



“The European Union is a bad thing for Britain”

With the European Parliament elections fast approaching, British citizens are facing an important choice: Their vote will have a significant impact on UK policies towards Europe. UKIP, Britain's most stridently eurosceptic political party, characterised by its right-wing populism, is expected by many observers to perform extremely well. But how do the British really feel about the European Union?

In the last few months, Nigel Farage has been riding a true wave of success. As the leader of UKIP (UK Independence Party), he is witnessing the highest level of support for his party to date. Latest poll results are ambiguous, but see UKIP from 25 to 35 percent, depending on the survey. Labour comes second, with 24 to 29 percent and David Cameron's Conservatives come in third with around 22 percent.

UKIP campaigns for an immediate exit from the EU and for tougher immigration regulations. A UKIP win in the European Parliament elections would have a significant impact on European politics, with a big anti-EU bloc possibly disrupting the work of the Parliament in Brussels.



The UKIP success story does not come as a surprise. Euroscepticism has been playing a significant role in UK



politics for many years. Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron has even proposed a referendum on British membership of the European Union if the Tories win the next general election.

The question is: Do these anti-European policies really represent the citizens' opinion on EU matters, or do right-wing parties rather capitalise on people's fears to catch votes?

back view has talked to three young Britons, the target audience for populist campaigns, and asked them how they perceive economic and social issues concerning the EU. Do they think Europe is a good or a bad thing for Britain?

Dave, 23 (civil servant):

The European Union is a broadly positive thing, but it is not without its imperfections. It has produced a lot of jobs in this country and a lot of economic activity. It makes sense for Britain to be economically tied to countries around it and it would be completely insane to withdraw from it.

The government's European policies are awful. It has succeeded in antagonising people and pulling them further towards parties like UKIP. Britain's policy towards Europe should be more engaging. It shouldn't be "us against them", which it seems to be at the moment. We have to talk to the other member states and we have to treat them with respect, otherwise no cooperation will be possible.

In order to change people's minds about the European Union, you have to start to debunk myths. Many people think that the EU can be held responsible for every bad thing that happens. The key to getting more engagement between policy making at the European level and young people is to show them the benefits for their daily lives. EU politics are rather abstract, but when you point out the financial or social advantages, like the low priced roaming fees, everyone can relate to the European Union.

Stephen, 23 (business & marketing assistant):

In general the European Union is a bad thing for the United Kingdom. I feel that the UK would have left the European Union a long time ago if it wasn't for the economic benefits. They are the reason why I believe that, with our current economic position, we should stay in the European Union nonetheless. However, if we were able to get the status of a major trading partner with the EU, like Norway, the strength of the country would be in a better place. Although the consequences of economic instability would be extremely dangerous during the financial crisis we're still facing, I do believe that in the long term Britain could be able to stabilise its economy.

Apart from the economic advantages, although you get the benefits of the European Union on a personal level, I don't see why it should be impossible to go back from the European to a national level. If I wanted to visit a friend in another European country, I could still apply for a visitor visa and travel there without much effort.

The European Union has a legitimacy problem. There are a lot of processes within the Union that are not democratic, almost tyrannical, with only very few people being able to make decisions and with these individuals actually not being elected.

When it comes to globalisation, there is definitely something like a European identity because European people are going to agree on substantial things when talking to people from other continents. But Britain is in a place where it has a different identity as well: the Commonwealth identity, and there is a really strong connection to those countries. The royal wedding was watched by more people than have ever voted in the European elections combined. That shows how strong Britain's international position still is.

There are two problems with the European Election turnout, especially among young people. One is disenchantment with politicians. After the Expenses Scandal, distrust in politicians is a major problem in British society, not only on a national, but also on a European level. The second problem is the rise of the Right, which has been a huge concern in whole Europe. I wouldn't say it is the European Union's job to try



and change the low voter turnout, but the British public has to learn to trust politicians again without leaning to the right.

Lisa, 31 (student):

“The European Union is generally a good thing for the UK. Many good standards come from the EU that affect your daily life positively. I also like the concept that wealthy countries contribute to the welfare of other countries. However, I do think that it’s a good thing we didn’t join the Euro, as the eurozone is really struggling at the moment.

What I like most about the EU is the idea of permeable borders. There is no need for us to have vast standing armies, we are all intertwined, whether politically, economically or militarily. We live in a global world, and so it makes a lot of sense to have the European Union.

Opting out of the EU would be a big mistake. The other European countries are our neighbours and we have strong ties, not only in economic matters. Leaving the Union might do us good in the short term as the pound would be quite strong, but in the long term it would ruin our relationship with the other countries.

Voter apathy is generally a big problem in the UK. Young people have the feeling that their vote doesn’t make a difference. I’m not sure what the right thing to do about that would be. I’ve heard that students in Finland have a course about the political system and voting at school. This could be a good way to engage adolescents in the UK, too. Education is the key to responsible voting behaviour.

As these statements of young Britons show, British opinions on the European Union are as much multifaceted as they are diverse. But one thing should be obvious, despite all the different views on European issues: the European Election will be crucial for both Britain and Europe, as the well-being of both of them cannot be viewed separately.

They rather depend on each other: The EU can only be a strong political union with the support of the United Kingdom, and Britain’s economy depends heavily on the European market. On Thursday, British citizens have it in their hands. Let’s hope they make the right decision. Right for Britain, but also right for Europe.

(text: Anja Menzel / picture: Maximilian Barthel by jugendfotos.de)