

Placating ‘worried nationalists’ may be key to the pro-EU side winning a referendum on the UK’s relationship with Europe.

by Blog Admin

*The chances of a referendum being held on the UK’s membership of the European Union have increased significantly in recent months. Based on a study for the European Council on Foreign Relations, **Peter Kellner**, President of the polling organisation YouGov, assesses how a referendum on EU membership might play out in practice. A large percentage of the UK population – which he terms ‘worried nationalists’ – are likely to oppose EU membership on the basis of general values concerning Britain’s place in the world. Encouraging these individuals to think more pragmatically about the UK’s relationship with Europe would likely be crucial for the pro-EU campaign.*



In a democracy, public opinion always matters; but British attitudes to Europe matter more than usual. This is partly because a referendum on Britain and the EU in the next few years is a distinct possibility; partly because Europe is an especially divisive issue on the political Right, with the United Kingdom Independence Party threatening to overtake the Conservatives at the European Parliament elections in 2014; and partly because any major change in the way the EU works requires the consent of all EU members, so Britain has a veto – and all the main parties have promised that they will wield the veto unless they have public consent.

YouGov has conducted fresh research for the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) into the roots of British attitudes to Europe. It finds that the attitudes of millions of voters to the EU are intimately linked to their view of Britain itself, to their view of how our society is evolving, and extent to which they want Britain to engage with the rest of the world generally. We asked people to consider eight pairs of statements and say, in each case, which they agreed with more. Two pairs explored attitudes to Britain; another two, recent and future trends about life in Britain; two looked at attitudes to the world as a whole; the final two specifically considered Britain and Europe. The full results can be viewed [here](#).

Different people will find significance in different findings: the widespread pessimism about the prospects for the next generation, for example, or the popularity of British traditions, or the divided views about whether Britain should work especially closely with the rest of Europe; or – most relevant to this analysis – the two-to-one majority regarding the EU as fundamentally a failure rather than a success.

However, the main reason for asking these questions together is to explore the connections among these attitudes. How far, if at all, do our attitudes to the EU flow from specific concerns about the way Brussels works, and how far from views about the state of Britain itself and/or our optimism or pessimism towards the future and/or our wider sense of whether Britain should engage with the rest of the world or try to keep it at bay?



United Kingdom Independence Party leader Nigel Farage (Credit: Euro Realist Newsletter)

Looking at our survey data, the strongest correlations with attitudes to the EU concern Britain's general place in the world. Supporters of overseas aid tend to be pro-EU; opponents of overseas aid are overwhelmingly anti-EU. The correlation coefficient between the two is 0.5 – which statisticians consider a high figure. It's a similar story, with almost exactly the same coefficient, when we compare attitudes to the EU with those to Britain's place in the world generally. The more strongly people agree with the view that Britain must work closely with global organisations such as the United Nations, the more likely they are to be pro-EU.

There is also a clear, though lesser, correlation between how we view the EU and whether we think Britain has grown better or worse in the past 30-40 years. By three-to-one, pro-EU respondents think Britain has improved, while by five-to-three, those who regard the EU as a failure think Britain has got worse. The correlation is 0.3. A similar figure applies when we compare expectations for the future, and whether or not our children's generation will be better off than ours: Those who are pro-EU divide evenly between optimists and pessimists, while those who are anti-EU are overwhelmingly pessimistic.

This correlation analysis takes us some way down the track of understanding the different forces at work on public attitudes to Europe. But we need to delve further, for these forces are not wholly independent of each other. For example, supporters of overseas aid are more likely than opponents to be optimists. One way to analyse these factors together is to do cluster analysis. The computer examines the pattern of responses, and creates clusters of broadly like-minded respondents. When we do this, we find that most Britons belong to one of three groups:

Worried nationalists (WNs): 42 per cent. They tend to have a traditional view of Britain, are pessimistic about the future and, were Britain a castle surrounded by a moat, would want the drawbridge up most of the time, in order to keep the rest of the world at bay. They tend to dislike overseas aid and think Britain should not bother too much with the global bodies such as the United Nations. The vast majority of them think the EU has been a failure.

WNs divide evenly between Labour and Conservatives; 15 per cent of them support UKIP (twice the national average) and just 5 per cent are Liberal Democrats (half the national average). They are slightly more likely than the general population to be women and to read the Sun or the Mail, and less likely to have a university degree.

Pragmatic nationalists (PNs): 23 per cent. Like the WNs, PNs tend to have a traditional view of Britain, but tend to be less pessimistic about the way Britain is heading. They are divided about the merits of overseas aid, but tend to think Britain does need to co-operate with global institutions. Were Britain a castle, they would lower the drawbridge more often than the WNs, to allow more contact with the outside world. They are divided on whether the EU has been successful, but tend not to have strong feelings either way.

PNs also divide evenly between Labour and Conservative. The share of Liberal Democrats is in line with the national average; but only 3 per cent would vote UKIP. Otherwise, their demographic profile is similar to that of Britain as a whole.

Progressive internationalists (PIs): 25 per cent. Here, "progressive" is used not so much as a left-of-centre label, but in the sense of holding a view that history tends towards greater prosperity and enlightenment. Their view of Britain tends to be rooted in values more than tradition; they generally think Britain is a better place today than was a generation ago but are less certain about the future. Overwhelmingly, PIs think Britain must play a full role in global institutions, most support our international aid programme and, by three-to-one, they think the EU is a success story. They are happy for the drawbridge linking Britain to the rest of the world to stay down.

Two-thirds of PIs would vote Labour (52 per cent) or Lib Dem (14 per cent); just 23 per cent would vote Conservative. They are more likely than the national average to be men, to have university degrees and to read the 'broadsheet' newspapers.

It should be stressed that these groups are not completely homogeneous; and there are another 10 per cent of the electorate that don't fit any of them (though this last group tends to have no clear views of these issues, and few of them are likely to vote in any election or referendum). Even within each group, there are some people who fit most but by no means all of the descriptions given. For example, there are internationally-minded optimists who reject the traditional view of British life and approve of overseas aid, but still dislike the EU. However, there aren't very many of them.

The broader lesson is that those who seek to persuade Britons either to love or to hate Brussels by stressing the precise wording of EU treaties, or the details of the Common Agricultural Policy, or the merits of the Working Time Directive, are wasting their time. Few people think about the EU in these terms; and the few who do are probably committed enthusiasts for, or utterly hostile to, the whole project; so their votes are locked up. For most people, attitudes to the EU are shaped by two broad things: their view of Britain itself, and how far they are at ease with the direction in which our society is heading. As with so much else in politics, fear is a big driver of public attitudes. At the moment, the fear factor is working hard for the EU's opponents.

Implications of the Analysis

First, Worried Nationalists comprise by far the biggest single group. In a referendum on whether to leave the EU, Worried Nationalists give the anti-EU lobby a head start. Although they could be outvoted if virtually all the Pragmatic Nationalists lined up against them with the Progressive Internationalists, I find it hard in practice to see how the British would vote to stay in the EU unless a fair number of nationalists could be lured from the "worried" to the "pragmatic" column.

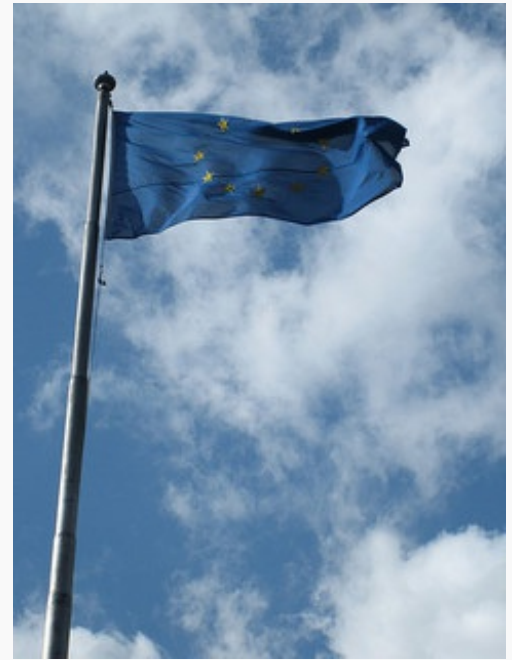
Although we don't have this kind of data for 1975, there can be little doubt that this is a big part of what happened 37 years ago. Many voters who started out both disliking the Common Market and fearful of Britain's future, ended up fearing that Britain would be worse off out in the cold. They decided on pragmatic grounds to swallow their dislike of "Europe" and vote to stay in. If an in-out referendum is held in the next few years, the pro-EU lobby will need to achieve the same shift and change the way the fear factor works.

Secondly, if the WN column can be reduced to, say, 35 per cent or less in a referendum campaign, then the PNs will become the swing group. Their votes will decide whether Britain leaves the EU or stays in. As in 1975, the fear factor will loom large. But this is part of a wider point. By its nature, pragmatism is concerned more with practical and often short-term outcomes, rather than big visions and long-term dreams. PNs are unlikely to be swayed either by those who summon the spirits of Shakespeare, Agincourt and Elizabeth I – or by those who wax lyrical about peace in Europe and the continent's shared cultural heritage. "Rule Britannia" and "Ode to Joy" might stir the partisans, but they will leave the pragmatists cold. To them, the big picture will matter far more: which is more likely to boost jobs, prosperity and our children's future: maintaining our partnership with our European neighbours or arranging a divorce?

In short, campaigning by both sides is likely to be scrappy and negative. It may be the least bad way to decide Britain's relations with the rest of Europe, but only a wild optimist could think it a glorious way.

This article was first published on the [European Council on Foreign Relations](#) website and has an accompanying [PDF report](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Peter Kellner is President of the opinion polling organisation YouGov. He has been a visiting fellow at Nuffield College, a distinguished visiting fellow at the Policy Studies Institute, and served as a member of committees set up by the Economic and Social Research Council to commission research into elections and social exclusion. As a journalist, he has written for a number of newspapers, including the Times, Independent, Observer, Evening Standard and New Statesman.

