

Ruth Ferrero-Turrión

# European Sovereignty

Commentary on the Findings  
of the Survey in Spain

EUROPA

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STIFTUNG

## HIGH IDENTIFICATION WITH EUROPE

Spain has traditionally viewed the EU as a key element in its modernisation process, as well as being considered essential in the process of political change towards democracy. This has meant that the EU has always been viewed in terms of what could be called 'naïve Europeanism', a Europeanism devoid of self-criticism towards the processes and decision-making that have been adopted from Brussels.

Public opinion has always been favourable to the processes of Europeanisation that have been progressively implemented. The data provided by the Eurobarometer survey are, in this sense, enlightening and help to understand the ambiguous response of Spaniards in relation to European sovereignty.

As can be seen in these graphs, the only time when adherence to EU membership declined was as a consequence of the economic crisis that began in the last quarter of 2007, when Spaniards felt that Europe had not only failed to respond adequately, but that citizens of southern Europe had been singled out as 'freeloaders' by states such as Germany or the Netherlands and other 'frugal' states.

However, the Standard 92 Eurobarometer (autumn 2019) showed that Spain is one of the most pro-European and optimistic countries regarding the way out of the economic crisis. In fact, 9 out of 10 Spanish citizens (88 %) felt that they were EU citizens, the highest value only behind Luxem-

bourg (90 %). Another of the data provided by the Eurobarometer was the high identification with the EU and with the idea of Europe (71 % feel attached to the EU and 73 % to Europe), well above the European average (55 % and 64 % respectively). Spaniards also have much more confidence in supranational institutions such as the European Union, or even the United Nations, than in national institutions, including national parties, governments and parliaments.

Undoubtedly, the syndemic situation in which the entire planet, the EU and Spain in particular, find themselves, has also had a decisive and positive effect on citizens' perceptions of Europe and the benefits of shared European sovereignty. According to the published Standard Eurobarometer, number 94, the only institution that gains in confidence on the part of Spaniards is the EU with 52 % compared to the European average of 49 %. On this occasion, however, the feeling of European citizenship fell by four points compared to Standard Eurobarometer No. 92. Part of the explanation can be found in the general disaffection with all institutions that has occurred during the pandemic.

Throughout 2020, the concept of European sovereignty has been linked especially to the EU's ability to deal with this crisis and on the basis that states in isolation could not solve the problem. Since the beginning of 2021, moreover, this issue has been closely linked to the question of access to vaccines and the Commission's plan for access to vaccines. In contrast to previous crises, confidence in the capacity to manage the

Figure 1  
Please tell me how attached you feel to ... European Union  
(Spain from 01/2002 to 06/2019)

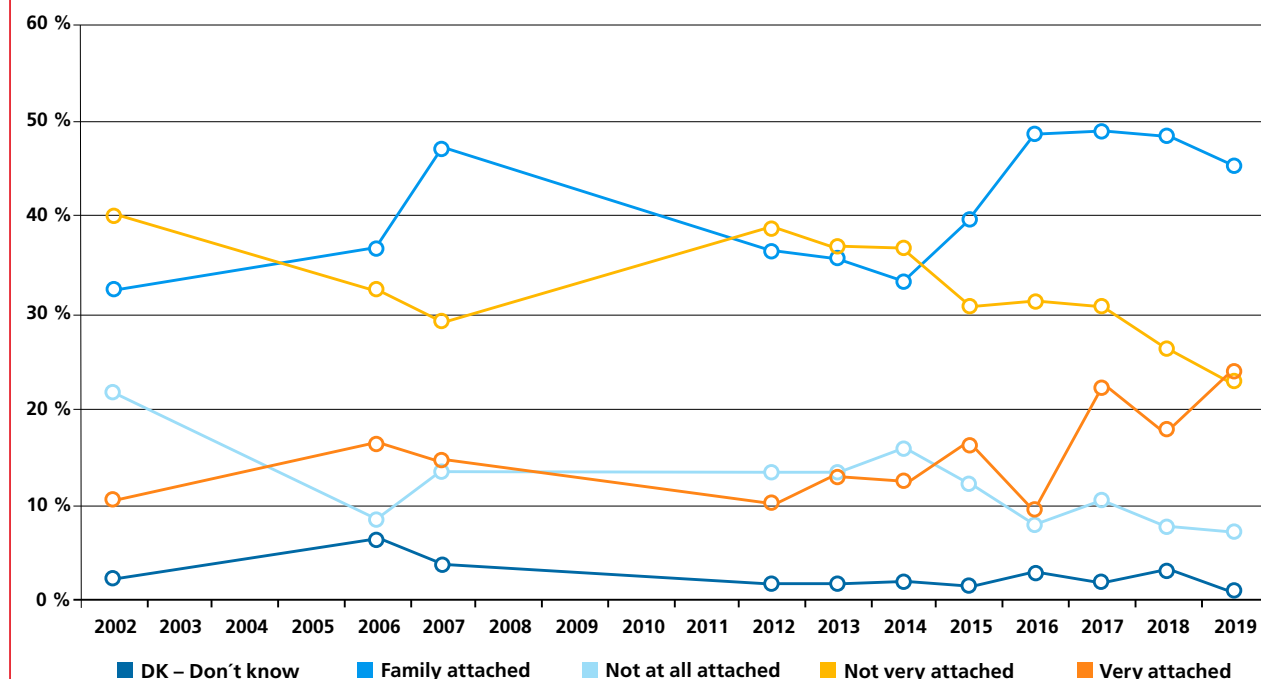
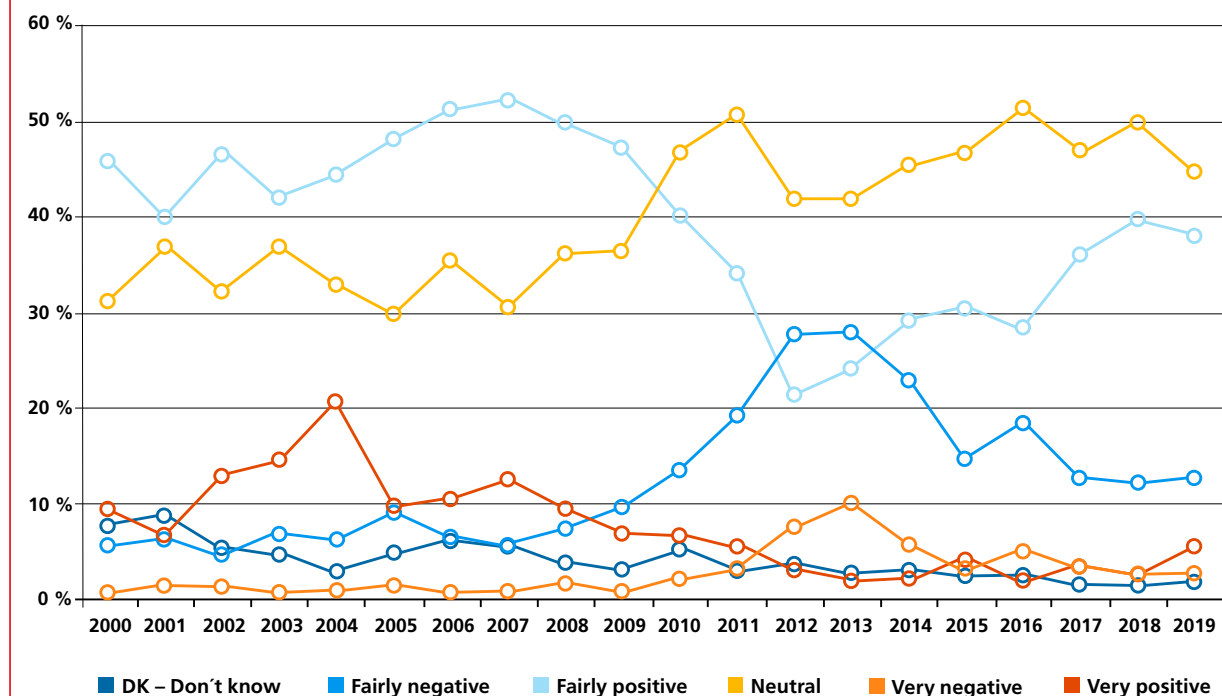


Figure 2  
In general, does the European Union conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?  
(Spain from 04/2000 to 11/2019)



crisis has increased as a result of the change in economic policy implemented by Brussels to alleviate the socio-economic and health consequences of the crisis.

One of the keys to explaining the position of Spaniards in relation to the EU in comparison with other Member States has a lot to do with the way in which the construction of the nation-state is understood. For instance, the constant question-

ing of the territorial structure of the state by peripheral nationalisms, especially Basque and Catalan. This situation has meant that any term in which the word sovereignty appears is immediately identified with the sovereignty claims of the nationalist forces that wield them. This may perhaps explain some discrepancies specific to the Spanish case. In any case, it does not seem to be due to the fact that the political system is a constitutional monarchy.

The results of the survey conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Fondation Jean-Jaurès are perfectly in line with the trend detected in the framework of Eurobarometers, where trust in European institutions and the identification of citizens with the European citizenship of Spaniards are at the top of the list. Although we are dealing with a case in which the connotation of sovereignty is linked to centrifugal nationalist forces, the fact that Spain scores high on this point is due to the fact that both from the centre and from the periphery the EU is seen as the normative and political framework in which one wants to be, independently of other political conflicts that have to be settled internally.

## **BRUSSELS: THE GUARANTOR FOR DEMOCRACY**

From the point of view of a southern country like Spain, the presence of the EU is seen as a guarantee of the country's democratic quality. Again, the visualisation of Eurobarometer data seems to suggest that a greater distrust in national institutions is reflected in a greater trust in the EU. That is, the more supranationalised some competences are, the better the country's situation will be.

Spain's governments have always been known for advocating greater supranationalisation of competences, so the increase in exclusive and/or shared competences is something it will always be in favour of. The only two areas in which it seems unlikely that there will be any cessions are those referring to foreign policy and specific areas of domestic policy. However, it is very likely that Spain would be in favour of some changes in the decision-making process, such as those referring to the transition from majority to qualified majority in the framework of the Foreign Affairs Council.

Looking at the cases analysed in the survey, it seems that some Eastern European countries see Europe as the guarantor of their own sovereignty, as the protector of their territoriality. This is the case of Poland and Latvia, countries that keep in their collective memory processes of annexation and even disappearance from the map. But also, the concept of European sovereignty is understood as a barrier and a defence against potential interference by Russia. This fear is not present in the southern countries, which understand it as a delegation of sovereignty to the supranational.

In other words, from Eastern Europe, European sovereignty is understood in terms of security and defence, while in southern countries it is understood as the renunciation of part of their national sovereignty to Brussels.

The survey also seems to indicate that what public opinion is calling for is an improvement in decision-making processes so that certain decisions are not blocked as a result of vetoes by certain countries.

This would not, therefore, be a fundamental reform, but rather one that modifies certain decision-making processes such as those affecting the security and defence field so that they

are adopted either by qualified majorities or through enhanced cooperation.

In the cases of health and climate change, there is, however, a case to be made for these areas to become shared or even exclusive competences with the EU.

## **DESIRE FOR EFFECTIVE ENFORCEMENT ON A GLOBAL SCALE**

The ability to be able to produce, act and demand a set of values is only possible if a process of European re-industrialisation actually takes place in a framework in which decisions in the area of security and defence are taken more quickly, i.e. via qualified majority voting. In this way, the EU could be proactive in those arenas of the international sphere where it would like its voice to be more forceful and assertive rather than hesitant.

It is multilevel governance that must act in an articulated manner to combat the security threats of terrorism, climate change or health crises. Without multilevel governance that is operational and effective in its responses, we may see the emergence of national retreats that jeopardise the European project. Responses to citizens' demands must at all times be coordinated between states and between states and the EU, and must ensure that no European citizen feels that he or she has been left behind.

It is the public's perception of being left behind as losers in globalisation or in the European project that has led many European citizens to join the ranks of the ultra-right parties.

The opinions expressed by the citizens interviewed in the survey seem to show a sort of rift between them and their governments, since a majority of them attribute a significant part of the paralysis in this area to nationalism. The importance given to external pressures on the EU to prevent its strengthening and strategic autonomy is striking, although perhaps this has much to do with the high percentage given by Eastern European countries that always feel the Russian threat.

## **THE EUROPEAN PROJECT IS ALIVE**

The main message is the need for strategic unity of action to enable the EU to compete on a level playing field with other global actors that have a greater capacity to act and react. Being small is not the way to have a relevant presence in the global sphere, and teamwork is essential for this.

The European project is alive, but it is important to make a self-critical analysis of what needs to be improved. Without a plan for improvement that leaves no one behind, there is a risk of losing the trust of more citizens. On the other hand, good management of the health and socio-economic crisis will allow many who had joined the Eurosceptic bloc to regain confidence in the European project.

I think it is an appropriate term, although it needs to be explained in a very pedagogical way and, above all, taking into account the meaning rather than the signifier. The same words have different meanings depending on who and where you ask, so it is essential to work on a pedagogical conceptualisation that reaches European citizens. This is, in my view, the main conclusion of the survey conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Fondation Jean-Jaurès.

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