

Public Opinion on a European Health Union

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1.3 | Public Opinion on a European Health Union

Introduction

The role of public opinion is of prominent importance in representative democracies, where one of the fundamental expectations is that public policy is a function of public opinion – regardless of whether this expectation is met in practice.¹ However, this relationship between policy and public opinion is not straightforward in the European Union context. Public opinion evolved from being irrelevant to EU policies to an increasingly crucial factor in the EU integration process. This change in the role of public opinion is partially ascribed to the increasing politicisation of the EU in domestic politics.

In the preceding chapters, we delved into the economic, demographic, and institutional changes in Europe and the progressive development of the European project. In this chapter, we will concisely explore the evolution of EU public opinion over the history of the EU and its role in EU and national policies. Moreover, we will touch on the avenues through which public opinion can affect EU policies and the tools that the EU uses to probe the views of its citizens. Finally, the most recent opinion surveys will be analysed and verified against the citizen-led Conference on the Future of Europe’s proposals to establish the public opinion climate regarding health-related issues within the EU.

¹ Wlezien, C., and S. N. Soroka (2016) “Public opinion and public policy”, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

1. Overview of the Role of Citizens' Will in the Political Process of the EU

During the early stages of the European project (1958 until the 1990s), European governance and legal system were mainly pushed by economic dispute adjudication between firms. This highly technocratic impetus drove the EU's policymaking process and rendered public opinion quiescent.² During those decades, the national and European elites shepherded European integration. Public opinion was peripheral to following European political and economic integration during this period, and was referred to as *permissive consensus*.

Nonetheless, since the final decade of the last century, public opinion has shifted to a more central role in the EU policy scene, coined by theorists as *constraining dissensus*.³ Over time, EU integration has deepened, and EU issues (like the Eurozone debt crisis, the immigration challenge, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic response, etc.) have become increasingly politicised in national and European elections. Moreover, the rise of Eurosceptic parties and the increased salience of EU issues to domestic politics made understanding public opinion instrumental for political leaders to consider during their regional negotiations and cooperation strategies.^{4, 5} This shift closed the political circle in the EU. On the one hand, the EU's policy choices are stimulated by domestic politics, which reflects the goals and constraints of the public. On the other hand, domestic politics, in turn, is influenced by these policy choices.⁶ This circle is demonstrated in Figure 1.

2 Hooghe, L., and G. Marks (2009) "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining", *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1): 1–23.

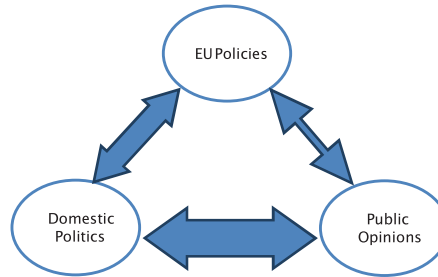
3 Ibid.

4 Schneider, C. J. (2013) "Globalizing electoral politics: Political competence and distributional bargaining in the European Union", in *World Politics*, 65(3): 452–490.

5 Hobolt, S. B., and C. E. de Vries (2016) "Public Support for European Integration", *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19 (1): 413–432.

6 Schneider, C. J. (2017) "The Political Economy of Regional Integration", *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20(1): 229–248.

Figure 1. The EU policy influence circle.



Source – authors' own design

2. How Does Public Opinion Affect the EU Policymaking Process?

The EU public can voice their views, goals, and constraints on EU politics through referendums, European and national parliamentary elections, and the EU policymaking process.⁷ These avenues through which the EU public can affect the EU will be demonstrated with examples to convey the relevancy of each.

Referendums

Since 1972, EU member states have witnessed more than 45 referendums on EU-related issues, most of which are on whether to become a member of the EU. That said, referendums have touched on other EU-related issues, such as adopting the euro and other EU policies. In this regard, the Maastricht Treaty (the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) in 1992 and the following ratification process triggered several referendums around the EU. Ireland ratified the Treaty readily with around 70% support in the public votes; but Denmark rejected it (50.7% of the population voted against), leading to four Danish opt-outs from the Treaty regarding the economic and monetary union and common defence, among others. The Danish referendum of 1992 is among the first examples of when public opinion constrains the governmental effort in European integration.⁸

⁷ De Vries, C. E. (2020) "Public opinion in European Union politics", in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁸ Ibid.

European and National Parliamentary elections

The European Parliament (EP) elections were regarded, traditionally, as “second-order national elections” where domestic concerns overshadowed the political agenda.⁹ That entails a lower turnout in the EP elections compared to the national ones, a high proportion of protest votes, and more support for more minor and ideologically more extreme parties. The EP elections were perceived as a means to voice voters’ discontent with domestic politics and to punish and reward the current government. Nevertheless, more recent work by EU scholars has suggested that due to the growing role of the European Parliament in EU policymaking, the behaviour of EU voters became increasingly influenced by the attitudes taken by the EU. Eurosceptic political entrepreneurs spotted and capitalised on the gap between mainstream parties’ pro-European position and the Eurosceptic attitudes of a large proportion of EU voters due to a more infringing role of the EU in domestic policymaking. In particular, those more extreme Eurosceptic parties could link issues like austerity and immigration to the European integration project and achieve many electoral successes. EU scholars attributed the surge in Eurosceptic party support in the 2014 EP elections to voters who had been adversely affected by the economic crisis of 2008 and discontent with the EU’s handling of the crisis. This electoral reaction suggests that European issues have an impact on EP elections.

That being said, national elections are an instrumental avenue through which public opinions could feed into the EU policymaking process too. The importance of national elections to EU policy is attributed to the fact that national governments are represented in the Council of the EU, which remains the single most powerful decision-making body in the EU. As the ministers in the Council are ultimately accountable to their national parliament, not the EP, national elections might prove more effective for voters to voice their opinions about European integration.^{10, 11}

9 Reif, K., and H. Schmitt (1980) “Nine second-order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results”, *European Journal of Political Research*, 8(1): 3–44.

10 De Vries, C. E. (2007) “Sleeping giant: Fact or fairytale? How European integration affects national elections”, *European Union Politics*, 8(3), 363–385

11 De Vries, C. E. (2020) “Public opinion in European Union politics”.

EU Policy Making

The extent to which public opinion shapes policymaking on European integration has been explored by EU scholars to determine to which degree the priorities of EU and government officials reflect the contours of European public opinion. Some authors have concluded that since the Eurozone crisis, the agenda of the Council of the EU has closely mirrored the ranking of public concerns. This alignment is pushed by the responsiveness of national governments to public opinions in the Council. Especially when those governments face a Eurosceptic domestic electorate or when the EU issue is more salient in domestic party competition. This may largely be the result of an increased likelihood of ratification failures or punishment in domestic elections.¹²

3. Eurobarometer: the EU polling instrument

As noted above, the significance of public opinion has grown in prominence and influence in the policymaking process of the European Union. Consequently, the EU has proactively engaged in polling to gain a comprehensive understanding of public sentiment. This polling has taken various forms. This section will focus on the Eurobarometer, as well as insights from the citizen-led Conference on the Future of Europe.

The Eurobarometer is the polling instrument used by the European Commission, the European Parliament and other EU institutions and agencies to regularly monitor the state of public opinion in Europe on issues related to the European Union as well as attitudes on subjects of a political or social nature. The data produced by the Eurobarometer is provided for experts in public opinion, researchers, media and the public.¹³

The Eurobarometer project was initiated in 1974 within the European Commission and was conceived to “reveal Europeans to themselves”.¹⁴ Since then, it has evolved and expanded significantly with different survey tools. In 2007, the European Parliament started commissioning its own regular series of Eurobarometer surveys, focussing on topics specific to

¹² Ibid.

¹³ European Commission (2023) *Eurobarometer - Retrieved 31 May 2023* (Brussels: European Commission).

¹⁴ European Commission (2023) *Eurobarometer - Retrieved 31 May 2023* (Brussels: European Commission).

the European Parliament, including the European elections. Eurobarometer surveys may employ different methodological approaches, depending on the type or topic of the survey. Each survey publication contains technical specifications and explanations on the methodology (face-to-face, telephone, and Online) and sample size used in each of the countries or territories surveyed, as well as information on confidence levels.¹⁵

The wide range of topics covered consistently over a long time, the regularity of publications, and geographical coverage make the Eurobarometer a unique source of knowledge and information in the European Union. The Eurobarometer data will be used in this chapter to examine the opinions of European citizens and investigate their attitudes towards the European Health Union.

4. Analysis of the recent Eurobarometer surveys

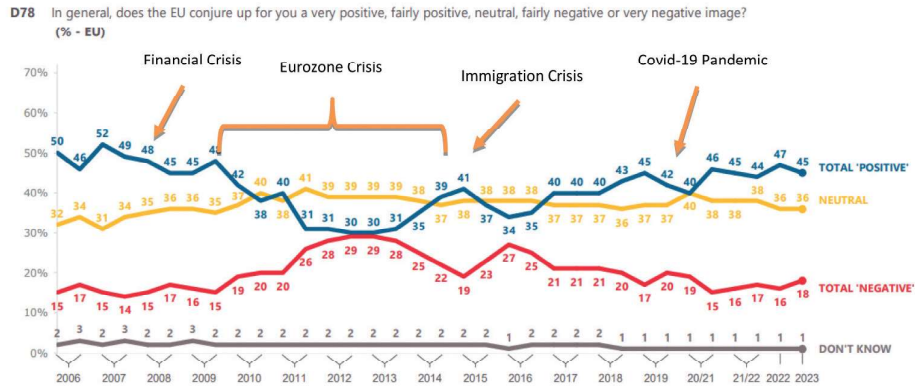
Data were gathered from six Eurobarometer standard surveys (no. 87 and nos. 94-98 conducted between Spring 2017 and Winter 2022-2023), a special European Parliament Autumn 2021 survey, and the Future of Europe 2020 Special Eurobarometer.

Perception of the EU

Tens of thousands of Europeans of different jurisdictions and demographics were surveyed for their views. Some of the health-relevant opinions were obtained and demonstrated in this chapter. Starting with the image of the EU, the vast majority of Europeans hold either a positive or, to a lesser extent, a neutral image of the EU (45% and 36%, respectively). Less than 15% have a negative view - see Figure 2. Notably, a discernible pattern emerges wherein the EU experiences a decline in positive perception following each major challenge it has encountered since 2006. This is evident after the 2008 financial crisis, the Eurozone debt crisis debate in 2011, and the immigration crisis of 2014. However, this pattern reversed after the Covid-19 pandemic, with an increase in positive views of the EU and a reduction in negative sentiments. This distinct pattern is observed in optimism about the EU's future and the trust in EU institutions, as we will see later.

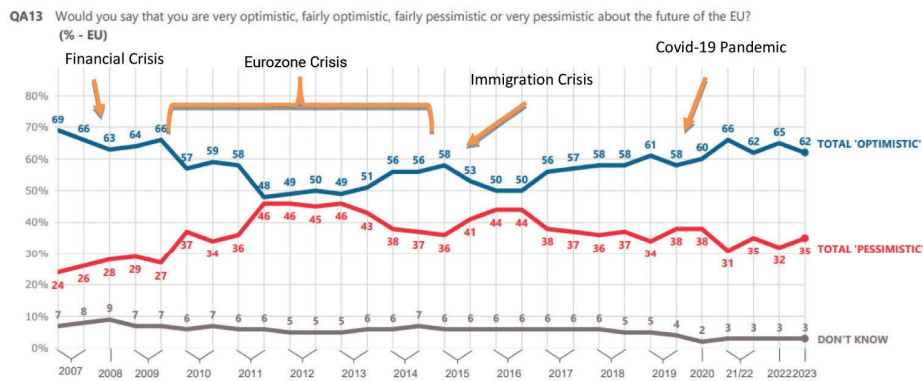
¹⁵ Ibid.

Figure 2. The image of the European Union – a trend over time¹⁶



This overall positive view of the EU is coupled with optimism about the EU’s future, as around 65% of respondents are optimistic about its future. In figure 3, we can identify the same distinct pattern seen in the trends regarding citizens’ image of the EU. Optimism has consistently waned following every EU crisis since 2006, apart from during Covid-19, the most devastating global health crisis witnessed in the past century.

Figure 3. The Future of the European Union – a trend over time¹⁷



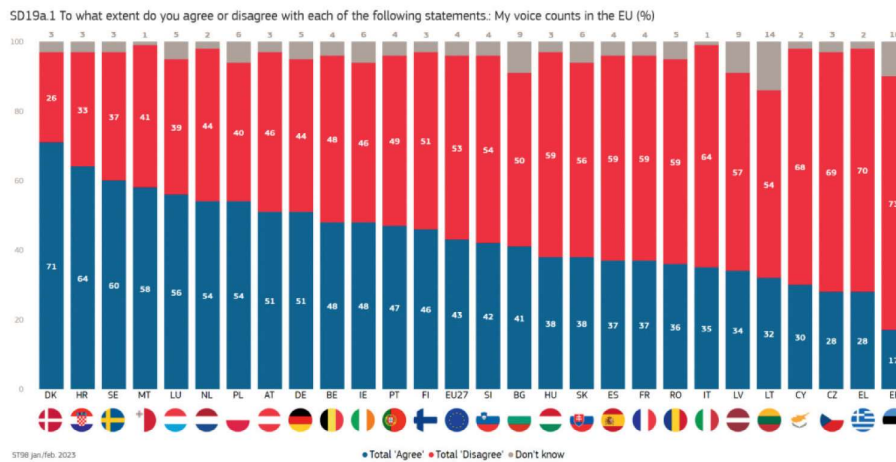
16 European Commission (2023b) *Public opinion in the European Union – First results: winter 2022-2023* (Brussels: European Commission).

17 Ibid.

Despite this optimism, European citizens still feel that their voices do not count in the EU and want to be heard more. This is discernible in that 53% of the surveyed EU citizens disagree with the statement: “My voice counts in the EU”. Figure 4 shows the percentages for each MS. When examining countries below the EU average of agreement with the mentioned statement, it is evident that many citizens of eastern and southern EU member states feel their voices hold little weight within the EU. However, there are exceptions to this trend, including France (western) and the Balkan countries (northern), which share similar sentiments. Conversely, surveyed Croatians, Maltese, and Portuguese stand out among southern European countries in feeling that their voices are heard within the EU. Furthermore, the vast majority of Europeans (90% of respondents) want their voices to be heard more in decisions relating to the future of the EU, as demonstrated in Figure 5.

It is evident that Europeans hold a positive perception of the EU and desire to have a more active role and involvement in shaping the future of the Union. This outlook prompts a timely exploration of the concerns voiced by EU citizens and the specific actions they seek from European institutions.

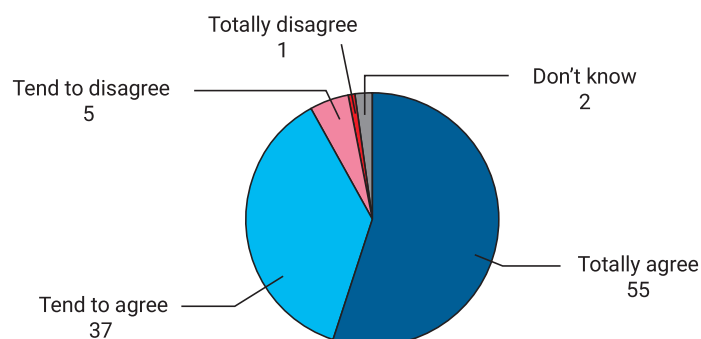
Figure 4. Country percentages of agreement/disagreement with the statement: “My voice counts in the EU”.¹⁸



18 European Commission (2023c). *Europeans’ opinions about the European Union’s priorities – Report* (Brussels: European Commission).

Figure 5. Agreement with the statement: “EU citizens’ voice should be more taken into account for decisions relating to the future of Europe”.¹⁹

QA4.1 Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, EU citizens’ voice should be more taken into account for decisions relating to the future of Europe (% - EU)



EU citizens’ concerns and demands

EU citizens clearly want to be heard. So, when they were surveyed regarding the most crucial issues at both national and EU levels, the topic of health featured prominently in their responses. Health has consistently ranked among the primary concerns of EU citizens for an extended period. Figure 6 illustrates the long-term trend of major “country-level” concerns since 2007, where health remains a prevalent answer despite fluctuations in other concerns, such as “Unemployment” during the global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis, or “Immigration” in 2014 and 2015. As might be expected, during the winter of 2020-2021, the health-related concern reached its peak, emerging as the most significant national issue for respondents, as depicted in Figure 7.

Prior to 2019, health was not included as a response option in Eurobarometer surveys regarding the most important issue at the “EU level”. However, once introduced in 2019, health quickly emerged as one of the top concerns. Similarly, on country-level issues, during the winter of 2020-2021 (during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic), health became the foremost concern among EU citizens, surpassing other

¹⁹ European Commission, European Parliament, Directorate-General for Communication, Directorate-General for Communication, (2021). *Future of Europe – First results: report* (Brussels: European Commission).

concerns such as the economic and financial situation, climate change, immigration, unemployment, and the cost of living, as illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 6. The most important issues facing EU citizens at the country level between 2007 and 2017²⁰

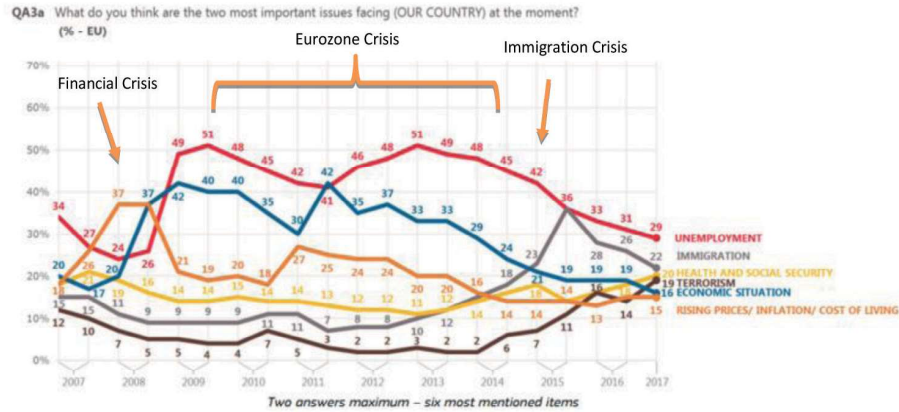
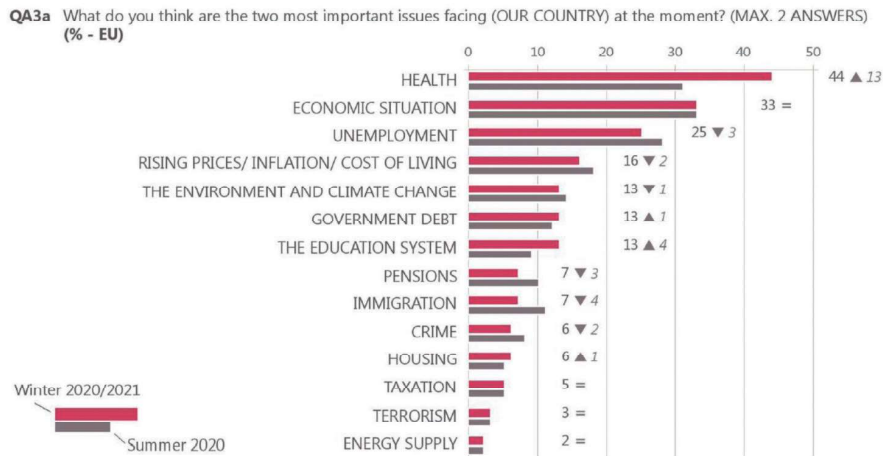


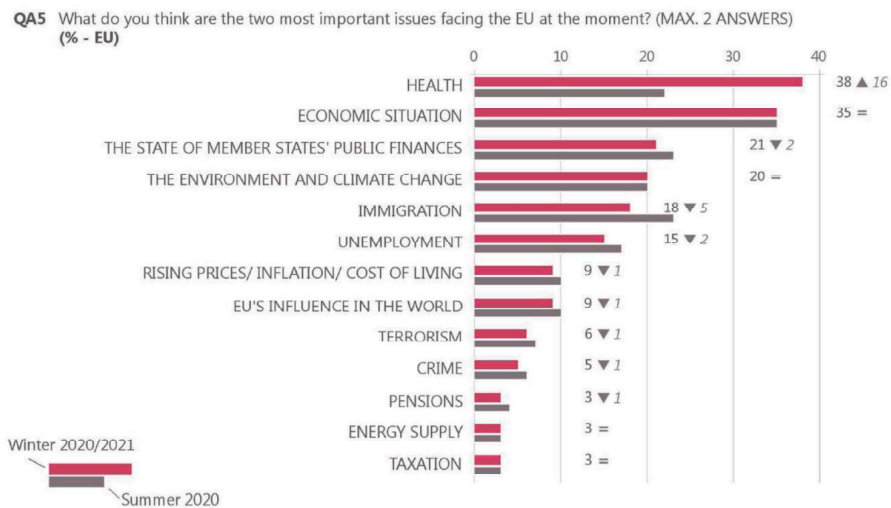
Figure 7. Most important issues facing EU citizens on the country level in 2020 and 2021²¹



20 European Commission (2017) *Public opinion in the European Union – First results* (Brussels: European Commission).

21 European Commission (2021) *Public opinion in the European Union – Report* (Brussels: European Commission).

Figure 8. The Most important issues facing the EU at the moment, Summer 2020 and Winter 2020-2021²²



Further, the European Parliament survey of Autumn 2021 asked EU citizens to prioritise the topics they want the EP to address. Figure 9 shows that most respondents (42%) wanted to see the EP prioritising “public health”, followed by “the fight against poverty and social exclusion” (40%) and “action against climate change” (39%). In different orders, though, those priority areas were identified by other Eurobarometer surveys – like the Special Eurobarometer Survey on the Future of Europe 2021. The identified priority topics of action demanded to be addressed by the EU parliament show that Europeans would like to see the European project, through its institutions, growing more social and to have a role in public health and social inequalities.

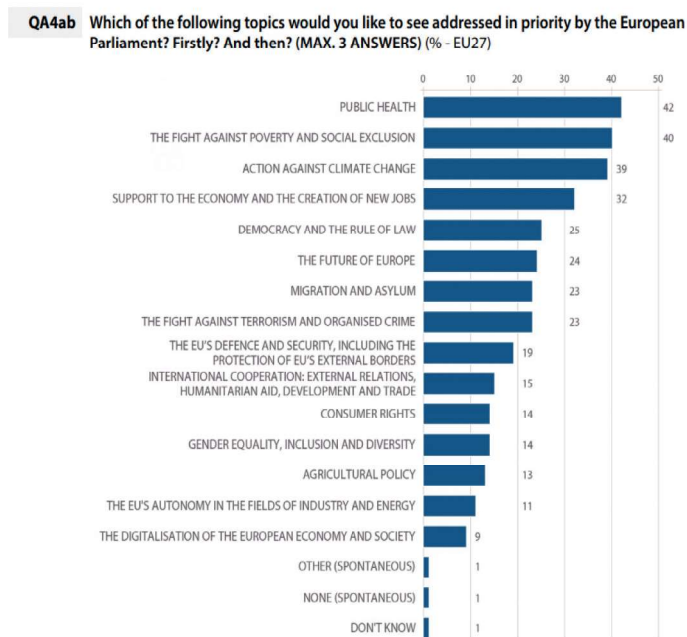
In addition, the European Commission asked EU citizens about the actions the EU should prioritise in response to the Covid-19 health threat. Consistently, answers leaned mainly towards a joint European preparedness and response strategy and a European health policy. Figure 10 presents the responses for spring 2020 and winter 2020-2021. However, this line of answers is comparable with other surveys conducted before and after those years. Notably, during the summer of 2022, the Eurobarometer survey posed a question to Europeans regarding their stance on a “common

²² Ibid.

EU health policy". The survey results revealed a resounding consensus among Europeans, with an overwhelming 70% of respondents expressing support for the establishment of a common EU health policy.²³

Finally, trust is the foundation of effective governance and institutional functioning, and when individuals trust institutions such as government agencies, regulatory bodies, and healthcare organisations, they are more likely to comply with policies, seek services, and believe in the system's fairness. Moreover, trust in institutions can positively impact public health outcomes by encouraging cooperation, adherence to public health guidelines, and engagement in preventive measures. This positive impact of trust was evident in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and other health crises like SARS, H1N1 and Ebola.²⁴

Figure 9. Topics that should be prioritised by the European Parliament, Autumn 2021²⁵



23 European Commission (2022) *Public Opinion in the European Union – Annex: summer 2022* (Brussels: European Commission).

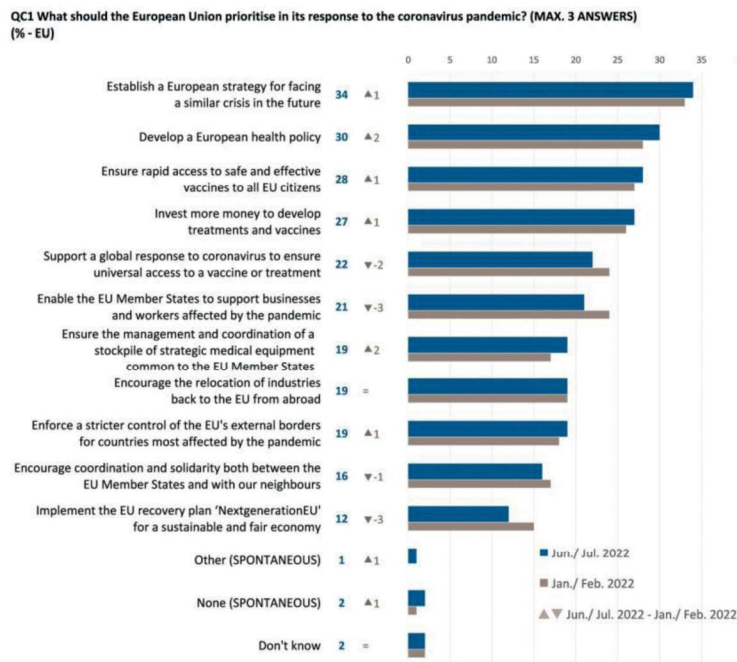
24 OECD (2022) *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy: Main Findings from the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions* (Paris: OECD).

25 European Parliament, D. Tsoulou Malakoudi, M. Alpoegger, M. Büttner (2022) *European Parliament Eurobarometer – Defending democracy, empowering citizens: public opinion at the legislature's midpoint* (Brussels: European Parliament).

To gauge trust levels, Europeans were asked to express their trust in the European Union, their national parliament, and their national government. The survey²⁶ revealed that respondents place significantly higher trust in the EU than in their national institutions. Figure 11 shows this difference amounted to around 15 percentage points in 2022, with 47% for the EU and 32% and 33% for national governments and parliaments.

In the context of European opinions, it is evident that the predominant sentiment is for the EU to enhance its social dimension and play a more prominent role in health governance and policymaking. This sentiment is accompanied by a positive and optimistic perception of the EU and a noteworthy level of trust in the EU that surpasses many citizens' trust in their own national institutions.

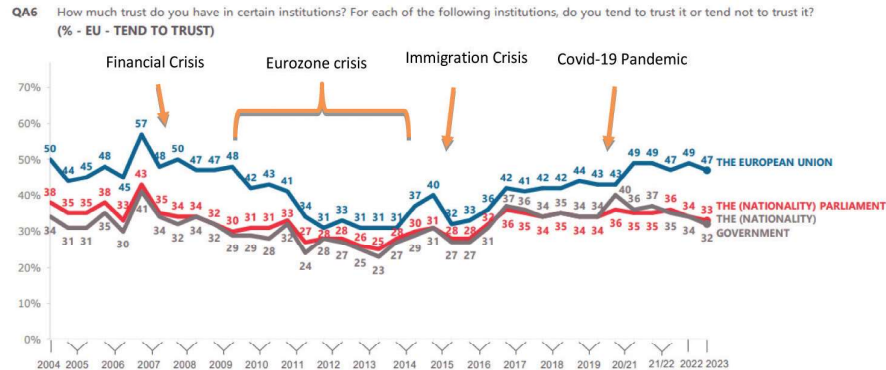
Figure 10. Priorities for the coronavirus pandemic response, Winter 2021-2022 and Summer 2022²⁷



26 European Commission (2022) *Public Opinion in the European Union – Annex: summer 2022*

27 European Commission (2023a) *Public opinion in the European Union – Report* (Brussels: European Commission).

Figure 11. Trust in national and EU institutions – a trend over time.²⁸



1.3.5 The Conference on the Future of Europe

The above-mentioned public opinion surveys will be examined against the Conference on the Future of Europe proposals to give a more complete picture of EU citizens’ opinion on health and the desired action from EU institutions.

The Conference on the Future of Europe was a citizen-led series of debates and discussions from April 2021 to May 2022. It was the first of its kind, as a major pan-European democratic exercise with citizen-led debates, enabling people from across Europe to share their ideas and help shape our common future. This was done via an innovative Multilingual Digital Platform where any European could share ideas, as well as via national panels and European Citizens’ Panels. There were more than 5 million unique visitors to the platform and more than 700,000 event attendees participated in the Conference.²⁹

After an exceptional yearlong journey of discussions, deliberations and collaboration by citizens from across Europe on the kind of Europe they would like to live in, the citizens’ panels came up with multiple health-related proposals. European participants called for various health-related objectives and several concrete actions to be considered by the three European institutions on how to follow up effectively on them, each within

²⁸ European Commission (2023b) *Public opinion in the European Union – First results: winter 2022-2023* (Brussels: European Commission).

²⁹ Council of the European Union, General Secretariat of the Council (2022) *Conference on the Future of Europe – Report on the final outcome: May 2022* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union). DOI: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2860/637445>

their own spheres of competences and in accordance with the Treaties. On the one hand, some of the health-related proposals can be pursued under the current treaties, like those about healthy food and healthy lifestyles, resilience and quality of the healthcare system, and a broader understanding of health (applying the One Health approach) - see Table 1. On the other hand, some of the required actions clearly demanded the amendment of the Treaties, namely Article 4 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), to make Health a shared competence between the two. Table 1 shows the proposed objectives and actions from the Health Panel of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Box: National Attitudes to an EU Health Union – The Case of Hungary
Publicus Institute, commissioned by the commission of the European Parliament’s S&D group, measured public opinion towards the European Health Union by surveying 2,499 individuals in a representative telephone survey in December, 2020.*

The results showed**:

- 71% of the surveyed Hungarians support the creation of the European Health Union.
- 61% would improve/rather improve their opinion about the European Union if a health union were realised.
- 60% rather agree that it would be better if the European Union could have a say in how its member states run their healthcare systems, in order to improve their quality.
- 87% rather agree that a minimum standard of healthcare is needed, that all member states must provide for their citizens.
- 64% rather agree that the European Union should establish a minimum amount that member states must spend on healthcare.

Moreover, in an online consultation regarding the European Health Union in 2020, which primarily involved respondents from professional unions and local governments, revealed that 54% believe that there is a need for a European directive to guarantee universal, non-discriminatory access to publicly funded health services, so that all people have access to socially guaranteed healthcare at a cost that does not affect their quality of life. Conversely, 15% did not agree with the previous statement and 31% did not give a clear answer.***

* Publicus Research (2020) European Health Union – Telephone Survey: December 2020 (Budapest: Publicus Research).

** Note. Political orientation affects the answers. The respondents that favour the opposition party in Hungary are more likely to support a bigger role of the EU in health than those who favour the government in Hungary.

*** Kökény M., O. Süli, and I. Ujhelyi (2021) *How Could the European Health Union Help the Hungarian Healthcare to Catch-Up?* (Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies).

Table I. The health-related proposals and measures of the Conference on the Future of Europe

Objectives	Measures
Healthy food and healthy lifestyle	<p>- The Conference Plenary proposes setting minimum standards for food quality, and traceability, including limiting the use of antibiotics and other animal medicinal products.</p> <p>- Equally important is educating people about healthy habits from an early age and encouraging them to make safe and healthy choices through better consumer information and labelling.</p> <p>They also recommend investing in research on the impact of the use of antibiotics and the effects of hormonal substances and endocrine disruptors on human health.</p>
Resilience and quality of healthcare systems	<p>Ensuring adequate working conditions and harmonisation of training and certification standards for health professionals, as well as the creation of a European health data space.</p> <p>Investment in health systems should be increased, in particular public and not-for-profit, infrastructure and digital health, and existing health research and innovation programmes should be further developed, coordinated and funded.</p> <p>The Conference Plenary also recommends ensuring strategic autonomy at the EU level to avoid dependency on third countries for medicines and medical devices, as well as coordinated strategic stockpiling throughout the EU.</p>
A broader understanding of health	<p>The EU should adopt a holistic approach to health, addressing, beyond diseases and cures, health literacy and prevention, and fostering a shared understanding of the challenges faced by those who are ill or disabled, in line with the “One Health” approach, which should be emphasised as a horizontal and fundamental principle encompassing all EU policies.</p> <p>The Plenary recommends improving the understanding of mental health issues and ways of addressing them, including the development of an EU Action Plan on mental health.</p> <p>First aid courses should be developed and made available free of charge, and a standard educational programme on healthy lifestyles, also covering sexual education, should be created.</p>
Equal access to health for all	<p>The adopted proposals recommend that a “right to health” should be established to guarantee that all Europeans have equal and universal access to affordable, preventive, curative and quality health care.</p> <p>Access to existing treatments should be ensured, through facilitating cross-border cooperation, notably on rare diseases, cancer, cardiovascular diseases and highly specialised treatments.</p> <p>In order to achieve the necessary coordinated, long-term action at the Union level through an enhanced European Health Union, health and healthcare should be included among the shared competencies between the EU and its member states by amending Article 4 TFEU.</p>

Conclusion

The legitimacy of the European Union heavily relies on public support. Over time, the role of public opinion has evolved and gained more significance in European politics and the integration process. Despite this progress, there is a prevailing sentiment among the majority of EU citizens that their opinions should be given greater consideration.

One prominent issue that concerns Europeans is health. They strongly desire the EU to address public health matters and effectively respond to future health threats through a unified European policy. Recognising the magnitude of this task, Europeans understand that achieving such a policy would necessitate amending the Treaties of the EU.

The demands of Europeans regarding public health issues have been clear and unequivocal. Now, it is up to the politicians of the Union to take action. The responsibility lies in their hands to respond to the aspirations of citizens and take the necessary steps towards building a more comprehensive and cohesive European Health Union. By acknowledging and addressing the public's concerns, politicians can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of the EU in matters of public health and strengthen the overall integration process.

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