Do European Citizens Accept EU and National Policies Equally?

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Following the global financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, a related economic emergency known as the Euro Crisis spread throughout Europe. To counter this crisis, the EU imposed a series of austerity measures in the worst-hit countries, including Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Greece.

These measures fuelled the outrage of numerous politicians, academics and activists. Many critics felt that the EU's financial policies were too severe, and believed that they would have serious economic and social consequences. However, it is unclear whether citizens were more outraged about these policies because they had been implemented by EU institutions rather than national governments.

Professor Sonia Alonso at Georgetown University in Qatar and Professor Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca at Carlos Tercero University in Madrid recently shed some light on this issue. To do so, they carried out a study to understand whether the willingness of citizens to accept unpopular policies varies depending on whether they were introduced by their national governments or by EU institutions.

Their study was carried out in Spain in 2017 and included a survey experiment with 1,200 participants. In the online survey, participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario in which Spain's public debt had increased substantially. They were asked to rate their agreement with a series of policies that were introduced to reduce it.

These policies included: reducing the wages of civil servants, cutting unemployment benefits, raising corporation tax, extending the age of retirement by five years, and increasing taxes on tobacco, alcohol and fuel.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups of 400 people. The control group was not informed about who had enforced the policies; respondents simply had to rate their agreement with the policies. The second group was told that the policies were introduced by the national government. The third group was informed that the policies were imposed on the national government by the European Central Bank.

Professor Alonso and Professor Sánchez-Cuenca analysed the responses to determine whether the source of the policies – either the Spanish Government or the European Central Bank – affected the extent to which participants agreed with them.

They found that agreement with policies did not depend on who introduced them, but rather on the actual content of the policies. Some policies were inherently popular or unpopular regardless of who the decision-making body was.

The most unpopular policies were extending the retirement age by five years and reducing unemployment benefits. The most popular policy was raising corporate taxes.

This suggests that during the Euro Crisis, citizens were unhappy with the policies themselves, and that the EU's involvement did not make the policies more or less popular. These results offer valuable insight about the discontent that arose in Spain after 2010.

In our current era of uncertainty, understanding what causes citizens to lose trust in national and EU institutions is invaluable for ensuring the stability and legitimacy of national democracies and EU institutions.

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