Heiko Giebler

What Citizens Expect from Europe

Evaluation of a Comparative Population Survey in Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden

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About the author

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Shaken by crises and facing significant challenges, the European Union is at a crossroads. The upcoming elections for the European Parliament in 2024 also pose the threat of major successes for authoritarian or, at the very least, Eurosceptic parties, which would have a significant impact on the EU, both internally and externally. Against that background, this study examines the extent to which an alternative vision for Europe exists in six countries and what specifics that vision might entail. For this purpose, potential voters of social democratic and socialist parties belonging to the S&D group in European Parliament were compared to other voters. The focus is on the current potential of progressive voters and not on a comparison with the voter base of previous decades.

Supporters of social democracy have a rather positive attitude towards the EU. If we look at the values that are to be given greater prominence in the future, social justice emerges as an absolutely central aspect alongside the safeguarding of peace and human rights. The voter potential thus emphasises that the task of the EU must not be limited to freedom of movement, free trade and democracy, but should also play more of a social role.

Climate change is an important challenge in all countries at the European level. The fight against climate changes is a major priority for the group examined. The sometimes significant discrepancies with those who are not potential voters of social democratic or socialist parties are indicative of the potential for conflict that the looming climate catastrophe presents. Additionally, the problem emerges in some instances that there is a need for competences in specific policy areas to be transferred to the EU, but the need for such transfers must be better communicated to voters.

As a group, the potential voters can be characterised as having a positive attitude towards migration and a tolerance of minorities.

It can clearly be stated that authoritarian and conservative positions would not find widespread appeal among supporters of social democratic and socialist parties in the six countries surveyed. The attempt to win over new supporters through the adoption of such positions would most likely scare off elements of the current potential.

1

BACKGROUND

German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt once reportedly said: "People with visions should go to the doctor." Schmidt, for his part, never actually denied making the comment. But it was probably just a cantankerous reaction to, from the late former chancellor's perspective, an inappropriate question from a journalist, as he explained in the 4 March 2010 issue of ZEITmagazin, than a general rejection of visions – insofar as they focus specifically on social conditions and relevant developments. And at the moment, Europe and the European Union need precisely that: a vision for the future.

Like every other region of the world, the EU has been hit hard by various crises over the past 15 years. In contrast to other regions, however, this was a new situation for many European countries following decades of positive developments. The economic and financial crises, the euro crisis, high numbers of refugees, Brexit, the rise of populist and radical right-wing parties, autocratic tendencies in member states, above all Hungary and Poland, the COVID-19 pandemic and, finally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine represent multiple and partially overlapping crises that have left no EU country unscathed. This also applies to the transnational institutional structure itself. At the same time, further and ever new challenges are on the horizon. The European Union will have to find answers to climate change, the renewed escalation of the Middle East conflict and a world order that is shifting due to the rise of China. At this point it (for now) seems exaggerated to say that the EU itself is experiencing a crisis. And yet we still need an idea of what a sustainable confederation of states should look like.

This necessity will be further fuelled by the upcoming European Parliament elections in 2024. Although Eurosceptic and, above all, right-wing populist and authoritarian parties have always been more successful in European elections than in national elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Marsh 2007), and whereas the election results for these parties were rather weak in 2019 (De Sio et al. 2019), there is a threat of significant gains in many member states in 2024. Unsurprisingly, such an election success for the right wing would change the European Union, perhaps even permanently – especially in times of crisis and facing major social challenges. This can already be seen at the national levels, where parties of this nature have been successful in recent years or have even become part of the government. Eurosceptic, right-wing populist and authoritarian parties have a clear idea of what Europe should look like. They want to see

the powers of the EU trimmed in favour of the nation-states. They would like the union to look more like an alliance of nations, thus putting the brakes on progressive politics. That, too, is a vision for Europe and the future of the EU.

But what do things look like within other political currents and party families? In this study, we examine the attitudes of voters who support the progressive leftist camp, meaning those who belong to the electoral potential of social democratic or socialist parties. Where do potential voters of these parties stand on Europe and the European Union? Is there a common vision for the future of Europe? One possibility, of course, is that there are no clear patterns either for individual countries or across international borders – that there are multiple and differing social democratic or progressive perceptions. Were that the case, it would be much more difficult to implement the competing visions, since large majorities are required for changes at the EU level.

To answer these questions, a comparative population survey in six countries – Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden – was conducted by YouGov on behalf of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung between 31 August 2023 and 18 September 2023. Some 3,100 eligible voters were surveyed in Germany in addition to just over 2,000 in each of the other five countries. The total of 13,386 respondents were recruited from YouGov's online panels and represent a quota sample. The people surveyed in each country thus correspond as closely as possible to the real population distribution by age, gender, education and region of residence. The YouGov online panels are high-quality panels that are constantly evaluated, carefully curated and continually expanded through targeted recruitment. The result of such a process is nevertheless not a completely random sample but a quota sample that exhibits characteristics that are extremely similar to the population at large. Accordingly, the results collected by the survey are certainly indicative, but they are not fully representative in the statistical sense.[1]

The study of six countries does not, of course, allow for broad statements to be made about the European Union. Nevertheless, the countries included are very different from one another in terms of their history and culture, for exam-

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[1] Further information, including the methodological approach of this study, can be found in the appendix.

ple, but also their role in the EU and Europe. Furthermore, not all countries use the euro as their currency. The European Union's five most populous countries are included, along with Sweden as a Nordic EU member state. With Germany, France, Italy and Spain, the four largest EU economies are represented in the study. Overall, the differences and similarities, as well as the central roles of the countries within the EU, lend the results a certain weight.

We understand the social democratic vision for Europe as typical assessments, perceptions and attitudes held by supporters of social democracy, meaning those members of the electorate who can in principle imagine voting for a social democratic or socialist party. The focus is on parties in each country that belong to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the European Parliament. In some cases, the parties describe themselves as social democratic, in others as socialist or progressive. For this study, we use the terms interchangeably, but are always referring to potential voters of S&D member parties. As such, this study does not focus on milieus or groups that once may have been among the core voters for these parties, but on people of whom that is (currently) still the case. Attempts could be made during an election campaign, of course, to win over or win back people who are not currently among the pool of potential voters. But such a strategy isn't just far more complicated, it also carries with it the danger of losing current supporters.

With the upcoming European elections and the associated election campaign, a better understanding for the existence and content of a relevant vision for Europe could serve as an important resource for parties. In this study, however, we only differentiate between those who belong to the potential of social democratic and socialist parties, and all other people who do not. The non-social democratic potential therefore includes not only supporters of centre-right parties or of right-wing populist and radical-right parties, but potentially also supporters of other party families. An identified and definable vision is therefore actually more of an independent perspective than if one were to compare potential voters of S&D parties only with, for example, followers of right-wing populist parties.

The analyses in this study are divided into five chapters. (Chapter 2) First, we look at the voter potential of social democratic and socialist parties in the individual countries in terms of size, degree of realisation and characteristics. In this way, we gain a better understanding of the potential before moving on to the real question of a social democratic vision for Europe. (Chapter 3) Here we start with a look at general assessments of the European Union and positions on the unification process, before examining (Chapter 4) which descriptions of the EU are chosen most frequently and what citizens think the EU should stand for more strongly in the future. (Chapter 5) The question of the allocation of competences then takes centre stage: To what extent should competences be transferred from the national to the transnational level and how does this fit in with perceived challenges? (Chapter 6) Finally, we turn to the specific political orientation of the European Union. We examine the posi-

tions taken by supporters of the relevant parties on various social issues in order to understand what political content a social democratic, progressive vision might have. At the end, a conclusion summarises the results and classifies them with regard to the central question.

2

THE POTENTIAL CONSTITUENTS OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Before we can address in detail and from different perspectives the question as to what European vision or visions people who tend to support social and progressive democracy have in the six countries studied, it is necessary to not only define this potential, but to also characterise it. How large is the social democratic following in the countries surveyed and how similar are the potentials? An answer to the latter question may be of particular importance: If differences emerge between the perspectives on the European Union in different countries or if differentiated visions emerge, this may not only be due to differences between the country contexts per se, but also due to the composition of relevant potentials in the individual nations.

Research has shown that various socio-demographic factors, but also general orientations and attitudes, can influence preferences (Campbell et al. 1960; Weßels et al. 2014). That would mean that if the potential voters in one country are significantly younger or more educated, for example, or are located further to the left on the political spectrum than in another country, it would be unsurprising if there were corresponding differences with regard to European preferences.

As is common in many studies, the voter potential is measured with the help of the "Propensity-to-Vote" (PTV) survey (van der Eijk et al. 2006). Survey participants were asked to indicate for each relevant party in their country on a scale from 0 (extremely unlikely) to 10 (extremely likely) whether they would ever vote for that party.[2] For this study, respondents are considered to be potential voters of a party if they have provided a value of 6 or higher. As mentioned above, for this study we use the terms "social democratic, progressive or socialist" to define potential voters of those parties that belong to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the European Parliament. These parties all belong to the family of social democratic parties but use different self-designations. To reflect these differences, this study does not exclusively use the scientifically correct term "social democratic party". As a rule, they are centre-left parties that have great programmatic similarities, but also differences in terms of content.
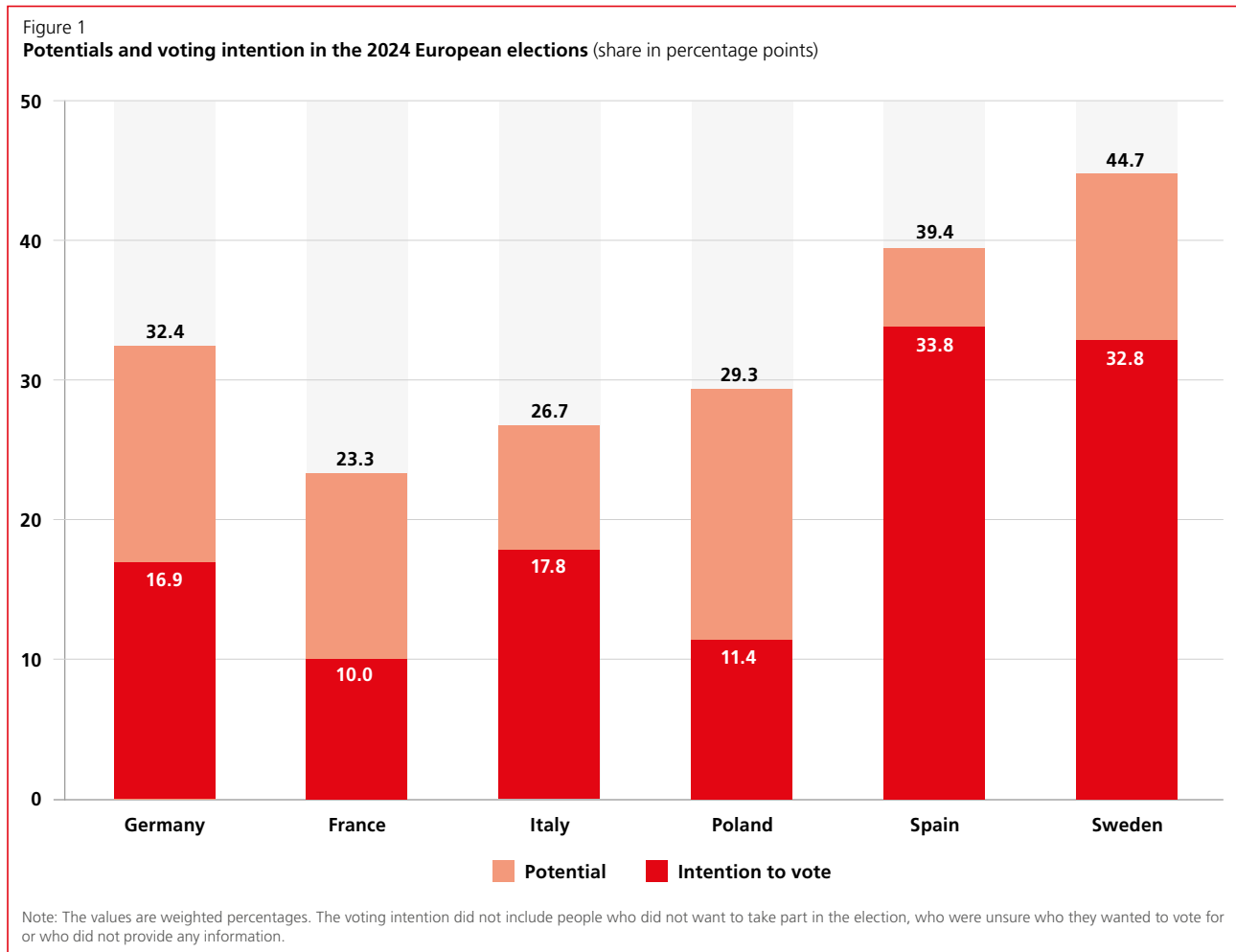
Table 1 shows the parties or party alliances assigned to this party family. PTVs offer the advantage that they make it easier to measure slight differences between parties. That would mean that re-spondents could thus belong to the potential of several parties at the same time, which is a good way to conceptually include the increasing number of

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[2] In France, in some cases not only the parties were surveyed, but also important politicians and candidates in the presidential elections due to the semi-presidential system.

Table 1
Social democratic and socialist parties in the six countries

Country	Party name (abbreviation)
Germany	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD)
France	Parti Socialiste (PS)
Italy	Partito Democratico (PD)
Poland	Nowa Lewica (Wiosna, SLD, Razem)
Spain	Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol (PSOE)
Sweden	Socialdemokraterna (S)

Note: In France and Spain, other smaller or regional parties are generally counted as being part of the social democratic party family. However, these were not polled separately and could therefore not be taken into account. However, it can be assumed that the potential of these parties is also expressed in the potential for the PS and PSOE. Due to France's semi-presidential system, the PS has always been polled together with Anne Hidalgo.

Figure 1

Potentials and voting intention in the 2024 European elections (share in percentage points)

Note: The values are weighted percentages. The voting intention did not include people who did not want to take part in the election, who were unsure who they wanted to vote for or who did not provide any information.

swing voters (Dentler 2023; Dassonneville 2018; Weßels et al. 2014). If, by contrast, only voting intention or the last voting decision were polled, then only the difference between the selected party on the one hand and all other parties on the other would result. When we refer in this study to the social democratic and progressive potential, supporters of social democracy or potential voters for social democratic or socialist par-ties, it doesn't mean that the individuals in question could not also concurrently imagine casting their ballots for another party. The two groups – the potential and the "non-potential" – can only be clearly differentiated through the answer to the question as to whether a social democratic and progressive party is under consideration or not.

In Figure 1, we first take a look at the size of the potential in the six countries (darker bars) based on the survey. To provide better classification, the specifically surveyed voting intentions for the respective parties in the upcoming European elections in 2024 are also shown (lighter bars).

The number of supporters clearly varies considerably between countries. France has the lowest figure, with less than one in four people belonging to the potential of PS. Italy, Poland and Germany follow in the middle, while the potential is significantly greater in Spain, at almost 40 percent, and above all in Sweden. There are even greater differences in voting intention. In Germany, France and Poland, only
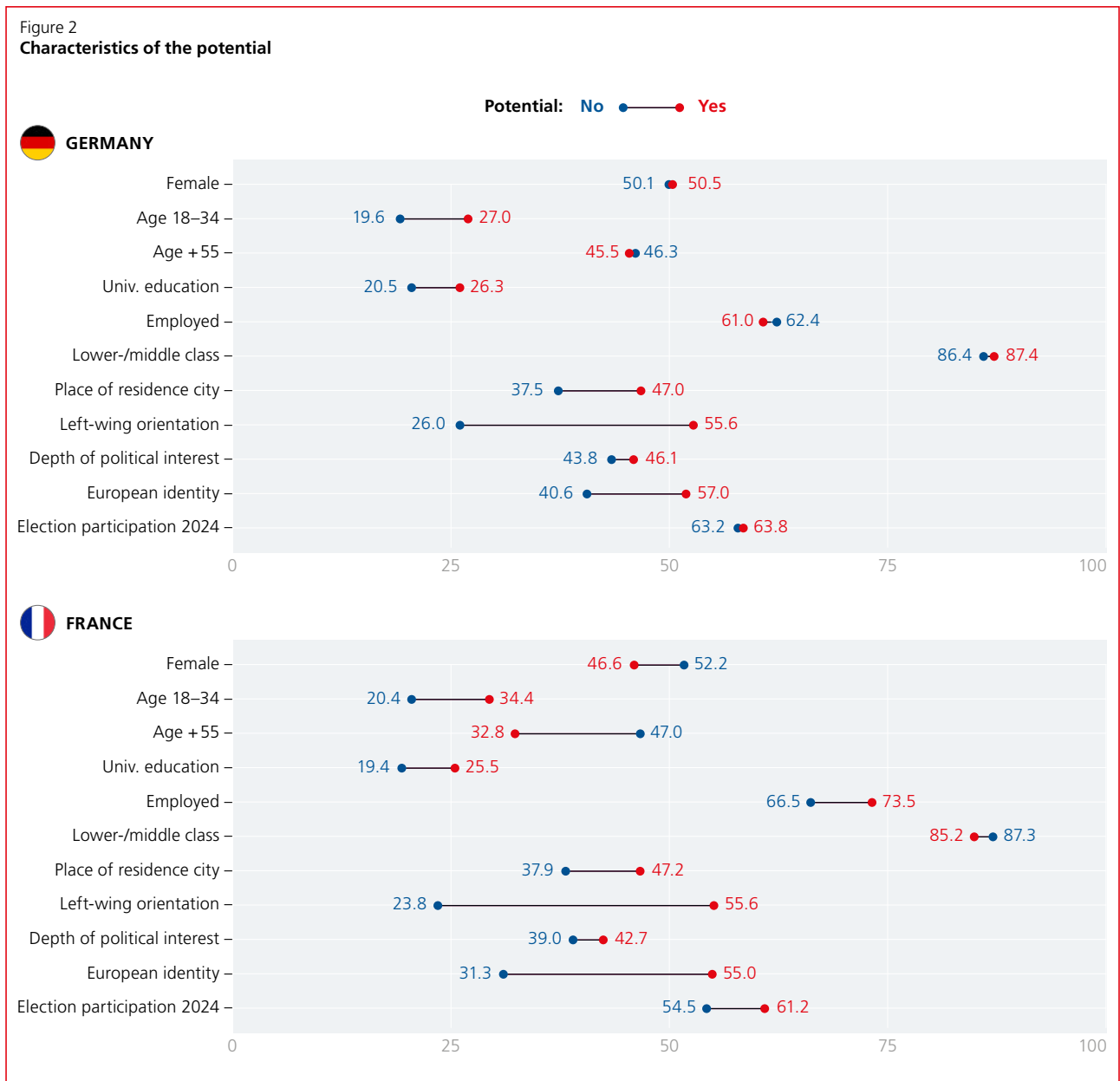
around half or fewer people from the potential actually intended to vote for a relevant party in the 2024 European elections at the time the survey was taken in September 2023. In Italy and again in Spain and Sweden, there is a better realisation of potential, meaning a better conversion into votes. The differences in realisation can primarily result from two factors: First, in countries with a large difference between potential and electoral intention, there are other parties with which social democratic parties share their potential, meaning they are direct competitors. A typical example here is Bündnis90/Die Grünen (the Greens) in Germany (Lichteblau et al. 2020; Lewandowsky and Wagner 2022; Wagner 2017). Respondents can imagine voting for a social democratic party in principle, but ultimately decide to cast their ballots for a different party, for which they also have an affinity. Second, by-elections such as the European elections are characterised by lower levels of voter mobilisation, i.e. voter turnout is (significantly) lower (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Giebler 2014; Franklin 2001). Accordingly, at least part of the difference may be the result from lower mobilisation, which may still increase during the election campaign. Further analysis here, however, would be inconsistent with the goal of this study. Suffice it to say that a social democratic and progressive vision for Europe would have varying levels of support across the national populations and that such a vision could not be realised without political allies, especially in countries with lower share of supporters and lower electoral intention.
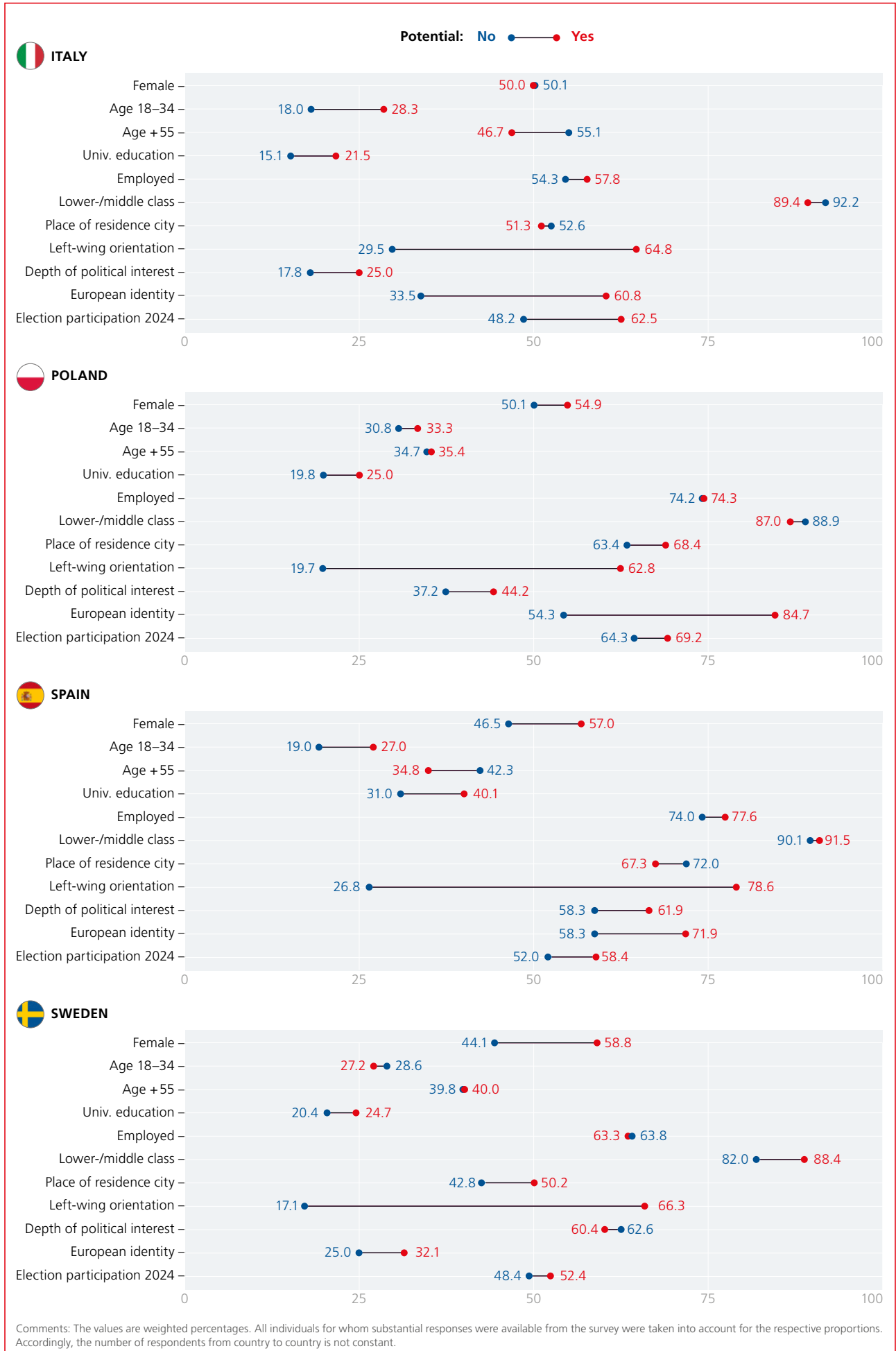
Are there equally large differences when it comes to the characterisation of the country-specific potential? Figure 2 presents the distribution of certain characteristics for those who are supporters of social democracy in the countries surveyed, and those who are not.[3] This approach allows for a comparison not only of potential voters with other individuals within the same country, but it also facilitates a cross-country analysis of the potentials. The red dots and numbers indicate the values for the social democratic potential. The following example illustrates how to read the graphic: For Germany, the gender distribution results in a value of 50.5 for the social democratic potential. This means that 50.5 percent of people who belong to the potential of the SPD identify as female. Outside of the potential, however, the figure is 50.1 percent.[4]

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3   The characteristics were recoded for a simplified presentation. Information on this method can be found in the appendix (Section A2).
4   As such, it is always a question of the shares within the groups and not about the distribution of a characteristic between the groups.

In Poland, Spain and Sweden, the share of *women* in the potential is significantly higher than in the comparison group. There is almost no difference for Germany, while the proportion of men is higher in France and Italy. The proportion of younger people (*18-34 years*), by contrast, is higher among social democratic supporters in all countries except Sweden. The picture is less clear for older people (*+55 years*); this group's share is higher in France, Italy and Spain, for example, but not in the other countries. No clear pattern emerges for the question of *occupation* either, but here the differences within and outside the potential are mostly marginal anyway. This also applies to self-classification in social *classes*. In all countries, however, it is evident that respondents with an *academic degree* are more prevalent (in some cases, significantly so) in the potential than they are outside the potential. The last socio-demographic characteristic we examine is the living environment. With the exception of Italy and Spain, the share supporters of social democratic and socialist parties living in an *urban environment* is slightly higher.

Figure 2
Characteristics of the potential

Potential: No ●——● Yes

🇮🇹 ITALY

	No	Yes
Female	50.0	50.1
Age 18–34	18.0	28.3
Age +55	55.1	46.7
Univ. education	15.1	21.5
Employed	54.3	57.8
Lower-/middle class	92.2	89.4
Place of residence city	52.6	51.3
Left-wing orientation	29.5	64.8
Depth of political interest	17.8	25.0
European identity	33.5	60.8
Election participation 2024	48.2	62.5

🇵🇱 POLAND

	No	Yes
Female	50.1	54.9
Age 18–34	30.8	33.3
Age +55	34.7	35.4
Univ. education	19.8	25.0
Employed	74.3	74.2
Lower-/middle class	88.9	87.0
Place of residence city	63.4	68.4
Left-wing orientation	19.7	62.8
Depth of political interest	37.2	44.2
European identity	54.3	84.7
Election participation 2024	64.3	69.2

🇪🇸 SPAIN

	No	Yes
Female	46.5	57.0
Age 18–34	19.0	27.0
Age +55	42.3	34.8
Univ. education	31.0	40.1
Employed	74.0	77.6
Lower-/middle class	90.1	91.5
Place of residence city	72.0	67.3
Left-wing orientation	26.8	78.6
Depth of political interest	58.3	61.9
European identity	58.3	71.9
Election participation 2024	52.0	58.4

🇸🇪 SWEDEN

	No	Yes
Female	44.1	58.8
Age 18–34	28.6	27.2
Age +55	39.8	40.0
Univ. education	20.4	24.7
Employed	63.3	63.8
Lower-/middle class	82.0	88.4
Place of residence city	42.8	50.2
Left-wing orientation	17.1	66.3
Depth of political interest	62.6	60.4
European identity	25.0	32.1
Election participation 2024	48.4	52.4

Comments: The values are weighted percentages. All individuals for whom substantial responses were available from the survey were taken into account for the respective proportions. Accordingly, the number of respondents from country to country is not constant.

The patterns are much clearer for characteristics relating to general orientations or political aspects. Not surprisingly, the proportion of people who classify themselves as being politically *left* is much higher in the social democratic potential than outside of it. An identical result is also obtained for the question as to whether respondents report having a *European identity* that is at least as relevant as their national identity. With the exception of Sweden, this also applies to high *political interest*, although the differences are significantly smaller. Finally, we also see that the intention to *participate in the 2024 European elections* is also substantially higher within the supporters in all six countries.

Across all countries, potential voters of the parties examined can be described as having a greater share of the university educated and with a higher proportion of younger people compared to those who do not belong to the group of potential voters. In addition, the potential is located much further to the left politically, has a higher level of political interest, is more likely to (also) have a European identity and is more likely to be planning to take part in the 2024 European elections. There is no clear picture for many other characteristics and no clear country patterns emerge. This also applies to the extent to which various characteristics are pronounced within the potential of individual countries. Since the connection between general orientations and specific attitudes and preferences is generally more pronounced than the connection between socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes and preferences (Weßels et al. 2014), it can certainly be expected that there are substantial overlaps with regard to visions for Europe within the social democratic and socialist potentials in the different countries. At the same time, differences to people who are not among potential voters of the parties are also to be expected, as the two groups sometimes differ significantly in terms of certain characteristics.

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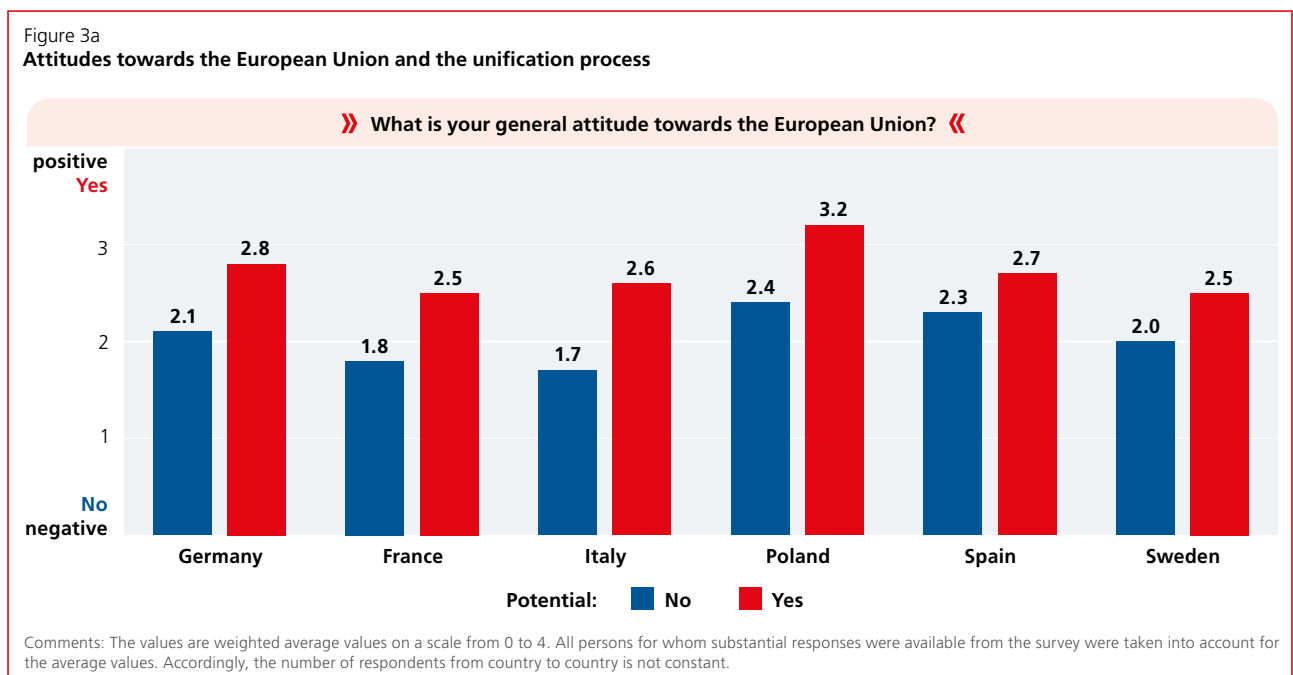# EVALUATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND GREATER UNIFICATION

Generally speaking, how do supporters of progressive, social democratic parties feel about the European Union? Even if the focus is more on future prospects, a lot can be gleaned from a generally positive or negative attitude. If the current European Union is viewed rather positively, this simply means that the transnational project is not only going in the right direction, but also that the project enjoys a certain amount of support. This kind of generalised support and the resulting trust is vital for the continued existence of political systems (Easton 1975).

In the left part of the graph (Figure 3), we present the general attitude towards the EU. The picture is very clear: In all six countries, the relevant potential has a much more positive attitude towards the EU than others. Poland has the highest ratings overall, but there are no other relevant differences between the countries. At the same time, it is striking that respondents from France, Italy and Sweden who do not belong to the potential tend to have a more negative image of the European Union, as values are below the scale midpoint of 2. For France and Italy, in particular, countries where the group of potential voters is smaller anyway, this points to a substantial group of EU sceptics.
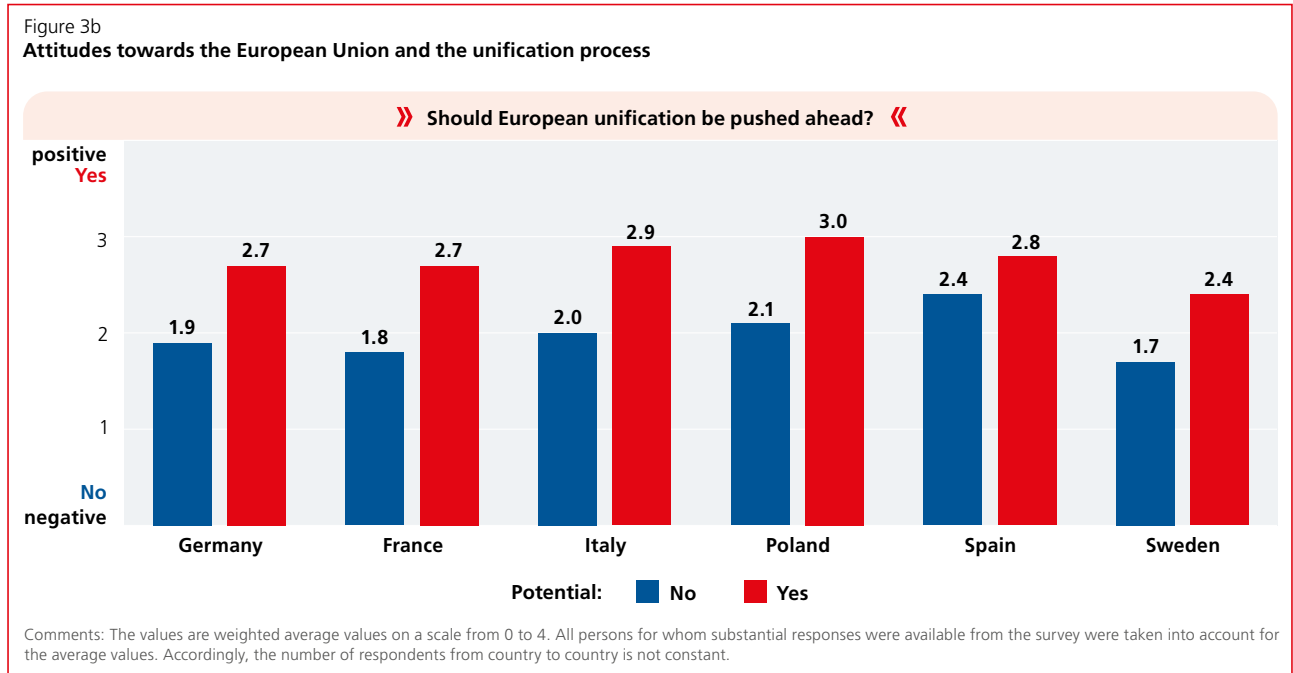
For the "Europe" project, the question of the extent of unification, meaning the degree of integration and harmonisation, is of course a very important one. Deeper unification is generally supported by the potential (right-hand side of Figure 3), although somewhat less strongly in Sweden. Particularly there, but also in the other countries, the blue bars are significantly lower. In Germany, France, Italy and Sweden, these values are below 2, translating to a tendency outside the potential to believe that the unification process has already gone too far. These countries thus appear to be home to significantly different visions for the future of Europe between potential voters for social democracy and others, and as such they harbour the possibility of political conflict within their populations – but also, of course, between the parties representing the different groups.

Finally, Figure 4 shows that there is a correlation between the general assessment of the European Union and the desire for greater unification. A distinction is also made between social democratic potential and non-social democratic potential.[5]

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[5] Further information can be found in the appendix (section A2). There are two regression analyses, one for each of the two groups.

Figure 3a
Attitudes towards the European Union and the unification process

» What is your general attitude towards the European Union? «

Comments: The values are weighted average values on a scale from 0 to 4. All persons for whom substantial responses were available from the survey were taken into account for the average values. Accordingly, the number of respondents from country to country is not constant.

Figure 3b
Attitudes towards the European Union and the unification process

» **Should European unification be pushed ahead?** «

positive
Yes

	Germany	France	Italy	Poland	Spain	Sweden
No	1.9	1.8	2.0	2.1	2.4	1.7
Yes	2.7	2.7	2.9	3.0	2.8	2.4

No
negative

Potential: ■ No   ■ Yes

Comments: The values are weighted average values on a scale from 0 to 4. All persons for whom substantial responses were available from the survey were taken into account for the average values. Accordingly, the number of respondents from country to country is not constant.

Figure 4
Link between general assessment and EU unification

Should European unification be pushed ahead?

Yes

» **What is your general attitude towards the European Union?** «

positive ... negative

Potential: —— No   —— Yes

Note: Shown here are predicted values calculated on the basis of weighted regression analyses.

Because the results for the six countries differ only slightly, only the general correlation across all countries is presented. There is a strong, positive correlation for both groups. The more positive people are about the EU, the more they are in favour of further unification. Irrespective of their affiliation to the potential, strong support for the EU project is therefore linked to the desire for progressive unification. A comparison of the two lines shows that the slope of the red line (social democratic potential) is less steep. This means that potential voters for social democratic and socialist parties, even if they are somewhat less positive about the European Union, are nevertheless more in favour of expansion than is the case for comparison groups. It is only with a value of three or more that this difference to people who do not belong to the potential disappears.

To a certain extent, this chapter also reflects the result from above; supporters of the parties in question are more likely to have a European identity and tend to have higher levels of education. These are characteristics that are often associated with a more positive assessment of the European Union and support for further unification. Potential voters for progressive, social democratic parties have a more positive attitude towards the EU and also tend to support deeper European unification. Voices critical of the EU and parties with corresponding positions not only exist in all six countries, but they also represent substantial sections of the population almost everywhere. This is certainly one reason for the relatively low values found outside the potential.

4

WHAT IS THE EU, AND WHAT SHOULD IT STAND FOR?

The European Union and its predecessor organisations were initially faced with the task of enabling economic cooperation after two world wars – with one primary intention that of securing peace (Möhle 2020). Over the decades, spurred by the collapse of the Soviet Union and, more pressingly, the enlargements undertaken in the 1990s and 2000s, not only have many reforms been implemented – freedom of movement, the abolition of border controls and the introduction of a common currency in many member states, to name but a few – but the nature of the EU and its potential additional responsibilities have also been discussed. These debates have covered many areas, including a common foreign and security policy, the internal and external promotion of democracy and common standards for working conditions.

In the survey, respondents were presented with a list of 10 descriptions of the EU and asked to pick the one that best described the EU from their point of view.[6] Table 2 lists the three descriptions most frequently selected by the group of potential voters for social democratic and socialist parties for each country, including the percentage share. For comparison, the table also shows how often the description was selected by respondents who do not belong to the potential voters.

Three fundamental things immediately stand out: First, the differences between the countries are small, as evidenced by the fact that only five descriptions were chosen by respondents as the most "accurate". Within the social democratic potential, the descriptions selected by respondents included freedom of movement and, in four out of six countries, the description of an alliance of countries with common democratic and political principles or as a free trade area. In France and Sweden, the view that the EU is an alliance to secure peace is also very popular; while in Italy and Poland, many are of the opinion that it is above all an alliance for shaping the future together.

Second, differences in the shares for people who cannot imagine voting for social democratic and socialist parties are also often small. This applies particularly to France, Spain and Sweden. However, it is noteworthy that the description

of the EU as an alliance of countries with common democratic and political principles is often seen as less accurate by the non-social democratic potential. Poland deserves special mention here.

Third, there are five descriptions that do not make an appearance in the top three places among supporters of the examined parties in any country. Descriptions of the EU as a monetary alliance with a common central bank, an alliance of shared cultural values, a defence alliance, an alliance of expedience for national interests or an alliance for social security seem less appropriate for this group in all six countries. Further analyses not presented here show that these descriptions also play a lesser role for respondents who do not belong to the potential. The exception is the description of the EU as a monetary alliance with a common central bank: In France, Italy and Poland, this is one of the three most common descriptions among people who are not sympathisers of social democracy.

The aforementioned exceptions aside, the best description of the EU does not seem to depend strongly on whether or not one belongs to the potential. However, the fact that the EU is less frequently described by the comparison group as an alliance with common political and democratic principles is striking. This could also be an expression of lower satisfaction with the European Union as a political system. However, it is also important to note that many descriptions are relevant to all citizens across all countries or within a country. The frequently chosen descriptions are appropriate if one considers the actual character of the European Union. An effective defence alliance is (still) a long way off, Europe-wide social security and social policy are, with a few exceptions, still relatively weak, and the EU has always attached great importance to the recognition of different cultural values. The euro is also a currency that has only been introduced in some of the member countries. At the same time, the EU is strongly characterised by freedom of movement, the common economic area and the attempt to implement common democratic and political principles – and is also perceived and described accordingly by citizens. This expression of realism should be viewed positively.

The description of the European Union provides an excellent starting point for the question as to what the EU, given the different values, should actually stand for. In terms of the

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6 In a first step, up to three descriptions could be selected, from which the most suitable description was then chosen by the respondents in a second step.

Table 2
**What best describes the EU?**

	Potential	
	Yes	**No**
🇩🇪 **GERMANY**		
A union of countries with open borders where people can travel, live and work freely	21.3	21.9
An alliance of countries with common democratic and political principles	15.6	9.7
An economic alliance in which countries can trade freely with each other without customs duties	13.5	20.1
🇫🇷 **FRANCE**		
An economic alliance in which countries can trade freely with each other without customs duties	16.8	14.5
An alliance for ensuring peace in Europe	16.5	16.8
A union of countries with open borders where people can travel, live and work freely	14.4	16.2
🇮🇹 **ITALY**		
A union of countries with open borders where people can travel, live and work freely	16.5	18.2
An alliance of countries with common democratic and political principles	15.3	10.4
An alliance that invests in a shared future and shapes it together	13.9	8.0
🇵🇱 **POLAND**		
A union of countries with open borders where people can travel, live and work freely	28.5	30.2
An alliance of countries with common democratic and political principles	18.4	8.0
An alliance that invests in a shared future and shapes it together	13.1	8.8
🇪🇸 **SPAIN**		
A union of countries with open borders where people can travel, live and work freely	23.9	22.9
An alliance of countries with common democratic and political principles	13.6	11.7
An economic alliance in which countries can trade freely with each other without customs duties	13.0	13.0
🇸🇪 **SWEDEN**		
An economic alliance in which countries can trade freely with each other without customs duties	23.7	23.7
A union of countries with open borders where people can travel, live and work freely	20.1	22.6
An alliance for ensuring peace in Europe	16.0	13.8

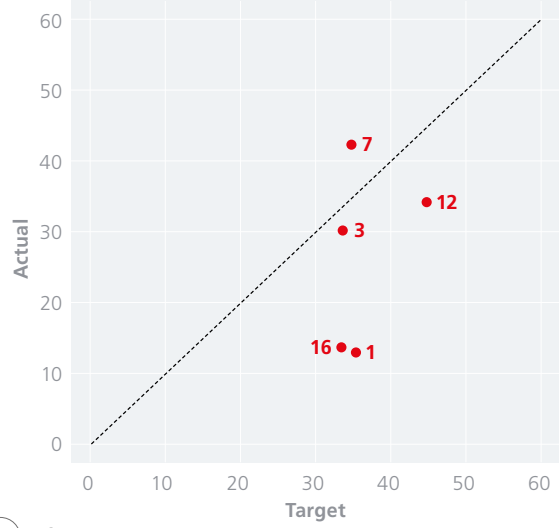Note: The values are weighted percentages.

Figure 5
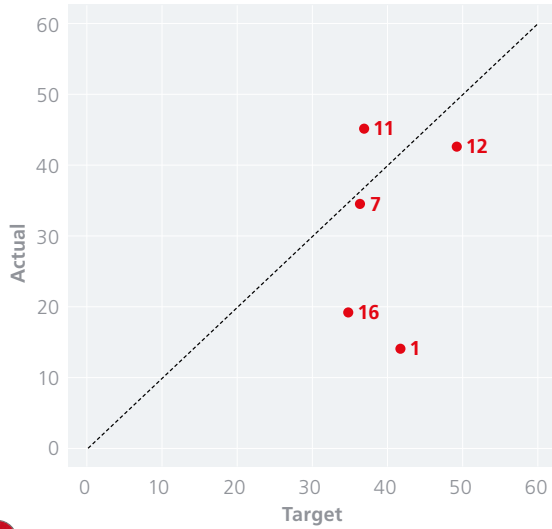**Which values would you personally like to see realised to a greater degree in the EU?**
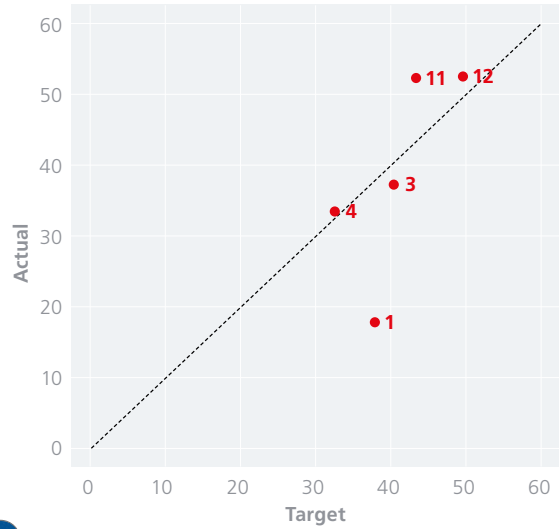

GERMANY
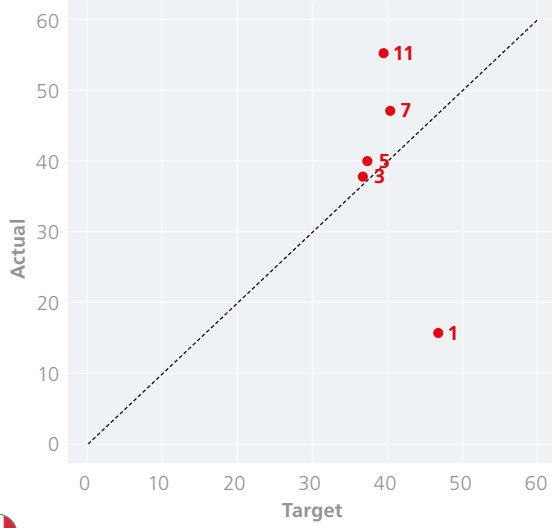
FRANCE

ITALY

POLAND
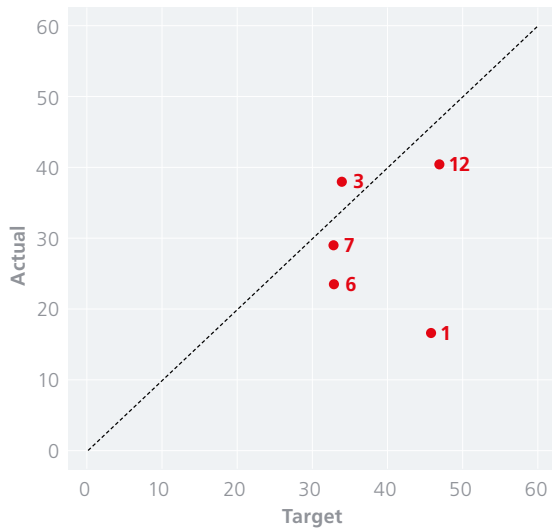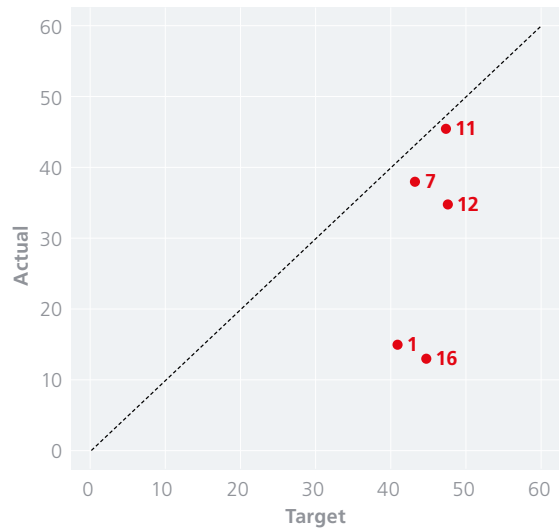
SPAIN

SWEDEN

1 Social justice	**4** Freedom	**7** Peace	**10** Protection	**13** Tradition	**16** Sustainability
2 Respect	**5** Cohesion	**8** Progress	**11** Democracy	**14** Innovation	
3 Security	**6** Prosperity	**9** Change	**12** Human rights	**15** Strength	

The values are weighted percentages.

search for a progressive, social democratic vision, this is not about describing present realities, but about looking to the future. Specifically, survey participants were asked which fundamental values they believe should be more strongly established in the EU. Up to five options could be selected from a list of 16 values. An identical list was also used to ask which values the EU currently represents. Here, too, it was possible to select up to five options.

We combine both sets of information and can thus make statements about which values should be more strongly established and at the same time examine the extent to which these values currently have already been established in the eyes of the population.[7] To this end, Figure 5 presents the five most frequently selected options by each country's social democratic potential as values that should be more strongly established (TARGET). The other axis shows the corresponding figures for the current situation (ACTUAL). If the plot points lie above the dashed line, the value is established to a greater extent than demanded, meaning that the EU is already on the right track here. If a point lies below the straight line, there is a deficit between the actual and the target status. A social democratic vision for Europe would certainly (have to) include overcoming these deficits. For clarity, we focus here only on supporters of social democratic and socialist parties.

As with the descriptions of the EU, there are also relevant overlaps here between the potentials of the parties examined. In fact, "social justice" (1) is one of the most important values identified for the future in all countries surveyed. Furthermore, this value is also less pronounced in all countries than it should be from the point of view of the social democratic potential. This is not surprising, as social justice is at the core of social democracy. How strongly this is emphasised in the countries and how large the perceived deficit is, however, is an important finding. In a relevant vision, Europe must be far more strongly oriented towards social justice than is currently the case. Though it also seems to be extremely interesting that those who are not supporters of social democracy also frequently choose "social justice" as a value they desire (not depicted). As such, for the parties interested in widening their base, it could make sense to focus more strongly on this issue.

In five of the countries, "peace" (7) and "human rights" (12) are among the most important values that the EU should stand for. "Peace" is not mentioned as often in Poland, while "human rights" play a lesser role than other values in Germany. In most cases, the target and actual figures match relatively well. Four countries each have "security" (3; Italy and Sweden are the exceptions) and "democracy" (11; France and Spain are the exceptions). Here, too, there are only minor deficits, if any. It is interesting to note that in three countries – France, Italy and Sweden – "sustainability" (16) was mentioned very frequently and there are also major differences between the target and actual states in these countries. Only in Germany does "cohesion" (5) appear

among the most frequent mentions, while respondents in Poland were the only ones to point to "freedom" (4) and in Spain, "prosperity" (6).

Despite certain national differences, potential voters of social democratic and socialist parties believe the European Union should primarily stand more strongly for social justice, peace and human rights, but also for security and democracy – a good reflection of the ideals of a social understanding of democracy. "Sustainability" is among the top five values in three countries, though at least a quarter of supporters of social democracy in each of the other three countries also selects this value (not shown). With the increasing threat of climate change and the foreseeable suspension of the use of certain raw materials, it can be assumed that sustainability will become increasingly relevant and that social democracy will have to develop and integrate a more robust ecological component into their platform. This applies not only at the national level, but above all in the context of the European Union. Within the potential, however, traditional, leftist values continue to be of great importance for the future of the EU, making for a good fit across national borders.

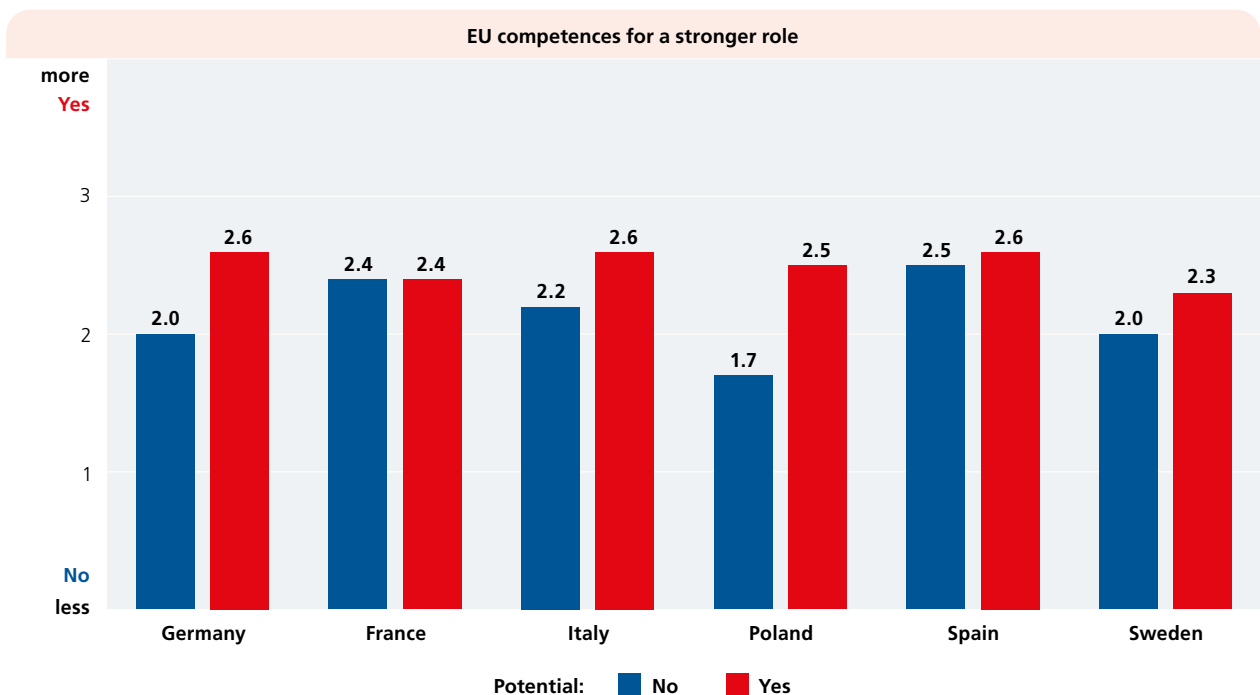**7** A complete list of the 16 values can be found in Figure 5.

5

COMPETENCES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

In addition to the question as to whether unification – more as an abstract concept – should be driven forward, a frequent point of contention is which political competences should be located at the European level and which at the national level (Möhle 2020). The question as to which competences should be assigned or transferred to the EU is, of course, crucial for the future role of Europe and also for the implementation of visions. Without the appropriate decision-making powers, it would be impossible to implement changes throughout the EU. At the same time, national sovereignty is not just an asset in theory, but also in practice. While this view is more prevalent among supporters of and parties in the conservative and right-wing political camp, it is not exclusive to them. From a social democratic perspective, it can also be important to make independent decisions – to defend standards of the welfare state, for example, if they were no longer to have support at the European level.

In the context of various crises over the past 15 years, but also due to changes in trans-Atlantic relations – particularly due to the presidency of Donald Trump and the rise of China as a major power – it can be argued that Europe must act more strongly as a united entity and that more competences must be transferred from the national to the international level to achieve that unity. To address this, survey participants were asked to provide their views on the issue. Specifically, the question focused on more or fewer competences for the EU to enable Europe to assert itself in dealing with the U.S. and China.

As mentioned above with regard to the general attitude towards the European Union and the progress of the unification process, the potential in all six countries surveyed affirms a pro-EU position in Figure 6. However, in all countries except Poland, and to a lesser extent in Germany, the differences between the groups are smaller. Indeed, those who

Figure 6
General shifts in competence

EU competences for a stronger role

	Germany	France	Italy	Poland	Spain	Sweden
No	2.0	2.4	2.2	1.7	2.5	2.0
Yes	2.6	2.4	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.3

Potential: ■ No ■ Yes

Note: The values are weighted average values on a scale from 0 to 4.

do not support social democracy only show an average be-low the mean value of 2 in Poland and, marginally so, in Sweden. This is astonishing given that, as mentioned, the is-sue of national sovereignty is an extremely sensitive one, es-pecially for right-of-centre actors. The specific reason given for shifting competences to the transnational level may play a role here, as the U.S. is more often seen as an increasing-ly unreliable partner and China as a threat to the EU's pros-perity and influence.

Given the small differences in several countries, it makes sense to look at specific policy areas to contextualise the broad support for a shift in competences as an instrument that could be used against other major powers. We used perceived challenges for the analysis. This contextualisation, however, can only be made with the proviso that no reasons were given in the questionnaire for individual policy areas; competition with the U.S. and China was not mentioned. A total of 18 policy areas[8] were surveyed in the study. Re-spondents were asked to indicate whether the EU or each country on its own should be responsible for decisions in these areas. It is beyond the scope of this subchapter to ex-amine six countries and the 18 different subjects for each. Figure 7 is therefore limited to the three areas per country that citizens within the potential named as the most impor-tant challenges.[9] In the figure, the policy areas for each country have been arranged from left to right according to their perceived importance. For the sake of comparison, val-ues are also shown for those who are not among the sup-porters of social democracy. These are average values; the higher the value, the greater is the support for that compe-tence to be handled by the EU.

Three aspects are immediately apparent when looking at the figure. First, those who could imagine voting for a social democratic or socialist party are consistently more support-ive of shifting competences to the transnational level than are members of the comparison group. Second, it is easy to see that policy areas are often identified as the greatest challenges and should be dealt with and decided on at the national level rather than by the EU. Many of the averages – for both groups – are well below a value of 2, which would correspond to an even distribution of responsibilities. How-ever, it is conspicuous that this applies above all also to pol-icy areas that are typically (still) regulated nationally – such as "healthcare" or "work and employment", but also "pros-perity and costs". It can thus not be definitively concluded that this is an explicit statement against decision-making

powers at the European level, but rather that policy areas currently perceived as major challenges are more likely to be "national". The area of "climate change", a challenge that, by contrast, cannot be tackled in a meaningful way at the national level, is viewed much more strongly as a "Europe-an" issue. In addition, survey participants were only able to select up to three policy areas as challenges. Had they been allowed to select more, the resulting picture may have been different. So, we should not assume that more transnation-al policy areas are not at all perceived as real challenges, but only that they rarely end up among the top three challeng-es. Third, there are again overlaps among supporters of the parties examined, but to a lesser extent than was the case in previous sub-chapters. In all countries, "climate change" is among the top three challenges, while "healthcare" is among the top three challenges in all countries except Ger-many and Sweden. Overall, however, the perspectives on challenges appear to be significantly more country specific.

Is it at least the case that policy areas seen as challenges at the European level go hand in hand with the opinion of citi-zens that these areas should also be handled and decided to a greater degree by the EU? Figure 8 shows that this is not always the case and that there are also relevant differences between the countries. The figure only shows the social democratic potential and the frequency with which a policy area was selected as a challenge at the European level (y-axis). The x-axis shows the applicable decision-making au-thority between the national and the European level. Higher values mean that competences for addressing the challenge should more strongly lie at the European level. Thus, if plot point is towards the top right, the corresponding policy area is viewed as a major challenge at the EU level and, from the point of view of supporters of social democracy, the deci-sion-making competence should lie more at the transnation-al level. Ideally, we would expect a positive correlation; if problems are not selected for the European level by survey participants, the competence for addressing those problems should also not be located at the European level. If, howev-er, the problem is seen as a European challenge, then people should want to see the EU to have more competences to meet that challenge. In this case, the plot point would lie at the top left of the graphic. The dashed line shows the statis-tical relationship between the two variables.
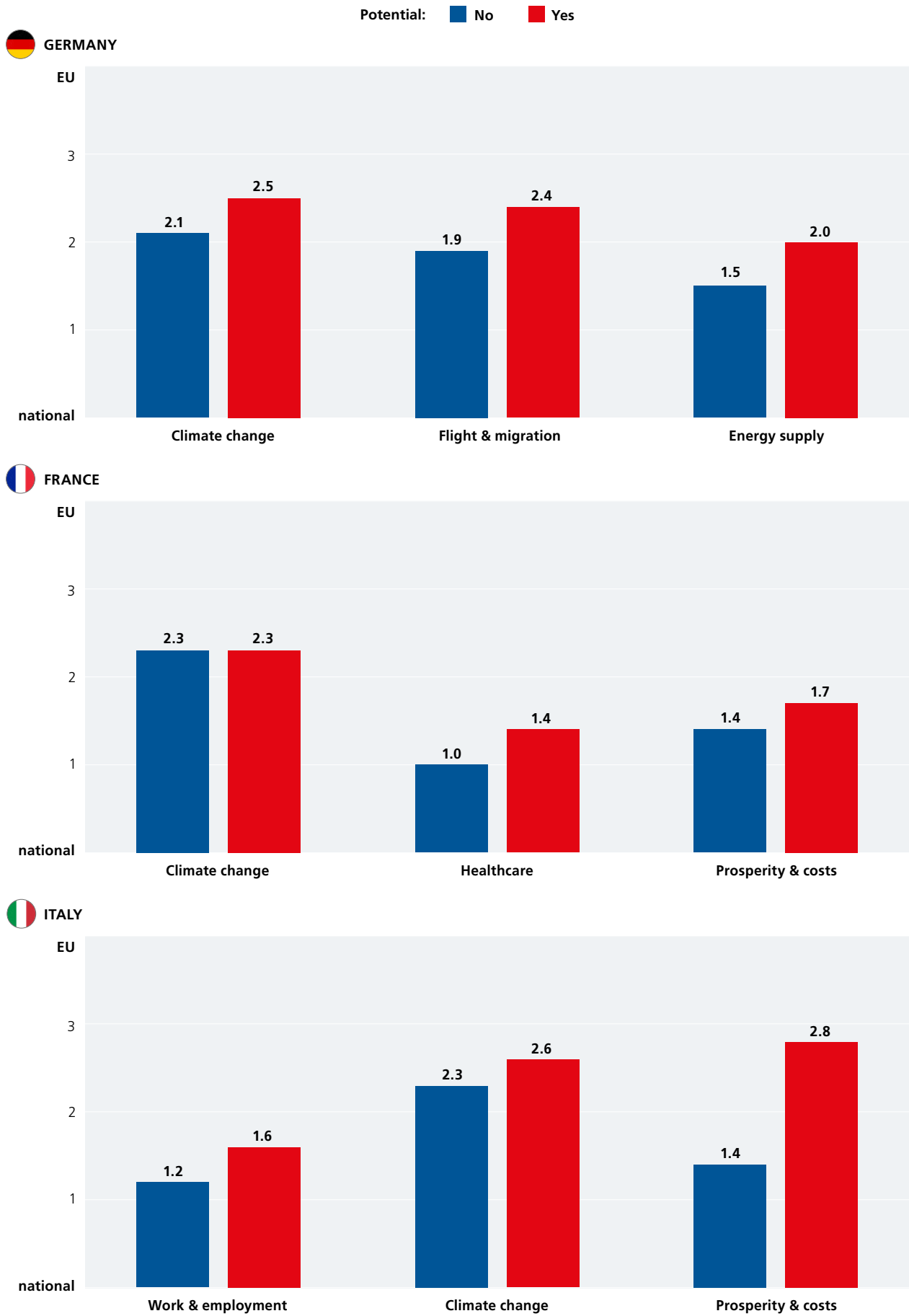
A distinct correlation between the frequency with which a policy area was selected as a challenge and more deci-sion-making powers at the European level did not emerge for all countries. Especially in Spain, but also in France, the expected correlation did not appear. In Sweden and Po-land, by contrast, the correlation is extremely strong. But in all countries, there are plot points whereby frequent selec-tion was not necessarily matched by clear support for mov-ing competences to the EU level. The reverse is also true, with clear support for the EU to receive competences to meet challenges that are not frequently placed at the Euro-pean level.

For the corresponding values of people who do not belong to the potential, there are similar patterns, but the correla-tions tend to be weaker (see appendix). Irrespective of their

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[8] The following 18 policy areas were surveyed: Climate change, protec-tion against crime and terror, security and defence policy, flight and migration, pensions and old-age provision, work and employment, healthcare, education and research, prosperity, cost of living and eco-nomic growth, right-wing populism, fake news and social polarisa-tion, digitalisation and artificial intelligence, future investments, taxes and wealth distribution, transport and mobility, housing and rent, en-ergy supply, foreign and trade policy, equal rights and the protection of minorities.

[9] This importance was determined for both the national and the Euro-pean context, whereby respondents could select up to three policy ar-eas for both levels. For Figure 7, importance was determined in such a way that it results from being mentioned as an important challenge at the national or European level.

Figure 7
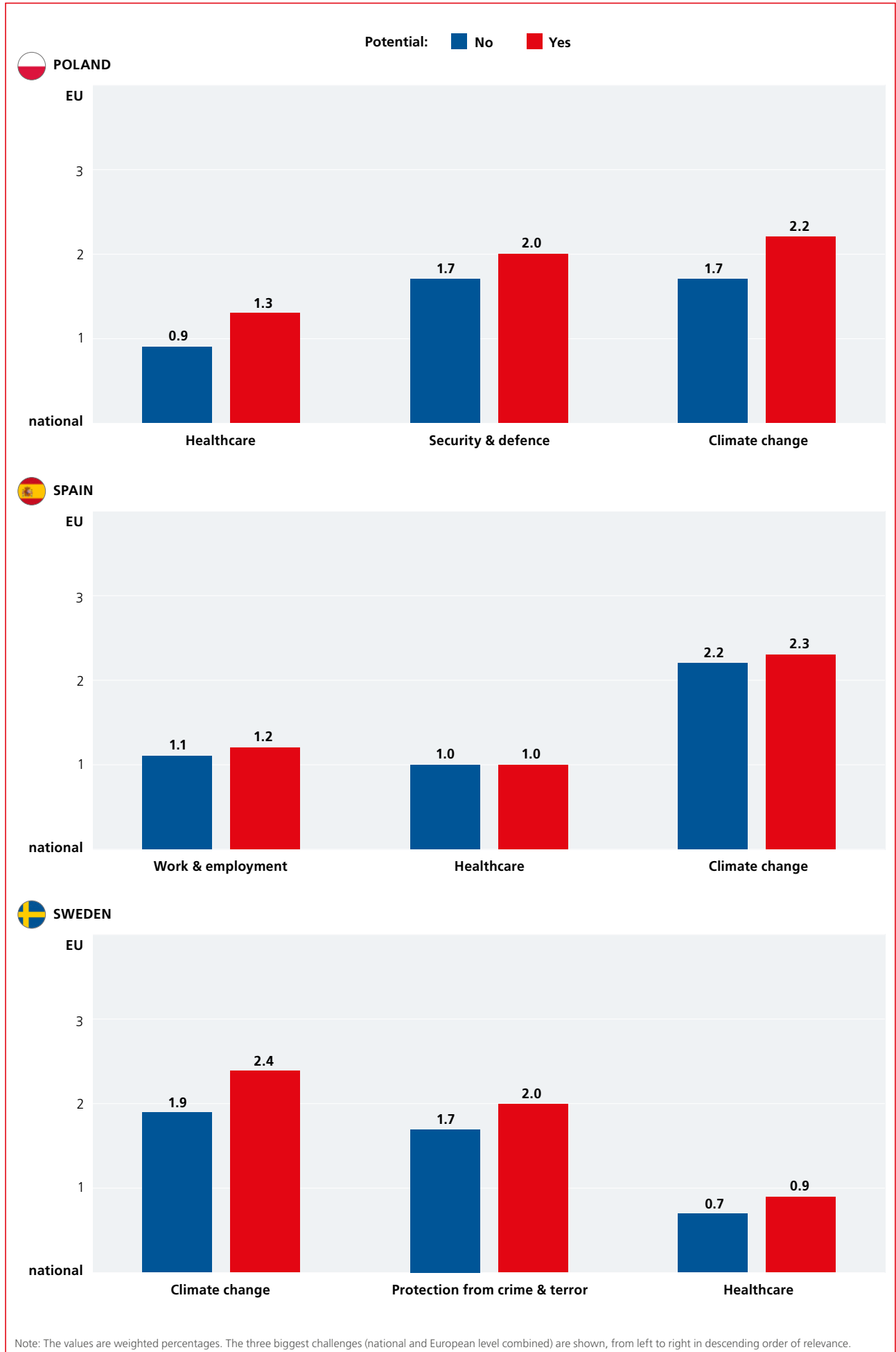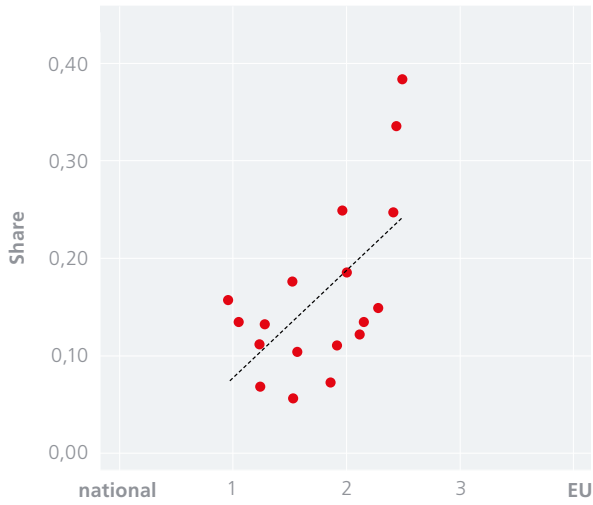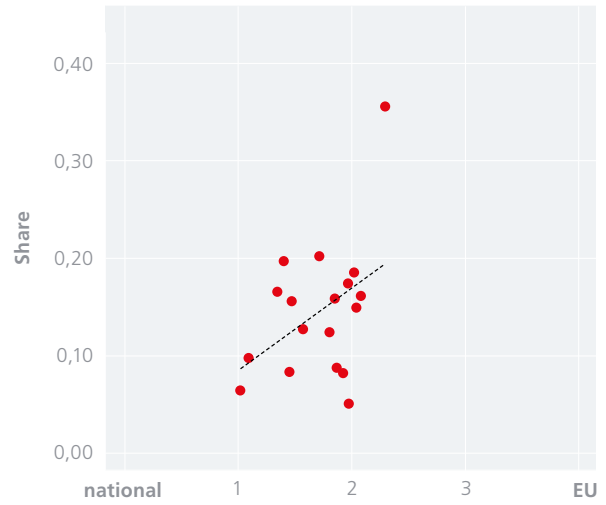**Key challenges and decision-making competences**

Potential: ■ No ■ Yes

GERMANY

	Climate change	Flight & migration	Energy supply
No	2.1	1.9	1.5
Yes	2.5	2.4	2.0

FRANCE

	Climate change	Healthcare	Prosperity & costs
No	2.3	1.0	1.4
Yes	2.3	1.4	1.7

ITALY

	Work & employment	Climate change	Prosperity & costs
No	1.2	2.3	1.4
Yes	1.6	2.6	2.8

Potential: ◼ No ◼ Yes

POLAND

EU

3

2

	Healthcare	Security & defence	Climate change
No	0.9	1.7	1.7
Yes	1.3	2.0	2.2

national

Healthcare | **Security & defence** | **Climate change**

SPAIN

EU

3

2

	Work & employment	Healthcare	Climate change
No	1.1	1.0	2.2
Yes	1.2	1.0	2.3

national

Work & employment | **Healthcare** | **Climate change**

SWEDEN

EU

3

2

	Climate change	Protection from crime & terror	Healthcare
No	1.9	1.7	0.7
Yes	2.4	2.0	0.9

national

Climate change | **Protection from crime & terror** | **Healthcare**

Note: The values are weighted percentages. The three biggest challenges (national and European level combined) are shown, from left to right in descending order of relevance.

Figure 8
Challenges at the European level and decision-making powers
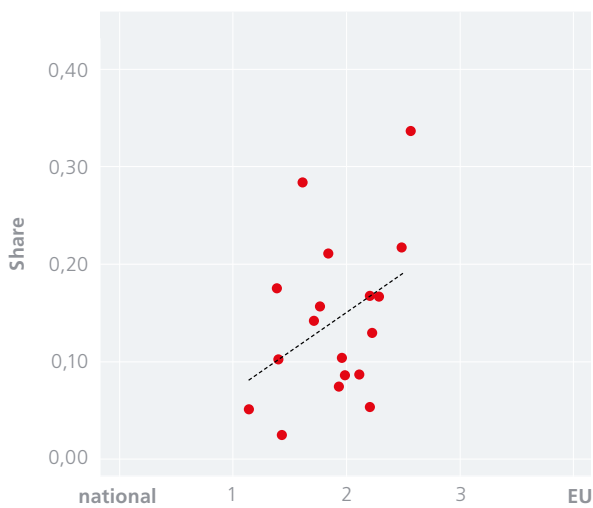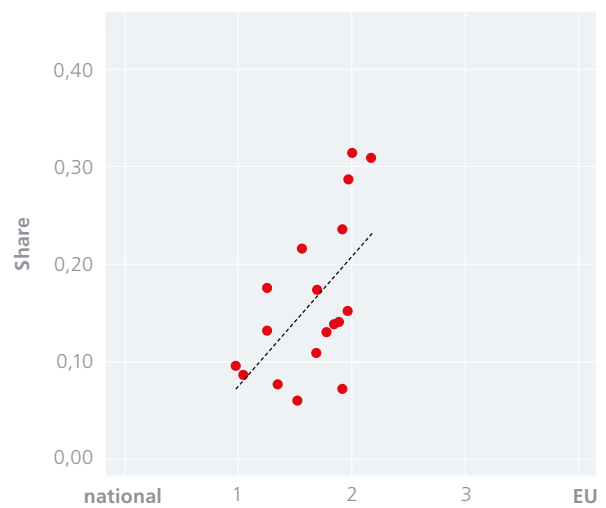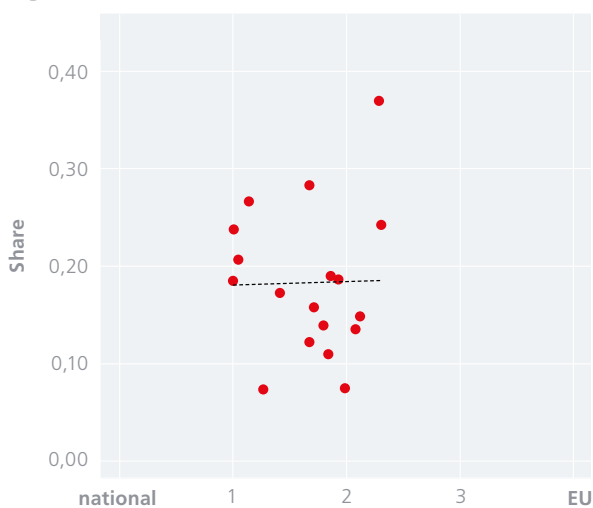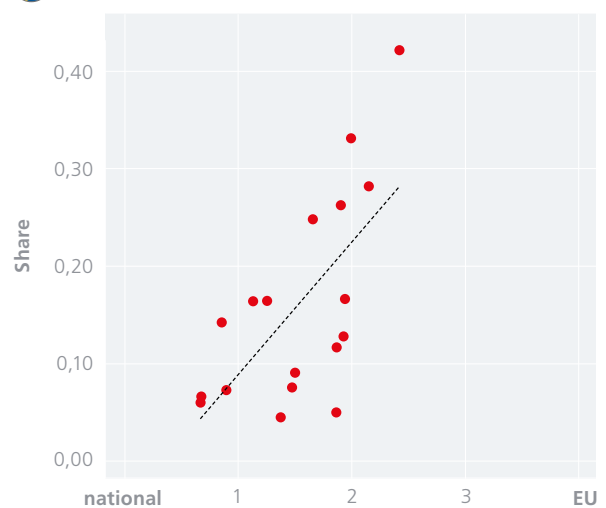

Notes: These are weighted averages and frequencies. The figure only includes people from the social democratic potential and each plot point corresponds to a policy area. The frequency with which an area was selected is plotted on the y-axis; the x-axis indicates the level at which the decisions are to be made. The dashed line shows the relationship between the two variables.

potential affiliation, citizens do not always automatically associate the localisation of a challenge at the European level with a corresponding shift in competence. In Spain, there is no association whatsoever.

These results are important and potentially problematic in areas where the allocation of competences and the localisation of competences are far apart. Although supporters of parties in the S&D group are in favour of more competences for the transnational level, this applies primarily to non-specific competences and in competition with other major powers. Central challenges not only tend to fall within the national framework – there is a widespread feeling that they should also be dealt with and decided upon there. Even challenges often placed at the EU level are frequently, but not always, associated with the assessment that this should entail corresponding shifts in competences. Through such a vision of Europe, on some issues a rather paradoxical

and, above all, inefficient constellation could emerge. It presupposes the European Union taking care of certain policy areas while at the same time not in all cases being equipped with the corresponding competences. At the same time, respondents in some cases would like the EU to receive competences for policy areas that are not seen as challenges at the European level.

Climate change is an exception: Here, the extent of the challenges and shifts in competence do indeed coincide. In many other areas, however, it will be necessary to partly communicate better that challenges can only be addressed if decision-making competences are also in place. If this doesn't happen, dissatisfaction is "pre-ordained", as the handling of challenges is expected but not always facilitated. Spain is worthy of particular mention here. Somewhat speculatively, it could also be that supporters of social democracy fear that political opponents will have the say in

Table 3
What are the biggest challenges at the European level?

	Potential	
	Yes	**No**
🇩🇪 **GERMANY**		
Climate change	40.2	21.9
Flight and migration	34.8	41.9
Energy supply	25.4	26.2
🇫🇷 **FRANCE**		
Climate change	37.1	28.7
Prosperity, cost of living and economic growth	20.3	22.9
Healthcare	19.7	19.6
🇮🇹 **ITALY**		
Climate change	36.5	27.8
Work and employment	30.8	34.4
Flight and migration	23.3	30.3
🇵🇱 **POLAND**		
Security and defence policy	32.3	32.8
Climate change	31.6	18.9
Flight and migration	29.3	38.3
🇪🇸 **SPAIN**		
Climate change	35.9	23.5
Prosperity, cost of living and economic growth	26.3	30.9
Work and employment	24.6	28.9
🇸🇪 **SWEDEN**		
Climate change	44.2	23.2
Protection from crime and terror	34.2	35.8
Flight and migration	28.7	39.4

Note: The values are weighted percentages.

the EU in the future and that a shift in competences would therefore not result in the challenges being dealt with in a manner consistent with their views.

Finally, Table 3 presents the three policy areas most frequently selected by potential voters of social democratic and socialist parties as challenges at the European level for the six countries. Even if the potential is not necessarily strongly in favour of a shift of competences to the EU, we can still see from the challenges mentioned what European policy should focus on in the near future from the perspective of this group of people. The table also makes it possible to make direct comparisons with the values of those who belong to the comparison group.

Climate change is seen as a very important challenge for the European level in all countries – and not just if both political levels are taken into account (see Figure 7). In all countries, the challenge is mentioned by more than 30 percent of supporters of the S&D parties – and in Germany and Sweden, that figure surpasses the 40-percent mark. The major differences to people outside the potential show the conflict inherent in the climate change issue and the role the fight against climate change should nonetheless play for the parties examined with regard to its own supporters. With the exception of France and Spain, "flight and migration" represent an important challenge for potential voters, although the area is still mentioned much less frequently than by people outside the potential. Only "work and employment" and "prosperity, cost of living and economic growth" appear more than once among the greatest challenges. Compared to above, "healthcare" is only listed as one of the top three challenges in France. At the very least, almost all of the areas listed therefore appear to be more easily and likely even better addressed at the European level.

6

THE POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

In a final step, we look at the political direction of the European Union, i. e., which political measures should be implemented in the future. In many respects, this is a substantiation of previous points that focused on descriptions of the EU, key values for the future and on the most important challenges facing us. However, opinions and perspectives often become clearer the more concrete the aspects to be evaluated are. If you ask about tax cuts, for example, there is often a high level of approval. However, if tax cuts are combined with the consequence that this would also mean less investment in infrastructure, education and social services, the answers are different. The challenges mentioned above represent another example: Climate change was identified as one of the key challenges facing the EU in all countries. But it is not possible to infer from that how this challenge should be dealt with if other policy areas could be affected by it. In short, the question of what vision supporters of the parties examined have for Europe can be better answered if information on rejection of and support for specific policies is included.

Solidarity is not only historically a central value of social democracy (Meyer 2018); many progressive ideas of social democracy aim to reduce inequality, and this often means standing up in solidarity for the weaker members of society. Solidarity also plays an important role in the European Union – for example in addressing the consequences of the economic and financial crisis at the end of the 2000s, taking in refugees and supporting Ukraine against Russia's war of aggression. Whether the EU has really shown solidarity in the past cannot be the focus here. Instead, we want to look at what role solidarity should play from the perspective of potential voters for social democratic parties – on the one hand with regard to member states in economic distress and on the other in the context of enforcing human rights at the EU's external borders.

Figure 9 presents the results for both forms of solidarity in each of the countries in the usual form. As expected, the average values of the social democratic and socialist potential are higher in all cases. However, the group differences are much smaller with regard to aid for economically weaker member states and are only marginal in the case of Italy and Poland. Related research suggests that ideological differences are reduced when respondents live in a context in which they are more likely to benefit from solidarity (Reinl and Giebler 2021) the European Union (EU. In Germany and Swe-
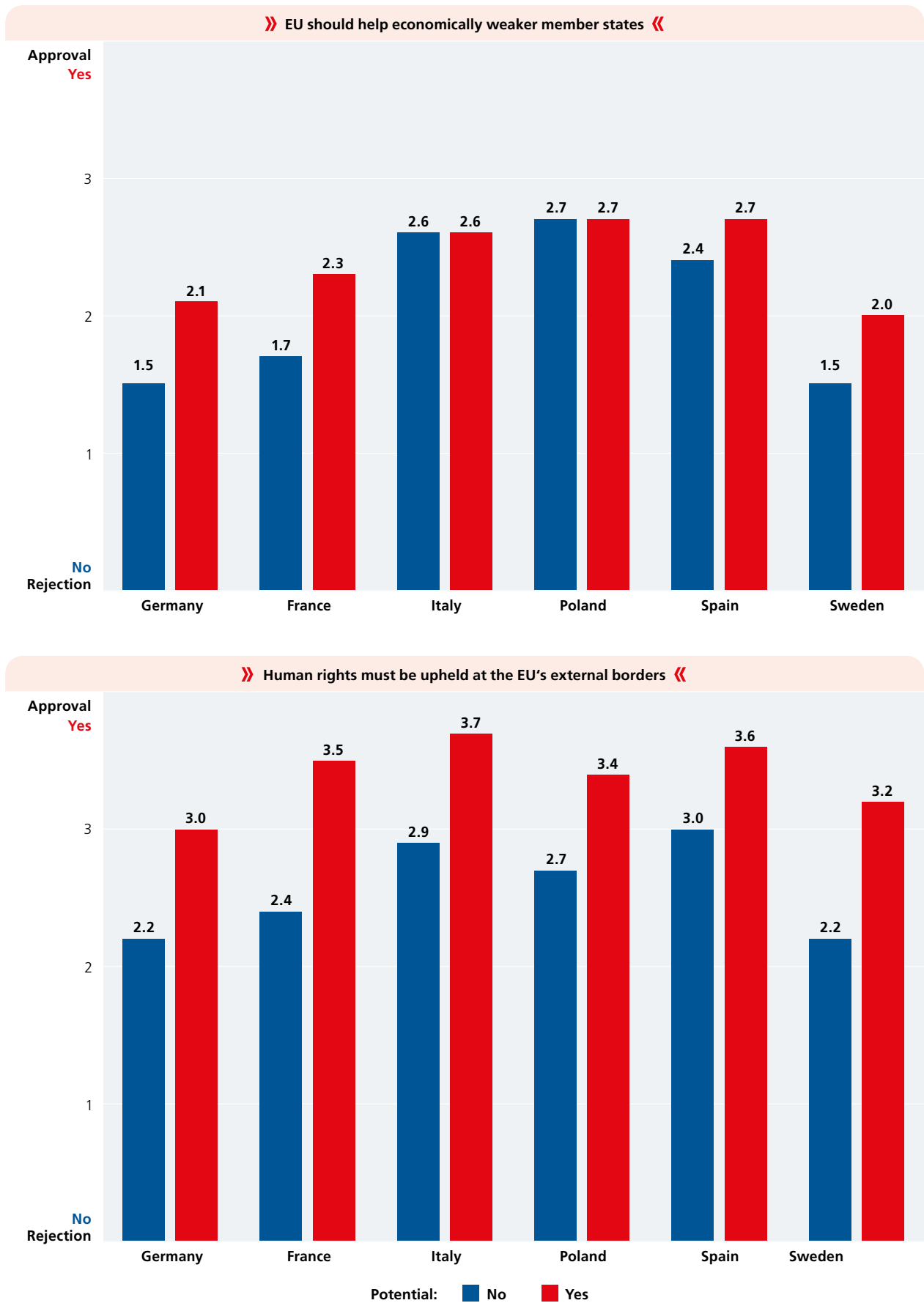
den, there is a clear difference between the groups, but even supporters do not hold a very positive view of this form of solidarity. When it comes to the EU's external borders, on the other hand, there is a feeling that human rights should not be sacrificed in order to reduce asylum applications; both groups agree on this. Overall, the expected picture emerges that respondents with an affinity for social democracy are more likely to agree with solidarity-based policies than those who are not part of the social democratic potential. However, this applies above all to a more humane asylum policy and much less to transnational solidarity in times of economic crisis. Agreement is lower in historically stronger economies, which indicates a certain rationality, insofar as people in these countries would not benefit from this form of solidarity.

Of course, there are many other political issues that are currently shaping public debate or have done so in the past. At the end of this study, we therefore broaden the perspective and also include other subject areas to answer the question of which political orientation is preferred by the examined potential and to what extent uniform patterns can be seen here across the countries in which the survey was carried out. A total of six issues, the two aspects of solidarity already considered and four other topics, were examined. They are listed in Table 4.

Three points should be emphasised here. First, in contrast to both of the issues regarding solidarity already addressed, the four additional issues are formulated without some concrete "European" connection. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that these issues are also likely to play an important role in developing a vision for Europe's future. Climate protection, including the challenge of "climate change," is localised at the European level anyway (see above) and the approach and assessment of immigration are already central topics of debate across Europe. Furthermore, the protection of minorities and diversity are central principles of the European Union, as is women's right to self-determination.

The second point is related to the substance of the issues. Contentious political issues are generally assigned to two different, overarching dimensions: the classic economic dimension and a more socio-culturally defined dimension that has emerged as a result of shifting values (Kitschelt 1995; Giebler et al. 2019; Kriesi et al. 2008). This survey focused more on the second dimension, which does not translate to

Figure 9
Attitudes towards solidarity

» EU should help economically weaker member states «

Approval
Yes

	Germany	France	Italy	Poland	Spain	Sweden
No	1.5	1.7	2.6	2.7	2.4	1.5
Yes	2.1	2.3	2.6	2.7	2.7	2.0

No
Rejection

» Human rights must be upheld at the EU's external borders «

Approval
Yes

	Germany	France	Italy	Poland	Spain	Sweden
No	2.2	2.4	2.9	2.7	3.0	2.2
Yes	3.0	3.5	3.7	3.4	3.6	3.2

No
Rejection

Potential: ■ No ■ Yes

Note: The values are weighted averages on a scale from 0 to 4. All persons for whom substantial responses were available from the survey were taken into account for the average values. Accordingly, the number of respondents from country to country is not constant.

Table 4
Political issues

Issue	Formulation
Transnational solidarity	The EU should support economically weaker member states with the help of EU funds in order to reduce the differences in prosperity between the member states.
Humane asylum policy	Human rights must be upheld at the EU's external borders, even if this does not lead to a reduction in asylum applications.
Climate protection	To avert the climate catastrophe, we should prioritise climate protection over everything else.
Allowing abortion	It is a woman's right to decide freely about pregnancy and abortion and abortion should therefore be possible up to the 12th week of pregnancy.
Immigration beneficial	Immigration enriches our society and secures our prosperity.
Tolerate minorities	For an open society, it is important to recognise and protect the diversity of all lifestyles.

Note: The formulations represent the progressive poles of the scales as they were used in the questionnaire.

a valuation of the two dimensions, nor should it lead to assumptions that the economic dimension is irrelevant. The selection of issues was made based on the issues that were the most prominent at the time of the survey. This could easily change in the future. Nevertheless, some of the issues do, in fact, have more of an economic character. "Transnational solidarity" is closely linked with redistribution, and when it comes to the question of climate protection, one element of the debate is the degree to which economic prosperity should be subordinated to the measures necessary to combat climate change. All of the other issues tend to be part of the socio-cultural dimension – issues which are often framed with the liberal, progressive and ecological positions on the one side, and the authoritarian, conservative and nationalist positions on the other. As such, we can draw only weak conclusions regarding the position the supporters of social democracy would take on economic issues. At the same time, we have already demonstrated the central role that social justice, as a value strived for by the European Union, plays for this group of people and that the potential of the social democratic and socialist parties is significantly further to the left. Both indicate that in the economic dimension, left-wing economic positions – such as market regulation, the welfare state and stronger worker protections – tend to receive more support. Unfortunately, however, these suppositions cannot be examined in greater depth at this point.

Finally, we refrain from including specific policy proposals – such as the introduction of a 40-hour work week. Assessments of such proposals are, of course, extremely interesting. At the same time, however, they are far more dependent on economic cycles than the contentious issues and thus have the potential for significantly distorting the results. Since it cannot be assumed that the economic cycle pertaining to these specific policy proposals is the same in the six

countries surveyed, we will remain at the level of the contentious issues, which are already sufficiently concrete and are also more compatible with other studies.

In order to examine certain positions on contentious issues with membership in the potential, a logistic regression analysis was performed for each country. In those analyses, responses to the various issues from those surveyed are treated as independent variables, with the dependent variable presenting the information as to whether the person is a member of the potential or not. The effects presented in Figure 10 show the change in probability of being a potential voter of the S&D parties through the comparison of an extremely progressive position with an extremely conservative-authoritarian position. Positive values "raise" the probability, while negative values translate to a reduction of the probability. The confidence intervals noted in the figure indicate the uncertainty of the effect. If the interval's value includes 0 (as indicated by the vertical dashed line), then no statistically reliable effect can be determined. Two examples: The effect for "transnational solidarity" in Germany means that the probability of belonging to the potential rises by a bit less than 10 percent in cases where a respondent expresses strong support for transnational solidarity. When it comes to the issue of humane asylum policies, the effect is also positive, but it is statistically insignificant and thus less suitable for distinguishing supporters in Germany from the comparison group.

Clearly, positions on controversial issues are quite useful at highlighting differences between people who belong to the potential and those who do not. In all six countries, a positive effect was revealed for the positions that immigration benefits society and that minorities should be tolerated and protected. Furthermore, the effect of "immigration is beneficial" is the strongest effect in all countries except for Spain.

Figure 10
Political issues and potential

GERMANY

FRANCE

ITALY

POLAND

SPAIN

SWEDEN
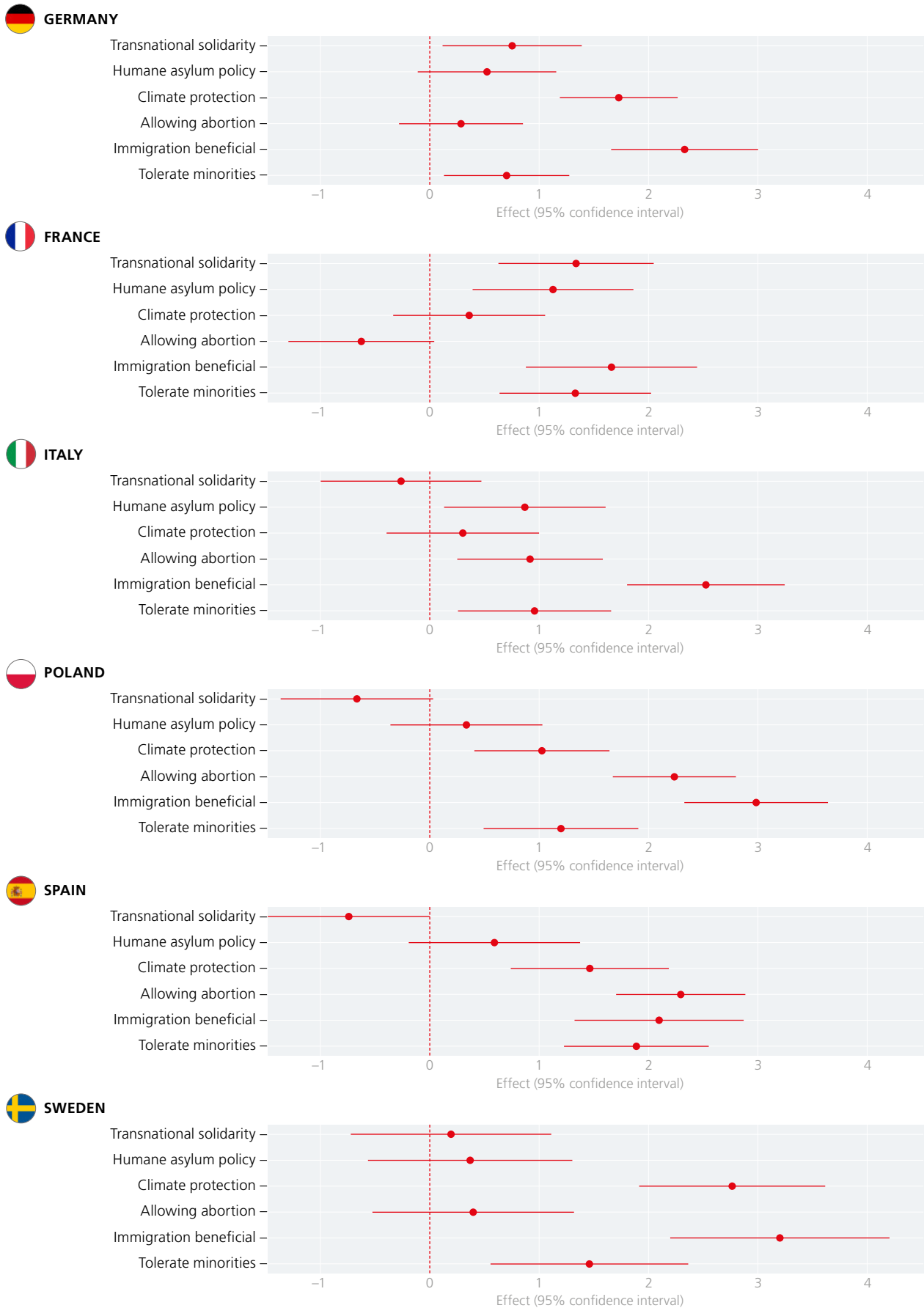
Note: The values are the product of logistic regression models. Weighted, country-specific regressions are calculated. The values represent changes in probability (average marginal effects), which correspond to the difference from the lowest to the highest value of the respective political issue.

With the exception of France, the probability of potentially voting for a social democratic and socialist party climbs by more than 20 percentage points when respondents view migration as an opportunity rather than as a threat.

In France and Italy, the two groups are not differentiated when it comes to the priority of climate protection, but in the other four countries, they are. "Transnational solidarity" only demonstrates a reliable effect in Germany and France, while the second question linked to solidarity only shows an effect in France and Italy, with the former being hinted at in Figure 9. More surprising is the fact that the question as to how asylum seekers at the external borders of the EU should be treated does not play a central role more frequently. This is likely because ideas on immigration, and on minorities in general, include extremely similar concepts and the underlying position has already been established. There is, however, a significant effect in three countries when it comes to the legality of abortion. Not surprisingly, those countries are Italy, Poland and Spain.

In no country is there a statistically significant negative effect for progressive positions. That means that on all issues, the potential is either equal to or more progressive – or further to the left economically – than the group of people who do not belong to the potential. More specifically: 23 of 36 effects are significantly positive, which translates to a share of almost 64 percentage points. At least the current supporters of the parties examined can clearly be classified as progressive.

A social democratic, socialist and progressive vision for Europe can therefore be linked to and described in terms of concrete measures and a specific political orientation. Even if aspects directly linked to solidarity, particularly those of an economic nature, do not always allow for a clear demarcation of the potential, the group can be adequately depicted through a positive stance on migration and tolerance of minorities. This stands in contrast to debates in the media that are frequently not well-founded, but also to the positions held by parties belonging to the S&D group. Climate change and efforts to fight it don't play a central role in all countries, but the results nevertheless underscore that social democracy, in the eyes of its supporters, needs an ecological dimension. It can clearly be stated that authoritarian and conservative positions would not find widespread appeal among the current potential in the six countries surveyed. The attempt to win over new or previous members of the potential through the adoption of such positions would most likely scare off current members and would thus not produce growth.

7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Shaken by crisis and in an era of significant regional and global challenges, the European Union is at a crossroads. The approaching 2024 European Parliament elections bring with them the danger of significant gains for parties that are authoritarian-minded or, at the very least, Eurosceptic, which would have a significant effect on the EU both domestically and abroad. In this study, we explored the extent to which a social democratic vision for Europe exists and what specifics that vision might entail. Using survey data from six countries – Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden – attitudes and assessments of Europe by supporters of social democratic and socialist parties were examined in comparison to others and augmented by analyses of the future of the EU. The parties considered are all part of the S&D group in the European Parliament. As such, they are social democratic, socialist and progressive parties to the left of centre. Our focus in this study is on the question as to what is important to current supporters of these parties and how they think about the European Union. It does not focus on positions traditionally assigned to the social democratic milieu.

Even if these six countries are, of course, not representative of all EU member states or of the potential accession countries, they do cover a relatively broad spectrum – not just in consideration of their histories, but also when it comes to the roles they play within the EU and the respective condition of the S&D parties within those countries. At the very least, this provides clear guidelines for what a relevant vision for Europe could look like, in contrast to those citizens who are not part of the potential of these parties. Furthermore, the countries examined are key states within the EU – in terms of population size, for example, or the size of their economies, which lends additional weight to the results presented.

Even if certain differences between the countries are apparent, it is broadly clear that a shared nucleus for such a vision exists. This is supported by the finding that characteristics of groups of people who would potentially vote for social democratic and socialist parties in the six countries examined do not significantly diverge, particularly when it comes to central factors like how survey respondents position themselves on the left-right political spectrum or the existence of a European identity. The vision can build on positive attitudes towards the EU and support for further integration. This represents a vital resource for political parties and decisionmak-

ers in that it demonstrates a certain faith in the European project and in the idea of further convergence. The European Union is hereby seen primarily as an alliance and guarantor for freedom of movement (including for place of work) and free trade, though it is also described as an entity sharing political and democratic principles. This, too, can likely be interpreted as support for the EU, since these descriptions reflect the EU's current role. When one looks at the values that respondents would like to see play a more central role in the future, however, the desire for safeguarding security and human rights is joined by social justice as a central issue. As such, the examined potential clearly emphasises that the task of the EU should not be limited to freedom of movement, free trade and democracy, but that it should also play more of a social and equalising role. In addition, the study has found that sustainability and climate change are, of course, important issues for supporters of the S&D parties and that the vision for Europe also requires an ecological dimension. This, however, must be clearly consistent with social justice.

Investigations into the degree to which a greater shifting of competences from the national to the European level should be included produce an interesting finding. A broadly defined shifting of competences framed as a necessity for keeping up with other large powers in global competition receives general approval. But there is certainly some scepticism when it comes to the transfer of competences in specific political fields – including among potential voters of social democratic parties. Even in the case of challenges that are more likely to be addressed at the European level, there is frequently, but not always support for corresponding competences at the supernational level. There are also significant differences between countries on this issue, particularly between Spain and, to some extent, France on the one hand, and Poland and Sweden on the other. One factor here may be that frequently mentioned challenges, such as healthcare or issues pertaining to work and employment, are classic elements of national policy. This, however, could also be an expression of concern that future decisions at the European level might be made by political actors who do not belong to the party family. It is also apparent that – aside from climate change – issues viewed as the most important challenges vary significantly from country to country. Either way, the result is in some cases a problematic discrepancy: It is difficult to imagine that addressing certain challenges, and also the broad implementation of a social

democratic, socialist and progressive vision in many member states, will be possible without support for a corresponding shifting of competences. It would be interesting for future research to look into why this discrepancy exists in certain policy areas and why there are significant differences between countries.

Supporters of the parties examined have relatively clear ideas about how certain societal issues should be solved. For issues most associated with socio-cultural conflicts, it is evident that the social democratic potential is comparatively more supportive of progressive and liberal political approaches. Immigration is viewed broadly positively, there is a feeling that minorities should be tolerated and protected, and measures for more climate protection are supported. Less clear than expected is the question of transnational solidarity in times of economic crisis. On this issue, there is no clear difference between the potential and the comparison group in countries that would likely be recipients of such solidarity. Furthermore, support for solidarity is generally lower in economically stronger countries.

Finally, the analyses show that current supporters of the progressive spectrum are not only similar in terms of its European vision, but also situates itself much further to the left, is more likely to express a European identity and is more likely to actually participate in the 2024 European elections. When it comes to socio-demographic factors, the differences between different political currents and the non-social democratic potential are less clear and reveal stronger differences from country to country. In France, the group of supporters is rather limited, while in Spain and Sweden, it is far greater.

In conclusion, it should be noted that there is indeed a future vision of a social democratic Europe and European Union. Our analyses reveal a few differences and country-specific patterns, to be sure, but those differences are more than outweighed by the numerous similarities. The group examined sees the EU in a positive light and supports cooperation, places social justice in the spotlight and prefers clearly progressive policies.

This makes it possible to establish a clear delineation from other political actors, particularly those to the right of centre. By contrast, a different political focus – such as on "less" Europe or on the dismantling of progressive policies – would, it can be assumed, likely result in the dampening of one's own electoral potential in all six countries included in the study.

To actually turn the vision into reality, partners will certainly be necessary. Two aspects are of significant additional relevance in this context: First, progressive and leftist actors must do an even better job than they have thus far of establishing the conditions for unified European policy. Doing so is the only way to implement the visions of the future held by the base – and to avoid disappointing them. To this end, it must be more clearly communicated that implementing the social democratic vision cannot and should not take place in a Europe of nations, but through progressive unifi-

cation and closer cooperation. This also means that competences must be shifted from the national to the European level, particularly when it comes to addressing all challenges viewed as transnational. Some of the countries have been far more successful here than others.

Second, the size and the realisation of the group examined differs strongly among the six countries surveyed. They have vastly different amounts of influence, both nationally and in the European Union. As such, in order to realise progressive ideas for the future, the parties must cooperate even more closely, and must certainly also form alliances with other fractions in European Parliament. Within the European Union's complex structures, such alliances are necessary anyway, but against the backdrop of a strengthening right wing, the incentives for such efforts should be greater than ever before in the history of the European Union.

Appendix

A1 DATASET

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung commissioned YouGov to implement and conduct a comparative population survey in six countries: Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden. The survey focused on expectations of a progressive European policy in times of multiple crises and the differentiation of these expectations according to different party (or groups of parties) potentials. The data acquired by that survey forms the foundation for this study.

The data comes from an online survey carried out between August 31, 2023, and September 18, 2023. The total of 13,386 people surveyed were recruited from YouGov's online panels and represent a quota sample. In this manner, those questioned in each country represent as accurately as possible the true population distribution according to age, gender, education and region of residence. The YouGov online panels are high-quality panels that are constantly evaluated, carefully curated and continually expanded through targeted recruitment. According to YouGov, participants are generally invited by email. A fully automated, randomised procedure which considers individual participant characteristics (turbo sampling) was used to select participants. The result of such a process is nevertheless not a completely random sample but a quota sample that exhibits characteristics that are extremely similar to the population at large. Accordingly, the results collected are certainly indicative, but are not fully representative in the statistical sense. The ratios achieved in the samples are in most cases almost identical to the distributions in the population, and any remaining deviations could be compensated for by weighting the analyses. Nevertheless, participation in an online-access panel is not completely random. As such, it cannot be assumed that the distribution of other characteristics in the sample are identical to the population at large.

The survey was conducted in the dominant language spoken in each country. The questionnaire was written in German and translated by YouGov. More people were surveyed in Germany (N = 3,103) than in the other participating countries. The number of survey participants in the other countries are as follows: France N = 2,099, Italy N = 2,015, Poland N = 2,020, Spain N = 2,085 and Sweden N = 2,064. Please contact the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung with additional questions you may have about the study design and methodology.

A2 NOTES ON THE ANALYSES

GENERAL

Adjustment weights are used for all analyses to achieve the greatest possible proximity to the actual distributions – in relation to quota variables – of the national populations. In instances where analyses are carried out across all countries, an additional weight is applied so that the total number of all respondents is identical. In this case, the value of all German survey participants is included in the calculation with the exact same weight, for example, as the value for all those surveyed in Poland or Sweden.

The number of cases was maximised for each of the analyses. This means that, in general, only those survey participants were excluded from the analyses for whom there were missing values pertaining to their affiliation with the social democratic potential. This results in different numbers of cases for the various analyses ("pairwise deletion").

CHAPTER 2

The potential of the S&D parties in the countries examined is determined using the following question:

*There are a number of political parties in [COUNTRY]. Each of them would like to receive your vote. For each of the following parties, please indicate on a scale from 0 to 10 how likely you are to **ever** vote for that party. 0 stands for extremely unlikely and 10 stands for extremely likely.*

The question is followed by a list of all relevant parties or, in France, a list of all relevant politicians that are to be evaluated using the scale. A value of 6 or higher means that a person belongs to that party's (or politician's) potential.

Table A1
Codification of variables for Figure 1

Characteristic	Codification
Female	1 = self-identification as female; 0 = self-identification as male
Age 18–34	age in years between 18 and 34
Age +55	over 55 years in age
Univ. education	1 = person holds a university degree; 0 = Person holds no university degree
Employed	1 = all forms of employment; 0 = no employment
Lower-/middle class	1 = lower class, lower middle class, middle class; 0 = upper middle class, upper class
Place of residence city	1 = city; 0 = rural area, suburban
Left-wing orientation	recodification of left-right scale: 1 = 1–5 left; 0 = 6–11 not left
Depth of political interest	1 = rather strong, very strong; 0 = moderate, less strong, none at all
European identity	1 = European, not national, more European than national, both equal; 0 = more national than Europe, national not European
Election participation 2024	1 = I will certainly participate; 0 = all other substantial responses

Note: Missing values, resulting from non-substantial responses (such as unanswered questions), are not considered and as such, neither is the person surveyed.

CHAPTER 3

Table A2
Regression table for Figure A3

	Potential	No potential
Attitudes to the EU	0.56 ***	0.75 ***
Constants	1.21 ***	0.45 ***
R²	0.31	0.51
N	3854	7321

Comments: Linear regression analyses with adjustment weights, the dependent variable is the attitude towards the progress of European unification.* = p<0.05; ** = p<0.01

CHAPTER 5

The correlation shown in Figure 8 (dashed lines) corresponds in each case to the result of a regression analysis for the selection frequency of the challenges and the respective value for the competence assignment (by level). These are aggregate analyses per country.

Table A3
Selection frequency of the challenges and the respective value for the competence assignment

	Potential	No potential
Germany	0,61	0,32
France	0,42	0,45
Italy	0,39	0,22
Poland	0,58	0,36
Spain	0,03	0,04
Sweden	0,66	0,62

Note: Correlation coefficients (N = 18)

Chapter 6

Table A4
Regression table for Figure 10

	Germany	France	Italy	Poland	Spain	Sweden
Transnational solidarity	0.39 *	0.84 **	−0.15	−0.38	−0.36	0.10
Humane asylum policy	0.27	0.70 *	0.46 **	0.19	0.30	0.19
Climate protection	0.88 **	0.23	0.16	0.57 *	0.72 **	1.38 **
Allowing abortion	0.14	−0.39	0.49 *	1.25 **	1.12 **	0.20
Immigration beneficial	1.19 **	1.03 **	1.34 **	1.66 **	1.04 **	1.60 **
Tolerate minorities	0.36 **	0.83 **	0.51 *	0.66 *	0.93 **	0.73 *
Constants	−2.58 **	−3.35 **	−3.09 **	−3.63 **	−3.27 **	−2.94 **
Pseudo-R²	0.10	1491	1502	1548	1755	1554
N	2568	0.13	0.09	0.14	0.12	0.15

Comments: Logistic regression analyses with adjustment weights; the dependent variable is membership in the potential. The results form the basis for the average marginal effects in Figure 10. * = $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$

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