

EUROBAROMETER 68

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IRELAND

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Introduction

With a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in the offing, January 2008 is a good time to examine the evidence on current Irish attitudes to European integration. This is the twelfth in a series of six-monthly reports on Irish attitudes to the European Union. This report is based on *Eurobarometer 68.1*, which was conducted between 24 September 2007 and 21 October 2007.

Basic trends in attitudes to integration

- Seventy-four per cent of Irish respondents believe that Ireland's membership of the European Union is 'a good thing'. A miniscule 6 per cent view it as 'a bad thing'. Support for membership peaked at 82 per cent in 1997 but since then there has been a slight reduction in support levels. Only Luxembourg and the Netherlands currently have higher levels of support for EU membership, the Dutch case being a reminder that high levels of support for membership does not guarantee a 'yes' vote in an EU referendum.
- Irish support for membership climbed steadily in the 1980s having lagged behind the European average to that point.
- Eighty-seven per cent of Irish people believe that Ireland has benefited from EU membership, the highest such score in Europe.
- Overall, Irish support for membership of the Union has remained at a very high level over the past twenty years, at a time when support for membership across the EU has declined substantially.

Policy attribution

Attitudes to integration involves more than overall judgements that membership is good/bad or whether a country benefits or not. Accordingly, respondents were asked for their views on whether decisions should be taken at national government level or jointly with the EU in relation to nineteen different policy areas.

- On fighting terrorism, support for the regions, scientific and technological research, energy, protection of the environment and defence and foreign affairs, a majority of Irish people said they favoured joint decision-making with the EU.

- In the areas of education, pensions, health and social welfare and tax, a majority of Irish respondents stated a preference for decisions to be taken by the Irish government.

Policy evaluation

Respondents were also asked to evaluate the role of EU decisions/actions in a range of policy domains. Evaluation of decisions/actions taken by the EU is best assessed by subtracting the proportions of negative responses from the proportion of positive responses for each policy item. This shows that:

- Irish people consider that the EU plays its most positive role in protecting the environment with a net evaluation of plus 33 points. They also believe the EU plays a positive role in the economy (29 point positive assessment), in fighting terrorism (20 point positive assessment) and in defence and foreign affairs (20 point positive assessment).
- Healthcare (minus 18 point negative assessment) is the policy area which Irish people think the EU has its least positive role. However, Irish respondents tend to consider health a national issue rather than a European one.
- Indeed, there are very high levels of don't know/neutral responses among Irish respondents in relation to whether the EU plays a positive/negative role in many of these policy areas. For example, 52 per cent of respondents were indifferent or did not know whether the EU played a positive or negative role in tax policy. Fifty per cent had the same view in relation to healthcare and 46 per cent in relation to defence and foreign policy. Thirty-eight per cent of Irish people were indifferent or did not know whether the EU played a positive or negative role in fighting terrorism while 37 per cent had the same view in relation to the economic situation and the EU's role in protecting the environment. But Irish respondents are not alone with as similar levels of indifference are exhibited by European respondents as a whole.

Finally, in terms of policy evaluation, respondents were also asked their views on four big issues that are central to the development of the Union.

- Irish support for the single currency remains extremely high with 87 per cent favouring the European Monetary Union. But there is much less support for

the single currency across the Union as a whole with only 61 per cent of EU respondents favouring it. However, scepticism toward the single currency is mostly confined to countries who have not adopted it.

- Two-thirds of Irish respondents (67 per cent) favour the development of a common defence and security policy by the EU. Sixty-six per cent also favour a common EU foreign policy.
- There is little enthusiasm for further enlargement of the EU among Irish people with only 45 per cent favouring expansion, but Irish attitudes in this regard are identical to the European average.

Trust in political institutions

Commentators sometimes express concern that referendum issues are ultimately decided by voters who are in fact voting against incumbent governments or against the establishment. If this were so, the outlook for the Lisbon Treaty would look rather bleak.

- Trust in political parties is particularly low with only 22 per cent of Irish respondents placing trust in political parties, a figure that is identical to the European average.
- Trust in the Dáil and trust in the Irish government are remarkably similar. Thirty-three per cent of respondents profess trust in the Dáil while 32 per cent trust the Irish government.
- Irish people show higher levels of trust in European political institutions compared to domestic ones. As of autumn 2007, the most trusted political institution is the European Parliament with 63 per cent of Irish people professing trust in it. This is followed closely by the European Commission with trust in that institution currently at 60 per cent but this drops to 55 per cent in the case of the Council of European Union.
- While one can conclude that low levels of trust in politics may make things a bit uncomfortable for politicians campaigning on the doorstep, there is no evidence to suggest that the outcome of the referendum will be decided by attitudes to domestic politics.

Trust in the media

The media provide the channels through which what political institutions, political organizations and individual politicians say and do is communicated to the people.

- Irish people have higher levels of trust in the broadcast media than in the print media. Sixty-eight per cent of Irish respondents profess trust in the radio while 64 per cent said they trusted television. However, only 40 per cent of Irish people say they trust the press.
- Levels of trust in the internet remain low with only 32 per cent of respondents professing trust in it. But this low level of trust is coupled with a high level of don't know responses (33 per cent).
- All things considered, campaigners are likely to prefer to use radio and television rather than the print media to communicate their message as these forms of media carry greater credibility with the public.

Policy preoccupations in Ireland and Europe

Respondents were asked what are the two most important issues facing their country at the present time.

- Irish people have a different set of policy priorities compared to the European average. While European respondents are preoccupied with economic issues, Irish respondents are primarily concerned with crime and health.
- The three most important issues for Irish people in autumn 2007 were crime (57 per cent), health (45 per cent) and quite a long way behind inflation (22 per cent).
- The high levels of concern in relation to crime and health represent significant increases in the salience of these issues since 2003. Over the same period, concern with economic issues has tended to abate.

Irish images of the European Union

Attitudes to European integration can also be probed by examining the image people have of the European Union.

- When asked what image the EU conjures up for them, 69 per cent of Irish respondents said they had a positive image of the European Union compared to the European average of 49 per cent.

- But closer analysis of Irish responses to the image question shows that strong support for the Union is relatively small with only 21 per cent of respondents having a very positive image of the EU while the remaining 48 per cent only have a fairly positive image. Thus, the bulk of Irish support for the EU is not unqualified.

Determinants of attitudes to the EU

One can use the image indicator (as discussed above) in order to analyse, even if only in a preliminary way, the determinants or correlates of attitudes to the European Union.

Socio-demographics

- Variations in Irish images of the EU between the generations and the sexes are modest. Young people have a slight tendency to have a more positive image of the Union compared to the middle aged, while women have a slightly less positive image compared to men.
- Socio-economic differences are measured here by occupation and education. The highest frequency of positive image is found among managers (88 per cent), then among self-employed and other white collar workers (80 per cent). The positive image drops to 64 per cent among manual workers and 42 per cent among the unemployed.
- Sixty-four per cent of Irish respondents who have vocational or incomplete secondary education have a positive image of the EU. This rises to a 77 per cent positive image among Irish respondents who completed secondary education and to 83 per cent among individuals who have some third level education.

Perceptions of the economy

- Respondents were asked about how they evaluated the current situation in the national economy. Seventy-six per cent of Irish respondents thought the current economic situation in Ireland was good. This represents a 13 point drop on the number of people who said the situation was good in spring 2007.

A fifth of Irish respondents now think the economy is doing badly, a 12 point increase since spring 2007.

- Positive/negative assessments of the current economic situation are correlated with attitudes to European integration. While 77 per cent of Irish people who think the economy is doing well have a 'positive' image of the EU, this perception falls to 47 per cent among those who think the economy is doing poorly and to 5 per cent among those who judge the economic situation to be 'very bad'.

Identity

- A significant number of Irish people feel no sense of European identity. While only 6 per cent say they have no attachment to Ireland, 46 per cent say the same in relation to Europe.
- The stronger the sense of attachment an individual has to Ireland, the more positive image of the EU he or she is likely to have. Seventy-four per cent of those attached to Ireland have a positive image of the EU. This drops to 49 per cent among Irish people who do not feel attached to Ireland.
- Positive/negative images of the EU depend even more on a sense of European identity. Among those who feel 'very attached' to the European Union, 94 per cent have a positive image of the Union. This drops though to 84 per cent among those who are fairly attached and to 63 per cent among the not very attached category. Only 36 per cent of Irish respondents who feel completely unattached to the EU have a positive image of the Union.

Knowledge

Images of the EU are also affected by people's knowledge of European issues. *Eurobarometer 68.1* asked respondents three true or false questions on the EU's institutional workings.

- The decisive factor appears to be whether an individual knows anything or knows nothing. Eighty-one per cent of Irish respondents who got all three questions correct had a positive view of the EU. This positive image fell back to the mid-70s for those individuals who got one or two questions correct but

dropped substantially to 50 per cent for those who answer all questions incorrectly or said they did not know.

- Those who feel they understand the EU are much more likely to have a positive image of the Union compared to those who feel they do not understand or who don't know. While 83 per cent of those who understand how the Union works have a 'positive' image of the Union, only 62 per cent who don't have the same perception.

Conclusion

- Irish people remain broadly supportive of membership of the European Union but there is less enthusiasm among Irish people for integration.
- While Irish people are broadly positive towards the Union, there is a substantial lack of engagement with European issues. This is evidenced by the high levels of indifferent and 'do not know' responses given by Irish respondents when asked to evaluate the EU's role in various policy areas by the fact that the policy issues where responsibility is attributed to the Union are of low salience among Irish people anyway.
- Irish people have higher levels of trust in European institutions than domestic ones. But before coming to the conclusion that this will make ratification of a Treaty more difficult, one should bear in mind that there were similar low levels of trust in domestic institutions when the Nice Treaty was first rejected in 2001 and subsequently ratified in 2002.
- Irish people have significantly more trust in the broadcast media than in the print media. Sixty-eight per cent of Irish people trust radio and 64 per cent trust television. This compares to only 40 per cent who trust newspapers. This implies that messages coming from radio and television are likely to be viewed by the public as more credible, something which both sides of the campaign will no doubt consider.
- Socio-demographics do affect Irish respondents' image of the EU. The EU is viewed most positively by Irish people who are well off, better educated and those who are middle class. There are only small generational and gender differences with young people slightly more positive toward the EU than middle aged people and women slightly less positive than men.

- Political attitudes also play a role in determining positive or negative attitudes toward the EU. Irish people who have a strong sense of Irish identity are substantially more likely to have a positive view of the EU. Positive/negative image of the EU varies very strongly depending on one's sense of European identity.
- Individuals who have a better understanding of how the EU works and know something about the institutional workings of the Union are also more likely to have a positive view rather than a negative one.
- The challenge for the 'yes' camp in the forthcoming referendum on the Lisbon Treaty will be to mobilize the 'soft' support that exists in Ireland for the EU.