



The Von der Leyen Effect

Does visibility lead to accountability?

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Catherine E. De Vries

Isabell Hoffmann

Simon Hix

An eupinions | IEP@Bocconi Report

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Catherine E. De Vries

Generali Endowed Chair in European Policies and Professor of Political Science,
Bocconi University, Milan
Member of the Management Council, IEP@Bocconi
catherine.devries@unibocconi.it

Isabell Hoffmann

Senior Expert and Project Lead eupinions,
Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh
isabell.hoffmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Simon Hix

Stein Rokkan Chair in Comparative Politics,
European University Institute, Florence
Non-Resident Fellow, IEP@Bocconi
simon.hix@eui.eu

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Description

Europe is going through a hectic period of challenge and change. Once more, the future of democracy and the unity of Europe seem fraught with uncertainty.

This entire background forces Europeans to engage in a fundamental debate about their future: What are the great questions about the future that Europeans should tackle together? Or not? Within which framework should they act? Collectively or individually? Is efficiency more important than unity? Does the pragmatic search for solutions breach European principles?

eupinions is gathering the opinions of Europeans on these central questions about the future of Europe and bringing them to bear in the public debate. We would like to give Europeans a representative voice in this discussion.

Executive Summary

As Europe prepares for the 2024 European Parliament elections in June, discussions about global tensions, climate protests, and sluggish economic growth are dominating public discourse. Like many of their global counterparts, European voters are deeply divided on how to deal with these challenges. This atmosphere of polarisation is likely to influence voting decisions in the 2024 elections and reshape the composition of the European Parliament (EP). A different political make-up on the European Parliament might impact the future of key European initiatives, like the Green Deal, the response to the situation in Ukraine, and future enlargement efforts. The outcome of the European Parliament elections will also have an important bearing on the selection of the Commission president, a pivotal leadership figure in the EU.

In this report, we examine how European citizens view and evaluate the Commission president and how the selection of the next president influences their voting intentions. Drawing on a December 2023 survey of over 13,000 EU citizens, we examine the following themes: knowledge about the European Commission president and her policy track record, the desired qualities in the next Commission president, and European voters' intentions. We present evidence for overall EU public opinion, perspectives from voters in seven member states, and a breakdown of results by age and political leanings.

Our key findings suggest:

- 75% of European respondents are able to correctly identify President Von der Leyen, a share that is much higher compared to past Commission presidents.
- That said, only about 30% of European respondents feel informed enough to assess President Von der Leyen's performance.
- These 30% rate President Von der Leyen's performance positively (6 out of 10), and view the handling of the war in Ukraine as her biggest achievement.
- European respondents view problem-solving (61%), crisis management (59%), and having relevant experience (57%) as the most desirable characteristics for the new Commission president.

When it comes to voting intentions in light of this year's European Parliament elections:

- 60% of European respondents plan to vote, 25% are still undecided, and 15% indicate that they will not vote.
- Only 38% of European respondents view the opportunity to influence who becomes the next president as a motivating factor in deciding to cast a ballot; more respondents will vote in the upcoming election because they wish to support their preferred party (51%) or wish to have a say in the EU's policy direction (45%).

Introduction

The European Union is heading into an election year. Between 6 and 9 June 2024, European voters will elect a new European Parliament. Once again, commentators are highlighting the European Union's fragility. Mounting tensions on the global stage, for which the EU's foreign policy is ill-equipped, coupled with increasing backlash against climate policy and weakening economic foundations, are fuelling political polarisation within member states. This polarisation could shake up the composition of the European Parliament. Indeed, recent projections of the outcome of the European Parliament elections suggest that although the grand coalition comprising social democrats (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, S&D), Christian democrats/centre-right (European People's Party, EPP) and liberals (Renew Europe, RE) will likely still command a majority of seats, there is anticipated to be substantial gains for radical right party groups, namely the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) (Cunningham et al. 2024). In fact, should these two groups form a single parliamentary bloc, they could become the largest group, commanding about a quarter of the 720 seats. While these projections come with considerable uncertainty, they indicate a rocky road ahead for European policymakers.

The composition of the Parliament not only impacts the election of the Commission president. Given the projected shift to the right, it also raises concerns about the future of some signature EU projects, such as the Green Deal. Crafting effective policy solutions to tackle the EU's persistent challenges is already difficult enough, and garnering a popular mandate for such policies is becoming increasingly difficult, as evinced by the protests involving tractors on Europe's streets. Overall, it is incredibly difficult to overcome popular disagreements about policies, and prevent gridlock within and between the EU's institutions. Against this backdrop, the selection of the next Commission president is hugely consequential. The president of the European Commission is a, if not *the*, power broker in the EU and is tasked with shaping day-to-day leadership in Brussels.

Over the past five years, Ursula von der Leyen has been at the helm of the European Commission. President Von der Leyen's candidacy was initially marked by controversy as she was not one of the "lead candidates" ahead of the 2019 elections. Nevertheless, she was nominated by the heads of member states and got elected to the top job by the EP, because she belonged to the party group that won the most seats. She has grown in her role over her term and managed to elevate the profile of the European Commission president on the international stage (De Vries and Hoffmann 2019b). This was partly due to her adept coordination of Europe's responses to key challenges, such as the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines and the EU's aid to Ukraine, and due to running a tight ship around her own team and efficient communication strategies. Thus, President Von der Leyen increased the EU's visibility on the world stage (Fleming 2023).

But how do Europe's citizens perceive their Commission president? Has Ursula von der Leyen also enhanced the Commission's profile and visibility among European citizens? How do Europeans evaluate her leadership? And, finally, how do these views differ among age groups and across citizens with different political leanings? In this report, we aim to provide answers to these important questions. Doing so is especially important ahead of the upcoming EP elections, after which Ursula von der Leyen will seek a second term.

We present evidence from a survey conducted in December 2023 in which we asked over 13,000 citizens across the EU to evaluate Commission President Von der Leyen. First, we asked respondents if they could identify their Commission president from a list of names. Second, we asked respondents if they thought they had enough knowledge to evaluate Commission President Von der Leyen's performance and, if so, how they would rate her achievements and which they deemed was most important. Third, we asked respondents which characteristics a president of the European Commission should, ideally, possess. Finally, we asked respondents if they were planning to vote in the upcoming EP elections and whether the selection of a European Commission would factor into their decision to vote. We present three sets of evidence: one is based on a sample capturing public opinion in the EU27; a second that takes a closer look by focusing more in-depth on respondents from seven member states (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain); and a third set of results that breaks down the numbers by age groups and where respondents stand on the political left-right spectrum.

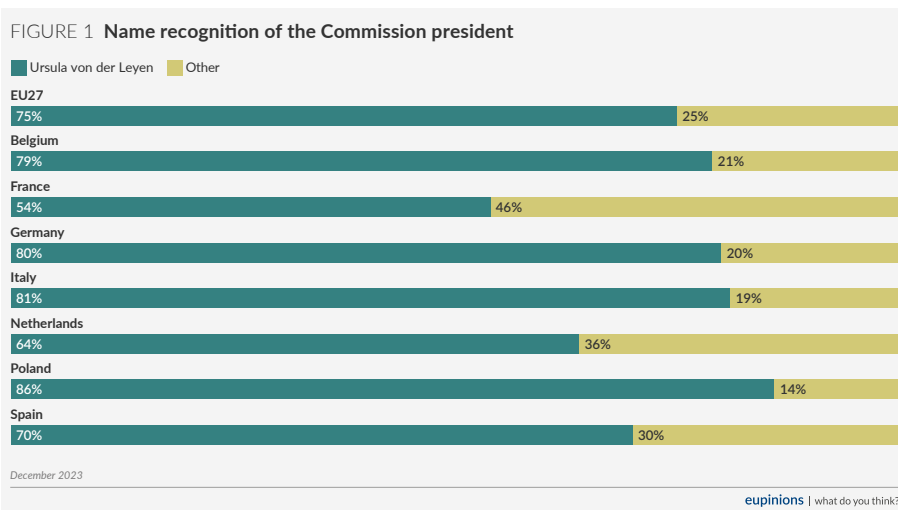
Our findings suggest that, unlike previous presidents, a large majority of Europeans can correctly identify Ursula von der Leyen as the Commission president. Notably, name recognition of President Von der Leyen is highest in Poland, among older age groups and those identifying as more right-wing. Our results, however, also suggest that Europeans overall feel inadequately informed to evaluate the Commission president's record, though notable variations exist across political groupings, with respondents leaning more strongly to the left feeling better informed. Respondents who feel adequately informed to evaluate President Von der Leyen's performance rate her favourably, citing the coordination of the EU's response to the war in Ukraine as her biggest achievement. Additionally, respondents emphasise the importance of practical problem-solving abilities, sufficient experience, and crisis-management skills in a Commission president. Only French respondents view being able to unite Europe as the most important attribute of a Commission president. Finally, while a majority of respondents indicate their intention to vote in the 2024 European Parliament elections, influencing the selection of the next Commission president does not appear to be their primary motivation. Instead, factors such as supporting preferred political parties or shaping the future of the EU takes precedence. Overall, these findings suggest that President Von der Leyen has raised the profile of the role of the Commission president among European citizens. However, this "Von der Leyen effect" does not imply that European respondents feel they have sufficient knowledge to assess her performance in office. They also do not intend to vote in EP elections to influence a potential reappointment.

In summary, these findings suggest that strong personalities, like Ursula von der Leyen, can enhance the name recognition of the Commission. However, this does not guarantee that the EP elections will primarily focus on holding the Commission president accountable for past actions or providing a policy mandate for the incoming Commission. In the conclusion of this report, we propose reforms to the way the EP elections are conducted, with the aim of strengthening the democratic mandate and accountability of both the Commission president and the Commission.

Do Europeans Know their Commission President?

For quite some time, EP elections have been regarded as “second-order national elections” (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Among other things, this means that European elections primarily revolve around national issues and political dynamics rather than serving as a platform for voters to endorse the EU’s policy direction. This is largely a consequence of institutional design, which involves 27 separate electoral contests where candidates compete on national party lists (Føllesdal and Hix 2006; De Vries 2018). One important consequence of the so-called second-order nature of EP elections is the limited media coverage dedicated to European issues and personalities.

As part of a previous eupinions survey conducted in 2015, we asked European respondents to identify the name of the European Commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, from a larger list of male names (De Vries and Hoffmann 2015). In that survey, only 40% were able to correctly identify Juncker. In December 2023, we repeated this question with Ursula von der Leyen and a set of female names. **Figure 1** shows the results. This time, 75% of respondents were able to correctly identify President Von der Leyen. This is considerably higher than the 40% share for Juncker in 2015. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given her nationality, a higher percentage of German respondents (80%) correctly identified President Von der Leyen. However, it’s noteworthy that a substantial number of Belgian, Italian and Polish respondents correctly identified Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission: 79%, 81% and 86%, respectively. President Von der Leyen’s name recognition is lowest in France, where only just over half of respondents (54%) identified her name correctly, followed by the Netherlands (64%).



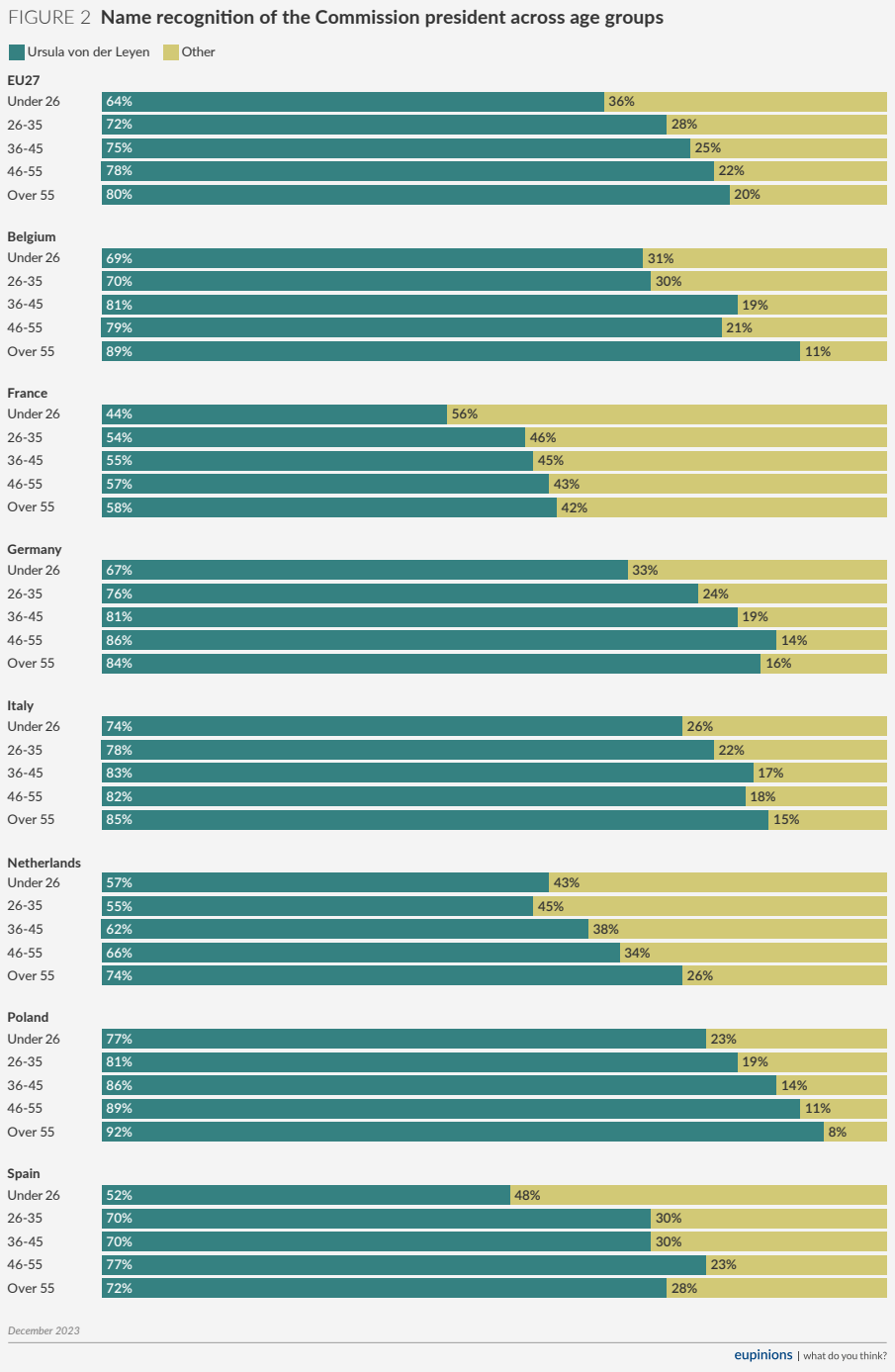
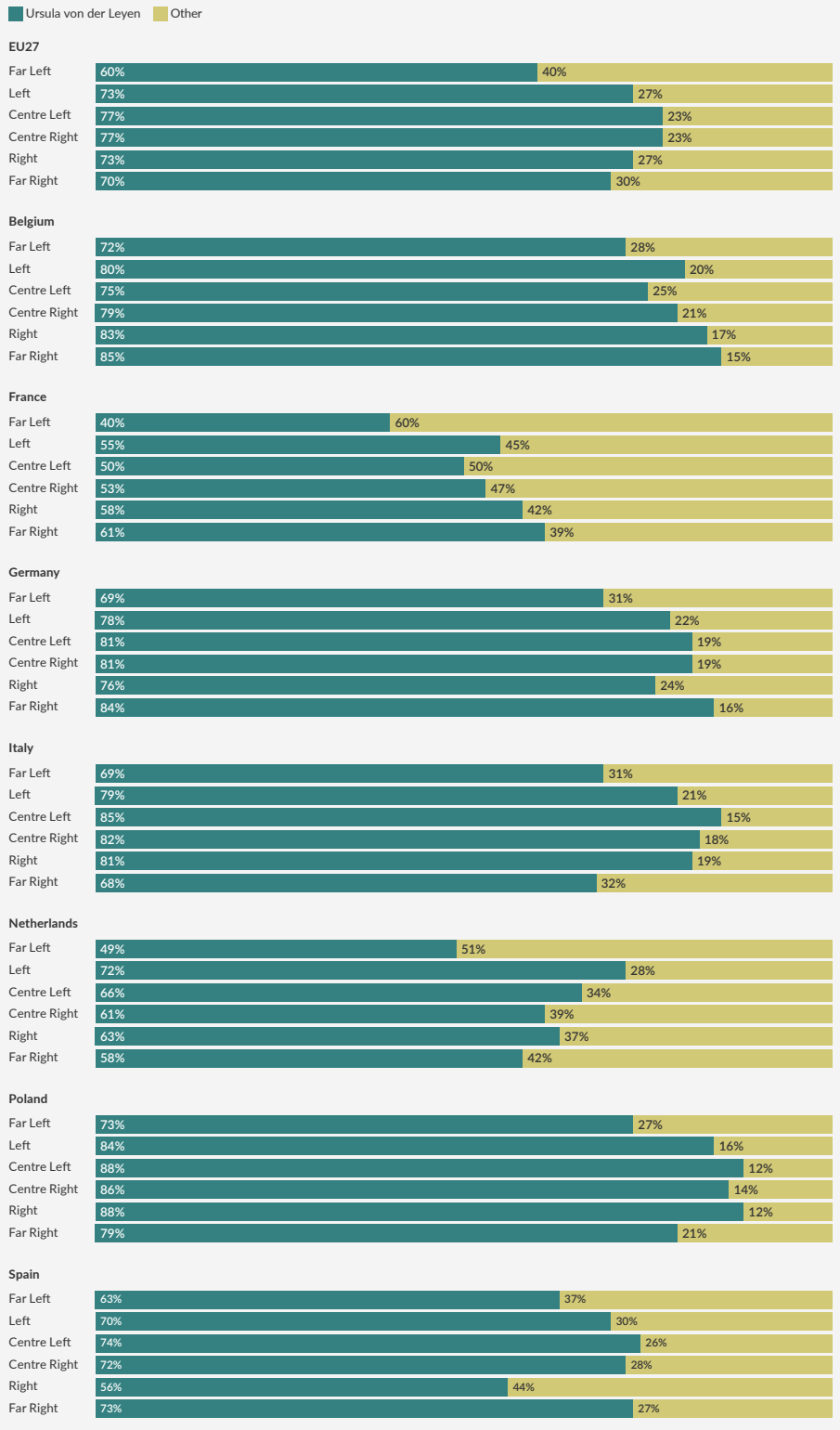


Figure 2 shows the name recognition of President Von der Leyen across different age groups. The figure suggests that within the EU27, Ursula von der Leyen’s name recognition is higher amongst older respondents. While 80% of respondents who are 56 and older correctly identified her, only 64% of those younger than 26 could. These differences between age groups are not entirely surprising, as being politically informed, also in the national context, is higher amongst older voters (Jennings 1996; Kleinberg and Lau 2019). President Von der Leyen’s name recognition is lowest amongst younger respondents in France and Spain (where

FIGURE 3 Name recognition of the Commission president by political leaning



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44% and 52% correctly identify her, respectively), and is highest amongst younger generations in Italy and Poland (with 74% and 77%, respectively). President Von der Leyen is most known amongst those over 55 in Belgium (89%), Germany (84%), Italy (85%), and Poland (92%).

Figure 3 shows the share of respondents who are able to correctly identify Ursula von der Leyen by political leaning. Here we rely on a question that asks respondents to identify themselves on a scale from left to right. Within the EU27, the name recognition of President Von der Leyen is highest amongst respondents who position themselves in the political centre and self-identify as either centre-left or centre-right, which is the majority of European voters. 77% of these respondents correctly identified the Commission president. President Von der Leyen's name recognition is lowest amongst European respondents who identify themselves as far-left (although this group is only 4% of our sample).

When we turn to the data for selected member states displayed in Figure 3, we can see that, on average, respondents in these member states who identify themselves as more right-wing are more likely to correctly identify the name of the Commission president. This might be a reflection of the political leaning of Ursula von der Leyen herself, who is a member of the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU, part of the European People's Party group). Note that there are some exceptions to these general patterns. For example, respondents who identify themselves as far-right in Italy, the Netherlands and Poland (who constitute, respectively, 4, 5 and 5% of Italian, Dutch and Polish respondents) are much less likely than their centre-right or right-leaning counterparts to correctly identify the Commission president. The name recognition of President Von der Leyen amongst far-right respondents is 68% in Italy, 58% in the Netherlands and 79% in Poland. Also, interestingly, in France, President Von der Leyen's name recognition is lower amongst respondents who identify themselves as centre-left or centre-right, compared to respondents who identify themselves as left or right. The share of French respondents to correctly identify the name of the Commission president is lowest among those who lean towards the far-left (overall 5% of French respondents).

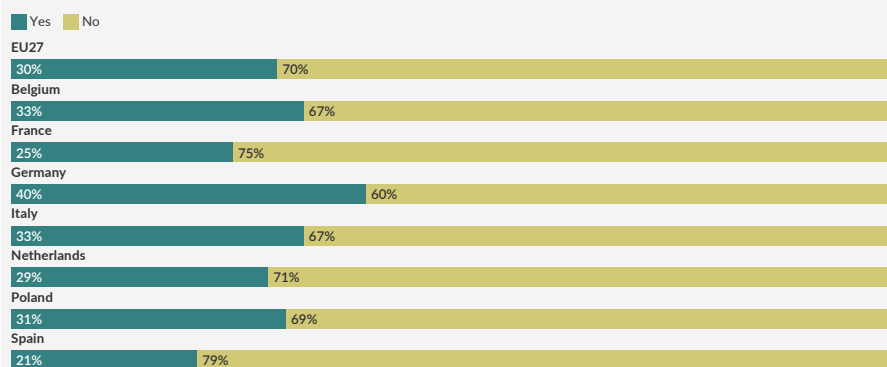
Overall, Figures 1-3 suggest that the name recognition of President Von der Leyen is quite high among European respondents. This constitutes somewhat of a break with the past: our work concerning President Von der Leyen's predecessors showed much lower name recognition, a finding echoed in other studies about European's knowledge about leading candidates in European Parliament election campaigns (Hobolt 2014; Gattermann and De Vreese 2020). Although President Von der Leyen is well known among European respondents at the end of her first term, important differences exist between countries, age groups and by political leaning. President Von der Leyen is least known among French respondents, while most known among Polish respondents. Across the EU as a whole, President Von der Leyen is best known by those who self-identify as either centre-left or centre-right. When considering member state data, her name recognition is higher amongst older respondents and those who identify as right-wing.

Evaluating Commission President Von der Leyen

In a next step, we explore how European respondents evaluate President Von der Leyen’s performance. Based on the data presented in the first part of this report, we know that not all respondents correctly identified the Commission president and that important differences exist between countries, age groups and political leanings. With this in mind, before we asked respondents to evaluate Commission President Von der Leyen’s record, we posed the following question: “Do you feel you know enough about Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission’s achievements to rate her performance?”, to which respondents could answer “yes” or “no”. If respondents felt that they possessed enough knowledge, they were subsequently asked to rate Commission President Von der Leyen’s overall performance and list her most notable achievements.

Figure 4 shows the share of respondents who feel they do or do not have sufficient knowledge to evaluate the performance of President Von der Leyen. Less than one-third of respondents in the EU27 (30%) feel they have sufficient knowledge to assess her performance. This means that the vast majority of European respondents *do not* feel that they are adequately informed to evaluate her performance. Although the European policy responses to the pandemic and the Ukraine war have been to a large extent coordinated by the European Commission and this appears, as demonstrated prior, to have increased the president’s name recognition relative to her predecessors, it did not necessarily translate into concrete knowledge about EU policy-making. The low share of respondents who feel they can evaluate the Commission president’s performance might well be a reflection of the continued low level of reporting on EU affairs in

FIGURE 4 Sufficient knowledge to evaluate the performance of Commission President Von der Leyen



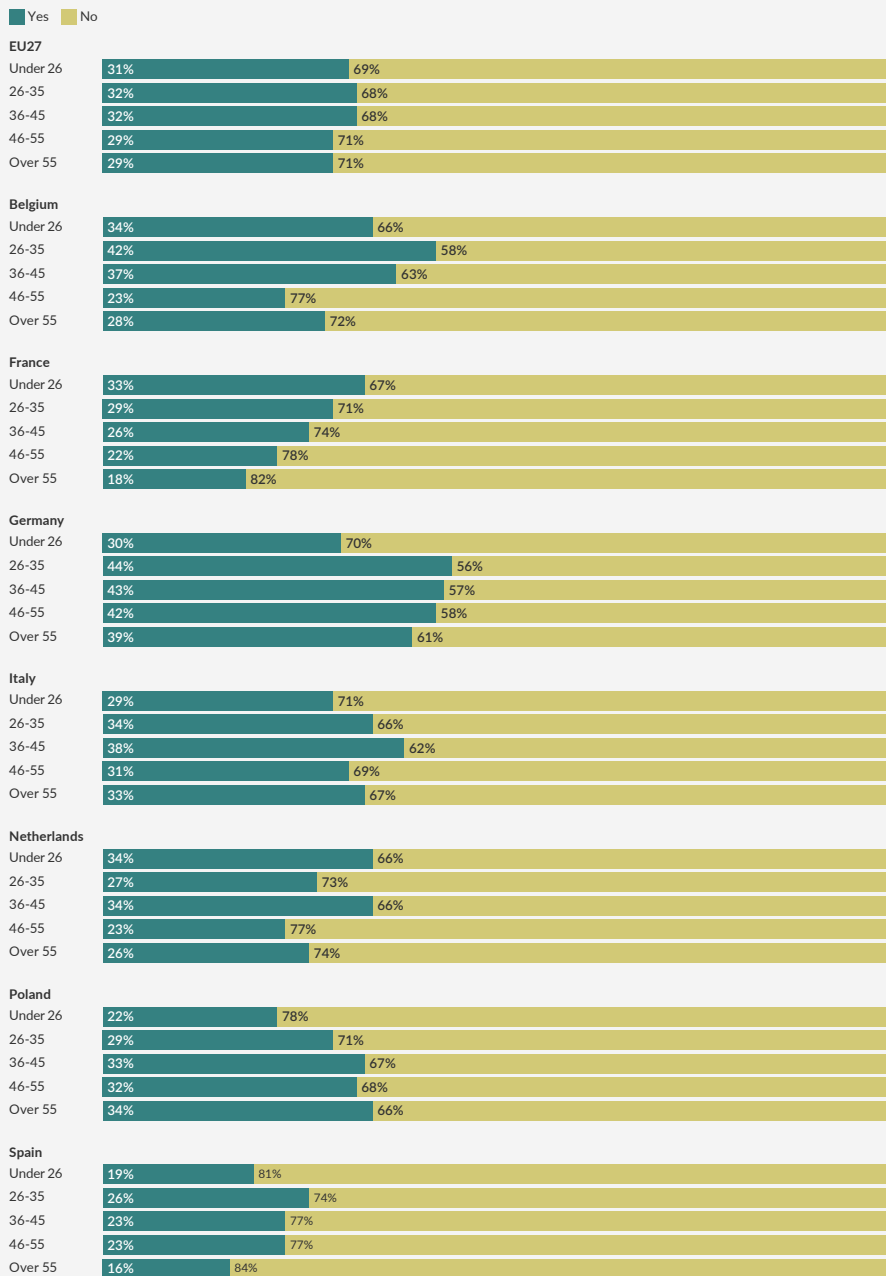
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national (Gattermann 2020) and in transnational media (Firmstone 2008; Lloyd and Marconi 2014).

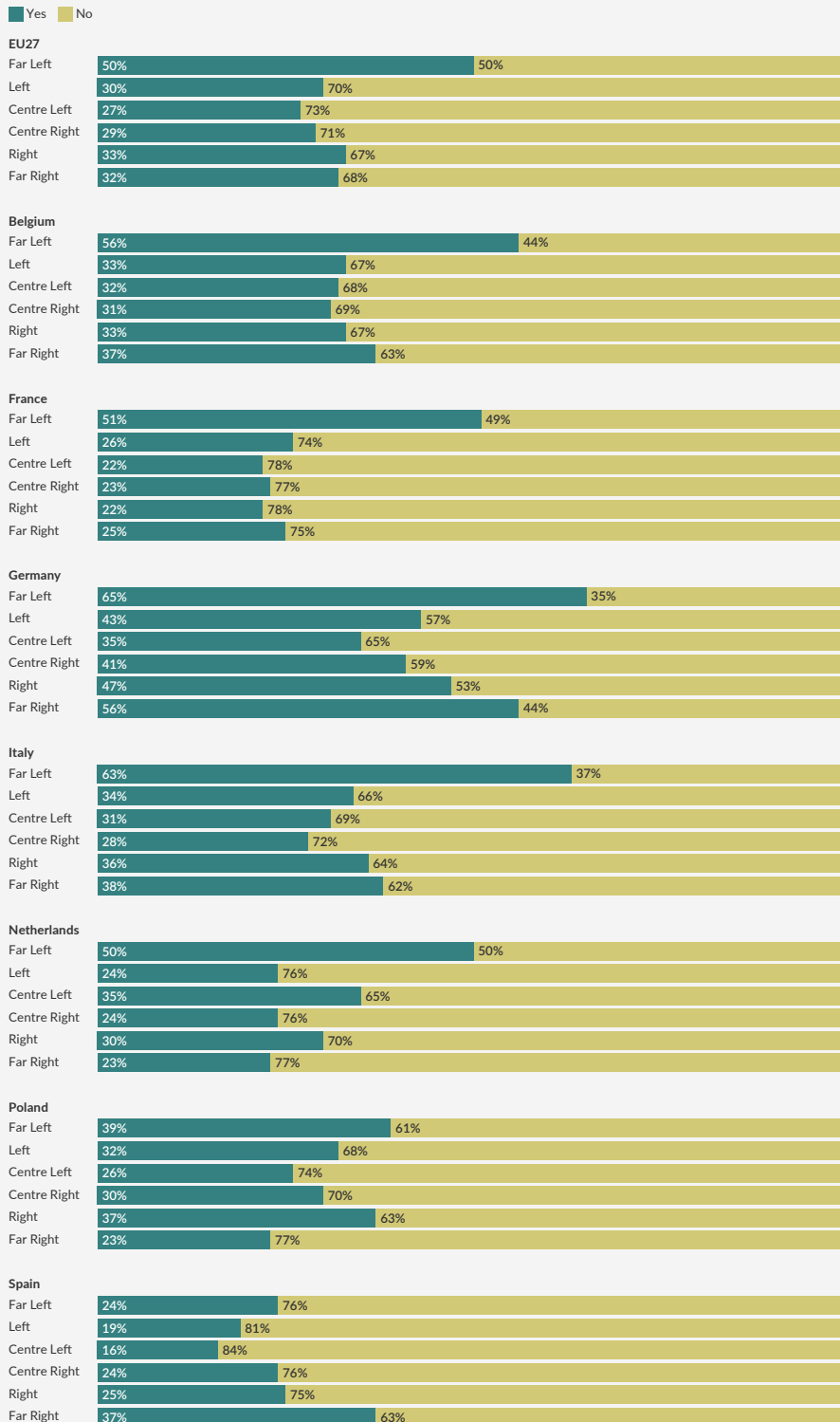
Figure 4 also highlights some interesting differences between member states. While across Europe, only a minority of respondents state that they have sufficient knowledge to judge President Von der Leyen’s performance, knowledge of her record is highest in Germany (40%), and lowest in Spain (21%). Figure 5 presents

FIGURE 5 Sufficient knowledge to evaluate the performance of Commission President Von der Leyen across age groups



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FIGURE 6 Sufficient knowledge to evaluate the performance of Commission President Von der Leyen by political leaning

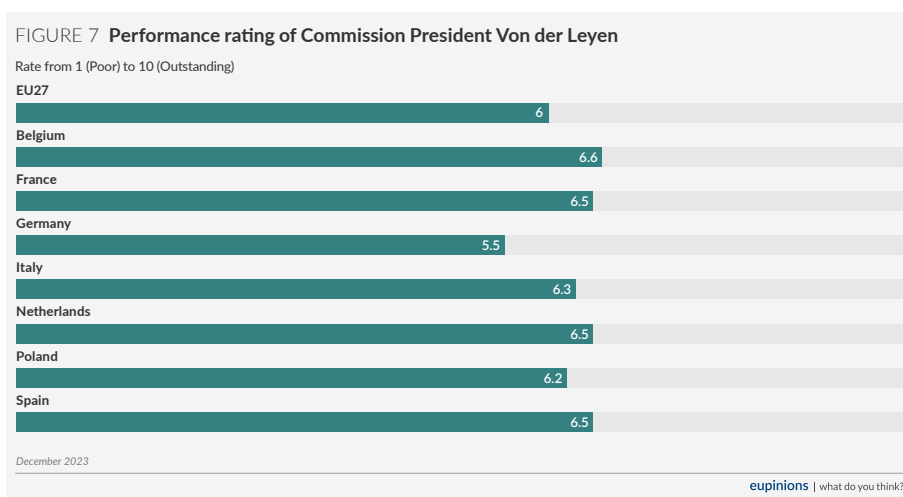


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similar data but for different age groups. In the EU27 as a whole, the feeling of having insufficient knowledge to evaluate President Von der Leyen's record is rather evenly distributed across age groups. The figure also shows that in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands, younger age groups feel marginally more informed about President Von der Leyen's performance compared to older age groups. Conversely, in Germany and Italy, respondents aged between 26 and 45 feel more knowledgeable compared to both younger and older age groups. In Poland, the largest share of those claiming to be informed is amongst those over 55 years old. That said, across age groups, a clear majority expresses a lack of sufficient knowledge to assess the performance of President Ursula von der Leyen.

What trends emerge when we compare respondents with left and right political leanings? [Figure 6](#) provides insights into this question. When we look at the patterns across different politically aligned groups in the EU as a whole, we find similar patterns as previously discussed: the majority of respondents, on both the left and right, feel they have too little knowledge to evaluate the performance of the Commission president. There is one exception: those who identify themselves as being on the far-left. Half of these respondents claim to have sufficient knowledge to evaluate President Von der Leyen's record, while another half state that they feel insufficiently informed. We find a similar pattern amongst French, German, and Italian respondents who identify as far-left. A majority of these respondents (51% in France, 65% in Germany, and 63% in Italy) feel that they have enough knowledge to evaluate the performance of their Commission president.

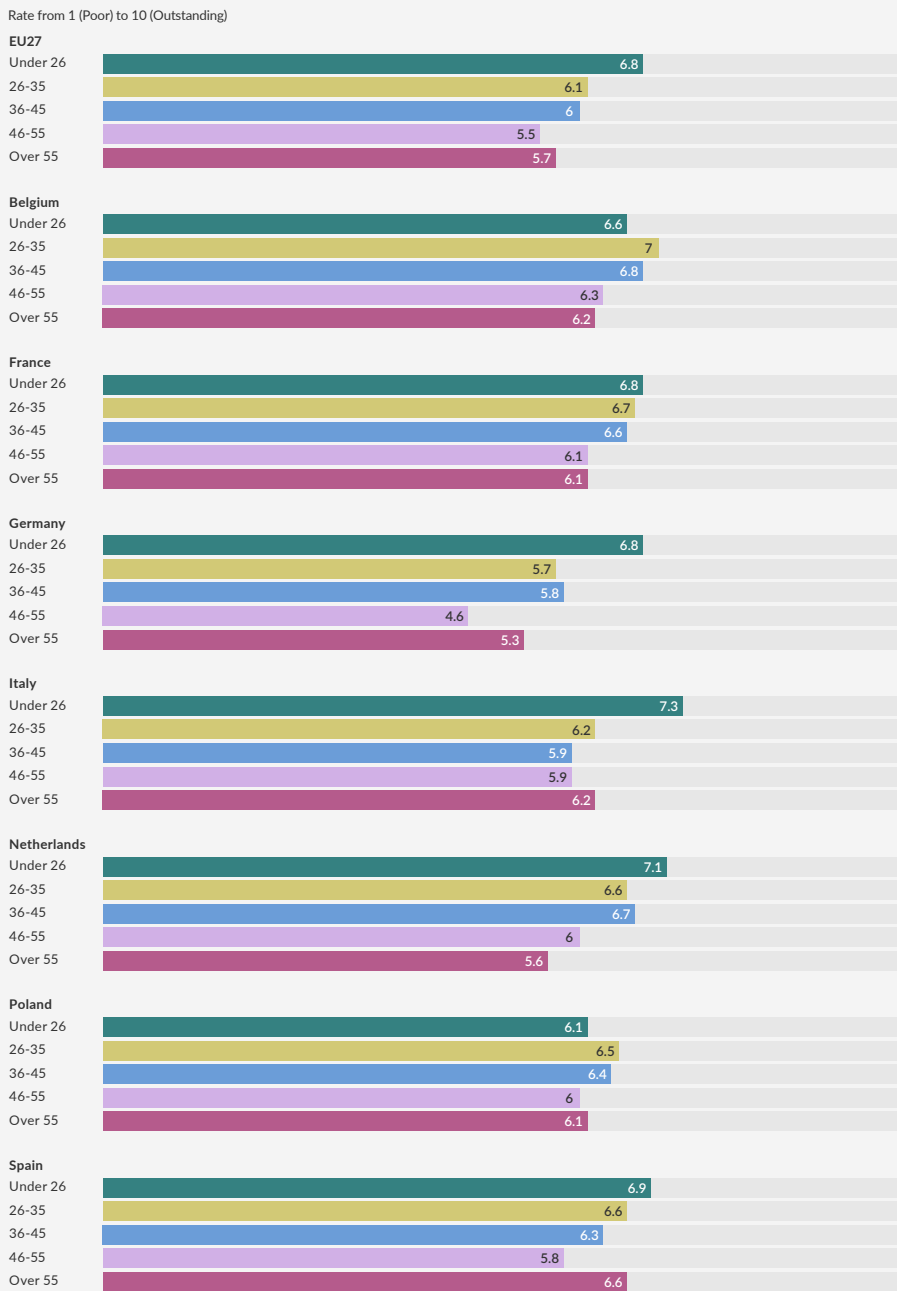
For those who stated that they had enough knowledge to evaluate the performance of President Von der Leyen, we posed two follow-up questions. The first asked them to rate her performance on a scale of 1 to 10, and the second to name her most notable policy achievement. [Figure 7](#) shows that within the EU27 the average performance score is 6 out of 10. Belgian respondents rate President Von der Leyen's performance most positively (6.6), followed by French, Dutch and Spanish respondents (6.5), while German respondents rate her performance most negatively (5.5).



When we explore the performance rating across age groups, we see that, as depicted in [Figure 8](#), while most age groups display a favourable rating (> 5), younger age groups in the EU on average rate the performance of President Von

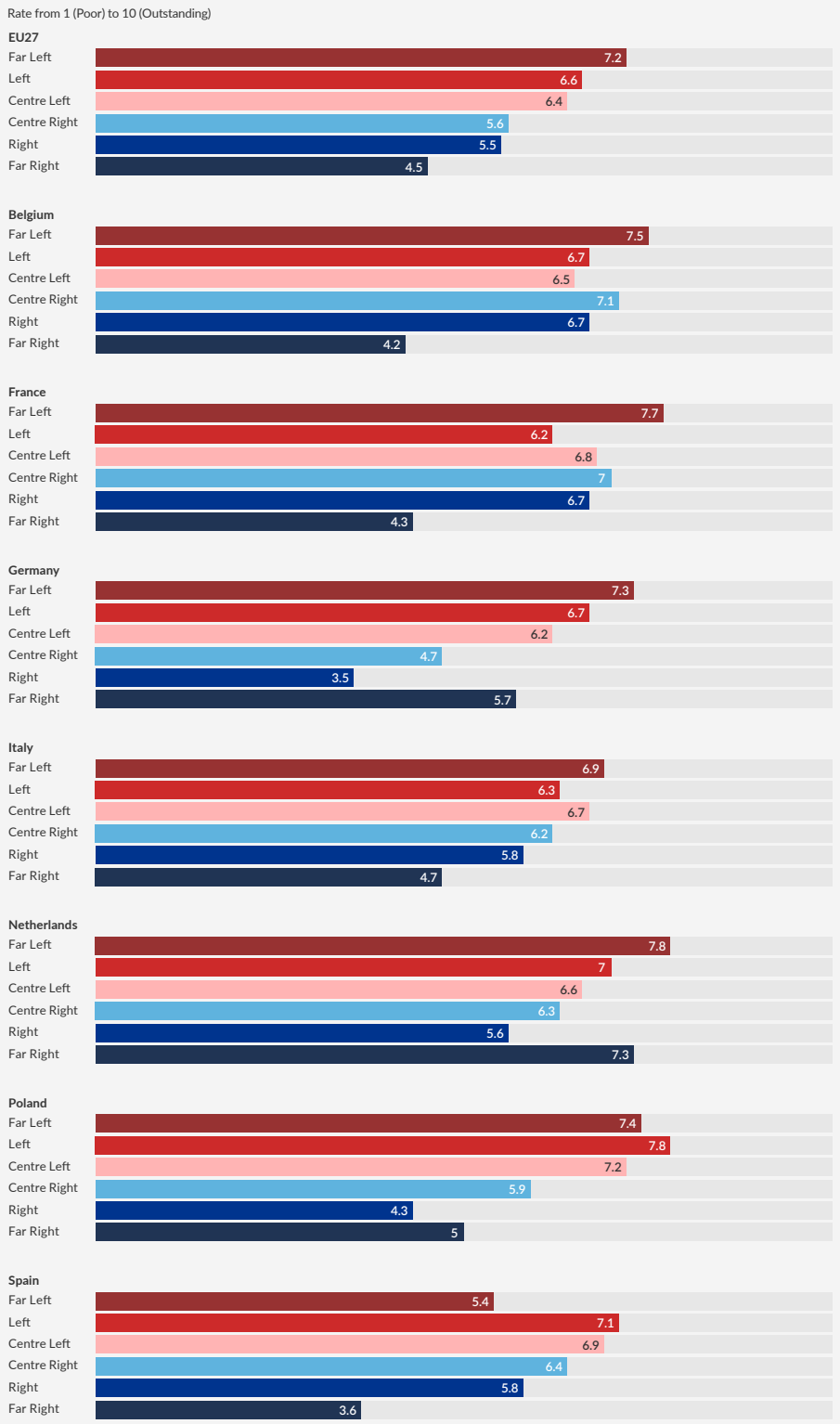
der Leyen most positively. Specifically, those under 26 give her an average rating of 6.8. Younger age groups in the member states we examined tend to be more positive compared to older age groups. For instance, respondents under 26 in Italy give the Commission’s president the most favourable rating, at 7.3 out of 10. Conversely, older age groups in Germany express the most negative sentiment. The average performance rating of President Von der Leyen is 4.6 among Germans aged 46–55 and 5.3 among those over 55.

FIGURE 8 Performance rating of Commission President Von der Leyen across age groups



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FIGURE 9 Performance rating of Commission President Von der Leyen by political leaning



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Figure 9 illustrates the performance ratings of President Von der Leyen when we group respondents by their political leanings. The data show that President Von der Leyen’s performance ratings are higher amongst respondents who identify as left-wing. Across the EU27, those who identify themselves as far-left view her performance very favourably (7.2), while respondents who see themselves as left or centre-left rate her performance with a 6.6 or 6.4 out of 10. Conversely, respondents who identify as more right-leaning express less positive views. Centre-right and right-leaning respondents rated her performance as 5.6 and 5.5 out of 10 respectively, while the performance rating of far-right leaning respondents is much lower, at 4.5 out of 10. The most positive performance ratings can be found amongst far-left respondents in France and the Netherlands (7.7 and 7.8 out of 10, respectively), and the most negative amongst right-leaning respondents in Germany (3.5 out of 10) and far-right leaning respondents in Spain (3.6 out of 10). These findings suggest that among those who consider themselves adequately informed about her performance, the actions of President Von der Leyen in office have resonated more with left- rather than right-leaning respondents.

As mentioned, we also asked respondents to identify what they felt Von der Leyen’s most significant achievement in office has been. Figure 10 provides an overview of the responses to this question. The largest share of respondents in the EU27 (35%) viewed the response to the war in Ukraine to have been President Von der Leyen’s biggest achievement, followed by the pandemic response (18%). The responses are pretty similar across member states, except amongst French and Italian respondents, for whom the war and pandemic responses were rated more evenly.

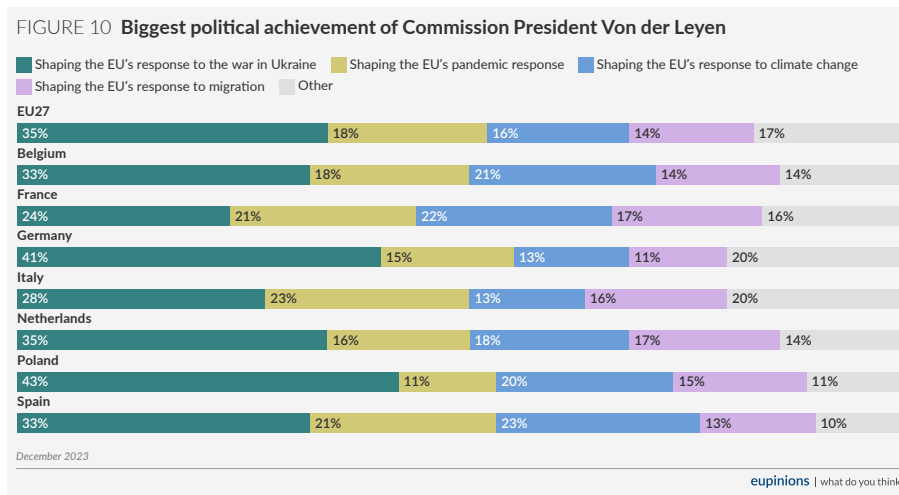
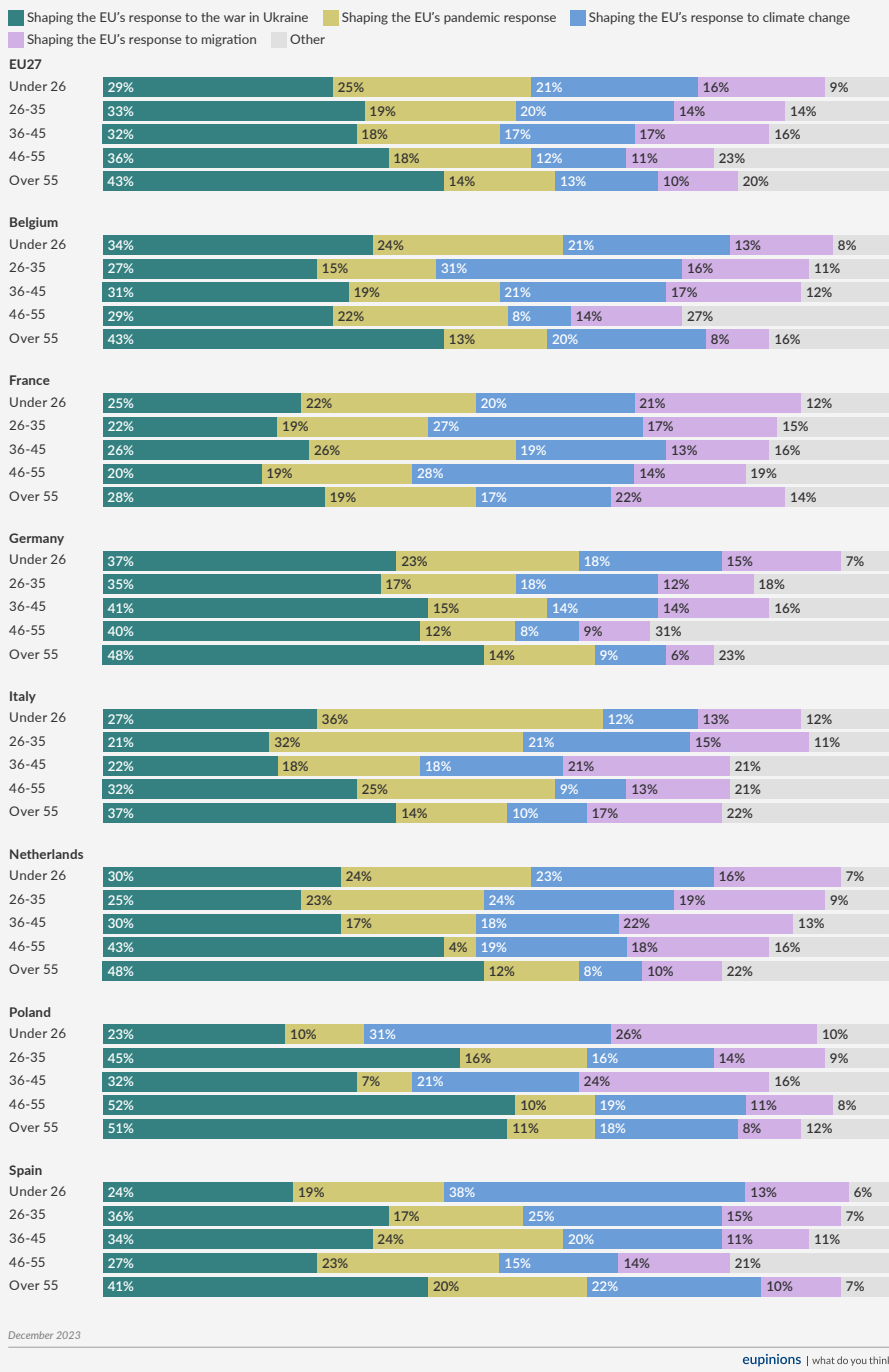


Figure 11 presents similar information categorised by age group. Interestingly, older respondents, especially those over 55, view the war response as more important than President Von der Leyen’s responses to the pandemic, climate change or migration, while the differences between policy responses are less pronounced amongst younger respondents, especially those under 26. In France, we see a similar type of pattern across all age groups. The effort to shape the EU’s response to the war in Ukraine is not clearly viewed as the biggest achievement of President Von der Leyen amongst French respondents. For instance, in the 46–55 age group, coordinating the EU’s response to climate change is viewed as most important (28%). In Italy, the youngest age group (under 26) considers shaping

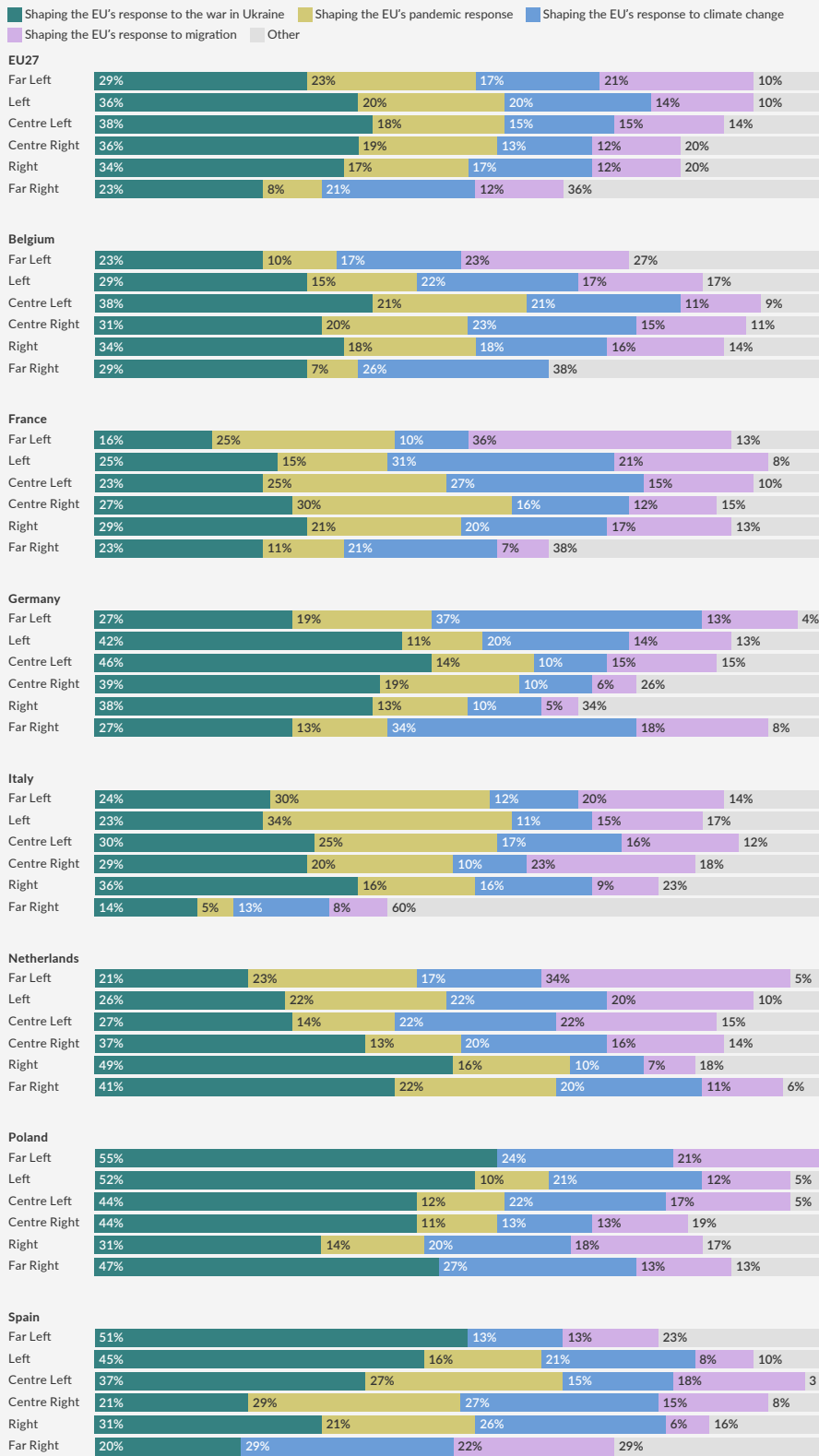
FIGURE 11 Biggest political achievement of Commission President Von der Leyen across age groups



the EU’s pandemic response as President Von der Leyen’s foremost achievement (36%), while in Poland and Spain, the same age group views addressing climate change as the president’s biggest achievement (31% and 38%, respectively).

When we look at the evaluations of President Von der Leyen’s biggest achievements by political leaning (see Figure 12), it becomes clear that respondents across the political spectrum largely agree that coordinating the response to the war in Ukraine was her most significant achievement. The only exception is

FIGURE 12 Biggest political achievement of Commission President Von der Leyen by political leaning



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respondents identifying as far-right, who were most likely to select the ‘other’ option. An interesting finding for Germany is that those identifying as either far-left or far-right are most likely to view the EU’s response to climate change as President Von der Leyen’s biggest achievement (37% and 34%, respectively).

Overall, the data presented in Figures 4 to 6 suggest that a majority of European respondents feel that they do not possess enough knowledge to evaluate the performance of Commission President Von der Leyen. That said, Figures 7 to 12 suggest that, amongst the minority of respondents who do feel adequately informed, they generally appraise President Von der Leyen’s performance positively, with two-thirds of this group rating her performance as at least 6 out of 10. Moreover, these respondents broadly agree that coordinating the EU’s response to the Ukraine war constitutes her biggest achievement.

Desired Characteristics of a Commission President

In a third step, we explore the qualities that European respondents would like to see in a Commission president. Respondents were asked to indicate the importance they attributed to the following characteristics for the president of the European Commission: a) caring about people like me; b) having the right experience; c) focusing on practical solutions; d) being able to unite Europe; and/or e) acting as a crisis manager. Figure 13, perhaps not unsurprisingly, suggests that a majority of European respondents views each of these characteristics as important. The highest share of European respondents (61%) believes that an ideal Commission president is someone who focuses on practical solutions, followed by someone who is a crisis manager (59%) and has the right experience (57%). When we compare responses across selected member states, interestingly, crisis management skills emerge as the most critical in Germany (71%), Italy (72%), and Poland (64%), whereas in France, the highest support is for the ability to unite Europe (59%).

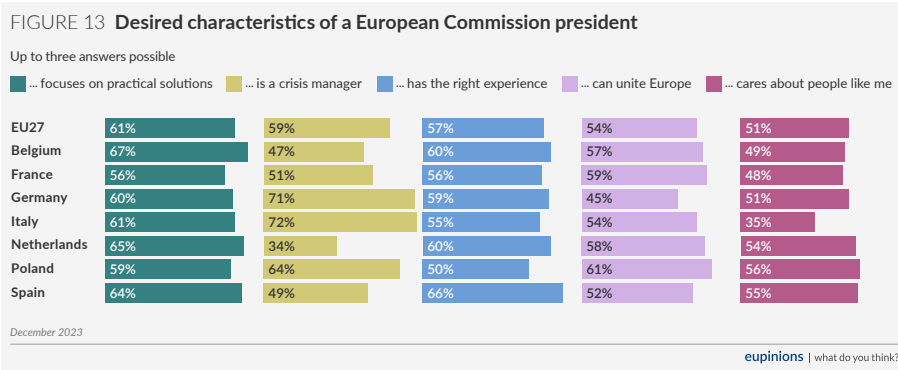
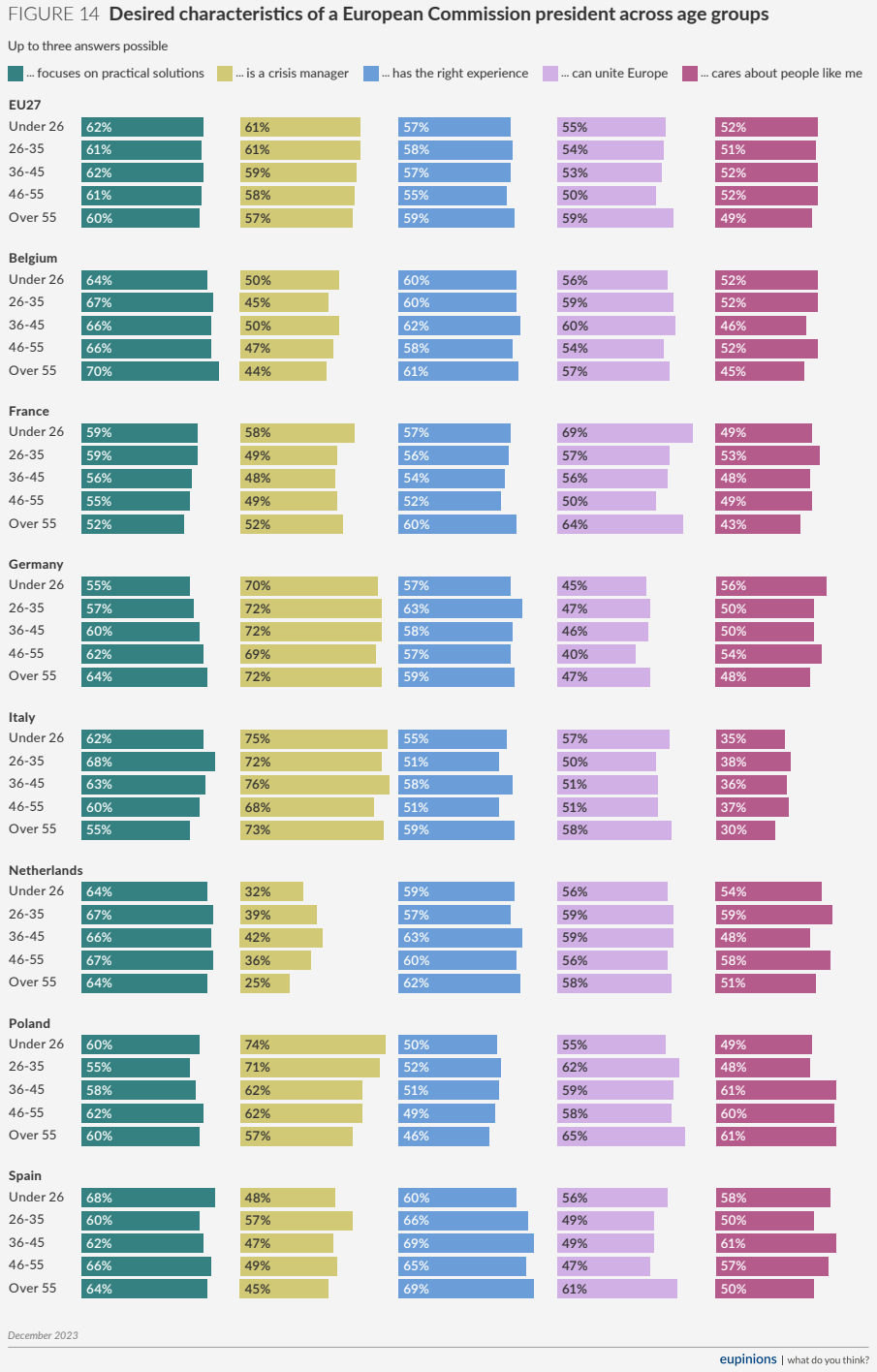
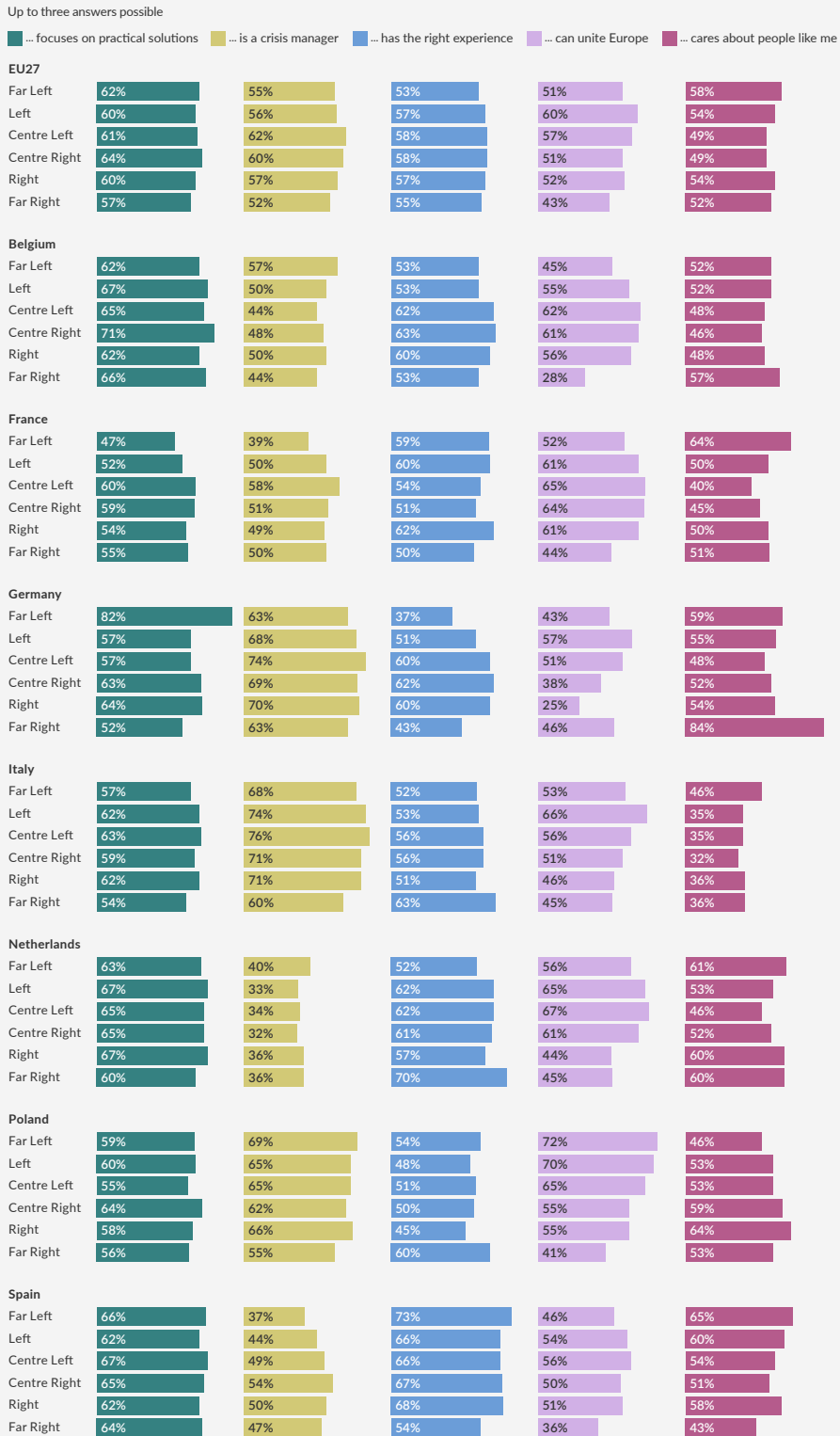


Figure 14 presents this information for different age groups. European respondents across different age groups consider the ability to focus on practical solutions as the most important characteristic in a Commission president. Being a crisis manager is equally important for younger age groups, aged 35 and below, and holds greater significance for them compared to older age groups. This is perhaps a reflection of the fact that these younger generations were politically socialised during periods when crises of one form or another dominated European policy-making (Lauterbach and De Vries 2020). In addition, two-thirds of French respondents under 26 think that the ability to unite Europe is important for a Commission president, marking the highest share amongst all European respondents (69%). Following closely are Polish respondents over 55 who also find it very important (65%).



When we look at which characteristics are considered most desirable for respondents of different political leanings (Figure 15), we find some interesting differences. The lowest support for the ability to unite Europe is found amongst respondents on the far-right (43%). For these respondents, the ability to focus on practical solutions is the most desired characteristic for a Commission president (57%). For respondents on the left, being able to unite Europe and to focus on practical solutions are the most desired (60% support for each).

FIGURE 15 Desired characteristics of a European Commission president by political leaning



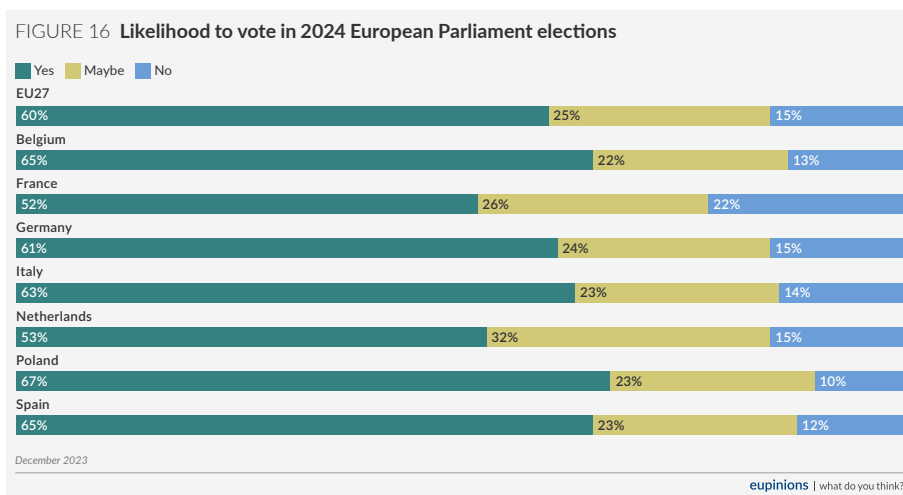
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When analysing differences across member states, we find similar patterns, but certain distinctions stand out. For example, amongst German respondents on the far-right, the ability to care for people like oneself is deemed the most desirable characteristic for a Commission president (84%), while for Dutch, Italian, and Polish respondents on the far-right, having the right experience matters most (70%, 63% and 60%, respectively). Conversely, for Belgian, French, and Spanish respondents on the far-right, the ability to focus on practical solutions is the most desired attribute (66%, 55% and 64%, respectively).

The data presented in Figures 13 to 15 suggest that the majority of European respondents consider all five listed characteristics — caring about people like me, having the right experience, focusing on practical solutions, being able to unite Europe, and acting as a crisis manager — to be important for filling the role of a Commission president.

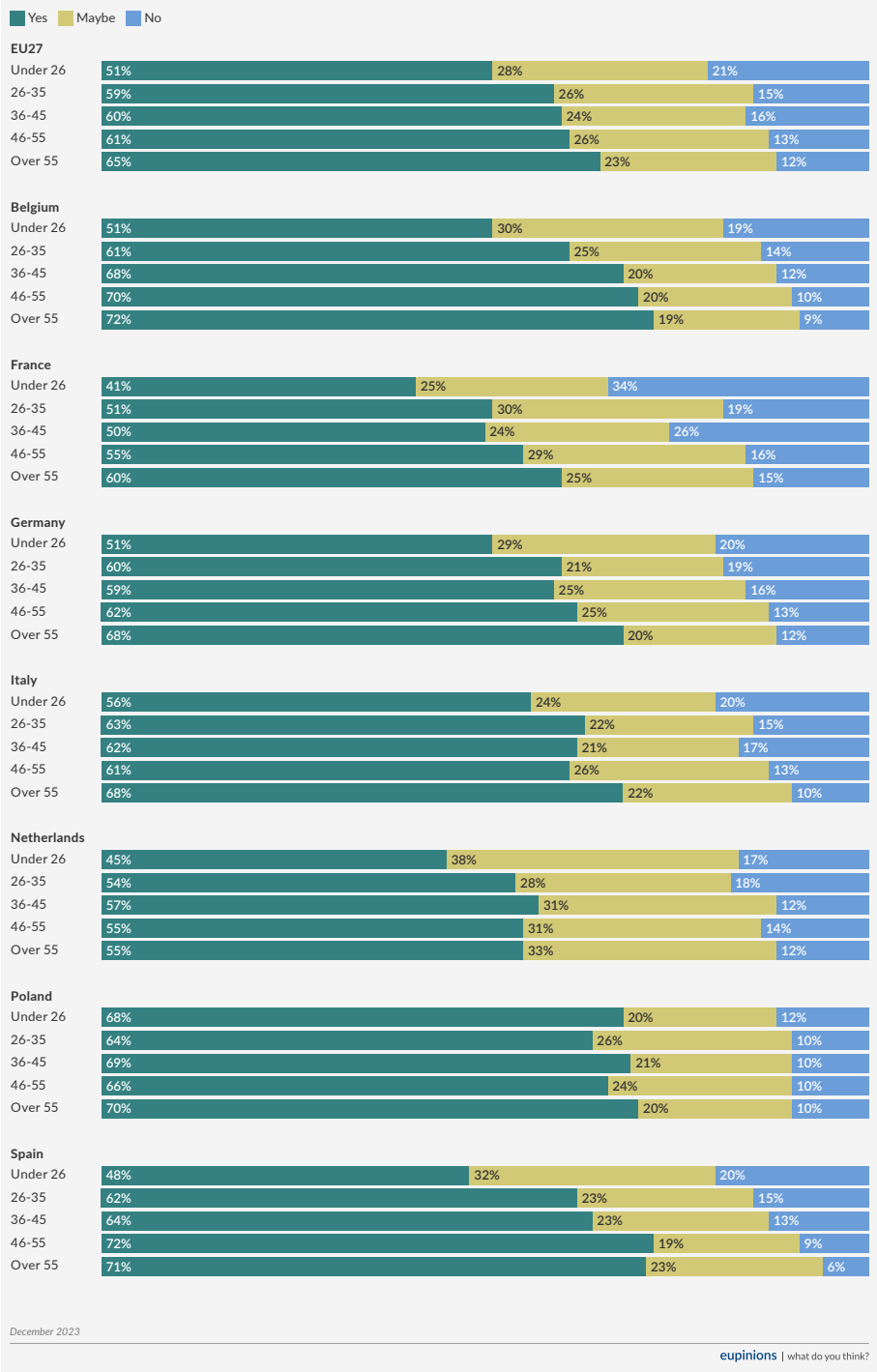
Reasons for Voting in the European Parliament Elections

In the final segment of this report, we explore whether European respondents are likely to vote in the 2024 European Parliament elections (Figures 16 to 18) and whether their ability to influence the selection of the next Commission president influences their willingness to vote (Figures 19 to 21). **Figure 16** provides an overview of the voting intentions of European respondents in the 2024 elections. It's important to note that our survey was conducted in early December 2023, several months before the commencement of the electoral campaign. A total 60% of European respondents indicated that they planned to vote in the upcoming election, while 25% were undecided, and 15% had already decided not to vote. The likelihood that respondents will vote in the elections is much lower in France and the Netherlands, where only 52% and 53% of respondents, respectively, stated that they intended to vote. In Belgium, Poland, and Spain, respondents are more inclined to vote, with rates of 65%, 67%, and 65%, respectively. These findings mirror those from previous studies conducted in 2019 (De Vries and Hoffmann 2019a).



Turning to the differences between age groups, as depicted in **Figure 17**, we find that the likelihood of voting is higher amongst older age groups. While only 51% of those under 26 stated their intention to vote, 65% of those over 55 said the same. This trend corresponds with what we know from voting behaviour in national elections (Smets 2016). The lowest share of respondents stating that they

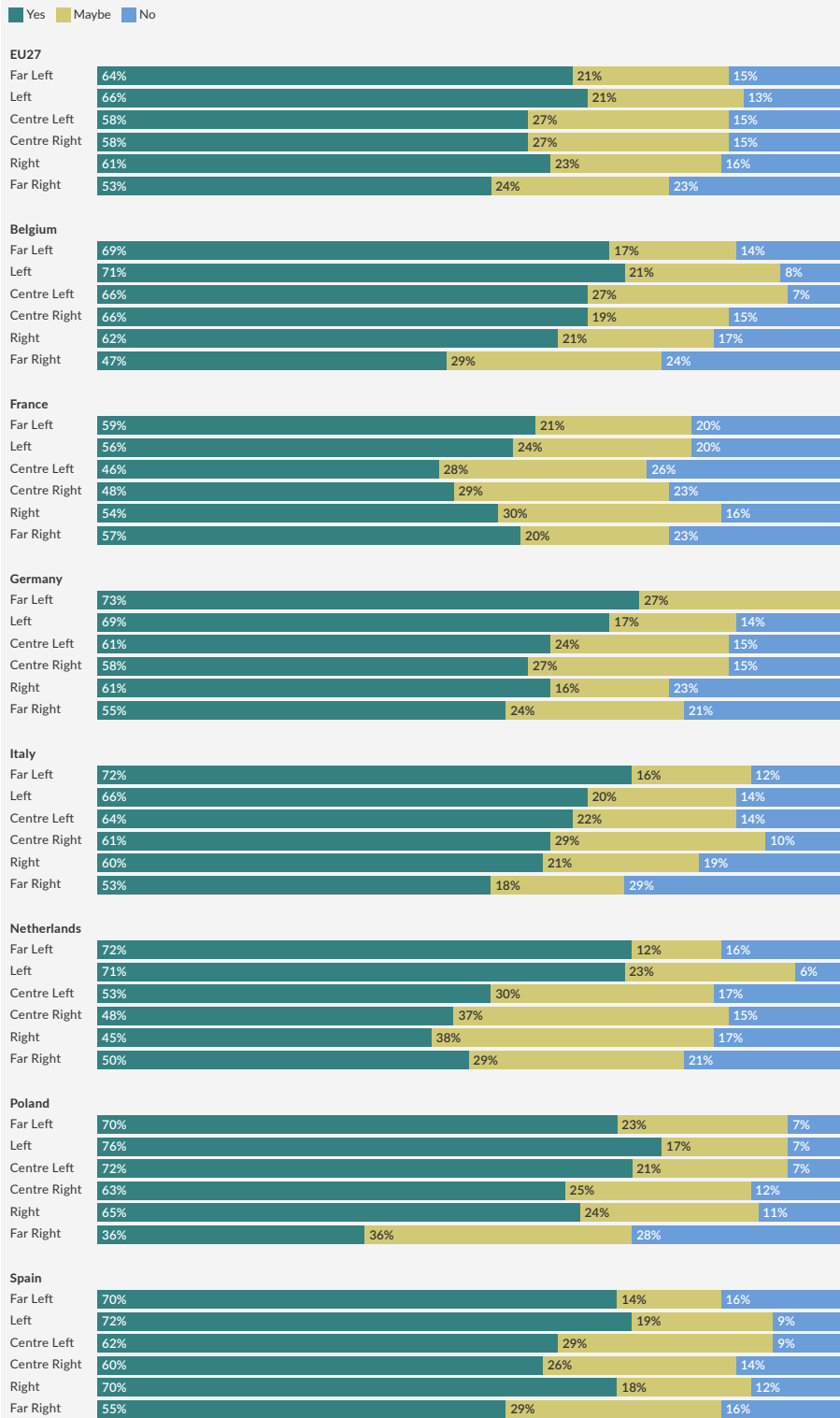
FIGURE 17 Likelihood to vote in 2024 European Parliament elections across age groups



will vote can be found amongst those under 26 in France and the Netherlands (41% and 45%, respectively), while the highest proportion is amongst older age groups in Belgium and Spain (over 70% in both member states).

Figure 18 displays differences in the likelihood of voting in the 2024 European Parliament elections amongst respondents with different political leanings. Interestingly, these data suggest that respondents identifying themselves as

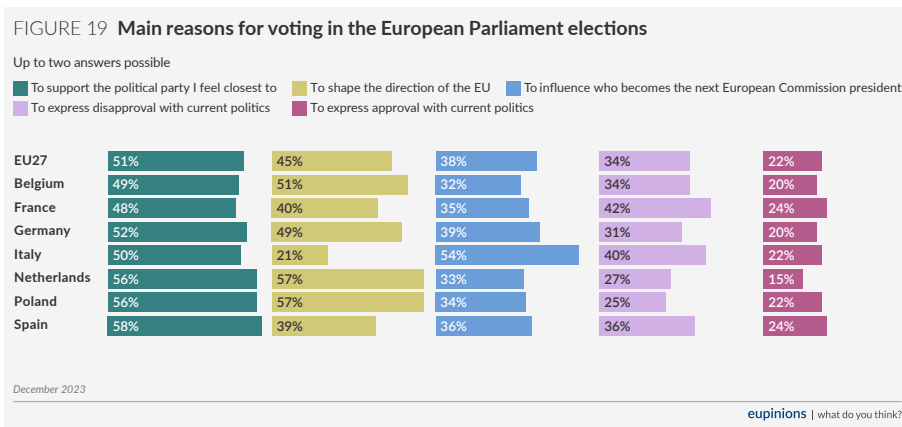
FIGURE 18 Likelihood to vote in 2024 European Parliament elections by political leaning



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far-right leaning are less likely to vote, at 53%, compared to respondents with other political leanings. This is intriguing considering that far-right parties are expected to do well in the 2024 elections (Cunningham et al. 2024). It will be interesting to see how effectively these parties will mobilise their voter base. However, we find exceptions to this pattern in some member states. For example, in France, respondents who identify as centrist, both left or right, are least likely to say that they will vote in the upcoming elections (46% and 48%, respectively), while in the Netherlands, the centre-right and right are least likely to vote (48% and 45%, respectively).

In a final step, we examine the extent to which the ability to influence who will become the next president of the Commission plays a role for respondents when deciding to cast a ballot. Figure 19 presents this information and shows that 51% of respondents select “to support the party that they are close to” as the main reason for voting in 2024, followed by “to shape the direction of the EU” (45%). Still, more than a third of respondents cite being able “to influence who becomes the next Commission president” as a primary reason for casting a ballot (38%). Interestingly, in Italy, being able to influence who will become the next Commission president is seen as the main reason for voting (54%).

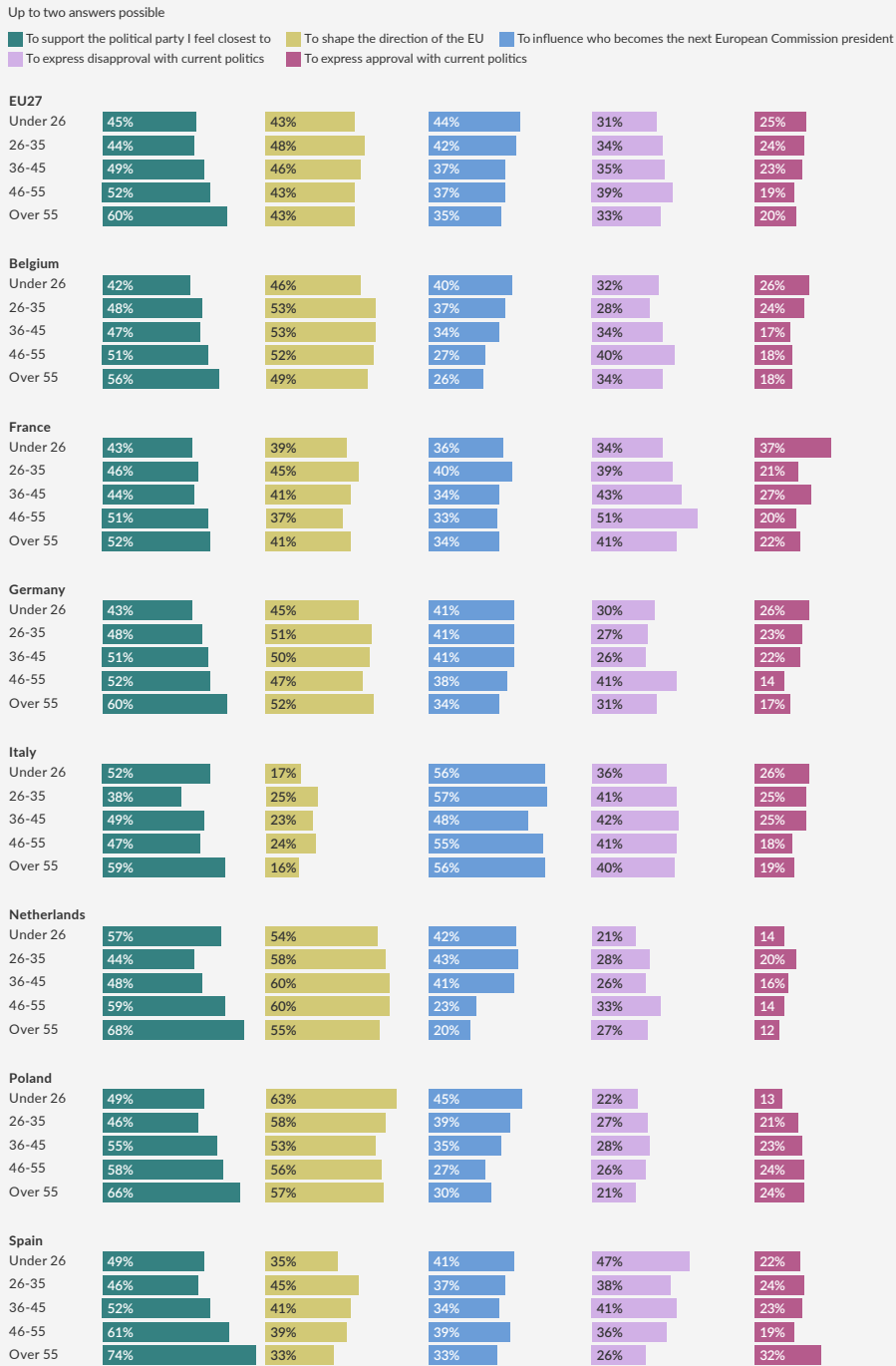


We now turn to differences across age groups, as illustrated in Figure 20. While younger respondents, below 36, view supporting their party, influencing who becomes the next Commission president and shaping the direction of the EU as important drivers for voting, a majority of older voters, over 55, suggest that supporting their party is the most important reason for casting a ballot in the elections (60%). These trends remain consistent across the selected member states.

Figure 21 presents the same information across respondents with different political leanings. Interestingly, the data suggest that among respondents who identify as far-right, one of the main drivers for voting in the 2024 elections is to express disapproval of current politics (55%). For Italian respondents who identify as centre-left or -right, influencing who becomes the next Commission president is the most significant motivation for voting (57% and 56%, respectively). However, this motivation is notably lower for respondents on the far-right end of the spectrum, as well as for those on the far-left in Spain.

Overall, Figures 16 to 18 suggest that a majority of Europeans intend to vote in the upcoming European Parliament elections, although fewer people plan to

FIGURE 20 Main reasons for voting in the European Parliament elections across age groups

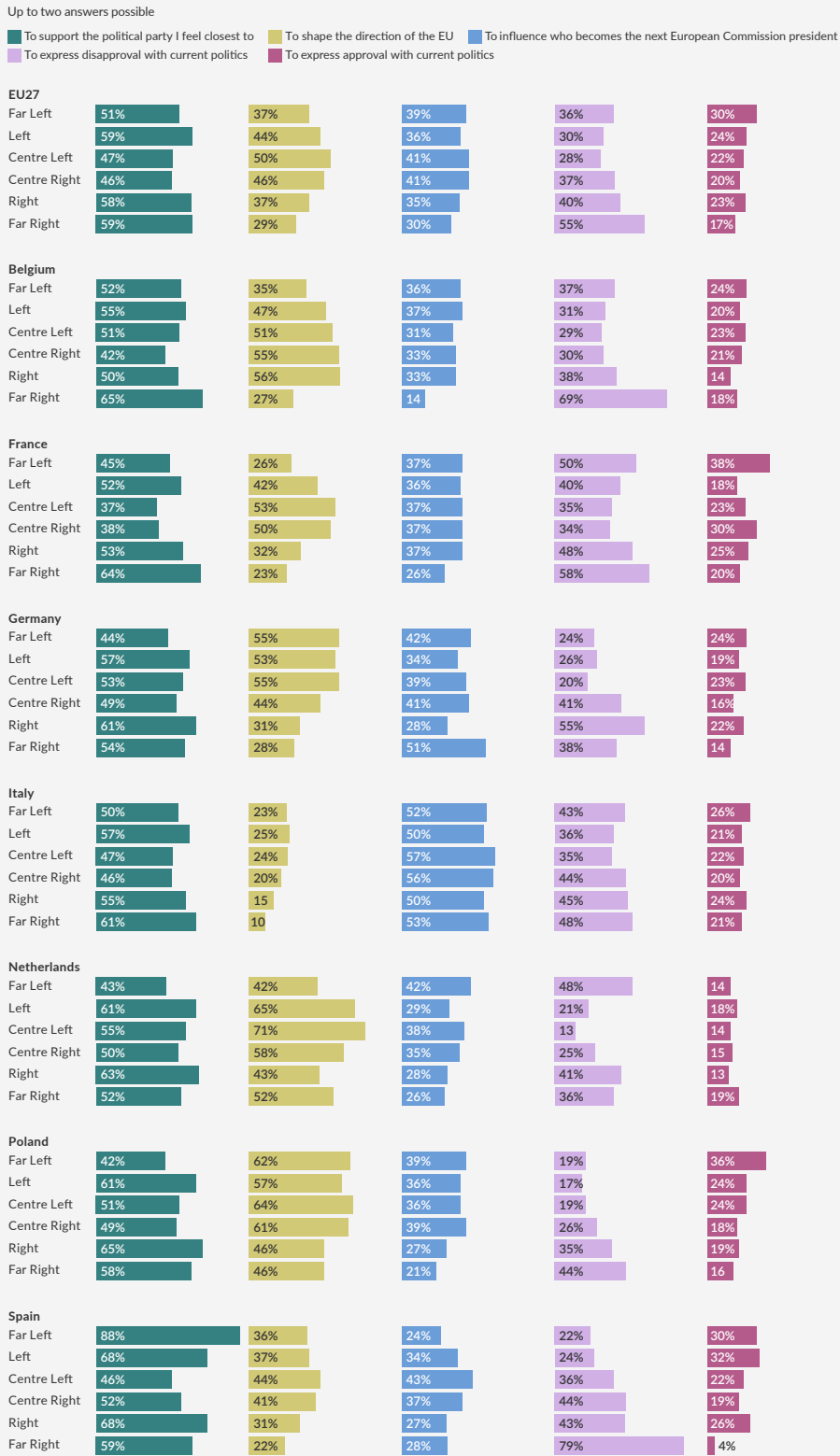


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vote in France and the Netherlands. The likelihood of voting is also lower amongst younger citizens and those who place themselves on the far-right. Additionally, we find that the ability to influence who will become the next Commission president is not a primary motivating factor for voting in the elections, except for Italian voters, particularly those who identify as centrists.

FIGURE 21 Main reasons for voting in the European Parliament elections by political leaning



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Concluding Remarks

Our findings underscore the existence of a “Von der Leyen Effect.” Unlike previous presidents of the European Commission, who remained largely unknown to the European public, a significant majority of Europeans today are aware that Ursula von der Leyen holds the position. This represents a noteworthy achievement, considering that media reporting is strongly embedded in the national politics of member states. However, this Von der Leyen effect has not translated into concrete knowledge about EU policy-making. Less than a third of European respondents feel that they possess enough knowledge to evaluate President Von der Leyen’s performance in office. Among those who feel adequately informed, President Von der Leyen’s performance is generally viewed positively, with the coordination of the Ukraine war effort cited as her biggest achievement.

Regarding the desired characteristics of the next Commission president, European respondents express a preference for a practical problem-solver with experience and crisis-management skills. While we find that a majority of European respondents aim to vote in the upcoming European Parliament elections (60%), influencing who will become next president of the European Commission is not the main driver behind the decision to vote. Instead, the main motivating factors for voting in the elections are to support one’s preferred party or to shape the future policy direction of the EU.

These findings suggest while President Von der Leyen laid the foundation for more visible leadership within the EU, the link between executive office and a clear policy mandate remains weak. Unlike national elections that decide the political composition of the government, the outcome of European Parliament elections does not automatically determine executive leadership in the EU. The selection of the Commission president is an interplay between the European Council and the European Parliament. The European Council proposes a candidate by qualified majority, who must then gain majority support in Parliament before taking office. In 2019, European parliamentary groups announced their “lead candidates”, but EU governments chose a Commission president who was not one of the lead candidates. However, President Von der Leyen was from the political family that won the most seats in the 2019 elections. The selection of President Von der Leyen, as we have shown, made a difference, because she elevated the profile of the Commission president. Nevertheless, the connection to policy outcomes still remains opaque in the eyes of voters.

This is significant because democratic elections are meant to establish an electoral bond between voters and their leaders. They should empower voters to mandate European leaders on policy development and enable them to assess their leaders’ performance by holding them accountable after a term in office. For this electoral connection to be effective, voters should not only be familiar with their leaders but also capable of evaluating their policy record. As demonstrated in this report, these prerequisites for democratic elections to function effectively are only partially met at the EU level.

Why does this matter? Well, it matters because it renders EU leaders vulnerable. We've witnessed this in the context of farmer protests against the EU Green Deal. President Von der Leyen, along with her commissioners, had to swiftly accommodate the demands of farmers because she did not receive a clear political mandate from European voters for the Green Deal during the 2019 elections. She could not refute farmers' demands by citing citizen support for the Commission's actions stemming from general elections. This means that specific interests can wield significant influence on EU policy-making when they voice their concerns loudly enough.

What can be done to strengthen the electoral connection in European Parliament elections? One key approach is to allow for more open competition for the main executive office: the president of the Commission. There are two options to achieve this: either enhancing the indirect election of the Commission president by the European Parliament, or enabling the direct election of the Commission president by European citizens (Algan et al. 2023).

A beefed-up election of the Commission president by the European Parliament would involve allowing the European Parliament to directly elect the Commission president immediately after the European Parliament elections, without waiting for the European Council to propose a candidate first. This would eliminate the ability of EU governments to make behind-the-scenes deals in determining the executive leadership. An alternative model could be a direct election of the Commission president. This could entail a two-round process, with the first round taking place at the same time as the European Parliament election, followed by a second round two weeks later.

In either scenario, candidates should campaign across the EU, present their goals and plans, preferably in multiple languages, and would then be elected by the citizens of Europe. Certainly, a more open contest for the Commission president carries potentially high risks for the EU. There's a possibility that a Eurosceptic candidate advocating for reduced EU policy powers might win. However, the EU's system of checks-and-balances would require the president of the Commission to build broad coalitions in the Parliament and Council to pursue any new policy agenda.

This is also the beauty of electoral democracy: the choice lies with Europe's citizens. In the next election, pro-European forces could mobilise support for further integration within Europe. Elections confer a political mandate upon an executive, but it is always subject to a time-limit.

Of course, no institutional reform, however well-designed, will instantaneously create a mandate for European policy-making and leadership. However, our point here is that a thorough reassessment of the EU's institutional framework and the role of executive leadership within it is becoming imperative. Rather than waiting for the next crisis to emerge and hastily agreeing to last-minute deals, we ought to proactively design and endorse reforms now, especially with the prospect of enlargement looming on the horizon.

Method

— This report is based on a survey conducted by Latana for the Bertelsmann
T Foundation on public opinion across 27 EU member states in December
— 2023. The sample of n=13,299 was drawn across all 27 EU member states,
— taking into account current population distributions with regard to age
(16–69 years), gender and region/country. In order to obtain census representative
results, the data were weighted based upon the most recent Eurostat statistics.
The target weighting variables were age, gender, level of education (as defined by
ISCED (2011) levels 0–2, 3–4, and 5–8), and degree of urbanisation (rural and urban).
An iterative algorithm was used to identify the optimal combination of weighting
variables based on sample composition within each country. An estimation of
the overall design effect based on the distribution of weights was calculated at
1.28 at the global level. Calculated for a sample of this size and considering the
design-effect, the margin of error would be 0.9% at a confidence level of 95%.

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Samuel Oswick

Cover:
Florian Bayer

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
33311 Gütersloh
Germany

Isabell Hoffmann
isabell.hoffmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Phone +49 30 275 788 126

eupinions.eu

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de