



EUROBAROMETER 70

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

AUTUMN 2008

NATIONAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IRELAND

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Introduction

This is the fourteenth report in a series of biannual reports on Irish attitudes to the European Union. The report is based on *Eurobarometer 70.1*, which was conducted between Monday 6 October 2008 and Friday 31 October 2008.

Considering the economic crisis in which Ireland now finds itself, we would expect to see major shifts in Irish public opinion on domestic economic issues. Given Ireland's commitment to holding referendums on EU Treaty changes and the likelihood that there will be a second referendum on The Lisbon Treaty later in the year, *Eurobarometer 70.1* provides a good opportunity to assess whether negative Irish evaluations of the economic situation are likely to spill over into negative Irish attitudes towards European integration. There is a flip side to this question: rather than having a negative effect on Irish attitudes to the EU, could the economic crisis entice more people to identify with the EU and seek refuge within the European tent? *Eurobarometer 70.1* examines these two questions by documenting changes in public opinion on domestic issues in recent years, conducting a basic statistical analysis of the relationship between Irish public opinion on economic issues and European issues and by analysing some of the features of attitudes to EU integration in Ireland.

The National Political Climate

- There has been a dramatic collapse in confidence in the economy since autumn 2007. As of October 2008, 84 per cent of Irish respondents rate the current economic situation as 'bad', a 63-point increase since autumn 2007. This represents the largest decline in national economic confidence across all EU member states.
- Eighty per cent of respondents rate the current employment situation as 'bad'. This is substantially above the EU average of 63 per cent and represents a 56-point increase on this indicator in the past year.
- But Irish people were more optimistic about their own personal economic situation in October 2008 with 55 per cent of respondents rating their job situation as 'good' while 62 per cent described the financial position of their own household as 'good'.
- To measure respondent's expectations of the country's future economic prospects, we subtracted 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. The resulting index shows that:

- Irish respondents are very pessimistic about the Irish economy's prospects over the next twelve months. With a 42-point net negative assessment, Irish respondents are amongst the most pessimistic of EU member states in this regard.
- There was also a substantial decline in optimism among respondents regarding the future financial position of their households. Whereas there was a 61-point positive assessment in spring 2008, as of October 2008, this had fallen to a 28-point positive assessment, which is well below the EU average on this indicator.
- However, while Irish respondents are pessimistic about the future of the national economy, one hopeful note is that the overwhelming majority of Irish people (88 per cent) said they are happy with the life they lead, ranking sixth highest out of the twenty-seven member states on this measure.

Irish Attitudes to Europe

- While the gap between Irish support for membership and average EU support is smaller than in previous years, one should bear in mind that these changes did not all occur in 2008. Instead, there has been a very gradual decline in evaluations of EU membership between autumn 2006 and spring 2008. Still, with 67 per cent rating EU membership as 'good', Irish evaluations of EU membership remain comparatively high.
- Since spring 2006, Irish respondents' positive image of the EU has declined by 14 percentage points. However, respondents have tended to shift to a neutral position rather than adopting a negative attitude to the EU. Currently, 59 per cent of Irish respondents say they have a positive image of the EU, amongst the highest in Europe with only Romanian respondents having a more positive image of the EU.
- There is strong support for Ireland's membership of the single European currency with 87 per cent of Irish respondents saying they are in favour of it. Furthermore, 64 per cent of respondents believe Ireland is more economically stable because it is part of the Euro. This is well above the 48 per cent average for the Eurozone and among the highest levels of endorsement among Eurozone members.
- Majority support among Irish respondents still exists for the development of an EU common foreign policy with 56 per cent saying they would favour such a

development. But there has been a drop in support for the idea of a common EU defence and security policy as 48 per cent of respondents said they would favour such a proposal, down 12 points since spring 2008.

- While Irish respondents have never showed much support for the idea of a two-speed Europe, support for such a development is particularly low with just 26 per cent of respondents saying they would be in favour. This may be a reflection of the current global economic crisis and some fall-out from the Lisbon Treaty Referendum last year.
- People's attitudes to the EU are also shaped by their level of knowledge. Cross-tabulating respondent's knowledge against their image of the EU shows that 67 per cent of the most knowledgeable Irish respondents had a positive view of the EU. This positive image dropped substantially to 38 per cent among those least knowledgeable.
- Trust in all European institutions has declined over the past six months. The biggest decline in trust was for the European Union itself, which fell by 12 points to 50 per cent. Meanwhile, however, the European Parliament remains the most trusted political institution with 54 per cent of Irish respondents professing trust in it.
- Over the past six months, there has been a sizeable decline in the number of Irish people who think the EU is going in the right direction. As of October 2008, only 21 per cent of respondents said they believe the EU is going in the right direction, a 25-point drop since spring 2008. However, these findings can be explained by the question wording and its focus on the global economic crisis.

Spillover or refuge?

The seismic shifts in Irish public opinion on national economic and political issues raise the question of the effect all this might have on Irish attitudes to the European Union. Will the crisis drive people into a negative reaction to European integration or, as many commentators have argued recently, will it lead them to seek refuge in the EU tent and thus strengthen their commitment to Europe. Based on the evidence and analysis in this report, we draw the following conclusions:

- The answer to the second part of the question is No—as of October 2008 there is no evidence of a shift to more pro-European attitudes in Ireland.
- As to the first part of the question, there is some evidence of a negative shift in attitudes to Europe. Three things about these negative movements must be strongly

emphasised. First, they are modest (for the most part in the range of 5 to 12 percentage points). Secondly, they leave Ireland's position as one of the most pro-integration member states unchanged. Thirdly, statistical analysis shows that domestic political attitudes have only a minor effect on attitudes to Europe.

- Other determinants of attitudes to the EU that are important in the present context include aspects of people's engagement with Europe – their knowledge of the European Union, their sense of collective efficacy and, more broadly, the degree to which they can be described as “opinion leaders”. While the latter attribute applies to all aspects of politics, national and European, it tends to be associated with positive attitudes to the EU.
- In the absence of clear evidence that the economic crisis is driving people to a more European position, it may be prudent for those committed to the passage of the Lisbon Treaty to deploy arguments relating to the economic crisis, certainly, but also to mobilize and augment the resources of knowledge, opinion leadership and sense of European political efficacy that we know are out there and that are clearly related to positive orientations to the European integration process.