

EUROBAROMETER 68

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ITALY

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The national situation and Italians' expectations

The majority of Italians (71%) are satisfied with their life. In the last poll, they represented 74% of the sample. Generally, men are more satisfied than women, young people more than older people, students and highly qualified people more than the less qualified.

Nevertheless, 74% of the sample expresses a critical opinion about the state of the national economy. In the last poll, this criticism concerned 58% of the interviewees. Nor are the Italians pleased with the European economy as a whole, now considered in negative terms by the majority of the sample. The common European currency, the euro, is less appreciated than in the past, but is still supported by 63% of respondents.

Employment and social protection in Italy are criticised by 78% and 68% of the interviewees respectively. In this situation, it is not surprising that Italians are generally not very optimistic about their future. More than one in three Italians holds pessimistic views on the situation of the economy and employment in Italy in the next twelve months. In addition, 52% of the sample clearly believe that things in Italy are currently going in the wrong direction.

Europe conjures up less pessimistic feelings: 17% of the sample think that, within a year, the EU economy will be worse than now, 25% foresee an improvement and 44% do not expect significant changes. Generally speaking, Italians are optimistic about the EU. This is the opinion of 64% of the sample, compared to the 28% who said they were pessimistic.

On the other hand, a relative majority believe Europe is not on the right track. But it is a small majority (29%) and represents almost half of those criticising the situation in Italy (52%).

The evaluation and knowledge of the EU

55% of the Italian sample have a positive image of the EU, while 10% see it in negative terms. At the same time, 50% of the interviewees hold a positive opinion on Italy's membership of the EU, compared to 16% who have negative judgements. The largest majority of people in favour of membership is found among left-wing voters and Italians in the North East.

However, the number of Italians confident of their knowledge of the EU has decreased sharply, as has that of those who say they have at least heard of the European institutions. Apart from the Parliament, the Commission, the Central Bank and the EU Council which are still widely known among Italian citizens, the other bodies have been heard of by less than half of the Italian population (in the case of the Court of Justice and the Court of Auditors) and by less than 30% of the sample (the case of the Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee and the European Ombudsman).

When asked to answer basic questions about the EU, Italians who gave right responses (a total of 32%) represent a lower proportion than elsewhere in Europe (42% on average), apart from the UK (30%). The latest countries to join the EU, Romania and Bulgaria, and the candidate countries, Croatia and the Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia (FYROM), record higher rates of correct answers.

The majority of Italians do not know the exact number of EU Member States, and they have the highest proportion of wrong answers to this question in the entire EU27. Thus, it is not surprising that 62% of Italians say they do not understand how the European Union works, compared to 53% recorded in the last poll.

Italians and Media

77% of the sample believes that, in Italy, people are not well informed about European political affairs. Only 18% hold the opinion that there is enough information. European citizens also increasingly support the idea that EU information is somewhat lacking.

The media is obviously to blame for this situation. 59% of Italians say that both television and radio do not provide enough information about the EU. Although with lower percentages, the majority of Italians think the same about the press and the Internet. Critical comments about media coverage of the EU are higher in the rural areas of the country than in the cities.

Italians also want more objectivity in dealing with EU issues. There is a clear increase in the number of interviewees who think that the national media portray the European Union too negatively.

This perception paves the way for a bigger concern about the work of Italian media. In general, the public trust them less and less. 55% of the sample tend to not trust television, 42% radio, and 56% the press. Only in relation to the Internet is there a majority of people expressing trust. On the other hand, 30% of the sample do not give an opinion on the subject, confirming, in a way, the limited use of the Web in Italy.

Youth and men tend to trust the media more, whilst older people and women are generally more sceptical. Television is trusted less by left-wing people, while right-wing voters are more diffident about the press.

The crisis of politics

Italians have a strong interest in politics. 56% occasionally discuss political issues with friends and 13% maintain they do so often. Moreover, the absolute majority of Italians tend to find themselves persuading friends or relatives to share their views on topics where they hold a strong opinion. This occurs more frequently among Italians than the average EU citizen.

The clear interest in politics is coupled with an increasing dissatisfaction about the way democracy works in Italy. 58% of the sample is not satisfied, compared to 44% registered in the last poll.

The unfavourable view does not spare Europe, whose democratic functioning is less and less appreciated in Italy (from 58% to 48%) and questioned more frequently (from 29% to 38%).

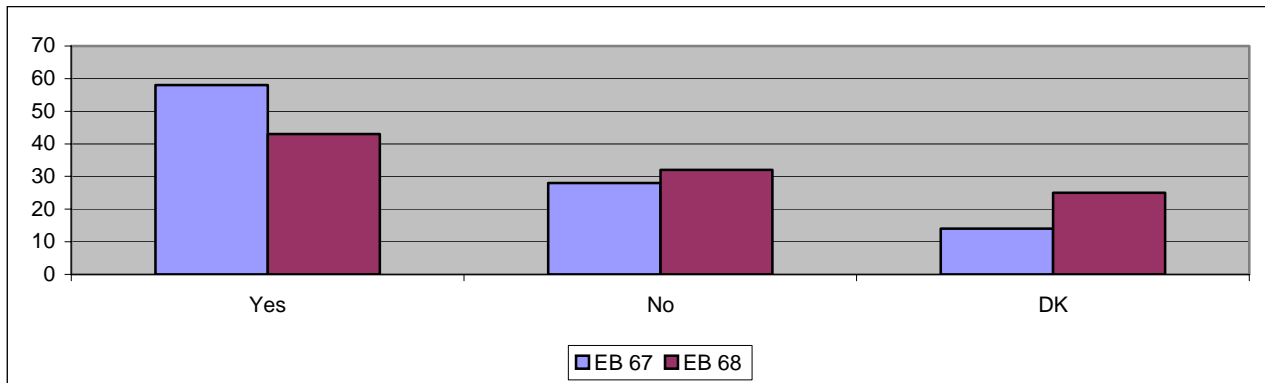
Discontent regarding Italian democracy results in an increased lack of trust in national institutions, including categories not necessarily linked to politics, such as religious and security organisations. However, the deepest crisis concerns politics. Only 23% of Italians tend to trust the national government, 25% the Parliament and just 16% political parties.

The Church, the Police and the Army continue to be highly trusted, but are affected as well by the wave of criticism and, therefore, have lost part of the usual support. Consumer associations hold their position better than others, being recognised as trustworthy by 58% of the sample.

The European Union is not spared by the critics. Now fewer than half of Italians (43%) trust the EU, compared to the 58% recorded a few months ago.

All EU institutions show a sharp decline of support, with the European Central Bank most significantly hit. The European Parliament, instead, is seen to be the most trusted EU body.

Tab. 1: Do you trust the European Union?



The priorities to face between Italy and the EU

Asked to identify the most important issues facing Italy at the moment, the interviewees put crime, inflation, unemployment and the economic situation at the top of their list of priorities. Safety and the fight against crime are perceived as the main problem by the relative majority of Italians (33%).

Taxation is the most clearly emerging issue. 24% of Italians consider it to be the biggest priority for the country compared to 18% in the last poll. This is the most relevant increase in percentage points recorded among the issues surveyed.

On the other hand, delicate issues, such as foreign policy, energy and the environment are considered important by a very low percentage of interviewees. Only 1% of Italians acknowledge foreign policy as a priority for the country.

The EU is considered more appropriate than the national government in dealing with almost all the issues taken into consideration by the sample. Crime, inflation, unemployment and economics are widely considered more an EU competence rather than a national one. On the other hand, taxation is still deemed to be a national concern, even if the different opinions are increasingly converging. Now 47% of Italians say fiscal policy should be up to Italy, whilst 44% consider it would be better managed at an EU level.

With regard to the big European debates, Italians remain widely in favour of increased European integration. More than two out of three Italians support an EU Foreign and Defence policy. Even though they are decreasing, the percentages of interviewees supporting new enlargements (43%) and a multi-speed Europe (48%) are high.

Although the majority of Italians remain clearly pro-European, there is an increasing percentage of those who consider the EU role in several issues as negative. In particular, the European Union is regarded as a bad player in matters such as inflation, taxation, unemployment, immigration and pensions.

An explanation for this phenomenon might be found in the fact that Italians are not happy with their involvement in European affairs. 70% of respondents say their voice does not count in the EU and 66% do not feel involved enough in European current affairs.

Crime and immigration

The relative majority of Italians believes the EU should emphasize its efforts concerning immigration and crime to strengthen its image in the future. The more vulnerable categories of the population, such as women and the elderly, are not surprisingly the most demanding.

Beyond being regarded as key policies to strengthen the EU in the future, immigration and fighting crime are also considered as two of the top issues facing Italy at the moment. More EU integration is supported by the biggest part of the sample for both policies. However, in Sicily and Sardinia, the survey found the lowest majority in favour of a stronger EU involvement in fighting crime.

The clear support for more EU integration in the fields of immigration and fighting crime does not hinder the surge of criticism against the current EU role in these matters. Italians with a positive opinion on EU action in fighting crime shrank from 45% to 34%. The EU's role in relation to immigration is now considered negatively rather than positively by a majority of the sample.