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Europeans' Commitment to the European Project

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Bruce Stokes

Europeans' Commitment to the European Project

The coalition of Eurosceptic parties now ruling Italy is a stark reminder that recent years have seen turbulent shifts in public attitudes toward the European Union. Views of the EU were fairly negative in 2016, prior to the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, but Europe-wide public sentiment about the European project rebounded in 2017, except in Italy (Figure 1). Even British voters, who narrowly chose to withdraw from the EU, markedly improved their views of the Brussels-based institution in 2017.

Majorities in nine out of ten EU member states, including 74% in Poland, 68% in Germany, 67% in Hungary and 65% in Sweden, now hold a favorable view of the institution (Figure 2). The lone dissenter is Greece (34%), which has been subject to EU-imposed austerity. Even in the UK, where just a year ago voters narrowly chose to leave the EU, 54% now voice a positive opinion of the European project.

The rebound in EU sentiment is particularly striking in a number of countries: with increases of 18 percentage points in Germany and France, 15 points in Spain, 13 points in the Netherlands and 10 points in the UK.

These are some of the key findings from a 2017 Pew Research Center survey, conducted among 9,935 respondents in France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Together, these ten European Union member states account for roughly 80% of the EU population and 84% of the EU economy.

Younger Europeans, who have never known a world without the European project, hold particularly positive views of the Brussels-based organization (Figure 3). A median of 73% of those aged 18 to 29 have a

favourable opinion of the EU, compared to a median of 58% of those aged 50+. The generation gap is largest in the UK (33 percentage points between young and old), the Netherlands (23 points) and France (22 points).

The public is also sharply divided along ideological lines in their views of the EU (Figure 4). For the most part, people who place themselves on the left of the political spectrum are more favourably disposed toward the Brussels-based institution, at least compared with people on the right. This gap is 43 points in the UK, 36 points in Italy, 20 points in Poland and 19 points in Germany. Notably, in Spain, the right has a significantly more positive view of the EU, resulting in a gap of 24 points.

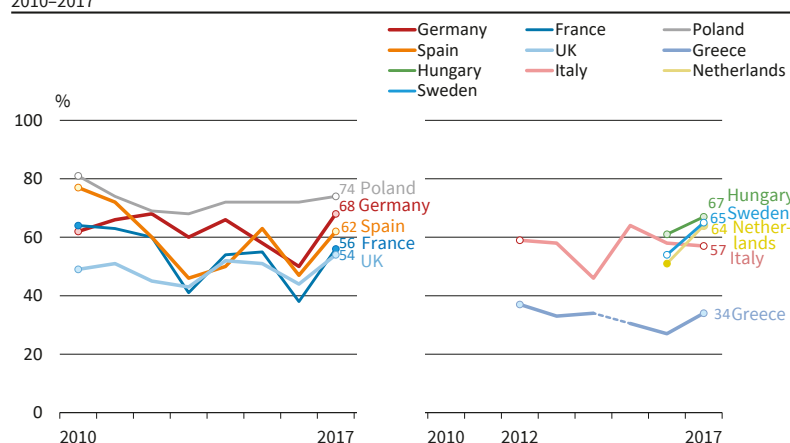
As might be expected, most adherents of Eurosceptic parties do not share the generally positive view of the EU. In the UK, just 31% of those who voice a favorable assessment of UKIP hold a favourable opinion of the EU. And just 41% of the public that expresses a favourable view of the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands see Brussels positively, as do 40% of those who favour



Bruce Stokes
Pew Research Center.

Figure 1

Public Favourable Views of the European Union 2010–2017



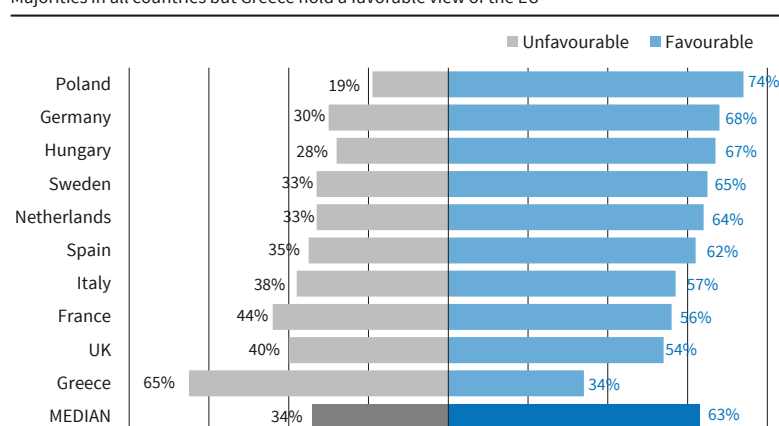
Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q 12f.

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Figure 2

Public Views of the European Union

Majorities in all countries but Greece hold a favorable view of the EU



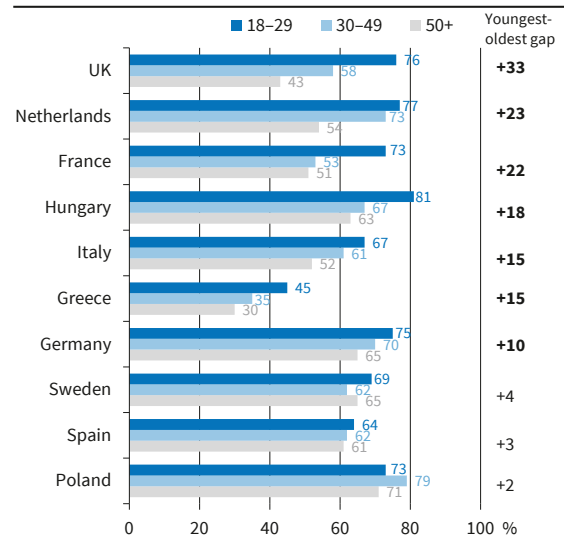
Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q 12f.

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Figure 3

Favourable Views of the European Union by Age Groups

Younger adults more likely to favour the EU



Note: Statistically significant differences in bold.

Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q12f.

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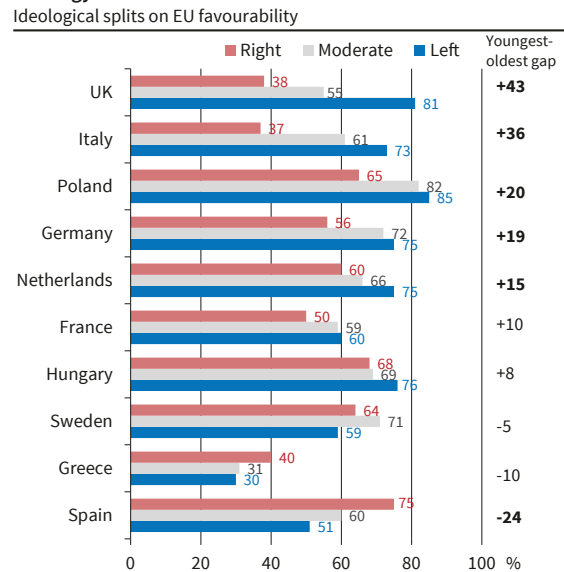
the National Front in France and 40% of those who look favourably on the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) in Germany.

A party's criticism of the European Union does not, however, always mean that its members share that negative view of Brussels. In Italy, 60% of those who look favourably on the Eurosceptic Five Star Movement have a positive view of the EU, or, at least they did in 2017. In Poland, where the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party is in a long-running feud with the EU, 65% of Poles who see PiS favourably still hold a positive opinion of the institution.

Figure 4

Favourable Views of the European Union by Political Ideology

Ideological splits on EU favourability



Note: Statistically significant differences in bold.

Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q12f.

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EU'S HANDLING OF ECONOMY AND REFUGEE CRISIS

More favourable views of the EU do not mean that the general public across Europe judges all of Brussels' actions positively. A median of just 42% approves of how Brussels has dealt with economic issues (Figure 5). The Greeks (12%), Italians (23%) and French (35%) are particularly unimpressed. Only in Germany (61%), Poland (58%) and the Netherlands (54%) do majorities hold a positive view of Brussels' handling of the economy. In these three countries, approval of the EU's economic management is up since last year – by 14 percentage points in Germany, 12 points in the Netherlands and 11 points in Poland.

In Hungary, Italy and Poland, leftist respondents are more likely than rightist respondents to approve of the EU's economic management. For example, only 14% of right-leaning Italians approve of the EU's economic policies, but 35% of left-leaning Italians approve. However, in Spain, 48% of people who place themselves on the right support Brussels' efforts, compared with just 27% of those on the left.

Europeans are even more critical of the EU's handling of the refugee issue. In nine of the ten EU countries surveyed, the public overwhelmingly disapproves of Brussels' efforts (Figure 6). This includes 90% of Greeks, 80% of Italians and 78% of Swedes. The first two nations have been on the front lines of the recent European refugee crisis, often being the first port of call for migrants from Nigeria, Eritrea, Sudan, Syria and Libya. And in Sweden, refugees make up a larger portion of the population than in any country in Europe.

In Germany, Hungary, Italy and Poland, respondents on the right of the ideological spectrum are less likely than those on the left to approve of the EU's performance on refugee issues. For example, only 23% of Hungarians on the right are happy with EU refugee policies, but 43% of left-leaning Hungarians are satisfied. However, in Spain the right is more positive – 37% of right-wing Spaniards approve of the EU's actions, compared with just 23% of left-wing Spaniards.

Those who have a favourable view of anti-immigrant parties are particularly judgmental about Brussels' handling of refugees. Among Swedes who have a favorable view of the Swedish Democratic Party, 84% disapprove of what the EU has done on refugees. For the French who see the National Front favourably, 76% criticize the EU on refugee policy, as do 67% of the Dutch who favour the PVV.

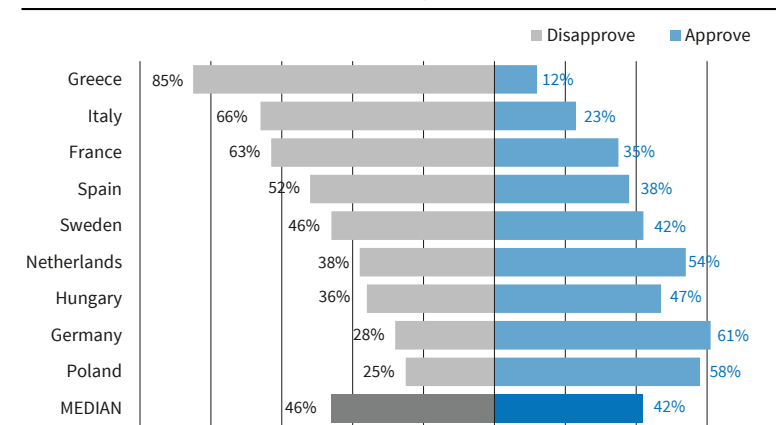
MOST EUROPEANS JUDGE BREXIT AS BAD FOR EU AND UK

In 2016, voters in the United Kingdom narrowly approved beginning a process of leaving the European Union. Today, the general public across the European continent thinks that the UK's exit will be detrimental for both the EU and the UK. For their part, Britons agree

Figure 5

Public Views on the EU Handling of Economic Issues

Do you ____ of the way the European Union is dealing with European economic issues?



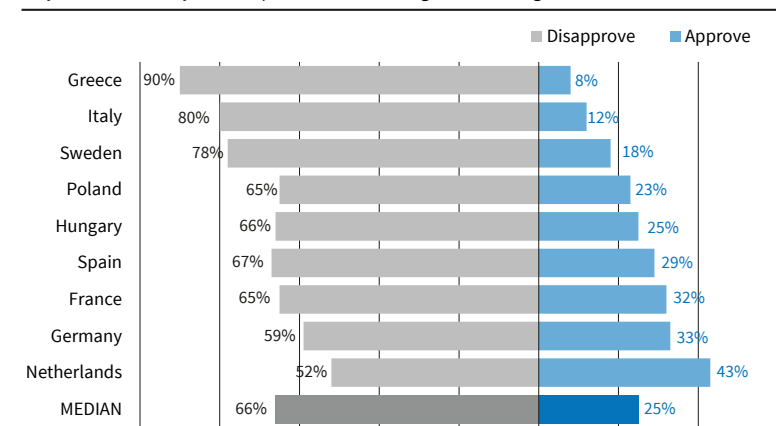
Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q 46a.

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Figure 6

Public Views on the EU Handling of the Refugee Issue

Do you ____ of the way the European Union is dealing with the refugee issue?



Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q 46b.

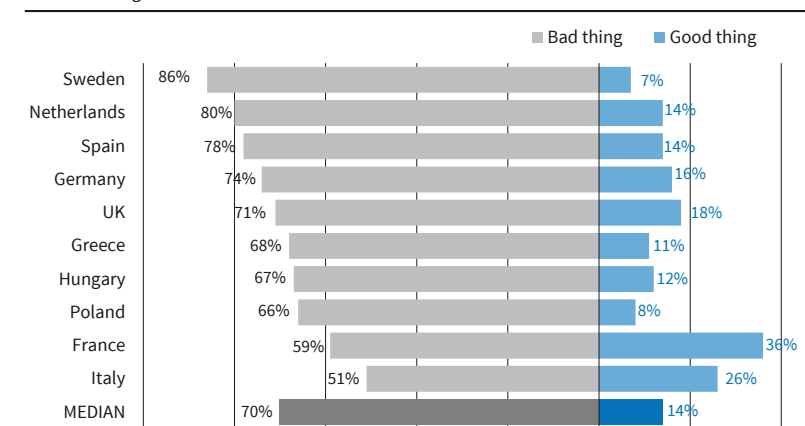
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that their country's exit will be bad for the European project, but are divided over what it means for the UK. A median of 70% in the ten EU nations surveyed think Brexit will be a bad thing for the EU (Figure 7). This includes 86% of Swedes, 80% of the Dutch and 74% of Germans. Notably, 36% of the French and 26% of Italians say the UK leaving will be good for the Union. Young people in France, the Netherlands and the UK are more worried about Brexit's consequences for the EU than their elders. And those on the left in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK are

Figure 7

Public Views on the Effect of Brexit on the EU

The UK leaving the EU will be a ____ for the EU



Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q 48a.

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more concerned than those on the right.

A median of 55% also say Brexit will prove bad for the UK, with Western Europeans more pessimistic than those in Central and Southern Europe. Germans (80%), Dutch (73%) and Spanish (70%) strongly believe that Brexit bodes ill for the UK (Figure 8). A plurality of Greeks (46%) and over a third of Italians (36%) say leaving the EU will turn out to be good for the British. Notably, about one-in-five Hungarians and a quarter of Poles voice no opinion on the implications for the UK.

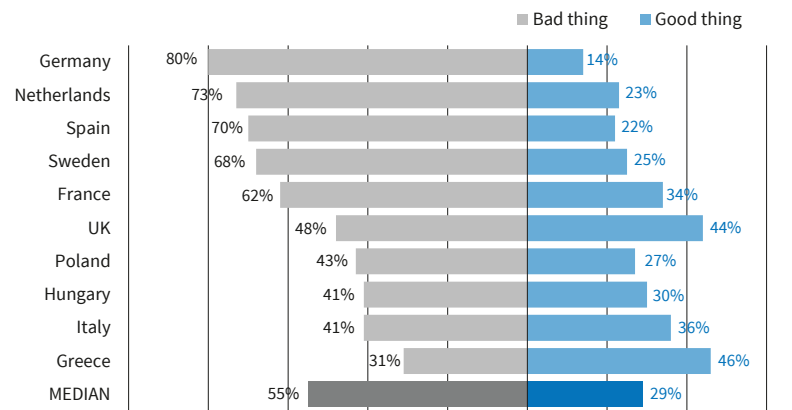
The British, for their part, are divided: 44% believe it will be good for the UK to get out of the EU; while 48% worry it will be a bad thing.

In many European countries, those on the left are more likely than those on the right to believe Brexit will be bad for the UK. In no country is the ideological divide wider than in the UK itself, where 82% of those on the left say Brexit will turn out badly for the UK and 58% of those on the right say it will be a good thing.

Figure 8

Public Views on the Effect of Brexit on the EU

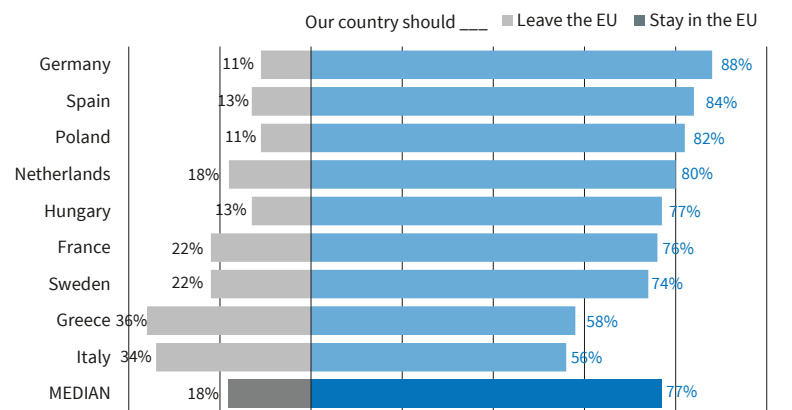
The UK leaving the EU will be a ____ for the EU



Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q 48b.

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Figure 9

Public Views on Own Country's EU Membership

Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q 45.

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FEW EUROPEANS WANT THEIR OWN COUNTRY TO EXIT THE EU

Few citizens on the European continent seem eager to see their own country depart from the EU, as the UK plans to do.

A median of just 18% in the nine continental EU nations surveyed want their own country to leave the EU. Greece and Italy are home to the largest number of exit supporters, but even in these countries over half of all citizens want to remain a part of the European project.

Large majorities across many EU member states surveyed want their nation to stay in the EU (Figure 9). Eight-in-ten or more in Germany (88%), Spain (84%), Poland (82%) and the Netherlands (80%) back remaining. More than seven-in-ten in Hungary (77%), France (76%) and Sweden (74%) also wish to stay in the EU. Even in Greece, where the public is highly critical of the EU, 58% of the public wants to remain a member.

A favourable view of Euro-sceptic parties does not necessarily translate into support for leaving the EU. In Germany, 69% of those with a positive view of the AfD still want Germany to remain in the EU. In France, 54% of those who voice a positive opinion about the National Front nevertheless back staying in the EU.

Greece and Italy are the only countries in which a third of survey participants support leaving the EU. In Italy, at least, the prospect of exiting the European project is a deeply ideological issue. Support from those on the right (56%) for leaving the EU is more than twice that found among left-wing Italians (22%).

While the public across Europe generally favours remaining in the EU, most citizens also support holding their own national referendum on EU membership, possibly reflecting a broader interest in their voices being heard on such major national issues. Majorities in Spain (65%), France (61%), Greece (58%) and Italy (57%) support such a national vote; and roughly half of Swedes (53%), Poles (51%) and Germans (50%) agree (Figure 10). Hungarians are divided over whether to hold a referendum, while more than half of the Dutch are against it (54% oppose).

There is stronger support for an EU vote from the right wing than from the left in France, Germany and Italy. In Spain, by contrast, it is the left wing that wants such a vote, including 80% of those who support Podemos. Not surprisingly, given their Euroscepticism, 84% of National Front supporters in France want a referendum on continued EU membership. In Germany, 69% of those who favour the AfD also want their own vote, as do 69% of those who support the PVV in the Netherlands and 63% of Five Star Movement members in Italy.

ON IMMIGRATION AND TRADE: LESS EUROPE

Support for remaining in the EU is strong across continental Europe; but so is support for taking back some powers from Brussels. Many Europeans want national governments, rather than Brussels, to control future migration both from outside the EU (a median of 74%

across the nine continental European nations polled) and within the EU (a median of 66%) (Figure 11). Moreover, a median of 51% would prefer their own governments, not Brussels, to negotiate future trade agreements with the rest of the world.

A total of 2.4 million migrants settled in the 28 EU countries from non-EU member nations in 2015. Many were refugees from war-torn Syria and North Africa. EU citizens are quite critical of the EU's handling of refugee issues. They also want their national governments to be the ones making decisions about the migration of non-EU citizens into their countries.

Roughly eight-in-ten in Hungary (82%) and seven-in-ten or more in Poland (77%), France (75%), Germany (75%), the Netherlands (74%), Greece (70%) and Sweden (70%) want their national government to make such judgements, not Brussels. In France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, the Netherlands and Sweden, it is people on the right more than left-wing citizens who back national sovereignty over external immigration. In Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, people aged 50 and older are more likely than those aged 18 to 29 to want their national government to control such immigration. But in Spain, it is younger people who are more likely to want Madrid to control such policy.

The free movement of people within the EU is one of the core four freedoms – along with the free movement of capital, goods and services – guaranteed by EU treaties. In 2015, 1.4 million people migrated from one EU state to another. But in 2017, over half of survey participants in all nine EU nations wanted their own governments to take responsibility for making the rules on the migration of EU citizens into their countries. Roughly seven-in-ten in France (71%), Poland (71%), Hungary (69%) and Sweden (69%) want their own capitals, not Brussels, to make such decisions. Italy and Poland join France, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden as societies where the ideological right is more supportive than the left of the exer-

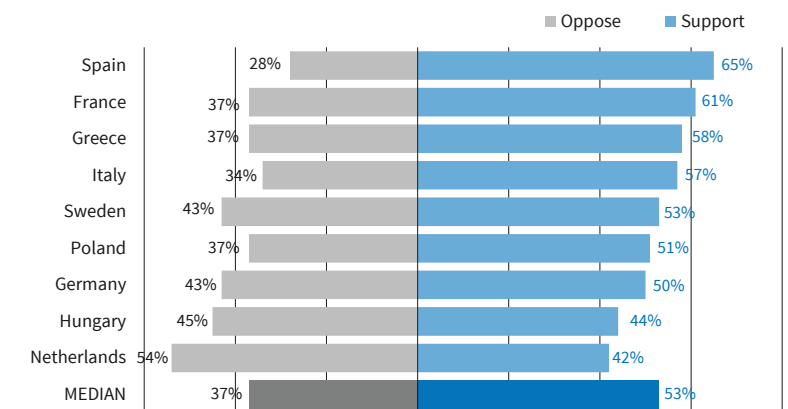
cise of national sovereignty over internal migration. Germany and Sweden are again the countries where there is a generational gap over views of such movements of people, with older respondents more likely to say power should reside with national governments.

The authority to make trade agreements has rested with Brussels since 1957, when the European Economic Community, the EU's predecessor, was created. In recent years such accords have met with a great deal of public resistance. Majorities in Greece (63%), Sweden and France (both 56%), and Hungary (55%) want the power to make trade deals to return to the hands of their national governments, as do about half

Figure 10

Public Views on Holding a National Referendum on EU Membership

Would ____ holding a national referendum on our country's European Union membership



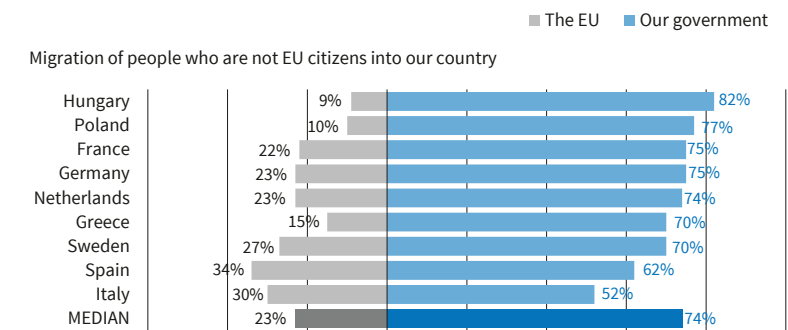
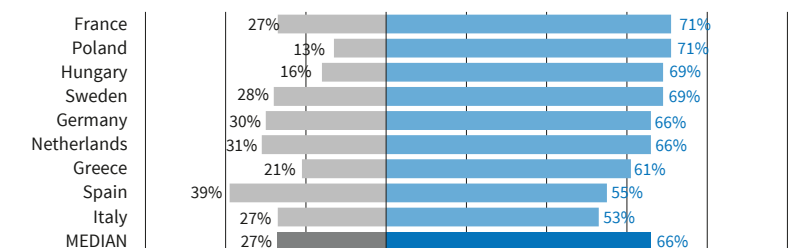
Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q 44.

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Figure 11

Public Views on Decisions Regarding Migration Issues

Do you think our government should make decisions about ____ for our country or should the EU make decisions about this issue?

**Migration of EU citizens into our country**

Note: Volunteered categories "Both" and "Neither" not shown.

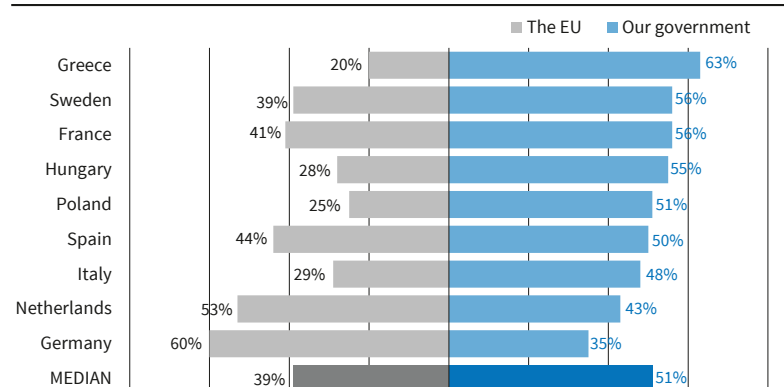
Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q 47b-c.

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Figure 12

Public Views on Decisions Regarding Trade Agreements

Do you think our government should make decisions about international trade agreements for our country or should the EU make decisions about this issue?



Note: Volunteered categories "Both" and "Neither" not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q 47a.

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of Poles, Spanish and Italians (Figure 12). Only the Germans (60%) want trade agreement authority to remain with the EU. In France, Hungary, Italy and the Netherlands, more people on the right than on the left want to take back responsibility for trade decision making; and it is older more than younger people in France, Germany and the Netherlands who want to reclaim that sovereignty.