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POLICY BRIEF
APRIL 2019
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THE POLITICAL CLIMATE IN SPAIN AHEAD OF THE ELECTIONS

The Spanish are once again being called upon to cast their votes. The national and European elections, which will be held one month apart, are occurring in a country which has been suffering from a period of political instability since the general election of December 2015, which marked the end of the two-party system that had hitherto been in place. Spain may be considered as in the front line of the political crises which, to varying degrees of severity, have not spared any of the most densely populated countries in Western Europe: the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and France. Since this 2015 election, the Spanish economy has recovered somewhat and unemployment has abated. Yet the country has been hit by a crisis of another kind, following the referendum of 1st October 2017 held by the Catalan government, which weakened Mariano Rajoy's position and even precipitated his fall. As the subsequent government led by Pedro Sanchez does not enjoy a stable majority, Spanish voters are being called into the polling stations on 28 April, and will vote again one month later for the European elections. The Spanish have suffered from the 2008 financial crisis and the Euro crisis but are gradually recovering their long-standing Eurofavour. These two elections, which may be an opportunity for the far-right to gain an initial foothold in the country, will be significant, not only for Spain's future, but for that of Europe.





THE POLITICAL LABYRINTH OF SPAIN BEFORE THE POLLS: SOCIAL CLIMATE AND ELECTORAL SITUATION TODAY IN SPAIN

■ **VICTOR SOBRINO**

Directeur, Kantar Spain

■ **MAXIME BORG**

Chargé d'études, Kantar France

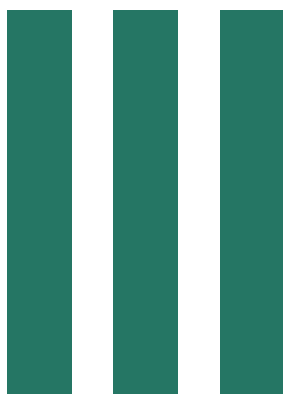
1. The economy gradually recovers as morale lifts more sharply

After the recession has triggered in Spain in 2008, economic growth in the country appears to have resumed. Since 2015, Spain has experienced one of the highest rates of growth in the euro area (3.2%) and its GDP level has returned to pre-crisis levels. However, although unemployment has fallen significantly in recent years, it remains high (14.1% in January 2019), particularly for young people with 34.1% of the under-25s unemployed. In addition, the high national debt (98% of GDP in November 2018), as well as the context of political uncertainty, have recently prompted the IMF to predict another slowdown in the Spanish economy in 2019 and 2020 (with growth rates of 2.2% and 1.9% respectively).

Spaniards themselves are very critical of the social situation in their country. According to the European Commission's Eurobarometer data published in November 2018, 75% of Spaniards believe it to be bad. When the same question is put to all European citizens, only 48% are of the same opinion, 27 points below the Spanish. Spaniards are even more critical when asked to assess the economic situation in their country. 80% of them rate it 'bad' whereas less than half of European citizens overall (48%) share this point of view about the state of their national economies. However, unemployment is certainly the issue of greatest concern for the Spanish people. 52% consider addressing it to be a top priority for their country, 29 points higher than the European average. 86% of the Spanish population think the employment situation in their country is bad meaning that public

opinion of this country is one of the most pessimistic in the EU on this issue after the Greeks. 31% even rate it 'very bad', twice the average recorded among all EU citizens. Unsurprisingly, young people aged 15-24 are particularly pessimistic. 75% believe the situation in Spain to be bad, 36 points higher than the average among young Europeans as a whole.

Faced with these difficult economic circumstances, the Spanish express a very pessimistic attitude with regard to the state of their society. However, when it comes to future prospects for their personal lives and for their country, the Spanish are far more optimistic. When asked about their professional situation, 60% rate it 'good', a figure in line with other Europeans. Nearly one third of the Spanish population (29%) even expect their life in general will be better in the next twelve months. This Spanish optimism is also comparable to the European average when it comes to the future. Nearly one quarter of Spaniards (24%) believe the economic situation in their country will be better in one year, three points higher than the average opinion of EU citizens in this regard. This high level of confidence about the future is even shared by 15-24-year-olds with regard to their professional future, with 46% believing that it will be better in the next twelve months (five points higher than the average for young Europeans aged 15-24), as well as the economic situation, with 42% expecting that it will be better in one year (one point higher than the average for young Europeans of the same age).





2 . Political representation still in crisis

Political life in Spain is marred by a notable level of distrust held by citizens towards their political institutions. For example, more than three-quarters of Spaniards say they do not trust their Government, 17 points higher than the average for the 28 EU Member States. The parties also suffer from a similar crisis of legitimacy in the eyes of public opinion. Only 8% of Spaniards say that they trust them, a particularly low level, even in comparison with the European average which is hardly remarkable itself (18%). The national parliament is not spared from this climate of distrust either, as shown by the fact that nearly four out of five Spaniards (79%) say they do not trust this institution, 21 points higher than the average for the 28 EU Member States.

This distrust held by Spaniards towards their political institutions had been falling, with a continuous improvement in the indicators recorded since 2013. However, this improvement came to a halt at the time of the Catalan institutional crisis and the events that followed from autumn 2017 onwards. Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution was invoked allowing the president of the government, Mariano Rajoy, which is something that has never happened since the return of democracy in Spain. This event has led up to a partial takeover of the autonomous community of Catalonia by the Government. This followed a referendum organised by the Catalan parliament on 1 October 2017 where 90% voted in favour of the region's independence with a turnout of 42.4%. This was judged illegal by the Spanish Constitutional Court and the activation of Article 155 of the Constitution by the head of government was then followed by the impeachment of the President of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, his Government, the dissolution of the local Parliament and the organisation of autonomous elections on 21st December 2017. The leaders responsible for the referendum and proclamation of

independence were then brought before the Spanish courts charged with 'rebellion, sedition, embezzlement of public funds and disobedience to authority', while the ousted president Carles Puigdemont took refuge in Belgium. Finally, on 21 December 2017, separatist parties secured a new absolute majority in the Catalan Parliament. The trial of the 12 Catalan independence leaders has been ongoing since 12 February 2019. It commands a central place in the country's public debate with some public opinion viewing it as a 'political trial'.

Since then, Catalans' sense of national attachment has steadily fallen to the point that, today, under a half of Catalans feel very or quite attached to Spain (46%) whereas elsewhere in Spain the vast majority feel this way (92%) according to data from the Eurobarometer in March 2018. The Catalan crisis of late 2017 also considerably increased the delegitimization of national political institutions in the region. This is reflected by the fact that only 30% of Catalans express satisfaction with how national democracy functions.¹

3 . Main campaign issues: Spain facing its historic fault lines

Spanish politics is in turmoil with four elections being held in the space of less than a month. On 28 April, the Spanish will decide on the composition of the national parliament. Then, on 26 May, three ballots will be held. Firstly, Spaniards will go to the polls to elect their new Members of European Parliament. Secondly, the municipal elections will also take place on the same day for the whole country. Lastly, the representatives of most of the autonomous communities (13 out of 17) will also be elected by citizens of the regions concerned on 26 May. The balance of power will certainly be disrupted by the new political landscape that will emerge following these elections.

Which issues will be central to the debates

1. [Les tensions infranationales au sein des états membres : un nouveau défi pour l'Europe](#). 5 points de vue d'experts Kantar de Catalogne, Écosse, Italie du nord (Lombardie et Vénétie) et Flandre. avril 2018



during the electoral campaigns? In order to understand this, a reminder of the political context in Spain is necessary. Since the president of the government, Mariano Rajoy of the People's Party, was ousted by a vote of no confidence on 1 June 2018 due to falling popularity following his management of the Catalan crisis and his party responsibility in corruption cases. Spain has been led by Pedro Sánchez, leader of the PSOE, who was appointed without holding an early general election. During his nine months in power, this economist has positioned his choices on the left of the political spectrum, for example by welcoming the *Aquarius* migrant rescue boat, raising the minimum wage by 22%, reindexing pensions on inflation, opening up the public health system to undocumented migrants and increasing the pay of state employees. However, Pedro Sánchez had too flimsy a majority, the PSOE itself only having 84 out of 350 deputies in the lower chamber of Spanish parliament and having to depend on fragile alliances. The vote on the annual budget law ended up getting the better of his government as the ERC and PDeCat Catalan separatist parties, who had so far supported it, refused to renew their support after the head of government declined to publicly state his support for the right to self-determination. This resulted in an early general election being called for 28 April.

Three themes appear to be emerging from the campaign. Firstly, the Catalan issue clearly plays a central role in the political game. The country's main political forces are deeply divided between those who support – or at least do not oppose – Catalonia's separatist government (the PSOE and Podemos) and those who are calling for Article 155 of the Constitution to be applied once again (the PP, Ciudadanos and Vox). The latter have adopted a radical line on this issue which in turn has provoked a radicalisation of the political line of the two biggest separatist parties. Carles Puigdemont took back control of the PDeCat, from Belgium, and removed the pragmatists in his party, who had made it possible for Pedro Sánchez to take office, from the lists for future elections. Some of them notably have been replaced by people currently awaiting the outcome of their trials at the Supreme Court, accused of rebellion,

sedition, embezzlement of public funds or disobedience, due to their involvement in holding the referendum in Catalonia on 1 October 2017. This choice means Carles Puigdemont can help or collaborate with the far right to make a return in Madrid, a factor which would galvanise Catalan separatist movements. The other separatist party in the national parliament, the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), has also opted to take a confrontational line with Madrid by naming Oriol Junqueras top of the list, another of the defendants in the above-mentioned trial, who is currently kept in preventive custody.

Another issue with a prominent place in the campaign for the legislative elections concerns the remains of the former dictator Francisco Franco. These are currently located 50 kilometres from Madrid in Valle de los Caídos. It was the current president of the Spanish government, Pedro Sánchez, who propelled this issue to the forefront of public debate. He managed this by stating in July 2018 that 'Spain could not allow itself a monument in tribute to a dictator' and promising that Franco's remains would be exhumed 'in the very near future'. However, to this day, the initiative continues to face difficulty but, from a strategic perspective, it allows the socialists to occupy a more significant space on the left, so far occupied by Podemos. This position on the issue of the former dictator's remains also presents an opportunity for the PSOE to place the liberal party Ciudadanos in the right-wing bloc, with the People's Party (PP) and the recently formed far-right party Vox. Like the PP, Ciudadanos had abstained from voting in parliament on Franco's exhumation on the grounds that it was 'not urgent'. The socialists are therefore hoping to win over voters from the liberals disappointed by their rapprochement with the right, with whom it governs in coalition in Andalusia, mainly thanks to the support of Vox since January 2019.

Lastly, economic and social issues are also expected to play a prominent role in debates in the course of the general election campaign. In this regard, the PSOE is pointing to its failed attempt to pass what has been termed 'the most social budget in history' according to Irene Montero, Podemos's

spokesperson. The planned measures in particular included a 60% increase in support for dependent persons, funding of public health and education, grants and investments, free medicines for pensioners in hardship, an increase in paternity leave, the taxation of Google and a tax on financial transactions. Podemos therefore has every interest in insisting on these issues in order to position itself both as a future ally of the PSOE and as an anchor to the left of the alliance formed in this way. This is because this party, uncomfortable with the Catalan issue due to its support for a self-determination referendum in Catalonia, finds itself at a disadvantage in the polls in the rest of Spain. As a result, this left-wing party is logically trying to bring back the debate to social issues.

4 . State of political forces: an open game in a changing landscape

The PSOE is leading in the polls with -28-29% of voting intentions and significantly ahead of its direct competitor the PP which is only credited with nearly 20% of voting intentions. Suffering as a result of the poaching of its most right-leaning voters by the far-right Vox (10-11%), the young new PP leader, Pablo Casado, has chosen to adopt a clear conservative line to win back these voters. His declarations about defending traditional values such as family and the nation, as well as the controversy over the proposal to delay the expulsion of pregnant migrants who would give their baby up for adoption, position his party more to the right of the political spectrum than in the time of his predecessor, Mariano Rajoy.

Nevertheless, the coalition hitherto predicted between the PP, Vox and Ciudadanos appears less certain than before. This is because of statements made by Santiago Abascal, the far-right party leader, about the need to 'facilitate the sale of firearms' the day after the Christchurch massacre. This led the PP and Ciudadanos leaders to distance themselves from Vox. The Catalan issue should however continue to bring these two right-wing parties closer to the far-right group

which embodies an uninhibited nationalism in favour of the complete recentralisation of the country.

As for Ciudadanos, this centre-right party is attempting to curb its fall in the polls. Just one year ago the party was leading the polls with 26-27% of voting intentions. At that time, it was ahead of the Popular Party. The party is today credited with just 16-17%. Its leader, Albert Rivera, has therefore decided to adopt a more divisive discourse, as seen by his call for protests to defend the unity of Spain alongside Vox and the PP on 10 February. This position upsets his centrist voters who had up to this point admired the pragmatism of his proposals and his ability to conclude agreements with both the PP and the PSOE, thus rejecting labels of right and left. In order to boost its chances, Ciudadanos finally played its master card: Inés Arrimadas, a member of the Catalan regional parliament who embodies the opposition to the Catalan separatists, announced she would be running for the Spanish parliament.

On the left, despite its lead in the polls, the PSOE does not appear able to form a government due to the emerging tripartite right-wing coalition. The Ciudadanos leader, Albert Rivera, has stated that under no circumstances would he agree to rule with Pedro Sánchez, while not ruling out an agreement with another socialist party leader. However, the head of the Spanish government appears, for the moment, to be the indisputable leader of his party, therefore reducing the chances of seeing a coalition between these centre-left and centre-right parties.

Lastly, Podemos does not appear able to claim to form a left-wing coalition with the PSOE due to its low ratings in the polls with 12-13% of voting intentions. The internal crisis the party has been experiencing for several months peaked with the resignation of one of its co-founders, Iñigo Errejón, on 17 January. This former candidate for the presidency of the Madrid region, as a left-wing radical, chose to join the political platform of the mayor of the capital, criticising Podemos for refusing to come together with the other left-wing forces.

However, the tendency of many of these former voters to turn towards abstention remains Podemos' main electoral problem. There may be several reasons for this. Firstly, strategic decisions can be cited, such as not entering into coalition governments in regions where Podemos supports socialists or not having supported the first attempt to put the socialist Pedro Sánchez in office in 2016. In addition, personal errors by the

leaders may also explain the abstention of some former Podemos voters. For example, Pablo Iglesias and his domestic partner Irene Montero choosing to put their decision to buy a luxury villa to the vote of activists or the overly vertical control that they exert over the party are often mentioned by the movement's supporters. Lastly, the PSOE's turn to the left may also explain the erosion of this party's voters.

- Established within Kantar Public, an international research company, Centre Kantar sur le Futur de l'Europe aims to feed the public debate on European issues, relying in particular on the national experts of Kantar Public, their knowledge of public opinion, political movements, socio-economic trends and migratory phenomena within the European Union and each of the countries that composes it.



Tableau ■ Quelques chiffres comparatifs sur l'Espagne et l'UE (Eurobaromètres)

	ESPAGNE	UE 28
How would you judge the current situation of the economy?		
Good	18%	49%
Bad	80%	48%
How would you judge the current situation of the employment situation in your country?		
Good	13%	45%
Bad	86%	51%
How would you judge the current situation of your personal job situation?		
Good	60%	60%
Bad	27%	20%
What are your expectations for the next twelve months: will the next twelve months be better, worse or the same, when it comes to your life in general?		
Better	29%	29%
Worse	7%	11%
Same	61%	58%
What are your expectations for the next twelve months: will the next twelve months be better, worse or the same, when it comes to the economic situation in your country?		
Better	24%	21%
Worse	19%	27%
Same	53%	47%
Tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust the Government		
Tend to trust	19%	35%
Tend not to trust	76%	59%
Tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust political parties		
Tend to trust	8%	18%
Tend not to trust	88%	77%
Tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust the parliament		
Tend to trust	15%	35%
Tend not to trust	79%	58%



THE SPANISH AND EUROPE:

PRO-EUROPEANISM SOMETIMES THWARTED

■ DANIEL DEBOMY

Chercheur associé à l'Institut Jacques Delors, directeur d'OPTEM

Less than one month after the legislative elections discussed above, the Spanish will be once again called on to vote, this time for the European elections on 26 May. These elections come at a time when Spanish public opinion is once again generally in favour of the European Union, as was recently analysed by the Jacques Delors Institute¹, based on data taken from the European Commission's regular surveys, complemented by data from the European Parliament for some aspects and informed by the contributions of qualitative studies conducted in the last thirty years².

1. THE JUSTIFICATION OF EU MEMBERSHIP: CONFIRMATION OF A VERY ROBUST INCREASE IN FAVOURABLE OPINIONS AFTER THE CRISIS

Developments in this area can be monitored through two indicators measured in the aforementioned surveys. Trends can be identified going back to when Spain joined the European Community in 1986.

The membership indicator measures the share of citizens who believe that their country's membership in the EU is a good thing (or a bad thing, or neither good nor bad). In the spring of 1986, this indicator for Spain was on a par with the European average of the time: 62% of favourable opinions, against 4% (34% who did not have a clear-cut opinion or who did not give an answer).

From then on, it broadly followed an upwards or downwards trend similar to the average European indicator, but with greater fluctuations. Between the period of accession and the emergence of the 2008 financial crisis, we can firstly see a sharp rise until the spring of 1991 (78% against 3%), then a fall to a low level in the spring of 1995 (to 44%, against 22% – below the European average). The indicator then rose again (often above this average), to peak at 73% (against 10%) in the spring of 2007. Subsequently, the crisis brought about a new very sharp drop (in which favourable opinions fell to only 47%, against 24%, in the spring of 2013).

In recent years, however, there has been a very clear recovery. 62% of Spanish people deemed **their country's membership** in the EU **a good thing** in the autumn of 2017; and over the past year this score has continued to rise: to 68% six months later, and **72%** (against 6%) at the end of 2018 – ten points

1. "L'opinion publique espagnole et l'UE : une eurofaveur retrouvée". *Brief*, Debomy, 18 June 2018, only in French.

2. Qualitative studies conducted by OPTEM and its partners of the European Qualitative Network, mainly for the Commission and other EU institutions.



higher than the EU average.

The benefit indicator (analysed here since 1989) refers to whether (or not) the country has benefitted from its membership. In Spain and the EU in general, there was a peak in the spring of 1991 (58%, a score near the average, having a positive opinion, against 25%, and 17% who did not answer), before falling until the spring of 1995, when only 28% acknowledged the benefit (for three years until the autumn of 1995, there were fewer positive opinions than negative opinions). The indicator for Spain then rose much more sharply than the European average until the crisis: in the spring of 2007, 75% of opinions recorded were favourable (against 14%), compared to 59% in the EU. The subsequent drop of this indicator was more significant and long-standing than the EU average: a 25-point drop compared to the pre-crisis peak.

Since this slump, the **recovery** involved more ups and downs but was **stronger for Spain than for the EU as a whole**. In the autumn of 2017, 70% of **opinions were positive**; in **2018** this figure rose to **75%** (against 19% in the autumn) – seven points above the EU average. We can also note that at the end of 2018 **only 19% of Spanish citizens believed that their country could better face the future outside the EU**, while **71% disagreed with this statement** (a result close to that recorded one year earlier, 21% against 73%).

2. THE ORIGINS OF SPANISH ATTITUDES: PRO-EUROPEANISM WHICH IS SOMETIMES THWARTED

The Spanish joined the European Community (before the EU) at a time when Jacques Delors' project to endow Europe with fresh impetus was welcomed in the various Member States. For them, membership symbolised that their country was acknowledged as a major nation and a developed and democratic country after the end of the Franco era, which led to the EU's popularity in Spain growing strongly in the first years.

This favourable opinion began to wane from 1992, at a time of economic downturn. After being squarely in the spotlight with the Barcelona Olympic Games and the Universal Exposition of Seville in 1992, the country woke up suddenly from its dream of quickly catching up with the older Member States. The disintegration of Yugoslavia, to which the Spanish were particularly sensitive, triggered fears of divides and violence while highlighting the limits and shortcomings of the EU – though they remained committed to the outlook of an ambitious Europe.

In the start of the 2000s, there was renewed optimism in Spain: recognised economic progress and social advances, including in the middle and working classes, a consolidated democracy and a greater international influence were important factors of this trend. At the same time, the desire for a European Union that was consolidated, cultural and historical in addition to being economic and political, continued, as did a strong feeling of a European identity. The contacts and travel facilitated by greater material comfort made it possible to experience this in a more concrete manner.

The idea of a discrepancy between this ideal and a less rosy reality, and the observation of the remaining gap with the more advanced countries remained, as did questions on the impact of some European measures (concerning agriculture and fisheries in particular). The positive effects of membership were, however, broadly acknowledged. Over this period, the introduction of the Euro, a strong symbol of European unification, was conducted in Spain without any major difficulty and dispelled the fears that had emerged in the previous years in low-income households.

It appears that over the second half of the 2000s the divides grew greater within Spanish society between the different social groups. The benefits were clearly acknowledged in the upper classes but remained more abstract for the working classes. Overall, the awareness of progress



achieved through EU membership was, however, relatively general.

After the start of the crisis and when the housing bubble burst in 2008, Spanish morale dropped significantly. Awareness of the benefits of EU membership did not disappear (allocation of European funding, free movement in all its forms, the Euro, etc.) yet these advantages were sidelined by the economic collapse and the sharp rise in unemployment. The idea of a sustained gap that was even growing again between the North and the South of the EU was heightened, while the outlook of Spain being placed under supervision sparked feelings of bitterness, scepticism and even abandonment.

The improved economic situation of recent years has clearly contributed to the sharp recovery in attitudes regarding the EU recorded in surveys and polls. **Today, the Spanish remain fundamentally pro-European and desire deeper European unification.**

Arguably, the particularly significant fluctuations in Spanish public opinion since the country's accession are linked to the intensity of their expectations: a rise in positive opinions that is greater than elsewhere when the EU seems to be meeting these expectations, and a greater drop when they believe it is falling short of them.

3. A CALL FOR A MORE UNITED EUROPE

The Spanish are well disposed to the idea of a more united Europe, as seen in the responses to several questions asked in the quantitative surveys.

In the autumn of 2018, in a question on the **appropriate speed of European integration, 51% of Spanish respondents selected answers which correspond to the fastest pace** (two points up from the previous year) – **a much higher share than that for Europeans as a whole** (36%).

76% (against 14%) claim to want more decisions to be made on an EU level. Despite

falling a few points in the last year, this percentage is twenty points higher than the European average, which is clearly less Euro-enthusiastic (56% against 34%).

When asked more specifically about nine policy areas, a very large majority claimed to be **in favour of common policies** in each area.

In each of these areas (the EMU and the Euro, a common foreign policy, the enlargement to other countries in coming years, a common security and defence policy, a common trade policy, a European migration policy, a common energy policy, a single digital market, free movement) **the Spanish scores of positive opinions are (sometimes greatly) higher than the average European scores.** They also claim to be **more optimistic than the average as regards the EU's future: 63%** (against 30%) – compared to 58% (against 37%).

4. TRUST MUST STILL BE RESTORED

At a general European level, trust in the EU, which was expressed by a clear majority prior to the crisis (57%, against 32%, in the spring of 2007), but which subsequently dropped significantly (to slightly above 30% in 2012 and 2013), has only partially recovered: 42% of citizens expressed their trust at the end of 2018, a score lower than that of the 48% who do not place their trust in the EU.

In Spain, **the level of trust** in the EU was initially greater (65%, against 23% prior to the crisis) and **fell** even further, dropping to the 20% mark in 2012 and 2013, and even to 16% in the spring of 2014. Since then, it has partly recovered, with the number of people expressing trust reaching a similar level to those who do not at the end of 2017 (44%, against 47%). **Yet this trust has once again fallen in the last year and remains expressed by a minority: 38%, against 54% in the autumn of 2018.**

The feeling that things in the EU are currently going in the **right direction is only** shared by a **minority of 31% of Spanish respondents, against 53%** (the general European score being 26%, against 51%).

As regards the EU's image, it is more posi-

tively regarded than negatively regarded, while the majority remains relative (43%, against 13%).

CONCLUSION

Since Spain's accession to the European Community, its citizens' attitudes towards the EU have fluctuated significantly. The economic crisis and its repercussions,

which were a source of great dissatisfaction and bitterness, resulted in a significant drop in positive opinions on the EU, obscuring the widespread underlying pro-Europeanism. **The Spanish, who once again fully acknowledge the justifications of EU membership, are particularly in favour of a united and strengthened EU. Like many other Europeans, they still show some reservations with their trust and express their doubts on the current direction taken.**



FIGURE 1 ■ Citizens considering being part of EU as a good thing

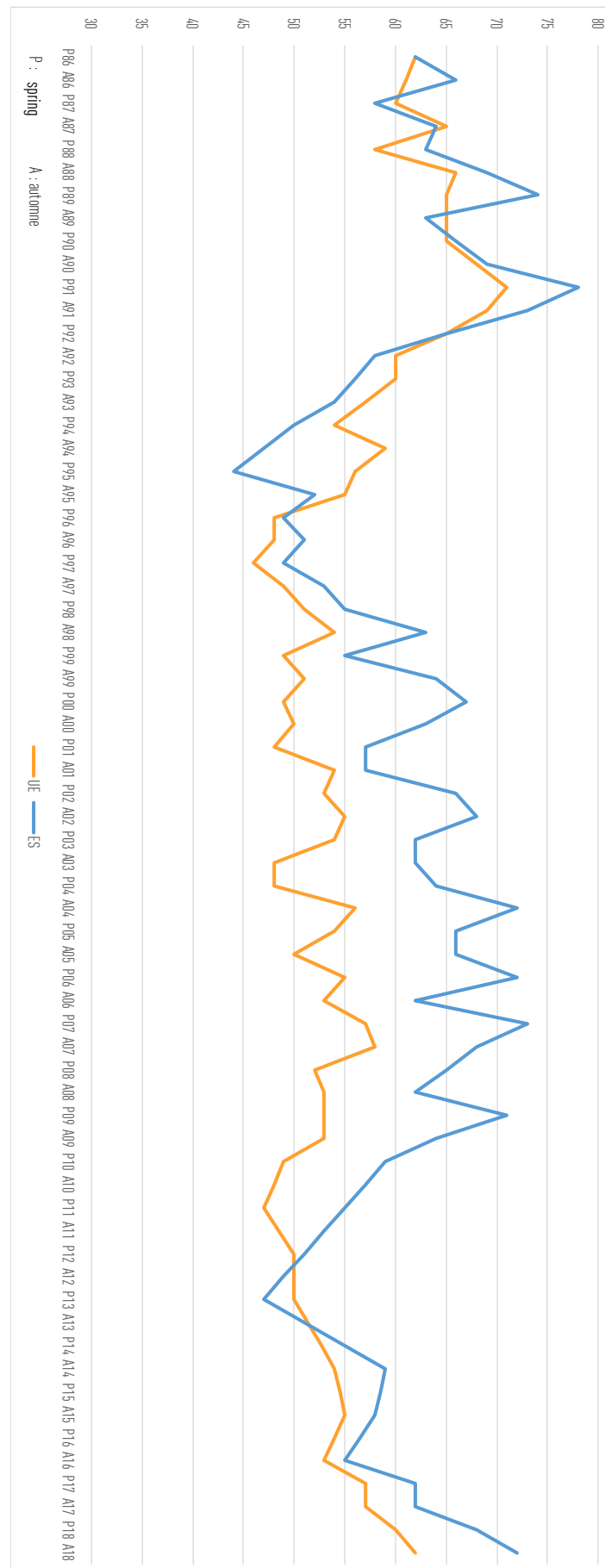
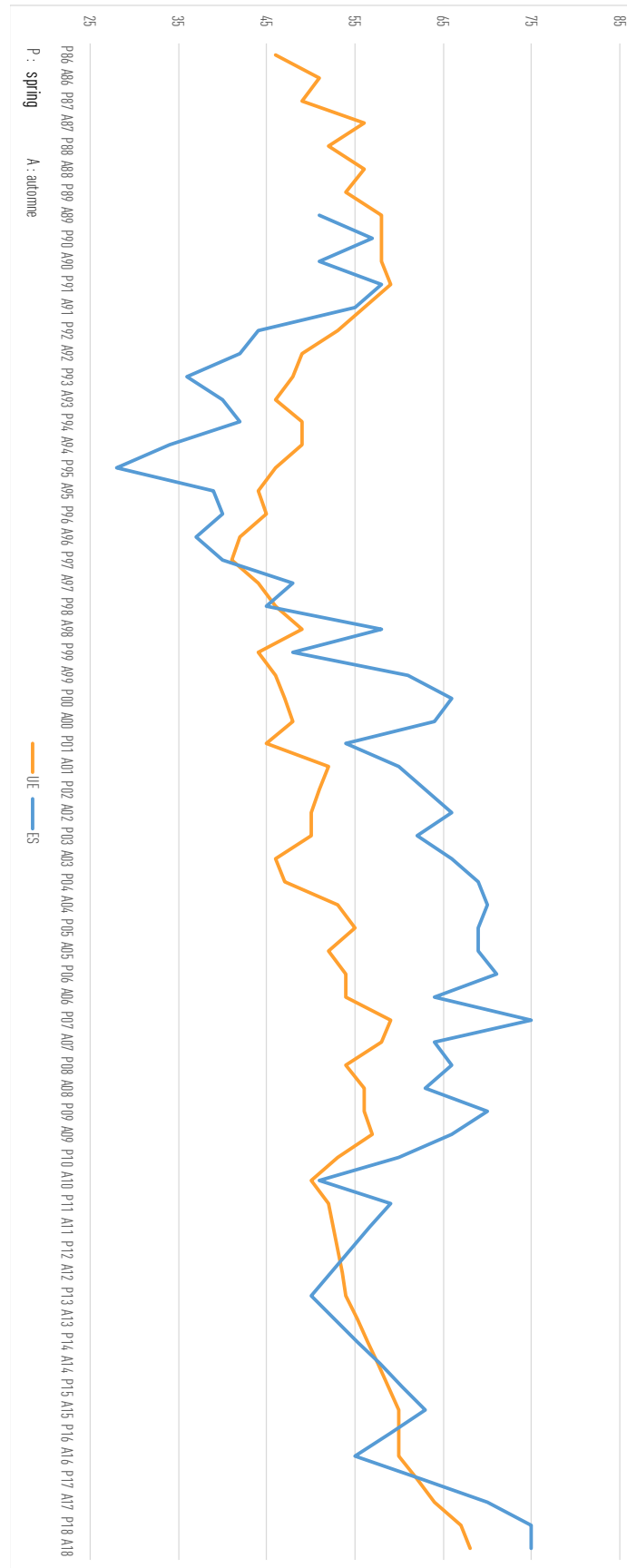




FIGURE 2 ■ Citizens considering being part of EU was a benefit for their country



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