

EUROBAROMETER 65

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

SPRING 2006

NATIONAL REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IRELAND

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The interpretations and opinions contained in it are solely those of the authors.

Introduction

The Irish government published a White Paper on the European Constitution in October 2005.

This report is based on *Eurobarometer 65.2*, which was conducted in spring 2006.

Irish Public Opinion toward Membership of the European Union

Seventy-three percent of Irish people feel that Ireland's membership of the EU is a "good thing", with just seven percent feeling it is "bad thing".

A large majority of Irish people believe that Ireland has benefited from EU membership (87 percent) with just seven percent dissenting from this view.

Seventy-three percent of Irish people have a positive image of the EU while just six percent have a negative image and 17 percent have a neutral image.

Irish People's Trust in Political Institutions

Irish people are more willing to trust international institutions than domestic institutions.

Fifty-seven percent of Irish people say that they tend to trust the European Union while 59 percent of Irish people tend to trust the United Nations.

The percentage of Irish people who tend trust the Dail is 44 percent while 42 percent tend to trust the Irish government and 32 percent political parties.

Almost everyone in Ireland has heard of the European Parliament (97 percent). People are also very familiar with the European Commission (89 percent) and the European Central Bank (83 percent).

Irish people who have heard of the Court of Justice of the European Communities are more likely to trust it than any of the other EU institutions (70 percent). Large percentages of respondents who have heard of the other institutions also tend to trust them and there is little difference in the percentages.

What the European Union means for Irish People

Fifty-four percent of Irish respondents associate "freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the European Union" with the EU. For Irish people, the single currency (53 percent) is as salient as freedom of movement. Other salient aspects of the EU for Irish people are "economic prosperity" (41 percent), "stronger say in the world" (28 percent) and "peace" (26 percent).

Less than ten percent of Irish people associate the EU with "not enough control at external frontiers" (nine percent), "unemployment" (seven percent), "bureaucracy" (seven percent) and "waste of money" (six percent).

The Media and Sources of Information on the European Union

Very few respondents in Ireland feel that there is too much coverage of the EU on either television or radio or in the press. About a quarter of people feel there is too little coverage of the EU in the media.

People feel that the media deals with the EU in an objective manner. About ten percent of people say that the media's approach to the EU is too negative while about 15 percent feel the media are too positive in their coverage of the EU.

When people look for information on the EU, the three most popular sources of information are television, newspapers and radio.

Only 16 percent of Irish people use the internet to gather information on the EU.

Irish people are more likely to report that they never look for information on the EU (17 percent) than respondents across the 25 Member States (12 percent).

Policy Issues and the European Union

Irish and European Economies and Standards of Living

Ninety-four percent of Irish people regard their quality of life as good and 83 percent feel their financial situation is good. Irish people are more positive about their national economy (92 percent) than they are about the economic situation in Europe (79 percent). Eighty-five percent of Irish people are positive about the employment situation in Ireland.

Eighty-three percent of Irish people feel that quality of life is better in Ireland than Europe while 81 percent believe that the Irish economy is better and 79 percent that the employment situation is better in Ireland. Irish people also feel that the Irish education situation is better than in Europe (80 percent) and 68 percent believe that the social welfare situation is better in Ireland.

When it comes to the environment in Ireland, 54 percent believe it is better in Ireland, 33 percent feel it is less good with just six percent saying it is identical.

Compared to the Japanese economy, more Irish people feel the European economy is performing worse (23 percent) than better (19 percent) though a quarter of Irish people believe the European economy is performing as well as the Japanese economy.

Irish people tend to be somewhat more positive about the performance of the European economy relative to the Chinese, American and Indian economies. That said, significant proportions of Irish people are unable to compare the performances.

To improve the European economy, 60 percent of Irish believe there is a need to improve education and professional training, to use energy more efficiently (49 percent) and to support investment in transport infrastructure (40 percent). Only 15 percent feel that increasing the legal number of working hours will improve the performance of the European economy.

European Union Policy

The two most salient issues for Irish respondents are crime (between 52 and 54 percent) and the healthcare system (between 45 and 47 percent).

Rising prices/inflation is a salient issue for between a fifth and a quarter of Irish respondents while housing is a concern for about 15 percent of respondents.

Less than ten percent of Irish people are concerned about the economic situation, terrorism, education, taxation, pensions and defence/foreign affairs.

Irish people regard the EU as having a very positive effect on the economic situation, on protecting the environment, defence and foreign affairs and on fighting terrorism.

Thirty-eight percent believe the EU should prioritise fighting poverty and social exclusion and 34 percent feel it should fight organised crime and drug trafficking.

Twenty-seven percent of Irish people feel the EU should prioritise protecting the environment.

Despite the salience of fighting terrorism and illegal immigration in the media, only about 16 percent of Irish respondents feel that the EU should prioritise these policy issues.

There is little demand for prioritising the welcoming of new Member States amongst Irish (13 percent) respondents.

Few Irish respondents believe that the EU should prioritise reforming the institutions of the EU and the way they work (six percent).

Irish Public Opinion toward the European Constitution and their Expectations about European Integration

In Ireland, 79 percent of people report that they have heard of the European Constitution.

Sixty-six percent of Irish people admit that they know very little about its contents.

The Irish people who are most likely to say they know the Constitution's contents are those who are most informed about the EU (47 percent), managers (22 percent), self-employed (20 percent), people with third level education (21 percent), people who place themselves to the right on a left-right scale (21 percent) and people living in Connaught/Ulster (20 percent).

In Ireland, 21 percent of people report that they have not heard of the Constitution. Forty-percent of those who are uninformed about the EU report that they have not heard about the Constitution, as do 33 percent of those with low levels of formal education, 30 percent of those who work in the home and 36 percent of unemployed.

In Ireland 48 percent are in favour of the European Constitution with 12 percent opposed and 40 percent are undecided.

Seventy-five percent of those who are very informed about the EU are in favour of the European Constitution as are 57 percent of males, 56 percent of those with a third level education, 59 percent of the self-employed, 63 percent of managers and 54 percent of those who live in Connaught/Ulster.

The groups in Irish society who are most likely not to express an opinion on the European Constitution are those who are not very informed about the European Union (65 percent), the young (48 percent), those with low levels of formal education (53 percent), people who work in the home (55 percent) and people who are unemployed (57 percent).

Irish people agree that the Constitution will make the European Union more democratic (55 percent), more efficient (55 percent) and more transparent (48 percent).

Irish people agree that the European Constitution will make the EU stronger in the world (66 percent), more competitive economically (60 percent) and more socially-minded (55 percent).

Thirty-five percent believe the Constitution should be renegotiated and 23 percent believe that the Member States should continue with the ratification process. Only a small percentage of Irish people believe that the European Constitution should be dropped (nine percent).

Almost half of Irish people (48 percent) believe that, in five years' time, the EU will play a more important role in their daily lives with eight percent expecting it to play a less important role and 35 percent expecting it to play the same role.

The percentage of Irish people who would like the EU, in five years' time, to play an important role is 37 percent with 12 percent liking it to play a less important role and 38 percent the same role.

Fifty-four percent of Irish people believe that, in five years' time, the EU will play a role in their lives that is equivalent to the role that they would like the EU to play in five years' time.

Conclusion

The Irish government's White Paper on the European Constitution would appear to have had little effect on Irish public opinion toward the Constitution. While most people have heard of the Constitution, a large majority of these continue to feel that they know little of its contents.

An important distinction needs to be made when considering Irish public opinion toward the European Union. It is important to distinguish between questions of a general nature about Ireland's membership of the EU and questions of a more specific nature, in this case the European Constitution.

While the White Paper is an important step, it is clear that much work needs to be done to inform Irish citizens about the European Constitution.