‘would vote’ in a future referendum on the European Constitution.
- Respondents in Ireland are less likely to trust domestic political institutions than they are international institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union.
- Fifty-six percent of Irish people trust the United Nations, 48 percent of Irish respondents trust the European Union and 57 percent of Irish respondents trust the European Parliament.
- Forty percent of Irish people ‘tend to trust’ the national parliament and the government and 24 percent of Irish respondents say they ‘tend to trust’ the political parties.
- When it comes to getting information about the European Constitution a larger percentage of people trust the Irish government the most (28 percent) than trust the European Parliament (five percent) or the European Commission (six percent).

Future Enlargement of the European Union and Attitudes Towards Turkish Membership

- Twenty-nine percent of Irish respondents favour an enlargement of the European Union that includes *all* of the countries wishing to join.
- Thirty-nine percent of respondents in Ireland favour limiting enlargement to include only *some* of those countries that wish to join.
- Thirteen percent of Irish respondents are of the opinion that the European Union should *not be enlarged* to any additional countries.

- The most favoured countries amongst both sets of respondents are Switzerland and Norway (favoured by over 70 percent) and Iceland (favoured by 62 percent).
- Forty percent or less of Irish people favour the membership of Serbia and Montenegro, Albania and Turkey.
- More than 90 percent of Irish people, either in favour of, or against, Turkey's membership of the European Union, agree that 'to join the European Union in about 10 years, Turkey will have to respect systematically Human Rights' and that 'to join the European Union in about 10 years, Turkey will have to significantly improve the state of its economy'.
- Irish people in favour of Turkish membership are likely to agree that Turkey is part of Europe because of its geography (90 percent), its history (80 percent), that Turkey's accession will enhance understanding between European and Muslim values (81 percent), strengthen security and help rejuvenate an aging European population (70 percent).
- Irish people against Turkey's joining the European Union are likely to agree with the view that the cultural differences 'are too significant to allow for this accession' (78 percent).

Conclusion

- The European Union is at an important stage in its development.
- Most Irish people are positive about the European Union and Ireland's membership.
- While there remains a lot of uncertainty about the European Constitution, amongst Irish people who have made up their minds there is a clear majority in favour of it and people recognise its importance.
- Moreover, many Irish people see the Constitution as providing a source of European identity.
- Opposition to the Constitution also focuses around concerns about lack of information and how the Constitution will affect Irish sovereignty.