

Public opinion and nuclear energy



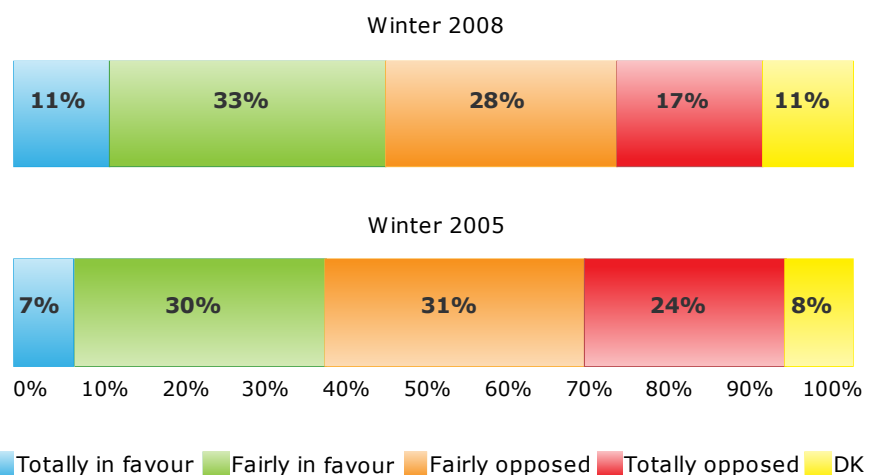
Public opinion on nuclear energy is a complex and controversial issue. Views remain so polarized and they differ so much from one Member State to another that it is impossible to identify an "average EU view." And yet public acceptance of nuclear energy has continued to increase in recent years. This endorses the crucial role that it plays in securing Europe's low-carbon energy future.

A major factor behind this is increased knowledge. Awareness of the facts has helped to dispel common myths and misconceptions about nuclear energy based largely on unfounded fears. In the European Commission's 2008 Eurobarometer survey on nuclear waste results revealed that there are now almost as many European citizens in favour of nuclear energy

(44%) as are against it (45%). The survey also shows that the number in favour would rise to 61% if they felt the waste issue was resolved. Furthermore, in the recent 2010 Eurobarometer survey on nuclear safety, 56% of EU citizens said that they wanted nuclear to be maintained or increased (up 7% on the corresponding 2007 survey). But citizens still need to know more about the advantages of nuclear energy and the existing waste storage solutions.

Safety is a precondition to achieving increased public acceptance. In the 2010 Eurobarometer, 59% of respondents said they believed nuclear power plants to be safe. According to the same survey, 74% of EU citizens still do not feel sufficiently informed about nuclear issues. However, in countries where there is greater knowledge, like Sweden (knowledge: 47%, acceptance: 62%), Finland (51% and 61%) the Netherlands (44% and 55%) and the Czech Republic (41% and 64%), public opinion is more favourable towards nuclear energy. Clearly, the more people know about it the more they are in favour of it.

Are you totally in favour, fairly in favour, fairly opposed or totally opposed to energy production by nuclear power stations? (%EU)



Source: Eurobarometer on Radioactive Waste, June 2008



Political will, public opinion

Recent developments in the United Kingdom and Finland show that if the political decision to include nuclear in the energy mix is taken in an open and democratic way, people tend to become more favourable to nuclear power. In 2003, for example, 40% of British citizens were opposed to building new nuclear reactors and 30% were in favour, according to an Ipsos Mori poll. By 2009, however, when official policy had changed and new build was back on the agenda, only 19% remained against and 43% were in favour of it.

In Finland an open public debate on the government's intention to build a fifth reactor started in 2001. According to a 2002 survey conducted by Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy and ÅF-Consult Oy, 36% of Finns were in favour of the building of a fifth nuclear reactor and 46% were against. A follow-up survey in 2008 showed that

support for the fifth reactor had grown to 43% and opposition had declined to 36%. When political will is combined with an open and democratic public debate more citizens are in favour of nuclear energy.

In general, nuclear phase-out policies in the EU have been largely the result of party political pressures, rather than in response to public opposition to nuclear. In Sweden, for example, in spite of official government policy, a TNS Sifo poll (February 2010) revealed that 52% of citizens (before the recent lifting of the nuclear ban) supported the continued use of nuclear energy. 30% supported the replacement of Sweden's nuclear reactors when they reach the end of their operating lives. 22% thought that additional reactors should be built.

"The time is very right for having nuclear energy now. Something is happening. The situation is shifting from lots of political and social concerns to issues of financing. There is much more social acceptance." (Luis Echavarri, Director General of the OECD/Nuclear Energy Agency, 20 May 2010)

A question of trust

Receiving information is one thing; trusting the source is another. The 2010 Eurobarometer on nuclear safety asked citizens how they rated the reliability and credibility of those sources, and then compared results with the 2006 poll. Scientists remain the most trusted source of information on nuclear energy. Trust in NGOs has declined significantly.

Security of supply, climate change and competitiveness

The main reason behind the nuclear energy revival is the fact that politicians now increasingly recognise that there is a connection between nuclear energy, security of supply, climate change and competitiveness. EU citizens are progressively coming to the same conclusion. The latest Eurobarometer on nuclear waste revealed that 64% of citizens believe that nuclear energy enables European countries to diversify their energy sources and 68% believe that using more nuclear would reduce the EU's dependency upon oil imports. 51%

Are you totally in favour, fairly in favour, fairly opposed or totally opposed to energy production by nuclear power stations? (%EU)



think that it helps to maintain stable energy prices. At the same time, citizens today are more than ever before concerned about climate change. The growing recognition that nuclear is a non-CO2 emitting energy source is largely behind their increased acceptance of it. The latest Eurobarometer on nuclear waste showed that 62% of those polled agree that nuclear energy produces less greenhouse gases than either coal or oil.