

EUROBAROMETER 67

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
IRELAND

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Introduction

Eurobarometer 67.2 was conducted at a time of heightened political activity and debate in Ireland. Domestically, voters were preparing to go to the polls for the first general election in five years. Some of the Irish public would have been aware that there was increased activity among EU leaders to resolve the issue of a constitution or ‘reforming treaty’ for the European Union.

Personal satisfaction and expectation over the coming twelve months

Let’s begin with the domestic dimension. This survey found Irish levels of personal satisfaction and expectation for the next twelve months to be high. When asked about the current state of the Irish economy, and its performance over the next twelve months, a high proportion of respondents viewed it as comparatively strong, though opinion on its future was more divided.

- Ninety per cent of Irish people are very or fairly satisfied with the life they lead.
- Forty-seven per cent believed their situation will improve over the next 12 months, with 46 per cent believing it will stay the same.
- Twenty-nine per cent of Irish people said they believe their job situation will be better in the next twelve months, with 57 per cent saying it will stay the same; only 4 per cent said they think their job situation will get worse.
- Seventy-one per cent of Irish people agreed that the national economic situation is much or somewhat better than the average of the EU countries; 68 per cent of respondents agreed that the employment situation is better or somewhat better than the EU average.
- On the future of the Irish economy over the next 12 months, 28 per cent said it will be better in the next twelve months, 37 per cent said it will stay the same and 27 per cent said it will get worse. Twenty-four per cent said the employment situation would get better, 38 per cent said it would stay the same and 30 per cent said it would get worse.

Most important issues facing the country in the next twelve months

In the context of the general election that was imminent when Eurobarometer 67.2 was conducted, the question of which two issues respondents felt were the most important facing the country showed up significant differences between Irish responses and those found across the EU.

- The most frequently cited issue in Ireland was healthcare, cited by 50 per cent of respondents. The second most frequently mentioned issue was crime, cited by 47 per cent of Irish respondents. Rising prices/inflation was the third most frequently cited issue in Ireland, cited by 28 per cent.
- On the issue of housing (the fourth most mentioned issue), 15 per cent of Irish people mentioned it compared with eight per cent of Europeans.
- Only on the issues of immigration and environmental protection did the level of responses in Ireland approach the EU level. Twelve per cent of Irish people mentioned immigration, compared with 15 per cent of people throughout the EU. Six per cent of Irish people mentioned protecting the environment, compared with seven per cent of citizens throughout Europe.
- Whilst 20 per cent of the EU's overall population mentioned the economic situation facing their country, only nine per cent of Irish people said it was one of the two most important issues facing Ireland.

Levels of political engagement

Despite the intense level of political debate in Ireland at the time this Eurobarometer was conducted, Irish levels of political engagement are low by European standards. Only 10 per cent of people said they discuss political matters frequently with friends, 58 per cent saying they discuss political matters occasionally and 17 per cent saying they never discuss it. The Irish level of frequent political discussion was low, with 16 per cent of Europeans discussing political matters with friends frequently. Despite the fact that an election was imminent, levels of political discussion in Ireland appear not to have changed over time. The proportion of people that said they discuss political matters frequently in this survey was the same as in Eurobarometer 66.1 (six months ago) and in Eurobarometer 57.1 (five years ago, also just before a general election).

When asked if they found themselves trying to persuade others of their views when holding a strong opinion, 44 per cent of Irish people said they did so often or from time to

time. This was the sixth lowest rate across the EU, with 50 per cent of Europeans overall saying they attempt to persuade others.

Attitudes to and knowledge of the European Union

In line with previous Eurobarometer findings, Irish attitudes to the European Union were found to be quite positive in this survey.

- Seventy-six per cent of people said they believe Irish membership to have been a ‘good thing’, with only seven per cent believing it to have been bad.
- Eighty-six per cent of people believed Ireland to have benefited from membership. This was the highest level of belief in membership having benefited a country across the Union.
- Sixty-eight per cent of Irish people said they had a very or fairly positive image of the EU. Twenty per cent said they had a neutral image of the EU, and seven per cent said they had a negative view of it.
- When asked what words of a selected choice came to mind when reflecting on the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome (this year) 34 per cent of Irish people used the word ‘hope’, 15 per cent used the word ‘satisfaction’ and six per cent used the word ‘pride’. The words ‘sorrow’, ‘worry’ and ‘disappointment’ were all used individually by less than three per cent of people. There was a high proportion of people with no opinion on this issue – 27 per cent used no words and 13 per cent said they didn’t know – suggesting a certain lack of political engagement with the European project on the part of some of the population.
- Levels of knowledge in Ireland of the EU’s workings were mixed. Respondents were asked to state whether three questions on EU institutional workings were true or false. Comparatively, Ireland had a high proportion of respondents with three correct answers (33 per cent respectively). Twenty per cent of Irish respondents gave one correct answer and 19 per cent gave no correct answer. Ireland ranked mid-table in terms of the proportion getting at least one answer correct.
- On a subjective assessment of their own level of knowledge, however, only 33 per cent of Irish people said they understood how the EU works, compared with an overall EU total of 43 per cent. Fifty-seven per cent said they didn’t understand how the EU works, while a further 10 per cent said they didn’t know. Only one country had a higher level of people subjectively stating they do not understand how the EU

works (Bulgaria had 28 per cent), with Italy and the UK on a similar level to Ireland's. This contrasted with high understanding levels claimed by Lithuanian people (60 per cent) and Slovenians (64 per cent). When the objective measurement of understanding (knowledge questions) is crosstabulated against self-assessment of understanding the EU's workings, we see that only 12 per cent of Irish people who answered no questions correctly said they understand how the EU works, the proportion rising to 26 per cent among those who answered one question correctly. Only 50 per cent of people, however, who answered all three questions correctly said they understand how the EU works.

Trust in political and societal institutions

Respondents of this survey were asked if they tended to trust or tended not to trust various political and societal (media-related) institutions.

- The radio and television were the institutions most trusted by Irish people, 77 per cent and 72 per cent respectively. These levels were high compared with other member state populations.
- EU institutions commanded mid-table levels of trust. Sixty-three per cent of Irish people said they tended to trust the European Parliament; 58 per cent of Irish people trust the European Commission and the European Central Bank; 49 per cent trust the Council of the European Union. Fifty-four per cent of Irish people said they tend to trust the EU itself, which is low by comparative standards, ranking beside France, Latvia, Austria and the UK.
- The lowest levels of trust in Ireland were found in relation to national political institutions and the written media and the internet. Forty-five per cent said they trust the press (written media); 43 per cent said they trust the national parliament; 41 per cent said they trust the national government; and 36 per cent said they tend to trust the internet.
- At 41 per cent, trust in the national government is low by comparative standards (66 per cent of people in Luxembourg and 73 per cent of people in the Netherlands said they trusted this institution), while trust in the national parliament is similar to the EU average but low compared with trust levels found in Finland (77 per cent) and Denmark (85 per cent).

Using a three-item measure of knowledge, we see a relationship between trust and knowledge. Over half of those who answered no question correctly said they tended not to trust the EU. This proportion drops to 35 per cent among those who answer one question correctly, and drops down further to approximately 25 per cent of those who answered two or three questions correctly. Conversely, less than half of those who displayed the least knowledge of the EU's workings trust it while over 70 per cent of those who displayed the most knowledge of the EU said they trust it. The hypothesis that those who know most about the EU are more likely to trust it is supported by these findings.

Policy attribution to national or EU level

Respondents were asked for their views on whether eighteen different policy areas should have their decisions taken at national government level or jointly within the EU.

- On key policy areas such as defence and foreign affairs, environmental protection, competition, and agriculture and fisheries, a majority of Irish people said they would prefer joint decision-making within the EU, broadly in line with public opinion in most other member states.
- In other key policy areas – crime policy, health and social welfare policy, taxation and the economy, education, transport and immigration – a majority of Irish people expressed a preference for decisions to be made at national government level.
- Only in the area of crime policy did the proportion of people favouring national decision-making contrast with the majorities in most other countries. Along with the UK, Bulgaria and France, Ireland was at odds with the majority of public opinion throughout the EU. Irish public opinion (along with opinion in the UK) might be explained by the fact that as an island nation the issue of cross-border crime is less obvious to the Irish public.
- On the contemporary issue of global warming, a large majority of Irish people, along with majorities in all other member states, supported the view that the EU should deal with the issue very urgently. Similar support existed in Ireland, as well as throughout the EU, for a reduction of 20 per cent of carbon emissions by 2020. Support in Ireland and at overall EU level for both of these measures was approximately 90 per cent.

Enlargement

Irish attitudes to the 2004 enlargement were found to be quite positive.

- Forty-two per cent of Irish people said they had found it to have been a positive experience whether or not they expected it to have been so, with only 12 per cent saying they thought it was negative (again, irrespective of whether or not they expected it to have been so). The high level of positive responses was matched only by Denmark (42 per cent) and the low level of negative responses was matched only by Sweden (11 per cent). However, the 46 per cent non-committal response rate is a matter of some concern. Twenty-one per cent of people said they thought it had been neither positive nor negative, and a further 25 per cent of people said they didn't know.
- On the issue of further enlargement, however, only 43 per cent of Irish people said they are in favour of further enlargement to include other countries, with 38 per cent of people saying they are against it. Twenty per cent of people said they don't know. A majority in all member states that joined the EU in 2004 (and 2007) were in favour of further enlargement, but in Italy, Belgium, Ireland, Germany, France, Austria and Luxembourg less than 50 per cent of respondents supported the notion. When compared by blocs, 43 per cent of the "Former 15" supported further enlargement while in the "Accession 12" 68 per cent of people said they support it.

Attitudes to a European constitution

- Sixty-two per cent of Irish people said they are in favour of a constitution for the European Union (up four percentage points from the last Eurobarometer); 15 per cent are against a constitution (up three percentage points) and 23 per cent don't know (down seven percentage points).
- When support levels are examined over a period of two and a half years, we see that Irish support has increased from 54 per cent to 62 per cent in that time.
- The 62 per cent support level found in Ireland ranks mid-table comparatively, with high levels of 80 per cent, 82 per cent found in Slovenia and Belgium respectively and low levels of 47 per cent and 43 per cent found in Sweden and the UK respectively. The Irish 'don't know' level to this question is the fourth highest in the Union. It is important to bear in mind that this question asks of support for a

hypothetical constitution and not the abandoned treaty of 2004 or the draft treaty agreed in principle in June, 2007.

Conclusion

Eurobarometer 67.2 was conducted at a time of increased political activity, both domestically and at EU level. For this reason, it can be assumed that respondents' minds were more focused on some of the issues raised in this survey.

- A majority of Irish respondents expressed satisfaction and optimism regarding their personal situation and outlook for the next twelve months. The view of the economic and employment situations in Ireland was that they are strong, with overall optimism but some mixed views as to whether they will improve, disimprove or stay the same in the coming twelve months. Healthcare, crime, inflation and housing were the most commonly cited issues among Irish respondents.
- Attitudes to the EU remain positive, with large majorities believing membership to be a good thing, that Ireland has benefited from membership and that the Union is a positive thing. Knowledge of the working of the EU is average when compared with the public in other EU countries. Self-assessment of how well EU processes are understood showed Irish levels of understanding to be very low.
- Trust in various political and societal institutions varied from high trust in radio and television, to a mid-level of trust in EU institutions to low trust in the press, internet and national political institutions. When trust in the EU is tested against knowledge of its workings it was found that those who understand it best are more likely to trust it.
- In several policy areas, a majority of Irish people favoured decisions to be jointly made within the EU – most notably foreign affairs and defence, agriculture and tackling the issue of global warming. On policy decisions regarding crime, the economy and taxation, education and health, a majority favoured national decision-making.
- A majority of Irish people saw the 2004 enlargement as a positive thing but less than 50 per cent of respondents feel there should be further enlargement. Attitudes to the issue of a constitution for the EU yielded positive responses, and support for a constitution is in line with the overall EU percentage.

- As the well-known phrase would have it, “a week is a long time in politics.” There will be many such “long weeks” between now and the holding of a referendum on the EU reform treaty. Even now, however, the Irish combination of high support and low engagement in EU affairs should prompt all those involved to set about clarifying the issues for a positively disposed but inattentive and somewhat tentative public.