

Europeans still Positive about EU Enlargement but Anxious about Impact on Jobs

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When voters in France and the Netherlands rejected a proposed European constitution in nearly back-to-back votes last spring, the European project of political and economic union seemed to have hit a dead-end. Shocked EU leaders asked for a "period of reflection" to ponder the defeat's implications. More than a year later, the soul-searching continues. EU leaders, meeting this week at a summit in Brussels, have decided, again, that inaction is the safest course, postponing decisions on whether they should revise the proposed constitution and on whether the bloc has the "absorption capacity" to admit new members.

National flags with the EU Flag in background (© European Community, 2006/EP/Louise Weiss)

A 25-nation [Eurobarometer](#) poll, which was released in May, suggests that despite misgivings about enlargement and the constitution, the EU project is far from dead. Europeans, interviewed from February through March 2006, remain positive about further integration, though many are worried about the impact of enlargement, along with increasing globalization, on domestic job markets. Majorities in 21 countries agree that enlargement is positive overall and majorities in all 25 member states want to see more decision-making at the EU level across a variety of issues.

Positive Views of Enlargement

On average more than half of EU members (55%) see enlargement as positive, but new member states are more optimistic about the benefits of admitting more nations (69%) than older members (53%). The five countries where respondents are most likely to agree that "overall, the enlargement of the European Union is something positive" all joined the EU last spring: Slovenia (76%), Poland (73%), Cyprus (71%), Lithuania (69%) and Slovakia (68%). The five least enthusiastic countries joined the bloc a decade or more ago: Austria (40%), France (42%), Finland (45%), Luxembourg (48%) and the United Kingdom (49%).

Europeans also seem ready to see Brussels take on more responsibility. Majorities in all 25 member-states believe the EU should be playing a larger role in decision making in certain areas. This conviction is strongest on security issues such as the fight against terrorism, the promotion of democracy and

Views of Enlargement within the European Union

Could you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (% agreeing)

Overall, the enlargement of the European Union is something positive.



Further EU enlargement would increase problems on the (Nationality) job market



peace in the world, and organized crime. On average 80 percent wanted more EU involvement in the fight against terror (12% less), 77 percent wanted the bloc to play a larger international role promoting democracy and peace (12% less) and 75 percent wanted the EU to do more to combat organized crime (16% less). The desire for greater EU involvement was somewhat weaker on social and economic issues, such as the fight against unemployment. But majorities also wanted the EU to be more active in the fight against unemployment (51% more, 37% less), in the protection of social rights (56% more, 32% less), the protection of agriculture (57% more, 30% less) and ensuring economic growth (60% more, 28% less).

Most member states believe that "further European Union enlargement improves the influence of the European Union in the world." But although majorities in 23 countries agreed, there was skepticism in two older members: Austria, where only 43 percent agreed (49% disagreed) and France, where 50 percent agreed (40% disagreed). The conviction that the EU gave Europeans more international influence is strongest among new members: more than 7 out of 10 in Cyprus (80%), Slovenia (79%), Poland (76%), Czech Republic (73%) and Slovakia (71%). The only older member states to express similar levels of conviction are Belgium (74%) and Greece (72%).

A BBC poll of 23 nations, conducted in 2004 by Globescan and the [Program on International Policy Attitudes](#), found that most favor a more influential the European Union. In 20 countries, a majority (17) or a plurality (3) of citizens think it would be mainly positive for Europe to become more influential than the United States in world affairs. Among the 17 non-European states polled, 14 favored greater EU influence.

Eurobarometer's findings about steady support for the EU have also been confirmed elsewhere. In a nine-country poll conducted in May and June of 2005, the [German Marshall Fund](#) found that all nationalities had positive feelings about the bloc, ranging from 57 degrees on a 1-100 scale in Great Britain to 74 degrees in Spain. The average for all of the countries surveyed (Spain, Slovakia, Portugal, Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Netherlands, Great Britain) was 67 degrees, only a slight decrease from the 70 degree average in 2004.

Economic Anxieties

Despite feeling that enlargement is good for the EU as a whole, Europeans fear its effect on their own country's job markets. These concerns are especially prevalent among the citizens of countries that joined the EU before 2004, such as Germany, where 80 percent said EU enlargement would increase problems on its job market, Austria (75%), Belgium (74%), Greece (72%), and France (72%). Overall, 21 of the 25 member states agreed that enlargement is likely to cause problems with employment in their country, for an average of 63 percent. The only new member to express similar levels of concern is Cyprus, where 82 percent agree that adding new members is likely to have a negative impact on domestic employment. The issue was somewhat less pressing in Poland and Lithuania, where 45 percent express concern about jobs, Spain (46%) and the Czech Republic (49%).

Relatively few Europeans believe that the problem of greater competition on the job market because of enlargement is offset by economic benefits in the form of lower prices. On average, 57 percent disagreed with the statement that because of enlargement "many products had become cheaper," while only 34 percent agreed. Belgians (78%), Luxembourgers (76%) and the French (74%) are the most likely to disagree; Swedes (69%), Cypriots (55%) and Danes (53%) tended to agree.

This unease about the impact of greater economic integration is also reflected in their attitudes about globalization. Respondents were asked which of two propositions was closest to their opinion: "globalization represents a threat to employment and companies" in their country or "globalization represents a good opportunity" for domestic companies "thanks to the opening-up of markets." Majorities in nine of the 25 member states (Belgium, Germany, Greece, France, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Austria, Slovenia, and Finland) say globalization is a

threat while majorities in only four countries (Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden) see it as an opportunity. On average, 47 percent saw globalization as a threat compared to 37 percent who see it as an opportunity.

Optimism for EU, Pessimism at Home

Europeans are generally confident that the EU as a whole is headed in the right direction. Thirty-nine percent overall say the EU is on the right path, compared to 27 percent who say it is on the wrong one. (Twenty-three percent replied neither). Four of the five most confident countries are new Eastern European members: Lithuania (60% right, 8% wrong), Latvia (58% right, 14% wrong), Poland (58% right, 10% wrong), Slovenia (56% right, 14% wrong). Ireland (56% right, 11% wrong) is also optimistic about the EU's future. The French again stand out for their pessimism, though it is less intense regarding the EU's future than their own country's: 48 percent say the bloc is headed in the wrong direction, while only 29 percent say it is on the right path. The Austrians (44% wrong, 24% right) and the Finns (43% wrong, 38% right) also tend toward gloom regarding the EU's trajectory.

There is pessimism about the future in certain countries, however, especially in France, a founding EU member, where an overwhelming majority (68%) believe things in their country are "going in the wrong direction" and less than a fifth (19%) think it is headed in the right direction. Portugal, where 47 percent say things are going badly (28% in the right direction), also tended to be pessimistic, as did Italy (45% wrong, 21% right) and Great Britain (45% vs. 38%). In contrast, most of the Irish (65% right, 16% wrong), whose economy has boomed since it joined the EU in 1973, are convinced their country is headed in the right direction, as are most Lithuanians (60% vs. 23%), Danes (59% vs. 28%) and Estonians (54% vs. 16%). On average, however, more Europeans feel their countries are headed in the wrong direction (43%) than in the right one (34%). A fifth (20%) volunteered that their country's direction was neither right nor wrong.

The poll shows that the French and the Dutch, despite their common opposition to an EU constitution, have very different views of future. The Dutch are more optimistic than the European average, both about the direction of the EU and of the Netherlands itself. Thirty-nine percent of the Dutch believe their country is headed in the right direction (5 points more than the European average and 20 points more than the French). Forty-two percent believe the EU is on the correct path (3 points more than the European average and 13 points more than the French). There is also much more optimism about globalization in the Netherlands than in France: 53 percent of the Dutch see it as a good opportunity, compared to 21 percent of the French.