

# UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY

July 2015



THE  
PERILS  
OF  
PERCEPTION



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Welcome to this international edition of Understanding Society. This issue – *The Perils of Perception* – explores some of the challenges associated with measuring and understanding the way people think and act, as well as the potential perils of ignoring public opinion.

A global study we conducted last year examined perceptions of a number of important issues across 14 countries, from immigration and democratic engagement to levels of teenage pregnancy and the proportion of Muslims in the population. It turns out that people are often very wrong about the basic make-up of their population and the scale of key social issues. As well as considering some of the possible explanations for the gap between perceptions and reality, we also have local perspectives from Ipsos colleagues in Italy and Sweden – the two countries that came top and bottom of our "Index of Ignorance" respectively.

To help us explore misperceptions further, we are delighted to have contributions from Professor Ilya Somin of George Mason University, a leading thinker on the implications of voter ignorance, and Mark Earls, author of several books on understanding human behaviour.

Somin's article argues that for individuals political ignorance is a largely rational response given the limited influence they can realistically have over complex policy decisions. While there are no obvious solutions, he favours greater decentralisation and privatisation where possible, giving citizens the opportunity to 'vote with their feet' and potentially make better-informed decisions as a result.

For Earls, the gap between how we perceive the world and the facts is not only inevitable but also advantageous.

To function in a changing world, one of the ways humans have adapted is by outsourcing the cognitive load. In other words, we borrow opinions from those around us to help ground our views and shape who we are. As such, borrowed opinions are central to human life and go some way to explaining why people believe – and tell researchers – what they do.

But understanding and explaining misperceptions is only part of the story. Another important peril of perceptions is connecting what people say they are going to with what they *actually* do. One obvious test of this is political polling, which Ipsos is well known for across the world. As pollsters we project who will win, largely based on what people tell us, and these predictions are then tested against actual results for all to see. We examine some of the ways we handle the perils of polling, particularly in accurately predicting voter turnout, a key factor in many election outcomes.

Also in this edition, Darrell Bricker, CEO of Ipsos Public Affairs Global, takes a look at the big threats that worry people across the world. Our global research shows that the thought of war, terrorism and disease make many of us toss and turn at night. But how justified are these fears when we consider the things that really should concern us? Bricker explores the extent to which our perceptions are skewed by worrying about the wrong things – and suggests some issues we should perhaps be more anxious about.


Finally, we look at the impact of real shifts in public perceptions on institutions and organisations. Since the economic crisis in 2008, the European Union has faced challenges, particularly from its European citizens who have routinely expressed dissatisfaction with

the institution. We look at distrust of the EU in different member states and the impact this is having on national politics, as well as the risks to the wider European project.

We hope you enjoy reading about the perils of perception – it is certainly a topic we spend considerable time grappling with. Ipsos remains committed to disseminating the insights from our broad range of social and political research, in the belief that this leads to better policy and practice. If you would like to discuss any of the research here, please get it touch.

Bobby Duffy

Managing Director  
Ipsos MORI  
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# The perils of perception

Why the way we see the world is often very wrong



James Stannard, London



Bobby Duffy, London

Our perceptions of the world and how it really is don't always match. That probably isn't a huge surprise to most of us – but the scale of some of our misperceptions is shocking.

Our collective ignorance was made very clear in a survey we conducted last year across fourteen countries, exploring our understanding of basic facts like what proportion of our national populations are immigrants or Muslims, what percentage of teenage girls get pregnant each year, and whether crime is going up or down.

## People get a lot of things very wrong

For example, Americans think that a quarter of US teenage girls get pregnant each year – when the actual proportion is just 3%. The US is also one of the countries that are furthest from reality on the extent of immigration, with an average guess of 31%, when the actual proportion is 13%.

All countries overestimate the proportion of Muslims. The French think three in every ten people in France are Muslims, when the real figure is 8%, while Canadians' average guess was 20%, when the actual figure is a tenth of that (2%).

Incredibly, Italians think that nearly half of their population is over 65 years old. Italy does have a relatively old population compared with other countries, but the actual figure is only 21%: Italians have taken the rhetoric of an ageing population a little too much too heart. Even more bizarrely,

## Figure ONE.

Q: Out of every 100 people in Italy, about how many do you think are over 65 years old?



Across all countries:



Italians also think half their population is unemployed, when the real figure is only 12%.

We don't always overestimate though. For example, people in all countries are too negative about levels of national democratic engagement. In Britain people think only 49% voted in the 2010 general election, when 66% did. The French are most pessimistic, with an average guess that 57% voted at the last Presidential election, when the actual turnout was 80%.

Looking across all the questions, we created an "Index of Ignorance", to help identify which countries had the poorest understanding of these facts. Italy was the most wrong, with the US next worst. The most accurate countries were Sweden and Germany<sup>1</sup> – although even here, people are often very wrong.

## Why are perceptions so far from reality?

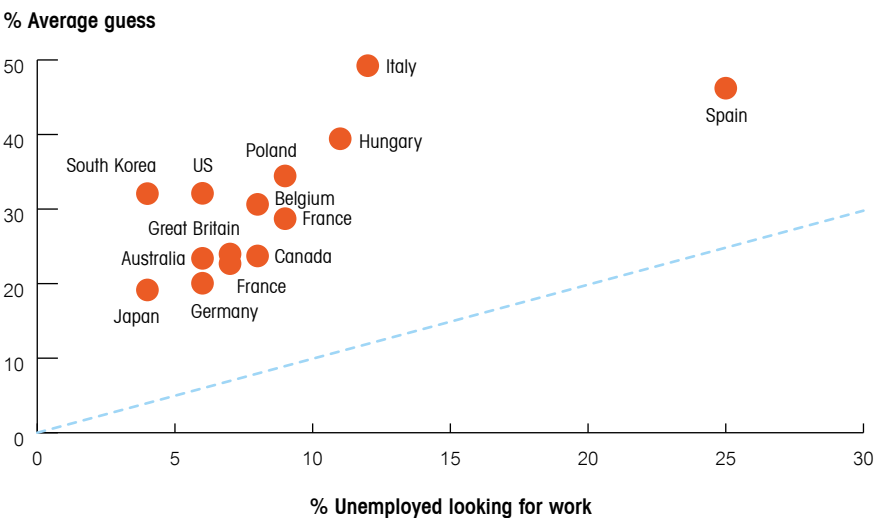
The purpose of the study was not just to raise a wry smile at other peoples' (or whole nations') expense. Even the term "ignorance" was chosen carefully, not to imply stupidity or judgement – as we will see, some ignorance may be rational.

Instead the main aim was to raise questions on why these errors arise, and what, if anything, we can and should be doing about them.

There are some very simple explanations. It's partly that people just struggle with basic maths, and some clearly misunderstand the questions – there are lots of ludicrous estimates from

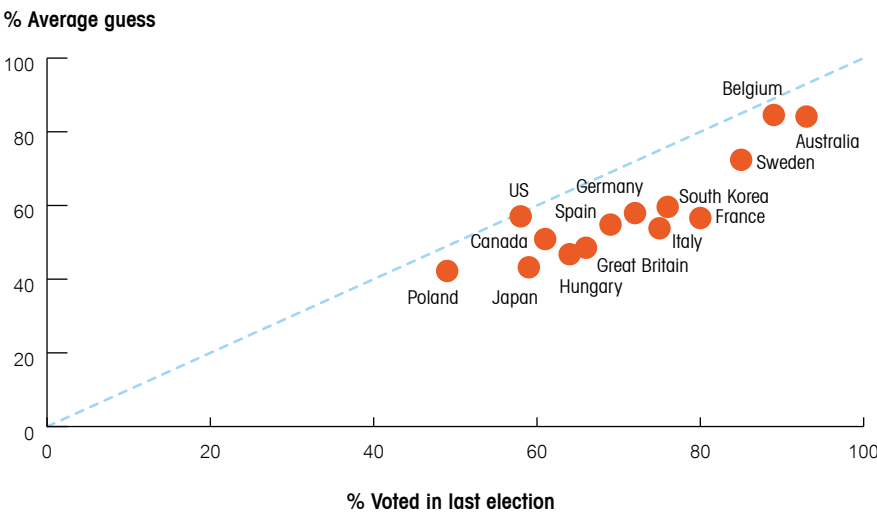
## Figure TWO.

Q: Out of every 100 people of working age about how many do you think are unemployed and looking for work?



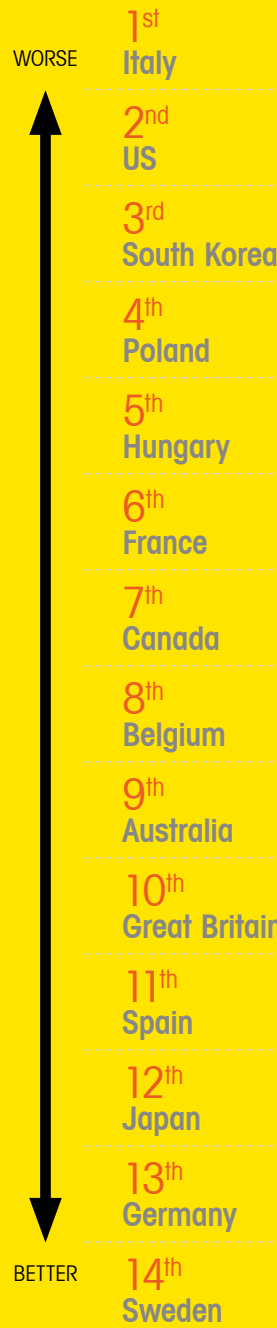
## Figure THREE.

Q: Out of every 100 eligible voters how many do you think voted in the last election?



## Figure FOUR.

Index of Ignorance



## The errors people make mirror the pattern of errors that academics see when they measure our perceptions of physical phenomenon like size, light or noise.

many individual respondents, and these will help pull up averages (although this doesn't explain the scale of errors).

Psychological and social psychological explanations are more interesting and important.

For example, the errors that people make in these questions mirror the pattern of errors that academics see when they measure our perceptions of physical phenomenon like size, light or noise. Psychophysics is the study of this relationship between

physical stimuli and our response – and (at its most basic) finds that people often overestimate small things and underestimate big things. The chart below plots the findings from our study, and this fits very well with accepted patterns in studies of our response to some physical stimuli.

There are a number of limitations to this explanation though. Firstly, we're not measuring people's reactions to an increasing scale or intensity of a single phenomenon like sound, but of

a number of different measures – so what we've asked will have an influence on how people respond, and there's no guarantee we would see the same patterns on different questions. We're going to test this in follow-up waves.

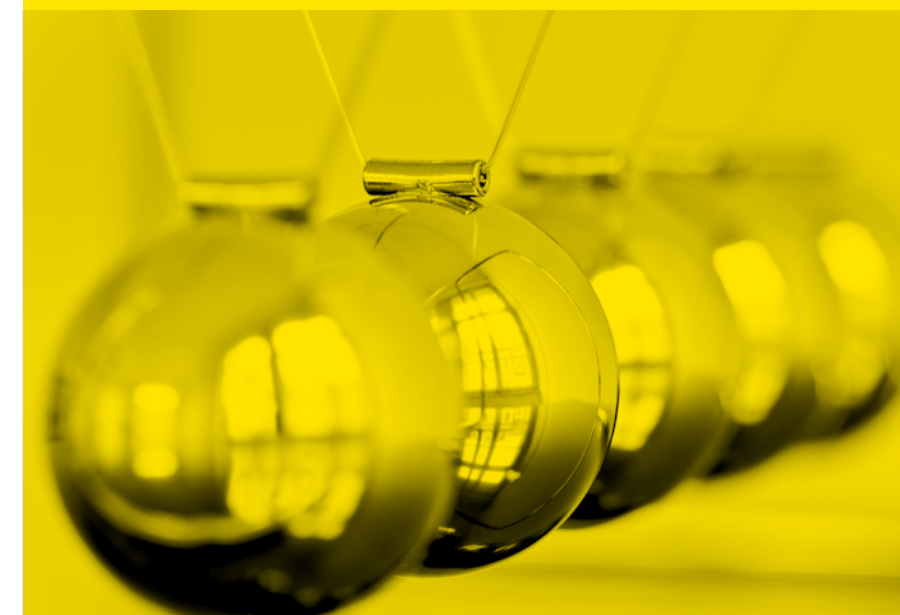
And we're also asking people to think about social phenomenon, where they will have formed impressions from a wide range of sources: to reduce this to a simple issue of how people interpret numbers and scales seems too restrictive.

More promising then is to recognise that our errors will be partly to do with our non-linear understanding of scale, but that it will also be socially mediated, influenced by information and impressions from a number of sources. In social psychology terms, we are subject to a range of biases and heuristics.

We know that people take mental shortcuts when answering questions, where they grab for easily available information even if it doesn't quite fit the question. In Daniel Kahneman's terms, answers to these sorts of questions are classic examples of fast thinking, rather than slow thinking.<sup>2</sup>

But we also need to recognise that answering these questions is not a completely neutral act, where people are just trying to be as accurate as possible. We also suffer from what social psychologists call "emotional innumeracy"<sup>3</sup>. That is, we may be sending a message (consciously or not) about what's worrying us as much as trying to get the right answers. Cause and effect can run both ways, with our concern – about, for example, high levels of teenage pregnancy or low levels of voting – leading to our misperceptions as much as our misperceptions creating our concern.

## People take mental shortcuts when answering questions, where they grab for easily available information even if it doesn't quite fit the question.



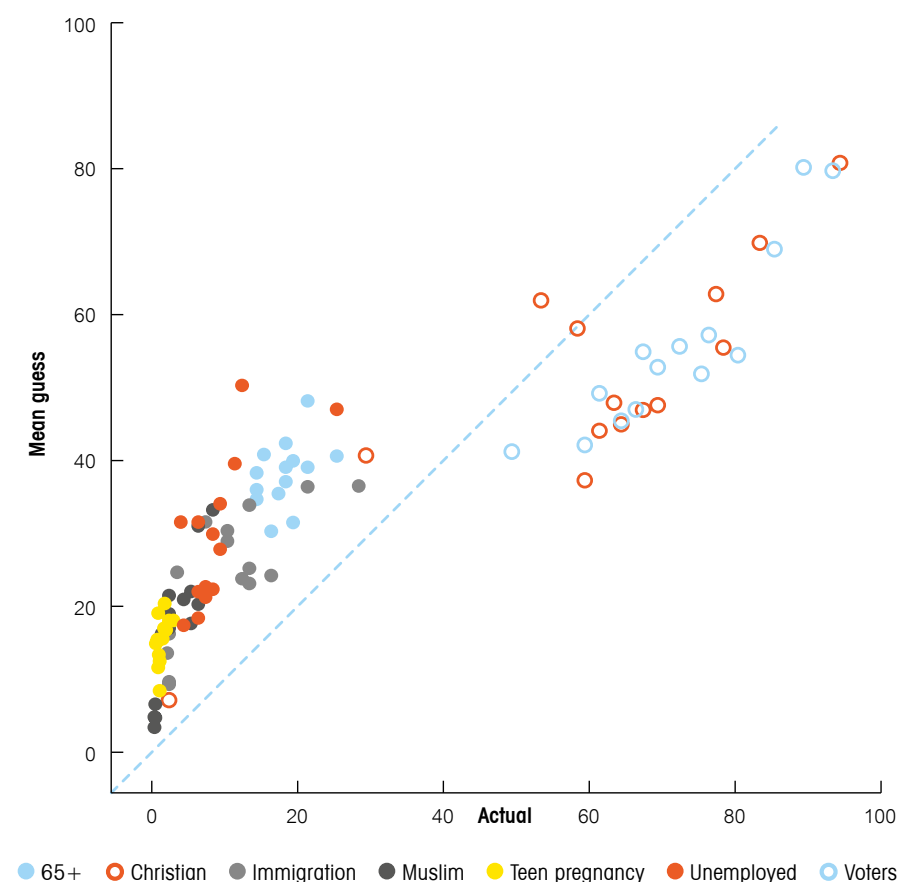
One important implication from this interpretation is that "myth-busting", where we try to allay peoples' concerns by telling them more about the facts, is likely to have limited impact: it misdiagnoses a large part of the issue, as our misperceptions are often an emotional not a rational response.

Of course, the media are bound to have a role in informing these impressions and misperceptions – but we need to be careful here. Whenever

we release results from these studies in the UK, one of the first responses is always "that will be a Daily Mail effect". But the fact that this happens everywhere shows we can't lay the blame entirely at one particular or even type of newspaper: if the media are a cause, it's a much broader, global issue. The real driver is how we remember information, where vivid anecdotes stick, regardless of whether they are describing something vanishingly rare.

### Figure FIVE.

Q: Perils of Perception 2014 - mean guess vs actual proportion in each country





# Do misperceptions matter?

Given all this, do our misperceptions really matter?

There are clear instances where they are important. We know, for example, that our mental image of normal behaviour influences how we ourselves behave – indeed, behavioural science studies often find our understanding of social norms is the most important influence on our behaviour. Consistently underestimating voter turnout is a problem then, as people have the wrong idea about the norm. An unfounded fear of rising crime can also directly affect our quality of life and make us focus too much time and resource on the issue.

Ilya Somin, who has written an article in this edition of Understanding Society, goes further and says this ignorance is a vital flaw in our political system.<sup>4</sup> His explanation is at the opposite end of the spectrum to the social psychologists, where our lack of knowledge is not due to “thinking fast” but instead entirely rational.

People have no reason to inform themselves, with all the costs of time and effort that involves, if they can’t influence anything through a political system where their individual vote counts for virtually nothing. What’s the point in finding out how the government spends our money, whether crime is increasing or decreasing or how many immigrants are coming to the country if our vote doesn’t affect political outcomes and decisions remain outside our control?

In this reading most modern systems of government are inevitably flawed and people would be more likely to get what they want if we cut central political control, pushing decisions down to local areas, the private sector and (ultimately) individuals, where choices are more personal and therefore better informed.

Whether we agree with this reading or not, it does point to one key trap we need to avoid when highlighting how wrong people are on these things. Our ignorance is more a symptom of our lack of control over decisions that affect our life than a reason to keep power in the hands of an elite who supposedly know better. We should not conclude that people are too dumb to be trusted to make decisions – if we want a better-informed population, we need to give them more influence, not less.

We should not conclude that people are too dumb to be trusted to make decisions.

# Case study: Italy



Chiara Ferrari, Milan

Is Italy the most ignorant country in the world? A quick glance at the data could lead to that conclusion.

The Ipsos Perils of Perception<sup>5</sup> study places us at the top of the “Index of Ignorance” – among 14 countries in the world – for the lowest accuracy in estimating facts about what Italy is really like. Our responses about different aspects of Italian society – unemployment rate, level of immigration, proportion of Muslims and Christians, voter turnout – show that we tend to overestimate what worries us and, vice versa, to underestimate things that might give us comfort.

One way of explaining the findings could be to look at the extent to which the average Italian citizen is exposed to and familiar with the relevant facts and numbers. Would it be more accurate to label this as “innumeracy” or the lack of ability to reason with numbers?

It would be fairly easy to label many Italians as illiterate and innumerate. Research shows that more than half of the Italian population – 57% – hasn’t read a single book in a year. Newspapers sell fewer copies now than they did in the postwar period (about 3.5 million copies now vs. 6.5 million) despite the population growing from 47 million in 1950 to around 60 million today.<sup>6</sup>

As with many other countries, most information is delivered to Italian households through TV,<sup>7</sup> which is more likely to be simplified, condensed and mostly conveyed through images. This is not the best way to commit specific facts or numbers to memory. Furthermore, this is reliant on the media getting the facts and numbers right, which is a rarer occurrence than might be expected.

On the other hand, the growth of the internet could be viewed as enhancing the diffusion and availability of information, albeit with a lack of guidance as to how reliable the sources people use are. In fact, the internet is full of facts and figures on virtually any topic, but not all the sources are equally reliable and it’s not always easy to separate the good from the bad.

Another factor is the role of emotions. For example, a study published in 2010 by Daniel Herda, a sociologist at the University of California, found that emotions are important in explaining misconceptions about minority populations.<sup>8</sup> Various studies have found that people tend to overestimate the size of minority populations, and that this is more often recorded among the less informed and those who have more frequent contact with a specific minority. Herda argues that “perceived threat has a strong positive association with innumeracy”.

It is an intriguing hypothesis that emotions affect the accuracy with which people are capable of estimating facts about issues and subjects which, in one way or another, pose a threat or are seen as likely to affect our way of life.

The above would explain, at least in part, why Italians overestimate the presence of immigrants and Muslims, along with the unemployment rate. On the latter, the average guess of 49% would mean one Italian in two out of work!

What are the implications for Italy, if its citizens appear unable to come to terms with how things really are? How does this impact on our understanding of the mechanisms which regulate our life as citizens? The risk we run, as a country, is that skepticism about the facts on key social issues in turn leads to a more generally negative

outlook on life, promoting a culture of defensiveness that could lead to Italy isolating itself from the outside world.

Which policies should be enforced to counter this? Enhancing familiarity with facts and figures could help starting very early, in primary school, to get kids acquainted with the information and its most reliable sources. The Ministry of Education, universities and researchers are already promoting programs for primary schools with the intention of preparing future generations to manage information and to make informed decisions. This will hopefully encourage more rational thinking when challenged by Ipsos pollsters with apparently simple questions on basic facts.

The risk we run, as a country, is that skepticism about the facts on key social issues in turn leads to a more generally negative outlook on life.



# Case study: Sweden



David Ahlin, Stockholm

As a Swede, achieving the bottom ranking in the Ipsos Index of Ignorance is of course something to be proud of! However, according to the study, we are still way off on a number of basic country facts. Why is this? As well as the broader issues discussed elsewhere in this edition, are there specific factors at work in Sweden that can help explain misperceptions?

Considering the reasons Swedes over-estimate the proportion of immigrants in the population provides an interesting case study. In a European context, Sweden has a relatively generous immigration and refugee policy. Between 2004 and 2013, a total of 465,000 refugees and their relatives were given a permit to stay in Sweden.

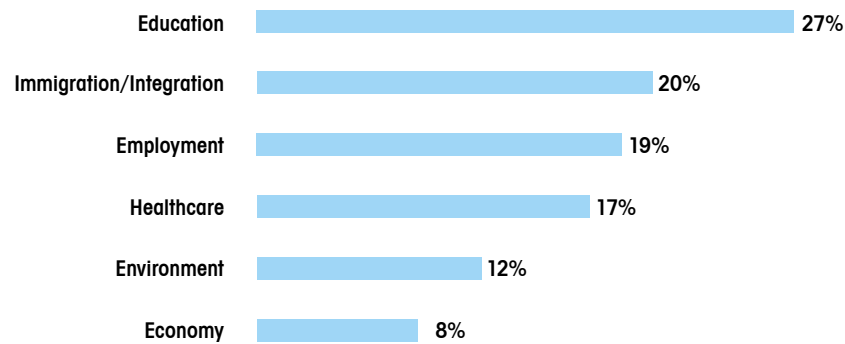
This is quite a substantial number given a population of around 9.5 million.<sup>9</sup> Last year, the number of asylum seekers was the highest since the Yugoslav War: 81,300 refugees, with more than 30,000 of these from war-torn Syria.<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that immigration has become one of the most pressing issues for Swedish voters. In January, Ipsos showed that immigration ranks as the second most important issue for Swedes after education. Not since the early nineties has immigration been at the top of the political agenda.

During this period, the Sweden Democrats (SD), an anti-immigration party, has more than doubled its support and became the third largest party in last September's general election. More recent polls show that their support has continued to increase. So far, SD is the only party to advocate a more restrictive immigration policy. Taking the role of underdogs in Swedish politics, SD has already caused a crisis for the new Social Democratic-Green Party coalition

## Figure SIX.

Q: What is the most important societal or political issue facing you today?



government, and the party is constantly in the media spotlight.

Ipsos research, as well as findings from other surveys such as the Eurobarometer, shows that in general the Swedes have a positive view on immigration. However, more and more people think Swedish immigration policy is too generous and a majority say that immigrants' integration into society is a failure. And to make matters worse, a large share of new immigrants today end up in suburbs already burdened by high unemployment, lack of housing and social unrest, where young people grow up with a feeling of no hope for the future.

Everyone is talking about the challenges of immigration and integration, but politicians seem to have little to offer in terms of new ideas and solutions. With this backdrop it is perhaps not all that surprising that Swedes today exaggerate the share of immigrants among the population.

But in spite of being quite wrong on immigration, and on many other key

facts, we are apparently less inaccurate than many others. Why might this be the case?

Part of the answer is that we might be a bit better informed than people in some other countries included in the study. Swedes continue to consume a lot of news, with eight out of ten reading a newspaper at least three times per week.<sup>11</sup> More people read news online, particularly young people. Trust in national news organizations is also still high, with seven out of ten saying they trust the national TV and Radio News.<sup>12</sup>

Could it be that Swedes really do know more about the basic facts than citizens in other countries? Or that the media does a better job of providing us with statistics in a way we can understand and believe? While it is possible that these factors play a role, they certainly do not provide a full explanation, as other articles in this edition show us. And, crucially, we Swedes should not be too proud either. We only perform relatively well – in absolute terms, we are still wrong on many things.

# The challenge of political ignorance

Why voters are ignorant and why it matters



Professor Ilya Somin, Arlington, Virginia

Democratic government works best when voters know enough to hold leaders accountable for their performance. Unfortunately, widespread political ignorance often makes it difficult or impossible for them to even come close to doing so. The problem of voter ignorance is one of the most serious shortcomings of the modern democratic state.

Not long before the November 2014 election, in which Americans decided which party would control Congress, an Annenberg Public Policy Center survey found that only 38% of Americans knew that the Republican Party currently controlled the House of Representatives, and a similar number knew that the Democrats control the Senate.<sup>13</sup> Although the future of federal government spending is one of the most contentious issues on the political agenda, most Americans had little idea of the distribution of federal spending today.

Such ignorance is not limited to the United States. A 2013 Ipsos MORI poll found that political ignorance in Britain is remarkably similar to that in the US, with voters in both countries making many of the same errors. Both Britons and Americans greatly underestimate the very high percentage of government spending that goes to entitlement and pension programs, greatly overestimate the amount devoted to foreign aid, and overstate the crime rate and the percentage of immigrants in the population.

The more recent Ipsos Perils of Perception study in fourteen nations found similar results in other countries.<sup>14</sup> Survey respondents in all the nations included in the study massively overestimate the unemployment rate, and the percentage of immigrants and Muslims in their country's population.

Most also believe that the murder rate is rising, even though it has actually been falling. Many of these mistakes are politically consequential. Undue pessimism about the economy is obviously relevant, given that economic issues are almost always near the top of voters' list of priorities.

Surveys consistently show that electoral outcomes are heavily influenced by economic trends over the last year or two before election day, even though incumbent politicians usually have little influence over short-term economic conditions. On the other hand, voters tend to overlook the potential long-term effects of current economic policies, even though the latter are both more consequential and more under the control of politicians than short-term trends.

Overestimating the percentage of immigrants promotes exaggerated fear of foreigners. Such misperceptions

contribute to the growing support for immigration restrictions which have been an important factor in recent elections in several European countries. Overestimation of crime rates can increase support for harsh criminal justice policies, and lead voters to tolerate abuses by law enforcement agencies.

The Ipsos results are consistent with previous studies showing widespread political ignorance in a variety of nations. Voters in many countries are misinformed about the distribution of government spending, in much the same way as in the United States and Britain. While it is difficult to make definitive international comparisons, it is clear that political ignorance is a serious problem in many democracies, including virtually all of those for which we have extensive survey data.

Political ignorance is not primarily the result of stupidity on the part of voters or lack of available information. IQ scores in both the US and Europe have risen significantly over the last few decades.<sup>15</sup> Thanks to the internet, political information is easier to get than ever before. Still, there has been little or no measurable increase in political knowledge over the last several decades.

Widespread political ignorance is mostly the result of rational behavior. No matter how well-informed you are, the probability that your vote will swing an election is tiny— usually no more than one chance in several hundred thousand. Though few know the exact odds, voters have an intuitive sense that there is little payoff to studying political issues. With the exception of a minority who find politics interesting, most people prefer to spend their time on other things. The fact that ignorance is so persistent over time, and in so many

**The problem of voter ignorance is one of the most serious shortcomings of the modern democratic state.**

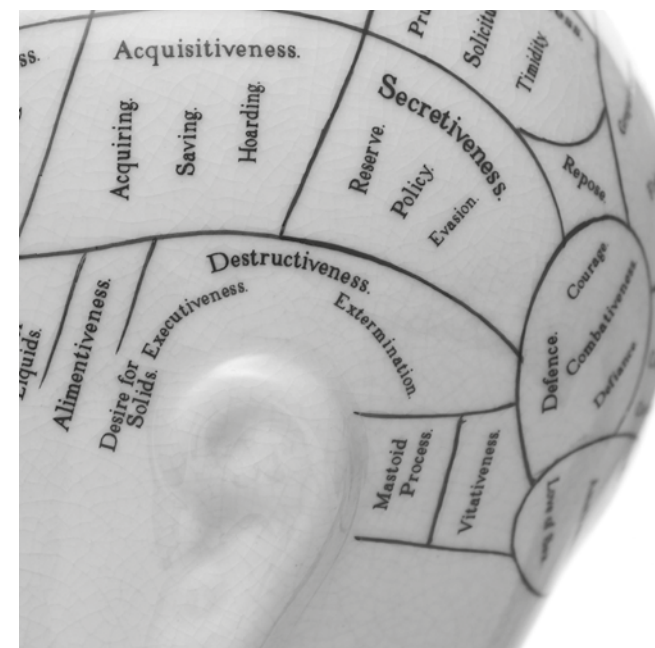


In both Europe and the United States, foot voters have historically made good decisions, even under difficult conditions. In the nineteenth century, millions of poorly educated and often illiterate European and Asian immigrants acquired the knowledge they needed to understand that there were better conditions available in the United States and Canada. More recently, both European and American foot-voters have flocked to jurisdictions where public policy ensures greater

*Ilya Somin is a law professor at George Mason University in the United States. He is the author of Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter (Stanford University Press, 2013).*

**Political ignorance is a deeply rooted problem with no easy solution. But it can be mitigated by making more of our decisions by "voting with our feet", and fewer at the ballot box.**

## The benefits of borrowed opinions



This simple idea is incredibly hard-working. It explains so many phenomena in the modern world: the rise and rise of social media platforms, the importance of word of mouth and social networks in shaping individual behaviour (from alcohol consumption to obesity) and, of course, that elusive “virality” that modern marketers and politicians seek. Even the UK Government’s own policy Nudge Unit, the Behavioural Insights Team, have

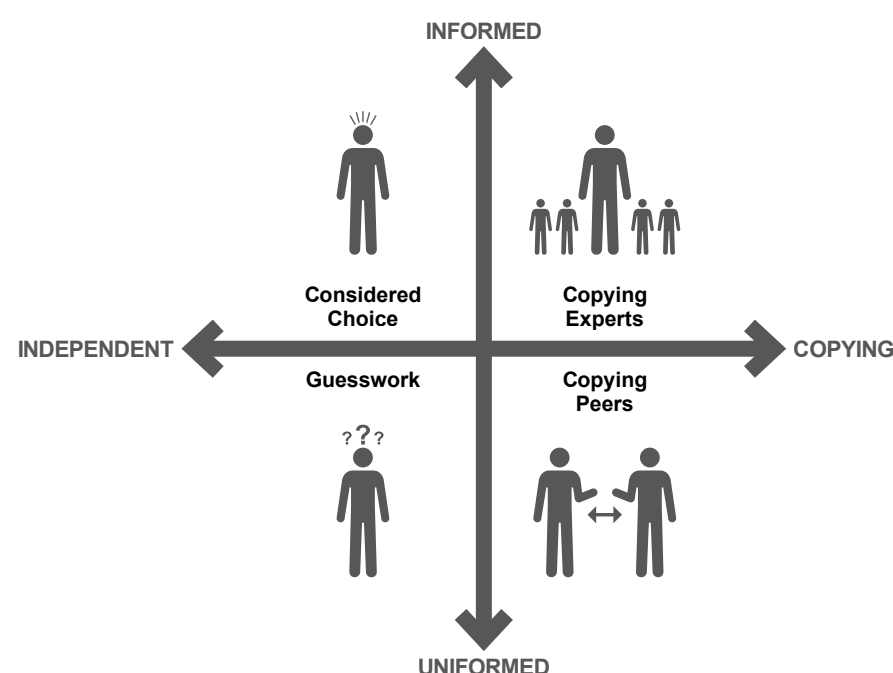
When we find an opinion or perception is received - borrowed or stolen from others rather than crafted by that individual - we feel something is wrong. Some even go as far as the arch individualist, Oscar Wilde, in condemning the masses for such unoriginality.: *"Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation"*.

The simple map of choice styles which Professor Alex Bentley and I created based on patterns observed in data perhaps shows graphically how important this “cognitive outsourcing” is in many aspects of human behaviour.

**When we find an opinion or perception is received, borrowed or stolen from others rather than crafted by that individual, we feel something is wrong.**

## Figure SEVEN.

Map of human choice



Key: x-axis describes independent to socially-shaped;  
y-axis describes uninformed to informed<sup>18</sup>

Source: *Map of Human Choice*, adapted from Bentley, Earls and O'Brien's book, *I'll Have What She's Having*, MIT Press (2011)

## Opinions on the map

Sometimes we do merely borrow the opinions of those around us - this is where so many political opinions seem to be grounded. It's the kind of thing everyone I know thinks - everyone being a relatively small sample, naturally. On our map, we call this Copying Peers.

Typical of this are choices in fashion, music and other "popularity" categories.

Sometimes by contrast, the opinions themselves seem more like the entry price of belonging to a particular group. This is more like what we call Copying Experts or Authorities. This of course makes them very hard to challenge or shift. Traditions are emblematic of this kind of choice; behaviours and ideas which mark social identities also sit here.

And of course, "outsourced" opinions can become even more troublesome, the more time we spend together without coming across others with differing opinions. In the Big Sort,<sup>19</sup> Bill Bishop describes how the familiar "risky shift" mechanism is driving America to more and more extreme and resilient positions based on borrowed opinions.

## More fun with borrowed opinions

On the other hand, people also borrow from themselves, porting opinions from one context to another, with mixed results. Some years ago, Professor Alex Bentley and I were struggling to make sense of two sets of opinion polls (about the health challenges for Sub Saharan Africa). While the African responses seemed entirely plausible, we were surprised by the apparent ignorance of American respondents: how could so many of them imagine that heart problems would trump, for example, water-borne diseases in the to-do list for Africa? How ignorant could they be? How patronising could we be? In retrospect, it was clear that US respondents were trying to understand another social world in terms of one they knew well. A pretty good approach for many challenges, if not this one.

To conclude, it's all too easy to dismiss an individual's - or a population's - opinions as ignorant or as being so obviously based on a false understanding of the world or of facts in broad circulation. It can even be comforting, in that it

seems to point out the opportunity for correcting factual misunderstandings. Or, the responsibility of those failing to communicate the facts successfully.

However, we students of human behavior should be more ready to acknowledge the central importance of borrowed opinions in human life - and borrowed opinions of the different sorts described above - or we will continue to find ourselves scratching our heads at the strange things that people believe. And not just the stories of Spaghetti Monsters and Alien Abduction. We borrow all kinds of opinions, and their power should not be underestimated. When the great William James had closed a lecture explaining the structure of the solar system, he was famously countered by a stern New England matron for whom James' speculations were most entertaining. She pointed out that he'd forgotten to account for the giant turtle on whose back the world rides, and the other turtles on which that turtle in turn stands. Despite evidence to the contrary, for her it was "turtles all the way down".

Mark Earls' new book *"Copy Copy Copy - how to do smarter marketing using other people's ideas"* (Wiley) is out now.





# Do we worry about the right things?

What keeps us up at night and what should



Darrell Bricker, Toronto

The world is scary, and getting scarier. At least that's what we believe. Eight in ten (83%) of the nearly 18,000 people from 24 countries that we surveyed said the world has become more dangerous over the last year. The biggest doomsayers live in Turkey where a startling 91% think there is more to fear.

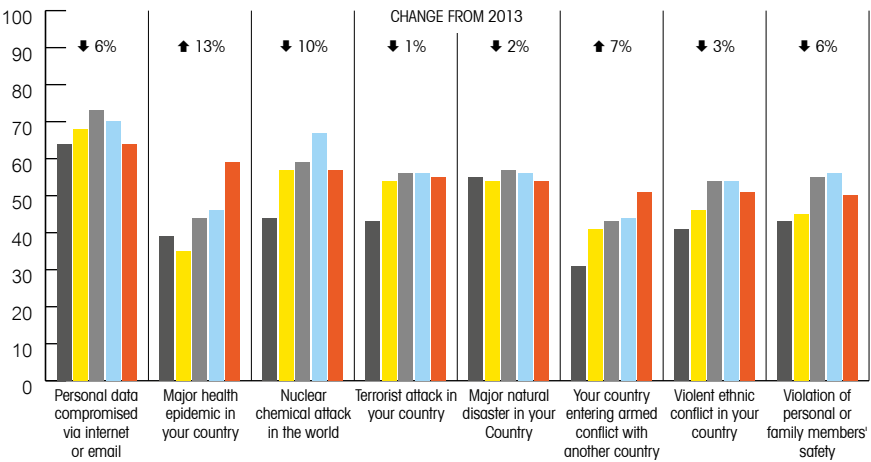
What keeps us up at night? We are preoccupied by external personal threats – things that could be done to us by someone or something else. At the top of the list is the potential for our personal electronic information to be compromised. Sixty four percent of us are worried about having our personal data hacked via the Internet or Email (although this concern is down 6% from 2013). You feel especially vulnerable if you live in Spain, Turkey or Germany.

According to a multi-country study we did for the Center for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), we are most concerned about criminals hacking into our personal banking information (78%), followed by the theft of personal information such as photos and private messages (77%), and private companies monitoring our online activity and selling this information for commercial purposes (74%).<sup>20</sup>



Figure EIGHT.

Q: How real do you feel the threat is of any of the following happening in the next twelve months?



Aug 2010 May 2011 Sept 2012 Oct 2013 Oct 2014

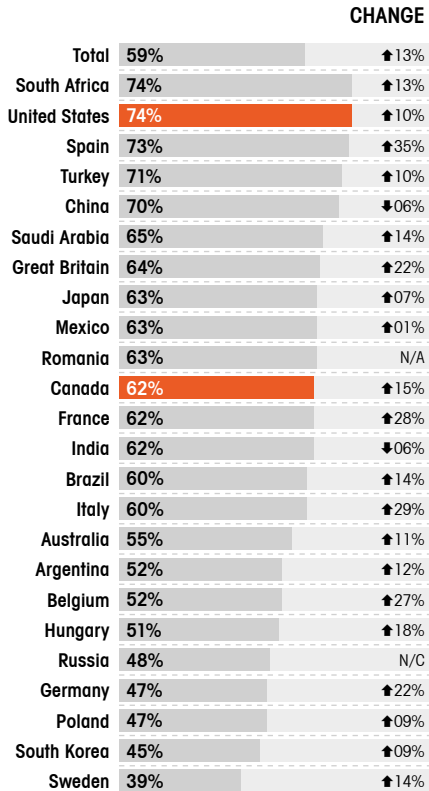
In the United States, one of the countries that saw the biggest jump in concern about health epidemics, the number of fatalities attributed to Ebola was just two.



Figure NINE.

Q: How real do you feel the threat is of any of the following happening in the next twelve months?

A major health epidemic breaking out in your country...



Let's face it though, while having your personal data compromised creates a sense of violation and potentially a major inconvenience in your life, it won't kill you. For that we have to turn to our next big worry - the outbreak of a major health epidemic in our home country (59%). This is up 13% in 2014, and is especially strong in South Africa, the US, and Spain. This is clearly being driven by news about the outbreak of the Ebola virus in Africa.

Should you be worried about dying from being infected by the Ebola virus? If you live in West African countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, or Guinea you should absolutely be taking precautions. But, the truth about Ebola is that it caused just over 11,000 deaths up to May 2015 – almost exclusively in West Africa.<sup>21</sup> In the United States, one of the countries that saw the biggest jump in concern about health epidemics, the number of fatalities attributed to Ebola was just two.

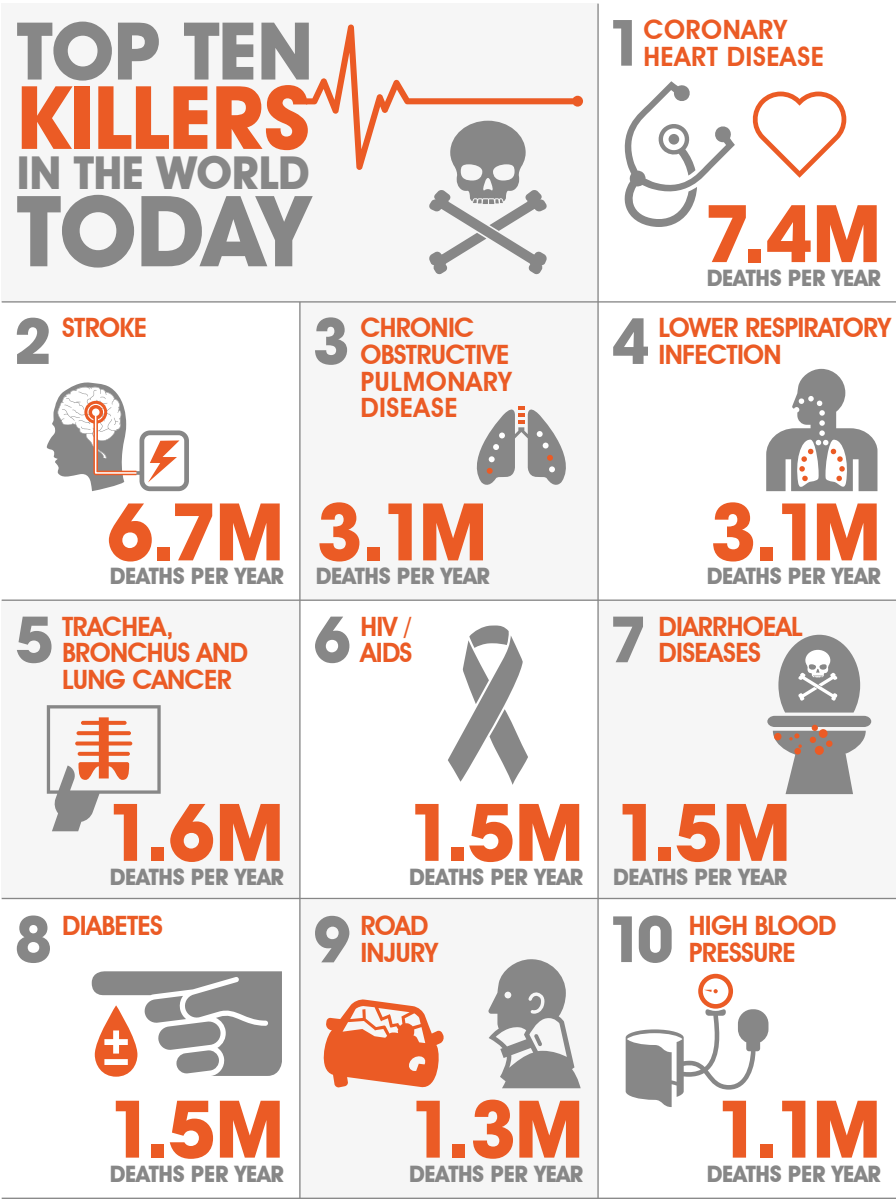
What about war and terrorism? These risks cause over half of us to toss and turn at night (51% and 55% respectively)<sup>22</sup>. But here's the truth - war caused 176,000 casualties in 2014 (according to the International Center for Strategic Studies), and deaths due to terrorism numbered about 18,000 (U.S. State Department)<sup>23</sup>. That's certainly a lot of fatalities, especially when compared to Ebola. And again, how worried you should be obviously depends where in the world you live. But, if you keep in mind that roughly 150,000 people die every day in the world – around 55 million a year – these risks are quickly put into some kind of perspective.

Completing our list of the biggest external fears are natural disasters (56%) – which caused 22,000 deaths in 2013<sup>24</sup> - and violent personal crime (50%), which accounted for a much larger number of deaths – around a half million worldwide in 2012.<sup>25</sup>

It's important to go through these grim statistics to make a point. While external threats dominate the news cycle and understandably get considerable attention and resources from our political leaders, they are not the biggest causes of death in the world today.

So why are we so afraid of what is so statistically unlikely to harm us? Contemporary models of risk perception are that people do not estimate risk using only reason or by looking at statistics. The psychometric paradigm (originally set out by Paul Slovic) suggests people are more likely to be afraid of things they cannot control (such as natural disasters) or that are unknown or new (such as the murky world of terrorism).<sup>26</sup> The Social Amplification of Risk Framework contends that external factors, such as media coverage or cultural influences, can also ramp up or cool down people's perception of risks.<sup>27</sup> On this model, it's no surprise we saw such a leap in fear of external diseases in the wake of such extensive coverage on the Ebola virus.

This at least helps explain our misperceptions of risk. As other articles in this edition make clear, being irrational is hardwired in us, and can have clear benefits when it comes to weighing risks and choices. But what if we were to look at potential threats in a cool, reasoned way? What should we really be afraid of?

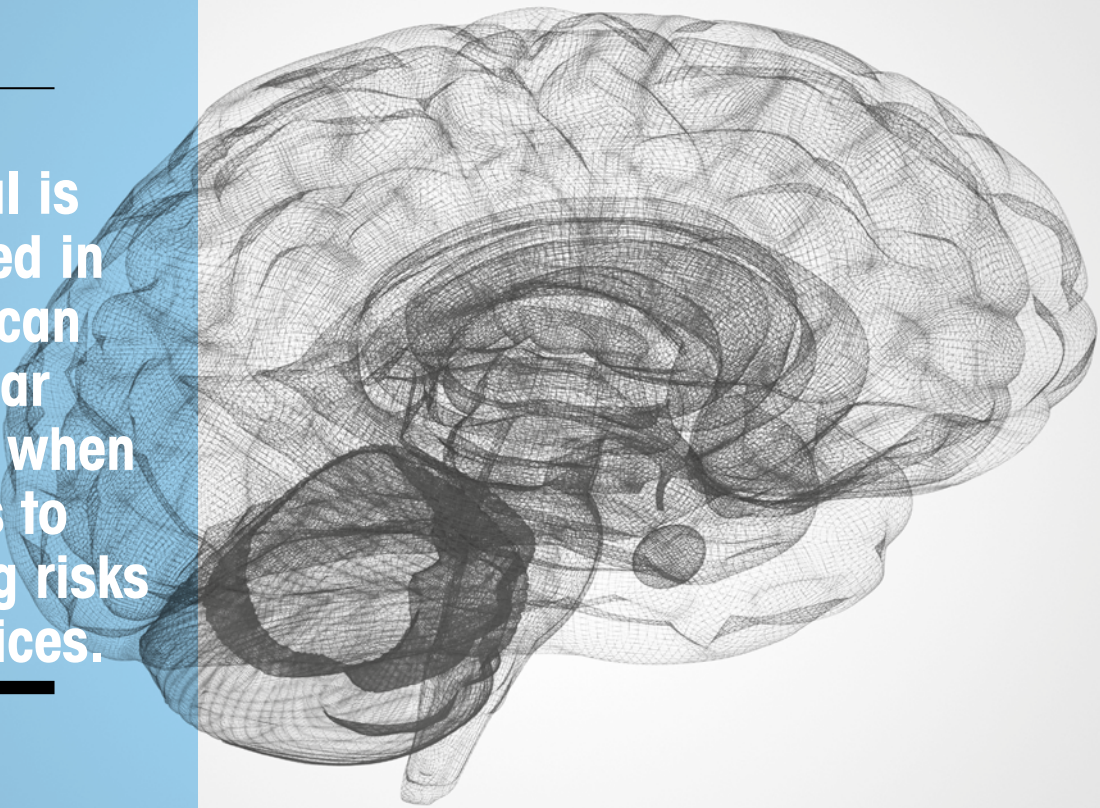


Source: World Health Organisation

What does this tell us? For the most part, the biggest risks we face are diseases that can't be passed from person to person. Indeed, many of these diseases are brought on by our own poor lifestyle choices related to smoking, diet and exercise. In fact, the top 5 killers are all heart or lung related diseases.

So want to sleep better at night? Focus on what you do to yourself as opposed to what may be done to you by someone or something else. Quit smoking (causes six million deaths a year), eat better, get some exercise (being overweight caused 2.8 million deaths in 2014), and relax (stress is a leading contributor to cardiovascular diseases, the number one killer). Although the world is a scary place and seems to be getting scarier, we are more in control than we think.

Being irrational is hardwired in us, and can have clear benefits when it comes to weighing risks and choices.





# The perils of polling

Connecting what people say with what they do



Julia Clark, Washington



Gideon Skinner, London

This edition of Understanding Society is all about the challenges of understanding public perceptions, with a particular focus on differences between how we see the world and how it really is. But there are other perils of perception too. One of the most challenging is connecting what people say they are going to do with what they actually do. This is never more apparent than during elections. As pollsters we project who will win, largely based on what people tell us, and these predictions are then tested against actual results for all to see.

First, it's worth reflecting on the fact that people are just as bad at estimating how many people vote as they are with other behaviours looked at earlier in this edition. People don't just overestimate issues with negative connotations, such as teenage pregnancy and the rate of unemployment. They also underestimate some positive behaviours too – notably, how many of their fellow citizens vote.

As the chart below shows, every country we surveyed underestimated the level of turnout in their last major election – and countries with high levels of turnout are just as prone to this as those with low levels of turnout (although two with compulsory voting, Australia and Belgium, are at least towards the bottom end of the scale).

Estimating turnout might be the most important factor when predicting elections, and getting it wrong can easily throw a poll off course.

## Figure TEN.

Q: Out of every 100 eligible voters how many do you think voted in the last election?

	% POINT DIFFERENCE	TOO LOW	AVG. GUESS	ACTUAL
France	-23		57	80
Italy	-21		54	75
Great Britain	-17		49	66
Hungary	-17		47	64
South Korea	-16		60	76
Japan	-16		43	59
Spain	-14		55	69
Germany	-14		58	72
Sweden	-13		72	85
Canada	-10		51	61
Australia	-9		84	93
Poland	-7		42	49
Belgium	-4		85	89
US	-1		57	58

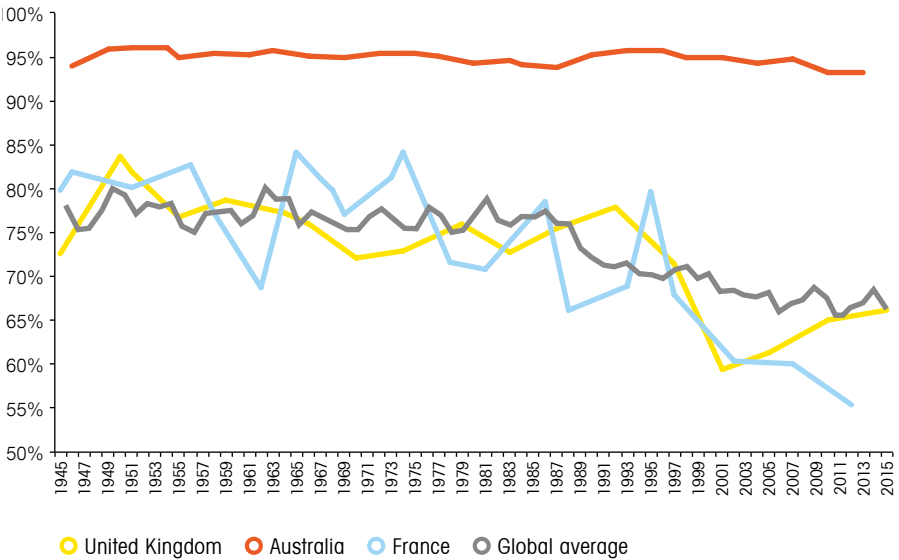
As with the overestimating of negative behaviours, it may be that people are being swayed by stories they read in the media that turnout is not as high as it should be, or that this underestimation is another manifestation of social desirability<sup>28</sup> – people recognise that voting is a good thing, and that there should be more of it, and this contributes to them underestimating the true level of turnout (so as not to appear complacent, for example).

As data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance shows, this may be partly in response to a real trend across the globe that has seen turnout dropping over the last 20 years or so (figure 11). It should be pointed out this is not universal – for example in Australia turnout has stayed at a relatively high level, and in France while it has been broadly stable for presidential elections there has been a sharp fall in turnout in parliamentary elections, which may help to explain some of the misperceptions among the public there.

However, this is an issue where the tables are turned on researchers – particularly opinion pollsters – by the members of the public who take part in their surveys. Estimating turnout is one of the most – indeed it might be the most – important factor when predicting elections, and getting it wrong can easily throw a poll off course. Why is this? It wouldn't matter if voters and non-voters were the same in terms of age, background, and political views, but all the evidence suggests that this isn't the case, especially in countries with relatively low levels of turnout. Firstly the demographic profile of voters and non-voters is different, with voters being typically older and more educated than those who don't vote.

## Figure ELEVEN.

Voter turnout in parliamentary elections







Demographic profile of voters and non-voters		
	Non-voter	Voter
18-29	30	20
29-49	40	38
50+	29	42
Primary education	48	47
Some secondary	40	35
College +	12	18

Source: ISSP 2006 Average 37 Countries

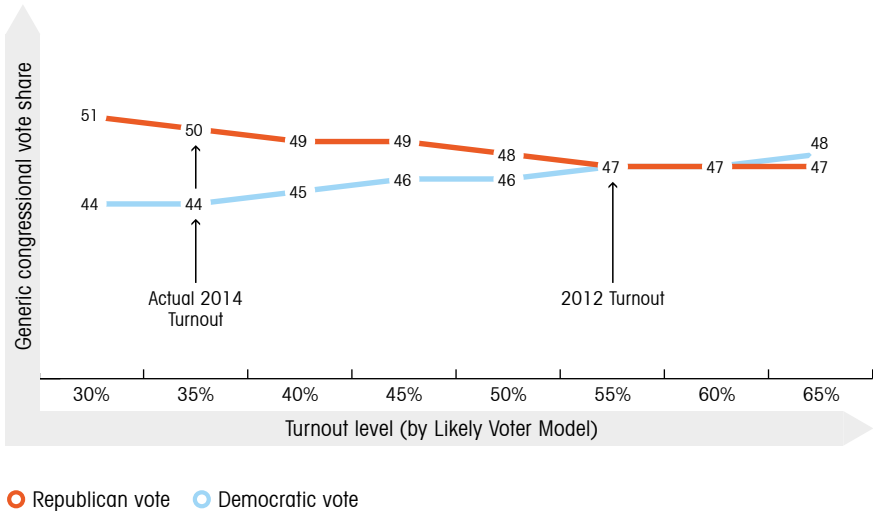
Even more important, though, is the fact that supporters of different parties have differing levels of likelihood to vote (which of course may be demographically related – if one party tends to have higher support among older people, they will tend to do relatively better in low-turnout elections). There are examples of this from across the world – just one from

the United States below shows that the Republicans benefit from differential voting rates, especially when turnout is low, because their support tends to come from groups who are more likely to vote come what may.

This chart shows the results of our “generic congressional ballot” question,<sup>29</sup> indicating the percentage who say they would vote Democrat

## Figure TWELVE.

2014 Generic congressional ballot by turnout levels



or Republican at a series of different turnout levels. On the left we see a 30% turnout where the Republicans easily defeat the Democrats; on the right we see a 65% turnout where Democrats have a small advantage. Note that these findings are all from the same set of data on a single survey; we get these different results by selecting different likely voter populations based on the expected turnout.

A low turnout shows a clear Republican victory; a high turnout shows a likely Democratic win: these voting populations are not the same. If we take the 35% cut-off representing the actual 2014 turnout and compare it to the 55% cut-off representing a turnout level similar to the 2012 presidential election, we can see some of the difference in the demography of the US voting population.

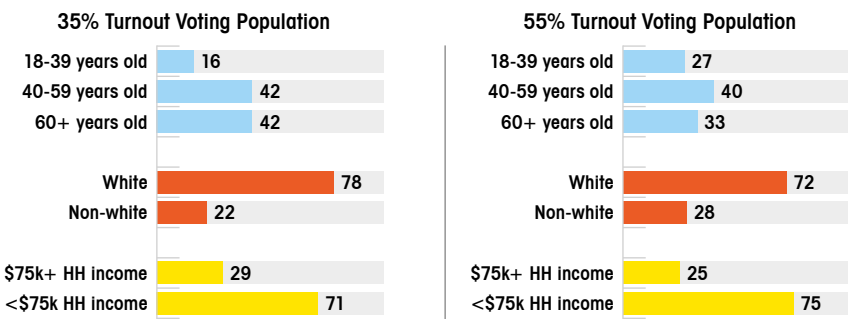
At 35% turnout, the voting population is older, whiter, and more affluent. Compare that to the 55% turnout voting population which is younger, more diverse and not quite as affluent. These demographic groups – particularly race and ethnicity – are strongly connected to partisan identification and voting patterns. Finding the right mix of likely voters is therefore critical to election polling: defining this group accurately makes all the difference in predicting the correct winner.



The rise of challenger parties in many countries also makes it harder to predict turnout among their supporters – although not always in the same direction.

## Figure THIRTEEN.

Voting Population Demographics by Turnout Level



And there are real-life instances where getting turnout wrong has led polls to the wrong conclusion. The normal turnout in Swedish elections, for example, has been in a range of 80-85 percent (over 90 percent in the late 1970s). When the first Swedish election to the European parliament was held in 1995 no pollster or pundit expected a lower turnout and so did not correct their figures accordingly. The turnout ended up in the low 40s, which meant the polls had an average error of more than 3% – at a time when the norm for Swedish pollsters was an average error below 1%.

More recently, in the UK 2015 general election, the challenges in accounting for differential turnout again appear to be one of the key factors underpinning the performance of the polls. Ipsos’ own final prediction was within two percentage points for every party, with the exception of Labour, the main opposition party, whose share was overestimated. Early analysis suggests that this can be at least partly put down to the tendency of Labour supporters to overestimate how likely they are to vote.

While most people across the board overstate their likely turnout, in previous elections our approach accounted for this, which always moved the figures in favour of the Conservative party, whose support is older and more likely to vote. In 2015, however, there was an increase in Labour voters’ overestimation of their turnout which cancelled out this gap, and contributed to the overestimation of Labour’s share in the final poll.

There are clearly reasons why people may overestimate their likelihood of voting in an election – social desirability bias may again play a part, or people may just sincerely miscalculate their motivation for voting for a particular party, especially if they are not habitual voters. If we take the Harder and Krosnick<sup>30</sup> model of an individual’s turnout behaviour as a function of three things – motivation to vote, ability to vote and the difficulty associated with the act of voting – then it points towards the problem being a mix between a lack of motivation on voting day itself, whilst habitual voters may also be much more aware of the relative ease of voting.<sup>31</sup>

The rise of challenger parties in many countries also makes it harder to predict turnout among their supporters – although not always in the same direction. In the Italian elections in 2013, there were signs of the polls overestimating loyalty towards the Centre-Left, and underestimating the strength of movement towards Beppe Grillo's Movimento 5 Stello. And yet in Britain's 2010 election, despite the 'Cleggmania' bubble that built up around Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats after he positioned himself as an alternative to the two main parties in the UK's first televised leader debates, the number of seats he won actually fell as this enthusiasm measured in the polls

(coming mainly from those who had not voted before) was not carried forward into the polling booths.

# How should pollsters respond?

Clearly doing nothing is not an option, when not accounting for differential turnout could easily make the difference between a wrong and right prediction. There are a range of different approaches that have been used to deal with this problem:

1. Weighting by past vote profile. This is often suggested as a way of making samples more politically representative, but will be less successful if there is a genuine change in the political balance of a country between elections and the previous assumptions no longer apply (this approach also needs to take account of the phenomenon of 'false recall', whereby people incorrectly remember how they voted in the past).
2. Indices/filters based on likelihood to vote (and/or other behavioural questions). This is more closely attuned to the intentions of voters at the time, so should be less

constrained by past assumptions. However they are also particularly susceptible to bias through voters overstating their enthusiasm for voting. This is illustrated by how differently these models worked in the UK in 2010 and 2015. A more refined approach to this would be to include more behavioural questions in the index rather than simply attitudinal ones, on the grounds that these are more likely to be correlated with future behaviour (for example, by modifying stated likelihood to vote according to past voting behaviour).

3. Statistical models which use a range of questions (attitudinal and behavioural) to estimate turnout probabilities through techniques such as logistic regression. This approach is more sophisticated, and allows more granular estimates of turnout. However, it is also more complex, and a lot rests on the accuracy of the assumptions the analyst is making about the expected level of turnout.

Of course, pollsters can use a combination of these models, and it is also important to be aware of socio-political contexts – what works in one country may not work in other. Success, though, will often rely on calling turnout right.

Finally, this also raises questions regarding the role of opinion pollsters, and how we use our data.

But expectations are changing. More sophisticated forecasting models are being built, such as the range of academic teams who have gained greater profile across countries

forecasting elections, as well as the internationally famous example of Nate Silver in the US. Surely it is our duty as experts in public opinion to take into account everything we know about how public opinion may change – indeed, ignoring issues like turnout can yield what we know to be misleading results. Yet the more the modelling takes us away from the raw data, and involves adjustments based on experience and expertise, the more scope in turn there is for incorrect assumptions that lead to error too.

Finding the right balance between trusting the pure data and taking into account the biases we nonetheless know exist – especially in a world of falling turnout – is the biggest peril polling needs to face.

This also raises questions regarding the role of opinion pollsters, and how we use our data.



# The future of Europe

Ignore public perceptions at your peril



Glenn Gottfried,  
London

As we have seen in this edition, there are significant difficulties associated with understanding and explaining how people perceive the world and how they report their own behaviour. However, these challenges do not change the fact that perceptions matter. People's views about reality shape how they think and act in every area of their lives. In aggregate, shifts in perceptions can have significant and far-reaching consequences. There are very real perils for organisations and institutions if they ignore public perceptions, particularly when they change on important issues.

Europe provides a clear example of the challenges raised by changing public perceptions. The European Union has been heading down a rocky road since the onset of the 2008 economic crisis. Despite some modest economic recovery in the eurozone, European citizens have routinely expressed dissatisfaction with the economic and democratic status quo within their countries and across the EU.

Although there has been ongoing hardship it is evident that Europe's political elite are keen to progress with further integration and even deepen political ties within the eurozone as recently proposed to by Germany and France. The Eurobarometer survey series is conducted several times annually and measures public opinion across Europe. The findings show both the stiff test Europe faces and the variation between and even within member states.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the greatest challenge Europe faces is regaining citizens' trust. Distrust of the EU is clearly on the rise (see Figure 15). Between the onset of the economic crisis in mid-2007 and the most recent available data<sup>33</sup>, distrust of

Figure FOURTEEN.

Q: For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it – The European Union

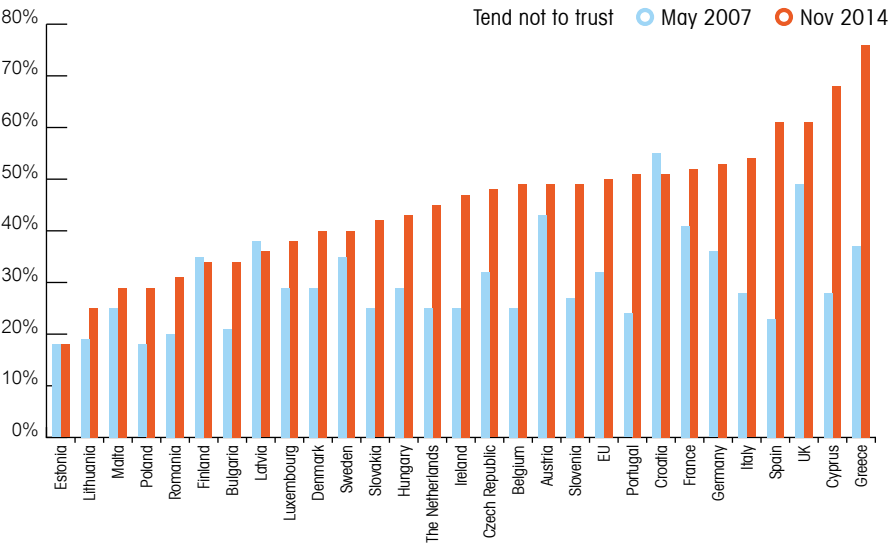
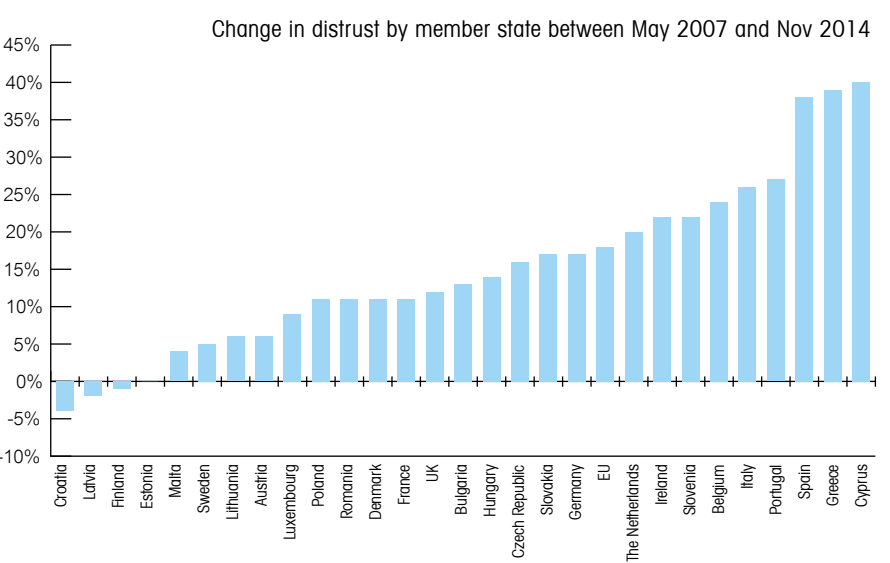


Figure FIFTEEN.

Q: For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. – The European Union



the European Union has increased in all but four member states (Finland, Latvia, Croatia and Estonia).<sup>34</sup> Roughly half (50%) of all EU citizens have no trust in the European Union in the most recent figures – an increase of 18 percentage points since May 2007. Distrust remains high not just within countries hit hardest by the economic crisis, such as Greece, Cyprus and Spain, but also in a number of Europe's stronger economies, for instance the UK and the Germany. More recent member states such as Estonia, Lithuania, Malta and Poland maintain the most faith, with only modest levels of distrust.

Differences in the changing levels of trust are at least partially explained by experiences since the recession. Countries with the largest increases in EU distrust are those hit hardest by the sovereign debt crisis and slow economic recovery, including Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy. More economically powerful countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom have seen less change, in part because there was already significant scepticism about the EU in these nations before the crisis.

Europe's public are divided between creditor and debtor states.<sup>35</sup> The previously perceived benefits of European membership around economic stability seem to be less convincing for those within the indebted states, as their governments face significant pressures to implement austerity. At the same time the public within creditor states may be running out of patience with the economic woes of the debtor countries.

The trends in perceptions are clear, and this is reflected at the ballot box. Populist parties have been on the rise, building on public disapproval of European integration, immigration and the growing sense that mainstream politics is 'out of touch' with ordinary citizens. While most of these parties have not yet gained enough support to form governments, they have effectively influenced the European agenda of national governments. A case in point is the upcoming EU referendum

in the United Kingdom. It is unlikely this would be happening without the political pressure exerted by the UK Independence Party, following success at the European elections in 2014.

Meanwhile in Denmark, the Danish People's Party have reshaped the political landscape on immigration and European matters, pushing for citizens' right to vote on EU issues in the most recent election campaign.<sup>36</sup>

But it's not just changes in national sentiment that Europe should be



Europe provides a clear example of the challenges raised by changing public perceptions.





worried about. Figure 16 shows just how different attitudes towards the European Union are when broken down by self-reported socio-economic class. When asked to evaluate their country's membership to the EU only two in five (40%) of those identifying with the working class say it's a 'good thing' – 17 points less than those who identify with the middle class and 31 points less than those who identify with the higher classes. Nearly one in five working class individuals (22%) say membership is a 'bad thing' compared to just 8% of higher class citizens.

Differences also exist between various educational levels (see Figure 17). Those with lower skill levels are less likely to see the benefits of EU membership.<sup>37</sup> Just 36% of those who left education at a younger age (15 years or below) see EU membership as a 'good thing' and one in four (26%) as a 'bad thing'. For those who left full-time education between 16 and 19 years 45% see membership as a 'good thing' and 18% as a 'bad thing'. But it's those who've received the most education (leaving at age 20 years or older) who see EU membership most positively. Nearly two in three (63%) of those who have continued education in their 20s see EU membership as a 'good thing' versus roughly one in eight (12%) seeing it as bad.

Europeans are also divided on the benefits EU membership has brought them and their country, there are even wider divisions on how Europe should move forward. The prospect of deeper integration for some and not for others (the so-called two-speed Europe) does not resonate well across all of Europe (see Figure 18).

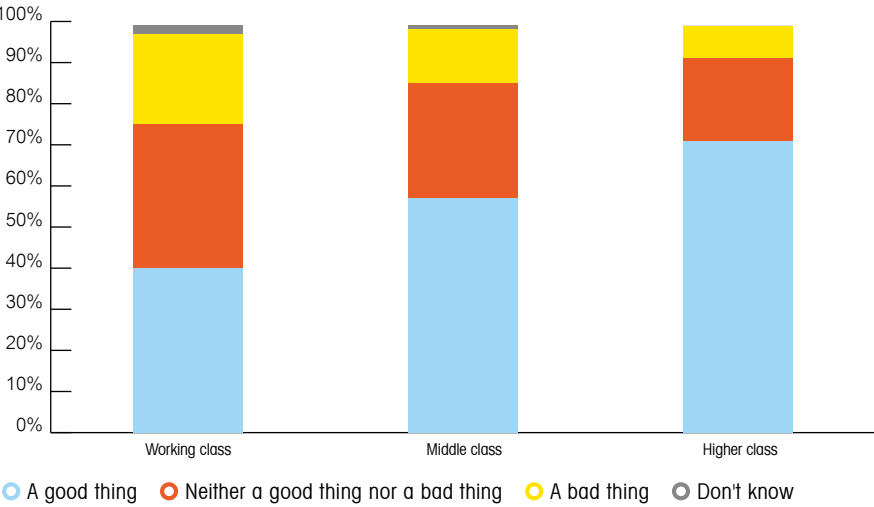
Of course, much of the negative shift in perceptions is a response

to the global recession, reflecting dissatisfaction with economic and political situation in Europe generally, rather than being specifically about EU policies and institutions. Indeed, recent research suggests that the most significant determinant of citizens' trust and support for the EU is how much they trust their national governments.<sup>38</sup> If circumstances improve in individual countries, support for the EU is likely to recover. And dissatisfaction and distrust are certainly not the same as citizens wanting their countries to leave the EU. Even so, these findings are challenging as Europe's leaders and supporters look to the future. There are real risks for the EU if citizens do not feel their concerns are being addressed, as the tricky politics around the recent Greek crisis have shown.

But, with a longer view, there

Figure SIXTEEN.

Q: Generally speaking, do you think that (country's) membership of the EU is a good thing, a bad thing, neither a good thing nor a bad thing?  
- By perceived social class



are reasons to be more cheerful - if sentiment doesn't decline too much during this particularly challenging period. In general, the youngest generation and better educated people are most trusting of the EU, and most positive about its future. And this is not just an age effect – there is a cohort element here, where the current young are more positive than previous generations of young people. As education levels continue to rise and this younger cohort make up more of the adult population, this could become an increasingly influential group of advocates for the EU in terms of public sentiment. However, this is far from certain, and Europe's leaders must continue to work hard to engage people across Europe, making the case for the ongoing role of the EU in an increasingly uncertain world.



Figure SEVENTEEN.

Q: Generally speaking, do you think that (country's) membership of the EU is a good thing, a bad thing, neither a good thing nor a bad thing?  
- By age stopped full-time education

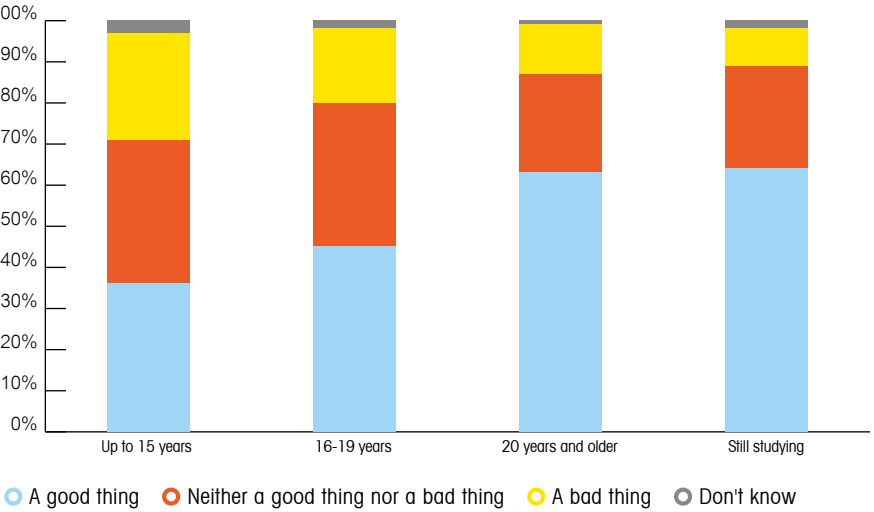
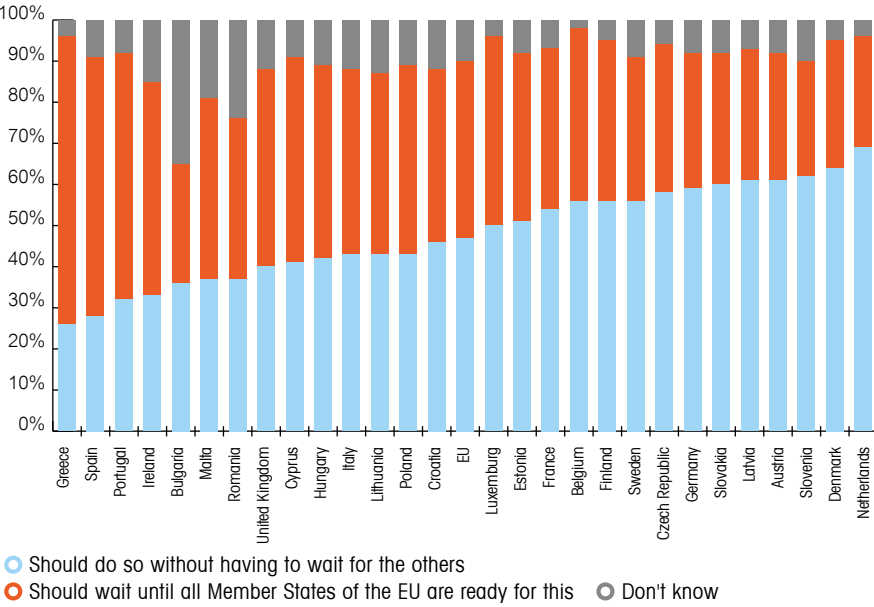


Figure EIGHTEEN.

As regards the idea of a "Two speed europe", which of the following comes closest to your personal preference?



Europeans are divided on the benefits EU membership has brought them and their country, and there are even wider divisions on how Europe should move forward.

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per country per wave, face to face

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Base: 11, 527 adults across 14 countries, online, 12-16 August 2014, data is weighted

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Base: 11, 527 adults across 14 countries, online, 12-16 August 2014, data is weighted

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## About Ipsos MORI's Social Research Institute

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The Social Research Institute works closely with national government, local public services and the not-for-profit sector. Its 200 research staff focus on public service and policy issues. Each has expertise in a particular part of the public sector, ensuring we have a detailed understanding of specific sectors and policy challenges. This, combined with our methodological and communications expertise, ensures that our research makes a difference for decision makers and communities.