Public opinion in the European Union

Ireland

Autumn 2018

This survey has been requested and co-ordinated by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication. This report was produced for the European Commission’s Representation in Ireland.

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.
Standard Eurobarometer 90

National report

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

IRELAND

http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion

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INTRODUCTION

The annual Eurobarometer report for Ireland is one of a series that explores trends in Irish and European public opinion towards the European Union (EU) and political and social issues more generally. The data for this report were gathered in November 2018 as part of the Standard Eurobarometer, now in its 90th edition, and referred to throughout this paper as Standard Eurobarometer 90 (SEB90).¹

This national report comes at a time when 'Brexit', the United Kingdom’s departure from the EU is high on the political agenda. Britain’s decision to leave the EU by referendum in June 2016 has a special impact on Ireland, perhaps unique to other Member States. Ireland is the only country to share a land border with the United Kingdom, Ireland and Britain’s economic relationship is deep, and then there are the implications that Britain’s withdrawal from the Union may have for the Northern Ireland Peace Process. Avoiding a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and the “Backstop”, have been central to the negotiations between the EU and the British government.

With this context in mind, this short national report focuses on Irish attitudes to the EU in light of Brexit and contrasts this with positions held by citizens of other Member States. The report looks at four key themes: citizens’ general orientations to the EU; citizens’ connection with the EU, their evaluations of the EU regarding satisfaction with democracy, responsiveness, and trust, and their feelings concerning the future of the Union.

¹ The Standard Eurobarometer is a cross-sectional study comprising of representative samples of citizens in the 28 Member States of the EU. The member institutes of Kantor carried out the survey with Behaviour and Attitudes administering it in Ireland between 8-22 November 2018. The survey comprised 1,004 respondents aged 15+. There is a margin of error of +/- 3 per cent on each estimate. Full technical details are contained in the SEB90 First Results available at: http://ec.europa.eu/comfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2215
KEY FINDINGS

CITIZENS’ GENERAL ORIENTATIONS TOWARDS THE EU

- Sixty-four per cent of Irish people have a positive image of the EU, the highest levels of positivity recorded since 2008, above the EU average of 43 per cent, meaning Irish people have the most positive image of the EU of any Member State. Only 8 per cent of Irish people declare having a negative image of the EU.

- Irish people are much more enthusiastic about the EU compared with British citizens. Between 2000 and 2018, the mean difference in positivity regarding the EU is 30-points. As of November 2018, the difference is 21-points, with 43 per cent of Britons expressing positivity towards the EU.

PEOPLES’ CONNECTION WITH THE EU

- Sixty-six per cent of Irish people say they feel attached to the EU, the highest proportion of citizens saying so since May 2007. Attachment to the EU has increased by 24-points since 2013. However, attachment is relatively soft, with most people saying they feel ‘fairly attached’ rather than ‘very attached.’

- As of November 2018, 85 per cent of Irish citizens’ report feeling some semblance of EU citizenship. While a sense of EU citizenship among Irish people has always been prevalent, it has increased by 18-points over the past five years. Ireland now ranks third among Member States, just behind Luxembourg (89 per cent) and Germany (86 per cent), and above the EU average on this metric, which currently stands at 71 per cent.

CITIZENS’ EVALUATION OF THE EU

- Irish people are the most satisfied with how democracy works in the EU, with 75 per cent expressing satisfaction, substantially above the EU average of 50 per cent.

- Seventy-six per cent of Irish people agree that the interests of Ireland are well-taken account of in the EU, an increase of 17-points in the past two years and coinciding with the negotiations between the EU and the British government on Brexit. This score represents the highest proportion of Irish citizens feeling this way since data was first collected on this metric in 2007, and the highest proportion of people in any Member State feeling this way.

However, distrust of the EU, which currently stands at 38 per cent is above the levels observed pre-the Global Financial Crisis. Nevertheless, as of November 2018, a majority of Irish citizens profess to have a trust in the EU (50 per cent), above the EU average of 42 per cent.
PEOPLES’ FEELINGS REGARDING FUTURE OF EU

- Seventy-per cent of Irish people disagree with the notion that Ireland could best face the future outside of the EU, maintaining a consistent trend among Irish people over the past 6-years. The level of disagreement in Ireland with this premise is above the EU average of 61 per cent.

- Eighty-six percent of Irish people say they are optimistic about the future of the EU, the highest number of people saying this ever, and the greatest proportion of people expressing such optimism across the EU, with the EU average at 58 per cent.

- Irish optimism about the EU has been steadily growing in recent years with a 32-point increase in the proportion being optimistic since 2013.
I. CITIZENS’ GENERAL ORIENTATIONS TO THE EU

We start with the standard means of tapping orientations towards the EU – the image indicator. It examines whether respondents have a positive, a neutral, or a negative image of the EU.²

**Figure 1** shows the trajectory of Irish public opinion on this metric going back to 2000. As of November 2018, 64 per cent of Irish people profess to have a positive image of the EU, the highest levels of positivity recorded since 2008 (see dashed blue lines with circles).

It continues the upward trend of positivity towards the EU in Ireland we have seen since the exit of the EU/IMF Programme in Winter 2013. As **Figure 1** shows, while Irish citizens have traditionally taken a favorable view of the EU, there was a substantial dampening of enthusiasm towards the EU during the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), bottoming out, in May 2013, when only 33 per cent of Irish people said they had a favorable view of the EU. Over the past five years, this has nearly doubled, increasing by 31-points from that low point.

As of November 2018, negativity towards the EU stands at 8 per cent, the lowest proportion saying this since April 2008, and a decline of 23-points from its high point in November 2012, when 31 per cent of Irish citizens expressed a negative view of the EU. The remaining segment of Irish citizens have a neutral image of the EU – currently 28 per cent. This proportion of people remains somewhat higher than it did pre the GFC, when it averaged about 19 per cent. While this implies that a particular segment of the Irish public remains ambivalent to the EU, the broader message is that Irish enthusiasm for the EU, historically strong but which took a hit during the GFC, is recovering. Positivity towards the EU is at its highest level in a decade, and correspondingly, negativity has fallen to its lowest level since 2008. Favorable sentiments are now in the pre-GFC ranges, implying the warmth that Irish people have traditionally displayed for the EU, but which dampered during the GFC, is returning.

² Question: “In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?” (Source: SEB90 QD78).
Looking at demographic differences on this indicator, university educated citizens (those who report completing their education aged 20 or above) are more likely to have a positive image of the EU – 77 per cent of this group say this. However, this falls to 52 per cent among those who have primary/early secondary education (measured as those who report completing their education aged 15 or below). There are also differences between different social groups. While 71 per cent of people self-identifying as middle class or upper class profess to have a positive image of the EU, only 52 per cent of self-identifying working-class respondents say likewise. These patterns are nothing new and represent long-standing differences observed regarding support for the EU, but imply that for enthusiasm to increase, the key may lie in the working class and the less educated groups.

Figure 1 also tracks the average positive image toward the EU among the EU public generally and also displays the proportion of British citizens expressing a positive image. Two messages emerge from this data. The first is that Irish people’s assessments of the EU, even during the GFC, have consistently remained above the mean EU rating. Currently, the average positive score among EU citizens is 43 per cent, a 21-point difference when compared to the positivity in Ireland. Among the 28-Member States, Irish people are the most positive about the EU, followed by Bulgaria, where 56 per cent of Bulgarians stated positivity. At the other end of the spectrum cross-nationally, only a quarter of Greek citizens and 28 per cent of Czech respondents said they had a positive image of the EU.
The second observation is that the Irish public is much more enthusiastic about the EU compared with British citizens. Over the eighteen years explored here, the mean difference in positivity regarding the EU is 30-points. As of November 2018, the difference is 21-points, with only 43 per cent of Britons expressing positivity towards the EU. And while this figure represents the highest proportion of UK citizens expressing such enthusiasm for the EU since 2000, the takeaway message is that positive Irish feelings towards the EU far outstrip British sentiments, a pattern that even held during the GFC, where Irish enthusiasm for the EU slumped.

![Figure 1](images/figure1.png)

Figure 1 Images of the European Union in Ireland, Britain, and the EU average 2000-2018 (%).  
Source of data: SEB53-SEB90. Please note: Don’t know/neural responses for IE excluded from the figure for readability.
II. PEOPLES’ CONNECTION WITH THE EU

Another means of examining feelings towards the EU is to see what connection citizens have with it. Two measures are relevant here, namely how attached to the European Union citizens feel (the attachment indicator) and whether citizens feel like they are citizens of the EU (the EU citizenship indicator). Figure 2 explores the attachment indicator by tracking Irish levels of attachment to the EU over the past eleven years while also highlighting the mean attachment to the EU among EU citizens (yellow circle).

As of November 2018, 66 per cent of Irish people say they are attached to the EU, the highest proportion of citizens saying so since May 2007. As Figure 2 illustrates, the number of people feeling attached to the EU has been steadily growing. Compared to November 2013, when only 42 per cent of Irish people felt attached to the EU, the proportion feeling attached has increased by 24-points in five years. One caveat to this positive picture is that for three-quarters of those professing an attachment to the EU, the attachment to the EU is ‘soft’ with most people saying they feel ‘fairly attached’ rather than ‘very attached’. Thus, attachment, while plentiful, is not especially strong for most.

The extent of Irish attachment to the EU, albeit that it remains primarily soft, has reversed a trend we saw develop during the GFC, where Irish levels of attachment lagged a little behind the EU average. Currently, we observe that Irish levels of attachment are above the EU average by 8-points, and rank fifth highest among EU Member States, behind Luxembourg (74 per cent), Poland (71 per cent), Germany (70 per cent), and Latvia (67 per cent).

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3 Question: “Please tell me how attached you feel to the European Union: Very attached: Fairly attached: Not very attached: Not at all attached.” (Source: SEB90 QD1a_3).

4 Question: “For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your own opinion: You feel you are a citizen of the EU – yes, definitely: Yes – to some extent; No, not really; No, definitely not” (Source: SEB90 QD2_1).
Turning to our second measure of connection with the EU – a sense of European citizenship, which is measured in SEB90 by agreement or disagreement with the proposition “you feel you are a citizen of the EU”, with the response categories being: ‘no, definitely not’; ‘no not really’; ‘yes, to some extent’ and ‘yes, definitely.’ Figure 3 tracks the evolution of Irish and mean EU public opinion on this measure dating back to 2010. The formulation of the question produces high levels of sense of EU citizenship among Irish respondents, with 85% of respondents overall reporting some feeling of EU citizenship. It breaks down into roughly evenly between those with a strong sense (43 per cent) and those with ‘some’ form of EU citizenship (42 per cent).

What Figure 3 also shows is that the sense of EU citizenship among Irish people, while always prevalent, has been steadily rising in recent surveys. Compared with November 2013, when 67 per cent of Irish people overall reported having a sense of EU citizenship, the figure today is 18-points above that. It ranks Ireland third cross-nationally concerning the extent of a feeling of EU citizenship, just behind Luxembourg (89 per cent) and Germany (86 per cent).
It also continues a trend that Irish people have felt a more significant connection to the EU regarding a sense of EU citizenship compared to the average EU citizen. As of November 2018, the mean levels of EU citizenship stand at 71 per cent, with about two fifths strongly identifying as an EU citizen, with the remaining three-fifths opting for the softer option.

![Figure 3](Image)

*Figure 3* Feelings of EU Citizenship: Ireland and EU average 2010-18 (%).

*Source of data:* SEB73-SEB90.
III. CITIZENS’ EVALUATIONS OF THE EU

Our next step is to explore how people evaluate the European Union. One means of doing so is to explore how citizens feel about the way democracy works in the EU. Figure 4 shows the proportion of citizens in each Member State saying they are satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, broken into whether they are very satisfied or fairly satisfied.

We see that Irish people (highlighted by the green bars as opposed to the purple ones in Figure 4) are the most satisfied with how democracy works in the EU, with three quarters expressing satisfaction. Ireland ranks ahead of Denmark in second place, where 68 per cent of respondents’ express satisfaction with the way democracy works in the EU, followed by Belgium, where 66 per cent express satisfaction. At the other end of the spectrum, Greek citizens are the least satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU, with only 31 per cent expressing this view. About a quarter of Irish respondents (19 per cent overall) are very satisfied with the way democracy in the EU is, the highest proportion offering this robust assessment in the EU.

Overall, Irish assessments of how democracy works in the EU is substantially above the average EU assessment of 50 per cent (emphasized by the blue bars in Figure 4). Moreover, it is far more than British citizens evaluations: as of November 2018, only 48 per cent of Britons are satisfied with democracy in the EU, a significant 37-point gap between Irish and British citizen’s evaluations.

Question: “And how about the way democracy works in the EU? Are you: very satisfied; fairly satisfied; not very satisfied; not at all satisfied” (Source: SEB90 QA16b).
The Standard Eurobarometer also asks citizens how well they feel the interests of their country are taken into account into the EU (the responsiveness indicator). Figure 5 tracks Irish responses to this issue over the past decade. As of November 2018, 76 per cent of Irish people agree that the interests of Ireland are well-taken account of in the EU. As we can see, the proportion of Irish citizens supportive of this view has increased over-time, especially in the past two years. Where only 58 per cent of Irish people thought this in May 2016, on the eve of the Brexit referendum in Britain, this has risen by 17-points since, an increase which coincides with the negotiations between the EU and Britain on the latter’s exit, where the Irish border issue has been a key issue.

This increase has reversed a trend that took hold during the GFC, having hit a low score of 38 per cent in spring 2011. Since then, responsiveness has steadily increased, while the numbers disagreeing with the proposition have fallen from a high of 51 per cent in May 2012 to the current level of 18 per cent.

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Question: “Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: “The interests of (OUR COUNTRY) are well taken into account in the EU: Totally agree: Tend to agree; Tend to disagree; Totally disagree” (Source: SEB90 QA17a_2).
The Irish score represents the highest proportion of Irish citizens expressing this view since the metric was first recorded in 2007, and also the highest proportion cross-nationally in the Union, just ahead of Germany, where 72 per cent of Germans agree with the premise. This score is well above the EU average on this metric, which currently stands at 49 per cent, and continues a trend where Irish citizens have consistently felt the EU is more responsive to its country’s needs than the average EU citizen. It also far outweights British sentiments on the issue. As of November 2018, only 40 per cent of British citizens feel the interests of their country are well taken account of in the EU, while 48 per cent disagree.

Figure 5 Feelings that the European Union is responsive to the interests of its Member States: Ireland, Britain (agree proportion), and EU average (agree proportion) 2007-2018 (%). Source of data: SEB68-SEB90.
Our final means of analyzing citizen evaluations of the EU is to look at the proportion of respondents expressing trust in the EU. Trust is a barometer of citizens’ confidence in an institution and is something institutions crave because higher levels of trust are considered to confer greater legitimacy on an organization. Figure 6 tracks Irish levels of trust in the EU dating back to 2003 along with displaying the mean EU trend on the trust metric.

As of November 2018, more Irish people profess to have trust in the EU compared with those who distrust it (50 per cent versus 38 per cent). We see that over the past two years, the trend on trust has evened out with relatively consistent proportions of citizens professing trust and distrust in the EU.

We could interpret this trend in two ways. On the positive side, trust in the EU among Irish citizens has experienced a great recovery over the past seven years. With trust having hit a record low of 24 per cent in autumn 2011, it has risen 26-points since then, with a corresponding drop in levels of distrust over this period. However, the caveat to this positive picture is that levels of distrust among Irish people remain relatively high, at least in a historical context. Whereas the mean levels of distrust pre the GFC among Irish people were 24 percent, today nearly 2 in 5 express distrust. It is one metric where recovery in positivity post-GFC has failed to show as much improvement as other metrics.

Putting this finding into a comparative context, Figure 6 shows that as of November 2018, more Irish people trust the EU than the average EU citizen, with the mean EU score of 42 per cent. It is notable that Irish levels of trust are higher than in other states that received an EU/IMF bailout except Portugal. While 55 per cent of Portuguese citizens express trust in the EU, putting it ahead of Ireland by five points, trust in Cyprus (41 per cent), Spain (38 per cent), and Greece (26 per cent) are significantly lower than the trust levels observed in Ireland.

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7 Question: “I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it: The European Union” (Source: SEB90 QAB_14)
Figure 6 Trust in the European Union: Ireland and EU average (trust proportion) 2003-2018 (%).

Source of data: SEB60–SEB90.
IV. PEOPLES’ FEELINGS REGARDING THE FUTURE OF THE EU

Two SEB measures allow us to explore how people feel about the EU’s future. The first is attitudes regarding whether people feel that Ireland’s interests in the future are best served by remaining a member of the EU (the continuing membership indicator). SEB90 does this by asking respondents whether they agree or disagree with the proposition, “our country could better face the future outside of the EU.”

Figure 7 shows though that only a quarter of Irish people agree with the proposition that the country could better face the future outside of the EU while a substantial majority, 70 per cent, disagreed. The extent of disagreement with the premise among Irish people is above the EU average of 61 per cent (a 9-point difference). This sentiment is linked to a respondent’s level of education, with those Irish citizens having university level education more likely to disagree with the proposition (78 per cent) compared with those having only primary/early secondary education. Country’s prospects are better served by remaining with the bloc, Ireland ranks 10th across Member States regarding this position. Significantly higher proportions disagreeing with the statement are in the Netherlands (87 per cent disagreement), Germany (77 per cent), and Sweden (74 per cent).

As Figure 7 shows, there has been remarkable consistency in the Irish responses to this question since it was first asked in 2012 with on average two-thirds of citizens against the proposition and about one quarter agreeing. Figure 7 also highlights the divergence in British and Irish opinions on the subject. As of November 2018, British people were divided on the question with 44 per cent agreeing with the proposition Britain could better face the future outside of the EU (as illustrated in Figure 7 by the orange line with the circular points), while 42 per cent disagreed. In sum, there is little evidence to suggest that we are seeing Euroscepticism emerging in Ireland or that Ireland is following the course of Britain on this issue.

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8 Question: “Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: "(OUR COUNTRY) could better face the future outside the EU: Totally agree; Tend to agree; Tend to disagree; Totally disagree" (Source: SEB90 QA17a_5).
Figure 7 Support for the proposition that a country can better face the future outside of the EU: Levels of agreement/disagreement in Ireland, Britain, and EU average 2012-2018 (%).

Source of data: SEB78-SEB90
However, what about the future of the EU and Irish people’s expectations for it? SEB90 asks respondents whether they are optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the EU. Figure 8 illustrates that Irish people are overwhelmingly optimistic about the future of the EU, notwithstanding Brexit. As of November 2018, 86 percent of Irish people overall say they are optimistic about the future of the EU. Since the question was first asked in 2007, it represents the highest proportion saying this. The next closest state to Ireland is Poland, where 73 per cent of people are optimistic about the future of the EU.

Irish people are significantly more optimistic than the average European citizen, with the mean proportion of people feeling optimistic across the bloc 58 per cent. Putting this figure into context, while a majority of Irish people have been consistently optimistic about the future of the EU, since 2011, there has been a substantial increase in this optimism. From its low point of 53 per cent of Irish people expressing optimism, there has been a 32-point increase in optimism.

![Figure 8 Optimistic about the future of the EU: Ireland and EU average 2007-2018 (%). Source of data: SEB67-SEB90](image)

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9 Question: “Would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the EU?” (Source: SEB90 QA18).
CONCLUSION

There are three takeaway points from SEB90. The first concerns Irish attitudes to the EU. As of November 2018, sentiments are broadly positive both comparatively and longitudinally. Most Irish people have a positive image of the EU (64 per cent), the highest proportion of people saying this since 2008, and the most people saying this of any of the 28 Member States. In addition, most Irish citizens say are satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU (75 per cent), the highest proportion saying this in the Union, and attachment to the EU among Irish people, currently at 66 per cent, is at its highest level ever and is above the EU average of 58 per cent.

Moreover, and noteworthy in light of Brexit, 76 per cent of Irish people feel the EU is responsive to the country’s needs, the highest proportion ever saying this, and the highest across the Union. Finally, Irish people are the most optimistic about the EU’s future, with 86 per cent expressing optimism for the future, the highest proportion in the Union, and the greatest number of Irish people expressing this ever. In sum, positivity towards the EU is strong and robust across several indicators, reaching their historical peak on some measures, while on other metrics, reaching a ten-year high. It implies that Irish positivity towards the EU, which significantly dampened with the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), is returning to halcyon days of the late 1980s and early 1990s, where Irish support for the EU was copious and strong.

Nevertheless, there are three qualifications to this positive picture. The first is that while a majority of Irish report trusting the EU, the level of distrust, currently at 38 per cent, remains high in the Irish context. The second is that increasing enthusiasm for the EU has occurred in tandem with economic prosperity in Ireland. Previous Eurobarometer reports for Ireland have documented the strong link between economic optimism and attitudes towards the EU\(^\text{10}\), implying that enthusiasm towards the EU is somewhat conditional, and could be subject to reconsideration depending on economic performance, especially as the economic consequences of Brexit remain unclear. Third, while we see that positivity is widespread, some of it is relatively soft, and that while Irish people express favorable sentiments towards the EU, the strength of this commitment varies.

\(^{10}\) For example see Eurobarometer 84 Ireland at: http://ec.europa.eu commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/71258 (Date accessed: 6 February 2019).
The second takeaway point is that attitudes towards the EU in Ireland and Britain diverge significantly. This is not terribly surprising, but the starkness of the differences is nonetheless interesting with enthusiasm on a range of metrics about 20-30-points higher among Irish people compared with the views of British citizens. The preceding paragraph tells the Irish story: most people have a positive viewpoint of the EU, whether it be exploring image, responsiveness, or optimism about the EU's future. The stark reality is that positivity towards the EU in Ireland's nearest neighbour is for the most part below the EU average, and significantly weaker compared to the support for the EU in Ireland.

The third takeaway concerns the evolution of Irish attitudes to the EU in light of Brexit. While SEB90 does not directly probe Irish sentiments to Britain's impending departure, there are several proxy measures which can illuminate our understanding of where public opinion is. The first is the significant increase in Irish people's belief that the EU is responsive to Ireland's needs. Seventy-six per cent of Irish people agree that the interests of the country are well-taken account of in the EU, a record-high on the metric, with support for this statement rising 16-points since the referendum, and 13-points in the past year. This increase has coincided with the period in which the EU is negotiating with the British government and where the avoidance of a hard border on Ireland has been a key requirement in the EU negotiating position. The results can be seen to reflect that that the EU position is foursquare behind the Irish government's position and that this has been noted by Irish citizens.

Looking at the future membership indicator, a majority of Irish people (70 per cent) disagree with the proposition that Ireland can best face its future outside of the Union. The proportion of citizens disagreeing with this stance has been relatively consistent since 2012 and in stark contrast to British sentiments on this issue, which we discussed earlier. However, we must recognize that the true impact of Brexit remains to be seen and thus its impact on public feelings on a variety of issues remains for now a matter of wait and see. Hence, continual monitoring of citizen attitudes is required.