

Internal and external political efficacy

Political attitudes are a key component of people's belief systems, and refer to an enduring feeling, or mental or emotional mindset, with which people approach political problems or situations. Together with trust, political efficacy is one of the most relevant indicators of the overall status of democratic systems. The more people feel able to understand politics and have their voice heard, the more likely they are to pursue democratic endeavours.

Political efficacy refers to the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have an impact upon the political process. It has two dimensions: internal efficacy, or people's self-perception of their capability to understand and participate in political processes, and external efficacy, or their feeling of having a say in what governments do.

Internal efficacy has been used broadly as a factor explaining political participation. Citizens' self-efficacy and involvement was also found to predict trust in government and parliament and satisfaction with democracy. According to data from the European Social Survey (ESS), in 2018 on average only 35% of people in 22 OECD countries reported feeling confident participating in politics. However, there is wide variation, ranging from 60% in Norway, a country with high turnout levels, to 14% in the Czech Republic, a more recent democracy. The OECD average slightly increased between 2016 and 2018 (by 2 p.p.). The greatest increase was in Poland (5.2 p.p) and the Netherlands (4.6 p.p.), while the steepest declines were in Hungary (6.3 p.p) and France (2.9 p.p) (Figure 13.4).

External efficacy is critical for the legitimacy of public institutions, as it measures whether people believe the system is responsive to their demands. Data from the ESS and the World Values Survey (WVS) show that on average less than half of the population (40%) in 26 OECD countries believe the political system in their countries allows people like them to have a say in what the government does, 1.7 percentage points higher than in 2016. Countries vary widely, however, ranging from about 74% in Switzerland to about 15% in Italy. Between 2016 and 2018 the percentage of people who perceived they had a say in their government's actions increased the most in Poland (11.2 percentage points), which experienced a change of government after eight years, and Estonia (10.7 p.p.). Conversely, external efficacy levels fell the most in the United Kingdom (4.6 p.p.) and Germany (2.5 p.p.) (Figure 13.5).

External efficacy is closely associated with satisfaction with democracy and trust in public institutions (González, 2020). Low or falling levels of system responsiveness could lead to perceptions that the system works in the interests of a few, fuelling disenchantment and political cynicism. Indeed, according to the ESS data for 22 OECD countries, there is a strong and positive correlation between external efficacy and satisfaction with democracy. Countries with

the greatest levels of external efficacy are the ones where most of the population report feeling satisfied with the way democracy works, such as Switzerland or Norway. In contrast, in countries such as Italy, Slovenia or Latvia, low levels of external efficacy are associated also to less satisfaction with democracy overall (Figure 13.6).

Methodology and definitions

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a cross-national survey established in 2001. Every two years, face-to-face interviews are conducted, achieving a minimum effective sample size of 1 500. For smaller countries (with a population of less than 2 million), the sample is reduced to 800.

The World Value Survey (WVS) started in 1981. The 7th round of the WVS is taking place worldwide in 2017-21 and includes the same questions on external political efficacy as the ESS. Samples employed are random probability representative of the adult population. The usual sample size is 1 300. Countries with greater populations and diversity apply samples of 1 500 to 5 000 while for those with populations below 2 million the sample size is 1 000.

Further reading

González, S. (2020), "Testing the evidence, how good are public sector responsiveness measures and how to improve them?", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 38, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c1b10334-en>.

Prats, M. and A. Meunier (2021), "Political efficacy and participation: An empirical analysis in European countries", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No 46, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/4548cad8-en>.

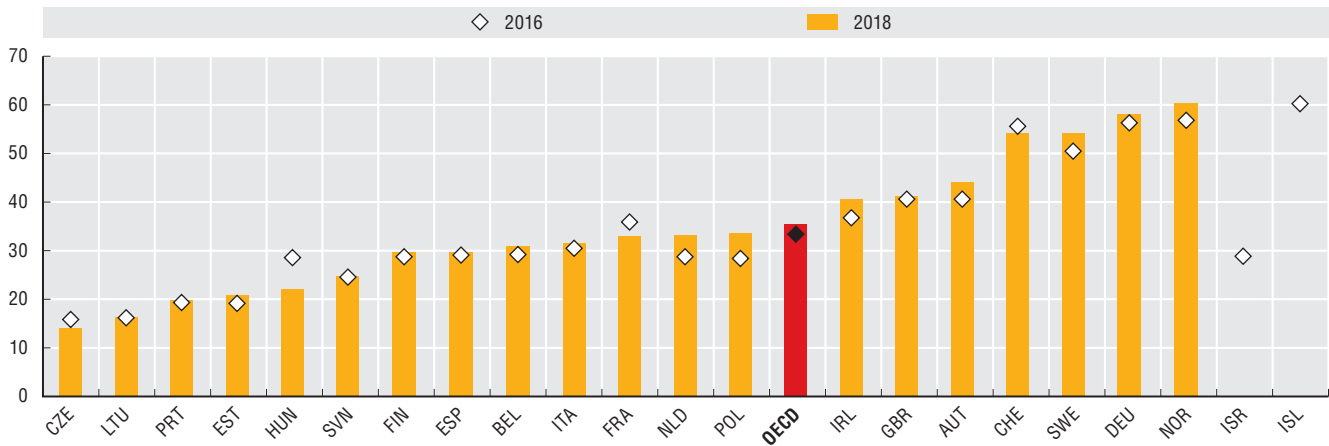
Figure notes

13.4. The scores for 2016 and 2018 reflect the percentage who answered "quite confident", "very confident" or "completely confident" to "How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?" The options "not at all confident" and "a little confident" are not shown.

13.5. The scores reflect 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 Australia, Colombia, Japan, Mexico and New Zealand are from the WVS. Averages are based in ESS data.

13.6. 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?"

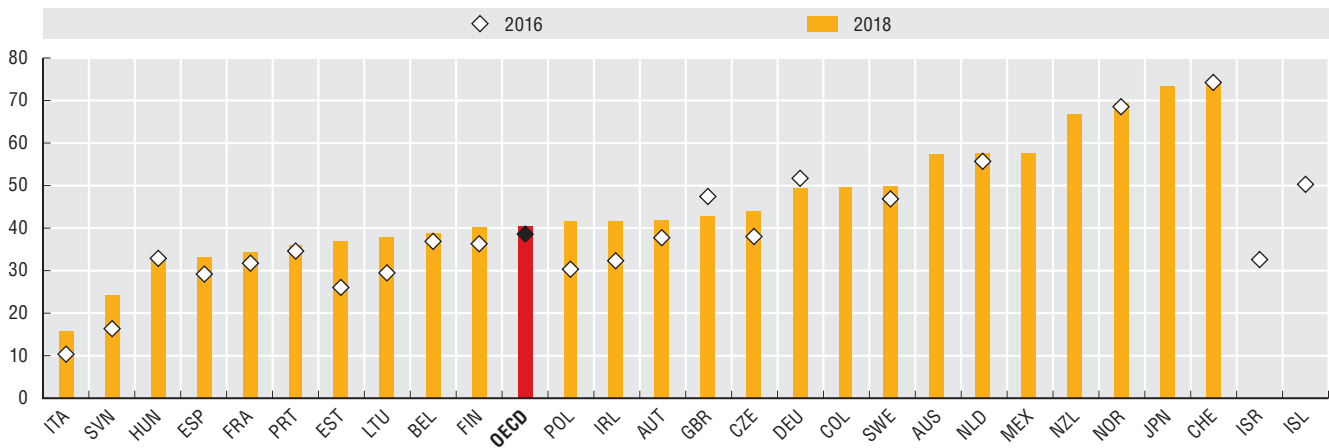
13.4. People's confidence to participate in politics, 2016 and 2018
% of the population



Source: OECD calculations based on Rounds 8 and 9 of the European Social Survey.

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934259180>

13.5. Having a say in what the government does, 2016 and 2018 (or nearest year)
% of the population



Source: OECD calculations based on Rounds 8 and 9 of the European Social Survey and the 2017-20 round of the World Values Survey.

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934259199>

13.6. External political efficacy and satisfaction with democracy, 2018



Source: OECD calculations based on Round 9 of the European Social Survey.

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934259218>



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