

The UK referendum on the EU constitution may be a long way off, but both sides are already gearing up for the fight. **Richard Gowan** reports on the groups the pro-camp will have to target if it is to win

WHERE BATTLE WILL BE JOINED IN EU VOTE

What does a little Englander look like?

Ask most Europeans to visualise a typical British Eurosceptic and they will probably conjure up a young man with cropped hair, numerous tattoos and an unhelpful attitude towards foreign policemen. The reality is rather different.

must now go under the microscope.

In the run-up to the constitutional referendum, pollsters and analysts will make good money taking the public temperature over and over again, and interpreting the nation's mood. Yet sufficient data already exists to draw broad conclusions about how the campaign may develop – and

'What does a little Englander look like? The nemesis of Brussels does not look like a hooligan, but a grandmother'

An amalgamation of recent statistics suggests that the type of Briton most likely to be strongly opposed to the EU is a woman in her later fifties or early sixties. She is lower-middle class, and lives in the Midlands. The nemesis of Brussels does not look like a hooligan, but a grandmother.

Profiles built on statistics can, of course, be as misleading as any other stereotype. But Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to hold a referendum on the constitution, combined with the success of anti-EU candidates in the June European elections, has meant that British attitudes to Europe

they make mildly cheerful reading for pro-Europeans.

Crucially, polling does not support the tabloid newspapers' claim that Britain is a fundamentally anti-European country.

Research conducted by the ICM polling agency in March this year analysed attitudes towards Europe in terms of age, gender, region and class. It found that all groups were strongly suspicious of the (then unfinalised) constitution. Two-thirds of respondents were opposed to it.

But when asked whether they would

like Britain to leave the EU completely, only a third agreed. Just over half were actively in favour of continued membership.

Distinct differences emerged between types of voter on this issue. Some were predictable. The young display a higher degree of support for membership than their elders. Women, traditionally more conservative than men, are less pro-European too. But more intriguing divisions emerge when responses are broken down by class and region.

Residual Marxists will not be surprised to learn that the EU is a class issue. Whereas nearly two-thirds of those in the upper and upper-middle classes are in favour of continued British membership of the Union, only 42% of what are technically known as 'C2s' (the skilled working class) share this commitment.

This Euroscepticism cannot be reduced to simple isolationism. The majority of C2s have holidayed abroad in recent years and have regular access to the Internet.

It is also unlikely that they are unaware that the EU has an important role to play in defending their social rights. Separate polling by MORI has demonstrated that a majority of the British public is conscious of Brussels' significance to their working hours and conditions.

However, it is probable that they doubt that the EU has a positive role to play in making them better off.

Mistrust of Europe's economic influence is high in all classes, in spite of the efforts of both the government and independent organisations such as Britain in Europe to underline its advantages. This mistrust is at its highest among C2s.

If pro-Europeans are to make their case successfully, they must find new ways of presenting its economic benefits to ordinary voters.

A comparison of various regions' views of the Union underlines the importance of this message: the EU is particularly popular in Wales and the South-West, which have benefited markedly from European funds.

However, those who believe that the Union is a natural ally of Britain's Celtic periphery will be disappointed: Euroscepticism remains strong in Scotland.

In spite of these variations, the British average of 51:36% support for EU membership marks them out as moderately pro-European rather than fiercely Eurosceptic.

Their suspicion of the constitution is rooted more in doubts over its contents than the idea of Europe

per se. Nor are they as easily swayed by the rabid anti-European voices of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) as the June European elections might suggest.

While UKIP notched up nearly three million votes in the European poll, it had very little impact on the views of the public as a whole.

An ICM poll on attitudes conducted when the party was at the height of its popularity showed no swing in public opinion against the constitution – if anything, it suggested a tiny (1%) shift in favour of the treaty.

This suggests that the British electorate are willing to be reasonable about Europe. But it does not mean that they are interested in it.

While the political classes were getting excited over Blair's spring referendum U-turn, polls found that only 9% of voters thought Europe to be the most important issue facing the UK. This group is thought to consist largely of worried pro-Europeans rather than diehard Europhobes.

If, as is now threatened, the referendum on the constitution is two years' away, it is unlikely that the public will follow it closely.

The gaggle of UKIP-supporting minor celebrities which dominated the run-up



to the European elections in June had become almost invisible in the media by the end of the month. Joan Collins' career is back on hold.

Such apathy allows pro-Europeans a quieter life. But it is problematic in that, to win the referendum, they must make the public understand why the constitution is essential to the good functioning of the sort of moderate EU most Britons want to live in.

The gap must be closed between those who back the constitution and those who are uneasy about it but want to stay in the Union.

Achieving this must involve work at the grass-roots level in response to these differences. In recent years, pro-Europeans around the continent have lost a series of referendums on the EU and the euro because they did not engage in such work. Norway's 1994 effort to enter the Union was blocked because Eurosceptics made good use of local and regional differences to outmanoeuvre pro-European politicians in Oslo. A similar grass-roots effort kept Denmark out of the euro zone.

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However, it is equally crucial that pro-Europeans should not only address such differences but aim to overcome them.

Regional differences played little part in the final result of the 1975 referendum on British membership of the Common Market, resoundingly won by pro-Europeans after a 22% swing away from their opponents in the six months before polling day.

Only the Highlands and Islands of Scotland voted on a clearly parochial basis, with Orkney and the Shetlands delivering anti-Common Market majorities contrary to the national trend.

The decisive factor in 1975 was, in fact, none of the social divisions mentioned

so far. They were all overwhelmed by party loyalty, even though the contest was supposedly a non-party affair.

With the Tories and Liberal leaderships solidly in favour of Europe, the referendum "campaign" was reduced to in-fighting within Labour. With the

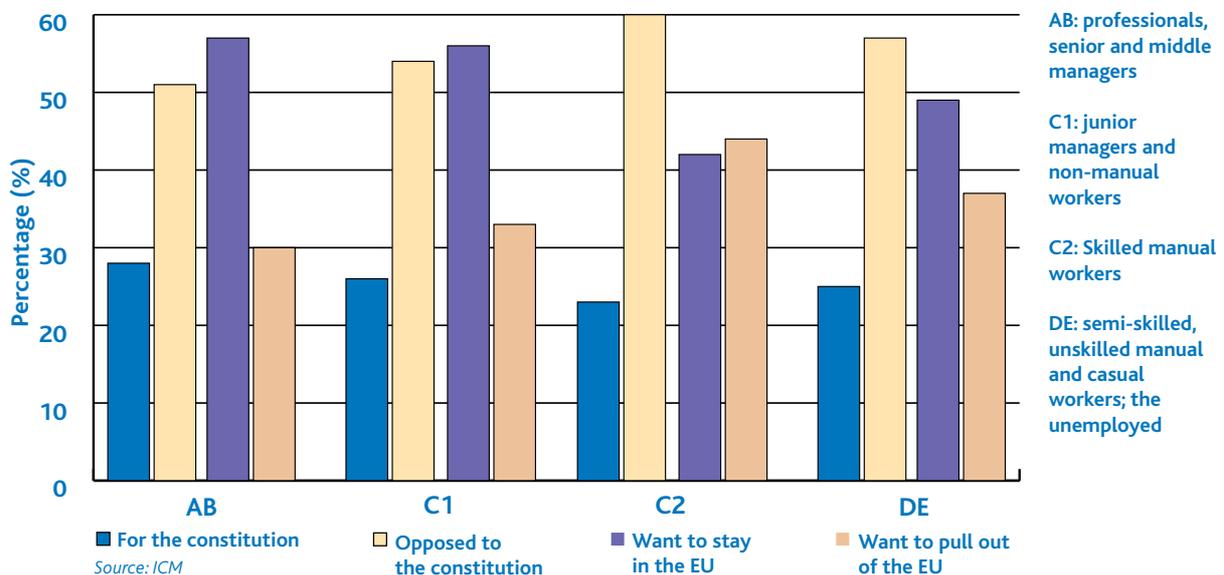
pro-market Roy Jenkins and Denis Healey winning that struggle within the party, the national result was assured.

Moreover, the campaign demonstrated that public apathy toward Europe could be overcome. Less than six months before the referendum, a Gallup poll found that only 1% of Britons rated Europe as the most important issue facing the UK. But by the month of the poll, public interest in the result was high and the eventual turnout was 65%.

The key question for the next referendum may thus not be about divisions between classes and areas, but about how far the opposing camps can each cohere.

Two scenarios are imaginable, both

EUROPE: THE CLASS DIVIDE



related to the outcome of the expected May 2005 general election.

In the best-case scenario for pro-Europeans, Tony Blair would win that election by a clear majority (perhaps 100 seats in the House of Commons), allowing him or his anointed successor to take on a newly-fractured Tory Party.

While pro-European Conservatives such as Kenneth Clarke would feel little need to toe their party line, the Tories' weakness would open up more political space for UKIP. Differences between the two parties would hamper the anti-European message from the right. The constitution would be won.

In the worst-case scenario (barring the still unlikely eventuality of a Conservative victory), Blair might win the election by a narrow margin, giving the Tories an incentive to hang together in hope of a victory next time around.

With Labour entering a period similar to the last years of John Major, it

'To win, pro-Europeans must make the public understand why the constitution is essential to the good functioning of the sort of moderate EU most Britons want to live in'

would be the pro-European camp which would fracture.

Anti-European figures in the Labour Party such as Tony Benn (a key opponent of the Common Market in 1975) would come to the fore. With UKIP redundant, the more mainstream opponents of the constitution would have the upper hand.

Even in the best case scenario, the campaign ahead of this referendum will not be as simple as that of 1975.

Then, the entire press except the Communist *Morning Star* was in favour of staying in the Common Market. Nor did there seem to be a serious alternative to membership: Commonwealth premiers and US President Gerald Ford all advocated a Yes vote to Europe.

This time round, the press will not be so favourable to pro-Europeans and the Tories may be able to say that there remains a transatlantic alternative to European solidarity.

Nonetheless, if Labour maintains coherence, it clearly has a well

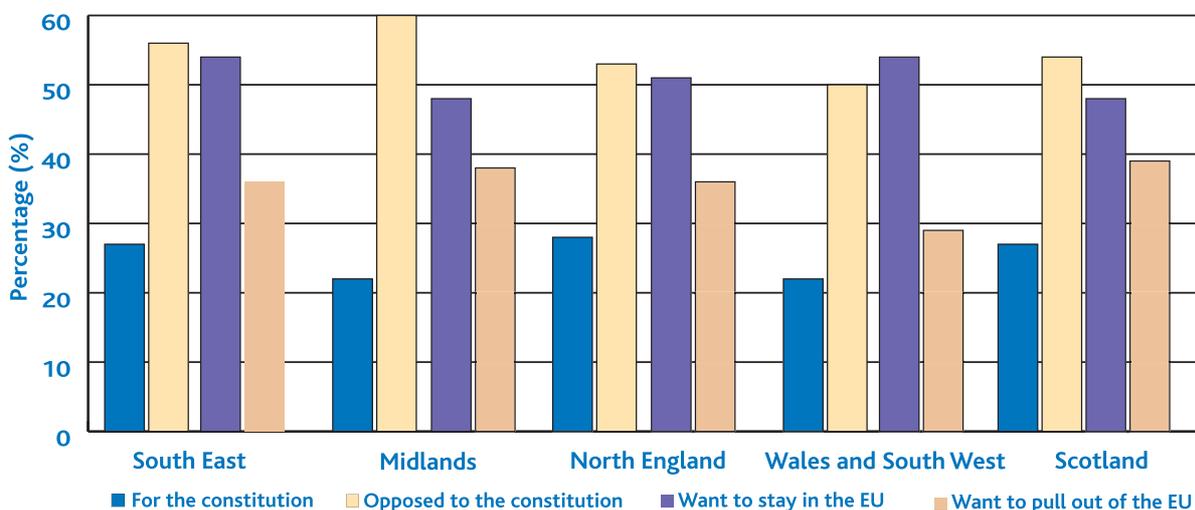
of pro-European public opinion to tap.

To date, the party's leaders have been somewhat coy in their efforts to do so. Having announced the referendum so as to pre-empt argument prior to the European elections, the prime minister and his supporters have not been consistent in selling the constitution.

How long they can continue to prevaricate is unclear. They may be inclined to do so in the belief that Europe remains unsellable.

But if the opinion polls are correct, an act of concentrated political will could yet mean that a few 60-year-old women in the Midlands will be unhappy the morning after the referendum.

EUROPE: THE GEOGRAPHICAL DIVIDE



Source: ICM