

Eurosceptic attitudes are widespread in the Nordic states, but there is a high level of variation between countries.

Blog Admin

While the United Kingdom has been the focus for most discussions about Euroscepticism, citizens in the Nordic states have also displayed notable Eurosceptic attitudes. As part of our collaborative project exploring contemporary Euroscepticism, [Benjamin Leruth](#) assesses public opinion in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. He finds that attitudes vary significantly, with citizens tending to be particularly critical of European policies which their country has opted out of. There also appears to be little public support for Iceland or Norway joining the EU in the near future.



Throughout 2012, the growth of Euroscepticism was a persistent theme. Indeed in the latest [Eurobarometer poll](#), only 31 to 33 per cent of respondents indicated that they tend to trust the European Union. Among those responses, it is possible to compare public support among the five Nordic States: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. While these countries are commonly considered as a bloc with similar socio-cultural and political values, they have all opted for a different level of European integration.

Denmark

Denmark joined the European Community in 1973, and has had no less than six referendums on issues related to European integration since 1972, the last one being held in 2000 on adopting the single currency. Two out of those six referendums saw a victory for the “no” side (Maastricht and the adoption of the euro). Following the outcome of the Maastricht referendum, Denmark negotiated opt-outs from the Maastricht Treaty through the Edinburgh Agreement.

Interestingly enough, recent Eurobarometer results show that Danes are not among the strongest Eurosceptics within the EU. Indeed, in November 2012, 48 per cent of respondents claimed that they tend to trust the European Union, which corresponds to 15 per cent more than the EU average. This trend is confirmed by previous Eurobarometer results, and in 2009, 65 per cent of the respondents said that Denmark’s membership to the EU is a good thing, ranking the country among the most positive EU member states.



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However, Danes are much more critical regarding specific policy areas such as the EMU (30 per cent in favour, in comparison to 53 per cent in favour for the whole of the EU) and a common foreign policy (46 per cent, against 64 per cent for the whole of the EU). Contrary to Denmark’s political situation, 60 per cent of respondents are in favour of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) among EU member states, despite the country opting out of the CSDP through the Edinburgh Agreement.

Finland

Finland joined the European Union in 1995 after 56.9 per cent of the population voted in favour of EU membership. In contrast to Denmark, Sweden and Norway, Finland does not have a “referendum tradition”. The country is the most integrated Nordic state, and is thus considered as less resistant to European integration than its Scandinavian neighbours.

Eurobarometer results tend to show that the Finnish population is actually more Eurosceptic than those in Denmark. Indeed, in November 2012, 47 per cent of respondents said they tend to trust the EU, a trend that has remained quite stable for the past three years. Regarding the benefits of EU membership, the Finnish population is much more sceptical: between 2000 and 2009, 37 to 51 per cent of respondents believed that Finland’s membership is good for their country: results that were generally below Sweden, Denmark and the EU average throughout these years.

The Finnish population is currently the most positive towards Economic and Monetary Union, with 76 per cent of respondents being in favour of this policy area. As Finland is the only Nordic state which has adopted the single currency, it is no surprise to see such a difference from attitudes in the other Nordic EU states, Denmark and Sweden. Just as it is the case for Denmark and Sweden, the Finnish population is opposed to a common foreign policy (41 per cent are in favour). Finally, respondents seem more sceptical towards the development of a Common Security and Defence Policy (with 52 per cent in favour) than the EU average (73 per cent in favour).

Iceland

Iceland applied for EU membership for the first time during its history in 2009, and accession negotiations are still underway. Currently, Iceland’s relationship with the European Union is mostly shaped through the European Economic Area (EEA) and Schengen agreements. As a non-member state, data available through Eurobarometer polling is less extensive; however, it is possible to analyse trends regarding public support for EU membership.

Recent [opinion polls](#) suggest that less than a third of the Icelandic population is in favour of EU membership. This trend is confirmed by data available in the latest Eurobarometer: 26 per cent of respondents believe that Iceland’s membership would be a good thing, 33 per cent believe that Iceland would benefit from joining the EU and 34 per cent trust the European Union. Since the Icelandic government submitted the application, public support has [declined drastically](#) and it is expected that the relationship with the European Union will be a major issue during the upcoming parliamentary elections, which will be held in April.

Norway

Similarly to Iceland, Norway is not a member of the European Union; however, the country has applied on three separate occasions for EU membership. In 1972 and 1994, the population rejected EC/EU membership with 53.5 and 52.2 per cent of the electorate voting ‘no’. Norway still remains a close partner of the European Union, mostly through the EEA and Schengen agreements. Since the 1994 referendum, the issue of EU membership has remained largely off the agenda. Public support for EU membership is very low: in July 2012, 17.2 per cent of respondents to a [national survey](#) said they would vote in favour of EU membership, with 74.8 per cent against. This illustrates why EU membership is not discussed in the political sphere: effectively, since 1994, government coalition agreements include a “suicide clause” on the EU question.

Sweden

Sweden has been a member of the European Union since 1995: in the 1994 referendum on EU membership, 52.3 per cent of the population voted ‘yes’. The country has negotiated an informal opt-out of the Eurozone by not joining [ERM II](#). In 2003, when the population was asked whether Sweden should join the Economic and Monetary Union, 55.9 per cent voted against. As a result, Sweden’s de facto opt-out remained in place.

The latest Eurobarometer poll suggests that 33 per cent of Swedes trust the European Union, which corresponds to the EU average. In 2009, 57 per cent of respondents said that Sweden's membership is good for the country. As expected following the 2003 referendum, the most "Eurosceptic" result is related to Economic and Monetary Union: only 23 per cent of respondents are in favour of EMU. Recent [national surveys](#) show more critical results: 82.3 per cent of the population opposes EMU membership, while the situation was even more negative in 2009. Furthermore, only 37 per cent of respondents are in favour of a common foreign policy, and 54 per cent are in favour of the CSDP. Both results are largely below the EU average.

Conclusions

Euroscepticism is a highly complex concept, which covers many aspects that are not outlined in Eurobarometer polls or other surveys. In order to explain why mass Euroscepticism is higher in Norway or Iceland for instance, many factors should be considered such as economic incentives to join, socio-economic cleavages between the EU and the state, or cultural particularism.

Nevertheless, it is possible to draw some broad conclusions from the above discussion. First, issues of sovereignty and self-determination seem to shape public opinion on European issues. Eurobarometer results indicate that this is the case for the three EU Nordic states (e.g. public support for a common foreign policy and the CSDP), while [several studies](#) have shown that national sovereignty played a key role in the 1994 referendum in Norway. Second, Nordic populations seem to have critical views on policies they opted out from. The only exception to that rule would be the Danes' perception of the CSDP. Third, even though Finland is the most integrated Nordic state, the Finnish population is more critical than its EU neighbours regarding the benefits of EU membership. Finally, current trends show that due to low levels of public support, Iceland's accession to the EU is unlikely to happen in the short term.

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This post is part of a collaboration between [British Politics and Policy](#), [EUROPP](#) and [Ballots & Bullets](#), which aims to examine the nature of euroscepticism in the UK and abroad from a wide range of perspectives. [Read more posts from this series.](#)

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