

What do people in Belgium really think?

Belgians, like many others, want more public services but aren't ready to pay more for them [says the OECD](#). That said, people in Belgium are more satisfied with public services than the international average, but less than Americans, despite having a much bigger social security system. What's going on?



Source: Shutterstock

Whether active or not, retired, students or entrepreneurs, what do people think of their situation? What difficulties do they encounter in their life, professionally or privately? These questions are incredibly important because, beyond numbers and indicators, the smooth functioning of an economy has to include qualitative aspects.

Surveys carried out by international institutions can help. Just think of the EU Commission's Eurobarometer, which captures people's feelings about European issues, or the ECB's survey of SME financing, which closely follows the difficulties faced by SME managers. The OECD recently published the [OECD "Risks that Matter" survey](#), which looks at the personal concerns of citizens. This survey is also an opportunity to assess citizens' satisfaction with their country's policies and evaluate new ideas too.

The latest [Risks that Matter survey](#) leaves me with mixed feelings about the average citizen. In a

caricatural way, they moan, aren't happy, want more public services, but without paying more.

More precisely, the most mentioned fears among the 21 countries surveyed are associated to falling ill, becoming disabled (including the younger generation), making ends meet at the end of the month, and having enough money when they retire. And Belgians are no different.

Given these fears, the majority of people (60% in Belgium) would like the government to do more to ensure better economic and social security. Moreover, only a small minority of respondents (20% across OECD countries, 30% in Belgium) consider they can easily access public benefits from the government if required.

Not many people think they receive the benefits they should, given the amount of tax they pay. Also, nearly two-thirds of respondents on average - 59% in Belgium consider other people receive benefits undeservedly. And unsurprisingly, nearly 70% of respondents (both in Belgium and the OECD average) favour taxing the affluent more to support the poor but the survey doesn't stipulate the level one considers rich.

The survey also focuses on the quality and accessibility of public services and Belgians seem relatively more satisfied than the international average, probably due to a highly developed redistributive system and a rather large social security system. Education and childcare are exceptions, as Belgians score close to the international average, even though in the same areas, Belgium ranks at the top for public expenditure incurred.

It seems, Americans receive relatively little public support, but they're rather satisfied with it

Interestingly, given the weakness of public intervention in the United States and the fact that the US economy generates significant inequalities, one might think the survey results would reflect many fears and a low degree of satisfaction in that country. However, in contrast to what I expected, the US performs better than Belgium in six of the seven categories of public services offered - healthcare being the only exception and it even consistently scores above the OECD average.

The OECD Risks That Matter Survey 2018

So it seems, Americans receive relatively little public support, but they're rather satisfied with it. This result doesn't really correspond with intuition. How can the French or the Belgians, who devote a huge amount of resources - as a percentage of their GDP to redistribution and public aid, have lower satisfaction levels in comparison to Americans. It seems the quantity of services received isn't the only criterion of satisfaction. So public support seems not only to be a question of benefits but much more a cost-benefit dilemma. As proof, Norway and Denmark are the only two countries to perform better than the US when it comes to the issue of receiving the benefits they should, given the taxes people pay.

But the cost-benefit analysis isn't probably enough to explain the surprise yet positive US

results. Patriotism, which leads to less criticism of its administration, can also play a role. Conversely, maybe in some countries benefiting from a large social security system, people aren't really aware of what the government does for them. They think they pay too much in taxes and receive too little support while their administration is (in terms of spending) already spending the most it can.

This illustrates the advantage of international surveys: you can learn more about a country, but also critically analyse the results by comparing them to other countries.

[For Belgian country highlights, click here](#)

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