

ATTITUDES RELATED TO EUROPEAN UNION REFERENDUM IN THE MEMBER STATES

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Résumé: *La perception des états membres de l'Union Européenne liée au referendum d'élargissement.* Notre étude est consacrée au processus d'élargissement de l'Union Européenne abordée sous l'angle des comportements électoraux des nouveaux pays adhérents et des pays souhaitant la rejoindre. Dans le cadre de cette recherche, nous avons mis l'accent sur le temps écoulé entre la demande d'adhésion et l'adhésion elle-même, ainsi que sur les résultats des référendums dans les pays qui veulent intégrer l'Union Européenne. Nos observations mettent en évidence des similitudes dans l'évolution du comportement des électeurs des ex-pays socialistes de l'Europe Centrale ainsi que des attitudes spécifiques qui les distinguent des états membres les plus anciens de l'Union Européenne. A partir de ces résultats, des regroupements peuvent être envisagés tout d'abord en dégagant un groupe de huit pays ex-socialistes dont les comportements électoraux peuvent être qualifiés de "passifs", du point de vue de l'activité électorale, et ensuite un second groupe comprenant six états qualifiés de "passifs, mais enthousiastes" (c'est à dire avec une faible participation aux élections mais un engagement très favorable à l'adhésion à l'Union européenne). De notre point de vue, cette seconde attitude est la plus représentative des opinions des citoyens d'Europe centrale. Par ailleurs les situations des pays tels que l'Irlande et le Danemark, des membres anciens de l'Union, nous permettent de souligner toute la complexité des attitudes électorales lourdes d'enjeux pour l'avenir de l'Europe.

Mots-clés: adhésion UE, référendum, pays post-socialistes, Danemark, Irlande.

Introduction

The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 was the largest of its history. Unlike the previous enlargements, this time many countries, extensive lands and large populations were added to the European Union. Their common features definitely differ from those of the "foundation members", since they are usually poorer, their modern democracies are more vulnerable, and the sanctification of their intention to join the European Union was characterised by low participation rates at their accession referendums. Our paper analyses the accession process, the intentions and attitudes of the voters in the accession candidate countries, with special regard to the time period between the submission of application for membership and the accession, and to the referendum decisions of the candidates. The possible changes in the attitudes of the voters following the accession are analysed in the case of Denmark and Ireland which two countries held the highest number of referendums related to European Union issues.

Enlargement history of the European Union

In the course of the European integration process, one may witness the contrast between the interests of nation states and those of the supranational organisation. It is true

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from the moment of its formation that the accessing states would like to realise the biggest possible profit with the least curtail of their national independence. Their approach to closer integration is ambivalent, and consequently the institutional system is over-bureaucratized and the reforms of the organisation are realised via slow procedures. The difficult decisions of the near past are related to the enlargement and the reform processes introduced in parallel with it.

The possibility of enlargement exists from the day of the foundation of the EEC. Within the meaning of Article 237 of the Treaty of Rome the enlargement of the Community has no legal impediments. Article O of the Treaty on European Union drafted it almost with the same words as the Treaty of Rome (EU is meant instead of EEC where appropriate) "any European state may apply to become a member of the EU". The interpretation of the term "European", however, constitutes a problem. However, neither the Treaty on European Union nor other official documents define exactly what the attribute stands for. In addition to the subjective approaches, of course, certain practical conditions are also analysed in the process of evaluating the candidate countries. All states may access whose political and economic structures are in compliance with the expectations of the Union and accept to share the values and objectives of the European Union as set out in the Treaties³.

Enlargement seemed to be only a conceptual possibility during the early period characterised by the French hegemony. In 1973, Great Britain, Denmark and Ireland were the first to access the Community. In the case of the Southern European countries developing into democracies from their former totalitarian political arrangements, the accession was decided on the basis of political will (Greece 1981, Spain, Portugal 1986). The stabilisation of the democratic political arrangement was a more important aspect in their cases than the economic performance. The GDP per capita in the Spanish and Portuguese economies was only 70% of the EEC average, thus their economic integration was not lacking problems at all (Nagy, A. 1999a, b). The enlargement of 1995 following the collapse of the bipolar world was the result of the fact that neutrality as such became incomprehensible. The integration of the new members which economically performed better than the EU average (Austria, Finland and Sweden) was an easy process.

The rapprochement of the East Central European states is a new element in the enlargement process. The large number of candidate countries is a novelty in comparison with the previous enlargements. All of these states belong to the group of countries with less developed economies and their GDP per capita is only around 40% of the EU average. The new situation provoked new reactions within the European Union which itself struggled with its internal reform processes. The applicants were given associate member status laid down by the European Agreement without being promised full membership and a strict criteria system was set up for the candidate countries which never happened in the past. The "Copenhagen criteria" were introduced in June 1993 requiring the candidates to have stable democratic institutional systems guaranteeing the rule of law, human rights and protection of minorities, and to have functioning market economy which has the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union and to have the ability to take on the obligations of membership (including the Monetary Union, Schengen Agreement etc.). The conditions also included that the EU must have the ability to take in new members without jeopardising the integration process. The criteria were to

³ The accession process is regulated. The European Commission prepares its 'avis' after the application handed in to the European Council which forms the basis for the decision of the European Council. Following the assent of the European Parliament, the parliaments of the Member States and the Candidates ratify and then the accession may be regarded complete and finalised.

demonstrate the connection between the institutional reforms and the enlargement process, suggesting that “it is out of the question that the words of the Treaty of Rome guarantee enlargement” (Csaba, L. 1999).

In December 1994, at the Essen Summit, the pre-accession countries were named. After Hungary and Poland handed in their application for membership in April 1994, eight more states – which actually have not yet applied for accession – were added to the list. Besides, at that time the EU did not have any relations with the Baltic States and Slovenia even on the level of being associate members. It was the typical case of “soft compromise”: instead of naming the maturity for integration the boundaries of the maximum extendibility of the Union were defined. In 1995, the Commission drafted the “White Paper” in which it named those measures, community requirements whose acclimatisation in the candidate countries was not only a precondition but an objective, too. In 1996, the pre-accession states received questionnaires to provide data for the avis of the Commission. As a result of this, the evaluation was published on 17 July 1997 in the “Agenda 2000” package. In December 1997, a decision was made at the Luxembourg Summit on the indivisibility of the “acquis” which meant that the acquis could be transposed only in complete⁴. The “process of eastern enlargement” began with the European Conference in London on 12 March 1998 when the representatives of the members, candidates and Turkey held their meeting. The latter, however, was excluded from the “accession process” which was started with the applicant countries on 30 March 1998. The “negotiation process” was started with five Central European countries producing the most intensive progress (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary and Estonia) and Cyprus in a “small group form” on 31 March 1998. The strategic change was brought about at the Helsinki Summit on 10-11 December 1999. Beside the “Helsinki Six”, Malta (which renewed its application in the meanwhile), Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania were also invited. This posed a fundamental change in the course of the negotiations, and meant the implementation of the “line-up” idea.

In 2001, the Commission analysed the situation of the countries involved in accession negotiations and the progress of the negotiations. On the basis of these, at the Copenhagen European Council held on 12-13 December 2002 it announced in its declaration entitled “Single Europe” that ten countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) concluded the accession negotiations. These countries signed the Treaty of Accession on 16 April 2003 in Athens and became full members from 1 May 2004. Romania and Bulgaria were expected to access in 2007, while Turkey was not given a concrete date.

Voters’ attitudes – accession referendums

It is a general tendency in the history of enlargements that the treaties of accession – i.e. the fact of becoming the member of the Community – are sanctified by a referendum. The only exceptions were the countries of the second wave between 1981 and 1986 (Greece, Portugal and Spain). Until 1 January 2005, there were 29 referendums held in the Member States related to affairs of the Community and more than half of them brought a decision about accession.

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationships between the two most important data of the accession referendums: the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes within the total valid votes. The Figure displays the fact that it is an eminent experience of the referendums held

⁴ On the one hand, the candidate countries could get rid of the chimera of “secondary membership” or “partial membership”, and on the other hand, it meant obligations for the freshly arrived members since they had to open up at a much bigger scale than any other states did earlier (Csaba, L. 1999).

before 2003 that there is a definite relationship between the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes if the greater tendency to vote is accompanied by a decrease in the proportion of “yes” votes. It may be also observed that the trend line is followed by two parallel lines of the studied countries: Ireland, Austria and Denmark are definitely above the line while Great Britain, Finland, Sweden and Norway are unquestionably below it. The results of the referendums of 2003 follow the general tendency and the two parallel divisions still exist. It is remarkable, however, that the former “socialist” countries of East Central Europe constitute a separate set which has only a slight overlapping with the set of countries of the previous referendums. Malta definitely separates from these eight countries.

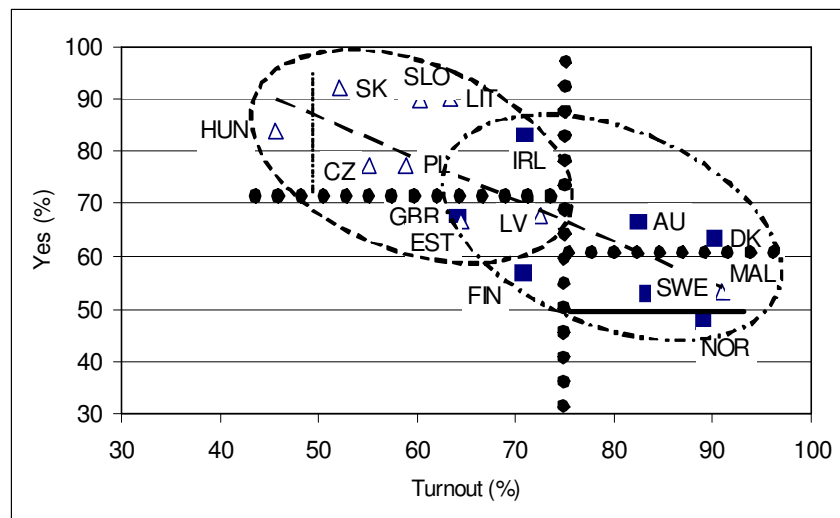


Figure 1. Results of the referendums on accession as reflected by the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes (Source: Teperics, K., Rózsa, P., 2004)

In our opinion, the differences between the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes supporting EU accession, and the concentration of the points characterising the referendums of the various countries allow for a categorisation of these states. The categorisation aimed at seizing the general characteristics, therefore, only four groups were set up altogether based on the two-two categories defined by the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes (active and passive, or enthusiastic and sceptic, respectively). The definition of the limits did not coincide with the limits used for the parliamentary elections. Taking into consideration the qualified majority (66%) as a limit may seem logical but the Figure illustrates that the values of many countries would get very close to this line and their getting into another category would depend on 1-2%. On the contrary, an empty zone of about 10% may be observed both in the case of the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes, between 72 and 82, and 65 and 75% respectively. Therefore, the certain categories are divided along these zones. We intended to express with the three-point system of Figure 1 that there is not a boundary line between the different groups but a dividing zone. In addition to this, we drew the boundary line of 50%, too. The wide straight line drawn at the value of 50% of “yes” votes marks a sharp separation since in Norway – which is below this line – the voters said “no” to accession. We used a narrow point line in the case of the turnout since it only marks a psychological boundary because in the case of Hungary it was not a precondition for the validity of the referendum that at least half of the electors voted.

On the basis of the above, the following groups were formed:

1. Active but sceptic about integration (turnout >80% but “yes” votes <55%).
2. Active and enthusiastic about integration (turnout >80% and “yes” votes >60%).
3. Passive and sceptic about integration (turnout <75% and “yes” votes <70%).
4. Passive but enthusiastic about integration (turnout <75% but “yes” votes >75%).

The eight former “socialist countries” of East Central Europe were all found to be “passive” and six of them were “passive but enthusiastic”. The concrete values, of course, were essentially influenced by the internal situation of the countries. Nevertheless, in our opinion the similarity in the attitude of the voters may be explained by various common factors which actually go beyond daily politics. The most important of these are the serious reservations about the partial abandonment of state sovereignty, the passive acceptance of the necessity of accession and the apathy and disinterest developing as a result of the protraction of the accession process (Teperics, K., Rózsa, P. 2004). The definitely different position of Estonia and Latvia, and their getting into the “passive and sceptic” category, may be explained by the considerable proportion of the national (mostly Russian) minority (estimated even as one-third of the total population). Although, the EU accession may result in a bigger estrangement from Russia but it also means that the formerly experienced discrimination afflicting the national minorities (e.g., the limitation of the granting of citizenship) shall not occur in the future. For this reason some parliamentary parties made the anti-EU policy part of their political programmes and thus the anti-accession approach could become part of the everyday political parlance.

Voters’ attitudes – after the accession

The above described categorisation was set up on the basis of – not expressed at the same dates – only one relation of the voters in the certain countries, thus the “enthusiastic” and “sceptic” attributes (just like the “passive” and “active” expressions) characterise actually the attitudes expressed on these referendums. The behaviour of voters experienced at the accession referendums does not – or not necessarily – coincide with the general EU policy of the countries concerned. For instance, the “sceptic” Finland introduced the euro while the “enthusiastic” Denmark still uses its own currency. It is worth, therefore, to examine whether the attitude of the voters remained the same after the accession, and if not then which way they changed.

The answer to the above question could be found with the help of the turnout data at the referendums concerning European Union issues. The interpretable data is available only for Denmark and Ireland which joined during the first enlargement process. The Danes and Irish held five-five referendums concerning EU issues which are an excessively high value. Until 1 January 2005, approximately 40% of the referendums on EU affairs held in the Member States of the Community were held in these two countries (Figure 2). Regarding the referendums after their accession, the role of Denmark and Ireland becomes even more decisive: more than two-thirds of the referendums held on the area of the European Union (altogether 14) were related to these two states⁵. Following the accession, the first referendum, both in Denmark and Ireland were related to the Single European Act, in 1986 and 1987. In both countries the “yes” votes constituted a majority. The second referendum was organised in 1992 about the ratification of the European Union (Maastricht) Treaty; this was rejected by the Danish voters and accepted by the Irish. In 1993, the referendum was repeated on this issue in Denmark and then the “yes” votes got into majority. In 1998, the voters of the two states ratified the Treaty of Amsterdam. In

⁵ On results of referendums on EU affairs see Filliez, F., Kaufmann, B. (2004) and Kaufmann, B. Schiller, T. (2005).

2000, Denmark rejected the accession to the euro zone. In 2001, the Irish said “no” to the Treaty of Nice and then accepted it a year later. The comparison of the Danish and Irish referendums, therefore, is relevant because three referendums out of five were held about the same issue and the Danish and Irish voters went to the poll either in the same year or in subsequent years.

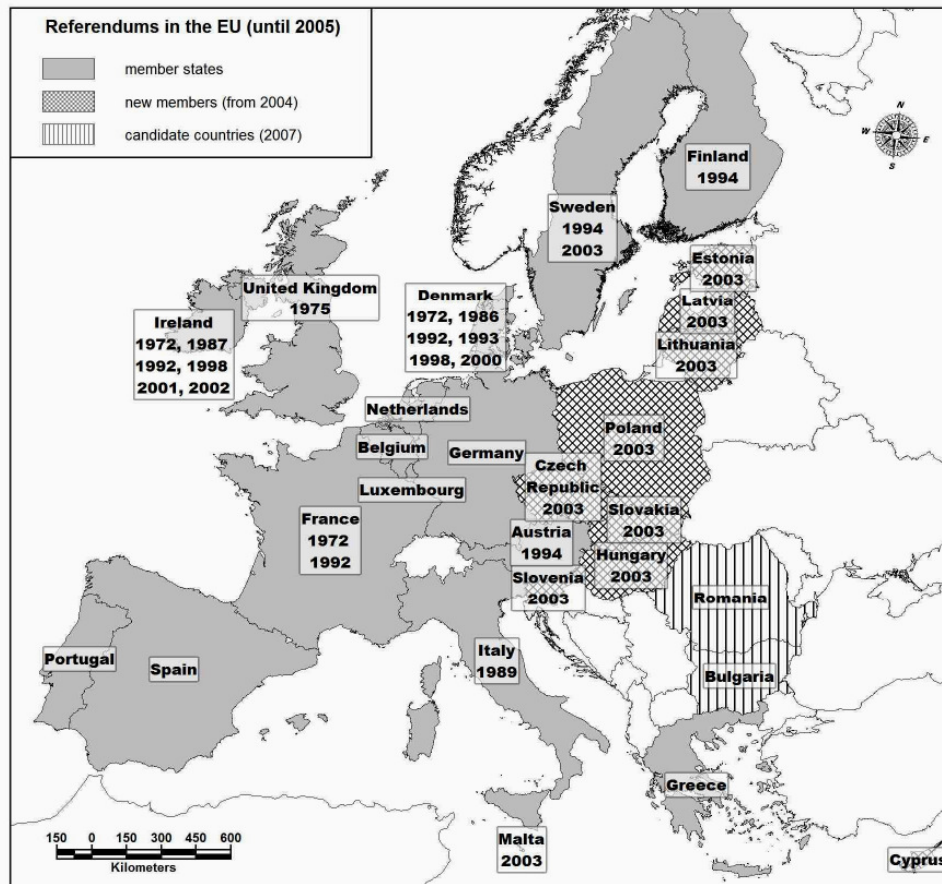


Figure 2. Referendums on EU issues in the current Member States (up to 1 January 2005)

The participation at the EU referendums in Denmark and Ireland, and the ratio of supporters are demonstrated in Figure 3. In both countries, the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes were the highest at the first, that is, at the accession referendum. Beyond that, however, the data represent rather different pictures. In the case of Ireland, it may be observed that turnouts at the referendums ranges between wide extremes (34.8–83.1%) and follows a decreasing tendency. As opposed to this, the willingness to vote is much more balanced in Denmark (75.4–90.4%) and is in fact independent from the time passed from the accession. In Ireland, there is a definite connection between the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes with higher participation rate producing more supportive votes. As opposed to this, there is no connection of this kind in the case of Denmark: despite of the more balanced activity, the proportion of “yes” votes may be called strongly varying.

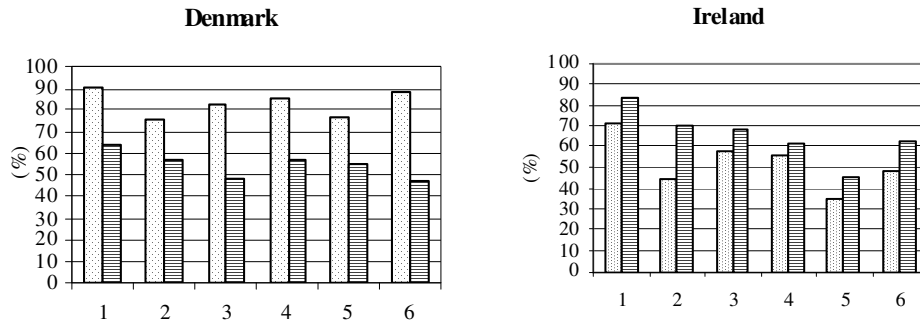


Figure 3. Turnouts at the subsequent Danish and Irish referendums on EU issues (dotted column) and the proportion of “yes” votes within the valid votes (hatched column). (See the dates of the chronologically listed referendums in Figure 2)

Figure 4 highlights the relationship between the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes. The points of the Irish and Danish referendums do not only separate from each other but refer to differing connections. In the case of Ireland, it is striking that – as opposed to the general trend of the EU referendums – the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes shows a definite positive correlation. In the case of Denmark, no such relationship can be observed. Here, the referendums related to the European Union were always characterised by high turnout and had close results except for the accession referendum.

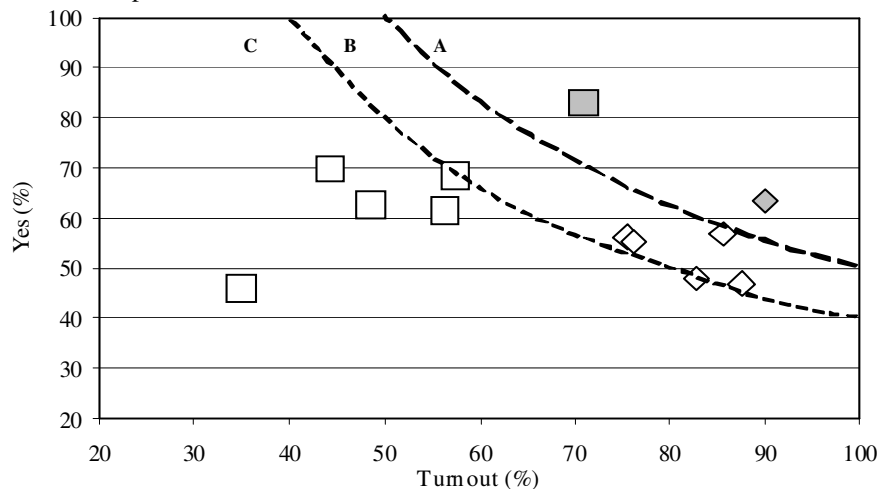


Figure 4. Relationship between the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes in the case of the Danish (◇) and Irish (□) EU referendums (the grey symbols mark the accession referendums). Letters *A*, *B* and *C* mark the fields with “yes” votes above 50%, 40-50% and below 40% defined in relation to the total number of enfranchised voters.

We rendered these countries into different categories on the basis of the data on the accession referendum: Denmark, due to its high (above 80%) turnout and the significant (above 60%) support, belongs to the “active and enthusiastic”; while Ireland, due to its more moderate (below 75%) turnout but outstandingly high support (“yes” votes above 75%) was listed among the “passive but enthusiastic” countries. The differing attitudes of the voters of the two countries can be detected in the case of the future referendums, too. The referendums in Denmark

following the accession were still characterised by high (above 75%) turnouts. As opposed to this, in the EU member Ireland, the formerly relatively low turnout further decreased. Therefore, – similarly to the categorisation based on the data of the accession referendums – the attitude of the Danes experienced during the EU referendums may be regarded “active” while that of the Irish may be called “passive”.

As far as the attitude to the integration is concerned, a differentiation was made between the “enthusiastic” and “sceptic” countries on the basis of the accession referendums. These expressions, however, are not really eligible for characterising the voters’ attitudes concluded from the data of the referendums held in Denmark and Ireland after their accession. On the one hand, the negative answers to the questions related to the accession do not mean the rejection of the membership in itself, and the high proportion of “yes” votes”, especially in the case of low turnout, does not necessarily signify that the voters are really enthusiastic about the further deepening of integration. It must be taken into consideration that the approach to integration – due to the lack of interpretable data on other countries – can be applied only for the designation of the differences between the Danish and Irish attitudes. The proportion of “yes” votes on its own is not suitable for this. In comparison with the usually high (65.4% on average) “yes” votes in the case of the Irish referendums, the Danish data seems especially low (54.4%). On the basis of this data only, the Danish attitude could be even called “sceptic” but this approach would be misleading. It is remarkable; however, that the proportion of “yes” votes in Denmark was in all cases around 40-50% as of the total enfranchised voters after the accession while it was usually much below 40% in the case of Ireland (Figure 4). The use of the attribute “sceptic” in this case would be problematic since it is “engaged” in the political life and therefore its application in this context would allow for misunderstandings.

The most characteristic feature of the Danish referendums held after the accession is that there is a relatively small difference between the “no” and “yes” votes in addition to the high turnout. However, there is no connection between the turnout and the proportion of “yes” votes. Therefore, we presume that the attitude of the Danish voters towards the EU integration should be the most aptly called “considering”. The most basic conclusion to be drawn from the data of the Irish referendums is that there is a conspicuous positive connection between the support of the certain affairs and the willingness to participate. This means that the acceptance of the issues put to the vote depends on the willingness of participation, that is, on the mobilisation of the voters. In our opinion the attribute “accepting” could be the most suitable for the demonstration of this attitude.

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