

External political efficacy refers to one's belief that one has a say in what the government does. This is important as people expect that their views and needs will affect the decisions taken by public institutions. In turn, external political efficacy can be built and destroyed by people's experiences when interacting with public institutions and by institutions that are not perceived as responsive to people's needs (e.g. policy-making processes and government decisions that do not respond to public preferences). External political efficacy is of paramount importance to democratic systems as it relates to the belief that political and social change are possible and that people can play a part in bringing about this change. This belief is also associated with the idea that it is worthwhile to perform civic duties (OECD, 2017).

There is a long tradition of including external political efficacy metrics in political participation surveys such as the American National Electoral Study, which has collected these data biennially for the United States since 1952. More recently, General Social Surveys (i.e. European Social Survey [ESS]) and Surveys on Adult Skills (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies [PIAAC]) have picked up the topic as part of their regular measurement plans. According to the latest available data, in 2016 only 37% of people, on average, reported having a say in what government does in 23 OECD (mainly European) countries. There is, however, wide variation ranging from about 74% in Switzerland, a country with a long tradition of direct democracy, to just about 10% in Italy. From 2014 to 2016 the percentage of the population who believe they can influence government action increased the most in Iceland (24.5 percentage points) and Germany (14.4 p.p.) while the steepest declines happened in Poland (12.4 p.p.) and Sweden (9.9 p.p.).

In the academic literature, levels of external political efficacy are related to citizen engagement, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in public institutions, such as parliament. People who feel that they could influence their government are also those who are more satisfied with democracy and trust their assembly of elected representatives more (OECD, forthcoming). Switzerland, the Netherlands and Nordic countries such as Norway, Sweden and Finland, display the highest perception of external political efficacy, the greatest satisfaction with democracy and the greatest level of trust in their parliament. On the contrary, southern and eastern European countries such as Italy, Portugal, Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia trust their elected representatives less and are less satisfied with democracy overall.

Methodology and definitions

The ESS is an academically driven cross-national survey that has been conducted across Europe since its establishment in 2001. Every two years, face-to-face interviews are conducted with newly selected, cross-sectional samples. Each country must achieve a minimum effective sample size of 1500. For smaller countries (those with a population of less than 2 million), this number is reduced to 800. The survey measures the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of diverse populations in European countries.

Further reading

- Borgonovi, F. and A. Pokropek (2017), "Mind that gap: The mediating role of literacy and education in explaining disparities in external political efficacy in 28 countries", *Intelligence*, Vol. 62, pp. 125-137, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2017.03.006>.
- González, S. (forthcoming), "Statistical accuracy of responsiveness measures in public governance", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, OECD Publishing Paris.
- OECD (2017), *How's Life? Measuring Well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/how_life-2017-en.

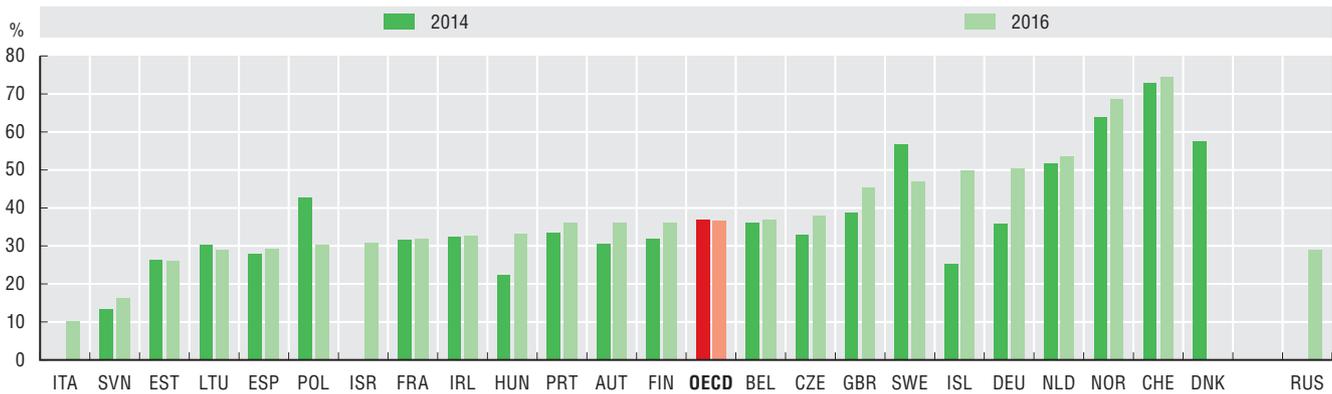
Figure notes

- On data for Israel, see <http://doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.
- 10.4. Data for 2016 refer to the percentage who answered "some", "a lot", or "a great deal" to "How: much would you say the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does? Data for 2014 refer to the percentage who answered 5 or more on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely agree).. Data presented are OECD calculations based on Rounds 7 and 8 of the ESS, from data available for 21 European countries. Data for Italy are available in Round 8, but not in Round 7. Data for Denmark are available in Round 7, but not in Round 8. Data for Israel are only available in Round 8.
- 10.5. Data refer to the percentage who answered 5 or more on a scale of 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied) to "As a whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country?"
- 10.6. Data refer to the percentage who answered 5 or more on a scale of 0 (not trust at all) to 10 (complete trust) to "How much you personally trust each of the institutions, your country's parliament?"

Perception of government responsiveness: External political efficacy

10.4. Having a say in what the government does, 2014 and 2016

% of the population

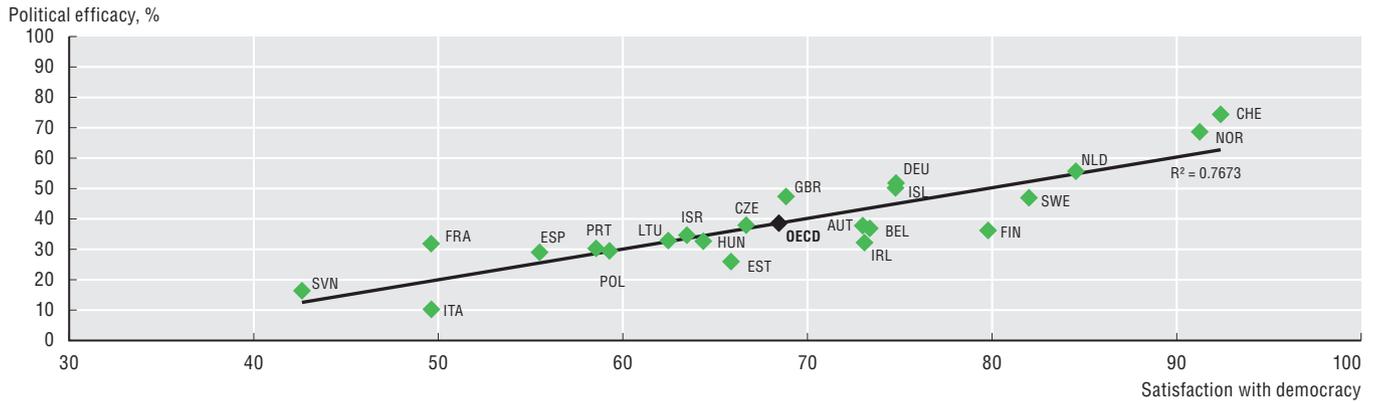


Source: OECD calculations based in Rounds 7 and 8 of the European Social Survey.

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934033194>

10.5. Political efficacy versus satisfaction with democracy, 2016

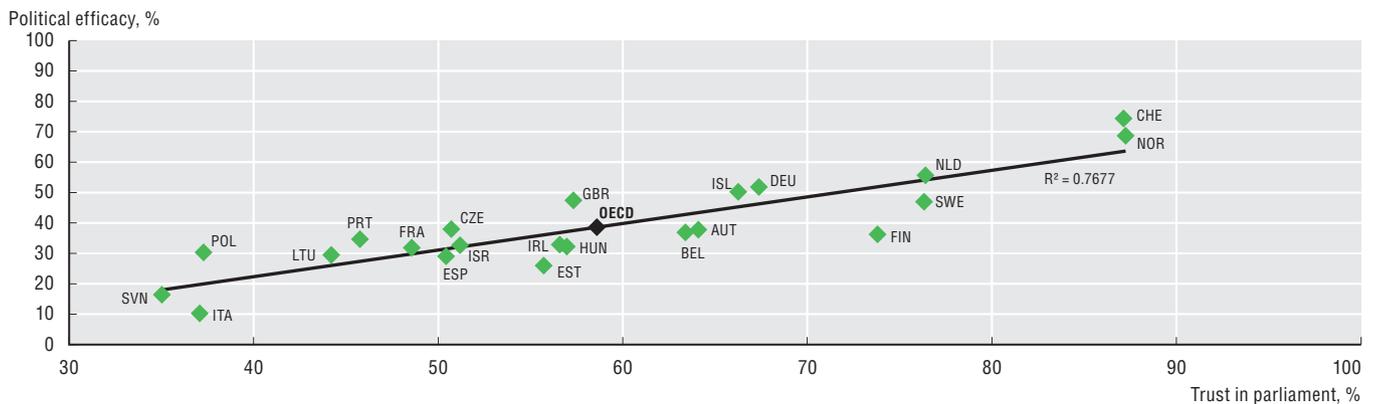
Political efficacy versus satisfaction with democracy



Source: European Social Survey, 2016

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934033213>

10.6. Political efficacy versus trust in parliament, 2016



Source: European Social Survey, 2016

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934033232>



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