

SPRING 2019 EUROBAROMETER

CLOSER TO THE CITIZENS, CLOSER TO THE BALLOT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Parliament's Spring 2019 Eurobarometer, conducted three months ahead of the European elections, shows continued strong support for the European Union. Despite the challenges of the past years - and in cases such as the ongoing debate surrounding Brexit possibly even because of it, the European sense of togetherness does not seem to have weakened. 68% of respondents across the EU27 believe that their countries have benefited from being part of the EU. On the other hand, more Europeans (27%) are uncertain and see the EU as 'neither a good thing nor a bad thing' - an increase in 19 countries.

Support for European membership remains at a historically high level

Also for the second fundamental indicator to measure citizens' support for the European Union, with 61% of respondents in the EU27 saying their country's EU membership is a good thing, this approval rate is back at its peak level as last recorded between the fall of the Berlin Wall 1989 and the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty 1992.

In spite of major challenges over the past years (terrorism, migration, Brexit) the European sense of togetherness therefore does not seem to have weakened but seems rather to be shared by a majority of respondents in 25 Member States.

Yet the feeling of uncertainty however has evolved, as seen in the 27% of Europeans thinking that the EU is 'neither a good thing nor a bad thing', with an increase registering in 19 countries. As in previous studies, support for EU membership is stronger among younger and better educated respondents.

EU membership continues to be seen as beneficial

The approval of EU membership goes with a strong belief that EU countries overall have benefited from being part of the EU. With 68% in the EU27, results remain at their highest level since 1983. In addition, this view is shared by a majority of people in all Member States except for Italy.

Europeans would predominantly vote to remain in the EU

One month ahead of the date originally scheduled for the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU as laid down in Article 50, close to seven Europeans in ten said they would vote to remain in the EU if a referendum was held in their country. An absolute majority of respondents in 25 Member States hold this view, a relative majority shares this view in Italy, Czechia and the UK. While this broad majority for remaining in the European Union solidified and even increased, there are also more undecided respondents. Italian respondents are most uncertain, with 32% saying they would not know how to vote in the case of a referendum on their country's EU membership. In 13 EU countries overall, including also the UK, the number of respondents who are undecided has increased. This rise of uncertainty can be seen as a sign of the politically challenging times for the European Union in the run-up to the European elections in May 2019 - and as a confirmation of the challenge of these elections being indeed crucial for the future of the European Union.

Things are not seen as going in the right direction

Despite the overall positive attitude towards the EU but in line with the uncertainty expressed by a growing number of Europeans, the feeling that things are not going in the right direction in both the EU and in their own countries, has increased to now 50% on EU average over the past six months since the last Parlemeter 2018¹.

Protest parties not the solution

Nevertheless, most respondents feel that protest parties are not the right answer, with 61% of respondents seeing the rise of political protest parties rather as a matter of additional concern.

Role of the European Parliament

Focussing on the past and future role of the European Parliament, the largest group of respondents (41%) believe that the European Parliament's role has stayed the same over the years. Only one in five (21%) had the impression that the institution has strengthened its role, while 24% say Parliament's role has weakened during the past legislature. This pattern is similar across all Member States.

However, a majority of respondents would like to see parliament's role strengthened in the future (54%). These expectations for a more powerful European Parliament are highest since 2012, but can be interpreted as call for change in favour of more powerful European democratic institutions. It is interesting to note that not only those who believe that Parliament's role had already been strengthened over the past years call for an even more powerful institution in the future, but also a majority of those who did not see such a change in the past.

Europeans feel that their voice counts more in their country than in the EU

¹<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/parlemeter-2018-taking-up-the-challenge>

In the run-up to the European elections, half of the respondents (51%) say that their voice counts in the EU, with big differences between national results. Such differences also occur in the answer to the parallel question on 'my voice counts in my country'. Although there is a widespread perception in nearly all countries that people's voices count more in their own country than in the European Union, this sentiment varies significantly from country to country and depends strongly on national contexts, civic and socio-political cultures as well as traditions.

Awareness of election date not yet at peak level, likelihood to vote on the rise

Late February 2019, a third of Europeans knew that the ballot will take place in May and 5% could cite the exact dates (23-24-25-26 May). However, there were significant disparities between different countries.

More than 50% of respondents affirmed they would certainly vote in four countries: Denmark (65%), the Netherlands (62%), Sweden (61%) and Belgium (58%). Compared to September-October 2018, the share of people who were already certain that they would vote increased by four points on EU average, with Belgium (+17 point increase), France (+10), Greece (+9), Luxembourg (+9) and Spain (+7) topping the list of countries with the most important changes.

The age of the respondents - and thus of potential voters - is crucial for a proper analysis of the likelihood of voting in the European elections, since younger voters traditionally participate less in elections and are the least likely to vote. This is explained in detail in the report.

Economy is growing, migration is on the move

Asked about which issues they find most relevant for the election campaign, respondents have put economy and growth as well as the fight against unemployment at the front and centre of their expectations. Migration and the fight against terrorism are losing ground in the citizens' ranking of priorities, while at the same time the issue of climate change and the protection of the environment is continuing to rise through the ranks, becoming especially important for respondents who are 'very likely' to participate in the next European elections. Undecided voters, on the other hand, are more concerned about economy and growth, combating youth unemployment and immigration issues.

In view of these changes, a special focus on attitudes towards climate change and to immigration as campaign topics can be found in the third chapter of this report.

Main reason to vote? Civic duty!

The main reason cited to vote in the European elections for 44% of Europeans is because 'it is their duty' as a citizen. Apart from this reason, there are five others cited by more than 20% of respondents which all have to do with participation in democratic life: respondents would vote because they usually vote in political elections and because they feel they are citizens of the European Union. Equally important voting drivers are that respondents feel they can change things by voting in the European Parliament elections and because they want to support the European Union or a political party. Both 'very likely' and 'undecided' voters mentioned these

reasons the most. Among those who declare 'not likely to vote', civic duty also tops the list of reasons for participating in the elections, followed by the possibility to express dissatisfaction with their national government, discontent with their life and dissatisfaction with the EU.

Potential abstainers do not believe their vote would change anything

One third of citizens of voting age are considering not to participate in the European elections. Their main reason for abstaining is given as the belief that their vote would not change anything. Other reasons are a distrust of politics, lack of interest in politics or in elections in general, belief that the European Parliament does not deal sufficiently with problems that concern people like them, lack of knowledge about the role of the European Parliament or a feeling of not being informed enough to vote.

Methodology and data presentation

Parliament's Spring 2019 Eurobarometer was conducted for the European Parliament by Kantar Public. Fieldwork took place from 19 February to 4 March 2019 in all 28 EU Member States. 27.973 respondents, drawn as a representative sample from the general population aged 15 or more, were interviewed face-to-face. Following the political context at the time of writing, EU average figures were calculated for 27 Member States, with results for the UK being shown in addition.

The full report, including national factsheets, data annexes and results volumes can be found online on <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/>

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