

Focus on France

European Sovereignty

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

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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 on France.

SOVEREIGNTY? IN FRANCE, AN IDEA ASSOCIATED WITH ROYALTY

By way of preamble to the questions on European sovereignty, Ipsos asked the French and the Germans what comes to mind when they hear the term »sovereignty«. In France, the response was unequivocal. Out of the 1,000 persons interviewed, 300 (!) spontaneously associated sovereignty with »king«. As many as 30% gave this answer, which is exceptional for open questions of this kind. Usually, the most frequent responses total around 10%. This figure is even more remarkable, given that a whole host of associations clustered around the word »king« in the same semantic field: »queen« (8.7% of words mentioned), »royalty« (5.7%), »sovereign« (4.9%), »monarchy« (4.5%), »kingdom« (4.3%), and even

»crown«, »royal«, »château«, »prince«, all garnering between 1 and 3% of the words mentioned.

By comparison, in Germany the terms that come to mind most frequently are rather in the range of 10% and refer to »independence« (»Unabhängigkeit«, 7.4% of mentions, »Unabhängig«, 4.8%), »the state« (»Staat«, 4.2%) or »freedom« (»Freiheit«, 3.7%). However, one would be wrong to conclude at this stage that these represent opposing visions. The values highlighted in Germany are also present in France, and in relatively similar proportions: the term »independent« is mentioned by 7.9% of the French, the term »state« by 3.7% and »freedom« by 2.8%. It's just that these evocations are eclipsed by the predominant association between »sovereignty« and »king«, which necessarily affects the term's connotations.

Consequently, the word »sovereignty« only evokes »something rather positive« for 29% of the French, in comparison with almost half of Europeans as a whole (46%) and just under three-quarters of Germans (73%). Similarly, just under one in two French people consider the notion to be »outdated« (49%), with only 12% regarding it as »modern« and 35% as »neither one nor the other«. This is a considerable distance from the European average (32% »outdated«, 20% »modern« and 40% »neither one nor the other«), and even further away from the levels found in Germany (9% »outdated«, 31% »modern« and 50% »neither one nor the other«). On these two questions, France is a lot closer to its southern European neighbours, Italy and Spain.

On the other hand, the findings are more homogenous when it comes to the political orientations associated with the word »sovereignty«. In each of the eight countries in the survey, the majority agree that it is »neither left-wing nor right-wing« (a European average of 58 % take this view, 53 % in France). For others it remains more associated with the political right (23 % European average, 30 % in France), very rarely with the political left (6 % European average, 4 % in France).

The spontaneous reply of »royalty« wanes when the focus shifts to closed questions and respondents have to choose their responses to the term »sovereignty« from a fixed list. In that case the French opted for »power« (51 %), ahead of »nationalism« (43 %), »independence« (31 %) and »protectionism« (26 %). This ranking still deviates significantly from the European average, in terms of which the term »independence« comes to mind (mentioned by 42 %, +11 points in comparison with France), ahead of »power« (37 %, -14) and »self-determination« (34 %, +12). This is even more remote from the results in Germany, which favours the trio »independence« (63 %), »self-determination« (53 %) and »freedom« (35 %).

EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY, VIEWED MUCH LESS FAVOURABLY IN FRANCE THAN ELSEWHERE

A little over half of French people (54 %, as against 63 % on average for the eight countries in the survey) claim to have a clear idea of what is meant by »European sovereignty«. This is below the figure for the idea of »national sovereignty« (68 % of the French and 71 % of Europeans overall clearly understand what it means), and even less than in the case of what one might suppose to be the more difficult notion of »strategic autonomy« (60 % in France, 61 % European average). If one puts to one side those who have a »fairly good« understanding of what these expressions mean and focus solely on those who have a »very good« understanding, France catches up with the European average on each of these three terms, although with scores that still suggest a paucity of information. Those French people who claim that they understand »very well« what »European sovereignty« means falls to 14 % (16 % European average), the same score as in the case of »strategic autonomy« (14 %, 14 % on average), and 10 percentage points less than in the case of »national sovereignty« (24 % in France, 25 % European average).

This approximate level of understanding does not preclude rather favourable preconceptions. On average in the eight countries in the study the notion of »European sovereignty« has positive connotations for 52 % of respondents, as against 57 % positive preconceptions with regard to »national sovereignty« and 49 % as regards »strategic autonomy«. France distinguishes itself once again in terms of its slightly harsher assessments: 41 % of respondents take a positive view of the notion of »European sovereignty« (66 % and 61 %, respectively, among LREM and EELV supporters, but only 36 % among supporters of LR, 33 % with regard to LFI and 28 % with regard to RN supporters), as against 35 % with negative views and 24 % whose views are »neither negative nor positive«. This is a long

way from the enthusiasm displayed by Poles (69 % taking a positive view), Latvians (68 %), Romanians (66 %) or Germans (63 %). Only Italy comes below France, in fact with majority of low opinions (37 % »positive«, 47 % »negative« and 16 % »neither positive nor negative«).

It is only in France (52 %) and Italy (56 %) that the majority of respondents take the view that it is »contradictory to talk of European sovereignty because sovereignty refers above all to the nation«. In all the countries in the survey (58 % European average), and especially in Germany (73 %), the general consensus is that »it is possible to use these two words together because European sovereignty and national sovereignty are complementary«.

These differences refer once again to how »sovereignty« is understood. In France, this notion is associated above all with »living in accordance with one's own values and preferences« (item chosen by 60 % of the sample, as against below 50 % in Germany and Sweden), »the ability to assert one's own interests« (mentioned by 59 % in France, as against below 40 % in Germany and Poland), but significantly less with »free cooperation with one's partners« (27 %, as against 49 % in Germany and 52 % in Sweden).

EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY, A WISH BUT NOT A REALITY FOR THE MAJORITY OF FRENCH PEOPLE

Regardless of what one thinks about the concept, is Europe today sovereign? Out of the eight countries in the survey, the French are the most sceptical. While one French person in two (36 %) believe that »yes, Europe today is sovereign«, two out of three (64 %) think that that is not the case. The balance observed in France is the opposite of the one in Poland (65 % / 35 %), Romania (63 % / 37 %) or Sweden (61 % / 39 %). Opinions are more divided in the other countries, but only Italy, like France, has a majority of »no's« (46 % / 54 %).

In all countries, opinion is divided, however, on the essential conditions required for genuine European sovereignty, with similar rankings: »a strong economy« (mentioned by 69 % on European average, 67 % in France); »a common security and defence policy« (67 % in Europe overall, 67 % in France); »safeguards on European production in such strategic areas as food and health« (65 %, 70 %); »European energy sources/own energy sources« (60 %, 62 %); »strong defence of its own values – democracy, rule of law – both internally and externally« (61 % / 63 %); »control over the EU's external borders« (59 %, 63 %); »common instruments for combating foreign interference« (58 %, 64 %); »control over strategic infrastructure« (52 %, 55 %); »its own tax revenues« (53 %, 57 %); and »control over digital infrastructure« (46 %, 51 %). For the French and the Italians, however, it does not pass muster.

But there is no question of euroscepticism here. On the contrary, two-thirds of French people (66 %) think »that European sovereignty needs to be strengthened«, almost as many as believe that »their own country's sovereignty needs to be

strengthened« (70 %). The notion of reinforcing European sovereignty obtains a solid majority in all eight countries. Italy is least enthusiastic, at 60 %, while the European average is 73 %. Views are even more favourable concerning the reinforcement of national sovereignty, but still of the same order of magnitude (77 % favourable opinions, on average).

The majority of respondents thus feel that European sovereignty should be strengthened, especially insofar as they regard it as a means of responding to international issues of public concern: »the terrorist threat« is the reason most often given in France (42 %) and on average in the eight countries in the survey (37 %), »the challenge of climate change« (30 % in France, 34 % in the eight countries overall) and »the threat to health« (26 % in France, 31 % in Europe overall).

For the French, as for Europeans overall, reinforcing European sovereignty would also appear to be a solution to current geopolitical concerns, for example, providing a means of overcoming »their country's lack of clout at international level« (mentioned by 30 % in France, 27 % on European average), or of dealing with »Chinese great-power ambitions« (mentioned by 25 % in France, 20 % on average). Finally, in France more than elsewhere people expect that strengthening European sovereignty would help to deal with »the power ambitions of the digital giants – GAFAM« (mentioned by 19 %, the highest rate among the eight countries under investigation).

Europeans are divided on the reality of European sovereignty, but as a consequence there is consensus on the need to reinforce it, beyond a certain national variation in ranking. But in that case, how can the difficulties be explained? The French identify first and foremost »the weakness of the European institutions (Commission, Parliament)« (mentioned by 23 %, 19 % on average in the eight countries), »pressure from certain foreign countries in whose interest it is that Europe does not become stronger« (mentioned by 21 %, 22 % in Europe overall), as well as »cultural differences between European countries« (16 % / 16 %). The reason mentioned most often by European average – »the fact that some European countries are governed by nationalists« (23 %) – on the other hand, is mentioned less often in France (15 %).

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Hiroshimastraße 28, 10785 Berlin, Germany

Responsible for this publication in the FES:
Catrina Schläger | Head of Department International Policy Analysis

Cover picture: Jan Scheunert | picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com

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