

BRIEFING



EURC SCEPTICISM IN THE UK

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT OUR PROJECT

IPPR is holding a series of six high-level seminars in London and Brussels exploring what the future holds for the European project in light of the severe ongoing economic and political dislocations at the heart of the EU.

More than a year on from the first EU-sponsored bailout of Greece, we feel that the time is ripe to have an open and constructive set of debates about the key challenges facing Europe, their political and policy implications for Britain, and how policymakers in the UK should respond.

For more, see:
<http://www.ippr.org/research-projects/44/8095/after-the-euro-crisis-where-next-for-the-european-project>

IDEAS to
CHANGE OPINIONS

The drumbeat of euroscepticism has grown ever louder in recent weeks with the debate in the House of Commons on 24 October following much discussion over the party conference season and a concerted campaign played out in the tabloid press. There has been some interesting opinion polling on the issue in recent months which shows the unpopularity of the EU as an institution, the enduring desire for supranational action on some specific issues, and the lack of concern that voters currently have for Europe as an issue.

On 3 October, at the start of Conservative party conference, the *Daily Express* reported that, 'Two out of three Tories want UK to break ties with Brussels'.¹ The headline was taken from a YouGov poll of 2,754 individuals paid for by 'Vote UK out of EU' (formerly the EU Referendum Campaign).² The poll found that 50 per cent of people held a negative view of EU membership since 1973 compared to 29 per cent with a positive view. Similar numbers (51 per cent to 27 per cent) were against the United Kingdom remaining a member of the EU.

These findings are in line with the most recent Eurobarometer survey results, from spring 2011, which asked whether 'Your country has benefited from membership in the EU'.³ Only 35 per cent of Brits thought the UK had benefited from membership, compared to 54 per cent who disagreed. This is the lowest approval rating in the entire EU.

It is possible that the low satisfaction levels are linked to ignorance. The same Eurobarometer found that 58 per cent of Britons say that they do not understand how the EU works – the highest level in the EU. An earlier Eurobarometer survey (May 2010) found that only 34 per cent of Brits know their rights as an EU citizen – only Latvia, Romania, Bulgaria and France scored lower.⁴ When asked if they would like to know what their rights are as an EU citizen, Britons are the least enthusiastic, with only 53 per cent answering in the affirmative.

A separate YouGov poll of 2,023 people for Chatham House published in June probed the public's attitudes to the European Union in more detail.⁵ The graph below shows the low esteem in which the institution of the EU is held by British voters. Those polled were asked to give a mark out of 10 (where 0 was extremely negative and 10 was extremely positive) for nine international institutions. The European Union finished bottom of the list with a mean score of 4.0.

A separate question asked 'how closely should the UK work with the rest of the European Union in each of the following areas?' As the chart below shows, there was net positive support for close working on every one of the seven topics given, including 78 per cent for 'closely' to 13 per cent for 'not closely' on counter-terrorism, policing and border security; 67 per cent to 23 per cent on energy and climate change; 63 per cent to 26 per cent on defence and security policy; and even 53 per cent to 36 per cent on foreign policy.

1 <http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/275148/Two-out-of-three-Tories-want-UK-to-break-ties-with-Brussels>

2 <http://today.yougov.co.uk/sites/today.yougov.co.uk/files/yougov-archives-voteukouteu-yougov-031011.pdf>

3 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb75/eb75_en.pdf

4 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb73/eb73_en.htm

5 http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/0711ch_yougov_survey.pdf

Figure 1
 Survey results: How do you feel about international institutions?

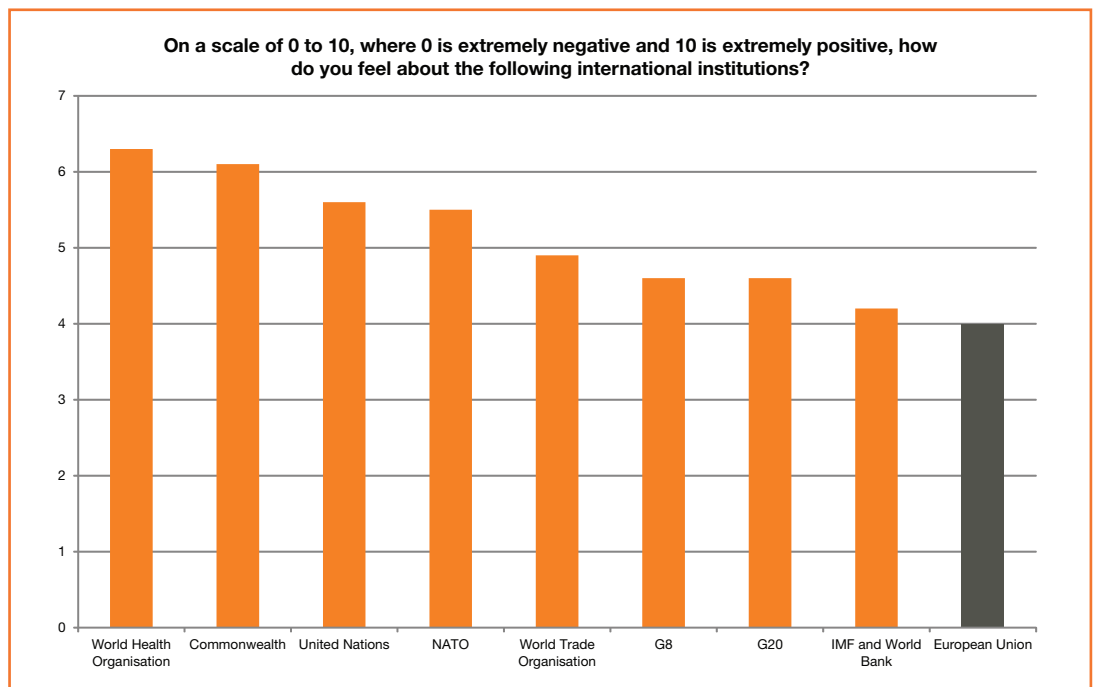
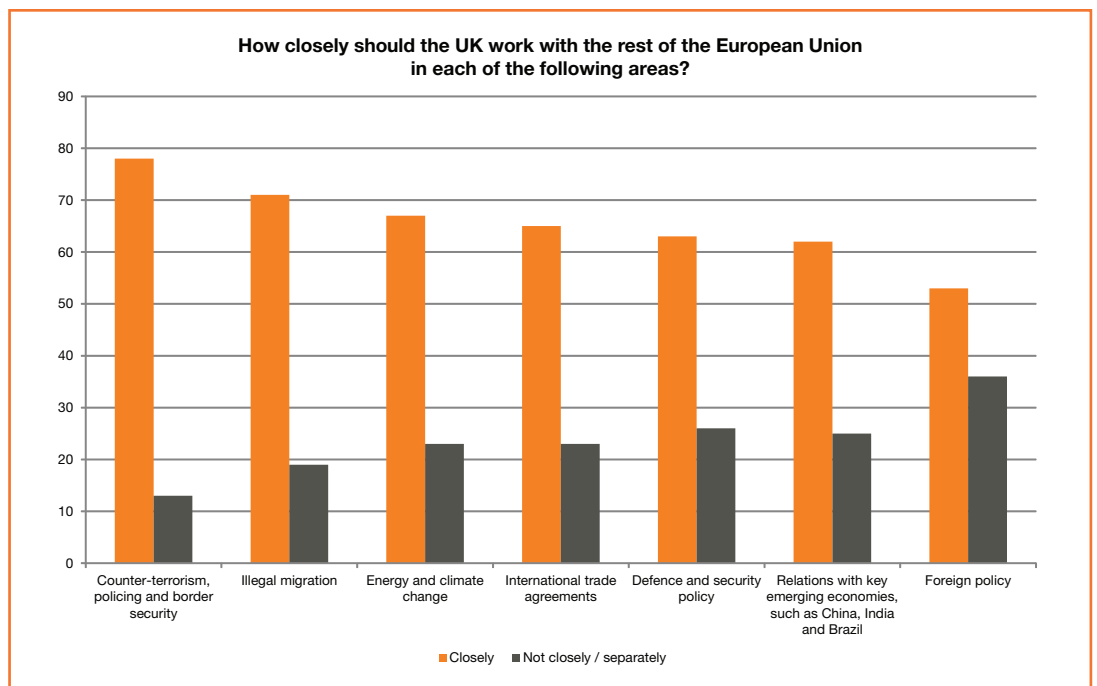


Figure 2
 Survey results: How closely should the UK work with the EU?



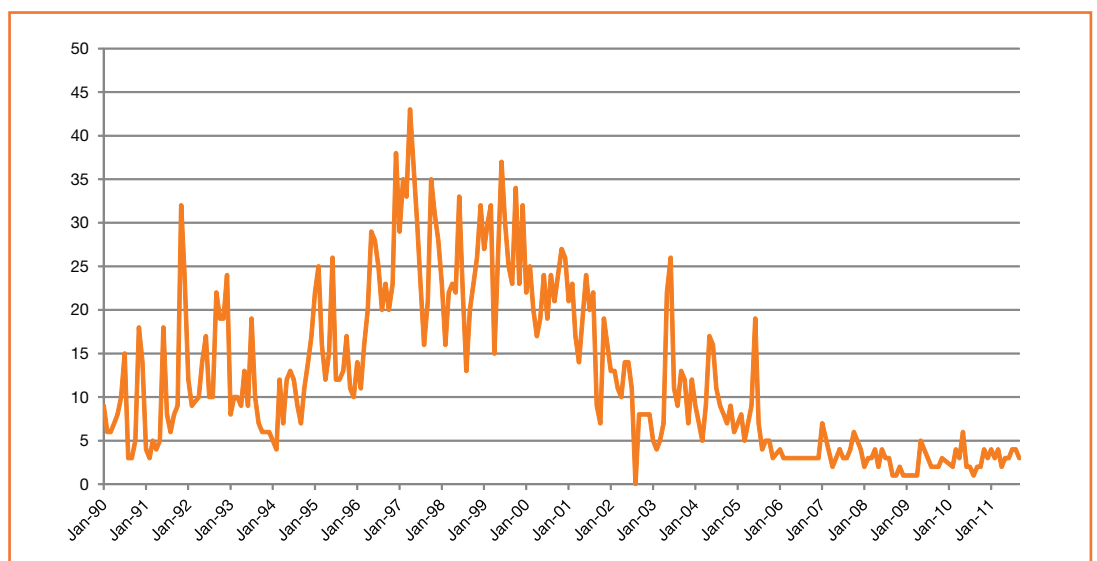
These findings are similar – albeit by larger margins – to a YouGov poll of 2,114 adults for the Fabian Society conducted in November 2010.⁶ That poll found that by 55 per cent to 27 per cent people thought the EU should agree minimum levels of worker rights (something it currently does) and by 47 per cent to 34 per cent that the EU should agree minimum levels of tax on large businesses (which it currently does not).

Perhaps most interestingly, the poll asked: ‘Thinking about the next 25 years or so, many people have suggested that China will join the United States as a second political and economic Superpower. If that turns out to be true, which of the following is closest to your view?’ Forty per cent said ‘Britain and other European countries should work more closely together to maximise their voice and influence in the world’ while just 33 per cent said ‘Britain and other European countries should use their own historic international links to try to maximise their own voice and influence.’

All this suggests that while voters clearly lack knowledge of and support for the EU as an institution, they still recognise the case for a supranational body at the European level covering a wide range of issues.

From the vociferousness of the debate in the UK press in recent weeks, one could be excused for thinking that Europe was dominating discussions around the country, as indeed it has done at various points over the last two decades. But as shown in the graph below, using data collected by Ipsos-MORI, over the last six years fewer than one in 20 people has regarded Europe as the most important issue facing Britain.⁷ Ipsos-MORI’s most recent Issues Index recorded only 1 per cent of respondents indicating the common market, EU, Europe and the euro as the most important issue facing Britain today.⁸ Only 4 per cent mentioned Europe when given the chance to list multiple issues facing Britain.

Figure 3
Proportion answering
‘Europe is the most
important issue facing
Britain today’



6 <http://today.yougov.co.uk/sites/today.yougov.co.uk/files/YG-Archives-Pol-FabianSociety-EUCoop-050111.pdf>

7 <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemID=56&view=wide>

8 http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/sept11IssuesIndex_topline.pdf

These findings are not to dismiss the strongly held views of many Brits in relation to Europe nor the need for institutional reform, but it does suggest that the nature of euroscepticism in the UK may be more nuanced than the current media debate implies.

Questions for consideration

- What is the character and nature of euroscepticism in Britain?
- Why does euroscepticism appeal to some parts of the electorate?
- Is euroscepticism in Britain a product of ignorance of the EU, dissatisfaction with the EU, or something else?
- Can the EU's brand be detoxified?
- Are the EU's powers the right ones for the 21st century?