Public attitudes towards ocean protection and fishing practices in the EU

Prepared for **OCEANA** · **SEAS AT RISK**

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1. Background & research design

Background

Sapience is a Brussels-based independent research and consultancy agency and spin-off of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), specialising in psychological and behavioural research. The Sapience team has extensive expertise in employing various research methods to understand, predict, and influence human behaviour.

In February 2024, Sapience was commissioned by Oceana and Seas at Risk to carry out EU-wide research to gather quantitative information concerning the **public attitudes towards ocean protection and fishing practices** in the EU.

Objectives

The present research aims to investigate public opinion regarding the importance of protecting the oceans and marine ecosystems, as well as the public perception of **Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)** and fishing practices. Specifically, the current study explores four main research questions:

1 Do **EU citizens care about the ocean**, have a strong relationship with it, and are concerned about its health?

2 Do they agree that marine protection and **MPAs are helpful and necessary tools** to safeguard the ocean, along with marine life and habitats?

3 Do they believe that, to offer this protection, **bottom trawling should not be allowed** inside MPAs?

4 Do they believe that the **EU political leaders should prioritize** addressing ocean issues as part of their mandate?

Research design & sample

To address the research questions, an **online survey** lasting approximately 6 minutes was developed. It garnered responses from a total of 7 013 participants across 7 selected countries. The survey was conducted from April 18th to April 25th, 2024.

To ensure **statistical reliability and representativeness**, a minimum of 1,000 respondents per country were included. Data were weighted within each country to achieve national representation across age, gender, and region.

This report will present the **findings from all surveyed countries**. A comprehensive breakdown of the overall sample provided in the appendix.
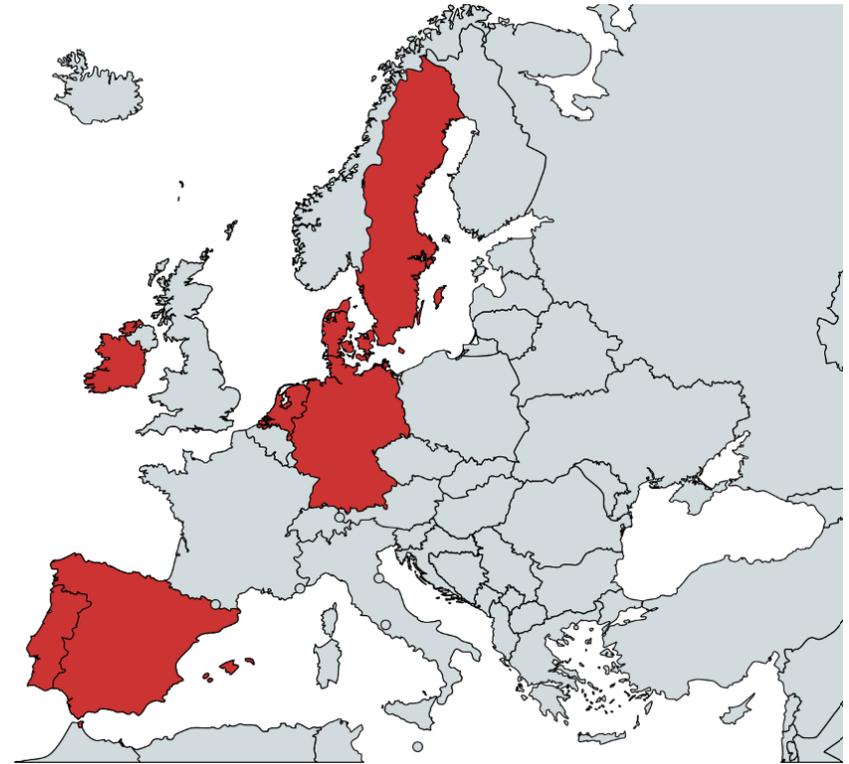
The 7 countries included: Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Netherlands, Spain, Portugal & Germany

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of the following **topics**:

- Background
- Perceived importance and knowledge of MPAs
- Awareness & knowledge of bottom trawling
- Opinion on MPAs and bottom trawling
- Drivers and barriers
- Sociodemographics & profiling

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2. Results

Key insights

90% believe MPAs are essential for preserving marine biodiversity

9 out of 10 citizens in the EU think protecting ocean and marine ecosystems is very important
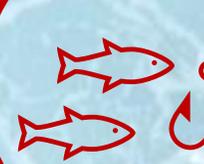
73% would support a ban on bottom trawling in MPAs

86% expect political leaders to give higher priority to the protection of marine biodiversity

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2.1 Perceived importance of the ocean & marine ecosystems

Why do citizens believe it is **important to protect the ocean** and the marine ecosystems?

"Q: How important, or otherwise, do you believe it is to protect the ocean and the marine ecosystems in the following ways?"

Top 2
Top 2
% essential/important

Category	Essential	Important	Top 2
Protecting (endangered) species of wildlife	70%	27%	97%
Minimizing pollution, including marine litter	62%	34%	96%
Protecting ocean habitats	60%	36%	96%
Reducing illegal and unregulated fishing	55%	39%	94%
Stopping overfishing	48%	45%	93%
Reducing offshore drilling that accelerates the climate crisis	46%	42%	88%

■ Essential ■ Important ■ Not very important ■ Not important at all ■ Don't know

Base: total sample (n=7 013)

2.2 Public perception of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

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How much do citizens know about Marine Protected Areas?

"Q: Have you already heard of Marine Protected Areas?"

No

17%

Yes, I know what they are

33%

Yes, but only by name

50%
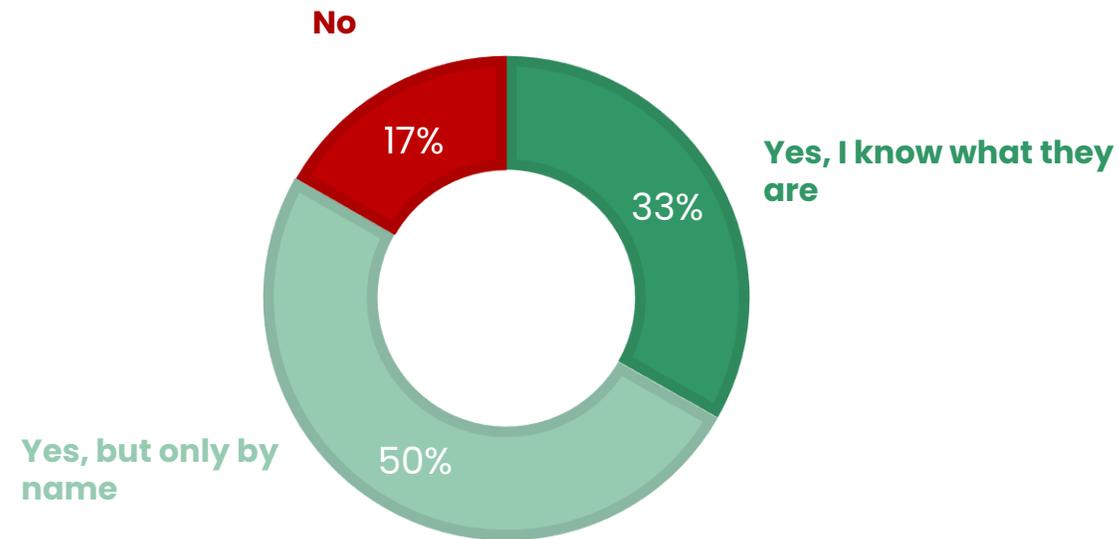
How much do citizens know about Marine Protected Areas?

"Q: Below you can find some arguments for and against Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). In each case, please indicate whether you have heard this information or not."

Statement	%
MPAs help preserve marine habitats such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, and sandbanks.	66%
MPAs protect endangered species and biodiversity from overfishing and pollution.	65%
MPAs help fish and other marine species to grow and reproduce without being disturbed by human activities.	64%
MPAs protect the marine ecosystem from climate change impacts such as rising sea temperatures, and storms and extreme weather events.	49%
MPAs must be well managed - with sufficient funding and enforcement capacity - to deliver both ecological benefits to marine biodiversity, and social and economic ones.	48%
MPAs contribute to ecotourism and local economies by allowing recreational and educational activities, such as snorkeling, diving, and wildlife watching.	44%
MPAs close areas off to fisheries and have negative impacts on food security and the price of fish in the market.	40%
MPAs prevent the development of offshore energy, like windfarms, from achieving climate objectives.	35%

Base: total sample (n=7 013)

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How necessary to the citizens believe MPAs are to conserve marine biodiversity?

"Q: How necessary do you think Marine Protected Areas are to conserve marine biodiversity?" *

Top 2
% very/somewhat
necessary

90%

| 63% | 27% | 5% | 1% | 3% |

- ■ Very necessary
- ■ Somewhat necessary
- ■ Somewhat unnecessary
- ■ Not necessary at all
- ■ Don't know

*

Respondents who answered 'No' to Q: "Have you already heard of Marine Protected Areas? Were given specific information about Marine Protected Areas.

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How necessary do the citizens in different countries believe MPAs are to conserve marine biodiversity?

"Q: How necessary do you think Marine Protected Areas are to conserve marine biodiversity?"

Legend:
- Very necessary
- Somewhat necessary
- Somewhat unnecessary
- Not necessary at all
- Don't know

Portugal
Top 2
96% ▲

Spain
Top 2
94% ▲

Ireland
Top 2
91% ▲

Germany
Top 2
91% ▲

Sweden
Top 2
89% ▽

Denmark
Top 2
86% ▽

Netherlands
Top 2
85% ▽

▲/▽ Above/below average

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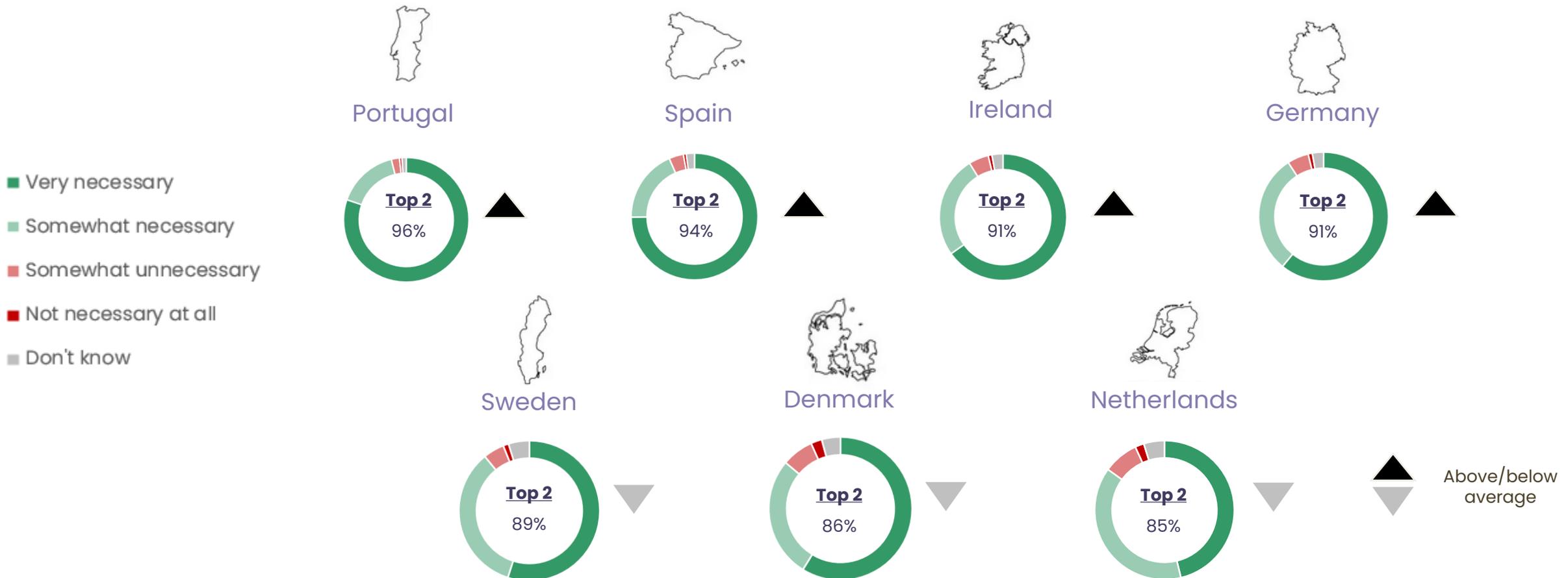
2.3. Public opinion on bottom trawling

How much do citizens know about bottom trawling?

"Q: How familiar are you with the fishing practice known as bottom trawling?"

I'm not familiar with it

29%

30% **I know what it is**

41%

I know it by name, but know little about it
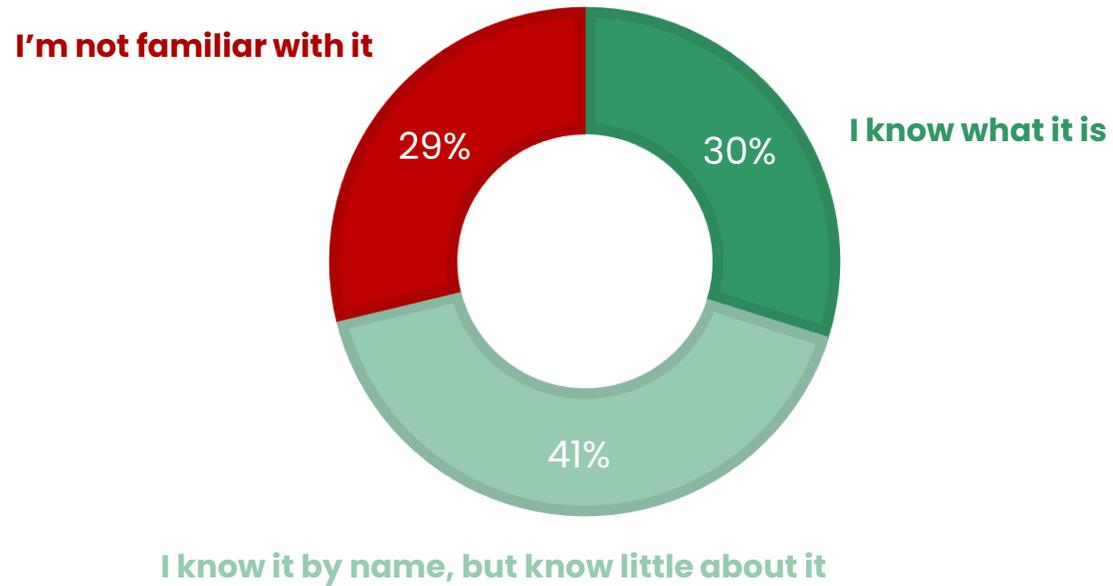
How much do citizens know about **bottom trawling?**

"Q: Below you can find some arguments for and against bottom trawling. In each case, please indicate whether you have heard this information or not."

| Argument	%
Bottom trawling affects the marine ecosystem balance by disturbing the seabed and removing large amounts of fish.	78%
Bottom trawling damages marine habitats like coral reefs and seagrass beds.	76%
Bottom trawling accidentally catches large amounts of dolphins, sharks, sea turtles and other "unwanted" fish that are then discarded.	73%
Bottom trawling is highly effective at catching fish and results in higher profits and financial gains in the short term.	71%
In the long term, bottom trawling can accelerate overfishing, reduce catches, and increase costs for fishers.	69%
Bottom trawling competes with artisanal fisheries that use low-impact fishing equipment to catch high-quality fish, as they share the same fishing grounds.	64%
Compared to other fishing methods, bottom trawling contributes more to climate change because it uses large amounts of fuel and releases carbon stored in the seabed.	54%
Bottom trawling supplies affordable seafood to the markets and contributes to food security.	50%

Base: heard of/know what bottom trawling is (n=4 995)

Are citizens concerned about the **impact of bottom trawling?**

"Q: How concerned are you about the environmental impact of bottom trawling on marine ecosystems?" *

Top 2
% very/moderately
concerned

39%	35%	22%	3%

74%

■ Very concerned　■ Moderately concerned　■ Somewhat concerned　■ Not concerned at all

*
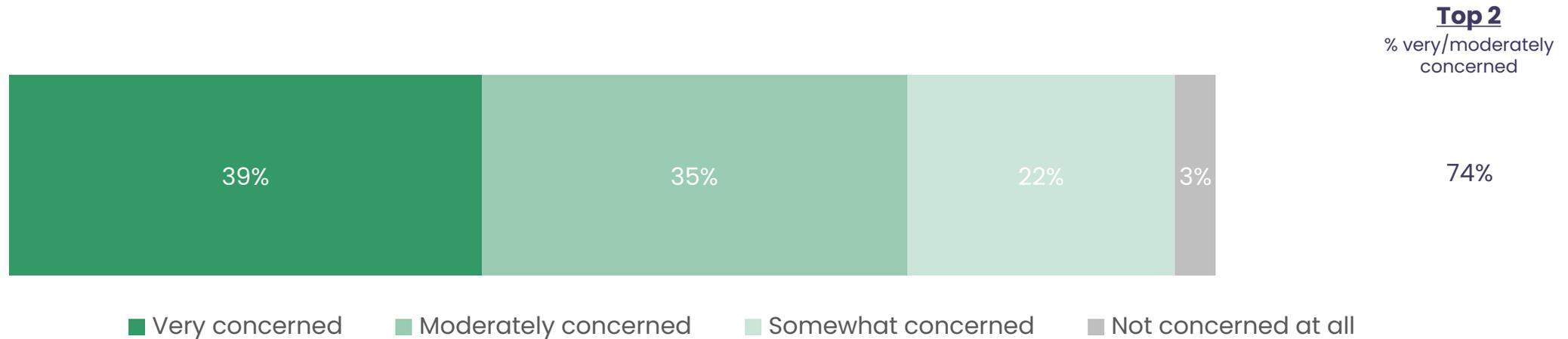
Respondents who answered 'No' to "Q: How familiar are you with the fishing practice known as bottom trawling?" were given specific information about bottom trawling.

Base: total sample (n=7 013)

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Which citizens oppose or support bottom trawling?

"Q: Which of the following best describes your opinion on bottom trawling as a fishing practice?"
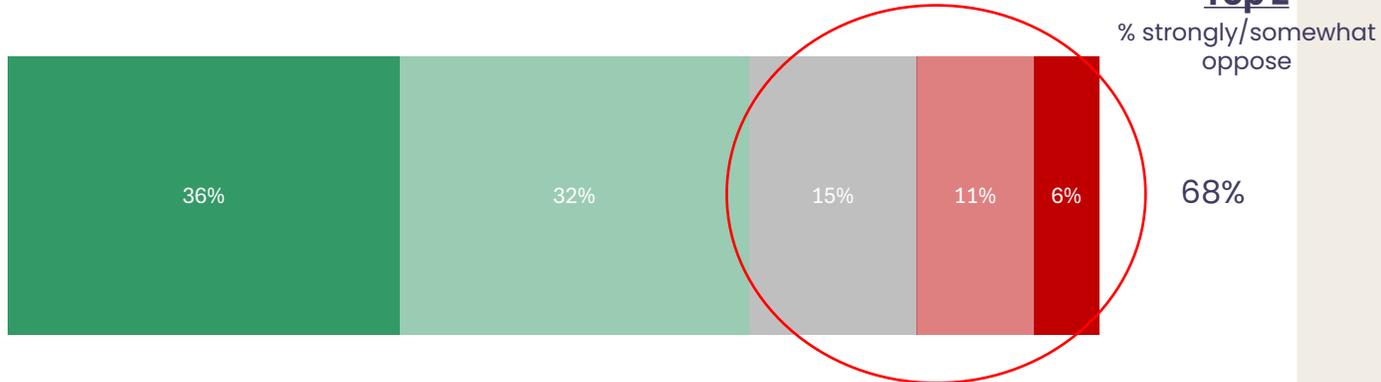
What is the age of those who support or are indifferent to bottom trawling?

36%	32%	15% 11% 6%

Top 2
% strongly/somewhat oppose

68%

- I strongly oppose it
- I somewhat oppose it
- I am indifferent
- I am somewhat supportive of it
- I am very supportive of it

Age	
18-24	25%
25-34	22%
35-44	19%
45-54	14%
55-64	10%
65 or older	9%

Base: total sample (n=7 013)

Base: supportive of/indifferent to bottom trawling (n=2250)

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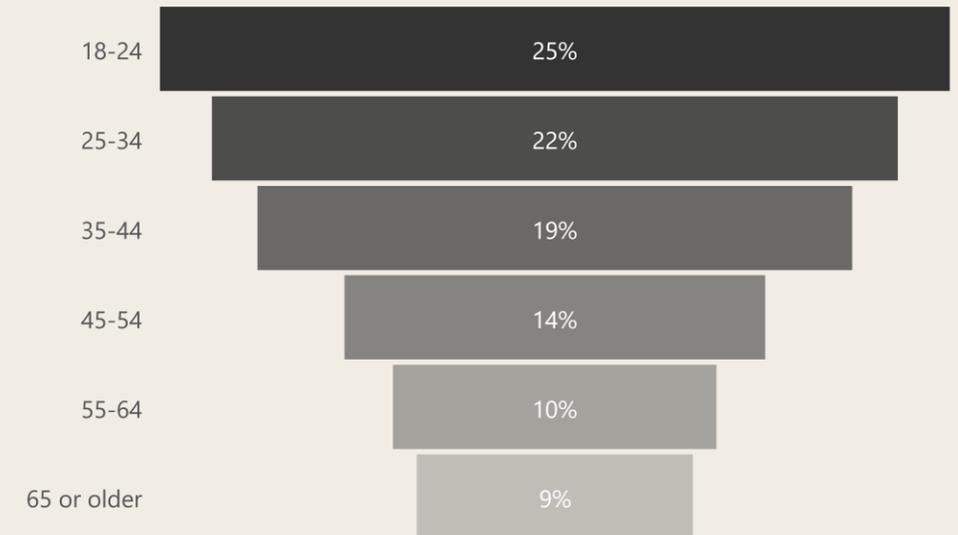
Do citizens in the different countries oppose or support **bottom trawling?**

"Q: Which of the following best describes your opinion on bottom trawling as a fishing practice?"

Legend:
- I strongly oppose it
- I somewhat oppose it
- I am indifferent
- I am somewhat supportive of it
- I am very supportive of it

Portugal
Top 2
74% ▲

Denmark
Top 2
72% ▲

Ireland
Top 2
70% ▲

Spain
Top 2
69% ▲

Germany
Top 2
68% ▲

Sweden
Top 2
62% ▽

Netherlands
Top 2
61% ▽

▲ / ▽ Above/below average

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2.4 Public opinion on legislation

# Do citizens believe that their legislation are effective in protecting the ocean and marine ecosystems?

"Q: In your opinion, does the legislation in your country effectively protect the ocean and marine ecosystems?"

Don't know

Very effectively

23%

10%

29%

Moderately effectively

Not effectively at all

13%

25%

Somewhat effectively

Top 2
% very/moderately effective

39%
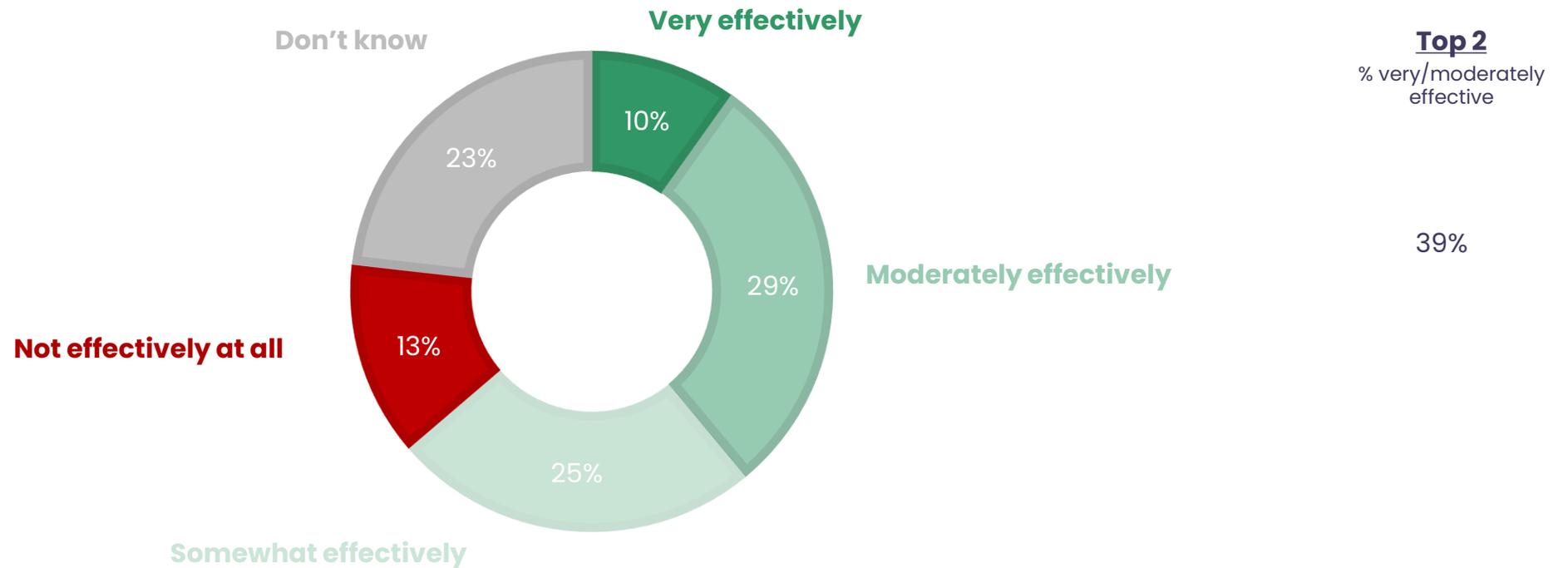
How **effective** do the citizens believe that MPAs are?

"Q: How effective do you think Marine Protected Areas are in your country? "

Don't know

Very effective

21%

17%

Not effective at all

5%

20%

37%

**Somewhat effective**

Moderately effective
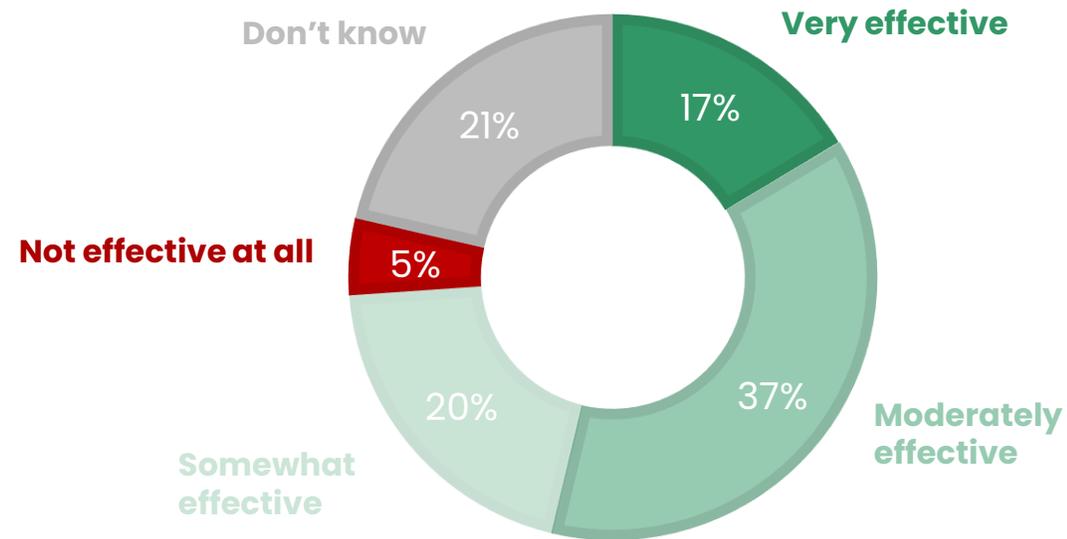
Top 2
% very/moderately effective

54%

Do the citizens oppose or support **stricter legislation?**

"Q: Would you support or oppose stricter legislation to protect Marine Protected Areas?"
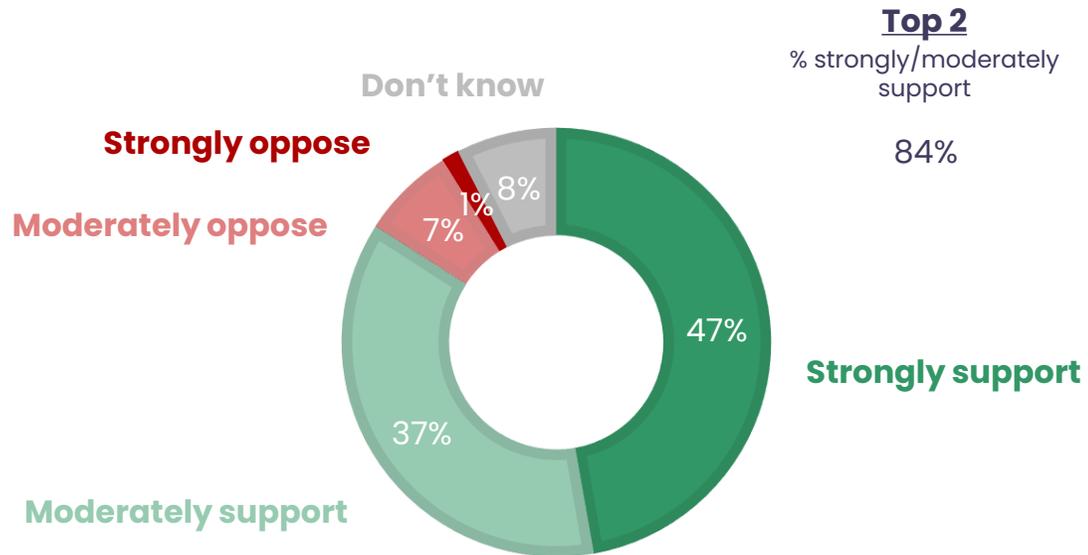
Don't know

Strongly oppose

Moderately oppose

8%

1%

7%

47%

Strongly support

37%

Moderately support

<u>**Top 2**</u>
% strongly/moderately support

84%

"Q: Do you believe that bottom trawling should be more strictly regulated?"

Don't know

Strongly disagree

Moderately disagree

8%

3%

7%

53%

Strongly agree

29%

Moderately agree

<u>**Top 2**</u>
% strongly/moderately agree

82%
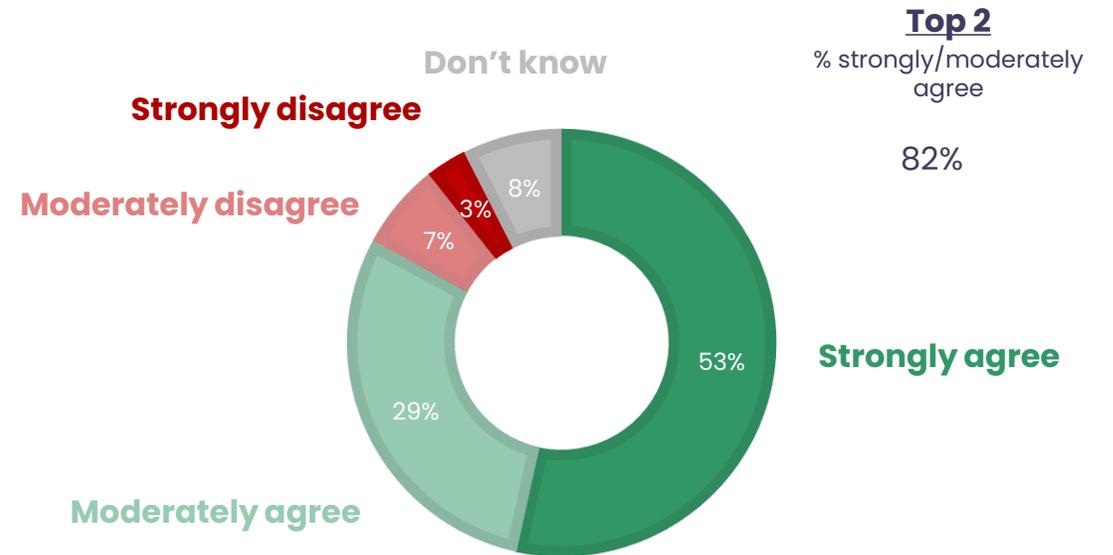
Do the citizens in the different countries support or oppose **stricter legislation** in favor of MPAs?

"Q: Would you support or oppose stricter legislation to protect Marine Protected Areas?"

Legend:
- ■ I would strongly support stricter legislation
- ■ I would moderately support stricter legislation
- ■ I would moderately oppose stricter legislation
- ■ I would strongly oppose stricter legislation
- ■ I don't know

Portugal
Top 2
92% ▲

Spain
Top 2
89% ▲

Ireland
Top 2
86% ▲

Sweden
Top 2
84% ▲

Germany
Top 2
83% ▽

Denmark
Top 2
79% ▽

Netherlands
Top 2
77% ▽

▲ ▽ Above/below average
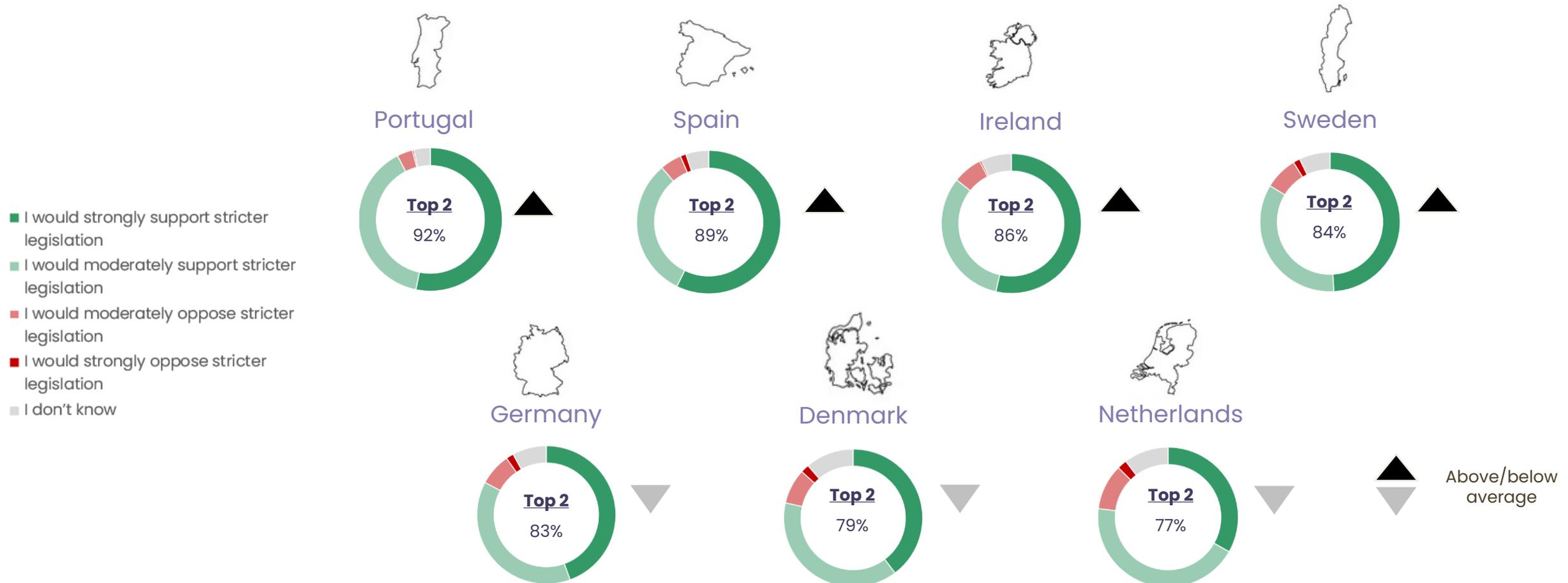
Do the citizens in the different countries believe in stricter regulations on bottom trawling?

"Q: Do you believe that bottom trawling should be more strictly regulated?"

Portugal

Top 2
93%

Spain

Top 2
87%

Ireland

Top 2
87%

▲
▽
Above/below average

Legend:
- ■ I strongly agree
- ■ I moderately agree
- ■ I moderately disagree
- ■ I strongly disagree
- ■ I don't know

Germany

Top 2
82%

Sweden

Top 2
78%

Denmark

Top 2
78%

Netherlands

Top 2
75%

Base: total sample (n=7 013)

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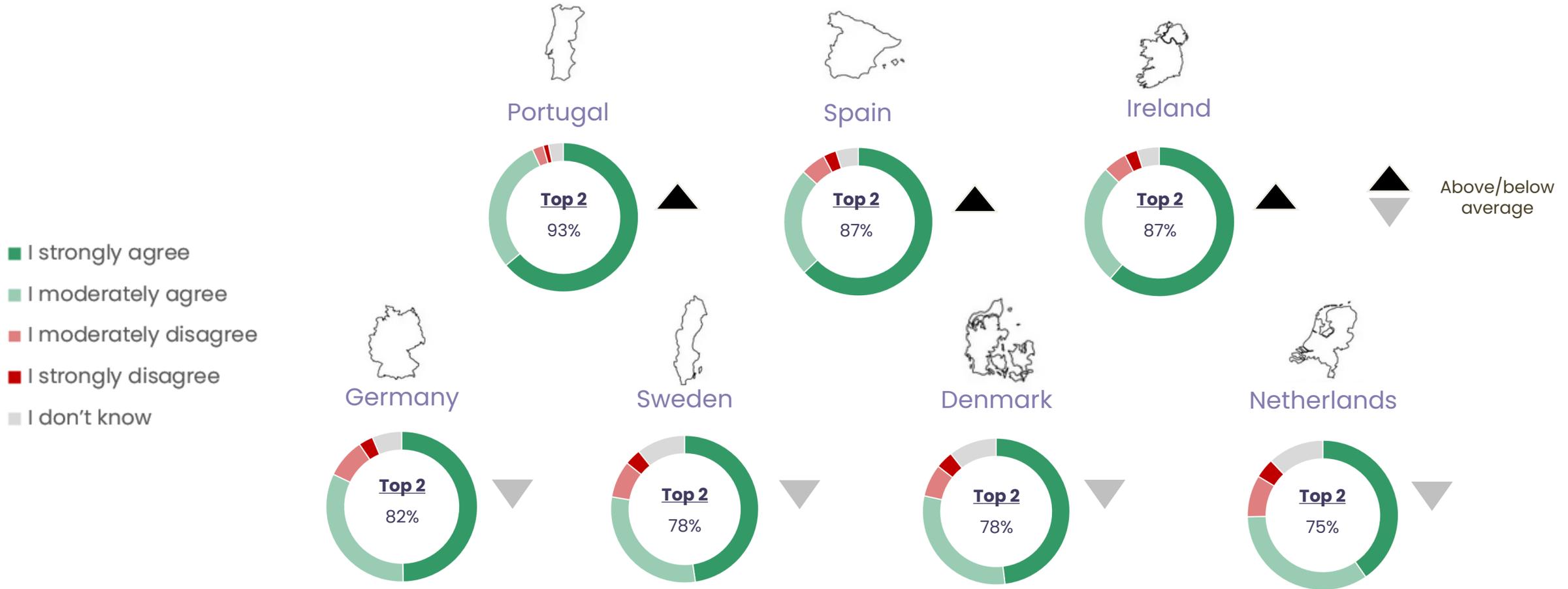
Greater knowledge of MPAs correlates with stronger support for stricter legislation regarding MPAs.

% responses

Q:Would you support or oppose stricter legislation to protect Marine Protected Areas?

Strongly support

Moderately support

Don't know

Moderately oppose

Strongly oppose

	Nothing at all	A little	A fair amount	A great deal
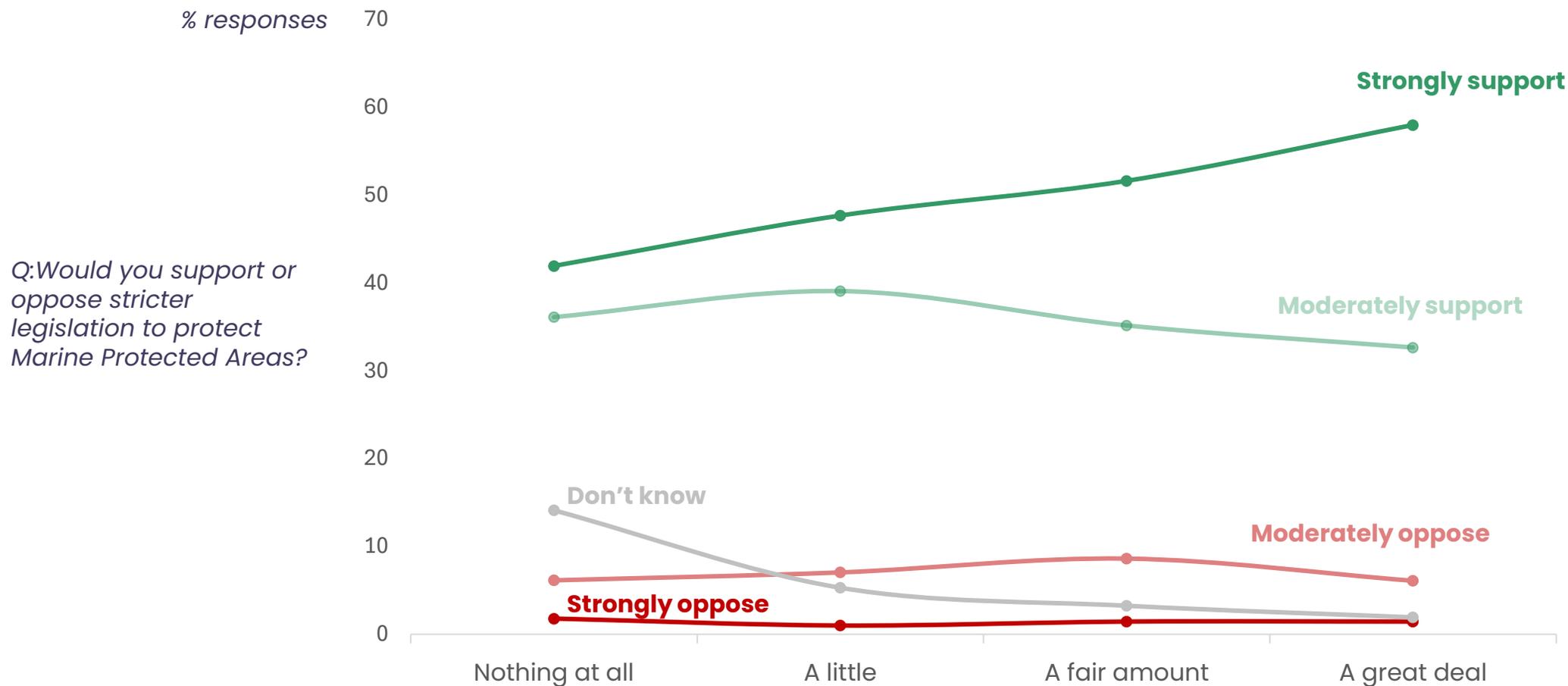
*Q: How much, if anything, do you know about the Marine Protected Areas in your country?*

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Do the citizens support or oppose a ban on bottom trawling in MPAs?

"Q: Would you support or oppose a ban of bottom trawling in Marine Protected Areas in your country?"

					Top 2
					% strongly/somewhat supporting a ban
46%	27%	11%	10%	6%	73%

■ I strongly support it ■ I somewhat support it ■ I am indifferent ■ I somewhat oppose it ■ I strongly oppose it

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Do citizens in different countries support or oppose a ban on bottom trawling in MPAs?

*"Q: Would you support or oppose a ban of bottom trawling in Marine Protected Areas in your country?"*

Legend:
- I strongly support it
- I somewhat support it
- I am indifferent
- I somewhat oppose it
- I strongly oppose it

Portugal
Top 2
80% ▲

Ireland
Top 2
78% ▲

Germany
Top 2
78% ▲

Sweden
Top 2
77% ▲

Denmark
Top 2
74% ▲

Spain
Top 2
70% ▽

Netherlands
Top 2
57% ▽

▲▽ Above/below average
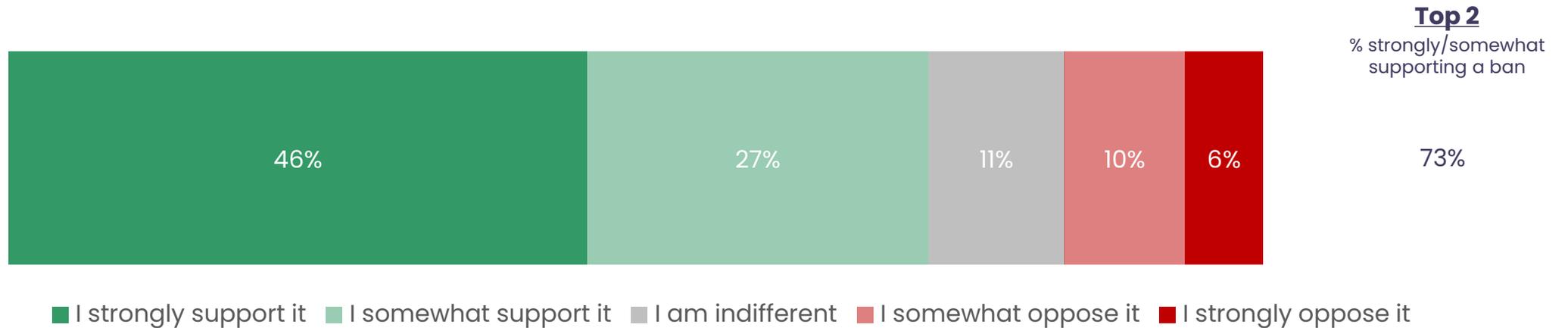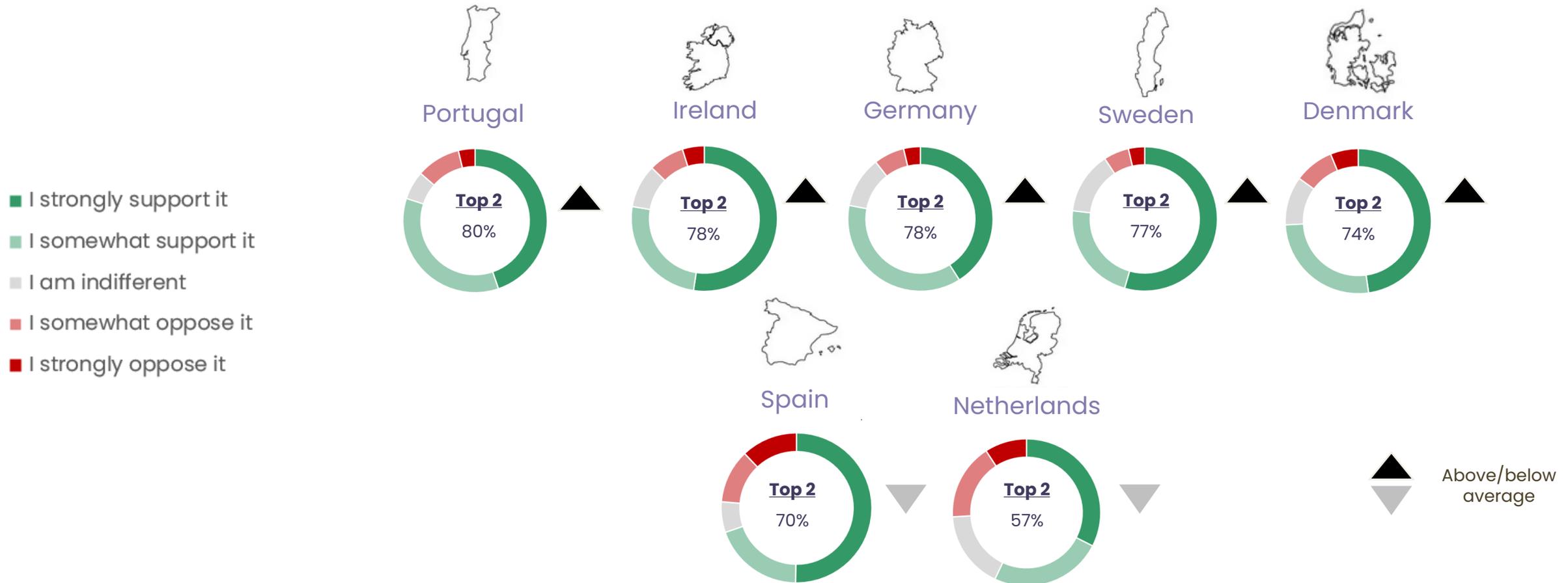
Do citizens believe that the protection of marine biodiversity needs higher political priority?

"Q: Do you believe that political leaders should give higher priority to protect marine biodiversity?"

Top 2
% strongly/moderately agree

52%	34%	6%	2%	7%

86%

■ I strongly agree   ■ I moderately agree   ■ I moderately disagree   ■ I strongly disagree   ■ I don't know

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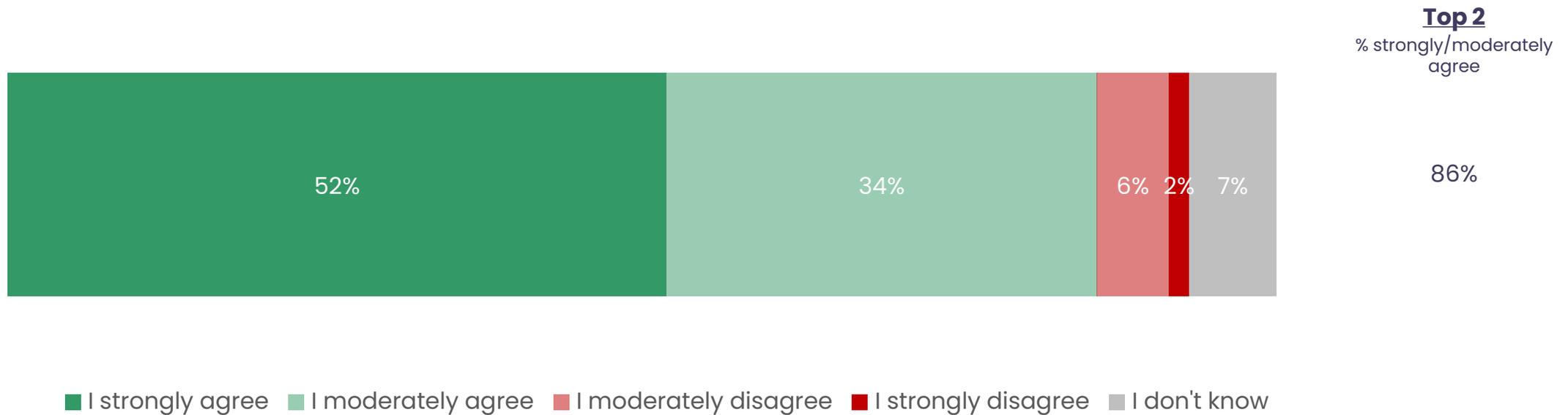
3. Conclusions

Conclusions

➤ The majority of citizens interviewed in the selected countries believe that protecting the ocean and marine ecosystems are very important. More than **9 out of 10 considering it essential or important** to protect endangered species, preserve ocean habitats, minimize pollution, reduce illegal fishing, and stop overfishing.

➤ The general level of knowledge about MPAs is relatively low, with only 1 out of 3 people being fully aware of their purpose. However, once informed about MPAs, the vast majority **(9 out of 10)** of **citizens believe MPAs are necessary** to protect marine biodiversity.

➤ Public opinion does not consider bottom trawling to be a sustainable fishing practice, with **3 out 4 people expressing high or moderate concern** about its impact on the ocean and marine ecosystems.

➤ This sentiment drives a push for stricter legislation to protect the ocean and marine ecosystems. Overall, **3 out 4 citizens would ban bottom trawling** in MPAs, and almost 9 out of 10 expect political leaders to prioritize the protection of marine biodiversity.
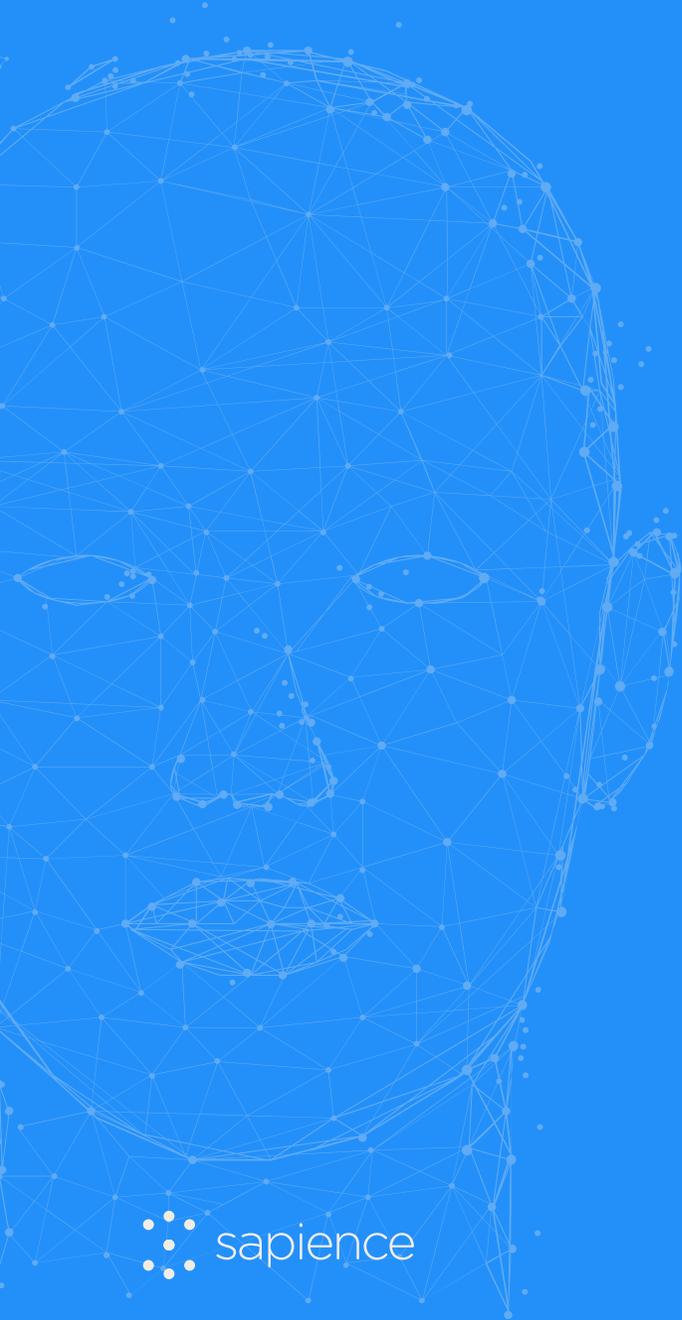
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Questions?
We are happy to help!

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Appendix

Appendix I – Demographic summary (Total sample, n = 7 013)

Gender	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Male	3410	3475	50%
Female	3590	3525	50%
Other	7	–	<1%

Age	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
18-24	704	771	11%
25-34	1235	1212	17%
35-44	1324	1272	18%
45-54	1379	1363	19%
55-64	1299	1282	18%
65+	1072	1112	16%

Region	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Denmark	1001	1001	14,3%
Germany	1003	1003	14,3%
Ireland	1001	1001	14,3%
Netherlands	1002	1002	14,3%
Portugal	1001	1001	14,3%
Spain	1002	1002	14,3%
Sweden	1003	1003	14,3%

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Appendix I – Demographic summary (Denmark, n = 1001) 🇩🇰

Gender	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Male	491	489	49%
Female	507	509	51%
Other	3	3	<1%

Age	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
18-24	117	120	12%
25-34	192	190	19%
35-44	157	160	16%
45-54	189	190	19%
55-64	181	180	18%
65+	165	160	16%

Region	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Hovestaden	307	320	32%
Midtjylland	229	230	23%
Nordjylland	97	100	10%
Sjælland	153	140	14%
Syddanmark	215	210	21%

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Appendix I – Demographic summary (Germany, n = 1003) 🇩🇪

Gender	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Male	491	490	49%
Female	509	510	51%
Other	3	3	<1%

Age	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
18-24	93	100	10%
25-34	174	171	17%
35-44	176	171	17%
45-54	184	191	19%
55-64	215	211	21%
65+	161	160	16%

Region	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Baden-Württemberg	134	130	13%
Bayern	160	150	15%
Berlin	47	50	5%
Brandenburg	28	30	3%
Bremen	8	10	1%
Hamburg	22	20	2%
Hessen	77	70	7%
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	19	20	2%
Niedersachsen	96	100	10%
Nordrhein-Westfalen	217	211	21%
Rheinland-Pfalz	48	50	5%
Saarland	12	10	1%
Sachsen	48	50	5%
Sachsen-Anhalt	26	30	3%
Schleswig-Holstein	35	40	4%
Thüringen	26	30	3%

Appendix I – Demographic summary (Ireland, n = 1001) 🇮🇪

Gender	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Male	469	490	49%
Female	531	510	51%
Other	1	1	<1%

Region	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Dublin	311	290	29%
Rest of Leinster	263	180	18%
Munster	260	280	28%
Connacht & Ulster	167	250	25%

Age	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
18-24	86	120	12%
25-34	184	170	17%
35-44	233	220	22%
45-54	204	200	20%
55-64	160	160	16%
65+	134	130	13%

Appendix I – Demographic summary (Netherlands, n = 1002)

Gender	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Male	495	491	49%
Female	507	511	51%
Other	-	-	-

Age	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
18-24	107	120	12%
25-34	181	180	18%
35-44	168	160	16%
45-54	183	180	18%
55-64	192	190	19%
65+	171	170	17%

Region	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Drenthe	26	30	3%
Flevoland	23	20	2%
Friesland	36	40	4%
Gelderland	124	120	12%
Groningen	32	30	3%
Limburg	65	70	7%
Noord-Brabant	151	150	15%
Noord-Holland	162	160	16%
Overijssel	67	70	7%
Utrecht	79	80	8%
Zeeland	23	20	2%
Zuid-Holland	214	210	21%

Appendix I – Demographic summary (Portugal, n = 1001)

Gender	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Male	477	529	53%
Female	522	470	47%
Other	2	2	<1%

Age	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
18-24	101	100	10%
25-34	153	150	15%
35-44	196	180	18%
45-54	214	200	20%
55-64	196	190	19%
65+	141	180	18%

Region	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Alentejo	44	70	7%
Algarve	40	40	4%
Azores	14	20	2%
Centro	217	220	22%
Lisboa	296	270	27%
Madeira	18	30	3%
Norte	372	350	35%

Appendix I – Demographic summary (Spain, n = 1002) 🇪🇸

Gender	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Male	487	485	49%
Female	513	515	51%
Other	2	2	<1%

Age	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
18-24	94	100	10%
25-34	153	150	15%
35-44	213	200	20%
45-54	219	220	22%
55-64	188	180	18%
65+	135	150	15%

Region	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Andalucía	179	180	18%
Aragón	28	30	3%
Cantabria	13	10	1%
Castilla y León	53	50	5%
Castilla-la Mancha	42	40	4%
Cataluña	163	160	16%
Comunidad de Madrid	147	140	14%
Comunidad Foral de Navarra	11	10	1%
Comunitat Valenciana	109	110	11%
Extremadura	23	20	2%
Galicia	59	60	6%
Islas Baleares	26	30	3%
Islas Canarias	49	50	5%
La Rioja	8	10	1%
País Vasco	48	50	5%
Principado de Asturias	22	20	2%
Región de Murcia	22	30	3%

Appendix I – Demographic summary (Sweden, n = 1003) 🇸🇪

Gender	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Male	500	500	50%
Female	501	500	50%
Other	2	2	<1%

Age	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
18–24	106	110	11%
25–34	198	201	20%
35–44	181	181	18%
45–54	186	181	18%
55–64	167	171	17%
65+	165	160	16%

Region	Count (unweighted)	Count (weighted)	% of total (weighted)
Blekinge	17	10	1%
Dalarna	28	30	3%
Gävleborg	26	30	3%
Gotland	6	10	1%
Halland	34	30	3%
Jämtland	14	10	1%
Jönköping	35	30	3%
Kalmar	24	20	2%
Kronoberg	19	20	2%
Norrbotten	22	20	2%
Örebro	28	30	3%
Östergötland	45	50	5%
Skåne	135	130	13%
Södermanland	30	30	3%
Stockholm	235	231	23%
Uppsala	39	40	4%
Värmland	26	30	3%
Västerbotten	25	30	3%
Västernorrland	21	20	2%
Västmanland	26	30	3%
Västra Götaland	168	171	17%

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