



EUROBAROMETER 69.2

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

SPRING 2008

NATIONAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY **IRELAND**

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Introduction

- This is the thirteenth report in a series of six-monthly reports on Irish attitudes to the European Union.
- The report is based on *Eurobarometer 69.2*, which was conducted between Friday 28 March 2008 and Wednesday 30 April 2008 just as the campaigns in the Lisbon Treaty referendum were beginning.

Basic trends in attitudes to European integration

Eurobarometer 69.2 confirms that Irish attitudes to the EU are quite positive:

- Irish levels of support for the EU have remained high over the past twenty years at a time when support for the Union across member states has declined.
- Eighty-two per cent of Irish people surveyed believed Ireland had benefited from membership of the EU, the highest such score in Europe. This compares to the EU average of 54 per cent.
- Seventy-three per cent of Irish people think membership has been ‘a good thing’. Only the Dutch rate membership of the EU nearly as high.

Trust in European Political Institutions

- The most trusted European institution by Irish people is the European Parliament with 62 per cent of respondents expressing trust in it. Sixty-two per cent also said they trusted the EU, an increase of seven points since autumn of last year and twelve points above the trust Europeans place in the EU.
- Trust in the European Commission and the Council of the European Union is lower with 54 per cent expressing trust in the Commission while 50 per cent said they trusted in the Council. Irish people expressing trust in these institutions. In both cases though, Irish people trust these institutions more than their European counterparts.
- However, a number of people said they did not know whether they trusted these European institutions or not. A quarter of people said they didn’t know whether they trusted the European Parliament while 37 per cent said likewise about the Council of the European Union. This suggests that many people do not know enough about the EU’s functions.

Policy attribution and evaluation

Respondents were asked whether they would prefer responsibility for specific policy issues to rest with the Irish government or whether decisions in the areas concerned should be taken jointly with the EU.

- *Eurobarometer 69.2* found that there had been a small but nonetheless significant shift toward a preference for the Irish government to take decisions on a number of issues.
- The increase in preference for the Irish government to take decisions was greatest in the policy areas that featured in the referendum campaign. There was a nine point increase in the number of people who wished the Irish government to take decisions in regard to agriculture and fisheries and taxation since last autumn. There was also an eight point increase in the number of people who wanted immigration policy to be decided solely by the Irish government.
- The decline in support for joint decision-making must be seen in the context of the developing referendum campaign where opponents of the Treaty said that Ireland would lose influence in these areas if the Treaty were accepted.
- But there is still majority support for the EU decision-making on a number of key issues. Sixty per cent of Irish people favour joint decision-making with the EU in respect of defence and foreign affairs and 63 per cent favour it in relation to protection of the environment.

Knowledge of the European Union & attitudes to National and European identity

People's attitudes to the EU are also shaped by their level of knowledge. *Eurobarometer 69.2* asked respondents a number of true/false questions on the workings of the EU.

- The evidence suggests that Irish knowledge of EU affairs is at best average and lags behind, for example, Danish knowledge of EU affairs. While 40 per cent of Danes answered all three questions correctly, only 29 per cent of Irish respondents did likewise. Only 10 per cent of Danes failed to answer any of

the questions correctly compared to over a fifth of Irish respondents (22 per cent).

- On a subjective assessment of their own knowledge, Irish people are split on whether they understand how the EU works. Forty-three per cent say they do while 47 per cent say they don't. These scores lag behind other countries that hold European referendums, such as the Netherlands and Denmark.
- When the objective measurement of understanding (the knowledge questions) were crosstabulated against the self-assessment of understanding the EU's workings, only 20 per cent of Irish people who answered no questions correctly said they understood how the EU work. This rose steadily the more knowledgeable a person was about the EU with 65 per cent of people who answered all the three questions correctly stating that they understood how the EU works.

Identity was an issue that was prevalent throughout the referendum campaign and may have had an effect on voting behaviour:

- Fifty-nine per cent of people said they felt 'very attached' to Ireland whereas only 10 per cent felt the same towards the EU. A significant number of Irish people felt no sense of European identity with 46 per cent saying they felt 'no attachment' to it while only 6 per cent said the same in relation to Ireland.
- When respondents were asked to look to their future identity, three-fifths of Irish citizens opted exclusively for an Irish identity rather than a combination of Irish and European. This places Ireland amongst the most nationally orientated member states on this indicator.
- Considering the fact that Irish people are much more attached to their national identity than a European identity, an integration referendum was never going to be easy.

Irish and European attitudes to Globalisation

Eurobarometer 69.2 examined respondents' attitudes to globalisation:

- Respondents were presented with a set of statements covering different aspects of this phenomenon. An assessment scale was created by subtracting the proportions of people who were negative about globalisation from the proportions of people who were positive about it. This showed that Irish

people were positively disposed towards certain broad macro-economic aspects of globalisation. There was a 39-point positive response to the proposition that globalisation provided an opportunity for economic growth while there was a 28-point positive response to the statement that globalisation meant more foreign investment for Ireland.

- But Irish citizens have a negative assessment of globalisation's effects on Irish culture and its effects on economic aspects that directly affect the citizen. There was a negative 15-point assessment to the proposition that globalisation represented a threat to Irish culture while there was a 41-point negative response to the statement that globalisation was profitable only for large companies and not citizens.
- Two-fifths of Irish people think that globalisation represents a threat to employment. On the other hand, 34 per cent said that globalisation represents a good opportunity for Irish companies thanks to the opening-up of markets.
- When Irish respondents were asked about the consequences of globalisation, 39 per cent of them said they associated it with relocation of some companies to countries where labour is cheaper. Forty-five per cent of respondents in the original fifteen member states said likewise, while only 27 per cent of respondents said this in the twelve new member states.

Trust in national political institutions and the media

- There was a modest increase in the expressions of trust in national political institutions among Irish people since autumn 2007. Trust in the Dáil was up nine points to 42 per cent, above the EU average of 34 per cent.
- Trust in the government and in political parties also increased by five points each but still remain relatively low. Thirty-seven per cent of Irish people say they trust the government while 27 per cent say they trust political parties. Both these scores though are above the EU average.
- The role of the media in a referendum is crucial in communicating the issues involved to the public. Radio and television are the two most trusted media sources by Irish people. Seventy-two per cent of citizens express trust in the radio while 68 per cent say they trust television. This is all the more significant considering the constraints placed on RTÉ's referendum coverage.

- The least trusted media source is the press with only 44 per cent of people expressing confidence in it, identical to the EU average.
- Although there has been a rise of eight points since *Eurobarometer 68.1* in the level of trust Irish people place in the internet, trust in the internet remains low with only 40 per cent of respondents saying they have confidence in it. But this is coupled with a high level of don't know responses (22 per cent).

The economy and expectations for the next twelve months

Respondents were asked about their expectations about the Irish economy for the coming twelve months. The result shows:

- There has been a substantial decline in Irish people's expectations regarding the future of the economy. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents believe the Irish economy will get worse in the coming year, a 23-point increase since autumn 2007. Only 9 per cent of people think it will get better.

Respondents were also asked their expectations regarding the country's employment situation, their expectations about the financial situation of their own household and their expectations about their personal job situation. Evaluation of these indicators is best assessed by subtracting the proportions of people who believed the situation would get worse in the coming twelve months from the proportions of people who believed the situation would get better or stay the same. This shows that:

- Irish respondents have a very negative outlook about the country's employment situation for the next twelve months. With a 38-point negative assessment of the country's future job prospects, Irish respondents are the most pessimistic in Europe in this regard.
- But Irish people are more optimistic about their own personal economic situation in the coming year. There was a 69-point positive assessment on our scale when respondents were asked about their own personal job situation and a 61-point positive assessment about the financial situation of their own household in the next year.

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 health and crime.
- The three most important issues for Irish people in spring 2008 were health (53 per cent), crime (51 per cent) and, quite a long way behind, inflation (22 per cent).
- Economic issues have tended not to be at the top of Irish people's agenda in recent years. But *Eurobarometer 69.2* indicates that the economy is becoming more important to Irish respondents. Fifteen per cent of people said unemployment is the most important issue facing the country (up five points on autumn 2007) and 14 per cent said the economy was the most important issue (up six points).

Understanding the Lisbon Referendum Outcome

In the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, held on 12 June 2008, the Treaty was rejected by a margin of 53.4 per cent to 46.6 per cent. Fifty-three per cent of the electorate turned out to vote. *Flash Eurobarometer 245*, a post-referendum survey conducted by Gallup for the European Commission casts some light on why the Treaty was rejected by Irish voters:

- The striking feature was the proliferation of reasons underlying the 'no' vote (although the methodology used may have affected the range of individual items identified as a cause of the 'no' vote). The main stated by respondents who voted 'no' was that they felt they did not know enough about the Treaty (22 per cent). The second most cited reason was a wish to protect Irish identity (12 per cent).
- An examination of socio-demographics indicates that occupation was associated with vote choice. While a majority of professionals and managers voted 'yes', a substantial majority of manual workers (those who turned out to vote that is) voted against the Treaty (74 per cent).
- Support for the Treaty dwindled among young people with a majority of voters in all age categories below 55 voting 'no' to Lisbon. However, there was a high abstention rate among young people with only 36 per cent of 18-24 year olds voting in the referendum.

- But to understand fully the reasons why the Treaty was rejected by Irish voters more research is necessary.

Conclusion

- In general, Irish public opinion towards Ireland's membership of the European Union continues to be positive. However, there are several qualifications to this support.
- There was a small but important in shift in preference in Irish people's attitudes to joint decision-making with the EU. There were increases in the numbers of Irish people expressing the view that decisions in certain policy areas should be made solely by the Irish government. This shift was evident in many of the policy areas which played a role in the Lisbon campaign: agriculture and fisheries, taxation and immigration.
- Knowledge of the EU among Irish people is average and lags behind Denmark, another country which holds EU referendums.
- A majority of Irish people (60 per cent) say they see themselves as Irish only. Coupled with the 59 per cent who say they are 'very attached' to Ireland indicates that an integration referendum in these circumstances was not going to be a walkover.
- Fifty-nine per cent of Irish people are pessimistic about the future of the economy. A majority of people are also fearful about future employment in the country over the next twelve months. However, Irish citizens are more optimistic about their own personal economic situation in the coming twelve months.
- Irish people place substantially more trust in European political institutions than they do in national political institutions. Irish people also have significantly more trust in the broadcast media than in the print media. This is significant in the context of a referendum campaign where the national public broadcaster's coverage is constrained.
- Turning to the referendum itself, the campaign was dominated by a proliferation of issues on both sides, particularly on the 'no' side. The most cited reason by respondents in the *Flash Eurobarometer 245* survey for voting 'no' to the Lisbon Treaty was a lack of knowledge of the issues involved.

- Given the nature of the accumulation of issues in the referendum campaign, soft support for the EU was vulnerable to a vigorous ‘no’ campaign.
- Further analysis though is required to determine fully the reasons for Ireland’s rejection of the Lisbon Treaty.