

Attitudes towards Minorities and Migrants: Key Findings from the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey

By their very nature, opinion polls are in danger of misinterpretation or simplification. The EUMC puts forward these questions & answers in order to facilitate a better interpretation of the survey results.

Questions & Answers

How to read the results of the survey?

As with all opinion polls, interpreting and comparing the survey responses is particularly challenging and often problematic. Respondents will interpret questions quite differently – depending on personal characteristics but also on a number of country-specific factors such as different historic traditions, cultural concepts, legal definitions and social realities. For instance, what is considered an ‘ethnic minority’ (or ‘minority ethnic’) in the UK is fundamentally different from a German or French understanding of the same term. An example is the Roma community which in some Member States is recognised as a national minority in others it is not. One therefore needs to read the results with care. For the purposes of analysis, the researchers created general categories to capture a variety of survey responses. Categories such as ‘resistance to multicultural society’ were created by the researchers to indicate broad tendencies in the survey responses, and cover a number of different attitude statements. Of course, by doing this, responses to individual questions are not highlighted, but this is a necessary consequence of the desire to produce more sophisticated breakdowns which are statistically significant.

Why has the EUMC undertaken this analysis, and how can it be used?

The EUMC is responsible for providing objective, reliable and comparable data on the phenomena of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism in order to help policy formulation in the EU.

Over the past decade, the EU has grown more ethnically diverse. Immigration, the process of enlargement and the internal movement of people have changed the ethnic make-up of the Union and its Member States. As enshrined in EU law, the EU is committed to promoting and protecting equality and respect to diversity. Thus, the EU needs to be interested in identifying trends with regards to the situation of minority populations across all Member States. Attitudes towards minorities and migrants are one of the indicators for the level of openness of a society. They may reveal the need for policy initiatives to promote intercultural understanding and community cohesion or to raise awareness for protecting equal rights for members of minorities.

In this context, the analysis of the Eurobarometer survey and the European Social Survey is a useful tool that informs political decision-makers about attitudes towards minorities and migrants. A key finding which should be of interest is that education apparently increases openness to migrants and minorities. At least for the EU-15, the research showed that when

people acquire higher levels of education they are more open to diversity and multiculturalism. This evidence could be seen as supporting policies which aim at countering intolerance and promoting intercultural understanding through the education system.

Does the survey result mean that there is wide-scale discrimination against minorities and migrants in Europe?

This particular survey can not answer this question as there is no direct link between attitudes and discriminatory behaviour. To measure discrimination, different research tools are required such as victim surveys, matched-pair discrimination testing, or benchmarking of policy outcomes. Much of the EUMC's research and documentation - including most prominently its Annual Report and thematic comparative reports – focuses on identifying the extent of discrimination against ethnic, cultural or religious minorities in the EU and drawing up conclusions for an adequate anti-discrimination policy at EU or national level.

Attitude surveys merely serve as a general indicator of the state of public opinion regarding certain broad social issues.

What is considered a minority or a migrant in this report?

Legal definitions of these groups greatly vary across the European Union. Some Member States relate to minorities as nationals of different ethnicity, some only to population groups recognized as such in the constitution, others do not know this term at all. In the interest of keeping questions and statements simple and comprehensible, the surveys were not able to reflect variations in legal concepts and social realities.

For ease of reading, the report uses a consistent terminology for all Member States. The term 'minorities' is used to describe nationals of an EU Member State who are of different ethnic origin than the majority population in that specific country. The term 'migrant' is used for non-EU citizens with resident status in the EU.

Parts of the analysis come to general conclusions without differentiating between ethnic minorities, asylum seekers or third-country nationals residing in the EU. In reality, attitudes may differ quite substantially towards any of these groups.

Obviously, for policy-making it is crucial to distinguish between different minority and migrant groups, who may experience different forms of discrimination. In its annual and thematic reports, the EUMC more specifically reviews where different minority groups continue to face discrimination, for example at the work place, despite having similar or better qualifications than those not belonging to a minority.

Does the report provide response figures for specific individual questions?

The report does not provide statistical figures per individual question or statement. This has been done in the original survey material, i.e. the Eurobarometer and European Social Survey.

The report takes the analysis a step further. What is unique about the EUMC's study is that it has carried out a complex analysis which provides a different level of meaning, such as the proportion of young people who are open to diversity, the degree of such support by income, education, occupation, rural/urban location etc. In order to carry out this sort of analysis it was necessary to combine statements so as to produce statistically significant results. For an

accurate and correct understanding of the analysis, the summary report highlights what statements were combined under each dimension.

The report uses the term ‘ethnic exclusionism’ to summarise negative attitudes towards minorities. What does this mean exactly?

The researchers broadly interpreted attitudes towards minorities and migrants as indicative of the level of ‘ethnic exclusionism’ in the population surveyed. In the case of the Eurobarometer surveys, attitudes towards minorities are assessed according to the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with certain statements. The researchers grouped selected statements under separate headings – such as ‘resistance to multicultural society’ – in order to statistically test different dimensions of ‘ethnic exclusionism’. For instance, the researchers rated as support for ‘ethnic exclusionism’ the level of disagreement with the statement “it is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different races, religions or cultures”.

In sum – ‘ethnic exclusionism’ can be understood as the extent to which majority populations do or do not express ‘open’ attitudes towards minority populations – as indicated by their answers to specific questions asked in the Eurobarometer Survey and European Social Survey.

What does it mean when respondents showed a certain level of ‘opposition to civil rights for legal migrants’?

There was a strong minority subscribing to this view across the EU (Eurobarometer). This statistic should however be read with care. The term ‘civil rights’ is not used as a legal term here but as a category created by the researchers to encapsulate different rights. In precise terms, it meant that those respondents had expressed disapproval to access to citizenship for immigrants, family unification or access to social welfare.

How to interpret the views expressed about ‘multicultural society’?

Quite clearly, the EU’s reality of being made up of different cultures, religions and ethnicities is widely accepted by its population. This is illustrated by the fact that a majority of 79 percent of people in the EU have no problem interacting with minorities or migrants (European Social Survey). Only a minority of one in four EU citizen expressed negative attitudes towards diversity (Eurobarometer). Younger people in particular were generally more open to multiculturalism.

There is however awareness for the limits of multiculturalism. A significant number of respondents (60 percent in EU-15, 42 percent in new Member States and the three Candidate Countries) expressed support for the general statement that “there is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept“ (Eurobarometer).

How should country differences be read?

The summary report notes differences on dimensions of ‘ethnic exclusionism’ with respect to individual countries. The researchers sometimes grouped together countries in regions when they found statistically significant regional differences regarding support for ‘ethnic exclusionism’. Yet, ranking countries according to these survey responses would be inappropriate. Differences in historical traditions, cultural concepts and legal definitions mean

that direct comparisons are not very meaningful. It is necessary to consider the differences of social context – for example - what may be a socially accepted statement in one country could be completely inappropriate in other.

The difficulty in comparing countries is illustrated when trying to find explanations for country differences. National differences in socio-economic circumstances failed to provide clear patterns. For instance, high unemployment rates produced inconsistent results with respect to different aspects of ‘ethnic exclusionism’. The only clearly emerging pattern was that economic prosperity of a country appeared to lessen the perceived threat posed by incoming minorities. In general, the higher the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in a country, the lower the level of support for dimensions of ‘ethnic exclusionism’.

Why does the report in parts only refer to the EU-15 and sometimes include ‘Candidate Countries’?

The analysis is based on survey data (1997, 2000 and 2003) collected before the EU’s recent enlargement. During the survey period, the geographic scope of the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey varied. While the 1997, 2000 and 2003 Eurobarometer surveys covered only the EU-15, a 2003 Eurobarometer included the ten Accession countries, joining the EU in May 2004, and three candidate countries (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey). Lastly, the 2003 European Social Survey covered the EU-15 countries plus the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia.

A correct reading of the analysis would therefore need to note where specific findings only have validity for some Member States.

Why is there a distinction between the Eastern and Western part of Germany, and why is the United Kingdom divided into Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

This was done for technical reasons. The analysis here followed the categories used by the Eurobarometer, where statistical results for East and West Germany as well as for Northern Ireland and Great Britain appear segregated.

Are there links between the presence of minorities or migrants and intolerance?

The analysis comes to interesting findings which seem to suggest the opposite.

When looking at differences within countries, the research found that those who have most contact with migrants and minorities, that is the urban population, appear to be more open to other ethnic groups than people living in more homogeneous rural areas. Additionally, the surveys contradicted the notion that an increase in immigration inevitably leads to more intolerance. For example, the research found that recent net immigration influx did not enhance overall support for negative attitudes towards minorities.

Have negative attitudes towards minorities increased or decreased over the years?

The analysis did not provide a clear answer to this question as trends were contrasting.

In the survey period (1997-2003) there was an increase in those subscribing to the view that there were certain limits to multiculturalism. On the other hand, the number of people expressing their resistance to multiculturalism decreased between 2000 to 2003

(Eurobarometer). While they remained a minority, another increase was in those respondents in the EU-15 who were in favour of repatriation policies for legal migrants (Eurobarometer). On the other hand, those who expressed 'opposition to civil rights for legal migrants' remained stable over the different survey periods.