

Europeans' perceptions of fairness*

Headlines

- More than one in ten (11%) people in the EU perceive their lives as unfair, and more than one quarter (26%) view their country as unfair.
- People have the most positive perceptions of fairness in Ireland, Austria, Denmark and Luxembourg.
- Perceptions of fairness increase with income and decline with age.
- The unemployed are less likely to view their lives or country as fair than people who have a job.
- Europeans' happiness is linked to how fair they consider their lives and their country to be.

Why study people's perceptions of fairness?

Policy debates around fairness usually rely on country-level proxies based on aggregate economic data, such as the Gini coefficient, corruption indexes and measures of inequality of opportunity. However, people's perceptions of fairness are also worthy of attention, for several reasons.

First, **being sensitive to perceptions of fairness is a way of listening to people**, which is a fundament of democratic policy-making. Perceptions of fairness are effectively an expression of people's subjective judgement of whether a situation or state of affairs is just or unjust. Second, **people's perceptions of fairness are very likely associated with behaviour or practices of concern to society**, such as tax evasion, compliance with the law, voting and crime. Finally, perceptions of fairness reflect personal experiences,

values and beliefs which are partly unique to the individual, but which are also partly shared with others belonging to the same socio-demographic group (defined by, for instance, gender, age or employment status). Therefore, studying people's perceptions of fairness by socio-demographic group can allow policy-makers to **identify and act on the main societal drivers of people's perceptions of unfairness**.

Fairness perceptions across Europe

The special Eurobarometer on 'Fairness, inequality and intergenerational mobility' commissioned by the Joint Research Centre offers a unique opportunity to investigate Europeans' perceptions of fairness. Based on this data, two 'fairness perception indexes' were created: one capturing how fair Europeans consider their own life to be (i.e. '**life fairness perception**'), and another measuring how fair they judge their country to be (i.e. '**country fairness perception**'). The indexes range from 1 (*least fair*) to 5 (*fairest* – see the 'Quick guide' for more details).

In the EU as a whole, 11% of residents aged 15 or older – approximately 48 million people – view their lives as being unfair (i.e. index ≤ 2). This is, however, eclipsed by the 26% – about 113 million – who judge their country to be unfair (i.e. index ≤ 2).

There are substantial differences between Member States in terms of people's perceptions of fairness (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Whereas in the majority of Member States people have, on average, positive perceptions of life fairness (in shades of green), in most Member States people have negative perceptions of country fairness (in shades of orange). Member States with the most positive perceptions of fairness of both life and country (Ireland, Austria, Denmark and Luxembourg) are in Northern and Western Europe. By contrast, the three Member States with the most negative

*This policy brief has been prepared by François J. Dessart and Ginevra Marandola, Joint Research Centre. It can be downloaded from: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/research/crosscutting-activities/fairness>.

Figure 1. Life fairness perception by Member State

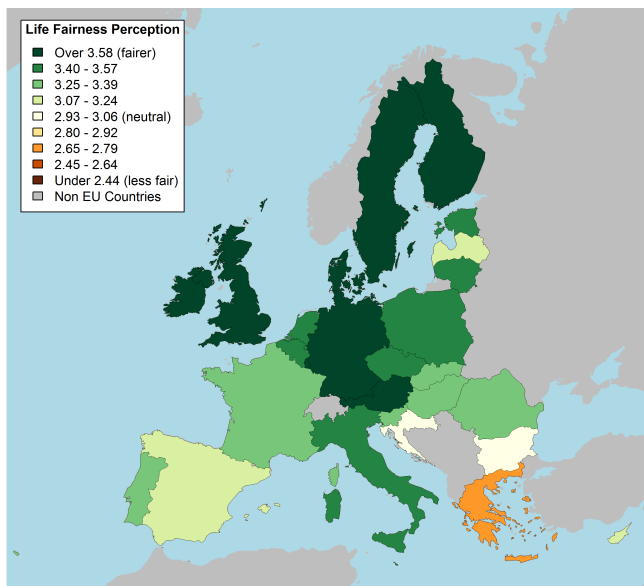
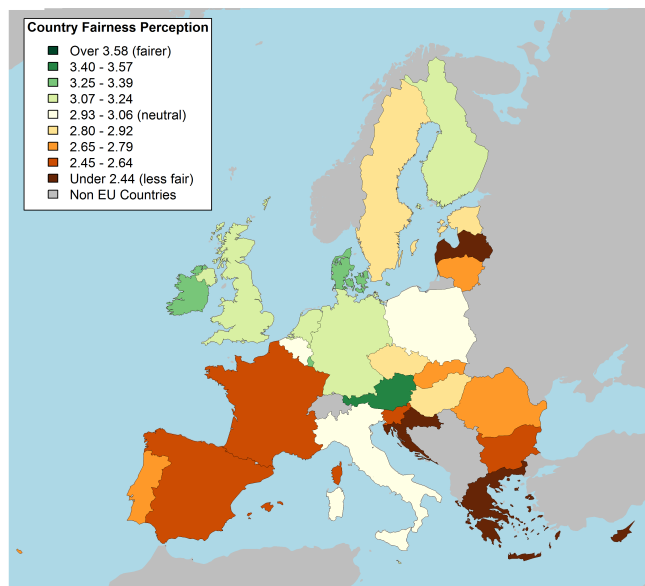


Figure 2. Country fairness perception by Member State



Data source: European Commission (2018), Special Eurobarometer 471. Member States coloured as 'neutral' have an average perception of fairness that is not significantly different ('t test' - $p > 0.01$) from the scale midpoint (i.e. 3). Below and above this category (precise range: 2.93–3.06693) Member States were grouped by quartiles.

perceptions of fairness of both life and country (Greece, Croatia and Bulgaria) are in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. Between these two extremes, regional patterns are less clear. In Western Europe, people's perceptions of fairness are most negative in France, particularly in relation to the country. Poland stands out as the Member State in Central and Eastern Europe with the most positive perceptions of fairness, for both life and country.

Socio-demographic determinants of perceptions of fairness

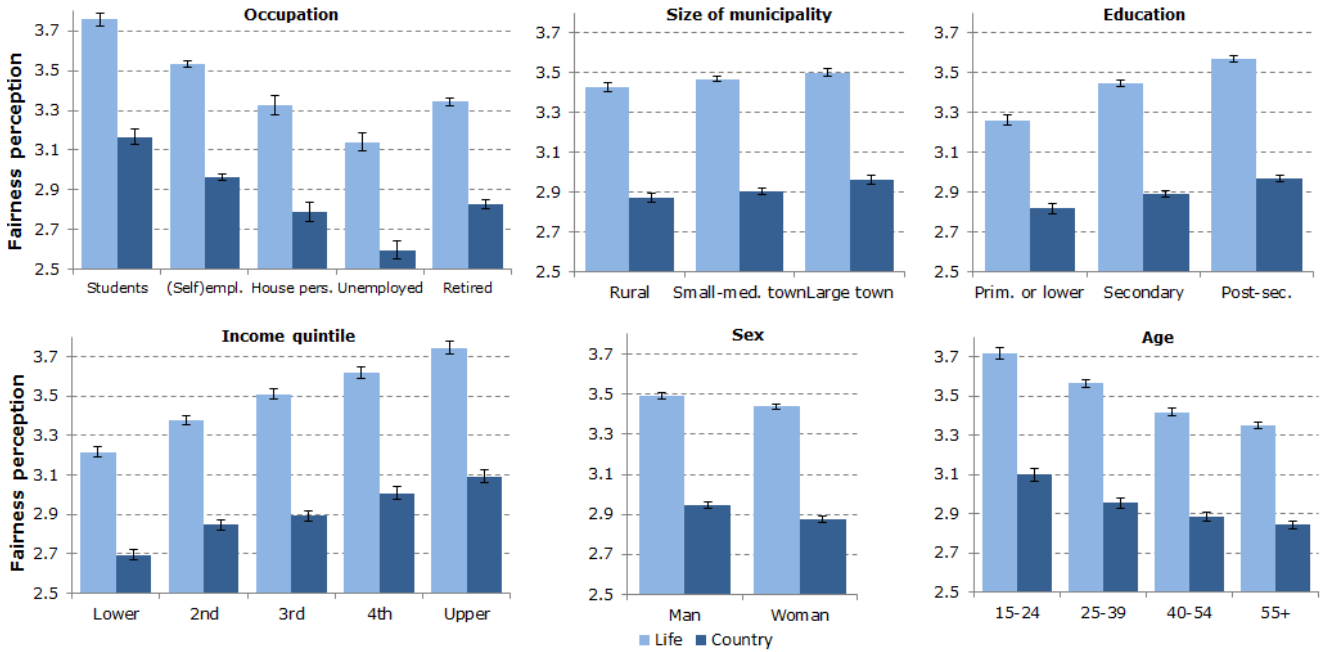
Large differences between life fairness perception levels (see Figure 3) are to be found between: **rich and poor** (the top income quintile has a level of life fairness perception 16% higher than the bottom quintile); **(self-)employed and unemployed** individuals (12% relative difference); **young and old** (11% relative difference between age categories 15-24 and 55+); and **more and less educated** (9% relative difference between those who have post-secondary education and those who have completed at most primary education). Smaller differences are to be found between men and women and between city and country dwellers: women view the fairness of their lives slightly less positively than men, and people living in large towns are more positive about the fairness of their lives than those living in mid-sized towns, who again are slightly more positive about the fairness of their lives than those living in villages and rural areas. Similar patterns pertain for country fairness perceptions. This is because people who view their lives as (un)fair are likely to also view their country as (un)fair (i.e.

there is a significant positive correlation between the two variables). However, people generally view their country as less fair than their own lives, irrespective of the socio-demographic group they belong to.

Socio-demographic characteristics are often strongly correlated: for instance, more highly educated individuals are more likely to have a job and to have higher income. A multivariate regression (see the 'Quick guide') was performed to investigate the isolated effect of each of these variables by controlling for the others.

The results of the regression show that lack of occupation (being retired or unemployed) is negatively correlated with perceptions of fairness, even when controlling for other factors. Age is significantly negatively correlated with perceptions of fairness, but especially on the life dimension. Income is strongly and positively correlated with perceptions of both country and life fairness, but especially with the latter. Education is an important predictor of positive life fairness perceptions, but is only marginally significant in explaining country fairness perceptions. The size of the municipality where people live does not have an impact on how fair they consider their lives to be, but people who live in mid-sized towns and large cities do perceive their country somewhat more positively than people who live in rural areas or villages. When controlling for other factors, men and women's perceptions of fairness are no longer significantly different from each other. This suggests that differences between sexes are mostly explained by differences in other characteristics.

Figure 3. Fairness perception indexes by socio-demographic group

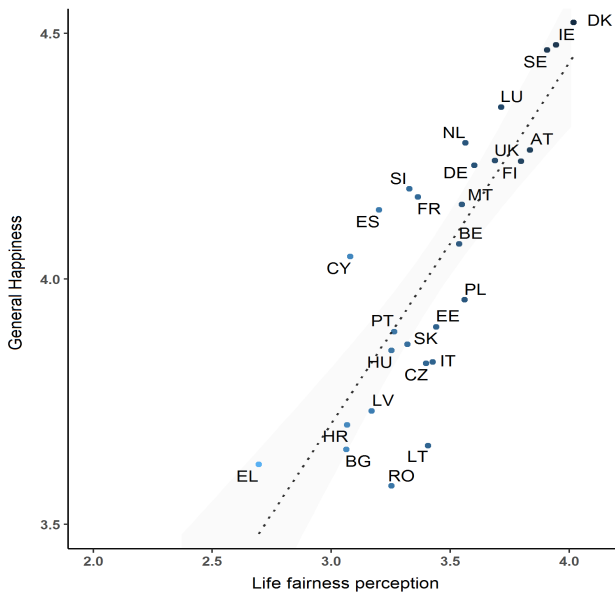


Data source: European Commission (2018), Special Eurobarometer 471. The six socio-demographic variables considered all have a significant influence on life and country fairness perceptions (p values for all K-Wallis tests < 0.001). However, not all sub-groups are significantly different from one another.

Perceptions of fairness in relation to happiness

Although a causal link cannot be established, in Member States perceptions of life fairness are strongly correlated with people's general happiness (see Figure 4). Member States with the highest life fairness perception levels (e.g. Denmark, Ireland and Sweden) are those where people report being happiest. Conversely, in Member States with low life fairness perception levels (e.g. Greece, Croatia and Bulgaria), people report being less

Figure 4. Relationship between life fairness perception and happiness

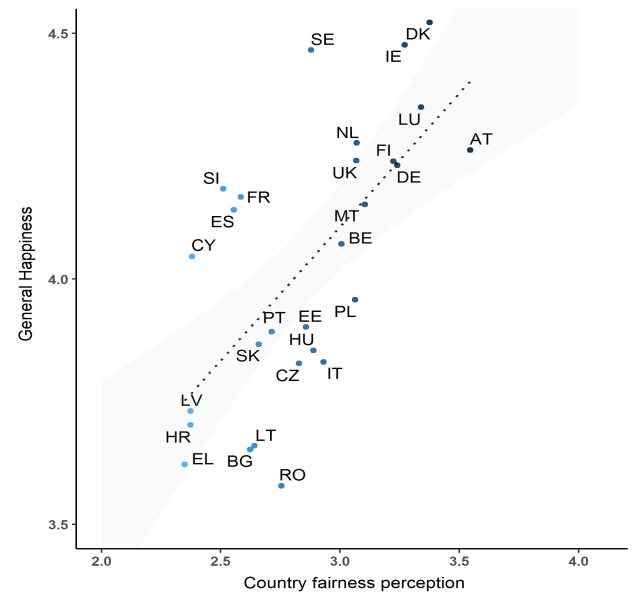


All other things being equal, if, within a Member State, the life fairness perception index increases by 1 unit (measured on a scale from 1 to 5), people's happiness (measured on a scale from 1 to 5) increases by 0.74 units. Data source: European Commission (2018), Special Eurobarometer 471.

happy in general. Also interesting is the relationship between how fair people think their country is and how happy they feel (see Figure 5). While less strong than the relationship between perceptions of life fairness and happiness, the association suggests that **individuals' happiness is correlated with the perceived fairness of their country.**

Controlling for other factors that explain happiness in a multivariate regression (see the 'Quick guide'), the link between perceptions of fairness and happiness is confirmed: happiness is strongly associated with

Figure 5. Relationship between country fairness perception and happiness



All other things being equal, if, within a Member State, the country fairness perception index increases by 1 unit (measured on a scale from 1 to 5), people's happiness (measured on a scale from 1 to 5) increases by 0.54 units. Data source: European Commission (2018), Special Eurobarometer 471.

Quick Guide

All data reported in this report come from the Special Eurobarometer 471 on 'Fairness, inequality and inter-generational mobility' ($n = 28,031$), conducted in late 2017 for the Joint Research Centre.

Life fairness perception (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.76$, weighted average = 3.46, standard deviation = 0.88), was calculated by averaging replies (on a 1-5 Likert scale – midpoint: 3) to the following statements: 'I believe that most of the things that happen in my life are fair' and 'I think that important decisions that are made concerning me are usually taken in a fair way'.

Country fairness perception (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.78$, weighted average = 2.91, standard deviation = 0.95) was calculated by averaging replies (on a 1-5 Likert scale – midpoint: 3) to the following statements: 'I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice in our country', 'I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve in our country' and 'In our country, the political decisions are applied consistently to all citizens'.

We use Eurovoc's classification (references: 911 to 914) when analysing regional differences between Member States. The regressions between socio-demographic variables and perceptions of life/country fairness include the following control variables: age, self-declared income quintile, occupation, size of municipality, sex, education, and country fixed effects. The regression between perceptions of life/country fairness and happiness takes into account the following control variables: health, age, trust, intergenerational mobility perception, ability to react to problems, income, employment status, marital status, presence of children, gender, education and country fixed effects.

judgements of life fairness, and moderately but significantly with judgements of country fairness. While, from a policy perspective, it might be difficult to influence people's perceptions of the fairness of their lives, the correlation between happiness and perceptions of country fairness suggests that institutions and states **may be able to affect people's happiness through measures to guarantee a fair society**.

Evidence-based policy

The figures reported in this policy brief suggest that **there is a significant share of Europeans who hold negative views about fairness in their country**. One quarter of Europeans do not see their country as a place where justice prevails, where people get what they deserve, or where political decisions are applied consistently to all citizens. This issue is especially problematic in some Southern, Central and Eastern Member States. Although in most countries people hold positive views about the fairness of their lives, one in ten still does not believe that things that happen in their life or the way that decisions are taken regarding them are fair. **Older, unemployed, and in particular, poor Europeans** are

those who **report the most negative perceptions of fairness**, in relation to both their lives and their country. This suggests that making efforts to reduce the unemployment rate and to combat poverty could have a positive effect on people's assessment of the fairness of their lives.

Commonly used **proxies of fairness at country level**, such as indicators of income inequality, inequality of opportunity and corruption, might **fail to capture fairness as it is experienced and perceived by people**, not to mention differences in perceptions of fairness across socio-demographic groups. People's perceptions of fairness are linked to happiness and are likely to influence voting behaviour and compliance with the law. For these reasons, **there is a need to more systematically collect data on how people perceive the fairness of their lives and their country**.

Related JRC work

This brief is one of a **series of 'science for policy' briefs** reporting on recent JRC research on various aspects of fairness. A **comprehensive report on fairness** will be published in 2019.

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