



Standard Eurobarometer 76

**PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION
Autumn 2011**

NATIONAL REPORT

IRELAND

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Directorate-General for Communication.

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Standard Eurobarometer 76 / Autumn 2011 – TNS Opinion & Social

Contents

Introduction.....	2
Irish economic and political context.....	2
Knowledge of European affairs	3
Probing the 2020 agenda.....	5
Media usage	8
Conclusion	11

Figures and Tables

Figure 1 Subjective knowledge of the European Union by EU member state, Autumn 2011 (QD2).....	3
Figure 2 Objective knowledge (of membership) by EU member state, Autumn 2011 (QA15).....	4
Figure 3 Objective knowledge (of Swiss membership) by EU member state, Autumn 2011 (QA16).....	5
Figure 4 Importance of Europe 2020 initiatives, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011 (QB1.1).....	5
Figure 5 Ambition of objectives to be reached by 2020 in the EU, Ireland and EU average (QB2.1).....	6
Figure 6 Perception of EU priorities in Europe 2020 agenda, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2020 (QB3a, QB4a, QB5a, QB6a, QB7a, QB8a, QB9a).....	7
Figure 7 EU going in right direction, Ireland and EU average, 2010-2011.....	8
Figure 8 Percent consuming media every day or almost every day, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011 (QD3).....	9
Figure 9 Use of news sources on European political matters, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011 (QD5).....	9
Figure 10 Relative trustworthiness of institutional and official websites, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011 (QD8).....	10
Figure 11 Expectations of role of online social networks, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011 (QD13.1).....	11
Table 1 EU going in right direction by level of subjective knowledge of European matters, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011.....	13

This national report for the European Commission’s Representation in Ireland was written by Professor Richard Sinnott (UCD Geary Institute) and James McBride (Irish Social Science Data Archive)

Introduction

The European Union is in the midst of a fundamental crisis that is both economic and constitutional. European leaders are inevitably preoccupied with the high politics of fiscal federalism. Meanwhile ordinary politics and policy making proceed off-stage, as it were, seeking by way of medium-term policy-making to bring growth back into the system and to deal with the challenges of widespread unemployment and creeping social exclusion.. In many ways we are back to the original dynamics of European integration as captured in the concept of spillover.

Against this background, the present Eurobarometer national report focuses on the Europe 2020 agenda¹ with particular reference the public's perceptions and evaluations of policy and policy-making and of how the media portray the process and the issues involved. First, however, the report takes a look at the economic and political context in which Ireland and the European Union find themselves in this European crisis.

Irish economic and political context

The Irish economy has, as documented in previous National Reports, undergone an extended period of painful contraction, culminating in November 2011 in a request for financial assistance to the IMF and the EU's European Financial Stability Facility. With fieldwork for EB76.3 taking place approximately 12 months after the submission of the request for assistance, almost nine months after a change of government in the February 2011 general election, and about two weeks before yet another austerity budget, how did the economy look?

The best that can be said of the current state of the economy is that it has not continued to collapse at the scale experienced in the early stages of the current crisis. Unemployment continues to rise, though at a slower rate than in the previous two or three years. According to the most recent figures available, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate has risen to 14.4%², compared to the 13.5% recorded in the EB74 National report. Despite signs of growth in the agricultural and industrial sectors, the economy as a whole continues to contract, GDP decreasing by 1.9% in the third quarter of 2011³.

Shortly before fieldwork commenced for EB76.3, Ireland held its first major ballots since the February 2011 general elections, when a presidential election, two referendums, and a parliamentary by-election were held on the 27th October. Both elections were won by the Labour Party, with Michael D. Higgins inaugurated as the country's first Labour

¹ Europe 2020 is the EU's growth strategy for the coming decade. The Union has set objectives in five areas - on employment, innovation, education, social inclusion and climate/energy - to be reached by 2020, with each member state adopting its own national targets in each of these areas. Concrete actions at EU and national levels underpin the strategy. The strategy website, <http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020>, outlines these objectives in detail, and tracks member state progress towards meeting the objectives.

² *Quarterly National Household Survey: Quarter 3 2011*, p. 1.

http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/labourmarket/2011/qnhs_q32011.pdf

³ *Quarterly National Accounts: Quarter 3 2011*, p.1.

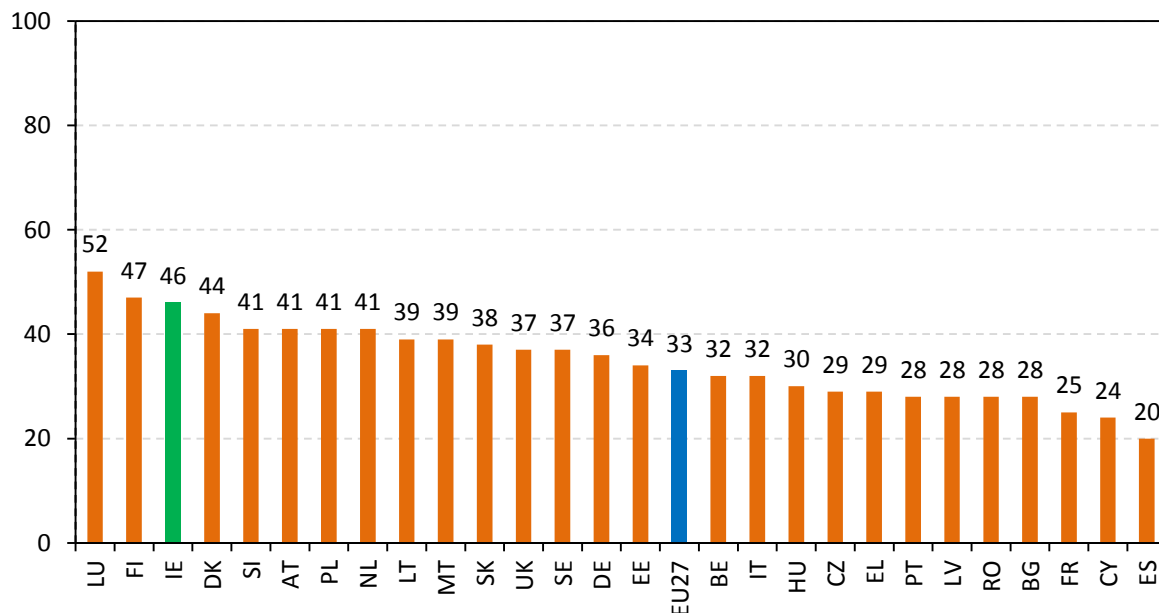
http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/economy/2011/qna_q32011.pdf

president on 11th November. In winning the accompanying by-election, which was held following the death of Fianna Fáil deputy leader (and former Minister of Finance) Brian Lenihan, Labour became the first governing party to win a by-election in almost 30 years. Despite that loss, which left the party with no Dáil representatives in Dublin, Fianna Fáil had reason for longer term optimism, their vote increasing by approximately 4.5% over their general election performance. As for the referendums, it was a case of “win some, lose some” for the government, as it prevailed on the vote giving it the power to reduce judges pay in line with similar cuts in other parts of the public services, but it lost on the vote to increase the power of the Houses of the Oireachtas to conduct inquiries into matters of general public importance.

Knowledge of European affairs

The set of Eurobarometer questions designed to measure awareness of and attitude to Europe 2020 present the respondent with a not inconsiderable cognitive challenge. However, the fact of the matter is that these are complex issues and their complexity must be taken into account in formulating questions in a survey of this sort. Thus, knowledge of the European Union is measured in EB 76 by two subjective indicators and two objective indicators. The subjective questions ask to what extent does the respondent think that people in Ireland are well-informed or not well-informed about the EU. Then, the individual respondent is asked to what extent do you think you are well, informed about European matters (see Figure 1).

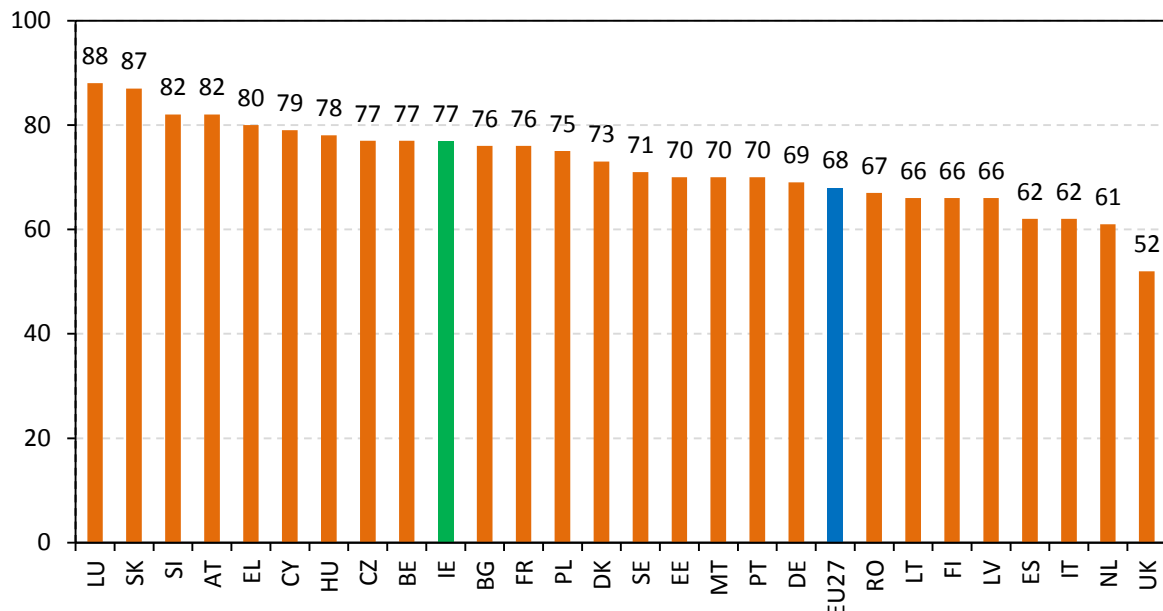
Figure 1 Subjective knowledge of the European Union by EU member state, Autumn 2011 (QD2)



On both measures Irish respondents are highly ranked (second and third respectively). Specifically, 41% of Irish respondents see their fellow citizens as well informed in regard to European matters and 46% see themselves as well informed. The fact that Irish people are highly ranked on these subjective measures might be regarded as encouraging.

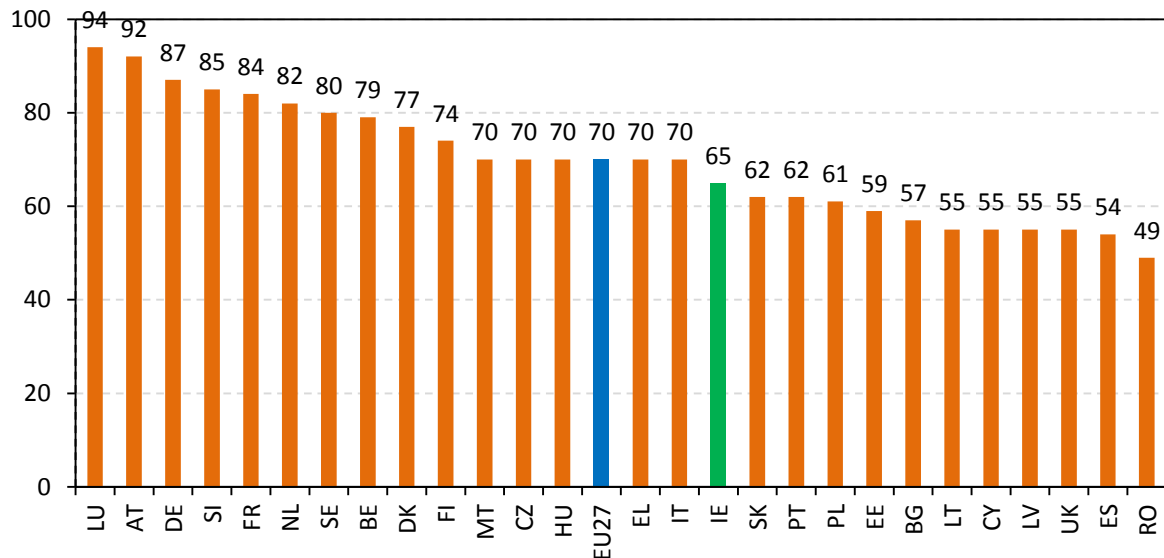
However, levels of subjective knowledge in the low forties, even if better than the level in most member states, has to be regarded as low in absolute terms and certainly low in a state that has faced regular referendums on European integration issues. The two objective questions might also be seen as an indication of a well-informed electorate. The absolute levels of knowledge captured by the two items is indeed considerably higher than that identified by the subjective questions. Thus, 77% of Irish people give the correct answer to the question or proposition that the EU currently consists of 27 member states, placing Ireland 10th from the top in the ranking of the 27 members and substantially ahead of the European average (Figure 2). The second objective question suggests a qualification to this picture of a high level of knowledge. This is because only 65% get the right answer – namely, that Switzerland is not a member of the EU (Figure 3).

Figure 2 Objective knowledge (of membership) by EU member state, Autumn 2011 (QA15)



In an ideal research design we would have more than two items with which to measure objective knowledge. However, what we have is in line with previous research on knowledge and attitudes to the EU, which shows that there is a substantial section of the population who are not well informed on an objective basis, and a much larger proportion who are not confident either in the knowledge of their fellow citizens or in their own knowledge of EU matters. This should come as a warning to politicians and campaigners that there is a lot to do to prepare the electorate for their decision-making role when they are called upon to vote in referendums on European issues.

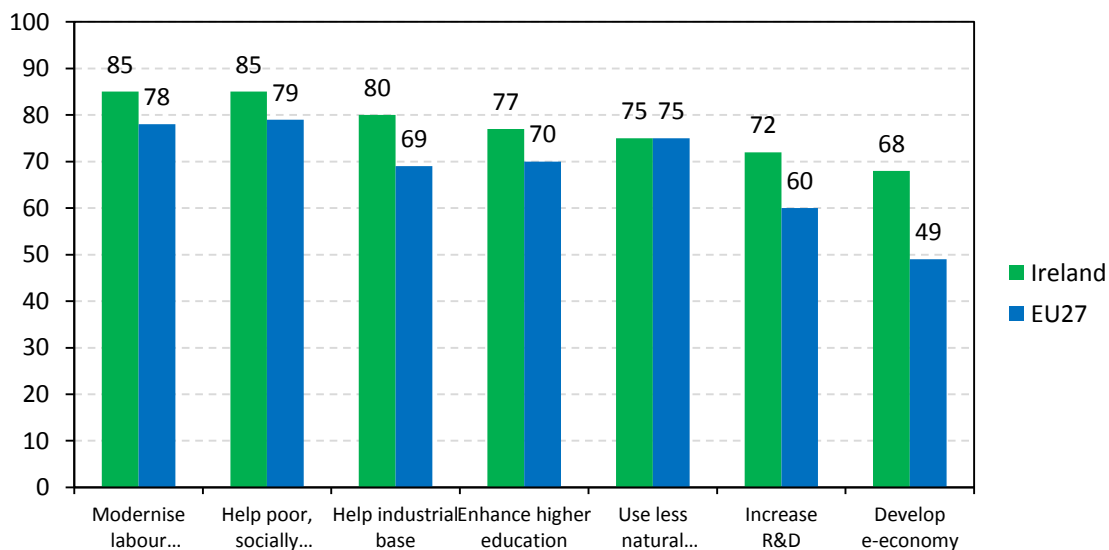
Figure 3 Objective knowledge (of Swiss membership) by EU member state, Autumn 2011 (QA16)



Probing the 2020 agenda

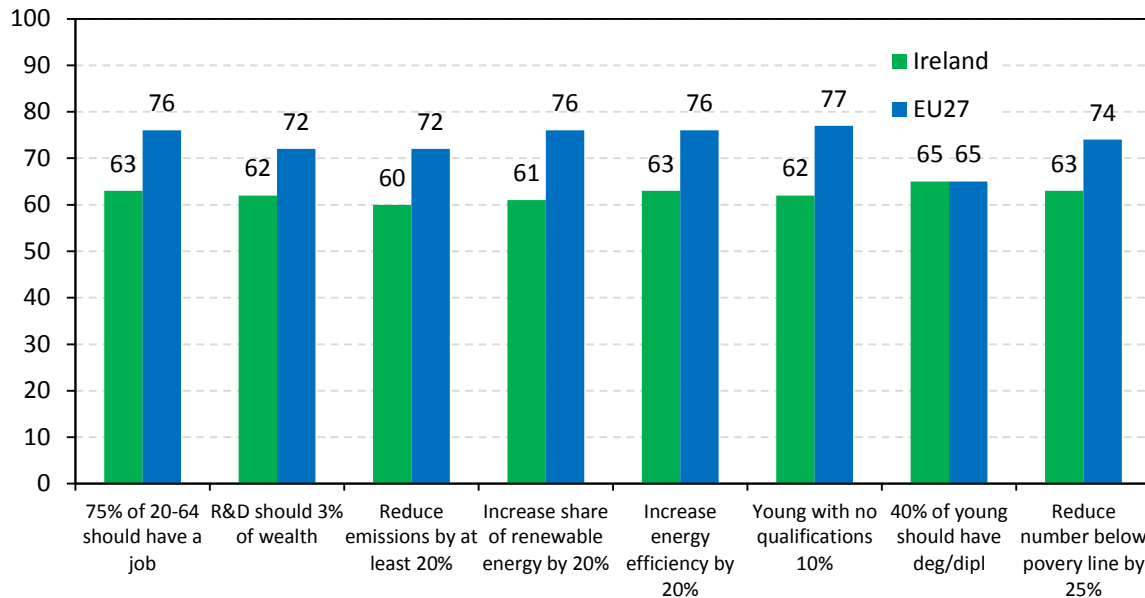
Eurobarometer 76 allows us to compare the salience of seven issues that are central to the 2020 process (Figure 4). In relation to each issue the survey asks the respondent to indicate how important that issue is for the EU to exit the present financial and economic crisis and prepare for challenges of the next decade. The responses were recorded on a scale from 1 to 10 where one means that the respondent thinks the initiative is not at all important and 10 means it is very important.

Figure 4 Importance of Europe 2020 initiatives, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011 (QB1.1)



Not unusually this kind of data indicates levels of salience that are rather high. Thus, 85% of Irish respondents say that the modernisation of labour markets is a very important issue, very important being measured by a score of 7 to 10 on the 10 point scale. The tendency for the European average to be lower than the Irish figures is consistent across six of the seven issues. The exception here is the proposal to use less natural resources. In this case the salience scores registered by the European Union and by Ireland are identical. The largest gap in the salience between the European average and the Irish figure is the 19 percentage point difference on the issue of developing the e-economy. In summary, Irish levels of the salience of these issues tends to be significantly higher than the EU average. From this it would appear that there is a greater appetite for these initiatives in Ireland in comparison to the European Union as a whole.

Figure 5 Ambition of objectives to be reached by 2020 in the EU, Ireland and EU average (QB2.1)



EB 76 also measures the public's evaluation of policy options in the 2020 agenda by asking the respondent: Thinking about each of the following objectives to be reached by 2020, would you say it is too ambitious, above right or too modest? The objectives envisaged in this question include the issues of employment, research and development, reduction of emissions, increased share of renewable energy, increased energy efficiency, young with no qualifications, youth with degree or diploma and how to reduce by 25% the number of people who are below poverty line.

Figure 5 shows that when we turn to the evaluation of the objectives of Europe 2020 policy, the European average is more pro-EU intervention and, with one exception, outstrips interventionist sentiment in Ireland by 10 percentage points. The exception to this observation is that 40% of young people should have a degree or diploma. This elicits identical support from Ireland and from the European Union as a whole.

Next in this series, EB 76 addresses the question of EU priorities in a number of areas. The areas considered are young people, industry, energy, poverty, jobs and skills, innovation, and the Internet. Each question presents three policy alternatives in dealing with these issues.

Figure 6 Perception of EU priorities in Europe 2020 agenda, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2020 (QB3a, QB4a, QB5a, QB6a, QB7a, QB8a, QB9a)

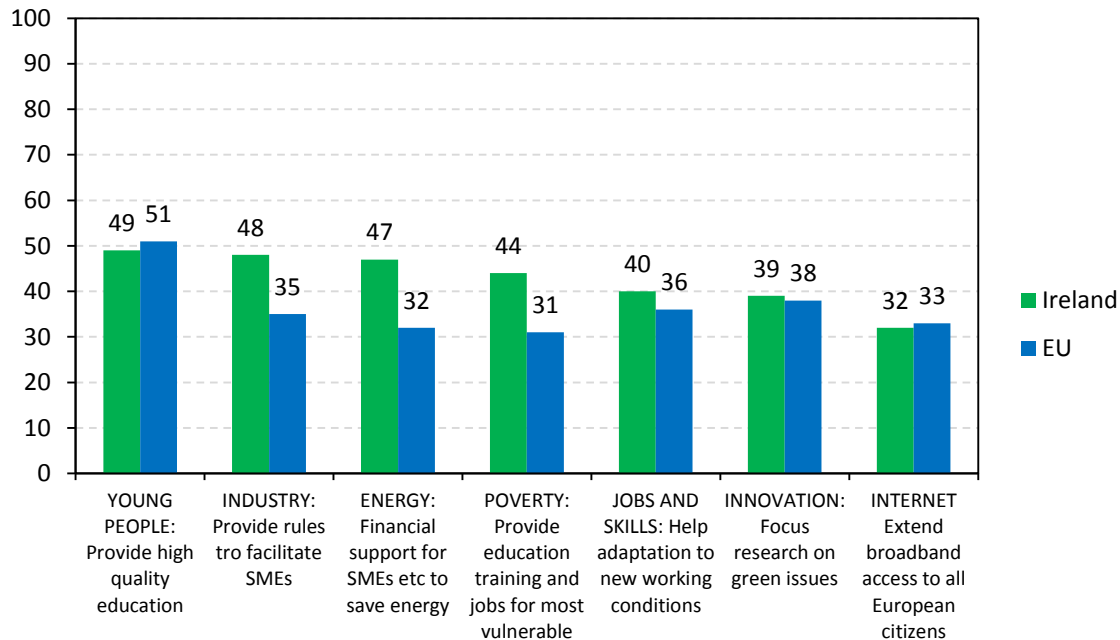
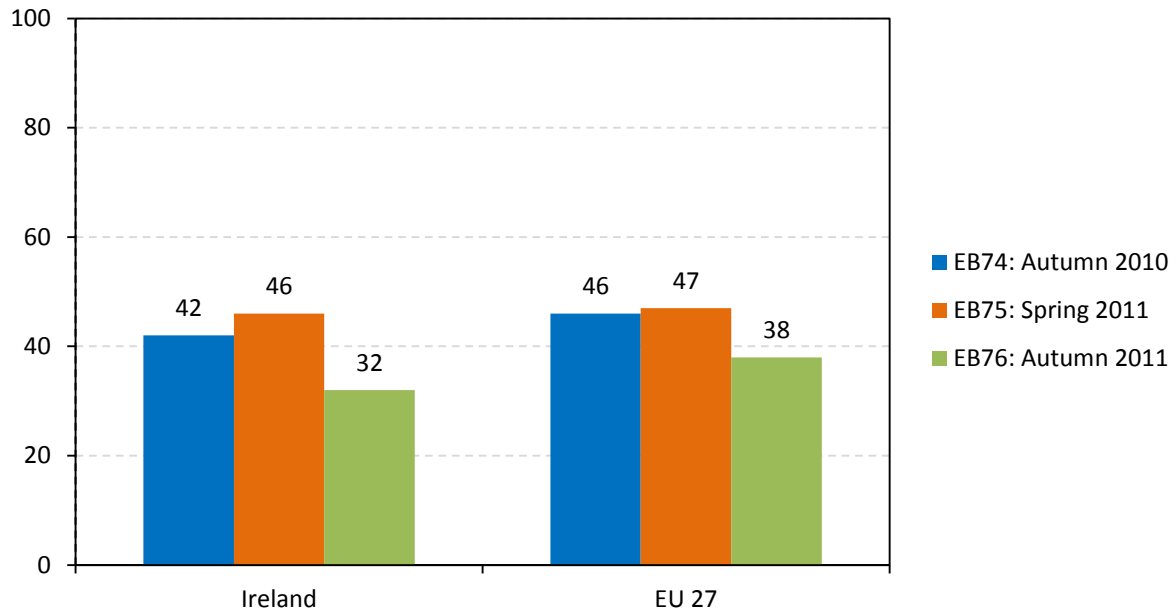


Figure 6 provides a synoptic view all of the data collected in this way. Ireland and the European Union are more or less at one in giving most emphasis to providing high-quality education for young people. In the Irish case almost equal emphasis is given to providing rules that facilitate the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises. Reasonably similar proportions of people also tend to concur on the importance of helping workers to adapt to new working conditions, focusing on research on green issues, and extending broadband access to all European citizens. The remaining two items address the issues of energy policy and poverty and in both cases the Irish data present a more clear-cut profile, being 15 percentage points ahead in advocating financial support for SMEs and 15 percentage points ahead in support of providing education, training and jobs as means of tackling poverty.

Given the complicated policy-making process behind the Europe 2020 agenda, it is particularly useful to have a simple question that summarises respondents' views. The question is as follows: having heard about the priorities of the EU, do you think that the EU is going in the right direction or in the wrong direction to exit the crisis and face the world's new challenges. The results for Ireland and the EU average are presented in Figure 7. The question has been asked on three separate occasions and, accordingly, provides an indication of attitude change between autumn 2010, spring 2011, and autumn 2011. Between autumn 2010 and spring 2011 attitudes remained essentially the same – a

plurality of approximately 40 to 45% gave a positive response. However, in autumn 2011 positive sentiment in both Ireland and the European Union fell significantly and fell more in Ireland than in the European Union. Positive sentiment in Ireland fell by 14 percentage points compared to 9 percentage points for the EU as a whole

Figure 7 EU going in right direction, Ireland and EU average, 2010-2011

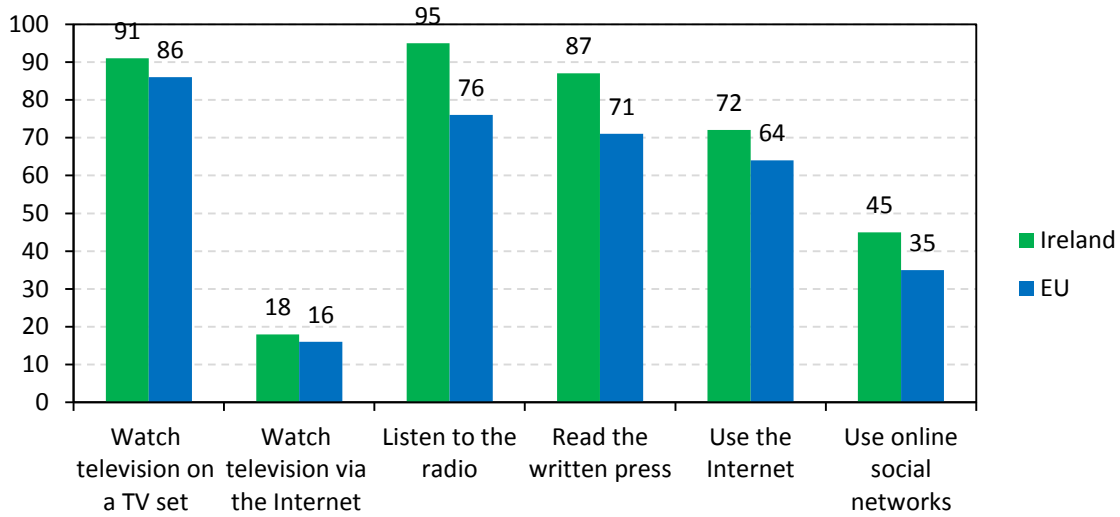


Media usage

As already indicated, politics and policy-making in the European Union presuppose a knowledgeable and reasonably sophisticated citizenry. Examples of the kind of sophistication required are exemplified in the questions used in EB 76. However, the challenge of adequately measuring public opinion must be met if the democratisation of the European Union is to be consolidated. In the light of all this, EB 76 collected quite extensive data on the media usage and media attitudes of respondents.

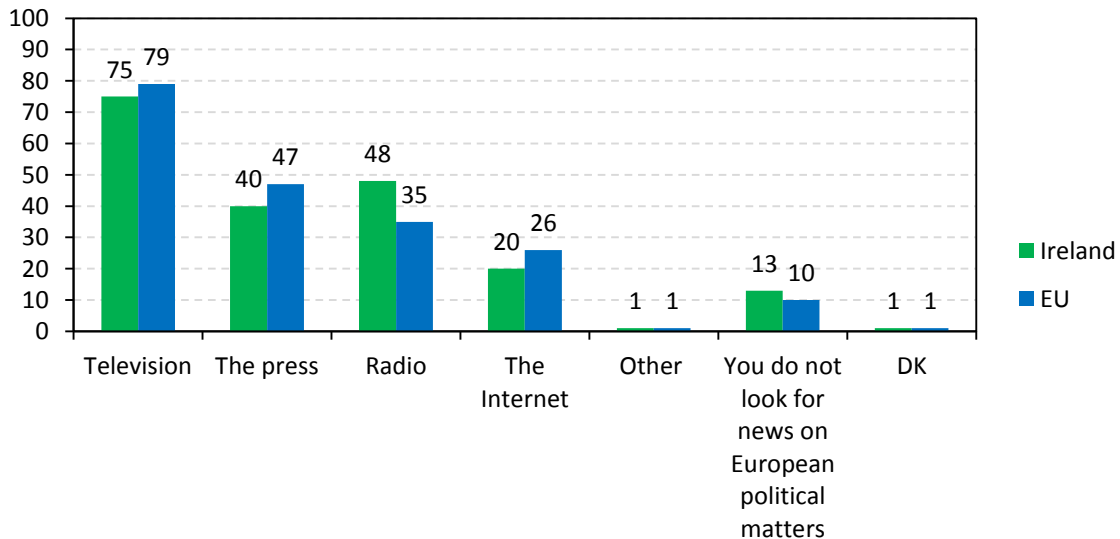
Figure 8 shows that television exposure has reached close to saturation point in Ireland and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in the European Union as a whole. 91% of Irish respondents claimed to watch television every day or almost every day. This compares with a European average of 86%. Further differentiation is apparent if we compare consumption of radio and the written press – 95% of Irish people listen to the radio on a daily basis compared to 76% of the EU population. When we look at the readership of the written press, the contrast between Ireland and the EU average is still a substantial 16 percentage points. Important also is the evidence of the extent of usage of the Internet and online social networks – 72% of Irish people compared to 64% of the population of the EU. The more recent development of online social networks is lower on the scale but still quite substantial – 45% in Ireland and 35% in the EU

Figure 8 Percent consuming media every day or almost every day, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011 (QD3)



The foregoing observation relate to media consumption in general, that is irrespective of content. This is the potential pool of citizens who are, as it were, available to receive political communication. In order to understand the role of the media it is essential to look specifically at News sources that deal with European political matters. This is shown in Figure 9. These data give rise to some modifications to the picture of general media usage. Thus, news sources on European political matters are found in television watching first and foremost with a substantial gap around 30 percentage points to the next most frequent usage -- the press at 40% for Ireland and 47% for the European Union as a whole. Radio shows an opposing contrast, Irish consumption of radio coverage of European political matters is significantly higher than the media consumption pattern in the European Union as a whole

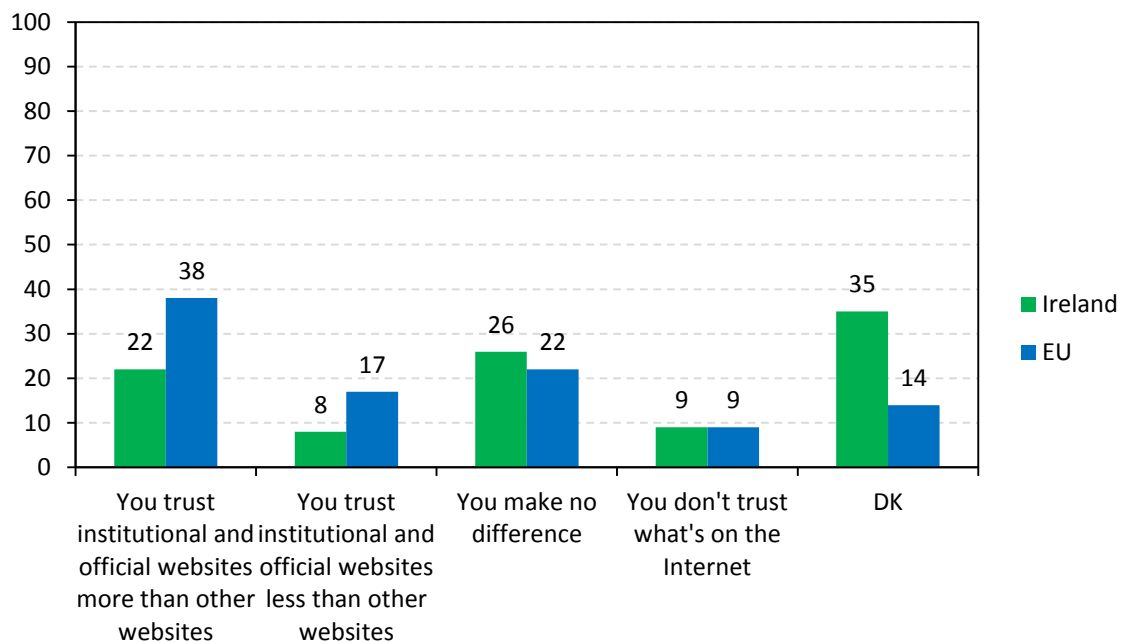
Figure 9 Use of news sources on European political matters, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011 (QD5)



We noted the quite extensive penetration of the Internet in both Ireland and in the European Union as a whole. When we restrict attention to Internet usage as a source of news about European political matters the rate of take-up of the Internet drops dramatically – from 72% using the Internet in general to 20% using it in relation to political matters in Ireland. Fall-off in the European case is from 64% to 26%. This leaves the political use of the Internet just slightly higher in Europe as a whole and in Ireland -- 26% compared to 20%. It is clear that full realisation of the potential of the Internet as a tool for communicating with the citizens about European matters is still a long way off.

Many factors affect access to the Internet, including psychological factors and attitudes of trust and distrust. EB 76 asked respondents which of two statements is closer to their own opinion. The statements were you trust institutional and official websites more than other website versus you trust institutional unofficial websites less than other websites. The results are shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10 Relative trustworthiness of institutional and official websites, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011 (QD8)

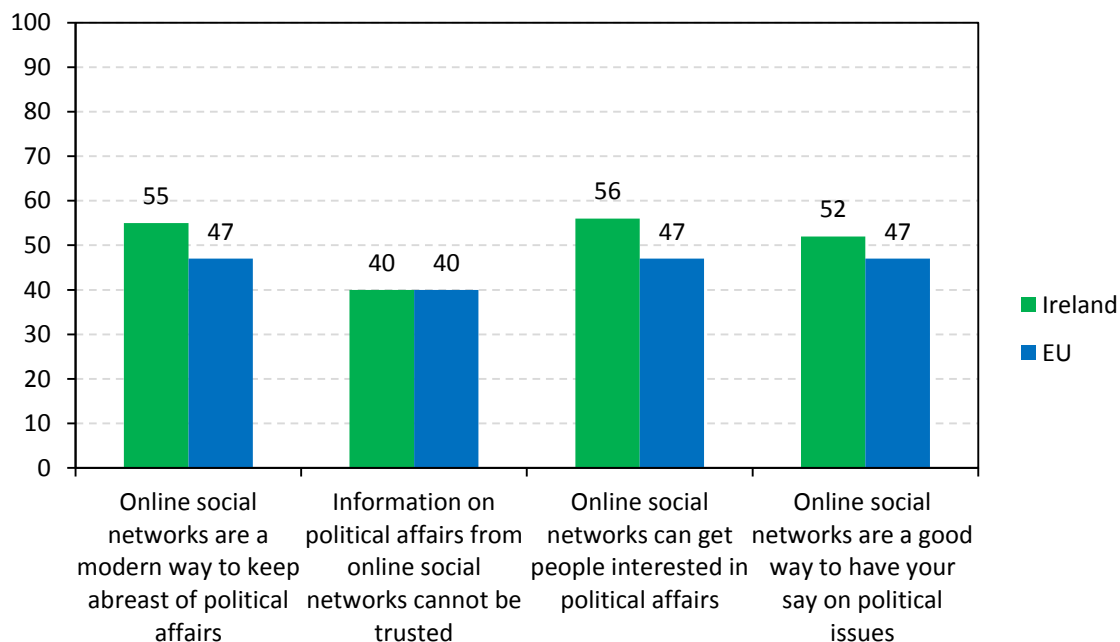


Irish respondents are significantly less likely to answer with a positive sense of trust in institutional and official websites than is the case with respondents from the European Union as a whole – only 22% of Irish respondents express trust in the institutional and official websites more than in other websites compared to 38% of respondents in the European Union as a whole. 26% of Irish respondents say it makes no difference, 9% say they don't trust what on the Internet at all – 35% compared to 14% in the Union as a whole.

One can summarise these responses as mixture of scepticism – the fact only 22% trust institutional and official websites more than other websites – and agnosticism – the fact that 35% give a don't know response to this question.

In an effort to probe more deeply into contemporary attitudes to the Internet and specifically into social networks, respondents were first asked: Regardless of whether you participate in online social networks or not – networking websites, blogs, video hosting websites, - please tell me whether you totally agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, or totally disagree with each of the following statements. The interviewer then put four statements to the respondents. As Figure 11 shows there is relatively little variation in the responses as between Ireland and the European Union and also relatively little differentiation between respondents within each of these political entities -- 40% or more agree with all of the statements, the highest endorsement agreement with the statements is 56%. In this case Irish respondents tend to be very slightly more positive about this aspect of Internet use, respondents in Ireland being more likely to agree that social networks are a modern way to keep abreast of political affairs and more likely to endorse the view that social networks can get people interested in political affairs.

Figure 11 Expectations of role of online social networks, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011 (QD13.1)



Conclusion

This brings us to the “so what” question. Does all, or even any, of this matter in terms of the approach to developing a communications strategy to support the Europe 2020 agenda? Obviously, this is a complex and difficult question that cannot receive anything like a comprehensive answer on the basis of the present evidence.

Recall the question asked at the end of section B of Eurobarometer 76. Respondents were questioned as follows: Having heard about the priorities of the EU, do you think that the EU is going in the right direction or in the wrong direction to exit the crisis and face the new world challenges (QB10). This question is designed to get at the overall response of the citizen to the 2020 agenda.

As with all questionnaire items this question must be treated with some caution, the danger being a syndrome whereby the respondent, faced with a question about something that they have just been exposed to, generates an attitude on the spot in preference to leaving himself or herself open to the embarrassment of being shown to not be fully au fait with the subject matter of the interview.

However, given the extensive discussion of various aspects of the 2020 agenda in the questionnaire up to that point, it is reasonable to suppose that we are getting at real attitudes in this question and not simply ad hoc fabrications. We can therefore treat this variable as the dependent variable in an examination of what may affect the individual's assessment of the direction the EU is taking this way or that.

A second important variable in the analysis in this report is the measurement of the knowledge level of respondents. The question posed above then becomes an hypothesis if you like, the hypothesis or proposition taking the following form: those who are well informed regarding EU matters are more likely to believe that the EU is going in the right direction, while those who are less well informed are likely to believe that the EU is going in the wrong direction.

Subject to the limitations of a bivariate analysis of this sort, using the data in Table 1 we can conclude that level of knowledge is quite closely related to the belief that the EU is going in the right direction. Thus, 40% of the well-informed believe the EU is going in the right direction as compared with 27% of the not well-informed; the relationship is stronger again when the analysis is conducted across all 27 member states. In this case, 50% of the well-informed believe the EU was going in the right direction compared with 33% of the not well-informed.. These findings provide a link between our discussion of the 2020 agenda and our discussion of the knowledge of respondents. It provides quite substantial evidence in favour of the proposition that knowledge is related to positive attitudes to integration. In short, the more they know about it, the more they like it.

Table 1 EU going in right direction by level of subjective knowledge of European matters, Ireland and EU average, Autumn 2011

IRELAND

		<i>Subjective level of inform on Euro matters</i>			
		Well-informed	Not well-informed	DK	Total
<i>Is EU going in right or wrong direction?</i>	Right direction	40	27	25	33
	Wrong direction	23	21	4	21
	Neither	30	35	33	33
	DK	7	18	38	13
N		471	520	24	1015

EU27

		<i>Subjective level of inform on Euro matters</i>			
		Well-informed	Not well-informed	DK	Total
<i>Is EU going in right or wrong direction?</i>	Right direction	50	33	24	38
	Wrong direction	29	33	18	31
	Neither	16	22	26	20
	DK	5	13	32	11
N		8728	17540	326	26594