



Standard Eurobarometer



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Introduction

This is the fifteenth in a series of biannual reports on Irish attitudes to the European Union. It is based on Eurobarometer 71.3, which was conducted in Ireland by TNS-MRBI for the European Commission Representation in Ireland between June 16 and July 2 2009.

In the prevailing economic and political situation in Ireland, the pace of events is measured in minutes and hours rather than in weeks and months. This can make for a short shelf life for any opinion poll as public opinion itself scrambles to catch up with the most recent developments. Accordingly, it cannot be too strongly emphasised that fieldwork for Eurobarometer 73.1 was carried out in the Irish case between June 16 and July 2, and the data are a snapshot of public opinion at that time. However, because it is part of the biannual Standard Eurobarometer series, this opinion poll has the countervailing advantage of being able to trace change in most of its variables over time and thus to say something about longer term trends. Most importantly, while it cannot say anything directly about behaviour in the forthcoming second referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, it can address the question of Irish people's underlying attitudes to European integration and the implications these may have for the outcome of the referendum.

Background: The national political and economic climate

The Irish economy continues to struggle in the global recession. GNP growth, which as recently as 2007 was running at 4.4%, is projected to fall by 8.9% in 2009, and by a further 2.3% in 2010. Employment levels are also falling sharply, the size of the labour market falling from 2.1 million in 2007 to a predicted 1.8 million in 2010, with an accompanying rise in the unemployment rate from 4.6% in 2007 to a forecast figure of 16.1% in 2010. This sharp contraction of the economy is associated with a period of severe deflation, the CPI falling from 4.9% in 2007 to a projected -4.6% in 2009, though this is expected to ease somewhat to -0.3% in 2010. All of this has combined to severely affect public finances, with the General Government Balance deteriorating from €348 million in 2007 to an expected -€18.3 billion by 2010.

April 2009 saw the government unveil a supplementary budget to attempt to deal with the worsening situation. Measures were introduced, intended to increase government revenue by €1.8bn and reduce spending by €1.5bn. In addition, plans were outlined for the establishment of the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), which will buy property-related loans of between €80bn and €90bn from Irish banks, in an effort to restore liquidity to national credit markets.

Towards the end of the period under review, the outline of the Irish government's response to the defeat of the constitutional referendum on the Lisbon Reform Treaty in June 2008 began to emerge. The Department of Foreign Affairs commissioned an analysis of the outcome of the referendum, which found that while overall, Irish people have a generally positive attitude toward the European Union, the outcome of the referendum was driven by a combination of factors: attitudes to European integration; knowledge (or lack thereof) of the EU and of the contents of the Lisbon Reform Treaty; specific policy concerns; and domestic political factors such as government satisfaction and one's own personal economic situation.

These findings informed the approach of the Irish delegation to the June meeting of the European Council, held in Brussels. At that meeting, it was agreed that concerns of the Irish people relating to range of policy areas would be addressed by way of legal guarantees. With these guarantees in hand, the Irish government launched its referendum Information Campaign on July 8th with an announcement that a second ballot on the Reform Treaty would take place on Friday, October 2nd.

Besides the Lisbon Reform Treaty, the other major political event of the first half of 2009 was the set of elections held on June 5th, which saw the Irish electorate vote in local, European and in two Dáil by-elections. Leading into this campaign, Fianna Fáil, the main government party, was in the midst of a slump in its opinion poll numbers which more or less coincided with the onset of the economic crisis. The election results, while not as bad as the opinion polls had suggested they might have been shortly before polling day, were very disappointing for the governing parties. For the first time since September 1927, Fianna Fáil failed to emerge from a national election as the largest party. The Green Party were also punished at the polls, losing most of the seats they held at county and city council level. The winners in this election were Fine Gael, who topped the poll for the first time, and Independents and Others, who took almost one-fifth of the vote between them.

Eurobarometer analysis

Assessment of economy plunges 83 points since Autumn 2007

Evaluation of the state of the economy (“How would you judge the current situation of the Irish economy”) plunged by 83 percentage points between spring 2007 and summer 2009, with most of the action taking place between Autumn 2007 and Autumn 2008. As of June 2009, Ireland shows the third lowest positive evaluation of the national economy, at 6 per cent. This is in strong contrast to the very positive evaluation of the economy in Denmark (69 per cent “economy good”).

Some positives

However, there are some positive trends. At a minimum, there are some indications that a significant section of the public believes that the economic crisis is bottoming out. Thus, the proportion of Irish people believing that the economic situation will get worse over the next twelve months has fallen 22 percentage points since autumn 2008, leaving just under half in pessimistic mood compared to the more than two-thirds with negative expectations less than a year ago.

Assessment of household financial situation

European evaluations of one’s personal or household economic situation as good actually went up 4 percentage points. In the Irish case, there was some decline in positive evaluation of one’s own situation (from 83 per cent good in spring 2006 to 74 per cent in spring 2007 and down to 61 per cent in summer 2009). This is a far cry from the plunge in evaluations of the Irish economy as such from 89 per cent in spring 2007 to 6 per cent in summer 2009.

A marginal effect on attitudes to European integration

Public anxieties relating to the economy have had, at most, a marginal effect on attitudes to European integration. The small decline in approval of Ireland’s membership of the Union between 2005 and 2007 pre-dates the economic crisis and, if anything, the most recent data (June 2009) indicate a slight recovery in this measure of support for integration. Irish perceptions of benefits accruing from membership of the EU had also fallen slightly between 2006 and 2008 but, in June 2009, they levelled off at 79 per cent.

In comparative perspective

Ireland has the fourth highest level of support for European integration as measured by the membership indicator, being ten points behind Luxembourg but only marginally behind Spain and the Netherlands and 16 points ahead of the European average. On the benefits indicator, Ireland shares first position, being just one point behind Slovakia and therefore indistinguishable from it. On this measure, Ireland is 23 points ahead of the European average

Image of the EU

From 2000 to 2007, Irish positive image of the EU hovered around the 70 per cent mark, while falling significantly below 70 in spring 2003 and rising significantly above it in 2004. However, between autumn 2007 and June 2009, this indicator of Irish attitudes fell 12 percentage points. Nevertheless, negative responses to this image question are very low in absolute terms, their highest level being the current reading of 11 per cent.

Support for monetary union

Irish people are almost unanimously in favour of monetary union and of the single currency, support being well over 80 per cent and very stable over time.

Foreign policy and a common defence

Support for a common foreign policy and a common defence is lower and less stable while still managing to remain above the 50 per cent mark. Support for the other two institutional issues — enlargement and a two-speed Europe — tends to fall short of a majority.

A two-speed Europe

A two-speed Europe is a minority preference. For the most part, this preference is supported by just under 30 per cent of Irish respondents in recent Eurobarometer surveys. This suggests that a 'no' outcome to the referendum would move the EU closer to the two-speed Europe that is the policy preference of less than one-third of the electorate.

Eurozone membership and economic stability

Two-thirds of Irish people feel that membership of the Eurozone provides them with a greater feeling of economic stability. Ireland is in fact third from the top of a ranking of Eurozone countries on this variable. Both the absolute level of endorsement of this view (67 per cent) and the high ranking it produces suggest that Irish people are conscious of the importance of this aspect of European integration in the present period of economic turmoil.

Poor cognitive underpinning

The evidence suggests that a substantial majority have a sense of political efficacy in the EU context in that 62 per cent of them agree that "Ireland's voice counts in the EU". However, while 62 per cent are satisfied that Ireland's voice counts in the EU, only 40 per cent claim to understand how the EU works. This puts Ireland close to the bottom of the EU ranking on this particular variable and suggests that the cognitive underpinnings of Irish attitudes to the EU may be weak, especially in the context of Ireland's commitment to holding referendums on EU treaty changes.

Knowledge matters

Eighty-one per cent of those who say they understand how the European Union works have a very or fairly positive image of the EU. The other side of the coin is that only 40 per cent of those who say they do not understand how the European Union works have a favourable image of it.

Determinants of Irish images of the EU

Irish people's image of the EU is negatively affected in particular by being unemployed and positively affected in particular by the belief that Ireland's Eurozone membership contributes to greater economic stability.

Social class and other factors

Other factors play a lesser role. On the negative side these include being female and having a lower middle class or manual working class occupation and having a negative assessment of the country's direction and of one's own financial situation. On the positive side, the additional lesser influences are trust in the EU, belief that things in the EU are going in the right direction and understanding how the EU works.

Distinction between national and European attitudes

Overall, there is no evidence to support the view that Irish people's longstanding positive attitudes to integration are being undermined or reversed by people's negative reactions to the national economic crisis. People seem quite capable of distinguishing between their negative assessment of the domestic situation and their largely positive attitudes to Europe and of expressing their views accordingly.