IRISH CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE EU REPORT OF A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN IRELAND





Behaviour & Attitudes

his Synthesis presents the results of a group discussion held in Ireland on 11 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the European Union. It is part of a wider citizenship project managed by Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, with the support of national partners of the European Qualitative Network coordinated by OPTEM, on behalf of the European Commission.

Introduction

This report presents the results of a group discussion held in Ireland on 11 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the european union.

It is the irish section of a pan-european qualitative study involving 18 of the member states.

In each country the study was carried out by the national partner of the european qualitative network coordinated by optem: in ireland by behaviour & attitudes.

This study forms a part of a wider citizenship project managed by notre europe – jacques delors institute on behalf of the european commission.

BOX 1 ➤ Composition of the group of respondents

Gender	Age
Women: 4	20-34 years: 3
Men: 4	35-49 years: 3
	50-60 years: 2

Social class

Lower-middle social class: 4 (professions of head of household: civil defence, taxi driver, carpenter, service technician)

Higher-middle class: 4 (professions of head of household: finance executive, service engineer, sales merchandiser, medical sales representative)

Political oninion

The respondents were also recruited so that diverse political opinions were represented in the group.

1. Initial thoughts about the european union

When initially asked their thoughts on the european union terms such as; money, the troika, bureaucracy and big brother are voiced.

Overall initial spontaneous reactions towards the european union are however quite positive.

- The protective character of the european union is a common trend throughout the group, as many now look towards the european union as a guardian type influence which is there to offer back up and support in times of need especially financial
- During the group the european union was referred to as a 'big brother' type character. However, this was quite a loaded term as respondents referred to it in both a positive and negative manner. At one level respondents are quite happy to think that there is an overarching power looking over us, but on the other hand there is a fear of handing over too much power and giving away too much control of irish affairs to an external institution.
- Solidarity and unification with other member states is another positive factor which has emerged from the european union. This has been enforced through the single currency, which is viewed as a factor of integration and aids the freedom of movement between member states. However, some concern is also voiced questioning if ireland would have been better off with our own currency. Nevertheless, at overall level the single currency is viewed as a positive implementation of the EU.
- **Freedom of movement** between member states is also viewed as a positive in terms of business



opportunities (irish exports), travel and increased opportunities for the country's youth.

"i don't look at it like they are watching us, i think of the good things. I think we can travel more freely and work in different countries. Now my kids have the freedom to go and work and start in another country"

- Financial support provided to ireland is also positively discussed, mainly in reference to structural funds and the country's infrastructure which was developed during the '90s with the help of EU grants and funding; building of new roads, luas etc. Farming and other EU grants and cheap finance being made available were also positively referenced.
- Improved mortgage options is also referenced, as ecb tracker mortgages have become available and provide better rates than variable mortgages thanks to the european central bank.
- Improvements in the judicial system is also mentioned as the european court of justice is referenced as a backup mechanism for when faith is lost in one's own country's judicial system.
 - "when it goes to the european courts you feel confident that the right decision will be made"
- The european convention of human rights is spontaneously mentioned as another positive aspect of the european union.

Some negative aspects of the european union were also voiced, however these are viewed as secondary to the positives. The negative aspects mentioned include the following:

- Loss of individualism or control of internal affairs. While respondents are positive about the protective character of the european union, some concerns are expressed about the 'big brother' effect and handing over too much control of irish affairs
 - "it was nearly like if they had told us to start jumping i would say we would have to do it. It was literally yes, what they said went but i know they were helping us out"
- Germany is viewed as a controlling power over europe's finances. This notion is reinforced with ireland's budget being discussed in germany's parliament before it was released in dáil eireann.

"you heard that thing about our budget being discussed in their parliament (germany) before it was even presented. That just shows you how powerless ireland is". "truth be told it was probably always the case anyway. Because they (germany) were the paymasters, like it or lump it. You mightn't like it, but you know"

- Too much bureaucracy and too many irrelevant regulations. Issues revolving around legislation and european regulations are felt to be irrelevant to ireland on occasion. Regulations regarding the EU habitats directive (cutting of bogs), the waste of funds used in the cap initiative, predominantly the 'butter mountains', and the waste of produce due to the commissions regulation on 'bendy bananas'.
 - "some of it seems silly. You tend to think of it as only affecting us, not thinking that there are 26 other member countries, so it's applying to everyone. But sometimes it just feels silly. There's a huge amount of waste because of what they say should be standard you know".
- Questioning of the euro currency. Although at an overall level many are happy with ireland's inclusion in the single currency some are curious as to whether ireland would have been better off with our own currency. Partly in support of this, some are curious as to why the british did not join the single currency.
- Continued voting until the desired outcome is achieved. Some irritation was evident in regards to european citizens being asked to vote on an issue or referendum several times until the desired 'yes' vote is achieved i.e. The nice treaty. "if you reject a treaty then you can do the treaty again and then pass it you know."

"we said 'no', what are you asking us again for".

2. Sources of information and knowledge on the EU

Mainstream media is noted as being the main source used when looking for information relating to the european union; mainly TV news, radio, national newspapers and internet news websites, as well as internet search engines.

- General opinion exists that the european union is dominant in national media and all important events are adequately covered.
 - "it's so dominant in the national media now you know. There is big coverage on rte and the irish times, when it was saying about the elections and stuff like that, and what it means for us etc. You see western european countries about the recession in europe as well so it's constantly in your face"



Word of mouth is also identified as an information source, and in some cases a prompt to searching for more information online.

Discussions on the EU with family and friends however tended to centre around children's education and what they are learning at school with regards to the EU.

"she (daughter) was learning all about the countries in the european union and that, i would often press on the internet to find out more about it"

There is some minor concern regarding the objectivity of the information presented in the mainstream media however, as respondents reference politicians using the media as a form of 'propaganda' and 'spin' to suit their political agenda.

"all the news channels always have information on it you know and they will talk about the situation for merkel and her problems there and how she had to sell the idea to her people first. So if we didn't know about that they'll tell you. Now some of that could be propaganda as well, that's another way of looking at the thing, because they are politicians at the end of the day".

"there would be a certain amount of spin depending on who's reporting on it. It suits a certain agenda it's going to be put out there with a certain tilt to it to suit that, whoever is giving it out you know".

Despite this slight hesitancy over the objectivity of some mainstream media reports, respondents do believe that the information presented in mainstream media is **accurate and creditable**. When any doubt does exist however many believe that there are plenty of other online websites which can be used to gather more information and identify the true nature of the report.

"if you have any doubt in your head too, there is always other avenues that you can start exploring anyway you know".

3. Questions regarding the future of the EU

3.1. General knowledge of the EU

Overall there appears to be a lack of knowledge of the eu's institutional systems. Awareness of the separate EU institutions does exist, but there is low awareness of the differences between the various EU institutions.

- Confusion exists between the roles and responsibilities of the european parliament, the european commission and the european council.

 Respondents are aware of the different institutions due to having seen or heard about them through mainstream media, or recall having voted in an election or referendum previously, but little is known about the individual offices.
 - "it's confusing between the european parliament and the european commission and something else, what is what".
- Some awareness of ireland's presidency of the council of the european union during the first six months of 2013 is evident. Respondents are also aware that the presidency works on a 6 month rotation bases. However, there is low awareness of what ireland achieved during its presidency.
- Confusion and some irritation exist over the movement of the european parliament between brussels and strasbourg. Some perceive this to be in an effort to please the french. There is an understanding however that it would be difficult to find a permanent location, which would please all member states.

"it's just they are playing to the sensitivities of the french, shifting off to strasbourg every couple of weeks"

"... but then if it did get a permanent seat everyone would be saying why did they pick there?"

3.2. Major challenges for the EU in the years ahead

Respondents show a high level of understanding that there are major challenges for the EU ahead, with banking issues, employment and debt from struggling nations such as portugal, greece and spain being the main issues referenced.

There is a perception that ireland's financial difficulties are 'small fish' in comparison to the financial strain which portugal, greece and spain put on the EU. Therefore, there is some anxiety around the debt of these nations and the possibility that should their financial difficulties continue, or should they fall back into recession, that they will take down the other EU countries with them.

"i think that debt of the nations, portugal, greece, spain, when i see countries as big as spain, italy, if they were to go under god knows what would happen here. There was talk before, we were talking about a retrospective deal on banking debt and stuff for bailing out anglo, but they (the EU)



weren't concentrating on us at all. They were looking at the bigger countries within the european union".

• There is some feeling that the EU should take more control over member countries' banks. Following the need for the irish bailout a high level of distrust in the government's ability to control the country's finances exists. Therefore, there is almost unanimous agreement that the EU should have more control over the running of member countries' banks, preferably through increasing the role and responsibility of the european central bank, or at the very least develop a set of guidelines by which banks should be runespecially in the area of interest rates.

"one european central bank, like in the states"
"i think that once the EU make a rule it should be across the board"

- "... but i mean they will say you work by that plan but if you need to go up or down that is your own business"
- Lack of employment throughout europe is also an area which may present challenge for the EU and the demise of young people's hope for the future, due to their negative employment prospects.
 - "i see a lot of friends here and friends in spain, france and italy and there is a similar trend happening over there that is happening here. Which is a lot of younger people are going back to live with their parents, because the parents are the only ones who have the money as the kids can't get a job. Now when the hope goes with people you are in serious trouble."
- There is still a fear that the recession may return, but optimism is prevalent as many believe that the EU now has a plan in place to make sure that it doesn't get as bad again.
 - "i would love to know what they've got planned for us in years to come, like you know. In a few years' time, if we are all supposed to be on the up now, the few quid is coming in, what have they planned for us, like if we get another recession"

3.3. Desire to be better informed on EU related matters

Overall, respondents did express the wish to be better informed on matters related to the EU. However, when this is examined further in fact respondents' true area of interest is in EU matters which directly affect them. Issues which solely affect other member states are of little to no interest to them.

"you only really tend to pay attention to the things that will affect us on a national level. I think that tends to get coverage in our national press you know"

Specific areas which they would like to know more about include:

- EU structures and the differences between the various EU institutions
- How financial budgets are divided up between countries
- · What EU citizens are entitled to vote for
- And details on what grants/funding is available to them

4. Current means of expression of citizens' views

Despite various contact points being referenced for the EU an overarching belief exists that it would be difficult to express oneself and to have one's voice heard by the european union.

- Spontaneously mentioned methods of contacting the european union in order to have their voices heard include:
 - Contacting local tds, mep's
 - Emailing the european union's website.
 - Visiting the EU commission office, at molesworth street in dublin
 - Trying to contact máire geoghegan-quinn, the current european commissioner for research innovation and science, directly.

However, there is a strong belief that should you try and use these contact points to contact the european union you will not receive a reply, or any response is likely to be delayed, unless close to the timing of an election. This view is mainly influenced by previous experiences with local county councilors and their lack of, or slow, response to queries.

"if you email your td here, if there is a topical issue you will get like an automated response type of thing that goes out to everyone. So it'll just be the same you know"

- "... wait until election time and then they'll try to help you."
- There is however expectation that being a member of a lobby group would enable you to get your voice heard more readily.

"you're never going to get your voice heard on a sole level, you need to be involved in, or be part of, a lobby group"



 In order to get your request heard there is also a belief that all other avenues would need to be exhausted within your own country before the EU will take you seriously.

"i think you would have to be seen to exhaust all the avenues of resource in this country before you start..."

In reference to reasons why many believe it would be difficult to contact the EU and to have their voices heard, some believe the EU did not want to be viewed so much as a 'big brother' type figure, but more an adviser to member countries and therefore wants countries to sort out their own issues internally before they will step in.

"they probably have to be very conscious they don't seem to be 'big brother', that is what people's image of them is. I mean you are irish, you know, sort your problems out first, if you can't than come to us. But we set the rules so if you aren't playing by the rules come back to us"

Additionally, there is a general belief that the european union is only interested in dealing with 'bigger picture' issues, such as equal pay for women, the right to die etc.

A number of other specific issues that might prompt a desire to contact the european union were also mentioned:

- People who had no debt previously now paying back the country's deficit.
- People with a disability losing their medical cards.

However, there is also a belief that it takes too long for EU legislation to be implemented. Examples given were:

- Poolbeg incinerator
- 48 hour working directive.

Nevertheless, it is appreciated that this is more to do with national government than the EU.

"everything that is implemented is always 10 years behind. They wait right up to the cutoff point and then they start. Unfortunately that trickles back down to us when there is a cost, because we were so long implementing EU policy."

5. Perceptions of new ways for citizens to get their voice heard

Respondents' suggestions for new ways in which to get their voices heard include a number of suggestions; these mainly include the main communication channels previously mentioned including email, visiting the EU office, contacting local meps.

Respondents did however have a number of suggestions on how the public's knowledge of the EU could be improved. These include:

- Improved communication with local meps. Many cite the need for improved information on the issues being discussed and legislation being implemented by the european union. It is felt that local meps could do more to keep the public informed, either through public meetings/roadshows or by placing articles in national newspapers. During these public meetings/roadshows the public would also get the opportunity to put their issue/query to meps.
- Promotion of the EU in schools. Although it is acknowledged that the structures and responsibilities of the EU is taught in schools it is believed that more could be done in this area to make the youth feel more connected to the EU and feel more european.
 - "they will be more european than we will."
- Detailed information regarding the eu's rationale behind new legislation. There is some feeling that more could be done by the EU to help explain their reasoning for introducing certain legislation, such as the eu's conservation law on turf cutting.
 - "we see these you can't cut your turf and that is coming from the EU, what is the reasoning and reckoning behind that, why are they doing that"
- Detailed information on the eu's website.
 Easily digestible information on what is being discussed, or considered, by the EU on the EU website.
 - "have some link on the website that says what happened this week; you can click on it yourself if you really want."
- Telephone helpline. A telephone helpline which the public can call when looking for help, or advice, on EU related matters. There is a preference for talking to a person rather than having call answered by an answering machine.



Assessment of several propositions for improving citizens' involvement

During the group respondents were presented with eight propositions which detail ideas on how EU citizens could have their voice heard by the EU. Some of these propositions relate only to better information for citizens, whereas others go further aiming to encourage more involvement in the EU by citizens.

Some of these propositions already exist, however it is clear that none of the respondents in the irish discussion group are aware of the existence of any of these communication channels.

A. an information service on the functioning of the EU and EU policies, comprising an information office open for the public in every large city, a web site, and a service quickly answering any questions asked by telephone, mail or email.

(ranked 5th)

This proposition already exists in the form of the europe direct service. However, there is **little enthusiasm for the proposition** and it is ranked fifth in terms of preference.

The rationale for this proposition failing to resonate with respondents was due to it being considered similar to the service currently being offered by the citizens information centre. Therefore, it is suggested that the training up of citizens advice staff on EU matters and directing queries towards them, rather than establishing another office, would be more cost effective.

"the people who are already working in citizens advice offices, train them up on it... expand someone within the government or some civil service role already".

B. debates to be organised in major media between average citizens and experts of EU issues on the directions taken by the EU.

(ranked 6th)

Debates of this kind have been conducted by various TV channels, however in a slightly different form. Amongst the irish respondents there is little interest in attending debates and as a result this proposition was ranked sixth in terms of preference.

Nevertheless, some state that they would be interested in watching/listening to debates if on TV or radio.

It is thought that the issues being debated would need to be topical and discuss how the issues would affect irish citizens on a day-to-day basis. The debate would also avail of an opportunity for the EU to put across their reasoning for new legislation which is not being well received, such as the european habitats directive which prohibits turf cutting.

There is also the suggestion that the chairperson of the debate would need to explain the issues in a simple and easily digestible manner as viewers/listeners may get confused.

C. opinion polls on the EU organised regularly in the whole of europe, allowing citizens to know both what their fellow countrymen and what the citizens of the other countries think.

(ranked 8th)

This proposition currently exists in the form of the euro barometer survey. However, it is **the least favourable of all the propositions** and is ranked eighth.

Political opinion polls are a regular feature in sunday newspapers, however as results tend to be up and down on a weekly basis respondents appear to have little belief in them and therefore do not feel that there would be much interest in taking part in, or reading about, polls which relate to the EU.

"you see them in the sunday papers and all, labour are up and labour are down. They are up this week and down the next week".

We have found from previous research however that this is a natural reaction to opinion polls of this kind as the information contained in particular opinion polls is more beneficial at a corporate/organisational level than to ordinary people, who find that in some cases too much effort is required to understand the results.

D. the possibility, given several times per year, to meet with your members of the european parliament or other EU politicians in the vicinity of where you live.



(ranked 1st)

This was the **most favourable proposition** and generated a high level of interest from respondents.

Their reasoning for this high ranking is due to a general perception that by meeting with people face to face, meps and other EU politicians would be more accountable to the citizens who they represent.

Meeting with meps and EU politicians would also present citizens with an opportunity to discuss their issues and queries with the EU representative directly. It is also thought that as the meetings would happen several times a year representatives would be more likely to respond rapidly to queries as they would have to meet with them again.

"it makes them accountable to people and there will be a certain amount of people who will want to go."

E. consultations through the internet organised by the european commission whenever major decisions have to be taken in the EU, open to all citizens.

(ranked 4th)

This is the **fourth favourable of the propositions**. There is some feeling that by conducting the consultation online older people, or people who are not computer literate, will be excluded.

"you're excluding a huge proportion of society who aren't on the internet"

There is also a perception that responses to queries would be 'pr' type answers and written by government employees, rather than "EU members".

Some also felt that it would be more difficult to believe that the responses given to queries are genuine as there is no face-to-face contact.

"someone talking to you is more genuine, it's more effective i think".

There is some feeling that politics students and people who prefer using email to communicate would find the online discussion enjoyable and interesting.

F. similar consultations, organised by our national government.

(ranked 7th)

This proposition received **little positive feedback** and is ranked seventh out of the eight propositions.

There is a clear preference for the consultations to be run by the european commission over national government, due to a lack of trust in the national government. It is felt however that in the case of wanting to understand new legislation or a referendum, the information would be better coming from an independent body, such as the referendum commission, or from a european based citizens advice bureau, as these would be viewed to be more objective.

G. an interactive service using the internet and social networks, to collect on a permanent basis citizens' views, wishes or criticisms on directions taken by the EU.

(ranked 3rd)

This was **the third favourite proposition**. It is felt that social media would provide a sounding board and generate debate.

As this method allows for everyone to view other comments it is also seen to provide an opportunity to educate everyone rather than queries being answered on a one-to-one basis.

It is also felt that this method of communicating would attract more young people to be interested in the EU, although it was acknowledged that online communication can exclude older people.

There is a suggestion for the service to be offered through a discussion board as this would enable anonymity to those making comments.

H. information campaigns to be developed much more actively than in past years, in order to encourage citizens to involve themselves in the debates that are to take place and to take part in the coming election of members of the european parliament next spring.

(ranked 2nd)

This is **the second most preferable proposition**. Respondents are in unanimous agreement that there is traditionally a low turnout for european elections. Therefore, they are highly favorable towards any attempt to increase public interest and improve voting rates.



It is also felt that more information on how EU matters directly affect irish citizens needs to be made available.

There is some suggestion for this proposition to be tied in along with the meetings with EU members proposition (d).

"yes, you definitely need more on that, because i mean the turnout for those european elections all over europe, not just here, is tiny you know".

APPENDIX - DISCUSSION GUIDE

Qualitative study on citizens' involvement In the european union

Discussion guide

Introduction: ask each participant to introduce him(her)self with a few words, by saying who he(she) is and what he(she) does, etc.

Theme 1

We are here together today to talk about the european union. Could you please tell me what first comes to your mind about the EU?

- spontaneous reactions
- probe:
 - nature of topics spontaneously mentioned about the EU
 - positive and negative aspects related to the EU
 - · degree of initial interest and involvement of the respondents in EU related issues

Theme 2

Now, regarding what you know and what you think about the EU: where does that come from? From what sources do you get information or do you hear opinions about the EU - taking the word "sources" in the widest sense, ranging from official information sources to informal conversations with friends or other people...?

- spontaneous reactions
- probe:
 - degree of diversity of the sources mentioned
 - nature of (information) inputs from each one
 - interest/credibility of each one

Theme 3

Let us now discuss more specifically the future of the european union and questions you may ask yourselves in that respect. There are probably certain aspects which you regard as important and you would like to know and understand better as regards the way the EU works and the directions it takes - as you may not get all the information you would like to get from the sources you have mentioned earlier. What aspects would you particularly

- wish to know more about?
- spontaneous reactions • probe:



- general impressions of having a good or a poor degree of knowledge/understanding of these issues
- perception of major challenges for the EU in the coming years
- expressions by respondents of a need for better knowledge and understanding - on what subjects more particularly? In what is the information currently available on these subjects not satisfactory?

Theme 4

As a citizen, you should be able to give your opinion and to have your voice heard as regards future directions of the european union - whether to approve or to disapprove such or such a direction, or for any other reason. How can you do that today?

- · spontaneous reactions
- probe:
 - perceived ease/difficulty to express oneself and to have one's voice heard on EU related issues by what means?
 - perceived reasons why it is difficult
 - specific subjects on which respondents would particularly wish to give their opinion and to be listened to as citizens; expectations in that respect.

Theme 5

One may think of various means by which european citizens like us could have their voice heard.

Let me propose to try and think of any possible means, just letting our imagination run, without giving up an idea even if we do not know for the moment how it could be implemented in practice. What could we imagine?

- spontaneous reactions
- stimulate the group's' creativity by encouraging respondents to "jump" from one idea to another

Theme 6

I am now going to submit to you various ideas that have being put forward, of means that could be put in place to allow citizens to have their voice better heard on EU related issues.

I will ask you what you think of each one.

- make the respondents react to each proposition in turn, asking them about their degree of interest for each one and reasons thereof
- **A.** an information service on the functioning of the EU and EU policies, comprising an information office open for the public in every large city, a web

- site, and a service quickly answering any questions asked by telephone, mail or email.
- **B.** debates to be organised in major media between average citizens and experts of EU issues on the directions taken by the EU.
- **C.** opinion polls on the EU organised regularly in the whole of europe, allowing citizens to know both what their fellow countrymen and what the citizens of the other countries think.
- **D.** the possibility, given several times per year, to meet with your members of the european parliament or other EU politicians in the vicinity of where you live.
- E. consultations through the internet organised by the european commission whenever major decisions have to be taken in the EU, open to all citizens.
- **F.** similar consultations, organised by our national government.
- **G.** an interactive service using the internet and social networks, to collect on a permanent basis citizens' views, wishes or criticisms on directions taken by the EU.
- **H.** information campaigns to be developed much more actively than in past years, in order to encourage citizens to involve themselves in the debates that are to take place and to take part in the coming election of members of the european parliament next spring.

Thank you again for coming to participate in this discussion.

If other ideas cross your mind following the discussion, do not hesitate to let us know (communicate a relevant email address which the respondents can use for that purpose)



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Virginie Timmerman, Synthesis, Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, December 2014

HOW WOULD CITIZENS LIKE TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION?
Virginie Timmerman and Daniel Debomy, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, December 2014

HOW DOES THE EUROPEAN UNION COMMUNICATE WITH CITIZENS?

Virginie Timmerman and Daniel Debomy, Synthesis, Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014

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Daniel Debomy, Synthesis, Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, July 2014

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