

Towards the future of Europe: Social factors shaping optimism and pessimism among citizens

Introduction

Increasing dissatisfaction with democratic institutions in many Member States and discontent with the European project have given rise to populism and anti-establishment parties in several parts of the European Union over the past decade. This could adversely affect the political climate within individual Member States and also undermine the legitimacy of the European project. Therefore, it is important to explore the roots of these problems – to learn, for example, how people feel about the future, who tends to be pessimistic and what these people believe, how they feel, what their profile is. In view of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is particularly important to understand the drivers of optimism and pessimism in order to address challenges arising from potentially escalating disillusionment.

This report is based on empirical data relating to the 27 EU Member States (EU27), drawn from several European Commission Eurobarometer surveys during the pre-COVID-19 period. It seems likely on the basis of recent evidence that these results will remain valid even after the pandemic.

Policy context

Europe is at a crossroads, as the European Commission's *White paper on the future of Europe: Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025* concludes. Even before the pandemic, Europe faced many challenges: the consequences of new technologies and automation, climate change, migration, increased security concerns and terrorism, the legacy of the Great Recession that started in 2008, the ageing population, social welfare systems in need of reform and the rise of populist and nationalistic rhetoric. Some of these issues fuel Europeans' pessimism and lead to a decline in trust in institutions and in the European Union project. Such negative feelings could have a critical impact on the future of Europe.

The initiative to convene a Conference on the Future of Europe, with the aim of involving citizens in a debate in order to strengthen trust in European institutions, is a response to the challenges. The main aim of the Conference is to 'look forward and forge a vision for our future', based on the rationale that 'many Europeans remain concerned about their future and the European Union has to show that it can provide answers to their concerns'.

Key findings

Pessimism seems to have prevailed in the EU even during the pre-COVID-19 period: almost half of all Europeans (49%) think that things are going in the wrong direction in their country and the majority (54%) are convinced that the lives of the children of today will be more difficult in future than those of today's adults.

The results of the research show that social optimism or pessimism can be attributed to a complex set of factors at individual level.

Key drivers of optimism and pessimism

- Of the demographic factors, age seems the most relevant: the positive net effect of age on social optimism is high in youth, falls in middle age and rises again in old age.
- Being in a poor position in the labour market tends to make people pessimistic, and living in a household that is in a bad financial situation adversely affects optimism.
- People are more optimistic if they feel they are living in a cohesive society: they feel attachment to a community, have a sense of belonging and view positively the contribution of immigrants to the economy and society.
- Participatory factors play an important role: people who perceive that their voice counts in the EU and/or in their country are significantly more optimistic than those who do not think they have a voice in decision-making processes.

- Social optimism and pessimism are highly correlated with degree of life satisfaction or happiness, as well as with level of trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy. The strong relationship between personal and societal dissatisfaction proves that pessimism is closely linked to discontent with established institutions.

Profile of European optimists and pessimists

- Pessimists tend to have less interest in politics (for example, participating less in elections) than optimists. Pessimists are much less satisfied with how democracy works and tend not to trust in political institutions.
- Optimists and pessimists have very different views about the European Union. While few pessimists seem to have a positive image of the EU, most optimists regard the EU as democratic, modern, forward-looking or protective. Nearly half of social pessimists say they do not feel they are a citizen of the EU.
- All self-reported social classes share some social pessimism, but members of the lower middle class are most likely to be pessimistic.
- Social pessimists are more likely than optimists to feel that society has not treated them fairly or is not fair for all in general. Most pessimists take the view that justice does not prevail, political decisions do not apply to all citizens and people do not usually get what they deserve.

Comparative cross-country findings

- Country rankings in terms of social optimism do not reveal the East–West or North–South divide often found in comparisons of Member States: although the Nordic countries are the most optimistic, central and eastern European and Balkan countries are more optimistic than Mediterranean ones, and even more so than Continental ones.

- High relative levels of social pessimism were detected in some highly developed European countries, such as France, Belgium and Italy.
- Trust in institutions and growth rates of gross domestic product per capita in purchasing power parity were found to be the key country-level drivers of optimism.

Policy pointers

- People's perceptions about the future reflect the general climate in a society. A high level of pessimism can undermine social cohesion and even the legitimacy of the established political system. The report shows that pessimists often feel excluded from society. In order to include pessimistic groups, it is essential to identify their needs and remedy their situation, relying on solidarity from the rest of society.
- Involving citizens systematically and to a significant degree in the recovery process following the COVID-19 crisis will be vital. As the research found, people who feel their voice counts tend to be more optimistic not only about their own future but also about that of the society they live in.
- The results show the key role that labour market position plays in people's perceptions about the future. As emphasised by the Porto Declaration, adopted on 8 May 2021, a shift in focus from protecting to creating jobs is needed. The declaration refers to the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which aims to create not only more but also better jobs.
- Trust in institutions proved to be strongly associated with optimism at both individual and country levels. Eurofound's previous research has shown that facilitating access to high-quality public services could help to build trust in institutions.

Further information

The report *Towards the future of Europe: Social factors shaping optimism and pessimism among citizens* is available at <http://eurofound.link/ef21004>

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