

How Has Trust in the EU Changed Over Time?

Albert Landsberger

Key Messages

- Despite the various crisis that have shaped public perceptions of the EU, its institutions enjoy higher levels of trust than national governments.
- The average level of trust in democracy is consistently high in Europe, and the desire for a “strong” leader is low.
- Over the past decade, trust declined in Greece, which was hit hardest by the financial crisis, and Italy, which was noticeably affected by both the financial and the refugee crisis.



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The tenth direct elections to the European Parliament will take place on June 6–9, 2024. Much has happened since 1979, when the European Parliament was first directly elected by the citizens of the then nine member states. Border controls between member states have been abolished, the EU was established in its current form with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, and the number of member states has increased to 27, to name just a few of the positive achievements. In recent years, however, the success story seems to have been marred by crisis. Starting with the 2008 financial crisis, which seamlessly morphed into a sovereign debt crisis, followed by the 2015 refugee crisis, the 2020 coronavirus crisis, and now the war in Ukraine, the EU seems to be trapped in crisis mode. The EU's handling of each of these crises has, in some cases, been heavily criticized. In Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Hungary, parties critical of the EU have won national elections. In Germany and France, parties of this kind have also gained considerable popularity. In addition, many of the parties critical of the EU hold positions that are nationalist, authoritarian and in some cases anti-democratic. Criticism of the EU goes beyond the handling of the various crises and is also directed against the fundamental values of the Union. In the 2019 European elections, the Eurosceptic and right-wing populist to far-right *Identity and Democracy* Group (formerly Europe of Nations and Freedom) increased its number of seats from 36 to 59. But has citizens' trust in the EU eroded as much as these election results suggest?

Trust in the EU

Trust in a (democratic) institution can be seen as an indicator of the quality or competence that citizens attribute to an institution (OECD 2021). Data on citizens' trust in selected political institutions are provided by the World Value Survey (WVS) (Inglehart et al 2022) and the European Value Survey (EVS) (EVS 2020). These representative surveys are conducted for a large number of countries¹ and are published in waves, the last of

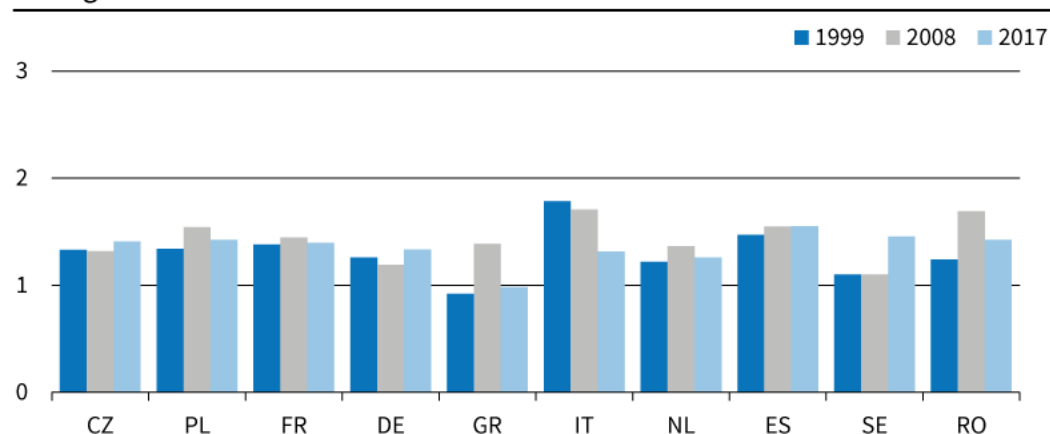
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¹ Both the WVS and the EVS are published in "waves". Seven waves of the WVS were published from 1981–2022 and five waves of the EVS from 1981–2017. The two datasets have been combined for this article.

which ended in 2022. Trust in the EU is also examined. The surveys in the countries considered in this article were undertaken in 2017 and 2018, before the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, it is worth looking at the development of the results. Figure 1 shows the average level of trust in the EU in the ten most populous countries for which data are available at the selected points in time, the years 1999, 2008 and 2017.² Trust in the EU is similar in most countries over this period, ranging between an average level of little trust and a fair amount of trust. Only Greece stands out as a negative outlier, with an average level of little or even lower trust of the respondents in 1999 and 2017. Italy and Romania show higher levels of trust in the EU at times. In the Czech Republic, Spain, France, Germany and Poland, there are no major changes in trust over time.

Figure 1

Average Level of Trust in the EU^a



^a The years in the legend indicate the »wave year«. The exact dates of the survey in each country are as follows: Czech Republic (1999, 2008, 2017), Poland (1999, 2008, 2017), France (1999, 2008, 2018), Germany (1999, 2008, 2017), Greece (1999, 2008, 2017), Italy (1999, 2009, 2018), Netherlands (1999, 2008, 2017), Spain (1999, 2008, 2017), Sweden (1999, 2009, 2017), and Romania (1999, 2008, 2018). The graph shows the average answer of the respondents to the following question regarding the EU: »Please look at the list and tell me whether you have a great deal of trust (3), a fair amount (2), little (1) or no trust (0) in each of the institutions listed.«
Source: World Value Survey; European Value Survey. © ifo Institute

The unchanged level of trust among Poles may come as a surprise. **Poland** was governed by the Eurosceptic PiS from 2015 to 2023. It pursued a policy of national sovereignty that was often at odds with further European integration (Buras 2017). The PiS' criticism of Europe was triggered by the distribution of refugees within the EU and the EU's criticism of Poland's judicial reform. Both were seen by the PiS as encroachments on national sovereignty. It also presented itself as the "guardian of Europe's Christian identity". However, the PiS' criticism was not directed at the EU project as a whole. The European institutions were criticized. Economic integration, from which Poland has benefited greatly and which can be seen as the reason for the high level of support for

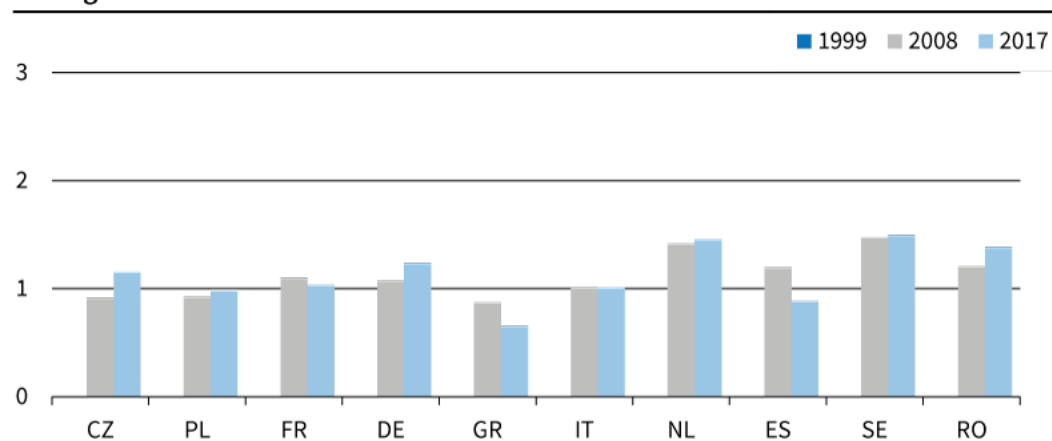
² There are no data for Belgium in 1999, but Sweden has been added.

EU membership among the Polish population, was hardly criticized (Polak et. al. 2023). PiS' institutional criticism of the EU has apparently not diminished Poles' trust in the EU.

Spain is the second country where the high level of trust in the EU may come as a surprise. Spain was hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis. At the height of the crisis in Spain, in early 2013, unemployment was close to 27 percent (Eurostat 2024a). GDP per capita that year was just over 10 percent below the pre-crisis level of 2007 (Eurostat 2024b). Unlike in Greece, where confidence in the EU fell sharply after 2008, it has remained consistently high in Spain. One reason for this is the traditionally strong pro-European attitude of the Spanish population. Even nationalist and regional parties (e.g. the Catalan independence party Esquerra Republica de Catalunya) have a positive attitude towards the EU (Llorente and Molina 2023). On the other hand, Spain was able to negotiate "better" conditions for the loans it received from the EU to rescue its banks in 2012. The reforms demanded by the Troika were limited to the banking sector (European Commission 2012). Politically unpopular measures such as fiscal consolidation and labor market reform had already been decided by the Spanish government itself (La Moncloa 2012). This meant that the Troika did not have to act in Spain as a representative of the harshly criticized austerity policy.

Figure 2

Average Level of Trust in the National Government^a



^a The graph shows the average answer of respondents to the following question regarding the national government: »Please look at the list and tell me whether you have a great deal of trust (3), a fair amount (2), little (1), or no (0) trust in each of the institutions listed.«

Source: World Value Survey; European Value Survey.

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Figure 2 shows the average level of trust in national governments.³ In the case of Spain, it fell significantly after the 2008 crisis. The political costs of the financial crisis were not borne by the EU, but by Spanish national politics. Another indication of this is that the

³ Data on levels of trust in national governments across the ten countries are only available for 2008 and 2018.

two-party system that had existed since Spain's democratization in 1978 split into a multi-party system (Llorente and Molina 2023). The crisis destroyed the economic upturn that formed the foundation of the system dominated by the PP (Christian Democrats) and the PSOE (Social Democrats) (Sola and Rendueles 2018). In 2014, the left-wing populist party Podemos (“We Can”) emerged from the protest movement Movimiento 15-M (May 15 Movement). It entered the Spanish parliament for the first time in the 2015 elections, coming in third place (just under 21 percent of the vote). The Catalan Ciudadanos (Citizens) also contested in national elections for the first time in 2015, winning just under 15 percent of the vote.

Trust in the national government has also declined in **Greece**. In contrast to Spain, the financial crisis has eroded trust in the political apparatus at both the national and European level. The particular severity with which the crisis hit Greece may be one explanation. From late 2011 to early 2018, unemployment in Greece was consistently above 20 percent. It peaked at almost 28 percent in early 2014 (Eurostat 2024a). GDP per capita also plummeted. It reached its lowest point in 2013, when it fell by more than a quarter compared to the pre-crisis level of 2007.

The rise of Syriza, an alliance of left-wing populist to radical left-wing parties, and the fall of the social democratic People's Party (PASOK) illustrate this loss of confidence. PASOK's share of the vote fell dramatically from 43.9 percent and thus an absolute majority in 2009 to 4.7 percent in January 2015. It formed the government alone in 2010, when Greece was forced to take out a loan from the EU for the first time. The country's credit rating was massively downgraded by the rating agencies. This was the moment when the public became aware of the crisis. In the 2012 parliamentary elections, PASOK was punished with a loss of 30 percentage points. The 2012 elections also marked the beginning of the rise of Syriza (17 percent of the vote). At national level, the party, which had received just 4.6 percent of the vote in 2009, became the strongest force in January 2015 with 36.3 percent. It broke up the two-party system of PASOK and the liberal-conservative Nea Dimokratia that had prevailed until then. Syriza's successes were based on strong opposition to the austerity policy imposed by the Troika, the rejection of the European Union in its then current form and the architecture of the Euro. An electoral program critical of the EU helped the small party on the left fringe to victory.

Apart from Greece, **Italy** is the only country shown here where confidence in the EU has fallen significantly. Italian trust in the EU was still above average in 2008. Italy has been hit by the financial crisis, although less severely than Greece and Spain. In addition, the distribution of refugees within Europe is an ongoing issue in Italy. In contrast to Greece and Spain, trust in the national government is stable in Italy. National politics also differ from Greece and Spain due to its instability. Popular parties ceased to exist in the early 1990s. Since then, national politics has been characterized by a multiplicity of parties

and shifting alliances (Radaelli and Franchino 2004). The rise of the Five Star Movement (M5S) was therefore not a new phenomenon in Italian politics. Founded in 2009 and often described as populist, the movement also took anti-EU positions. In 2013, in the first elections after the outbreak of the crisis, the M5S became the strongest force with a quarter of the vote. Symbolic of the party's EU-critical stance was its entry into a joint group in the European Parliament with the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in 2014, which it left again in 2017 (BBC 2017). Although the rise of MoVimento 5 Stelle changed the dynamics of Italian politics (Mosca and Tronconi 2021), the already established parties were punished less severely than in Greece. In the 2018 national elections, the movement once again became the strongest force, increasing its share of the vote to 36 percent. In the same year, the Eurosceptic and right-wing Lega Nord also achieved its strongest result to date with 17 percent. A majority of Italians voted for a party that is explicitly critical of the EU in the 2018 national elections. In the 2022 elections, this trend continued, with the highest share of votes for the far-right and EU-skeptical party Fratelli d'Italia, which gained 26 percent and the leading party in the government with prime minister Giorgia Meloni.

Comparing Figures 1 and 2, it is clear that in almost all countries, trust in the EU is higher than trust in national governments.⁴ This is also the case in the countries hit hardest by the crises. At the time of the 2018 survey, we cannot speak of an absolute crisis of confidence. Nevertheless, as the figures also show, declining trust in the EU is a problem in Greece and Italy. A dominance of governments critical of the EU could bring the already faltering process of European integration to a complete halt. The cases of Hungary and Poland have already shown that the EU has difficulties in dealing with national governments that are critical of it.

Democracy

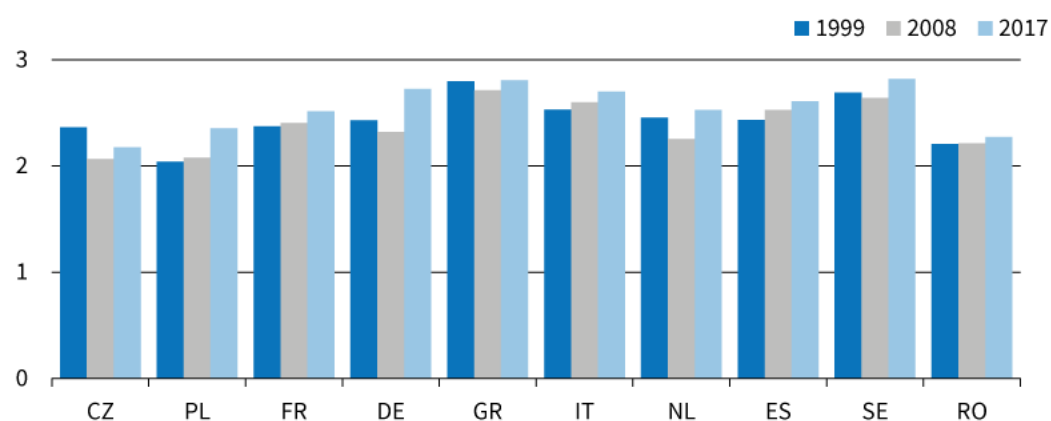
The upcoming European elections are the democratic bedrock of the EU. Since the first elections in 1979, voter turnout has steadily declined from just under 62 percent to 42.6 percent by 2014. In 2019, it rose slightly to just over 50 percent (EU 2024). In addition, some of the parties critical of the EU have anti-democratic tendencies. In 2017, while the PiS was in power, Poland became the first country in the EU to be subject to Article 7 proceedings to protect the fundamental values of the EU. This was triggered by the aforementioned reforms of the judicial system, which the EU Commission considered

⁴ The latest Eurobarometer shows that this is still the case. The level of trust in the European Union has increased slightly since 2017. 49 percent of respondents say they trust the EU institutions, while only 33 percent trust their national government (Eurobarometer 2024).

to threaten its independence. Such a procedure was also opened against Hungary in 2018 for similar reasons.

Figure 3

Average Level of Support for Democracy as a Form of Government^a



^a The graph shows the average answer of respondents to the following question about democracy: »I am now going to describe different types of political systems and ask you what you think of each one as a form of government for our country. In each case, please tell me whether you think such a form of government is very good (3), fairly good (2), fairly bad (1), or very bad (0) for our country.«

Source: World Value Survey; European Value Survey.

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Low voter turnout and anti-democratic tendencies could be interpreted as an indication of a loss of trust in democracy. With regard to the European elections, political scientists provide a different interpretation in that they are perceived as second-order-elections with traditionally lower turnout, which benefits protest parties (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Indeed, figure 3 shows that the average level of trust in democracy as a political system in general remains consistently high. With the exception of the Czech Republic, all countries show a maximum value in 2017. If one compares the approval ratings for democracy with those for the EU or national governments, the values here are significantly higher. In 2017, when the EU had already been through several crises, we could conclude that there can be no talk of a crisis of democracy, at least as far as its reputation among the population is concerned.⁵

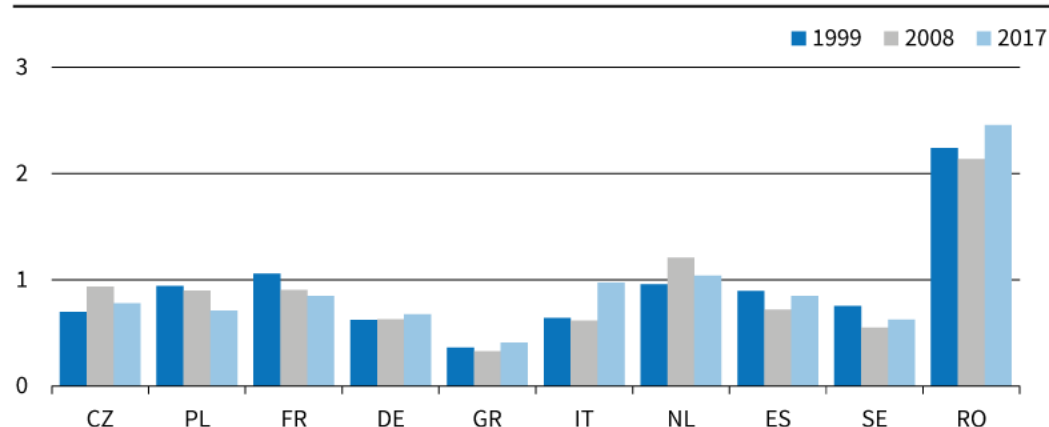
Nevertheless, the findings require caution. Unlike the question of trust in the EU, the question of trust in democracy asks about trust in an abstract concept. The EU is defined by its institutions, laws, single market and much more. However, it is not clear what respondents understand by democracy, especially since populists also like to claim that

⁵ However, when asked more specifically about how democracy works in the EU, less than 50 percent of respondents said they were satisfied in 2017. According to the latest Eurobarometer, the figures have increased in recent years, and in May 2024 57 percent of respondents were satisfied (Eurobarometer 2024).

they want to bring back democracy. In Poland, for example, confidence in democracy was highest in 2017, the same year that the controversial judicial reforms were passed.

Figure 4

Average Level of Approval of a »Strong« Leader for the Country^a



^a The graph shows the average answer of the respondents to the following question with regard to a »strong« leader: »I am now going to describe different types of political systems and ask you what you think of each as a form of government for our country. In each case, please tell me whether you think such a form of government is very good (3), fairly good (2), fairly bad (1), or very bad (0) for our country.«
Source: World Value Survey; European Value Survey. © ifo Institute

Many of the parties critical of the EU have authoritarian traits. The leaders often stylize themselves as “strong” leaders. Marine Le Pen in France, Matteo Salvini in Italy, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland all reflect this image. It is conceivable that the public's understanding of liberal democracy, as represented by the EU, has shifted towards a more authoritarian version characterized by these “strong” leaders. Figure 4 shows whether citizens think a “strong” leader is desirable for their country. The need for such a leader is low in all countries except Romania. There is also no clear trend - increase or decrease over time and across countries. Only Italy stands out with a clear increase at the current margin. This could explain the success of the Lega Nord or, more recently, the post-fascist Fratelli d'Italia. However, even in Italy, the absolute score, and thus the desire for a “strong” leader, is low. Romania's extremely high score may be due to its history characterized by authoritarian regimes. But the “strong” leader is only one indicator among many of authoritarian traits.

Conclusion

The EU has gone through a number of crises since the 2008 financial crisis. Since then, parties critical of the EU have emerged in many countries and in some cases won elections. Nevertheless, trust in the EU has suffered little or not at all in most countries. Overall, citizens still seem to trust the EU. Democracy, which is often attacked by the same parties critical of the EU, also enjoys a consistently high level of trust, and the desire for “strong” leaders is low. Only Italy and Greece have seen a notable decline in trust. The different developments in trust may be related to the different national effects of the crises. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that the data looked at here ends in 2017 and therefore doesn’t contain the coronavirus crisis and the war in Ukraine.

The stability of trust in the EU, especially in those countries where EU-critical parties have won elections, suggests that most people recognize the value of the European Union, regardless of their national government’s critical position or rhetoric towards the EU. However, supporters of the EU should not be lulled into a false sense of security. Instead, it suggests a clear task for them: Make the benefits of the EU clear to citizens. They should remain aware of them. This does not mean glossing over the EU’s shortcomings and mistakes. It is important to admit mistakes and acknowledge shortcomings in order to maintain trust. Spinning them or simply ignoring them erodes it (Grimm et al. 2024).

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