

PORTUGAL AT 40: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPEAN ENLARGEMENT IN RETROSPECT

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Portugal at 40: Public Perceptions of European Enlargement in Retrospect

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INTRODUCTION: 40 YEARS AFTER PORTUGAL'S ACCESSION

In 1986, Portugal joined the European Communities alongside Spain, marking a decisive milestone in its transition to democracy and its integration into what is now called the European Union. Forty years later, Portugal's accession is widely regarded as one of the most successful enlargements in the history of European integration. Over the past decades, Portugal has undergone profound political, economic and social transformation, consolidating its democracy while significantly improving its living standards, economy and infrastructure.

The economic effects of membership have been particularly striking. In the first decades after accession, Portugal experienced sustained growth, with GDP doubling in real terms and purchasing power rising substantially relative to the European average (Statistics Portugal 2016). Massive inflows of European funds supported the modernisation of infrastructure, education and public service provi-

sion, helping to transform what had been one of Europe's less developed economies into a more convergent and outward-looking member state (European Commission 2024a).

Forty years later, Portugal's accession is widely regarded as one of the most successful enlargements in the history of European integration.

Beyond economics, accession also played a crucial role in stabilising Portugal's young democracy and embedding it within a broader European political and institutional framework. As in

the case of Spain, EU membership is widely seen as having reinforced democratic consolidation and integration on the global stage following decades of authoritarian rule (Royo 2007).

The 40th anniversary of Portugal's accession comes at a moment when enlargement has returned to the core of the European political agenda. Russia's war against Ukraine, shifting geopolitical dynamics and renewed debates about the European Union's role in the world have revived discussions about further expansion to countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans (Scicluna

2025). Enlargement was once seen as a technical process, but is now viewed as a strategic and political choice about the future of Europe (European Commission 2024b).

Yet, while Portugal's accession is frequently described as a success story, much less is known about how this success is perceived across Europe today. Do European citizens in other member states view Portugal's accession as beneficial, for Portugal itself and for the European Union as a whole? How does Portuguese accession compare, in the eyes of European citizens, to other enlargement rounds? And to what extent do these perceptions vary across generations?

This report addresses these questions using original survey data collected across EU member states in the context of the eupinions data collection project by the Bertelsmann Foundation, in partnership with the Fundação Francisco Manuel dos Santos (for more information, see www.eupinions.eu). The report is divided into three parts. The first part examines general attitudes toward EU enlargement. The second part analyses how Europeans evaluate the effects of Portugal's accession, both for Portugal and for

the European Union. The third part explores how citizens assess their own country's accession experience.

By linking retrospective evaluations of past enlargements to current debates about future expansion, the report contributes to a better understanding of the public foundations of EU enlargement. As the European Union considers its next steps, public perceptions of past enlargements, such as that of Portugal, may play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of European integration.

The report begins by reviewing the existing academic literature on attitudes toward European Union enlargement. It then goes on to explain the data and methodology used. Next, it evaluates the EU accession in general and Portugal's accession in particular, analysing how Europeans perceive its effects both for Portugal itself and for the European Union as a whole. Finally, the report explores how citizens assess their own country's accession experience. Taken together, these different steps provide a comprehensive picture of how past enlargement rounds are viewed across Europe and how these views may shape support for future expansion.

WHAT SHAPES PUBLIC OPINION ON EU ENLARGEMENT?

Public attitudes toward European Union enlargement have been widely studied in the literature on European integration (for an overview see De Vries 2018, Hobolt 2016 and Hobolt and De Vries 2016). This body of research suggests that citizens' views on enlargement are shaped by a combination of material factors, political considerations and identity-based concerns. Crucially, these attitudes are not formed in isolation, but are often informed by elite discourse and experiences with previous enlargement rounds (De Vries and Edwards 2009, Doyle and Fidrmuc 2006).

A first strand of research emphasises the role of material considerations (Anderson and Reichert 1995, Gabel 2009, Gabel and Palmer 1995, Tucker et al. 2002). Individuals tend to evaluate European integration, including enlargement, in terms of perceived costs and benefits, including its effects on labour markets, welfare systems and economic growth. Enlargement may be supported when it is associated with market expansion and increased prosperity,

but concerns about redistribution, competition or fiscal transfers can reduce support. These studies have consistently shown that individuals in more economically secure positions are, on average, more favourable toward enlargement, while those who feel economically vulnerable tend to be more sceptical (see for example Gabel 2009, McLaren 2002).

A second line of explanation highlights political factors. From this perspective, citizens assess enlargement in terms of its implications for the functioning of the European Union (Rohrschneider 2002). Enlargement can be seen as enhancing the EU's geopolitical influence and its capacity to promote stability and democracy in neighbouring regions. At the same time, it may raise concerns about decision-making efficiency, institutional complexity and the Union's capacity to absorb new members. Research has shown that such concerns about "absorption capacity" play an important role in shaping public opinion, particularly in older member states (Toshkov et al. 2014).

A third strand focuses on the relationship between identity concerns and attitudes toward European integration more broadly (Carey 2002, Hooghe and Marks 2005, McLaren 2002). Individuals who identify more strongly with Europe and who hold positive views of integration overall are also generally more supportive of enlargement (Nissen 2003). Conversely, those with more exclusive national identities or higher levels of Euroscepticism tend to oppose further expansion (De Vries and Edwards 2009).

Enlargement, in this sense, is not only an issue with material or political consequences, but also a symbolic one, linked to questions of belonging, borders and the future shape of the European project.

More recent research points to the importance of retrospective evaluations of past enlargements. Citizens may rely on previous accession rounds as benchmarks when forming opinions about European integration and therefore, by extension, about future expansion (De Vries 2018). If earlier enlargements are perceived as successful, bringing economic convergence, political stability and mutual benefits, this can increase support for further enlargement (Timuş 2006).

Conversely, if past enlargements are associated with negative outcomes, such as economic strain or political tensions, they may generate scepticism toward new accessions.

In this regard, the Southern enlargement of 1986, including Portugal's accession, is particularly interesting.

In much of the scholarly and policy literature, Portugal is considered a successful case of democratic consolidation and economic catching-up within the European Union (see Pridham 1991). However, it remains an open

question to what extent this positive assessment is shared among European citizens. Citizens in different member states may evaluate the outcomes of Portugal's accession differently, depending on their national context, generational experiences and broader attitudes toward European integration.

Based on these insights, this report sets out three expectations. First, overall attitudes toward EU enlargement are expected to be broadly positive, but may vary across socio-demographic groups, particularly by age, as younger age cohorts lack direct experience with accession in comparison to older ones. Second, Portugal's accession is likely to be evaluated favourably, given the

[...] it remains an open question to what extent this positive assessment is shared among European citizens.

overall positive economic, social and political outcomes the country has achieved since 1986. Third, retrospective evaluations of coun-

tries' own accession experiences are expected to be predominantly positive, reflecting the long-term benefits associated with EU membership.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

By combining general attitudes toward enlargement with specific evaluations of past accession experiences, the analysis seeks to shed light on how historical enlargement trajectories shape contemporary public opinion and, ultimately, prospects for future expansion. The report is based on original survey data collected by eupinions. Specifically, it presents evidence based on a survey conducted in December 2025 in which more than 17,000 EU citizens were surveyed. The data are representative of the EU as a whole, as well as for Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain. The analysis focuses on citizens' attitudes toward European Union enlargement and their retrospective evaluations of accession experiences. To capture these dimensions, respondents were asked a series of questions addressing both general perceptions of enlargement and specific assessments of past accession rounds.

First, respondents were asked to evaluate different waves of EU enlargement, indicating which enlargements they believe have had a positive impact on the European Union. This allows for a comparative assessment of how different accession rounds, including the 1986 enlargement involving Portugal and Spain, are perceived across countries and demographic groups. Specifically, the report relies on answers to the following question:

1. The EU started with 6 countries and grew to 28. Which of these enlargements do you think had a positive impact on the EU?
 - 1973: Denmark, Ireland, UK
 - 1986: Portugal, Spain
 - 1995: Austria, Finland, Sweden
 - 2004: Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia
 - 2007: Romania, Bulgaria
 - 2013: Croatia
 - None of the above

Respondents could pick as many answer categories as they liked.

Second, the survey included a set of questions focusing specifically on Portugal's accession. Respondents were asked whether they think Portugal joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the European Union, as well as on their own country. These questions provide insight into how a specific enlargement case is evaluated from an external perspective. The specific questions were:

1. Do you think that Portugal joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the EU?

2. Do you think that Portugal joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on your country?

- very negative
- mostly negative
- very positive
- mostly positive

Responses “mostly positive” and “very positive” were coded as positive, while “mostly negative” and “very negative” were coded as negative.

Third, respondents were asked to assess the impact of their own country's accession to the EU. These evaluations cover three dimensions: the impact on the European Union, the impact on democracy within their country and the impact on the national economy. This enables a com-

parison between general attitudes toward enlargement and retrospective evaluations of concrete national experiences. The report relies on answers to three specific questions:

1. Do you think that your country joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the EU?

2. Do you think that your country joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the economy in your country?

3. Do you think that your country joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on democracy in your country?

- very negative
- mostly negative
- very positive
- mostly positive

Responses “mostly positive” and “very positive” were coded as positive, while “mostly negative” and “very negative” were coded as negative.

All results are analysed both at the aggregate level and across age groups (18–25, 26–35, 36–45, 46–55 and 56–69), allowing for an examination of generational differences in attitudes toward enlargement. By combining cross-country and cohort-based perspectives, the analysis provides a comprehensive picture of how European citizens perceive past enlargement processes and their consequences.

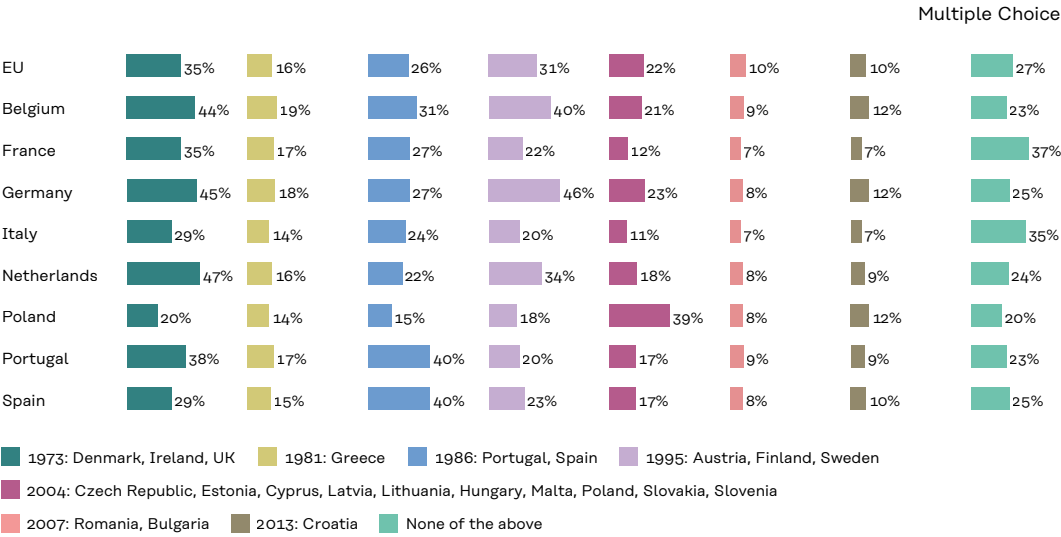
ATTITUDES TOWARD EU ENLARGEMENT

The report begins by examining how European citizens evaluate different rounds of EU enlargement. Rather than asking about enlargement in general terms, the question captures perceptions of specific accession waves, thereby providing a more

nuanced picture of how past enlargements are judged. Respondents could pick as many answer categories as they liked, so the answer categories do not total 100 exactly. Figure 1 presents these descriptive results.

Figure 1 Support for EU Accession Waves

The EU started with 6 countries and grew to 28. Which of these enlargements do you think had a positive impact on the EU?



Among the various accession rounds, the first enlargement in 1973 — which incorporated Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom into the European Communities — is most frequently seen as having had a positive impact on the EU, with 35% of respondents selecting this option. This is followed by the 1995 enlargement (Austria, Finland and Sweden), which is viewed positively by 31% of respondents, and the 1986 enlargement (Portugal and Spain), selected by 26%.

By contrast, later enlargements receive more limited support. The 2004 enlargement, which incorporated several Central and Eastern European countries, is mentioned by 22% of respondents, while the 2007 (Romania and Bulgaria) and 2013 (Croatia) enlargements are each selected by only around 10%. Notably, more than a quarter of respondents (27%) indicate that none of the enlargements had a positive impact on the EU, pointing to a significant degree of scepticism within the European public.

A closer look at country-level patterns reveals important variation. In several Western and Northern European countries, such as Germany (45%), the

Netherlands (47%) and Belgium (44%), the 1973 enlargement is particularly highly valued. Similarly, the 1995 enlargement receives strong support in these countries, especially in Germany (46%) and Belgium (40%). These patterns suggest that enlargements involving economically advanced and institutionally stable countries are more positively perceived.

The 1986 enlargement, which included Portugal and Spain, occupies a middle position in these evaluations. While it is not the most positively perceived enlargement overall, it nevertheless receives substantial support across countries. Notably, it is viewed particularly favourably in Por-

tugal and Spain themselves (both 40%), as well as in Belgium (31%). This indicates that the Southern enlargement is widely recognised as successful, though not to the same extent as earlier rounds.

In contrast, perceptions of the 2004 enlargement differ markedly across countries. While support is relatively low in most Western European countries, it is significant in Poland (39%), reflecting a more positive evaluation among citizens of countries that joined during this

Earlier enlargements involving economically strong democracies tend to be viewed more positively, while later and more complex enlargement rounds receive more mixed assessments.

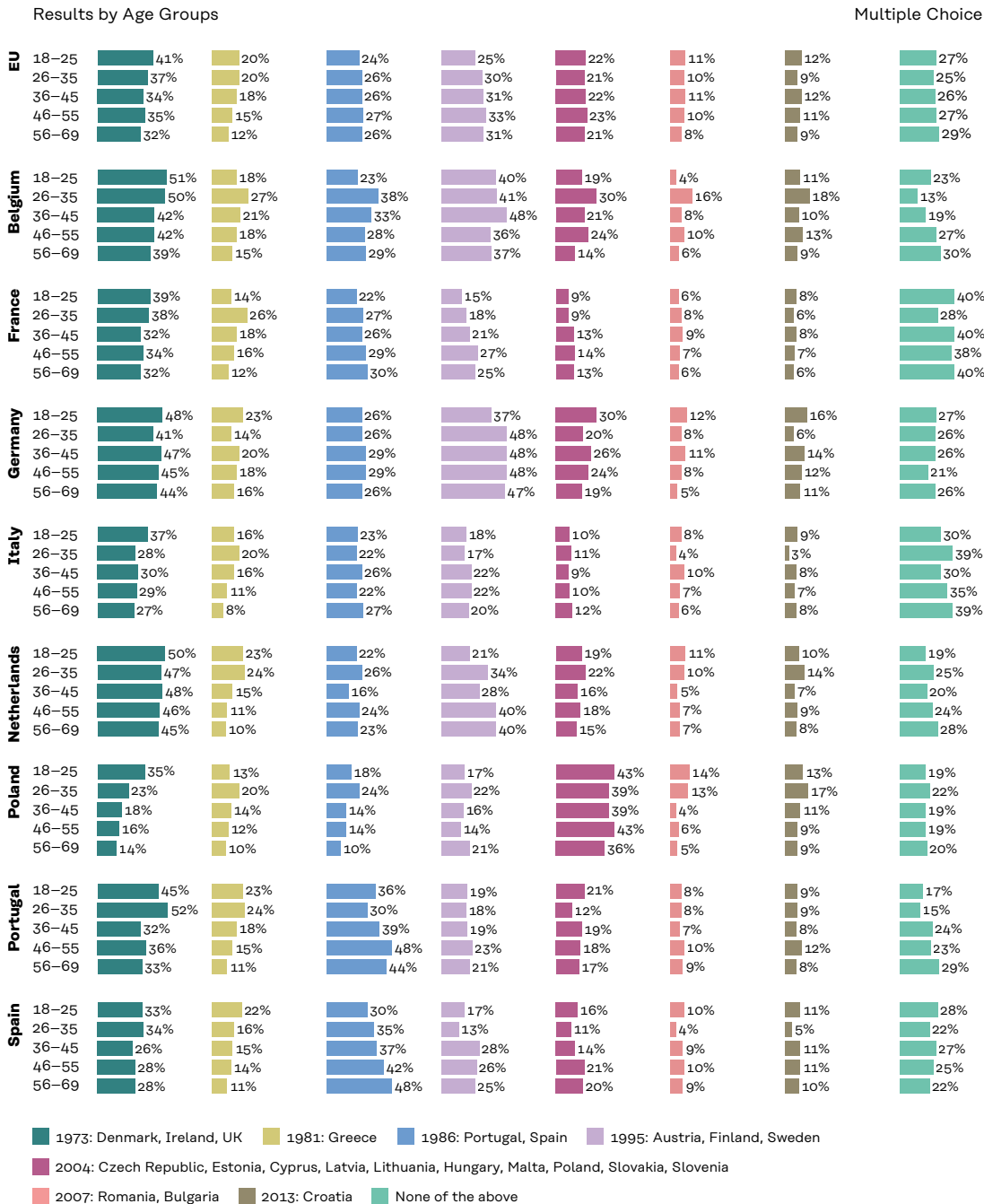
wave. This pattern underscores the importance of national experience in shaping perceptions of enlargement.

Taken together, these findings suggest that public evaluations of EU enlargement are shaped by both the characteristics of the accession countries and the perspectives of respondents' own national contexts. Earlier enlargements involving economically strong democracies tend to be viewed more positively, while later and more complex enlargement rounds receive more mixed assessments. The 1986 enlargement, including Portugal, is generally seen as a success, though it does not occupy the top position in the hierarchy of perceived positive impacts.

Introducing the age dimension adds an important layer to this analysis. Figure 2 presents the results by age group. Across the European Union, younger respondents are somewhat more likely to view earlier enlargements, particularly the 1973 round, positively, with 41% of those aged 18–25 selecting this option, compared to 32% among those aged 56–69. This suggests that younger cohorts, who have grown up in an already enlarged and integrated European Union, may be more inclined to interpret enlargement as a normal and beneficial feature of European integration.

Figure 2 Support for EU Accession Waves by Age Group

The EU started with 6 countries and grew to 28. Which of these enlargements do you think had a positive impact on the EU?



At the same time, support for the 1995 enlargement remains consistently high across all age groups, indicating a broadly shared perception of its success that cuts across generational lines. This may reflect the relatively uncontroversial nature of this enlargement, which involved economically advanced countries with a longer history of democratic rule and therefore raises fewer concerns about redistribution or institutional strain.

By contrast, generational differences are less pronounced when it comes to the 1986 enlargement. Evaluations of Portugal's and Spain's accessions remain relatively stable across age groups, typically ranging between 24% and 27% at the EU level. This stability is notable, as it suggests that the Southern enlargement has become part of a broadly accepted narrative of European integration, rather than being strongly shaped by lived experience or cohort-specific memories.

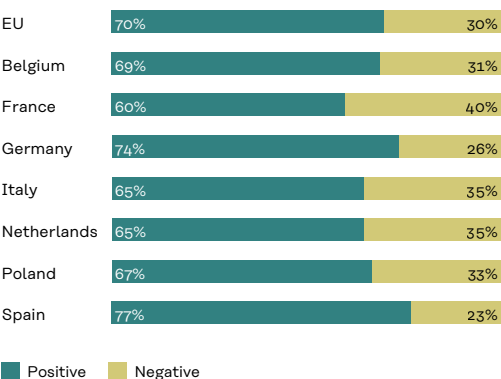
Interestingly, younger respondents tend to be slightly more open to recognising the positive impact of later enlargements, while older cohorts are somewhat more cautious. This pattern is also reflected in the share of respondents selecting "none of the above," which tends to be marginally higher among older age groups. Such differences are consistent with broader findings in the literature, which show that older citizens are generally more sensitive to the perceived risks associated with enlargement, including economic competition or pressures on national institutions. Overall, however, generational differences do not fundamentally alter the way previous enlargements are perceived. Rather than producing sharply divergent views, age shapes the intensity of support and the degree of scepticism.

EVALUATING PORTUGAL'S ACCESSION FROM A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

We now turn to the central question of this report: How do European citizens evaluate Portugal's accession to the European Union? Moving beyond general attitudes toward enlargement, this section focuses on a specific case and examines how its impact is perceived across member states. Figure 3 presents these results.

Figure 3 Effect of Portugal's Entry on the EU

Do you think that Portugal joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the EU?



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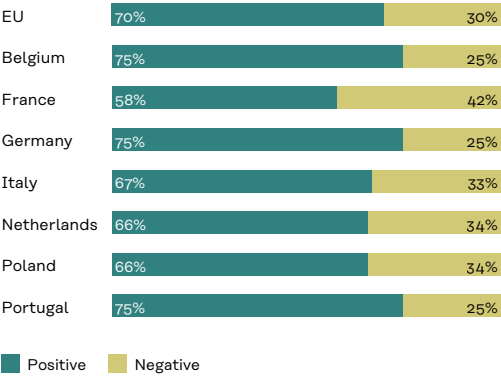
Across the European Union, 70% of respondents believe that Portugal's membership has had a positive impact on the EU, compared to 30% who hold a negative view.

Overall, the results point to a clearly positive evaluation of Portugal's accession. Across the European Union, 70% of respondents believe that Portugal's membership has had a

positive impact on the EU, compared to 30% who hold a negative view. This suggests that Europeans view Portugal as a positive enlargement case. These numbers are similar to those for Spain, presented in Figure 4: 70% agree that Spain's membership has had a positive impact on the EU, and only 30% hold a negative view.

Figure 4 Effect of Spain's Entry on the EU

Do you think that Spain joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the EU?



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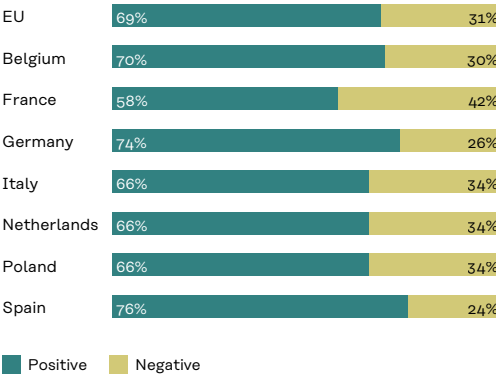
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This positive assessment is consistent across all countries included in the analysis. In Germany (74%) and Spain (77%), support is particularly strong, indicating a widespread perception that Portugal's accession has had a positive effect on the EU's development. Similarly high levels of support are found in Belgium (69%) and Poland (67%), as well as Italy and the Netherlands (both 65%). Even in France, where scepticism toward European integration tends to be more pronounced in recent years, a clear majority (60%) views Portugal's accession positively. Again, these numbers are very similar to those for Spain.

A similar pattern emerges when respondents are asked to evaluate the impact of Portugal's accession on their own country. At the EU level, 69% consider the effect to have been positive, while 31% perceive it as negative. Figure 5 presents these results. Once again, positive evaluations dominate across all countries. Germany (74%) and Spain (76%) stand out as particularly favourable, while Belgium (70%), Italy (66%), the Netherlands (66%) and Poland (66%) also display strong majorities in support. As Figure 6 shows, these results are comparable to those for Spain.

Figure 5 Effect of Portugal's Entry on Your Country

Do you think that Portugal joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on your country?

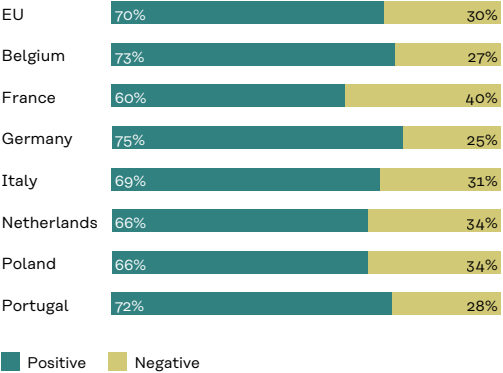


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Figure 6 Effect of Spain's Entry on Your Country

Do you think that Spain joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on your country?



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Although France again shows comparatively lower levels of support (58%), it nevertheless remains on the positive side of the balance. This consistency across both questions — impact on the EU and impact on one's own country — suggests that Portugal's accession is not only seen as beneficial in aggregate terms, but also as having generated tangible advantages at the national level.

These findings indicate that Portugal's accession is widely perceived as a success across Europe.

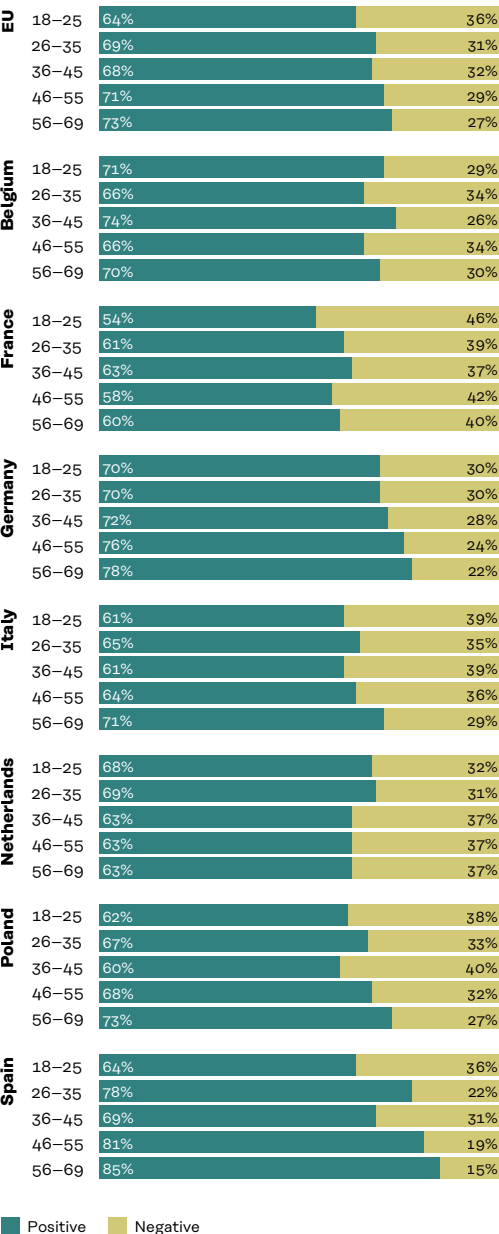
These findings indicate that Portugal's accession is widely perceived as a success across Europe. While it may not rank as the most positively evaluated enlargement when compared to earlier accession rounds, its effects are nevertheless perceived as clearly beneficial both for the EU as a whole and for individual member states by European citizens.

Introducing the age dimension provides additional insight into how Portugal's accession is evaluated across generations. At the EU level, positive assessments remain consistently high across all age groups, though a clear pattern emerges. Figures 7 and 8 show that older respondents tend to view Portugal's accession more favourably than younger ones. By comparison, these patterns are similar to those of Spain.

Figure 7 Effect of Portugal's Entry on the EU by Age Groups

Do you think that Portugal joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the EU?

Results by Age Groups



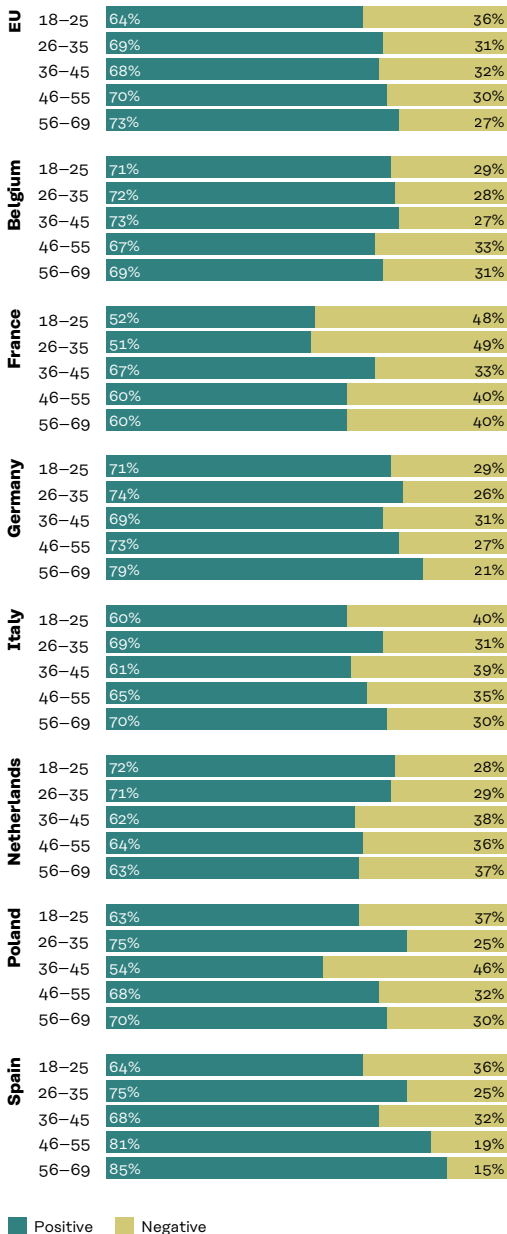
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Figure 8 Effect of Portugal's Entry on Your Country by Age Groups

Do you think that Portugal joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on your country?

Results by Age Groups



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Among respondents aged 18–25, 64% consider Portugal's accession to have had a positive impact on the EU, compared to 73% among those aged 56–69. A similar pattern can be observed when evaluating the impact on respondents' own countries, where support increases from 64% in the youngest cohort

to 73% in the oldest. This suggests that, while Portugal's accession is broadly recognised as successful across generations, older cohorts express this assessment more strongly.

This generational gradient is particularly visible in countries such as Germany and Spain. In Germany, positive evaluations rise from around 70% among younger respondents to 78% among the oldest cohort. In Spain, support increases even more markedly, reaching 85% among those aged 56–69. These patterns indicate that in countries with strong pro-European trajectories, older generations tend to express especially high levels of support.

By contrast, generational differences are less pronounced in coun-

[...] while Portugal's accession is broadly recognised as successful across generations, older cohorts express this assessment more strongly.

Younger respondents, by contrast, have grown up in an already enlarged European Union and may therefore take such developments for granted.

tries where overall evaluations are more ambivalent. In France, for example, support remains comparatively low across all age groups, ranging from 54% among younger respondents to around 60% among older cohorts.

This observed pattern of stronger support among older cohorts contrasts with the

generational dynamics often found in general attitudes toward European integration, where younger respondents tend to be more favourable. One possible explanation is that older generations are more likely to have experienced, either directly or indirectly, the transformative effects of earlier enlargement rounds, including the democratic consolidation and economic development associated with Portugal's accession. For these cohorts, enlargement may be more closely associated with tangible historical progress.

Younger respondents, by contrast, have grown up in an already enlarged European Union and may therefore take such developments for granted. As a result, their evaluations, while still clearly posi-

tive, tend to be less pronounced and more evenly balanced.

Overall, however, generational differences do not fundamentally alter the positive evaluation of Portugal's accession. Across all age groups, clear majorities view its impact favoura-

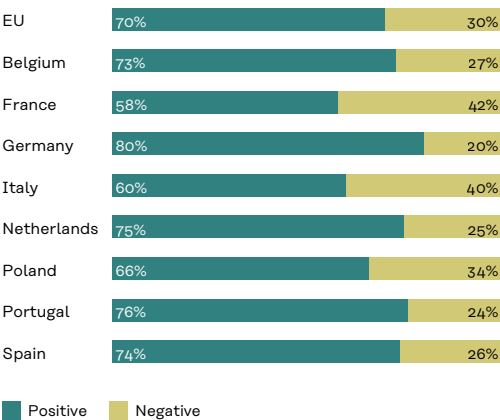
bly, reinforcing the conclusion that Portugal's membership is widely regarded as a successful case of EU enlargement throughout European society. Although not shown here, Spain exhibits a similar pattern.

EVALUATIONS OF OWN COUNTRY'S ACCESSION

We now turn to citizens' retrospective evaluations of their own country's accession to the European Union. This perspective provides important insight into how enlargement is judged not in abstract terms, but through concrete national experiences. Figure 9 reveals a consistently positive overall assessment, though with notable variation across countries and policy dimensions.

Figure 9 Effect of Own Country's Entry on EU

Do you think that your country joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the EU?



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Portugal exhibits particularly strong support, with 78% of respondents viewing EU membership as beneficial for democracy.

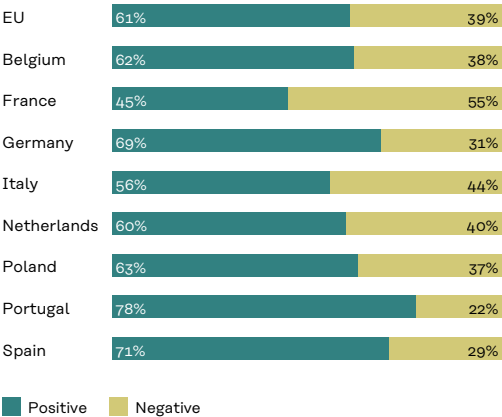
Across the European Union, a clear majority of respondents believe that their country's accession has had a positive impact on the EU. On average, 70% of respondents express this view, compared to 30% who see a negative impact. This suggests that enlargement is widely perceived as having strengthened the Union as a whole.

At the country level, positive evaluations dominate in all cases. Germany (80%), Portugal (76%), Spain (74%) and the Netherlands (75%) stand out as particularly positive, while France (58%) and Italy (60%) display comparatively more sceptical, but still net positive, assessments. Overall, these findings indicate that, despite ongoing political debates about the limits of enlargement, citizens broadly recognise that accession has had a positive effect on the EU.

When focusing on the impact of EU membership on democracy within countries, evaluations remain positive, though somewhat more differentiated (see Figure 10). At the EU level, 61% of respondents believe that accession has had a positive effect on democracy in their country, while 39% hold a negative view.

Figure 10 Effect of Own Country's Entry on Democracy

Do you think that your country joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on democracy in your country?



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Portugal exhibits particularly strong support, with 78% of respondents viewing EU membership as beneficial for democracy. Similarly high levels are observed in Spain (71%) and Germany (69%). These results are consistent with the historical role of EU accession in consolidating democratic institutions in Southern Europe.

By contrast, France represents a notable exception: a majority of respondents (55%) perceive a negative impact on democracy, making it the only country in the sample where negative evaluations outweigh positive ones. Italy (56% positive) and the Netherlands (60%) occupy more

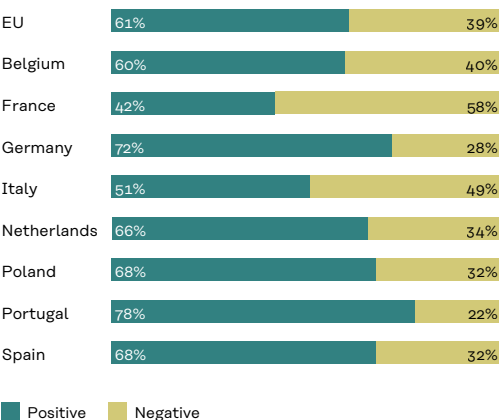
intermediate positions, suggesting a more ambivalent assessment.

These findings highlight that, while EU membership is widely associated with democratic benefits, this perception is not uniform across member states.

A similar pattern emerges concerning economic evaluations. Figure 11 shows that across the EU, 61% of respondents believe that accession has had a positive impact on their country's economy, while 39% hold a negative view.

Figure 11 Effect of Own Country's Entry on Economy

Do you think that your country joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the economy in your country?



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[...] economic benefits of EU membership are not perceived equally across member states and may be influenced by more recent economic developments.

Once again, Portugal stands out, with 78% of respondents reporting a positive economic impact. Strongly positive evaluations are also found in Germany (72%), Poland (68%) and Spain (68%), indicating widespread recognition of the economic benefits associated with EU membership.

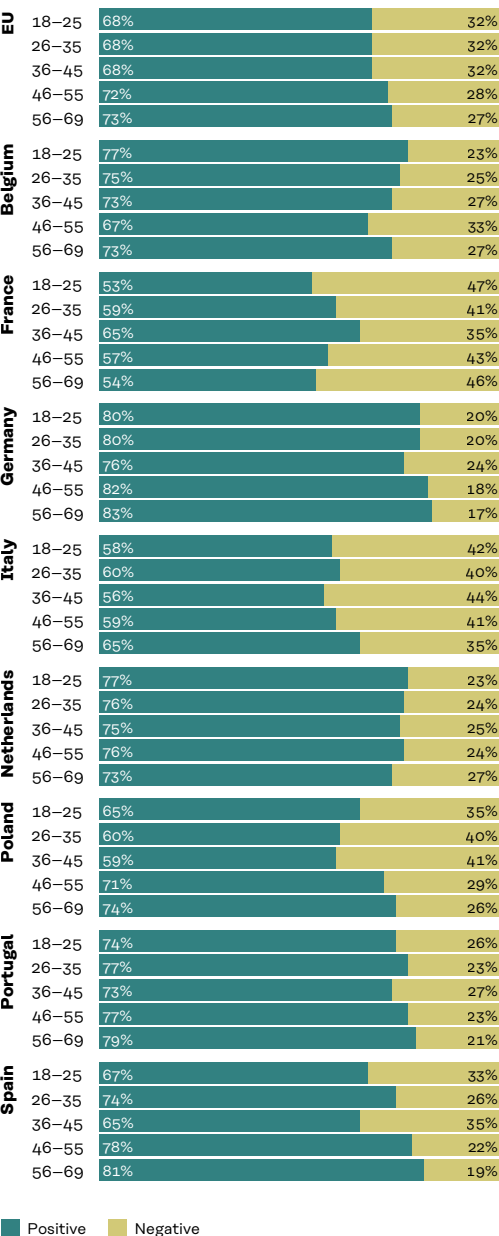
However, some countries present more contested economic evaluations. In France, a majority of respondents (58%) perceive a negative economic impact, while Italy (51% positive vs. 49% negative) shows an almost evenly divided public opinion. These patterns suggest that the economic benefits of EU membership are not perceived equally across member states and may be influenced by more recent economic developments.

Introducing the age dimension adds an important layer to these findings. Across all three dimensions — impact on the EU (Figure 12), on democracy (Figure 13) and on the economy (Figure 14) — evaluations remain broadly positive in every age group.

Figure 12 Effect of Own Country's Entry on the EU by Age Group

Do you think that your country joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the EU?

Results by Age Groups



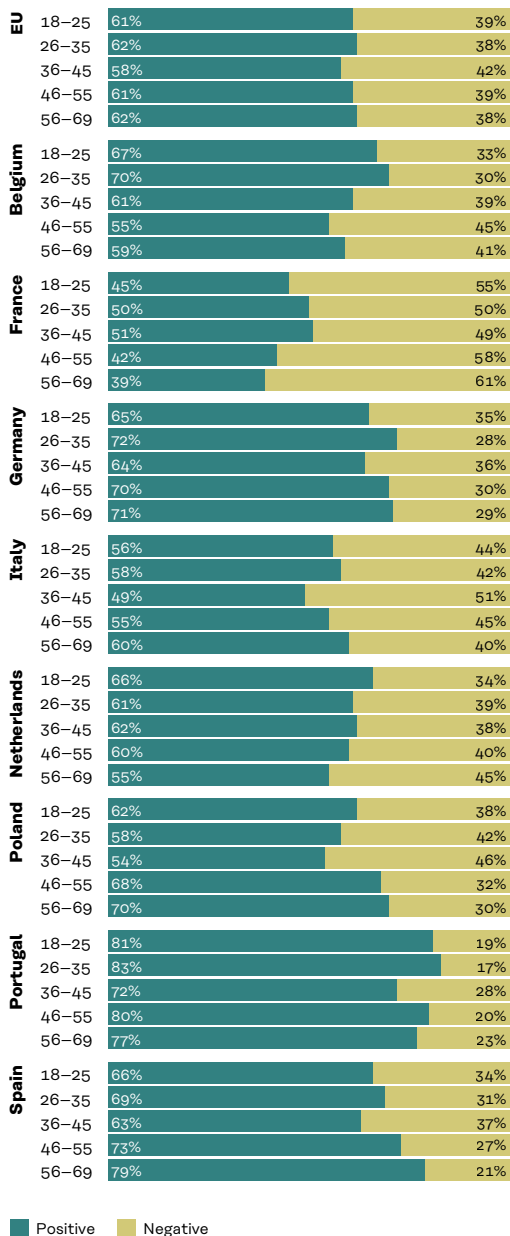
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Figure 13 Effect of Own Country's Entry on Democracy by Age Group

Do you think that your country joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on democracy in your country?

Results by Age Groups



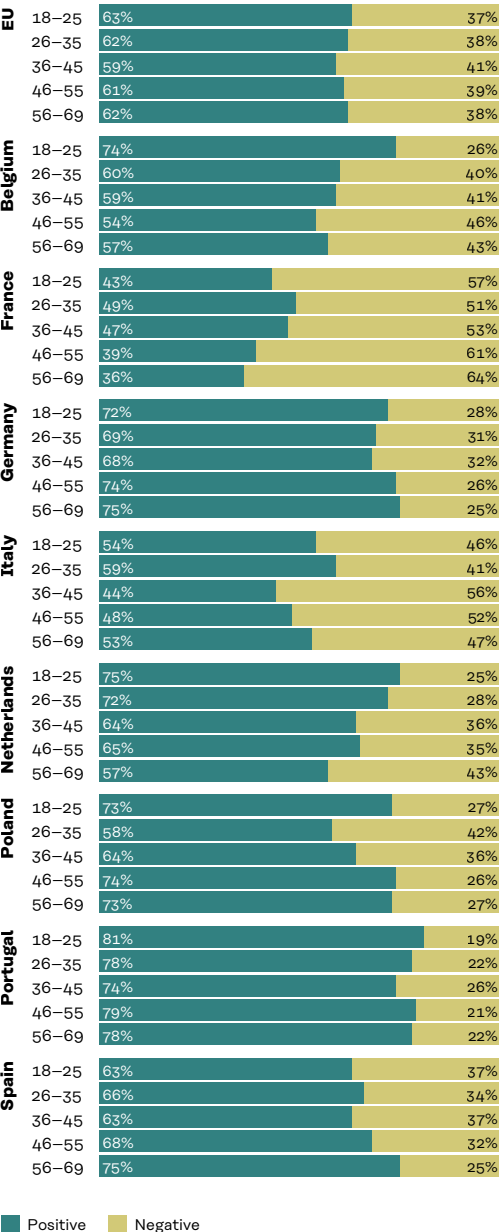
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Figure 14 Effect of Own Country's Entry on Economy by Age Group

Do you think that your country joining the EU has had a positive or negative impact on the economy in your country?

Results by Age Groups



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At the EU level, positive evaluations regarding the impact of EU accession increase from around 68% among younger respondents (18–25) to 73% among those aged 56–69. A similar gradient can be observed when respondents assess the impact on their own country, where support rises from approximately 64% in the youngest cohort to 66% in the oldest. While these differences are not large, they point to a gradual increase in positivity across age groups.

This pattern becomes more pronounced in country-level data. In Germany and Spain, for example, older respondents consistently report higher levels of support across all dimensions, particularly regarding the economic and political benefits of EU membership. In Spain, positive economic evaluations rise from 63% among the youngest respondents to 75% among the oldest, while in Germany support reaches up to 75% among older cohorts. Similarly, in Portugal itself, evaluations remain very high across all age groups, though slightly stronger among younger respondents in the economic dimension, indicating a broadly shared perception of success.

By contrast, in countries where overall evaluations are more ambivalent, such as France and Italy, generational differences tend to reinforce existing

scepticism rather than reverse it. In France, negative economic evaluations remain dominant across all age groups and, while younger respondents are somewhat less crit-

ical, no cohort expresses a clearly positive majority. This suggests that national context remains the primary driver of attitudes, with age playing a secondary, moderating role.

The finding that older cohorts tend to evaluate accession more positively contrasts with the patterns observed for general attitudes toward European integration, where younger generations are often more supportive. One possible explanation is that older respondents are more likely to recall, either directly or indirectly, the long-term benefits associated with accession, including economic convergence and democratic consolidation. For younger generations, these benefits may be taken for granted, resulting in slightly less pronounced, though still clearly positive evaluations.

Taken together, the results point to a broadly positive retrospective evaluation of EU accession across Europe.

Overall, generational differences again shape the intensity of support rather than its direction. Across age groups, clear majorities view their country's accession positively,

reinforcing the conclusion that EU enlargement is widely regarded as a successful historical process throughout European society. France remains the notable exception to these patterns, as enlargement is viewed there more sceptically than in the EU as a whole or in other countries.

Taken together, the results point to a broadly positive retrospective evaluation of EU accession across Europe. While the positive impact of EU accession as a whole is widely recognised, perceptions of its domestic impact, particularly on democracy and the economy, are more differentiated. Portugal stands out as a positively evaluated case across all dimensions, reinforcing the view that it is largely perceived as a success story of EU enlargement.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The empirical findings presented in this report provide an opportunity to revisit the theoretical expectations outlined at the beginning. Overall, the results highlight the importance of retrospective assessments and lived experience.

First, the findings support the expectation that enlargement is evaluated through a cost-benefit lens. The differentiated assessments across enlargement rounds suggest that citizens distinguish between cases depending on the perceived economic and institutional implications. Enlargements involving economically advanced and politically stable countries, such as those of 1973 and 1995, are more frequently viewed as successful, while later and more complex rounds receive more cautious evaluations. This pattern is consistent with material explanations of public opinion, which emphasise perceived economic gains and risks.

Second, the results underscore the role of political considerations. The

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relatively high share of respondents who do not identify any enlargement as clearly positive indicates that concerns about the EU's capacity to integrate new members remain salient. At the same time, the broadly positive evaluation of Portugal's accession suggests that enlarge-

ment is supported when it is associated with political stabilisation and institutional consolidation. In this sense, enlargement might not only be judged in terms of economic outcomes, but also by its contribution to the Union's democratic development and functioning.

Third, identity-related factors and broader attitudes toward European integration continue to shape perceptions of enlargement. Cross-country differences, such as the more sceptical views observed in France, indicate that national contexts and underlying orientations toward the EU influence how past enlargements are evaluated. Enlargement thus remains embedded

in broader debates about the direction and limits of European integration.

Most importantly, however, the findings highlight the central role of retrospective evaluations. Citizens do not assess enlargement in abstract terms, but seem to draw on concrete experiences and/or historically embedded narratives. The case of Portugal illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly: while its accession is not the most prominently celebrated enlargement, it is nevertheless consistently recognised as successful across countries and generations. This suggests that positive long-term outcomes, such as economic convergence and democratic consolidation, can foster lasting public support.

The generational patterns observed in the data further reinforce this interpretation. Older cohorts, who are more likely to have experienced

or internalised the transformative effects of earlier enlargement rounds, tend to evaluate accession more positively. Younger respondents, by contrast, are somewhat more open to enlargement in general, but express less pronounced evaluations of specific cases. This distinction points to an important difference between enlargement as a forward-looking political project and enlargement as a historically grounded experience.

Taken together, these findings suggest that public attitudes toward enlargement are not driven by a single factor, but emerge from the interaction of factors and experiences. Understanding this interplay is crucial for both interpreting current public opinion and anticipating how Europeans may respond to future enlargement initiatives.

CONCLUSION: A SUCCESSFUL ENLARGEMENT, BUT NOT THE MOST SALIENT ONE

Forty years after Portugal's accession to the European Communities, this report provides a clear answer to a central question: How do European citizens evaluate past enlargements, in particular the case of Portugal? The findings point to a broadly positive assessment, but also reveal important nuances that are relevant for current debates about the future of European integration.

First, attitudes toward enlargement in general remain cautiously positive. While earlier enlargement rounds, particularly those involving economically advanced countries, are more strongly associated with positive outcomes, the overall picture suggests that enlargement continues to enjoy a degree of public legitimacy. At the same time, the relatively high share of respondents who do not identify any enlargement as clearly positive indicates that support is not unconditional and remains a potential point of contention.

Second, Portugal's accession is widely perceived as a success across

Europe. A majority of European respondents regard its impact on both the European Union and their own countries as positive. This confirms the narrative of Portugal as a successful case of democratic consolidation and economic development within the EU. However, while recognised as successful, Portugal's accession alongside Spain in 1986 occupies a middle position rather than the top rank when compared to other enlargement rounds.

Third, generational patterns provide important insight into how these evaluations are formed. While younger respondents tend to be slightly more open to enlargement in general, older cohorts consistently express more positive assessments of concrete accession experiences, both in the case of Portugal and in evaluations of their own country's membership. This suggests that lived experience and historical perspective play a key role in shaping attitudes toward enlargement.

Taken together, these findings carry important implications for current enlargement debates. As the European Union considers further expansion to countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans, public opinion will play a crucial role in determining political feasibility. The case of Portugal demonstrates that enlargement can, over time, become widely recognised as beneficial. However, it also shows that such recognition may not translate into immediate or unconditional support for new rounds of expansion.

If enlargement is to remain a credible policy option, it will need to be framed not only in terms of strategic necessity, but also in terms of tangible benefits for both existing and future member states. The success of past enlargements, including Portugal's, provides a valuable reference point, but it does not automatically guarantee support for the future. Understanding how Europeans interpret these past experiences is therefore essential for shaping the next chapter of European integration.

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