

European sovereignty

Ipsos survey on behalf of the Fondation Jean-Jaurès and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Focus on Germany

Survey conducted by Ipsos on behalf of the Fondation Jean-Jaurès and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Some 8,000 people were interviewed over the internet via Ipsos' Access Panel between 28 December 2020 and 8 January 2021, making up eight samples of 1,000 persons representative of the national population aged 18 and over in France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Spain and Sweden. The sampling was carried out in accordance with the quota method (sex, age, occupation, rural/urban location, region). This summary presents the results for Germany.

Sovereignty? A positive notion highly valued in Germany

»When you hear the word ›sovereignty‹ what ideas or images spontaneously come to mind?« While the French overwhelmingly associate the term »sovereignty« with the semantic field attached to royalty (»king«, »queen«, »monarchy« and so on), the responses recorded »beyond the Rhine« outline a set of views that are significantly more favourable towards the idea of European sovereignty: independence, the state, freedom, autonomy, power, self-determination, security, trust, strength and so on.

The term »sovereignty« overall evokes »something generally positive« for three-quarters of Germans (73%), whereas the figure is below 50%, on average, in the eight countries in the survey, and only 29% in France. The Germans also provide the largest number of respondents, alongside the Poles and the Latvians, who regard the term as »modern« (31%), while less than 10% regard it as »outdated" (50% go for »neither one nor the other«). This differs considerably from the scores recorded in France and Italy, where the majority regard sovereignty as »outdated« (49% and 53%, respectively). The lack of political affiliation in relation to sovereignty is another distinctively German feature: only 3% of those asked consider the term »left-wing«, 5% »right-wing«, while the consensus of a large majority (77%) is that it is »neither left-wing nor right-wing« (15% had no opinion). In the other countries opinions are more divided, and while the majority of Europeans (58%) do not attribute any political affiliation to the word, for the remainder it is rather associated with the right (23%) than with the left (6%).

Finally, when asked to choose from a list the two words that they most associate with the term »sovereignty« more than half of Germans opt for »independence« (mentioned by 63%) and »self-determination« (53%), with »freedom« (35%) taking third place. Once again, the Germans look favourably on the notion, in contrast to southern Europe. In France, Italy and Spain, the words »power« and »nationalism« come to mind instead.

European sovereignty: two words that go together well

Do the largely positive connotations observed in Germany indicate stronger support for the concept of »European sovereignty«? Certainly, around 70% of Germans stated that they had a clear idea of what the expression means, and 63% had a positive attitude towards it (especially CDU, SPD and Green voters, with only AfD supporters split). When it comes to what people understand by the idea of »national sovereignty« 75% of Germans stated that they have a good understanding of it and 64% that it has positive associations, a little above the European average with regard to both terms. The expression »strategic autonomy«, by contrast, is less well understood (51% of Germans have a good idea of what it means, as against an average of 61% for the eight countries in the study overall), although people's assessments remain broadly positive (44% positive opinions as against 20% negative, with a European average of 49% and 21%, respectively).

The notion of European sovereignty is thus well understood and well regarded in Germany, and few Germans see any contradiction with national sovereignty. Three-quarters of Germans (73%, the highest percentage out of the eight countries under investigation, 15 percentage points above the European average) thus feel that it is possible to reconcile the notions of sovereignty and Europe, »because European sovereignty and national sovereignty are complementary«. Only 27% (as against a European average of 42%) consider that the two terms are contradictory, with »sovereignty referring above all to the nation«. Here again, the fairly clear distinction between Germany and the average in the countries under study derives from the meaning attached to the concept of sovereignty. For Germans, besides »independence from others« (mentioned by 63%), sovereignty also means »cooperation freely agreed with one's partners« (49%), while on European average this item ranks last (35%).

European sovereignty, already a reality for most Germans

To the question »in your opinion, is Europe already sovereign?«, the majority of Germans reply in the affirmative (57%, with 43% taking the opposite view). Once again, this is above the European average, which is finely balanced on this issue (51% saying »yes« as against 49% saying »no«), and a long way from countries in which critical views prevail, such as France (64% »no«) and Italy (54%).

Opinions on whether Europe has true sovereignty differ from one country to another, although there is consensus on the essential conditions for achieving sovereignty: »a common security and defence policy« is regarded as essential by 71% of Germans (with an average of 67% in the eight countries in the survey); »a strong economy« (mentioned by 67% in Germany, with a European average of 69%); »safeguards on European production in such strategic areas as food and health« (65%, 65%); »strong defence of its own values – democracy, rule of law – both internally and externally« (65%, 61%); »control over the EU’s external borders (61%, 59%); »common instruments for combating foreign interference« (60%, 58%); »European energy sources« (59%, 60%); »control over its strategic infrastructure – ports, airports, energy« (52%, 52%); »control over its digital infrastructure – social networks, 5G, the cloud« (49%, 46%); and »its own tax revenues« (45%, 53%). The ranking of the various elements differs slightly from one country to another, but the levels remain similar. And even when a particular condition is not regarded as »essential« in a given country, it is at least considered »important«. The European average is above 90% for »essential or important« for each of the 10 proposed conditions.

Whether European sovereignty already exists or not, respondents in all the countries in the survey are calling for it. Broadly speaking, 73% of Europeans believe that European sovereignty should be »strengthened«, a rate that rises to 83% in the case of Germany, one of the highest, along with Latvia (84%) and Romania (83%). For Germans it is as important to strengthen European sovereignty as to strengthen national sovereignty (84%). This massive support can be explained by its expected benefits. Asked to choose two reasons to justify this, Germans prioritise »the challenge of climate change« (42%, with an average of 34% it is ranked second in the eight countries in the survey), »the threat of terrorism« (37% in Germany and ranked first across the eight countries with an average of 37%), as well as »the threat to health« (30%, 31%). Strengthening European sovereignty also appears important to Germans in order to curb »US great-power ambitions« (21%), which is mentioned more often than »Chinese great-power ambitions« (18%), while the European average has this the other way around (17% for the United States, 20% for China). In Germany mention is made a little more frequently than elsewhere of »Turkish great-power ambitions« (11%/7% European average) – undoubtedly because of the special relations between the two countries – and less often »their country’s lack of clout at international level« (19%, 27% European average).

Going forward, what is it that is most hindering the further strengthening of European sovereignty? For Germans, one reason stands out, chosen by one person in three (35%): »the fact that some European countries are governed by nationalists«, an item that is more broadly mentioned than in other countries (23% on average across the eight countries, with only 15% in France, and 14% in Romania and Latvia). Germany shares this particular standpoint with Sweden (38% on this point). »Pressure from certain foreign countries in whose interest it is that Europe does not become stronger«, which is most often cited in Latvia (41%) and Romania (36%), garners only 17% in Germany, at the same level as »cultural differences between European countries«, further proof of how deeply embedded Germany is in the

European Union. »The weakness of the European institutions« (Commission, Parliament)« follows at 14%, while it is the primary reason put forward by the French (23%) and the Italians (22%). »Popular reluctance« and »pressure from big industrial corporations or digital platforms« are also mentioned, but by less than 10% of the sample.