

What **UK**  
Thinks **EU**

# DO WE FEEL EUROPEAN AND DOES IT MATTER?

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# Do we feel European and does it matter?

This analysis paper examines the likely significance of European identity in the debate about Britain's membership of the European Union. Using data from NatCen's British Social Attitudes survey and the European Commission's Eurobarometer, it considers how many people in Britain feel European and analyses what relationship, if any, this identity has with people's views on the European Union. It also assesses the relative importance of identity and more pragmatic, economic considerations in determining how people may vote in the forthcoming referendum on Britain's EU membership.

## NOT A NATION OF 'EUROPEANS'

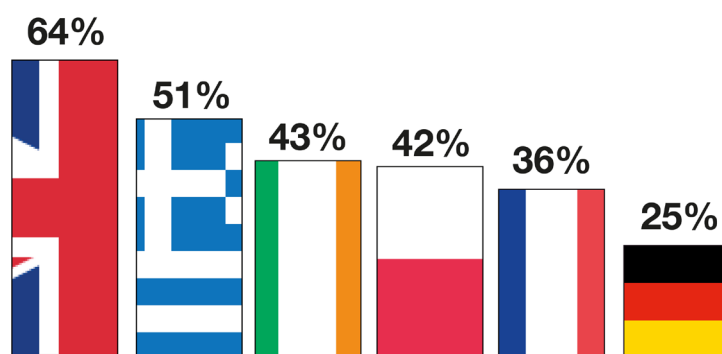
Very few people in Britain see themselves as 'European'.



\*British Social Attitudes, 2014

## LESS 'EUROPEAN' THAN OUR CONTINENTAL COUSINS

The UK stands out from other European nations as being particularly unlikely to embrace any sense of European identity.



Left-right: UK, Greece, Ireland, Poland, France, Germany

\*Eurobarometer, May 2015

## ECONOMICS TRUMP IDENTITY

Among those who do NOT feel European, 51% still say we should continue in the EU. Among those who think closer ties with the EU would make Britain economically weaker, just 23% say we should stay in.



\*British Social Attitudes, 2014

## INTRODUCTION

The success of the Conservative party in winning an outright majority in the 2015 General Election means that a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union will now take place. At some point before the end of 2017, the public will be asked, 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?'. How voters will answer this question and what will drive their decisions in the voting booth are already the subjects of fevered speculation among the political classes. With the opinion polls at the time of writing (October 2015) predicting a tight race, campaigners on both sides<sup>1</sup> will be looking for clues as to what might swing the vote in their direction. Will people be driven by issues of the head or of the heart? Will questions about the economic benefits and costs of our EU membership be at the forefront of people's minds, or will they instead be influenced by more emotional considerations about Europe and Britain's relationship with it? What, if any, role will arguments about democracy or about European values play? We know migration is likely to be a factor, but this too could reflect economic concerns about increased migration, political concerns about the appropriate level for determining migration policy, or cultural concerns about the impact of migration on British society.

In this paper, we focus on what role, if any, identity may play in shaping people's decisions in the referendum. Specifically, we examine the evidence on the extent to which people in Britain see themselves as 'European', and what, if anything, this might mean for their support for the European Union. The paper draws on data from two main sources – NatCen's British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) and the European Commission's Eurobarometer survey. British Social Attitudes has been measuring attitudes to Europe alongside issues of identity for around two decades via face-to-face interviews with a probability sample of the British public (see <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/> for more detail). Eurobarometer was established in 1974 as a vehicle for tracking opinion in the European Community. Conducted twice a year, each wave involves around 1,000 interviews in each country (see <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/> for more detail).

This paper is one of a series of short analysis papers that aim to explore public attitudes to different aspects of the current debate about Europe, in order to inform understanding of what factors might underpin voters' decisions in the referendum. The papers form part of a wider NatCen project to collate and analyse public opinion on Europe, a project which also includes a website on which all recent poll and survey data on this issue are being made available ([www.WhatUKThinks.org/EU](http://www.WhatUKThinks.org/EU)). The project is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council under its 'The UK in a changing Europe' programme of research (<http://ukandeu.ac.uk/>).

<sup>1</sup> Including Leave.EU and 'Vote Leave' on one side and the official Remain campaign, 'Britain Stronger in Europe', on the other.

## DO WE FEEL EUROPEAN?

The study of national identity is a complex field. People can feel multiple attachments to multiple different geographies. Someone living in Edinburgh may identify as Scottish, British, European, 'Edinburgh-ean', all, or none of these. These identities may exist in relative harmony, or people may experience tensions between them. All may be equally important, or one identity might dominate the others. 'Being Scottish' or 'British' or 'European' or whatever may have little day-to-day relevance in terms of someone's wider sense of themselves, or it might be a key part of their self-image. The attachments people feel to a particular national label may be emotional, cultural, political or some combination of these.

It is impossible for any single survey question to capture all these dimensions of national identity. However, NatCen's British Social Attitudes survey has, over two decades, been measuring the extent to which people in Britain identify with the multiple national (and, in the case of 'European', supranational) identities that are commonly associated with Great Britain and/or Ireland. Respondents are invited to describe how they think of themselves by choosing as few or as many identities as they wish from a list that is shown to them.<sup>2</sup> The survey then attempts to discern the relative importance of these identities by asking those who chose more than one which one *best* describes how they think of themselves.

As Figure 1 shows, we do not appear to see ourselves as a nation of 'Europeans'. Since 1996 (when the question was first asked), fewer than 1 in 5 have ever described themselves this way. The highest proportion to do so was 17% in 1999 (which represented a big increase on 1997, when only 9% did so). In the most recent survey (2014), only 1 in 7 of us (15%) described ourselves as 'European'. Meanwhile, even fewer of us see ourselves as 'European' above anything else – just 4% in 2014 (compared with 44% who felt primarily 'British', 35% who felt English, 6% who felt Scottish and 3% who felt Welsh).

Figure 1 - % of people in Britain who describe themselves as 'European', 1996-2014



Source: British Social Attitudes. See also Curtice, (2015a).

<sup>2</sup> They are shown a card which lists the following: British, English, European, Irish, Northern Irish, Scottish, Ulster, Welsh, Other (those who choose 'Other' are asked to indicate what they are thinking of).

## WHO FEELS EUROPEAN?

Further analysis of the BSA data for 2014 indicates that there are no demographic groups in Britain where anything like a majority of people express a European identity. However, some groups of people are rather more likely to do so than others. In particular:

- Men (19%) are more likely than women (12%) to describe themselves as European
- Those aged under 65 (18%) are more likely than those over 65 (8%) to describe themselves as European<sup>3</sup>
- Those in managerial and professional occupations (22%) are more likely than those in other socio-economic groups (between 11% and 14%) to say they are 'European'
- Graduates (29%) are more likely than those without any qualifications (5%) to see themselves as 'European'
- Politically, Liberal Democrat supporters are most likely to identify as European (26%, compared with 17% of Labour identifiers, 13% of Conservatives and just 5% of those who identify with UKIP). At the same time, data from BSA's sister survey, Scottish Social Attitudes, indicate that in 2014 just 8% of SNP identifiers felt European.

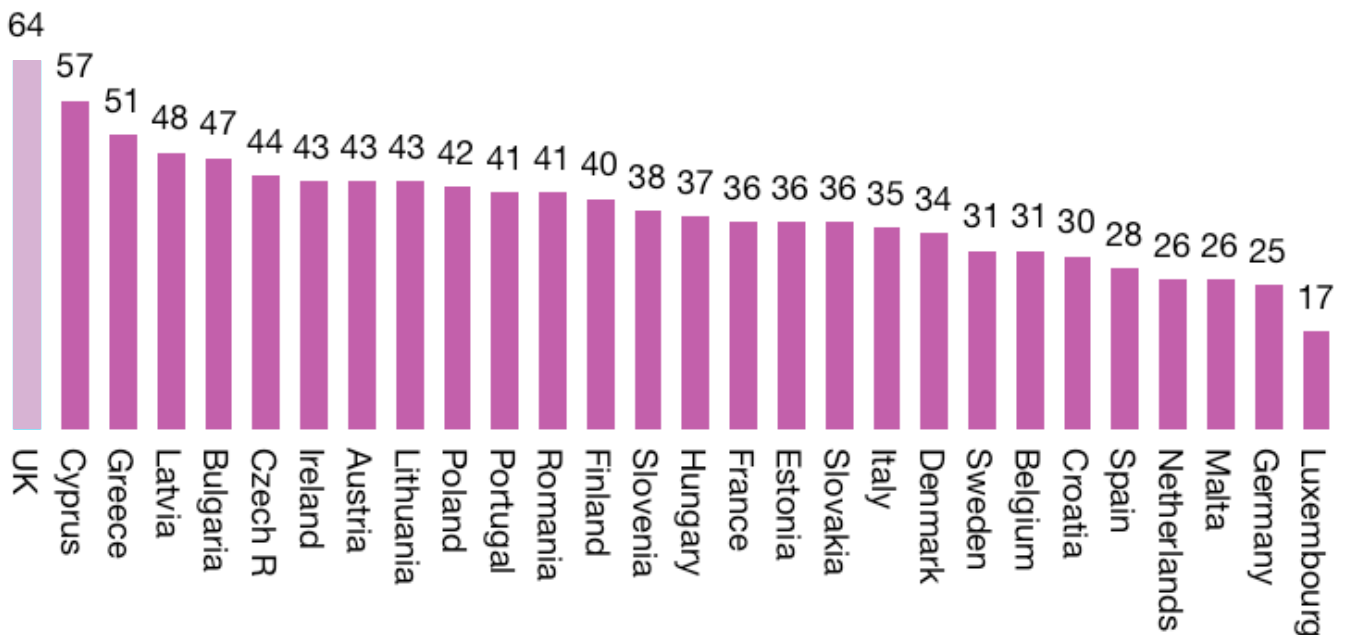
As the figures above on people's 'main' national identity remind us, the 'United Kingdom' is not a single country but a union of four countries. And in very recent memory, a very substantial minority (45%) of people in one of those countries voted to leave this Union and become independent. Much has been made in recent months of the possibility that a vote to leave the European Union could trigger a further referendum on Scottish independence, on the basis that Scotland is supposedly more 'pro-European' than England and would not tolerate being led out of the EU against its will. However, leaving aside the issue of whether Scotland is indeed more pro-EU (to which we turn briefly in the next section), data from Scottish Social Attitudes casts doubt on the notion that Scotland is substantially more 'pro-European' in terms of people's identity. In 2014, just 9% of people in Scotland described themselves as 'European', compared with the 15% figure for Britain as a whole. Of course, this apparent lack of European identity does not preclude the possibility that people in Scotland are more strongly in favour of political and economic union with Europe (see Curtice, 2015b), but it does at least call into question the notion that people in Scotland are more likely to identify with Europe in a more emotional sense, based perhaps on tales of the 'Auld Alliance' with France or links with Nordic sensibilities and customs. Perhaps for many Scots the debate about 'Scottishness' and 'Britishness' and the relationship between the two simply crowds out the possibility of feeling an additional, supranational identity.

<sup>3</sup>There was no consistent pattern across age groups under 65 – the proportion identifying as 'European' ranged from 15% among 55-64 year-olds to 21% among 35-44 year-olds.

## DO WE FEEL LESS EUROPEAN THAN OTHER COUNTRIES?

Are people in Britain unusual in being relatively unlikely to describe ourselves as European? To address this question we turn to data from Eurobarometer. In most years since 1992, Eurobarometer has asked people throughout the European Union to say whether, in the near future they see themselves as their nationality only, their nationality AND European, European AND their nationality, or European only.<sup>4</sup> This question can be used to divide people according to not only whether they prioritise their national or their European identity, but also whether they feel European at all.

Figure 2 - % saying they would see themselves as 'NATIONALITY only' by country, 2015

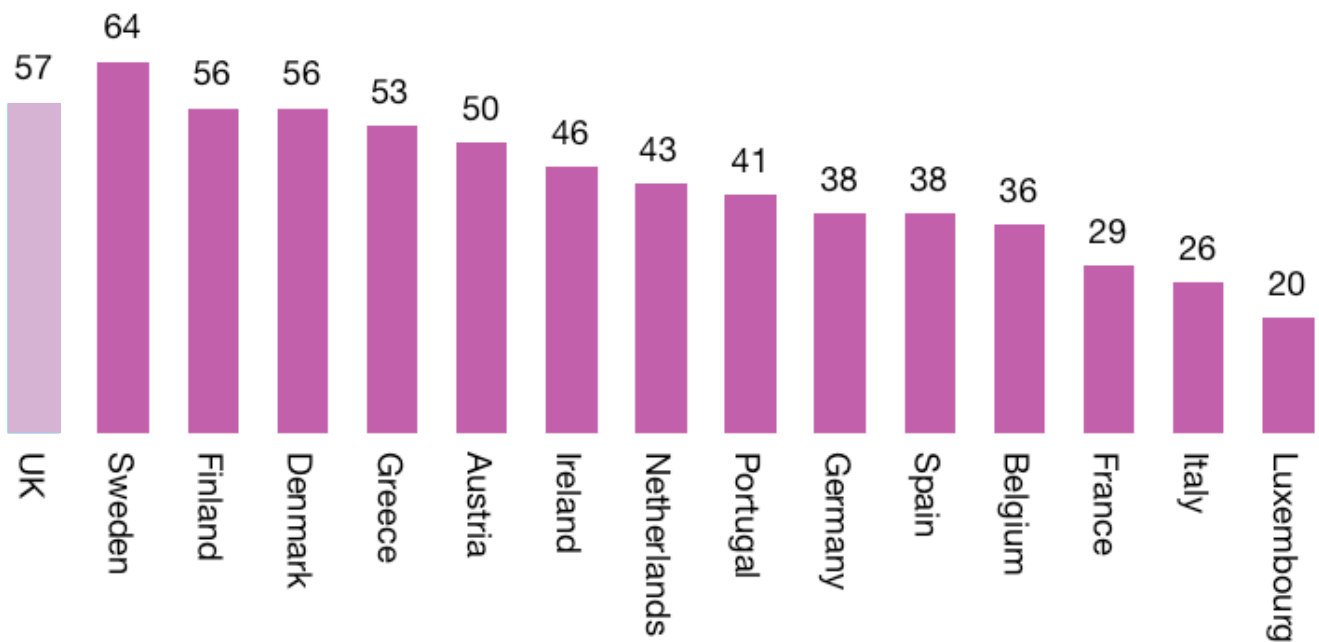


Source: Eurobarometer May 2015

<sup>4</sup>The question is worded "In the near future, do you see yourself as ... (NATIONALITY) only, (NATIONALITY) and European, European and (NATIONALITY), or European only?"

Looking back at past waves of Eurobarometer reveals that UK citizens have always been fairly unlikely to identify with Europe. In 1995, 57% of people in the UK said that, in the near future they saw themselves as 'British only' (Figure 3). In contrast, during the course of the past two decades people in a number of other EU countries appear to have become much more willing to describe themselves as 'European'. In Sweden, for example, 64% of people in 1995 described themselves as 'Swedish only', but by 2015 this figure was just 31%. Similar shifts are apparent for Denmark and the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent, Germany, Finland and Spain. In contrast, UK public opinion appears relatively immobile – we were not particularly likely to see ourselves as European in 1995, and we remain unlikely to do so now.

**Figure 3 - % saying they would see themselves as 'NATIONALITY only' by country, 1995**



Source: Eurobarometer December 1995



## DOES IT MATTER?

So far we have seen that most people in Britain do not think of themselves as European, that this has been the case for at least two decades, and that Britain stands out from most of the rest of Europe in its reluctance to acknowledge a European identity. But does any of this matter? More specifically, in the context of the current debate about the EU referendum, does whether or not people in the UK feel European have any bearing on whether they wish to leave or remain in the EU?

Daniel Hannan, a Conservative MEP who believes Britain should leave the EU, has argued that the debate about the EU ought not to be viewed as ‘pro-European/Europe’ vs ‘anti-European/Europe’. In his view, it is perfectly possible to love Europe while being opposed to the EU as a political and economic union (Hannan, 2015). While this is undoubtedly true, data from British Social Attitudes suggests that among the minority of Britons who go so far as to embrace a sense of European identity, relatively few share Mr Hannan’s view that Britain would be better off outside the EU (Table 1). In 2014, among those who described themselves as European, just 8% said Britain ought to withdraw from the EU, while 92% thought it should remain a member.<sup>5</sup> So feeling European and supporting the EU appear to be very closely aligned. However, this does not imply that those who do not see themselves as European are necessarily opposed to the EU – in fact, on balance more of this group in our 2014 survey preferred Britain to continue in the EU (51%) rather than withdraw (40%).

**Table 1 Attitudes towards Britain’s relationship with the EU by European identity, 2014**

		Should Britain continue or withdraw?		
		Continue	Withdraw	Unweighted base
European	%	92	8	117
Not European	%	51	40	847

In contrast, views on the economic consequences of the EU appear to be much more closely tied to both support and opposition to the EU (Table 2). In 2014, 35% believed closer links with the EU would make Britain stronger economically, while 17% said they would make Britain’s economy weaker (48% thought links with the EU made no difference or were unsure what impact they would have). Among those who believed closer EU links were good for our economy, 88% believed we should continue in the EU; in contrast, among those who believed closer EU links were economically harmful for Britain, 70% thought we should withdraw. In other words, instrumental concerns about the economic consequences appear to be much more closely tied to views on the EU than whether or not people feel European.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>The question on which this is based was worded: “Do you think Britain should continue to be a member of the European Union or should it withdraw?”

<sup>6</sup> This finding is confirmed by multivariate analysis – when controlling for the possible interrelationships between feeling European/not European and believing the EU is economically advantageous or otherwise, beliefs about the economic consequences for Britain clearly trump feelings of European identity.

**Table 2 Attitudes towards Britain’s relationship with the EU by perceptions of the economic impact of closer links, 2014**

Closer ties with the EU would make Britain economically...		Should Britain continue or withdraw?		
		Continue	Withdraw	Unweighted base
Stronger	%	88	11	319
No difference	%	49	42	427
Weaker	%	23	70	165

If relatively few people feel European, and not feeling European does not necessarily mean you oppose the EU, does this mean identity will play little role in most people’s decisions on whether to remain or leave? Before we conclude this, it is worth looking briefly at the relationship between support for the EU and identities that are closer to home for most people in Britain – feeling ‘British’ and feeling ‘English’ or ‘Scottish’.<sup>7</sup> The British Social Attitudes survey has regularly included a question – often referred to as the ‘Moreno’ question after Spanish sociologist Louis Moreno who used it to measure dual identities in Spain (Moreno, 1988) – that asks people to place themselves on a scale from feeling ‘English not British’ at one end, to ‘British not English’ at the other. (Equivalent questions are asked of those living in Scotland and Wales.) We know from many years of British and Scottish Social Attitudes data that the way people balance their state (British) and sub-state (English, Scottish, Welsh) identities is very different in England compared with Scotland and Wales. In England, the most common response is that people feel ‘Equally English and British’ – apparently many people see little tension (or perhaps little difference) between feeling English and feeling British. In Scotland, in contrast, most people feel either ‘Scottish not British’ or ‘More Scottish than British’.

How might these more local identities play into the debate on the EU? To assess this this we need to use a slightly different question on attitudes towards the EU that was included on both the British and Scottish Social Attitudes surveys in 2014. This asked people to choose from a more nuanced list which they thought Britain’s long-term policy towards the EU should be:

- ... to leave the European Union,
- to stay in the EU and try to reduce the EU’s powers,
- to leave things as they are,
- to stay in the EU and try to increase the EU’s powers,
- or, to work for the formation of a single European government?

In England it is those who feel ‘English not British’ who are most likely to favour the first option, Britain leaving the EU – 39% of those who felt English not British thought we should leave, compared with 23-29% of those in other groups (Table 3).

<sup>7</sup> There were too few cases in Wales in BSA to consider the relationship between Welsh vs. British identity and support for the EU.

**Table 3 Believe Scotland should leave the EU, by ‘Moreno’ national identity in Scotland and England, 2014**

'Moreno' National identity	% saying Britain should leave the EU			
	England	Scotland	<i>Unweighted base England</i>	<i>Unweighted base Scotland</i>
English/Scottish not British	39	23	410	363
More English/Scottish than British	29	20	307	401
Equally English/Scottish and British	23	11	1024	462
More British than English/Scottish	23	13	209	70
British not English/Scottish	25	14	282	109
Other	10	15	181	86

We might perhaps expect to see a slightly different pattern in Scotland. Given the SNP’s strong support for the European Union and the relationship (albeit not as strong as people sometimes assume – see Curtice, 2014) between feeling Scottish and support for Scottish independence, we might anticipate that those who feel ‘Scottish, not British’ would, if anything, be most supportive of the EU. But in fact, data from Scottish Social Attitudes 2014 suggests this is not the case – 23% of those who said they feel ‘Scottish not British’ said Britain should leave the EU. This is clearly lower than the equivalent figure for England – overall, fewer people in Scotland than England favoured leaving the EU in 2014 (17% compared with 26%), a difference borne out by a number of more recent polls. However, it is higher than for all other national identity categories in Scotland – for example, among those who feel ‘equally Scottish and British’ or more British than Scottish, only between 11% and 14% said Britain should leave the EU.

In Scotland as in England, those whose feelings of sub-state (English/Scottish) identity dominate, are more likely to express scepticism about the EU. Perhaps the more local people’s sense of national identity, the less inclined they feel to support apparently distant supranational institutions? Whatever the reasons, these findings may suggest that, while the debate in the run up to the referendum is of course likely to focus on what the EU means for Britain, it could actually be the strength or otherwise of voters’ English or Scottish identities that matters. At the same time, our findings on the relative unimportance of ‘identity’ as opposed to more ‘instrumental’ considerations suggest that patriotic appeals to ‘what is best for Britain’ may prove most effective when they are framed with reference to pragmatic considerations such as, for example, the benefits to the economy of remaining in or leaving the EU.

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## CONCLUSIONS

This paper posed two questions: do we feel European and does it matter? The answer to the first is fairly unambiguous: relatively few of us feel European. This fact has remained unchanged in recent decades, even as some of our continental cousins appear to have displayed an increasing willingness to embrace dual European and national identities. The answer to the second is slightly more complicated, but overall the answer appears to be: 'not much'. It is true that most people who feel European would prefer Britain to remain in the EU. But there are relatively few people in this group. Given that people in Britain have remained resolutely 'un-European' in our identities over several decades, one might question whether the 'Remain' campaign would have much luck if it made fostering a shared sense of European identity a key plank of its campaign.

On the other side, those who lack a European identity are divided in their views about the EU. Instrumental concerns about the economic consequences of Britain's membership are far more clearly associated with wanting to leave. On this basis, the 'Leave' campaign might arguably be equally unwise to pursue arguments along the lines of, 'We are British not European' – many of us may well already think this, but this does not necessarily mean we think we should leave the EU. In fact, the identity that seems most closely related to support for leaving the EU (though still not as closely as views on the economic consequences) is not how European or even how British people feel, but how English (or, in Scotland, how Scottish) they feel. But of course, fostering a sense of English or Scottish uniqueness as a way of bolstering support for leaving the EU might be thought by politicians campaigning to leave the EU to come with its own set of risks – not least to the long-term future of the United Kingdom.

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