

FOR RELEASE DECEMBER 5, 2017

Worldwide, People Divided on Whether Life Today Is Better Than in the Past

*Current economic conditions a key
factor in assessing progress*

BY *Jacob Poushter*

FOR MEDIA OR OTHER INQUIRIES:

Jacob Poushter, Senior Researcher
Rhonda Stewart, Senior Communications Manager

202.419.4372

www.pewresearch.org

About Pew Research Center

Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It does not take policy positions. The Center conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research. It studies U.S. politics and policy; journalism and media; internet, science and technology; religion and public life; Hispanic trends; global attitudes and trends; and U.S. social and demographic trends. All of the center's reports are available at www.pewresearch.org. Pew Research Center is a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts, its primary funder.

© Pew Research Center 2017

Worldwide, People Divided on Whether Life Today Is Better Than in the Past

Current economic conditions a key factor in assessing progress

Fifty years ago, the world was a very different place. The United States and its allies were locked in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, personal computers and mobile phones were the stuff of science fiction, and much of the world's population had yet to experience substantial improvements in [life expectancy](#) and [material well-being](#).

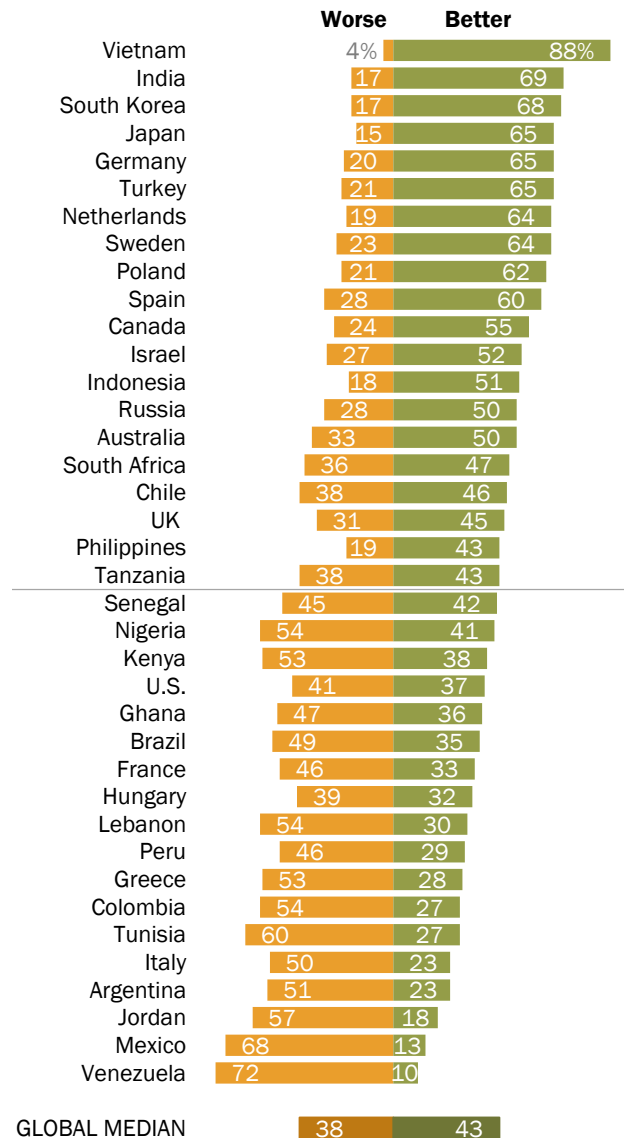
Numerous countries found themselves at important crossroads – whether it was military conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors, civil rights and war protests in the U.S., or Soviet tanks crushing Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring.

How far do people around the globe think they and others like them have come, compared with 50 years ago? Pew Research Center put that question to nearly 43,000 people in 38 countries around the globe this past spring.

At a country level, some of the most positive assessments of progress over the past 50 years are found in Vietnam (88% say life is better today), India (69%) and South Korea (68%) – all societies that have seen dramatic economic transformations since the late 1960s, not to mention the end of armed conflict in the case of Vietnam. A majority in Turkey (65% better) also share a sense of progress over the past five decades. In some of the more developed countries, publics also report that life is better today, including 65% in Japan and Germany, and 64% in the Netherlands and Sweden.

Globally, assessments vary on whether life is better or worse than 50 years ago

Life in our country today is ___ than it was 50 years ago for people like me



Note: "About the same" responses not shown.

Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q3. U.S. survey conducted June 27-July 9, 2017.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

But not everyone is convinced that life today is an improvement over the past. [Americans are split on this issue](#): 41% say life is worse while 37% say better. Meanwhile, half or more in countries ranging from Italy (50%) and Greece (53%) to Nigeria (54%) and Kenya (53%) to Venezuela (72%) and Mexico (68%) say life is worse today.

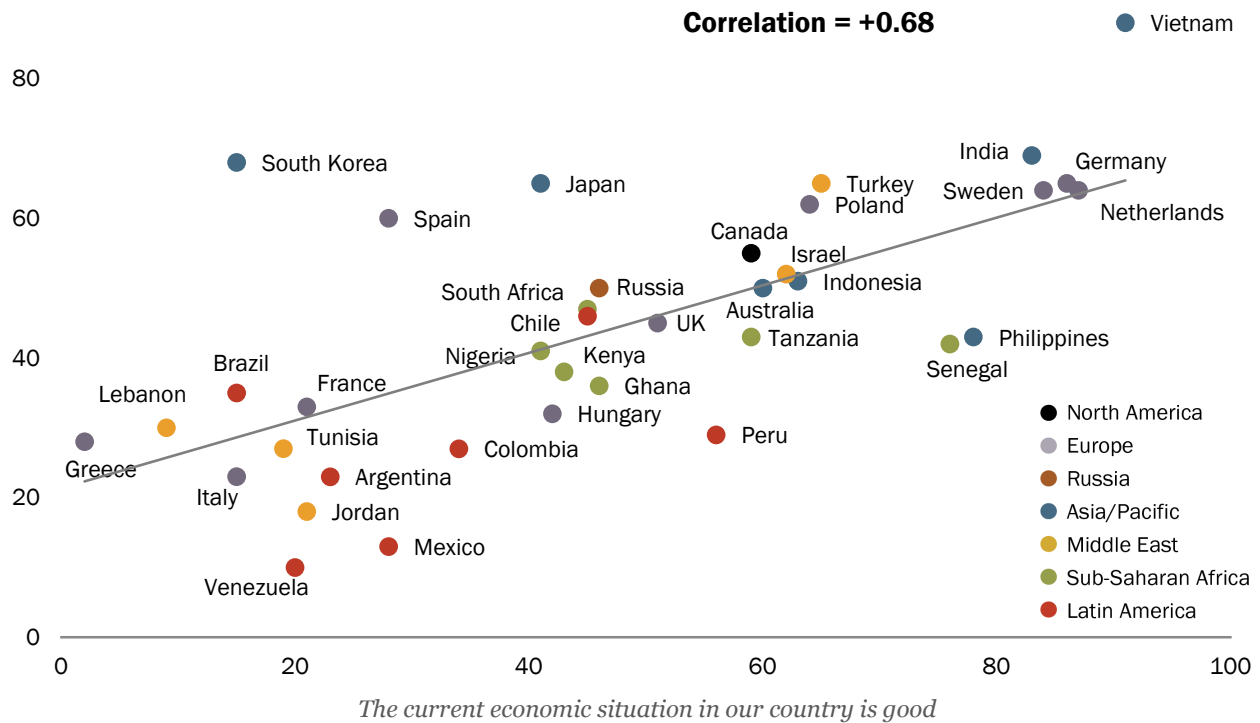
Events unique to the history of individual countries cannot be ignored when considering why publics are more positive or negative about how the present compares with 50 years ago. However, our analysis also indicates that views of the current economy are a strong indicator of whether people say life for people like them is better today than it was 50 years ago, even when controlling for the demographic factors of income, education, gender and age. Indeed, across the countries analyzed, people with positive views of the current economy are 30 percentage points more likely than those with negative views to say life has improved for people like them.¹

¹ Ghana and Italy excluded due to insufficient sample size on reported income. U.S. excluded because questions were administered on separate Pew Research Center surveys.

In general, countries that are more upbeat about their national economy are more likely to say life today is better compared with the past. For example, in Vietnam, where 91% say economic conditions are good, a corresponding 88% say life is better for people like them compared with 50 years ago. And in Venezuela, where only 20% say conditions are good, 10% say life is better for people like them. Overall, the correlation between economic assessments and views of the past is quite strong (+0.68).

In countries where the current economic mood is positive, people are much more likely to say life is better than it was a half-century ago

Life in our country today is better than it was 50 years ago for people like me
100 %



Note: U.S. excluded because questions were administered on separate Pew Research Center surveys.
Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q3 & Q5.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

These are among the major findings of a Pew Research Center survey conducted among 40,448 respondents in 37 countries from Feb. 16 to May 8, 2017. A separate survey in the U.S. was conducted June 27-July 9, 2017, among 2,505 respondents.

Regional variations in assessments of present vs. past

Latin Americans stand out for their widespread negative assessment of progress over the past half-century. Venezuelans and Mexicans (72% and 68% life is worse) are the most downbeat, but nowhere in the region do more than half say life has improved for people like themselves.

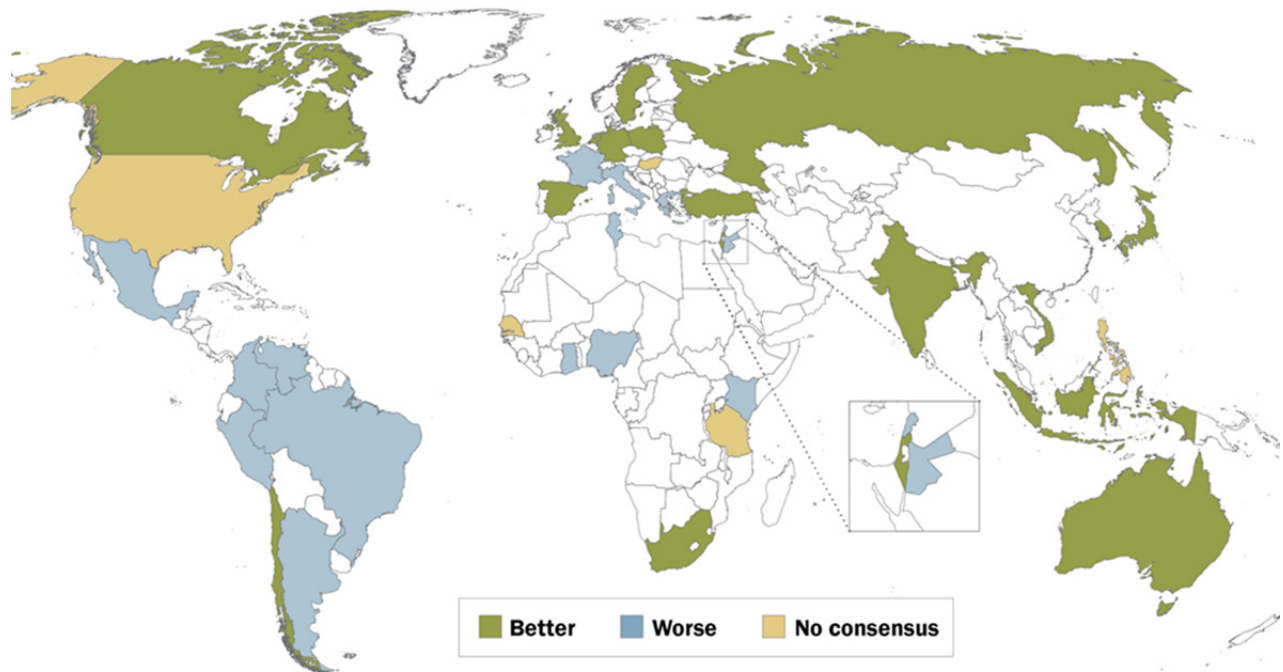
Across the Middle East and North Africa, views of life today compared with 50 years ago vary substantially by country. Turkey reports the most progress in the region, with 65% saying life is better, followed by Israel, where 52% say the same about their country. Tunisians, Jordanians and Lebanese tend to say life has gotten worse for people like them, with Tunisians expressing the most widespread negativity (60%).

In sub-Saharan Africa, comparative assessments of present and past are more evenly divided. A median of 46% say life today is worse than five decades ago, compared with 42% who think life is better. Positive ratings of progress range from 47% “better” in South Africa to 36% in Ghana.

Nigeria and Kenya are the only countries surveyed in the region where more than half say life is worse (54% and 53%, respectively).

Where people think life is better or worse than 50 years ago

Life in our country today is ___ than it was 50 years ago for people like me



Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q3. U.S. survey conducted June 27-July 9, 2017.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Europeans tend to see the past half-century as a period of progress. A regional median of 53% describes life as better today, compared with 30% who take the opposite view. Upbeat assessments are most common in Germany (65% better), the Netherlands (64%), Sweden (64%), Poland (62%) and Spain (60%). Greeks (53% worse) and Italians (50%) are the least convinced that life is better than 50 years ago.

The Asia-Pacific region is home to some of the most favorable assessments of progress. Vietnam (88% better) stands out, but views of life today vs. the past are also quite rosy in India (69%), South Korea (68%) and Japan (65%). Filipinos are the least sanguine about progress, with fewer than half (43%) saying life is better.

In North America, Canadians widely report progress over the past five decades (55%) while fewer Americans (37%) say the same about life in their country. In the U.S., [Republicans are more likely to say life is better today](#), compared with Democrats – an attitudinal shift in the wake of Donald Trump’s election as president in November 2016.

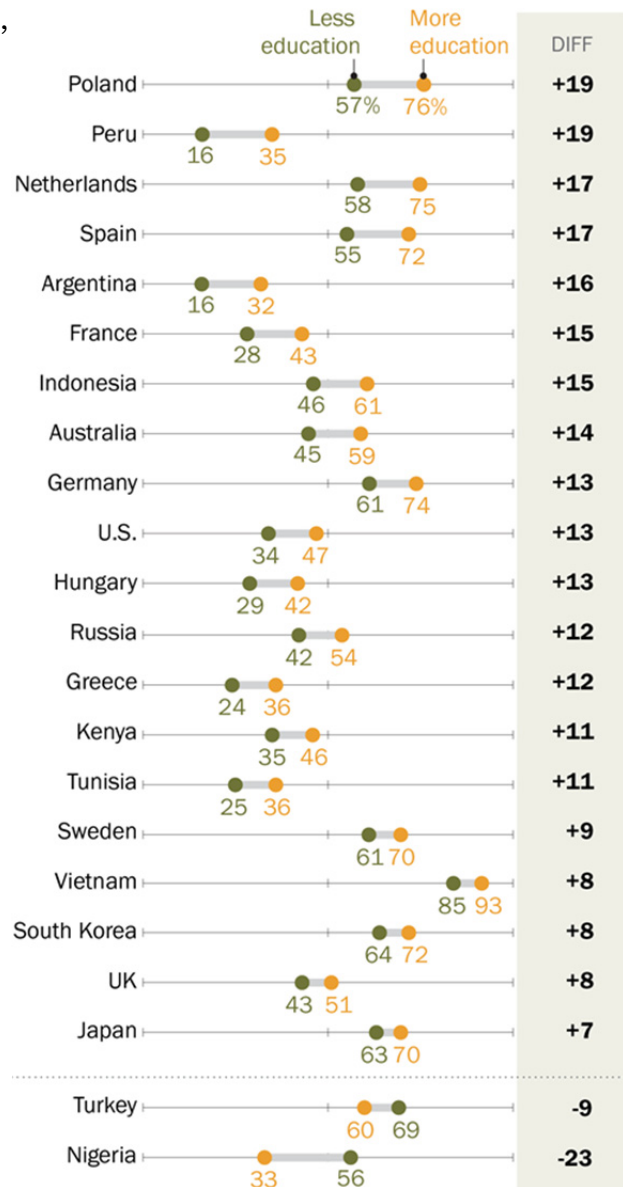
The more educated are more likely to say life is better

In more than half the countries polled, people with more education say that, for people like them, life is better than it was a half-century ago. The educational divide on whether life is better is greatest in Poland and Peru (both 19 percentage points). But it is also apparent in many European and Asian nations, as well as the U.S.²

The reverse pattern, with less educated more optimistic about life today, is seen in just two countries: Nigeria (by 23 points) and Turkey (9 points).

In many countries, the more educated say life today is better

Life in our country today is better than it was 50 years ago for people like me



Note: All differences shown are statistically significant.
Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q3. U.S. survey conducted June 27-July 9, 2017.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

² For the purpose of comparing education groups across countries, we standardize education levels based on the United Nations' International Standard Classification of Education. The lower education category is below secondary education and the higher category is secondary or above in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia, Turkey, Venezuela and Vietnam. The lower education category is secondary education or below and the higher category is postsecondary or above in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Poland, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, UK and U.S.

While age is not as large a dividing line on whether life is better today, there are some interesting patterns by age across a select group of countries. For example, in the United Kingdom, 66% of those ages 18 to 29 say life is better today, compared with 41% who say this among Brits 50 and older (some of whom might remember what life was actually like back then).

Age differences also appear in Australia, Sweden, the U.S. and Germany among advanced economies, and in South Africa, Ghana and Peru among emerging economies.

There is a reverse pattern on age in South Korea, where 73% among those 50 and older say life is better now compared with 59% who say this among 18- to 29-year-olds. This pattern is also found in Senegal and Venezuela.

In several countries, youth more positive on life in the modern day

Life in our country today is better than it was 50 years ago for people like me

	18-29	30-49	50+	Youngest-oldest diff
UK	66	39	41	+25
Australia	63	55	41	+22
Sweden	79	63	60	+19
U.S.	51	37	32	+19
South Africa	55	46	39	+16
Ghana	41	37	27	+14
Peru	37	26	25	+12
Germany	75	61	64	+11
Venezuela	6	10	13	-7
Senegal	37	44	48	-11
South Korea	59	67	73	-14

Note: All differences shown are statistically significant.
Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q3. U.S. survey conducted June 27-July 9, 2017.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Divisions within countries point to perceived gains and losses

In some countries polled, views about who has gained and lost over the past half-century divide sharply along religious or ethnic lines.

In Turkey, 79% of Muslims who observe the five daily prayers (*salah*) that are required under Islam say life is better for people like them compared with 50 years ago. In contrast, only about half (49%) of Turkish Muslims who pray seldom or never at all see the same progress. These divergent views may in part reflect differences in opinion about President Recep Erdogan and his religiously conservative AKP party.

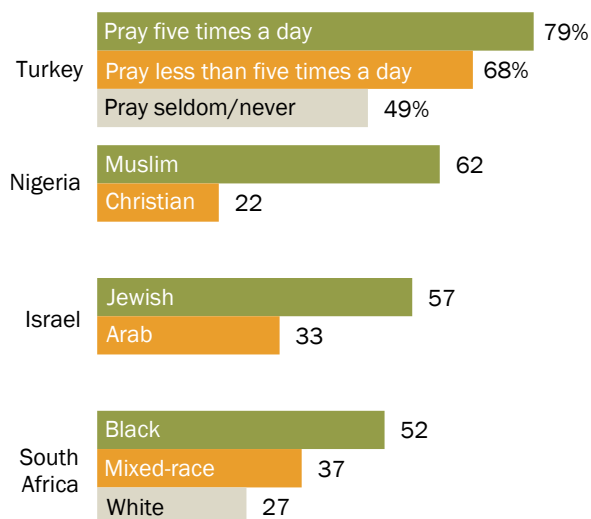
In Nigeria – home to both Muslims and Christians, but now governed by an elected Muslim leader – Muslims are much more enthusiastic about their country’s progress. Nearly three times as many Nigerian Muslims as Christians (62% vs. 22%) say life is better today compared with 50 years ago.

In Israel, 50 years after the Jewish State was victorious in the Six-Day War against a coalition of Arab nations, Israeli Jews are far more convinced than Israeli Arabs that life today is better for people like them. Nearly six-in-ten Jews in Israel say life has improved, compared with only a third of Israeli Arabs who see similar progress.

And in South Africa, there is a sharp racial divide on social progress: Blacks in the country, who a half-century ago were oppressed via the apartheid system, are much more likely to say life is better today for people like them (52%), compared with mixed-race (or “coloured”) and white South Africans (37% and 27%, respectively).

Views on whether life is better today divided by ethnicity and religion in some countries

Life in our country today is better than it was 50 years ago for people like me



Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q3.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

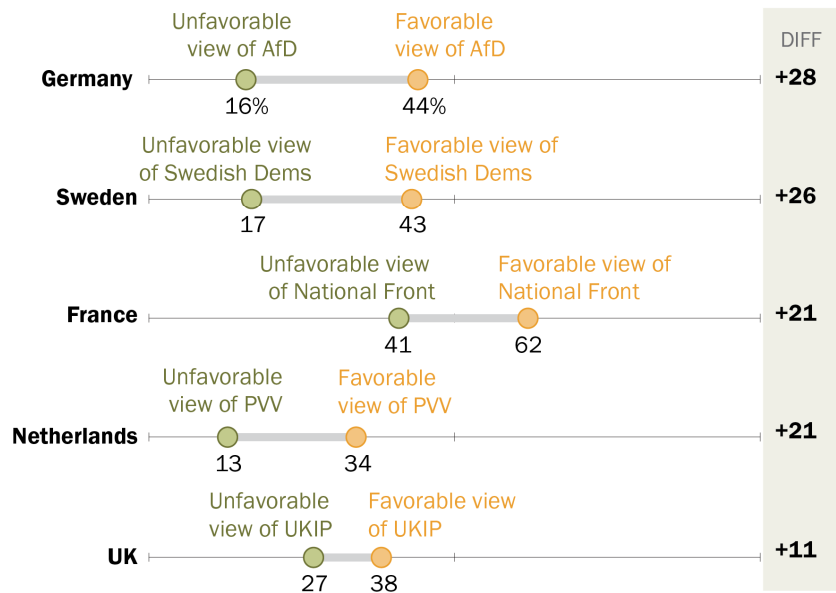
Political divides on life today in Europe

Populism is often associated with nostalgia for an idealized past. In the case of Europe, at least, our survey findings confirm that populists tend to be more enamored of the past than people who look askance at some of the continent's right-wing populist parties.

For example, Germans who support the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) are 28 percentage points more likely to say that life is worse off for people like them than those who have an unfavorable view of the anti-immigrant party. This pattern also holds in Sweden among supporters of the Swedish Democrats, in France among those with a favorable view of National Front, in the Netherlands among PVV supporters and in the UK among fans of the UK Independence Party (UKIP).

Those who view populist parties favorably in Europe more likely to say life is worse now

Life in our country today is worse than it was 50 years ago for people like me



Note: All differences shown are statistically significant.
Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q3.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Acknowledgments

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals.

Jacob Poushter, *Senior Researcher*

James Bell, *Vice President, Global Strategy*

Caldwell Bishop, *Research Associate*

Hanyu Chwe, *Research Assistant*

Stefan Cornibert, *Communications Manager*

Danielle Cuddington, *Research Analyst*

Claudia Deane, *Vice President, Research*

Janell Fetterolf, *Research Associate*

Courtney Johnson, *Research Associate*

Michael Keegan, *Information Graphics Designer*

David Kent, *Copy Editor*

Dorothy Manevich, *Research Analyst*

Martha McRoy, *Research Methodologist*

Patrick Moynihan, *Associate Director, International Research Methods*

Courtney Nelson, *Research Assistant*

Audrey Powers, *Administrative Manager*

Ariana Rodriguez-Gitler, *Digital Producer*

Steve Schwarzer, *Senior Research Methodologist*

Laura Silver, *Senior Researcher*

Katie Simmons, *Associate Director, Research*

Rhonda Stewart, *Senior Communications Manager*

Bruce Stokes, *Director, Global Economic Attitudes*

Kyle Taylor, *Research Assistant*

Richard Wike, *Director, Global Attitudes Research*

Margaret Vice, *Senior Researcher*

Methodology

About the Pew Research Center's Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey

Results for the survey are based on telephone and face-to-face interviews conducted under the direction of D3 Systems, Inc., ORB International, Princeton Survey Research Associates International, Kantar Public UK and Voices! Research & Consultancy. The results are based on national samples, unless otherwise noted. More details about our international survey methodology and country-specific sample designs are [available here](#).

[Detailed information on survey methods for this report](#)

[General information on international survey research](#)

Topline Questionnaire

Pew Research Center
Spring 2017 Survey
December 5, 2017 Release

Methodological notes:

- Survey results are based on national samples. For further details on sample designs, see Methodology section and our [international survey methods database](#).
- Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100%. The topline “total” columns show 100%, because they are based on unrounded numbers.
- Not all questions included in the Spring 2017 survey are presented in this topline. Omitted questions have either been previously released or will be released in future reports.

		Q3. In general, would you say life in (survey country) today is better, worse, or about the same as it was fifty years ago for people like you?				
		Better	Worse	About the same	DK/Refused	Total
Canada	Spring, 2017	55	24	16	5	100
France	Spring, 2017	33	46	19	2	100
Germany	Spring, 2017	65	20	11	4	100
Greece	Spring, 2017	28	53	17	3	100
Hungary	Spring, 2017	32	39	24	4	100
Italy	Spring, 2017	23	50	23	4	100
Netherlands	Spring, 2017	64	19	14	3	100
Poland	Spring, 2017	62	21	10	7	100
Spain	Spring, 2017	60	28	7	4	100
Sweden	Spring, 2017	64	23	10	2	100
United Kingdom	Spring, 2017	45	31	16	8	100
Russia	Spring, 2017	50	28	18	5	100
Australia	Spring, 2017	50	33	12	5	100
India	Spring, 2017	69	17	7	7	100
Indonesia	Spring, 2017	51	18	30	1	100
Japan	Spring, 2017	65	15	15	4	100
Philippines	Spring, 2017	43	19	37	2	100
South Korea	Spring, 2017	68	17	13	2	100
Vietnam	Spring, 2017	88	4	8	0	100
Israel	Spring, 2017	52	27	19	2	100
Jordan	Spring, 2017	18	57	23	2	100
Lebanon	Spring, 2017	30	54	15	1	100
Tunisia	Spring, 2017	27	60	11	1	100
Turkey	Spring, 2017	65	21	11	3	100
Ghana	Spring, 2017	36	47	15	2	100
Kenya	Spring, 2017	38	53	8	0	100
Nigeria	Spring, 2017	41	54	5	0	100
Senegal	Spring, 2017	42	45	13	1	100
South Africa	Spring, 2017	47	36	15	1	100
Tanzania	Spring, 2017	43	38	18	1	100
Argentina	Spring, 2017	23	51	21	5	100
Brazil	Spring, 2017	35	49	12	4	100
Chile	Spring, 2017	46	38	14	2	100
Colombia	Spring, 2017	27	54	17	2	100
Mexico	Spring, 2017	13	68	17	2	100
Peru	Spring, 2017	29	46	22	2	100
Venezuela	Spring, 2017	10	72	14	5	100