



THE UNIVERSITY  
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## **What makes voters want their own EU referendum?**

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### Approach

In the main report of this project we present descriptive insights illustrating in how far people in other EU member states would like their countries to hold a similar referendum to that on the UK's EU membership. Do people in other EU member states wish for a similar process to that currently underway in the UK for their own country? In France a majority of people would like a referendum on EU membership (53 per cent) and in Sweden, Germany, and Spain there are more respondents in favour of holding a similar referendum than opposed (**Table 1**). In Poland and Ireland the opposite is true, with more people not wanting a referendum than wanting one.

This is a complex issue and it should not be assumed that higher percentages wanting a referendum directly equates to a more eurosceptic public. We need multivariate analyses to properly establish which factors are ultimately relevant in determining whether a person is likely to wish for their own country to hold a referendum on its EU membership. In this briefing we present a set of such multivariate regression analyses that allow us to assess the relationship of this choice with multiple factors simultaneously. This means that we can assess the respective relationship between any particular variable on the respondents' wishes for their own country to hold a similar referendum as the UK controlling for all the other factors included.

*Table 1: Wish for own country to hold similar referendum as Britain<sup>1</sup> by country (%)*

	I would like [my country] to hold a referendum on its EU membership	I would not like [my country] to hold a referendum on its EU membership
Germany N= 1247	53	47
France N= 1243	65	35
Poland N= 1269	46	54
Spain N= 1323	55	45
Ireland N= 866	44	56
Sweden N= 827	60	40

Excludes don't knows

We proceed as follows: we first estimate the effects of the socio-demographic variables (age, sex and educational attainment) on respondents' wishes for their own countries to hold referenda on their EU membership. We do this for the full sample including dummy variables for the countries, to estimate whether differences between the countries are significant and remain so when controlling for the independent variables. We then run the models for each country separately to establish whether the different factors matter in the same way in all countries or whether different profiles of respondents emerge. Finally, we add a set of further explanatory variables capturing different important aspects differentiating respondents from each other on a range of political attitude domains:

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<sup>1</sup> "Now thinking of [own country], what do you think about holding a similar type of referendum as in Britain in which people would be asked whether they wanted [own country] to remain part of the EU or to leave the EU?"

- Trust both in their respective national parliament<sup>2</sup> and the EU parliament<sup>3</sup> to estimate a measure attitudes directed at actual political institutions at both the national and supranational level
- National identity<sup>4</sup> and European identity<sup>5</sup> as more affective measures of orientations at both levels
- Wish for own country's long-term strategy within the EU to leave the EU or reduce its powers (Euroscepticism) vs. to remain in the EU and increase its powers or work towards a single EU government (Eurofans)<sup>6</sup> as a measure of topical motivation and political strategy
- Self-perceived political position on the left-right spectrum<sup>7</sup> as a proxy for the impact of political affiliation
- Two practical evaluations: aggregate scores of respondent's knowledge of EU matters<sup>8</sup> and of media consumption to get informed about EU matters<sup>9</sup>

## Results

At first glance, it seems there is a fairly similar picture across the six countries surveyed with majorities in support of a referendum on the EU membership of Germany, France, Spain and Sweden, while in Poland and Ireland voters are less decided. In how far are there substantial differences between countries?

As **table 2** shows, there are significant differences between countries on this issue that are robust to socio-demographic controls. Voters in France and Sweden are more likely to want their countries to hold a referendum on EU membership than voters in Germany and Spain. In Poland and Ireland, voters are less likely to be in favour of such a referendum overall.

These differences between countries remain robust even when we control for age, sex and educational attainment. When adding further attitudinal variables (table 3), the effects remain

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<sup>2</sup> "How much trust to you have in [National parliament]?" – 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust), excluding those saying "don't know"

<sup>3</sup> "How much trust to you have in the European Parliament?" – 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust), excluding those saying "don't know"

<sup>4</sup> "Below is a scale from 1 to 7 to describe to what extent you think of yourself as European. The more European you feel, the further to the right you would put yourself. The less European you feel, the further to the left you would put yourself. Where would you put yourself on this scale?", excluding those who skipped the question

<sup>5</sup> "And here is a similar scale I would like you to use to describe to what extent you think of yourself as [COUNTRY ADJECTIVE from COUNTRY OF RESPONDENT]. Where would you put yourself on this scale?"

<sup>6</sup> "Do you think [COUNTRY OF RESPONDENT] long-term policy should be ..." – 1 and 2 ("to leave the EU" and "To stay in the EU and try to reduce the EU's powers" taken together) vs. 4 and 5 ("To stay in the EU and try to increase the EU's powers" and "To work for the formation of a single European government" taken together), 3 ("To leave things as they are") as reference category, excluding those who say "don't know"

<sup>7</sup> Self-positioning on left-right scale: "In political matters, people often talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. Generally speaking, how would you place your views on a scale where '1' means 'the left' and '10' means 'the right'?", excluding those who did not answer

<sup>8</sup> We used six different statements to judge how much respondents knew about specific situations in the EU: "When a citizen from Belgium crosses the border to the Netherlands, they usually have to show their passport to a border officer." (false); "Britain receives a discount on its membership payments to the European Union." (true); "If someone from Finland moves to Britain and works there, they have to wait six months before they can receive the same level of state support British workers get." (false); "When a citizen from Italy arrives by plane in Britain, they usually do not have to show their passport to a border officer." (false); "All citizens of any EU country are free to move to any other EU country to live even if they do not want to take up work there." (false); "Citizens of one EU member state who move to another EU country are allowed to vote in European Parliament elections in the new country." (true)

<sup>9</sup> "Have you followed news about politics in the European Union during the last three months using any of the following sources?" Yes/No for Print newspapers, online news websites, social media, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, TV programmes, radio programmes, publicity materials from political parties, other

significant in all countries except for Sweden, meaning that attitudinal differences do not explain all between-country variation. This means that the six countries differ substantially in terms of the demographics of those who are in favour of holding a referendum on their country's EU membership.

For Sweden, however, once the attitudinal characteristics are taken into account, Swedish respondents have the same likelihood as German respondents to back their own country's EU referendum. This suggests that the higher likelihood of Swedish respondents to vote for a referendum is indeed shaped by differences in their attitudes towards the issues investigated.

#### *Socio-demographic determinants of wish for own country to hold an EU referendum*

Next, we analysed whether the socio-demographic profiles of respondents impacted whether they were in favour of or opposed to their own country holding a referendum on its EU membership and in how far this differed across countries. Across all six countries, those who have completed a form of tertiary education are less likely to be in favour of their country holding a referendum on its EU membership than those with lower degrees of education. While this association is pronounced especially in Germany, France, Spain and Ireland, it is visible to a lesser extent in Poland and Sweden.

When it comes to age differences, younger people were much more likely to be in favour of holding a referendum in Poland and – when comparing those aged 54 years or younger to those aged 55 or older – also in Spain and Ireland. However, we found this pattern to be reversed in Germany and to some extent in Sweden, where those aged 35 to 54 years are most likely to want their country to hold a referendum on its EU membership while younger voters aged 18 to 34 years and those aged 55 and older are less likely to back their own country's referendum. Also, in Poland, and to a lesser extent in Sweden, women were more likely to be in favour of holding a referendum than men. In other countries there was no such pattern of gender.

From this analysis we conclude that there are differences between countries in terms of who would back a referendum on their own country's EU membership: the picture is much more diverse across Europe than it seemed at first glance. We also conclude that we need to keep socio-demographic factors as a part of our models when looking for determinants of who wants their own country to hold a referendum on its EU membership similar to the one in Britain.

#### *Attitudinal factors impacting respondents' wishes for their country to hold an EU referendum*

Not surprisingly, one of the key factors influencing whether people want their country to hold a referendum on its EU membership similar to the one in Britain is their wish for their country's long-term strategy within the European Union: those who are in favour of their country leaving the EU altogether or remaining a member of the EU, but significantly reducing its powers ("Eurosceptics") are much more likely to want a referendum compared to those who want to keep the status quo and those who want their country to remain a member of the EU and increase its powers or even work towards a single EU government. A possible rationale for this is that voters who are in favour of their country leaving the EU or significantly reducing its powers want a public debate to be held on their country's EU membership in order for their concerns to be heard. As the process underway in Britain demonstrates, to many of these voters a referendum on this matter seems to be a good way to initiate such a debate.

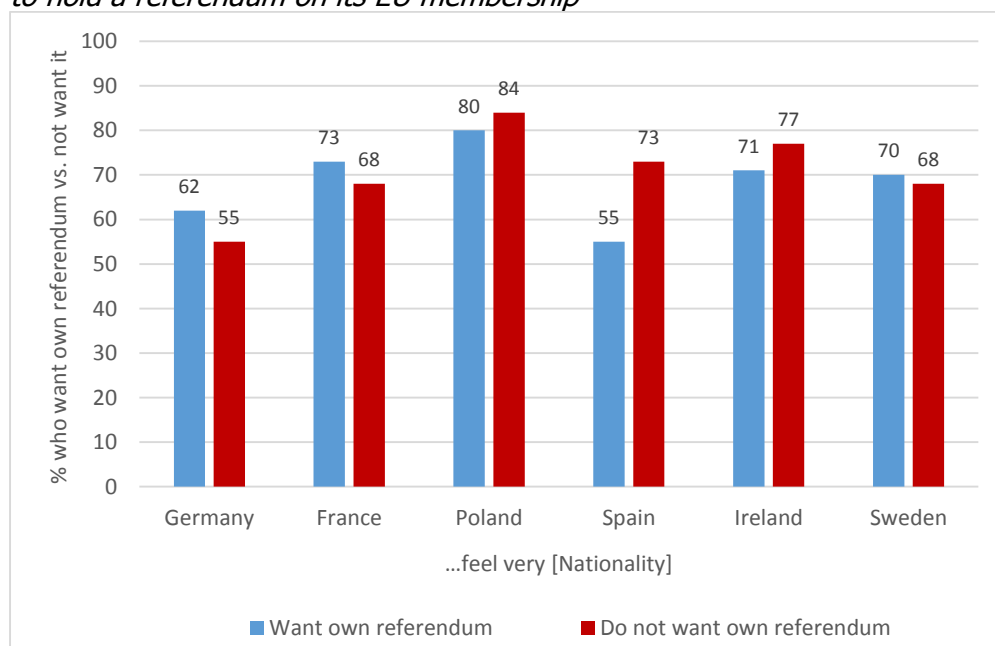
Interestingly, “Eurofans” (those who want their country to remain a member of the EU and increase its powers or even work towards a single EU government) are no more or less likely to be in favour of or against a referendum on their country’s EU membership than those who want to keep things as they are in terms of their country’s EU relationship. This indicates that for “Eurofans” a public vote does not seem to be an attractive option to discuss opinions on their country’s long-term EU strategy. We can only speculate whether these voters feel their wishes are already well represented in their current government’s EU strategy or whether this has to do with fears about the turn such a debate could take for their country’s EU relationship. Further research could shed light in these arguments.

However, Euroscepticism is not the only factor explaining whether voters want their country to hold a referendum on its EU membership, indicating that this is a more complex matter. In addition, those who have little trust in the European Parliament and claim to feel less European are more likely to back their own country’s EU referendum. In turn, those voters who trust the European Parliament and those who claim to feel more European are less likely to be in favour of a direct vote on their country’s EU membership. These effects are robust and very similar in terms of effect size across all six countries surveyed, with the exception of Germany.

While Germany displays the same effect of trust in the European Parliament on voters’ wishes for their own EU referendum as all other countries, those Germans who feel more European are no more or less likely to back a referendum on Germany’s future in the EU than those who feel less European. In Germany, similar to the effect of trust in the European Parliament, those who trust their national parliament more are also more sceptical of an EU referendum. In Poland, however, this relationship is reversed: those who trust the national parliament more are more likely to back a referendum on Poland’s EU membership.

It is striking to note that we do not find any impact of having a strong national identity on whether respondents want their country to hold an EU referendum or not: the relationship remains insignificant overall. If at all, to some extent, those who feel more national are less likely to be in favour of their country holding a referendum on its EU membership.

*Figure 1: Attitudes towards national identity by whether respondents want their own country to hold a referendum on its EU membership*



In contrast to national identity, for some countries respondents' attitudes towards political ideologies in general and their knowledge of and media consumption about EU matters seem to play more of a role when it comes to distinguishing those who want a referendum on their country's EU membership.

In Germany, France and Spain a person's self-positioning on a left-right scale has a (marginal) effect on wishing for their country's EU referendum, yet with differing directions: in Germany and France, those who position themselves further to the right are more likely to want their countries to hold a referendum on their membership of the EU, while in Spain those who position themselves further to the left are more likely to back such a referendum. In all other countries, political attitudes in terms of left-right self-assessment do not play a role in this matter.

In France, knowledge of and media consumption about EU matters also have an effect: while those who tend to know more about EU matters are less likely to support a referendum on their countries' EU membership, those who say they use a variety of sources to keep up-to-date about EU matters are more likely to be in favour of such a process. These effects are also visible in Ireland (for knowledge) and in Germany (for media consumption), albeit to a much lesser extent.

Finally, it is also worth noting that some of the relationships of age and education do not remain significant when also taking into account these attitudinal variables, suggesting that these attitudes are partially patterned by age and education.

### *Conclusion*

Multivariate analyses shed light on the factors underlying voters' wishes for their own countries to hold an EU-referendum similar to the process underway in Britain. From such analyses, we conclude that the picture is more complicated than it seems at first glance: in addition to variation in support for an own referendum, there is also variation between countries in terms of which population groups are in favour of such a direct vote.

Some factors however, apply consistently. In all countries, "Eurosceptics" are more likely to be in favour of their country holding a referendum on its EU membership, while "Eurofans" are not more or less likely to back such a process than those voters supporting the status quo. In addition to a person's wish for their country's long-term strategy within the European Union, attitudinal evaluations of trust in the European Parliament and one's own European identity also play a significant role in determining whether someone backs or opposes an EU-referendum in their own country. Political attitudes, knowledge of and media consumption to keep informed about EU matters play only a marginal role in some of the countries surveyed.

Most strikingly, however, we conclude that the extent to which people feel strongly about their own national identity does not impact how likely they are to back a referendum on their country's EU membership. This can be argued to partially refute the narrative that it is a rise in nationalism that drives voters to back a public debate on their countries to leave the European Union.

Table 2: Logistic regression models for wanting a referendum on EU membership in own country as dependent variable (socio-demographic comparison)

	All		Germany		France		Poland		Spain		Ireland		Sweden	
	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.
Intercept	1.57	.09***	1.33	.20	2.53	.18***	1.59	.18*	1.58	0.15**	1.30	.21	1.11	.21
<u>Age: 18-35</u>														
35-54	1.12	.07+	1.64	.16***	1.29	.16	0.62	.15***	1.14	.15	0.98	.17	1.55	.19*
55+	0.59	.06***	0.87	.15	0.91	.15	0.20	.15***	0.65	.15**	0.37	.19***	1.08	.18
Female	1.18	.05***	1.03	.12	1.07	.12	1.46	.12**	1.18	.12	1.16	.15	1.44	.15*
<u>Educ.: ≤ Lower Sec</u>														
Tertiary education	0.54	.07***	0.55	.18***	0.41	.17***	0.66	.19*	0.53	.13***	0.55	.19***	0.68	.20*
Upper/Post-Sec.	1.13	.07*	0.77	.16+	0.82	.16	1.00	.17	0.88	.15	0.86	.18	1.20	.19
<u>Country: Germany</u>														
France	1.73	.08***												
Poland	0.74	.08***												
Spain	1.05	.08												
Ireland	0.68	.09***												
Sweden	1.38	.09***												
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.075		0.034		0.051		0.153		0.055		0.078		0.038	
N	6802		1274		1243		1269		1323		866		827	

Displayed are odds ratios from a logistic regression model with coefficient standard errors and indications of levels of statistical significance.

\*\*\*p≤0.001, \*\*p≤0.01, \*p≤0.05, +p<0.10

Table 3: Logistic regression models for wanting a referendum on EU membership in own country as dependent variable with multiple predictors

	All		Germany		France		Poland		Spain		Ireland		Sweden	
	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.	Odds-R.	s.e.
Intercept	7.48	.22***	1.17	.49	14.30	.53***	1.49	.57	35.83	.44***	11.77	.61***	3.89	.66*
<u>Age: 18-35</u>														
35-54	1.14	.08	1.60	.18*	1.32	.20	0.77	.18	1.19	.17	0.87	.22	1.10	.25
55+	0.62	.08***	0.89	.18	0.79	.19	0.29	.19***	0.86	.17	0.33	.23***	0.79	.24
Female	1.25	.06***	1.09	.14	1.12	.15	1.67	.15***	1.10	.13	1.36	.18 <sup>+</sup>	1.76	.20**
<u>Educ.: ≤ Lower Sec</u>														
Tertiary education	0.67	.08***	0.75	.21	0.50	.21***	0.82	.25	0.53	.16***	0.62	.23*	0.97	.26
Upper/Post-Sec.	0.99	.08	0.96	.19	0.84	.20	1.24	.22	0.78	.17	0.84	.22	1.42	.25
Nat. Parliament trust	1.02	.01	0.92	.04*	1.04	.05	1.13	.03***	0.98	.03	1.03	.05	1.03	.05
EU Parliament trust	0.81	.02***	0.85	.04***	0.86	.05**	0.83	.03***	0.88	.03***	0.76	.05***	0.74	.06***
National ID	0.96	.02 <sup>+</sup>	1.07	.05	1.04	.06	1.09	.06	0.85	.04***	0.89	.05*	1.03	.07
European ID	0.83	.02***	0.95	.05	0.69	.06***	0.80	.05***	0.83	.05***	0.89	.05*	0.81	.06***
<u>EU: Keep status quo</u>														
Eurofans	0.97	.08	0.70	.21 <sup>+</sup>	0.84	.22	1.31	.19	0.71	.18 <sup>+</sup>	1.17	.25	1.24	.28
Euroseptics	2.86	.08***	2.17	.21***	2.58	.22***	2.98	.18***	1.48	.19*	2.69	.23***	6.20	.24***
Left-Right ID	1.03	.01*	1.12	.04**	1.06	.03 <sup>+</sup>	1.03	.04	0.91	.03**	1.03	.05	1.01	.04
Knowledge	0.94	.03*	1.06	.07	0.79	.07***	1.04	.07	0.96	.06	0.87	.08 <sup>+</sup>	0.96	.09
Media Consumption	1.03	.02	1.10	.05*	1.15	.05**	0.98	.05	1.05	.04	0.99	.06	0.96	.06
<u>Country: Germany</u>														
France	1.38	.10***												
Poland	0.78	.10*												
Spain	1.27	.10*												
Ireland	0.50	.11***												
Sweden	1.03	.11												
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.307		0.295		0.350		0.368		0.250		0.318		0.398	
N	6192		1190		1121		1127		1263		756		735	

Displayed are odds ratios from a logistic regression model with coefficient standard errors and indications of levels of statistical significance.

\*\*\*p≤0.001, \*\*p≤0.01, \*p≤0.05, <sup>+</sup>p<0.10