Great opportunities for comparative research: the European Social Survey

Despite ever closer European integration, EU countries show persistent and remarkable differences in a variety of fields. The European Social Survey (ESS) covers a wide range of topics that tap into key challenges facing Europe today.

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The ESS studies a broad range of attitudes and behaviours in a changing Europe in a two-yearly sequence. Topics addressed in the main questionnaire of the ESS vary from moral opinions, health issues, trust and social capital to all kinds of aspects of a person’s socio-economic position and household circumstances. Other topics change from round to round, enabling the ESS to cover a wide thematic range and adapt to changing demands. The ESS is widely used by academics, researchers, politicians, policymakers and journalists interested in patterns in public opinions and behaviours which vary over time and across countries.

The ESS data, collected in more than 30 countries in six rounds since 2002, thus may be used to shed light on issues of comparability and/or differentiation. For instance, significant differences in political engagement and social attitudes persist between Eastern and Western Europe, underpinned by differences in history, culture, institutional and legal conditions. There is also evidence of a growing economic and political divide between Northern and Southern Europe, fuelled by different experiences with the Eurozone crisis.

Over the past decade, the ESS has become an authoritative source of reliable data about Europe’s evolving social, political and moral condition with high standards of rigour in cross-national research with respect to sampling, data collection, reduction of bias, and reliability of questions.

This article is based on the ESS report ‘Exploring public attitudes, informing public policy. Selected findings from the first five rounds’, 2013.