

A Fragile Rebound for EU Image on Eve of European Parliament Elections

EU Favorability Rises, but Majorities Say Their Voice Is Not Heard in Brussels

Support for the European Union may be rebounding just in time for the European Parliament elections that begin May 22, according to a new survey of seven EU nations by the Pew Research Center.

After a dramatic decline in the wake of the euro crisis, EU favorability is now on the rise in France, the United Kingdom and Germany. The median favorability across the seven countries surveyed is 52% – up from 46% in 2013. This rise is led by a 13-point improvement in France.

And faith in one of the EU's founding principles – that European economic integration is good for their own country – is up in the UK, Poland and Germany. The median on this measure is 38%, up from 26% a year ago.

Nonetheless, in most of the countries surveyed ratings for the EU have yet to return to pre-crisis levels. Italians are increasingly critical of the institution and are divided over whether to keep using the euro as their currency. And Greeks, who have suffered most from the economic downturn, remain deeply skeptical of many aspects of the European project.

Moreover, majorities in all seven countries surveyed think their voice does not count in Brussels, with Italians (81%) and Greeks (80%) being particularly disheartened. And majorities in most countries complain that the EU does not understand their needs and is intrusive and inefficient. And they express little enthusiasm for giving the EU greater power on economic issues.

Concern about immigration adds to the public's disgruntlement. A median of 55% across all seven countries want fewer immigrants admitted to their country, including majorities in Italy, Greece, France and the UK.

These are some of the findings from a new Pew Research Center survey of 7,022 people in seven EU member countries – France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK – conducted from March 17 to April 9, 2014. Among the survey's other findings:

Views of the Economy: Economic gloom may have bottomed out in many nations after plummeting assessments between 2007 and 2013. Positive judgment of the economy has actually improved 28 points in the UK and 10 points in Germany since 2013.

Jobs, Debt, Inflation and Inequality: A median of 77% say a lack of job opportunities is a very big challenge. And six-in-ten or more see public debt (65%), rising prices (64%) and the gap between the rich and the poor (60%) as very big problems. But all those concerns are stable or down from last year.

Support for the Euro: Support for the euro, Europe's common currency, remains strong. Roughly seven-in-ten in Germany (72%), Greece (69%) and Spain (68%), as well as 64% in France, want to keep it as their currency. Only the Italians flirt with leaving the euro area – 44% now want to return to using the lira.

European Institutions: A median of just 36% express a positive view of the European Parliament. A median of only 34% say the same about the European Commission. And a mere 30% have a favorable view of the European Central Bank. Poles hold the EU and all its institutions in the highest regard. Greeks are the most critical.

A Promoter of Peace, but Not Prosperity: Many Europeans still maintain an idealistic vision of the EU. A median of seven-in-ten think the EU promotes peace, with the Germans (84%) and Poles (76%) most likely to hold that view. But less than half the public in four of the seven countries, including about three-in-ten in Greece (30%) and Italy (31%), say the EU promotes prosperity.

A Sour National Mood: A median of just 22% are satisfied with the way things are going in their country. The least pleased are Greeks (5%), Spanish (8%) and Italians (9%). Only in Germany (59%) does more than half the public say their nation is headed in the right direction. For the most part, sentiment about economic conditions tracks views on country direction.

EU Skepticism Varies across the Political Spectrum: Conflicting politics complicate the upcoming parliamentary elections. In the UK, Italy, Poland and Germany people on the right of the political spectrum are generally more judgmental of the EU. But in Greece and Spain the institution's strongest critics are on the left.

Immigration Concerns: A median of 52% across the seven countries say immigrants are a burden because they take jobs and social benefits, 48% say they want to be distinct from the local society, and 36% say they are to blame for crime. People on the right of the political spectrum are generally more critical of immigration.

Views of Minorities: Views of minorities vary widely, both between countries and about specific minority populations. Roma are viewed unfavorably by a median of 50% of those surveyed, with Italians (85%) holding particularly negative sentiments. A median of 46% hold anti-Muslim views. Again it is Italians (63%) who see Muslims in the most negative light. And Jews are seen negatively by a median of 18%, with Greeks (47%) harboring the strongest anti-Jewish sentiment.

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