

# Flash Eurobarometer Attitudes towards the EU in the United Kingdom

## Summary

Fieldwork: May 2009

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This survey was requested by the Directorate General Communication.

This document does not represent the point of view of the European Commission.  
The interpretations and opinions contained in it are solely those of the authors.

Flash EB Series #274

# Attitudes towards the EU in the United Kingdom

Conducted by  
The Gallup Organisation, Hungary  
at the request of the Directorate General  
for Communication



Survey co-ordinated by  
Directorate General Communication

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**THE GALLUP ORGANISATION**

## Introduction

Alongside the standard biannual Eurobarometer surveys, the European Commission periodically keeps track of the UK public's attitude to and knowledge of the European Union and its familiarity with certain important issues..

The main themes in the current report relate to British citizens and their:

- self-perceived knowledge of the EU
- need for information on the EU
- awareness of the EU
- opinion about who should be responsible for keeping them informed about the EU
- opinion about the benefits of EU membership
- thoughts on the opportunities provided by EU membership
- awareness of several benefits and projects related to the EU.

This study follows on from earlier Flash Eurobarometer surveys that have been undertaken since 2002.<sup>1</sup> The content of the questionnaires, however, has changed substantially with each wave of the surveys in order to reflect the changing reality both within the EU and the UK.

The fieldwork was carried out in the United Kingdom between 21 and 25 May 2009. 1,000 randomly selected citizens aged 16 and older were interviewed via fixed-line telephone. To correct for sampling disparities, a post-stratification weighting of the results was implemented based on key socio-demographic variables.

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<sup>1</sup> Flash EB 137, 185, 203 and 231 are accessible at the EC Eurobarometer website at [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/flash\\_arch\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/flash_arch_en.htm)

## Main findings

### Information about the EU

- 18% of UK respondents felt informed about the EU compared to 12% and 15% in, respectively, 2002 and 2006. However, 83%<sup>2</sup> said they knew little or nothing about the EU.
- Only a tiny minority of the British public “strongly” agreed that the information available on EU affairs was simple and clear (4%), and a third (34%) agreed to some extent.
- Respondents felt that EU reports on television, radio and, particularly, in the written press were too negative. Almost half (48%) perceived a negative bias in press reports.
- More than half of the British public (54%) indicated that they did not want to receive more information about the EU.
- British citizens mainly expect their government to inform them about the European Union and its decisions (43%).

### Support for the EU

- Respondents were divided about the “image” of the EU: of those taking a position, about half had a rather positive image of the EU (37%), while the other half took the opposite view (40%).
- Similarly, 37% of respondents felt the economic benefits of the UK being a member of the EU outweighed the costs and 40% took an opposite viewpoint.
- Taking an overview of the questions concerning the EU’s “image” and the “cost-benefit analysis” of membership, respondents aged 55 and over (34%) and those with the lowest level of education (39%) were the most likely to evaluate the EU and the UK’s membership consistently negatively.

### The UK’s contribution to the EU

- When asked to estimate the UK’s net contribution to the EU budget, only 6% of respondents said it was below 3% of GNI (the actual figure is 0.21% (2007)). On average, respondents estimated that the UK transferred, annually, 23% of GNI to the EU. Just under half of respondents (48%) did not or could not answer.
- Politically, 44% felt that the UK had a *lot* or a *fair amount* of influence on the way EU laws are made. Half (51%), on the other hand, felt that the UK had *little* or *very little* influence.

### EU policies affecting the UK

- Most respondents acknowledged that the EU had a role in tackling some of the most pressing topical issues – each of them having clear international dimensions (70%).
- Presented with areas where EU membership could be beneficial, a convincing majority agreed on these benefits: the single market (67%), a cleaner environment (58%), more weight in trade negotiations (58%). They were least convinced about improved working conditions (49%).
- The perception that consumers were benefiting from the single market was exceptionally high in the youngest segment (15-24 year-olds: 81%), among the most educated (78%) and those living in large cities (72%). Those who felt informed about the EU were more likely to confirm such benefits (74%) than those who knew little or nothing about EU matters – which was generally true for all benefits tested.
- Most interviewees would care (at least a bit) if any of these benefits were lost, e.g. by not being a member of the EU. Roughly one in six (16%), though, would *not mind* losing these benefits if the UK were not a member of the EU.

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that the due to rounding numbers might not add up to 100% or add up to 101%.

## 1. Information about the EU

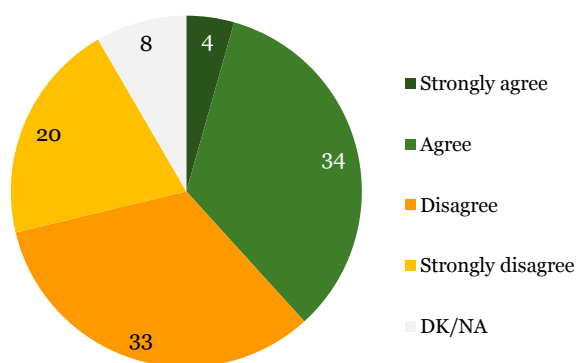
Historically, Standard Eurobarometer surveys have shown<sup>3</sup> that the **British public’s awareness levels of the EU** have been low. Although a vast majority (83%) still say that they know either little (69%) or nothing (14%) about the EU’s institutions and policies, this latest study shows a small change. The size of the most ill-informed segment of the public has halved since 2006, when almost 3 in 10 (29%) said they knew nothing at all about the EU, compared to roughly one in seven (14%) in the current survey. It remains to be seen whether or not this trend will continue or if it will be influenced by the information campaigns held prior to the European parliamentary elections, scheduled two-three weeks after the fieldwork of the current study.

There has been little change in regard to the proportion of respondents feeling most informed. A slight increase was detected, however, when comparing the current result (1% knew “a great deal” and 17% “quite a lot”; i.e. 18% felt informed about EU matters) with previous studies. In 2002 and 2006, the corresponding figures were, respectively, 12% and 15%. The proportion of well informed citizens was highest among those who held a consistently favourable opinion of the EU and the UK’s membership (30%), followed by those who provided a consistently sceptical opinion (21%). The self-perceived level of information was at its lowest among those with inconsistent views about the EU (11%).

Those who claimed they were knowledgeable about the EU (e.g. they knew more than “a little” about the EU, its policies and institutions) were by far the most likely to say they would be interested in receiving further information. Overall, 58% in this group were “very” or “quite” **interested in obtaining more information** about the EU versus 21% of those who claimed they knew nothing at all about EU affairs. Exactly half of those who said they knew nothing about the EU also indicated that they were not interested in receiving more information.

Overall, more than half of the British public (54%) indicated that they **did not want to receive more information about the EU**. Consequently, just under half of the British public (47%) were interested in receiving more information, with around 1 in 10 expressing a definite interest in having more information (9%) and 38% confirming they were “quite interested” in learning more about the European Union.

### Information available on the EU is simple and clear



Q15. Would you agree that current information available on the European Union is simple and clear enough? Would you ...  
%, Base: all respondents

Only a tiny minority of the British public “strongly” agreed that the information available on EU affairs was **simple and clear** (4%), and a third (34%) agreed to some extent. A larger share of respondents felt that EU-related information was not easy to digest: 20% strongly disagreed and 33% disagreed that the information was simple and clear.

Respondents’ replies indicate a general **negative bias in the reporting on EU affairs** on television, radio and in the written press. Each of these was seen to be rather negative in their reporting of EU-related news: the “too negative” replies outnumbered the “too positive” responses. In the case of broadcast media, slightly less than two in five respondents found the reports to be objective.

<sup>3</sup> For the latest results see Standard Eurobarometer 70 ([http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_en.htm)).

Reports appearing in the written press, however, were seen to be the most negative: a plurality of respondents (48%) indicated that reports about the EU tend to be unnecessarily negative. Even those respondents who expressed consistently unfavourable opinions about the EU and the UK's membership (see section 2.1 for a description of how groups were defined) mostly agreed that press reports about the EU were too negative (45% vs. 27% who saw them as objective and 18% who felt they are too positive).

When the survey asked those who criticised EU-related information for not being simple and clear enough if they would be **more likely to absorb information if it was easier to digest**, 29% of respondents said that this was *very* likely and a further 54% hinted that it was likely that they would be more open to EU-related information if it was less difficult.

A deeper analysis of the replies collected in the survey, however, did not confirm that the perceived simplicity (or complexity) of the information had much to do with the respondents' supposed awareness level: about one in five of those who felt informed *as well as* those who felt uninformed in EU matters *strongly* disagreed that the current information about the EU was clear and simple (21% and 20%, respectively).

British citizens overwhelmingly **expect their government to inform them about the EU**: 43% chose it as the agent primarily responsible for conveying information about the EU. One fifth of the British public felt that this responsibility lies with media outlets, and 14% felt that it was their local government's responsibility to inform them about the EU and its decisions.

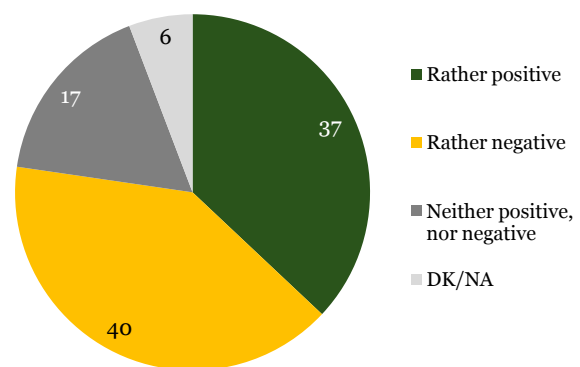
## 2. Support for the EU

The British public is highly ambivalent when it comes to judging the **“image” of the EU**: about half of those who took a position one way or the other had a rather positive image of the EU (37%), while the other half took the opposite view (40%, slightly more than the proportion of favourable replies). Roughly one in six (17%) took a neutral stance (neither positive nor negative) and 6% had no opinion on this matter.

A *positive* perception of the EU was well above average among the youngest respondents (aged 15-24: 47%), those with the highest level of education (55%) and city dwellers (47%). Manual workers were also more positive than the average as far as the EU's image was concerned (45%).

On the other hand, British citizens aged 55 or over (54%), rural citizens (46%) and those with the lowest level of education (60%) tended to have a *rather negative* image of the European Union. Men also had a clearly more negative image of the EU (44% vs. 37% of women).

**Attitudes toward the European Union**



Q1. In general, do you have rather a positive or negative image of the European Union?  
%, Base: all respondents

Similar results characterise British opinions when it comes to a **cost-benefit analysis** of the UK's EU membership: 37% of respondents felt economic benefits outweighed the costs and 40% took the opposite viewpoint. About 1 in 12 thought costs and benefits were in balance (8%) and about one in seven (15%) had no opinion.

Looking at the various social segments in the UK's general population, the survey found none where those respondents providing consistently positive replies (considering the image of the EU as well as the benefits of UK membership relative to costs) would be in the majority.

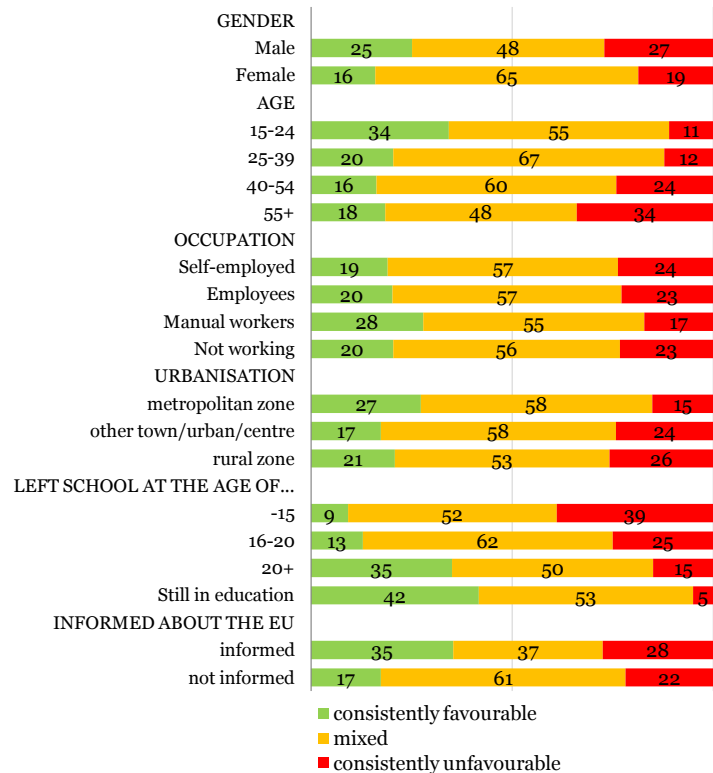
The older respondents and those with the lowest level of education were the most likely to evaluate the EU and the UK's membership consistently negatively (55 and over: 34%, least educated: 39%).

The correlation between time spent in full-time education and regarding the EU favourably is evident: only 9% of those with the lowest level of education were consistently favourable towards the EU and the UK's membership, but support rose with the level of education: 13% of those with an average level of education (in education at least until the age of 20) and to 35% of those with the highest level of education (presumably educated to degree level).

The opinions of men were more polarised than those of women, but on balance both genders tended to feel more negatively towards the EU and the UK's membership (men: 27%, women: 19%) than positively (men: 25%, women: 16%). Those living in the UK's metropolitan areas were somewhat more favourable towards the EU and the UK's membership (27% vs. 20% on average in the UK), and manual workers were generally more positive (28% vs. 19%-20% among other occupational groups).

Respondents' self-perceived level of information about the EU has a clear relation to their consistency of opinion about the EU: i.e. those who felt they knew quite a lot or a great deal about the EU were more than twice as likely to have a consistently favourable opinion about the EU's image and the benefits of membership than those who said they know nothing at all or only a little about the EU (35% and 17%, respectively). The same is true for those with consistently negative opinions: 28% of those who felt informed and 22% of uninformed respondents provided a consistently negative answer to this question. Overall, self-evaluated familiarity with EU matters goes along with a higher appreciation of the EU and the UK's membership: within the informed group the consistently positive answers outscored the consistently negative ones (35% vs. 28%). Among those who felt uninformed the consistently negative responses outnumbered the positive ones (22% vs. 17%).

### Support for the EU and the UK membership in various social segments (emotional and rational assessment combined, %)



### 3. The UK's contribution to the EU

The UK pays an annual **monetary contribution** to the EU on the basis of the rules laid out in the 2007-2013 multi-annual budget framework. In 2007, the UK's contribution to the EU budget was slightly over 0.5% of the UK's Gross National Income (GNI). The contribution - as determined in euros - is set to rise in the 2007-2013 period, and the recent exchange rate changes between the pound and the euro makes a further increase in the UK's annual contribution inevitable.<sup>4</sup> However, even considering these factors, the annual contribution will be around 1% of GNI.

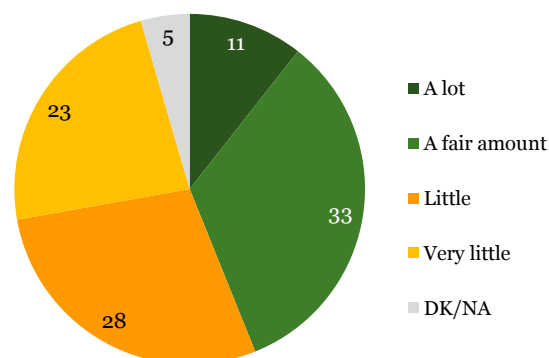
Public perception, however, is not even close. In the first place, roughly half (48%) of the British respondents admitted that they simply do not know how much, compared to the GNI, the UK contributes to the EU budget. (The relative majority in this group felt that the economic costs of membership exceeded the benefits: 38% - although such economic effects may indeed go well beyond the direct payments). Only 6% of respondents estimated the UK's contribution at below 3%, and only 25 of the 1,000 interviewees put this figure in the 0-1% range. The anticipated *average* proportion of the UK's national income transferred to the EU was a stunning 23%; this shows that the average citizen does not seem to understand such figures. Even the most educated (graduate level respondents) estimated the UK's contribution to the EU budget to be about 12% of GNI and 38% of them did not reply.

The UK's contribution was overestimated to a greater extent by the groups that expressed consistently unfavourable views about the EU and the UK's membership: 33% estimated the amount to be over 10% of the UK's national income and 7% thought it was below 3%.

When it came to **political contributions**, the public was divided in its perceptions of the UK's influence on EU decision-making: 44% felt that the UK had *a lot* (11%) or *a fair amount* of influence (33%) on the way EU laws are made. Half (51%), on the other hand, felt that the UK had little (28%) or *very little* (23%) influence. The stronger perception is that the UK does not have a major influence on EU decision-making.

The gap is considerable if we compare attitudinal groups defined by their stance towards the EU. Those with consistently positive views about the EU were almost four times as likely to agree that the UK has its fair share in shaping the *acquis* (80%) compared to those who were consistently sceptical (24%).

**Influence of the UK government on EU legislation**



Q8. According to you, how much say has the UK government in the way that EU laws are made ...?  
%, Base: all respondents

In fact, when UK citizens are confronted with a **media report saying the EU or “Brussels” “controls”** a particular policy area, some of them believe that the UK has or has had no say *at all* in how these policies are developed: one in five survey respondents were of this opinion. For this 20%, such media reports conjure up a completely independent “EU” decision-making process that develops laws that apply to the UK as an EU Member State. However, over three-quarters (77%) of respondents assumed – correctly – that the UK must have had at least some say in developing EU legislation (3% did not know or could not answer this question).

A rather large proportion of those who felt the UK had more than “very little” say in shaping EU policies still believed that that “Brussels-controlled” policies had no inputs from the British

<sup>4</sup> See, for example here: <http://www.global-vision.net/perspectives11.asp>

government (45%). It is also remarkable, that 15% of those who were aware that Brussels-based policies must have included British opinion felt that the UK influence on EU decision is very limited.

When asked, the majority of respondents agreed that if they knew that the UK had a role in shaping the EU's regulatory policies, they would be more positive about the country's EU membership. Almost two-thirds (62%) provided such an answer. Roughly one in seven (14%) would not change his or her opinion about membership, and 22% would be even more critical about the UK's participation in the EU.

## 4. EU policies affecting the UK

Most citizens in the UK acknowledge that the **EU has a role in tackling some of the most pressing topical issues** – each of them having clear international dimensions.

The Union's role was most widely acknowledged in the protection of human rights (85% felt that the EU had a role), in tackling climate change (81%), in countering international terrorism (79%) and dealing with the financial crisis (78%). Three-quarters thought the EU had a role to play in tackling global poverty and 72% in preserving the security of energy supplies.

Each broad socio-demographic and attitudinal segment of British society – including the most committed eurosceptics – overwhelmingly believe that the EU has a role in dealing with these key problems.

The survey asked respondents if they had heard of some **“signature” initiatives of the EU**, such as the various water quality monitoring systems (Blue Flag, Bathing Water Report, etc.), the European Health Insurance Card and the European Arrest Warrant.

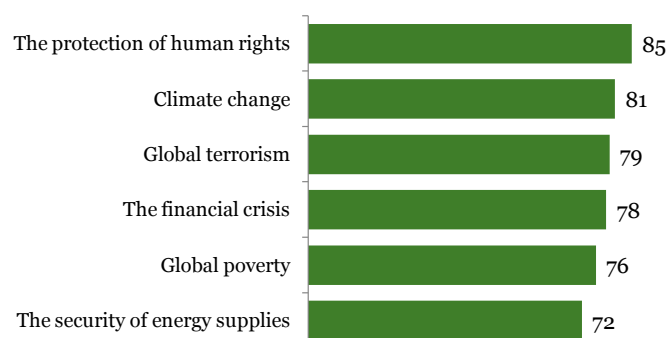
Britons were most familiar with the *European Health Insurance Card* that allows citizens to receive medical treatment in any other EU country: 54% had heard of the Card prior to the survey.

The *Blue Flag Guide* was known by 41% of interviewees (The Blue Flag is an eco-label for beaches in Europe and beyond, awarded on the basis of regularly monitored cleanliness of water and eco-friendliness of the beaches' facilities). The *Bathing Water Report* (16%) and the *European Arrest Warrant* (18%) were only known to a minority in the UK.

Respondents were, moreover, asked **how important the above initiatives were** for them. Overall, the majority of the UK public overwhelmingly rated the EU initiatives in each of the three areas as important or *very important*. This was especially true for the Health Insurance Card: 65% of UK respondents felt that this was a *very important* initiative “for them”, and a further quarter (25%) stated that they considered this as “important”.

Further to these, survey tested four areas where citizens might see a **benefit of the UK belonging to the EU**. In most instances, citizens generally agreed that each of these might be a benefit of EU membership. Two-thirds of Britons agreed that they benefited from the single market; while three in five thought that the environment was cleaner and that the UK got a bigger say in global trade talks thanks to the EU. British citizens were least convinced about improvements in working conditions:

### EU has a role in tackling various issues



Q12. Which of the following issues do you feel the EU has a role in tackling?  
% of “The EU has a role” shown  
Base: all respondents

those who felt that membership of the EU had contributed to improving working conditions in the UK (49%) only outscored the opposing camp (46%) by a small margin.

Most of those interviewed **would care (at least a bit) if any of the above benefits were lost**, e.g. by not being a member of the EU. Over a third of those interviewed would care *greatly* if any of these benefits were lost, and 45% would care *a bit*. Roughly one in six (16%) would *not mind* losing these benefits if the UK left the EU.

Even among those who are consistently critical of the EU and the UK's membership, only 28% would not mind if these benefits were gone.

Generally, those segments that were most in agreement that such benefits of EU membership exist would be most concerned if these were lost: the youngest (aged 15-24: 44%), metropolitan citizens (45%), the most educated respondents (46%) and manual workers (48%) would *greatly* care if these benefits were forfeit. Over half (53%) of those who thought they knew a lot or a great deal about the EU would be really sorry as opposed to a third (33%) of those who felt uninformed about EU matters. Finally, there is a very sharp difference across the groups created according to the respondents' stance towards the EU in general; two-thirds of those who were consistently favourable to the EU and the UK's membership would greatly care if these benefits were lost (67%), a view shared by just over a third (35%) of those with "mixed" views about the EU and 13% of those who expressed consistently critical opinions.