

**Martha Posthofen, Frieder Schmid**

# More just. More social. Less unequal.

What Germans expect from Europe.  
Summary report on the study.

**FOR A BETTER TOMORROW**

**FRIEDRICH  
EBERT   
STIFTUNG**

## FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

### A Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung project 2018–2020

Growing social inequality, societal polarisation, migration and integration, the climate crisis, digitalisation and globalisation, the uncertain future of the European Union – Germany faces profound challenges. Social Democracy must provide convincing, progressive and forward-looking answers to these questions. With the project “For a Better Tomorrow”, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is working on recommendations and positions in six central policy areas:

- Democracy
- Europe
- Digitalisation
- Sustainability
- Gender Equality
- Integration

You can find more on the issue of Europe at [www.fes.de/politik-fuer-europa/](http://www.fes.de/politik-fuer-europa/)

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The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany with a rich tradition dating back to its foundation in 1925. Today, it remains loyal to the legacy of its namesake and campaigns for the core ideas and values of social democracy: freedom, justice and solidarity. It has a close connection to social democracy and free trade unions.

FES promotes the advancement of social democracy, in particular by:

- political educational work to strengthen civil society;
- think tanks;
- international cooperation with our international network of offices in more than 100 countries;
- support for talented young people;
- maintaining the collective memory of Social Democracy with archives, libraries and more.

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## PREAMBLE

Crisis has become the normal state of the European Union (EU). The EU member states reflect an image of political disagreement to the outside world. On the inside, more and more citizens are turning away from Europe as it fails to deliver on the promises of democracy, progress, and prosperity for many. Instead of a greater prosperity for everyone, competition, growing inequality and poor working conditions prevail. Europe is drifting apart economically and socially to a worrying extent. Yet, a European Union that has a future means solidarity, rather than everyone competing against everyone else. What is it exactly that Germans expect from Europe? To which extent do Germans agree to policies that lead to a more socially balanced EU? Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung seeks to contribute to the debate over the future of Europe with its project "For a Better Tomorrow". This study marks the start of this contribution by surveying eligible voters in Germany on their attitudes and expectations towards the EU. The results show that there is a favourable, widespread agreement among the German public towards the EU. At the same time, two out of three citizens voice their concerns for the need of reforms. In particular, Germans wish the EU was more focused on social policy.

Europe has a deficiency regarding justice. This finding is illustrated by the gap between the values attributed to the EU and those values that citizens wish the EU would stand for. Apart from security issues, this gap is most pronounced regarding the issues of "justice" and "equal living conditions / livelihood opportunities". Citizens perceive huge economic and social differences between the EU member states. Three out of four respondents think that these disparities cause most of the problems the EU is facing.

In general, sociopolitical issues are particularly relevant for German citizens. The high extent to which citizens agree to specific measures aiming at reducing economic and social inequality in the European context reflects the wish for a more social Europe. Three out of four Germans agree to the introduction of a minimum wage throughout the EU. Just as many respondents agree to common minimum social standards. Measures that include greater control and regulation achieve the highest rates of agreement. Such measures include uniform taxation of multinational companies and fiscal control for regulating national debts. Agreement to measures that are perceived as unilateral is low, for example in the case of possible debt relief for EU member states.

The results underline that there is a high demand for a more social orientation of the EU. Agreement to specific political measures is high. Yet, the German public perceives the political supply side as insufficient and does not have confidence in any particular party to stand up for social justice in Europe.

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# 1

## DEMAND FOR REFORMS OF THE EU

For the last decade, the EU member states have faced numerous critical incidences, e.g. the financial and economic crisis, the Euro crisis, the handling of refugees and the British referendum on the EU membership. Nevertheless, approval of the EU is high. In September 2018, the Eurobarometer showed the highest approval of the EU ever measured.<sup>1</sup> A study conducted by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung showed substantially more optimistic attitudes towards the EU in 2017 compared to 2015.<sup>2</sup>

In the autumn of 2018, the German public was divided regarding whether the membership in the EU is rather advantageous or disadvantageous for Germany (cf. Figure 1). The share of citizens who think that the advantages of the German EU membership prevail is almost equal to the share of those who think the disadvantages prevail. Forty percent of Germans think that advantages and disadvantages are balanced. However, respondents from low-income classes evaluate the German membership in the EU as more disadvantageous as those from middle and high-income classes.

Citizens perceive the EU member states as disparate regarding their economic performance as well as their living standards and living conditions (cf. Figure 2). Cultural differences are perceived to a lower extent. The more respondents perceive EU member states as different considering their living standards and living conditions, the more they evaluate the German membership in the EU as disadvantageous. This coherence may serve as an indicator for social issues being linked to the attitude towards the EU.

Citizens evaluate the differences between the EU member states as challenging. Three out of four citizens agree to the statement that most of the problems of the EU are caused by the economic and social differences between the EU member states (cf. Figure 3). Moreover, there is a strong awareness of interdependency between the EU member states. Almost four out of five citizens agree to the statement that it is bad for Germany in the long run, if the other EU member states are not doing well economically.

A great share of citizens thinks the EU is at least partly dysfunctional. Only one fifth thinks that the EU is working the way it should all in all (cf. Figure 4). In contrast, two thirds express their demand for changing the EU: 46 percent agree to the statement that the EU works badly, yet might be fixed with some changes. At least 20 percent express their wish for changing the EU radically.

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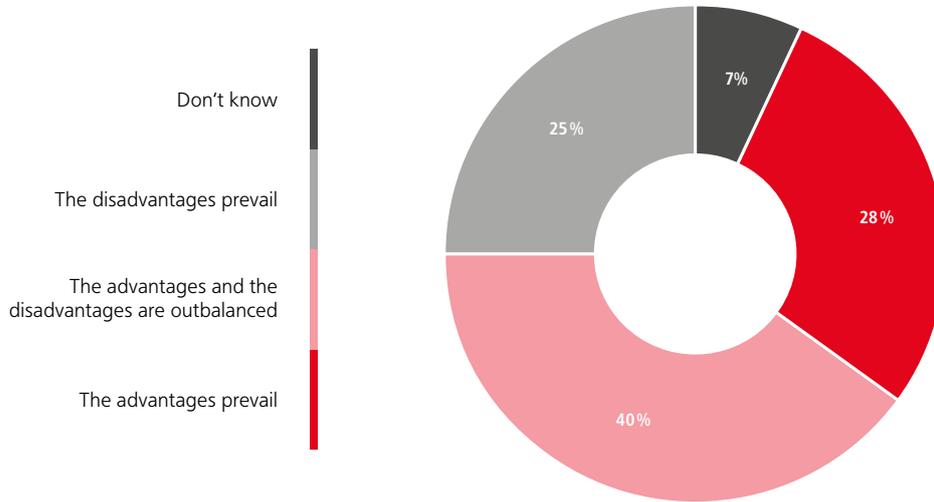
<sup>1</sup> Eurobarometer 2018: Taking up the challenge: From (silent) support to actual vote. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/parlemeter-2018-taking-up-the-challenge> (2018/11/19).

<sup>2</sup> Hilmer, Richard 2017: Was hält Europa zusammen? Die EU nach dem Brexit. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Berlin.

Figure 1

**Evaluation of Germany's membership in the EU**

Thinking of Germany's membership in the EU, do you think that the advantages or the disadvantages prevail or that the advantages and the disadvantages are balanced?



Basic population: eligible voters in Germany, sample size: n=2,010

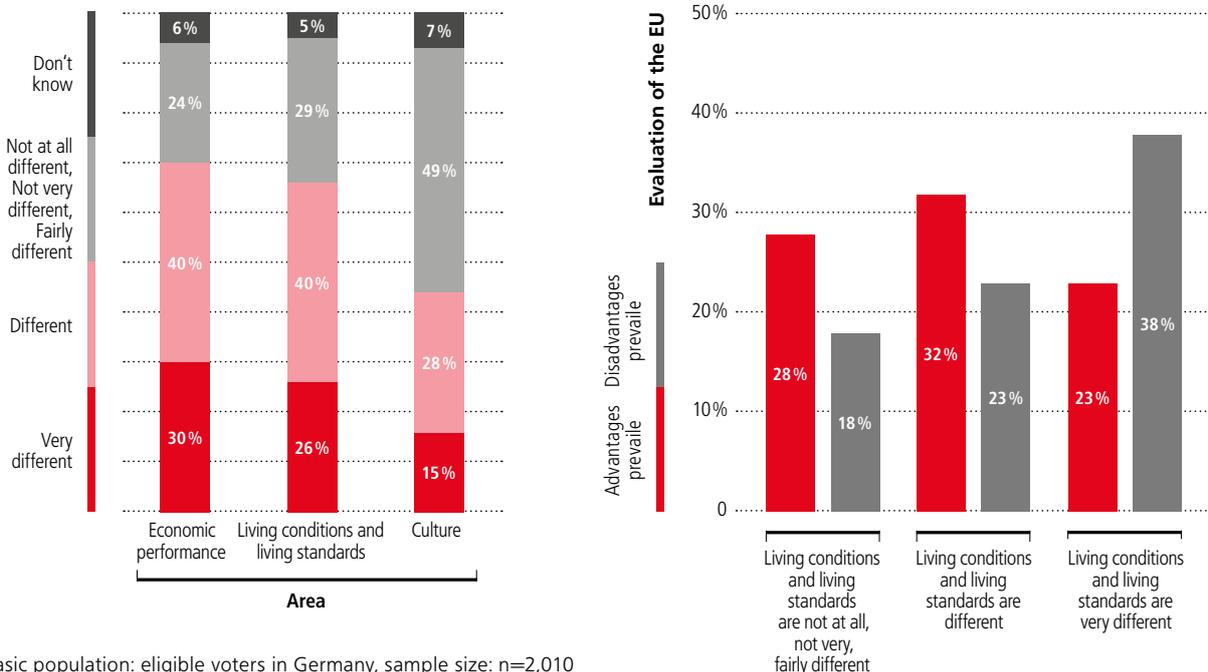
Quelle: YouGov 2018.

Figure 2

**Evaluation of the EU by perception of differences regarding living conditions and living standards**

Thinking of the EU member states, to what extent are the EU member different regarding the following areas? – Living conditions and living standards

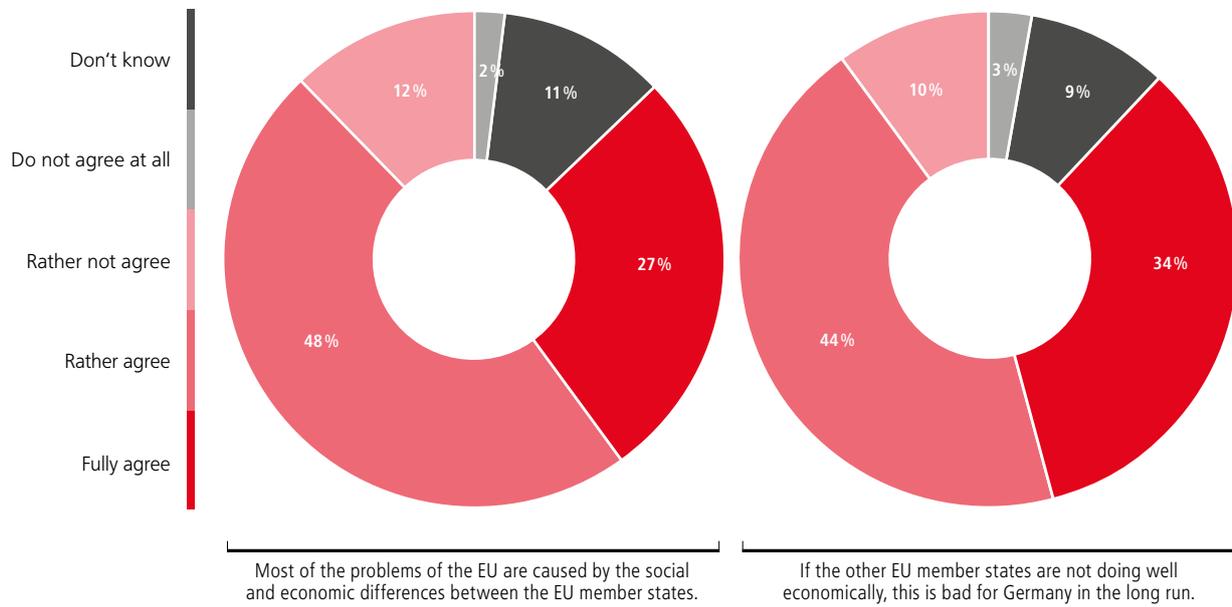
Thinking of Germany's membership in the EU, do you think that the advantages or the disadvantages prevail or that the advantages and the disadvantages are balanced?



Basic population: eligible voters in Germany, sample size: n=2,010

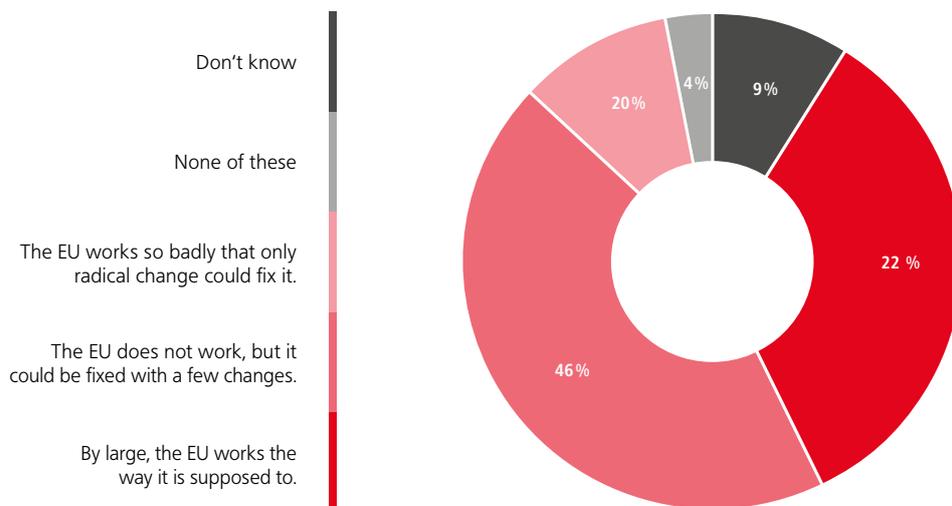
Quelle: YouGov 2018.

**Figure 3**  
**Evaluation of differences in Europe**  
 How far do you agree or not agree with the following statement?



Basic population: eligible voters in Germany, sample size: n=2,010  
 Quelle: YouGov 2018.

**Figure 4**  
**Demand for reforming the EU**  
 Which of the following statements do you most agree with?



Basic population: eligible voters in Germany, sample size: n=2,010  
 Quelle: YouGov 2018.

# 2

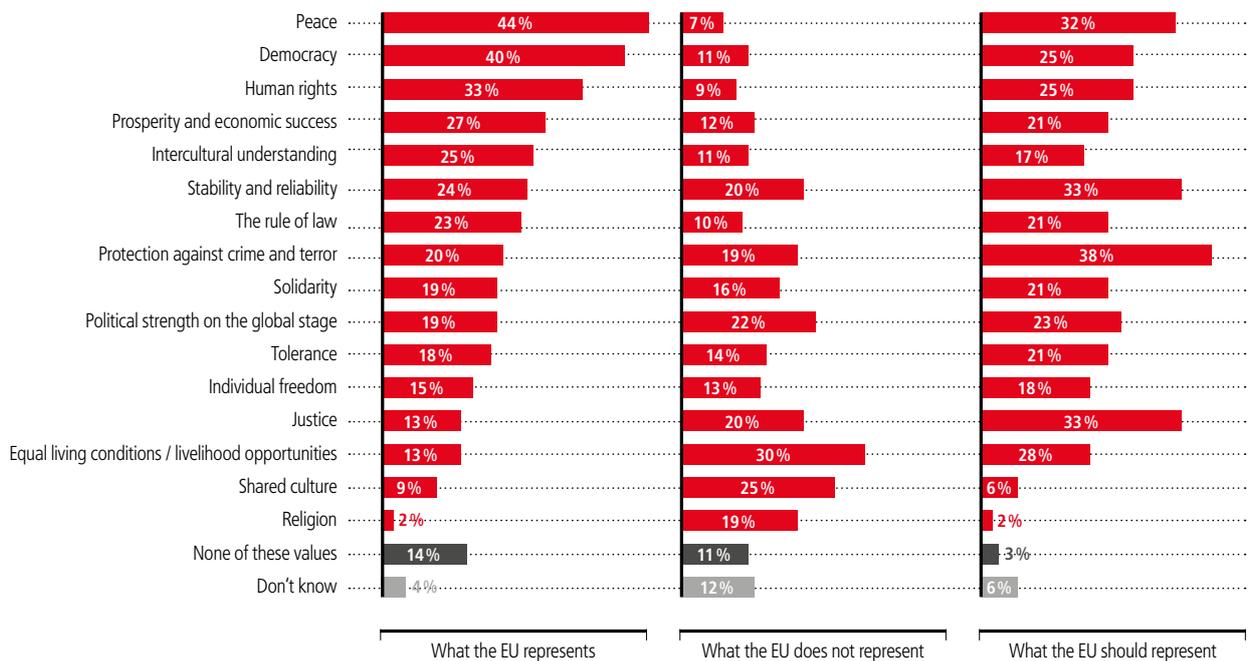
## THE EU HAS A DEFICIENCY REGARDING JUSTICE

If citizens are asked which values they currently associate with the EU, they attribute “justice” and “equal living conditions / livelihood opportunities” to a relatively low extent (13 percent in each case; cf. Figure 5). This finding is even more impressive against the results of the questions for which values the EU does not stand for. Almost one out of three citizens (30 percent) thinks that the EU does not stand for “equal living conditions / livelihood opportunities”. For another 20 percent the EU does not stand for “justice”. Citizens do think that this is a deficiency: One-third (33 percent) states that the EU should stand for “justice” to a higher extent. Only “protection against crime and terror” and “stability and reliability” show comparable figures. One fourth thinks that the EU should stand for “equal living conditions / livelihood opportunities” to a higher extent.

The gap between attributed values and demanded values shows clearly that citizens perceive a deficiency regarding justice. This gap is very pronounced regarding four issues in particular: (1) “justice” (20 percentage points gap), (2) “protection against crime and terror” (18 percentage points gap), (3) “equal living conditions / livelihood opportunities” (15 percentage points gap) and “stability and reliability” (nine percentage points gap). Apparently, there is a deficiency regarding social and distributional issues that the EU is currently not able to address.

Figure 5  
**Values of the EU**

In your view, which of these values does the EU currently represent? Please select up to five values.  
 And which of these values does the EU currently not represent? Please select up to five values.  
 Which of these values do you wish the EU would currently represent more to a higher extent? Please select up to five values.



Basic population: eligible voters in Germany, sample size: n=2,010  
 Quelle: YouGov 2018.

# 3

## SOCIAL ISSUES ARE MOST IMPORTANT

The findings indicate some gaps between the way the German public perceives the EU and the way it demands the EU to be. Which topics and issues, however, are relevant for the living environment of the German public?

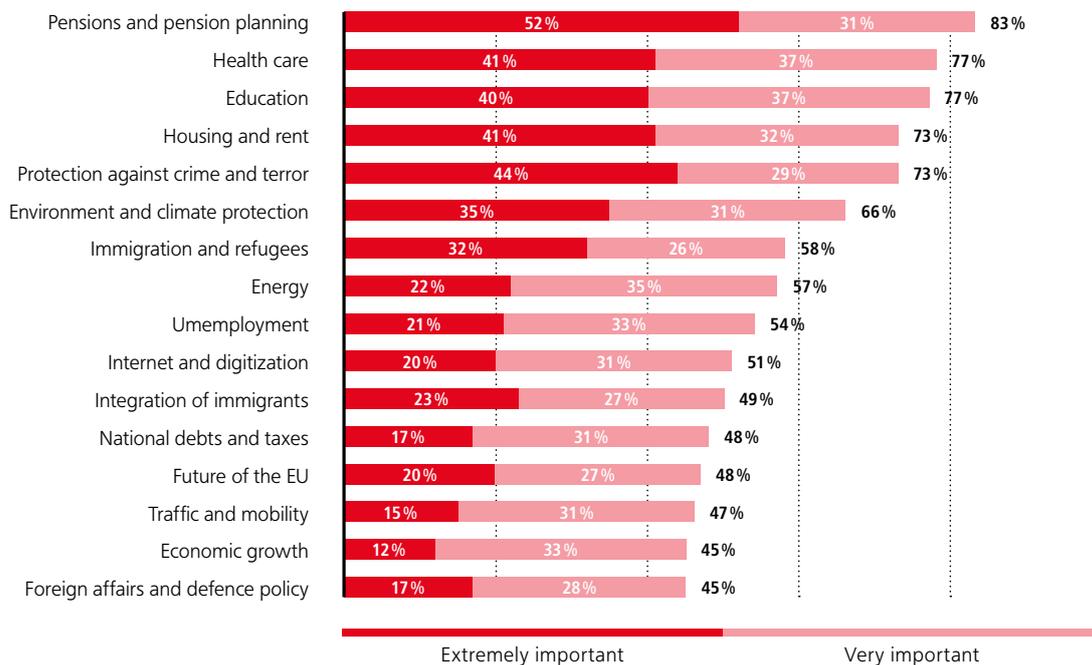
In the autumn of 2018, sociopolitical issues are most relevant to German citizens. Four out of the five most important issues address social issues and issues regarding equal living conditions (pensions and pensions planning, health care, education, housing and rents; cf. Figure 6).

The perception of the most important issues is different on the European level. "Immigration from the outside of the EU" (70 percent), "national debts of EU member states" (67 percent), "EU member states disagreeing politically" (63 percent) and "protecting

the environment and the climate" (62 percent) are perceived as the four most important challenges for the EU at the time of the survey being conducted. Unsurprisingly, citizens see challenges that cannot be addressed by a single country alone (e.g. climate protection, migration) as well as issues that relate to the interaction of the EU member states (e.g. national debts, international collaboration) as crucial for the EU as a supranational institution.

However, citizens recognize the need for action regarding sociopolitical issues on the European level as well. More than half of the surveyed Germans think that each of the following issues represents a great challenge for the EU: Disparate living conditions (55 percent), disparate social security systems (57 percent) and economic differences between the EU member states (58 percent).

Figure 6  
**Relevance of policy areas**  
 How important do you think are the following issues and challenges for Germany?  
 (Not at all important, Rather not important, Important, Don't know is not shown)



Basic population: eligible voters in Germany, sample size: n=2,010  
 Quelle: YouGov 2018.

In which policy areas do citizens expect the EU to provide problem resolutions – and in which policy areas do expectations towards national institutions prevail? Citizens clearly attribute responsibility for the most relevant issues “pensions and pensions planning”, “health care”, “education” and “housing and rents” to the national level (cf. Figure 7). Attributing responsibility for these issues to the European level is less pronounced. Attribution to the European level is highest for “health care” (14 percent) and lowest for “housing and rents” (9 percent). The issue “unemployment” is attributed to the national level as well. Apparently, citizens expect problem resolutions in these policy areas from national institutions rather than from the EU.

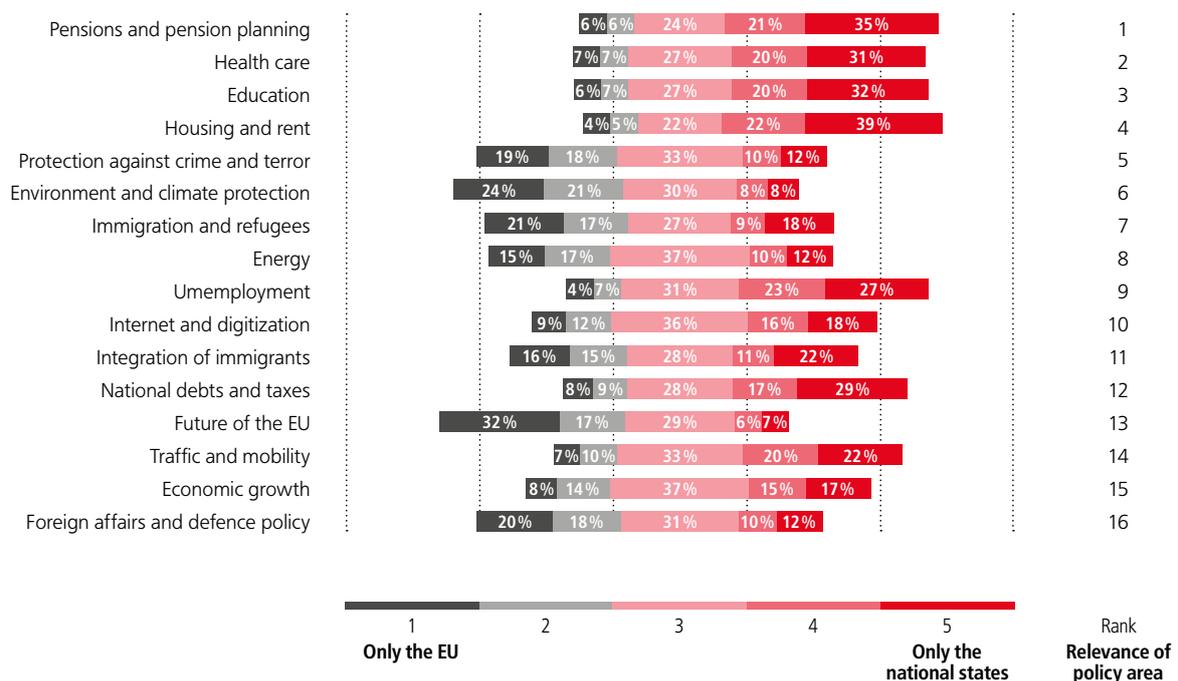
Possible explanations for these interpretative patterns might be:

- Doubting the EU being effective as a political institution and lacking realistic possibilities for action and problem resolution in the European context
- Perceiving the EU as an economic project, thus distrusting the motivation of the EU as a political institution
- Historically restrained socio-political agenda and lacking political competencies due to the principle of subsidiarity
- Attributing responsibility to the national level might be acquired and habitual

Figure 7

**Attribution of responsibility by policy areas**

Thinking about the following areas, do you think the EU should be responsible for decisions in these areas or should the national states (i.e. each EU member state by its own) be responsible? (Don't know is not shown)



Basic population: eligible voters in Germany, sample size: n=2,010

Quelle: YouGov 2018.

# 4

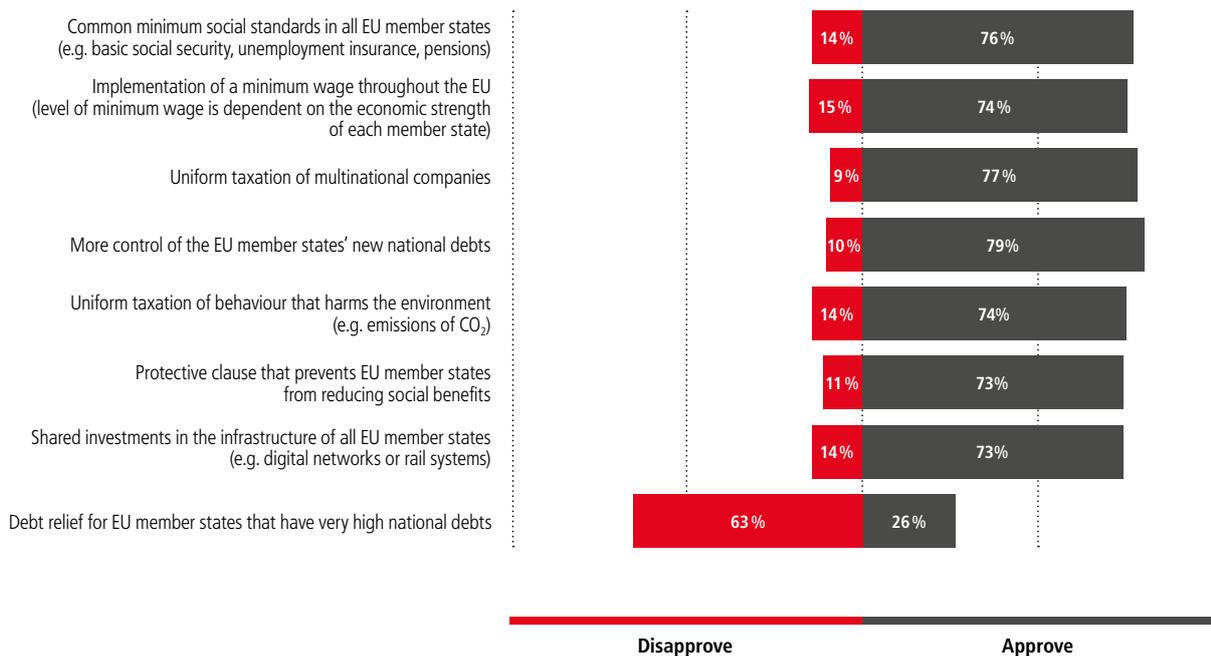
## HOW COULD A SOCIAL EUROPE LOOK LIKE?

Against this background, is there public support at all for specific measures to cope with the issue of social justice on the European level?

There is widespread support for socio-political measures aimed at reducing social inequality in the European context. Three out of four (76 per cent) respondents support common minimum social standards in all EU member states (cf. Figure 8). Support for a minimum wage throughout the EU (74 percent) as well as for a protective clause that prevents EU member states from reducing social benefits (73 percent) is comparably high. Joint efforts to regulate the economy like uniform taxation of multinational companies (77 percent) are highly supported. However, the findings show that support for po-

litical measures is not unconditional. High support for measures aimed at controlling EU member states fiscally indicates that accountability, transparency, and control are necessary constraints for the acceptance of specific measures.

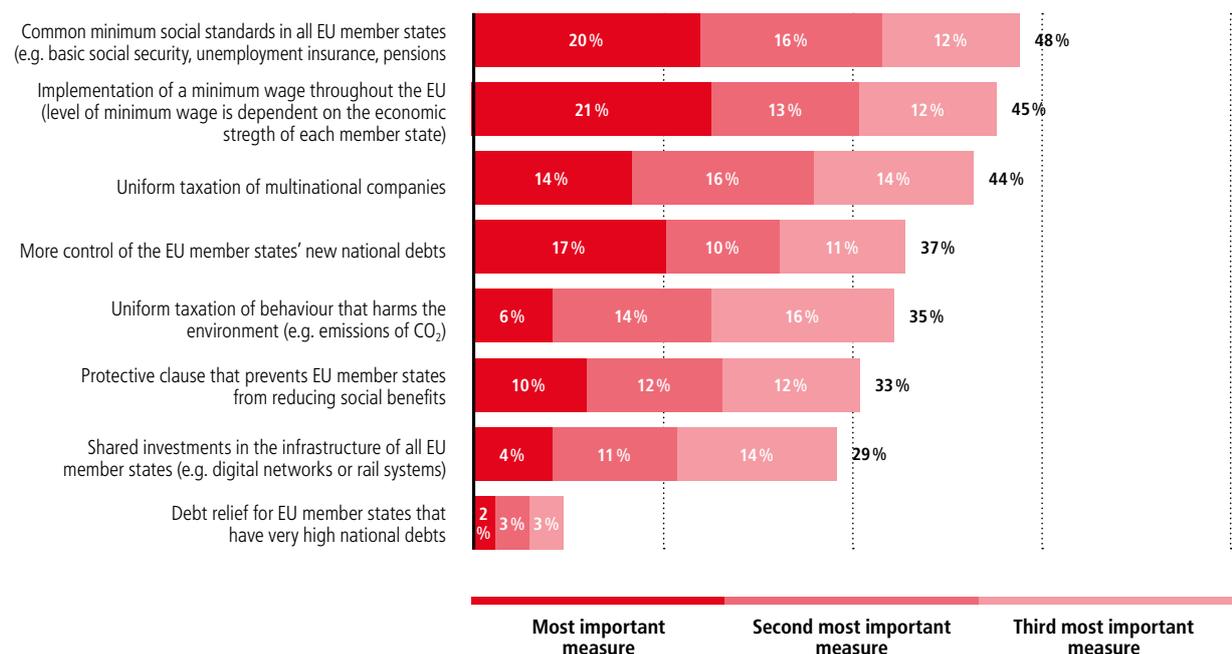
Figure 8  
**Relevance of policy areas**  
 How important do you think are the following issues and challenges for Germany?  
 (Not at all important, Rather not important, Important, Don't know is not shown)



Basic population: eligible voters in Germany, sample size: n=2,010  
 Quelle: YouGov 2018.

If citizens are asked to prioritize among different measures aimed at reducing social inequality in the European context, they show clear-cut preferences for sociopolitical measures. Almost half of the respondents (48 percent) think that shared minimum social standards in all EU member states is one of the three most important measures. One out of five (20 percent) even thinks these measures are of the highest priority (cf. Figure 9). A minimum wage throughout the EU and uniform taxation of multinational companies are ranked second and third. Thirty-seven percent of respondents consider more control of the EU member states' new national debts as one of the three most important measures. This measure is more polarizing than other ones. While one out of six (17 percent) considers greater fiscal control as the most important measure, another 63 percent do not consider this to be one of the three most important measures.

Figure 9  
**Priorities regarding political measures aimed at reducing social inequality in the European context**  
 In your view, which of these measures are most important? Please select the three most important measures.  
 Start with the most important one (*Don't know is not shown*)



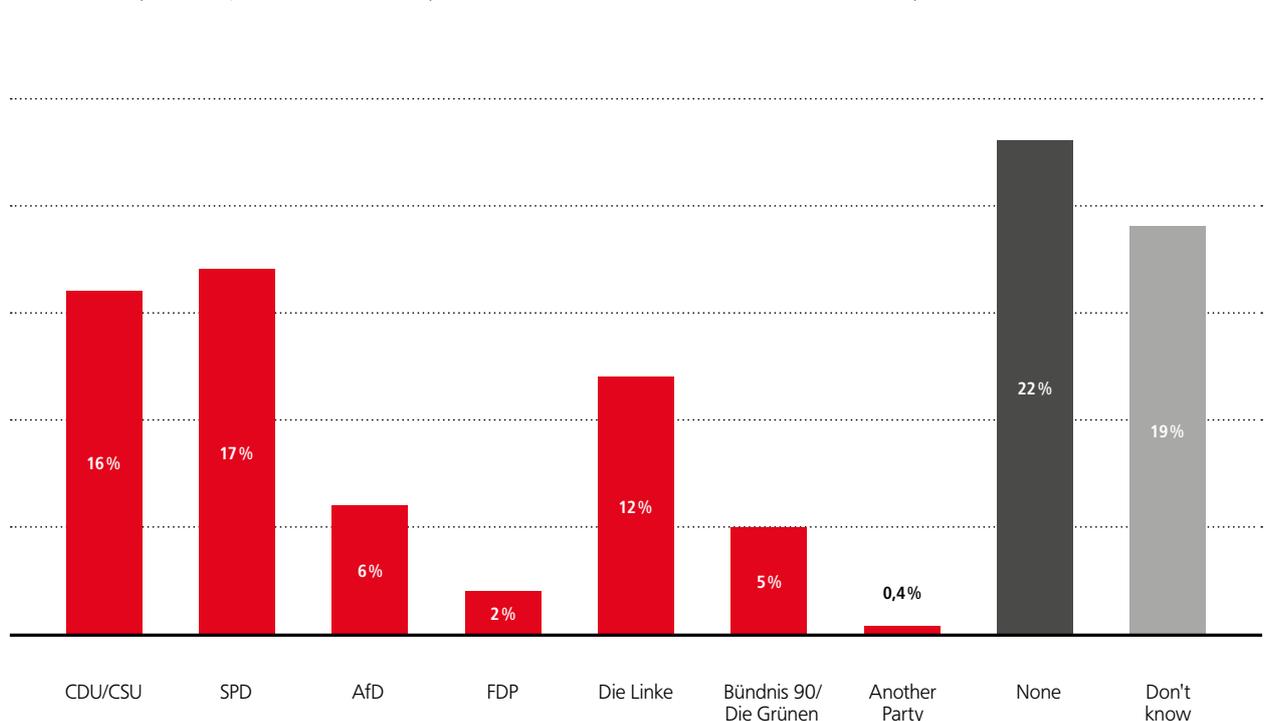
Grundgesamtheit: Wahlberechtigte Bevölkerung in Deutschland, Stichprobengröße: n = 2.010  
 Quelle: YouGov 2018.

# 5

## A SOCIAL EUROPE? LITTLE TRUST IN PARTIES

Citizens do not have confidence in political parties to promote the European integration in sociopolitical policy areas. As perceived by respondents, there is no political party that has Social Justice in a European context as a policy area on its agenda. One in five (22 percent) attributes this policy area to no party at all (cf. Figure 9). Another 19 percent are not able to answer this question. One out of six attributes competence in this policy area to the Social Democrats (SPD) or the Conservatives (CDU/CSU), respectively. Another 12 percent think the Left (Die Linke) is most competent in this area. Other parties are marginalized. These findings show that there is a significant representation gap regarding social issues on the European level that provides an opportunity for parties to shape their profile.

Figure 10  
**Competence attributed to parties regarding Social Justice in Europe**  
 Which of these parties do you think are most competent when it comes to the issue of Social Justice in Europe?



Basic population: eligible voters in Germany, sample size: n=2,010  
 Quelle: YouGov 2018.

# 6

## METHODICAL PROCEDURES

For this study, a qualitative and a quantitative study were conducted. The qualitative study consists of six semi-structured group discussions conducted from September 7<sup>th</sup> to September 13<sup>th</sup> 2018 in Cologne, Stuttgart and Rostock. The quantitative study consists of an online survey. The sample used in the survey consists of eligible voters in Germany. Respondents were recruited via the YouGov Online Panel, the online access panel of YouGov Germany GmbH. Sample size is n=2,010. The survey was conducted from September 28<sup>th</sup> to October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018. The margin of error is between  $\pm 1.0$  percentage points given a share value of five percent and  $\pm 2.2$  percentage points given a share value of fifty percent.

## **IMPRESSUM**

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## FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

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The findings of this study show:

- While approval of the EU is high among the German public, two out of three Germans think there is a need for reforms and demand change at the same time.
- The majority of Germans thinks that economic and social disparities are crucial for the problems of the EU. They demand a more socially oriented EU.
- Three out of four Germans support measures to reduce economic and social disparities within the EU.
- A great share of the German public does not have confidence in any party to promote social justice in the EU. Parties need to close this representation gap in order to cope with EU skepticism.

For further information on this topic, please visit:

[www.fes.de/politik-fuer-europa/](http://www.fes.de/politik-fuer-europa/)

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