



Youth participation in EP elections

Young people have been among the least likely voters to turn out in European Parliament (EP) elections. Moreover, the electoral turnout of 18–24 year olds has continued to decrease, as evidenced by survey data from the 2009 elections.

In trying to explain this phenomenon, some studies have focused on young people's euroscepticism, as well as their lack of interest in or knowledge of the EU. Others have stressed a more general tendency among European youth to abandon traditional forms of political participation. Amongst these latter views, some conclude that rather than losing interest in politics, young people now express it in new and alternative ways.

Various solutions to the problem of low youth turnout have been proposed, including compulsory voting, the use of new interactive media, organising salient electoral campaigns, and expanding the EU component of civic education curricula.

The 2009 EU Strategy for Youth also stressed the need to address low political participation amongst the youngest generations. The European institutions together launched a large-scale awareness campaign specifically targeting young people in the run up to the most recent EP elections.

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Context

Following the first EP elections, [voter turnout](#) has consistently declined, falling by an average of 3 percentage points (pp) in each election. Whereas in 1979, 62% of eligible voters went to the polls, the 2009 turnout was just 43%. Moreover in 2009, in the vast majority of the MS, turnout was higher in national elections than in the European election, with the difference exceeding 43 pp in the Netherlands and 35 in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Sweden.¹

This difference is often explained by the "second order" character of EP elections, perceived by citizens as less important than national ones. This interpretation does not explain, however, variations in participation across social and demographic groups.

Young people have historically been the age group characterised by the lowest turnout in EP elections. In particular, the Commission's [Post-electoral survey 2009](#) revealed a significant difference (21 pp) between the declared participation of people aged 18–24 (29%) and the oldest group of voters (aged 55+), 50% of whom claimed to have voted in the 2009 EP elections. The actual turnout among youth may be even lower as there is a tendency for over-reporting in social surveys.

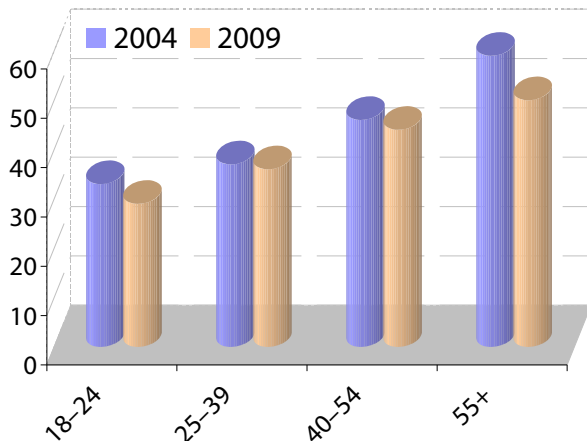
Moreover, youth participation has been decreasing at a pace faster than the general trend. In 2009, almost three quarters (71%)



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of eligible voters aged 18–24 abstained from voting in the EP elections. Compared to the 2004 turnout, this represents a decrease of 4 pp, while the average participation for all age groups dropped by 3 pp.

Figure 1. EP elections turnout in 2004 and 2009 by age groups



Source: 2004 and 2009 Post-electoral surveys.

Young people are a sizeable group of European citizens. In 2008 the overall number of 18–24 year olds in the 27 MS was estimated at almost 45 million. If they were engaged by European politics, their voice would carry considerable weight.

Moreover, it has been suggested that new trends often surface first among the youth, anticipating future radical changes in public opinion. Attitudes regarding political participation are believed to be formed during a voter's first three elections. Young people may thus be acquiring voting habits for the rest of their lives. If, as some experts see it, low turnout among the youth reflects a characteristic of a generation rather than an attitude linked to a specific age group, the decline of civic engagement is likely to continue as this generation ages.²

Whereas for young people abstention arguably means losing influence over European politics, it also undermines the legitimacy of the European Parliament and the electoral process. Aware of this, the EP specifically targeted this group in the campaign preceding the most recent elections. The 2009 turnout indicates,

however, that the debate on how to effectively address low youth turnout is far from settled.

Explaining low youth turnout

Attitude towards the EU

Some studies have linked low youth turnout in EP elections to the decreasing interest of young people in EU matters, coupled with their growing euroscepticism. Both were allegedly illustrated by the result of the 2005 French referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty. Fifty-nine percent of participating 18–24 year olds voted against the Treaty and the abstention rate amongst this group was 34%. The approximate average figures for all age categories were respectively 55% and 30%.³

However, the [Post-electoral survey 2009](#) does not seem to confirm the negative attitude of youth towards the European project. Fifty-four percent of young people aged 18-24 said they trusted the EU institutions, which is higher than either the EU average of 50% or any other age group. Moreover, 74% considered the EU membership of their country as a good thing (5 pp more than the EU average), 68% considered themselves European citizens (+4 pp) and 66% felt attached to Europe (+2 pp). At the same time attachment to their own country was 5 pp lower than the average of 86%. Furthermore, fewer young people (5%) were unsatisfied with the European Parliament as an institution, against the EU average of 8%.

Nevertheless, the [ICCS 2009 European Report](#) revealed that students in the EU are less interested in European political issues than in national ones. Fewer than 4 out of 10 students surveyed indicated that they used television on a weekly or more frequent basis to obtain news about Europe.

Moreover, it is argued that young generations take for granted the benefits of European integration, do not feel part of the process, and consider the EU institutions as

distant. In some MS, they also tend to perceive the EU as the initiator of market liberalisation leading to increased social inequality and unemployment. This is a sensitive issue given the economic vulnerability of youth: throughout the last decade, in the EU, the unemployment rate among 15–24 year olds has been around twice as high as in the total population and their economic situation has become even more precarious following the global financial crisis that began in 2008.

Table 1. What are the issues which make you vote in the European elections?

	EU 27	18-24	Diff.
Economic growth	41%	46%	+5
Unemployment	37%	41%	+4

Source: [European Elections 2009](#): Post-electoral survey. First results: Focus on the vote by age group, EP 2009.

Finally, the Post-electoral survey 2009 also revealed that young people do not know a lot about the EU. Forty-four percent of 18 – 24 year olds said they had all the necessary information to choose for whom to vote, against an average of 53%. This shortage of information is likely to be linked to participation, as respondents who were best informed were also those with the highest participation rate.

A general trend

Most commentators see low turnout in EP elections as one of many signs of young people's general alienation from politics. As early as 2001, the Commission concluded that young people were less committed than in the past to the traditional structures of political and social action, such as parties or trade unions, and had a low level of involvement in democratic consultation.⁴

Indeed, 18–24 year olds who abstained from voting in the 2009 EP elections declared more often than other age groups, that they were not interested in politics (20% against the average of 17%). Moreover, 68% of 18–24 year olds said they did not feel attached to any political party, while the EU mean was 54%. The lowest level of youth political

involvement has been [recorded](#) in Latvia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary and Malta.

One explanation given is that young people tend to distance themselves from society and that youth culture, which used to be a protest culture, has become a culture of individualism and demobilisation.⁵ However, this view seems to overlook alternative ways of participation, such as political protests or ethical and political consumerism (such as boycotting producers whose practices are perceived as ethically or politically objectionable).

These new forms of activism have been increasingly visible throughout the EU. The EU-funded [EUYOUPART project](#) (2003–2005) report, concerning the political participation of youth in eight MS, revealed that political consumerism was most frequent in Finland, Italy and Austria and participation in legal demonstrations was particularly high in Italy, Germany and France. This increase in youth participation in protests was recently illustrated by the "Los Indignados" movement in Spain.

The fact that young people do not reject all forms of political activity is also confirmed by their growing involvement in the alter-globalisation movement. The movement's emphasis on individualism and distrust of all institutions has attracted many young people willing to act, but disillusioned with traditional politics. Based on fluid networks, it offers new models of political participation centred on specific projects, such as organising events or conferences.⁶ The positions defended do not necessarily contradict the European Parliament's approach to environmental issues or the nexus between human rights and immigration policies.

How to reverse the trend

Studies dealing with low youth participation note the complexity of the problem and thus the lack of an easy solution. Despite disagreement about the effectiveness of

measures which could or have been undertaken, those studies provide food for thought for stakeholders interested in raising the electoral turnout amongst the youth.

Mandatory voting

Making voting compulsory has been described as the easiest and most cost-effective way to improve turnout not only among young people, but for all voters. Indeed, in the 2009 EP elections, Luxembourg and Belgium boasted the highest youth turnout (respectively 92 and 88%), and Cyprus and Greece – the two remaining MS in which voting is compulsory – also fared better than most countries. Therefore some commentators see it as an appropriate solution for EP elections. However, others consider mandatory voting as contrary to the principle of liberty. Modern democracies tend to abolish rather than introduce it. This may explain why this option has never been officially considered by the EP.⁷

The use of media

Whereas television remains the main source of political information, young people increasingly use alternative media.

One study concluded that young Europeans using both traditional forms (such as newspapers or TV news) and new forms of mass communication (e.g. the internet) were more likely to be politically engaged. Interactive forms of communication, such as Web searches, were even more effective in this respect than traditional one-way forms (such as newspapers or TV).⁸

The EUYOPART project report found a relationship between the choice of media

and youth participation. Whereas the active reception of media – necessary when reading newspapers or using the internet – strengthens political participation, passive reception (TV and radio), is associated with lower participation.

Raising participation through the internet

The internet has been considered as a medium capable of changing the way young people engage in political activities. Numerous websites, some created by young people, foster political activism and alternative journalism.

In the US, political campaigners have developed a range of "e-strategies" to reach young people. They include e-mail appeals for voter registration, campaign-sponsored chat rooms and blogs, and text messaging on mobile phones. Young people tend to react positively to opt-in services, leaving them a free choice to use a service or not, as well as to interactive and personalised information.

The internet has also been used to promote civic literacy and introduce children below the voting age to politics.⁹

However, while the internet appears to be a "mobiliser" for young voters already involved in the political process, it does not seem to engage with the disinterested youth, as

it requires an active search for information.¹⁰

Electoral campaigns

Only 30% of 18–24 year olds surveyed declared that they always vote in the same way, against a general average of 50% (-20 pp). In addition, they tend to decide on their

The family and peers

Survey data from both the EU and the US indicates that young people who discuss the elections with family and friends are more likely to vote. A [2004 US survey](#) revealed that three times as many young voters as older ones said they voted because family or friends encouraged them to.

Whereas parents seem to have more influence on political attitudes and ideological orientation of young people, friends tend to shape their political participation ([EUYOPART project](#) (2003–2005)).

This may explain why peer group education – which involves young people as instructors – is considered particularly effective. Some authors [advocate](#) using this form of education, both within and outside school, to raise participation in EP elections.

vote later than other age groups (see table 2). Also, 7% of young respondents stated that information received during the campaign convinced them to vote (2 pp more than the EU average).¹¹

All these elements could be interpreted as indicating that young people are more prone to the influence of electoral campaigns. In particular, one would expect large-scale campaigns with extensive media coverage to improve youth electoral turnout.

However, the analysis of the impact of the campaigns preceding EP elections has led to different conclusions. One study found a significantly negative effect of these campaigns on voter participation.¹² Furthermore, despite the fact that awareness of the campaign preceding the 2009 elections was high (67% of respondents remembered having seen the campaign) and similar for all voter categories, turnout among young people was considerably lower than in other age groups.¹³

Table 2. When did you decide to vote for the political party or candidate you voted for in the recent EP elections?

	EU 27	18-24	Diff.
Have always voted like this	50%	30%	-20
Decided a few months ago	21%	28%	+7
Decided a few weeks ago	13%	17%	+4
Decided a few days before the elections	9%	17%	+8
Decided on the day of the elections	6%	8%	+2

Source: [European Elections 2009](#): Post-electoral survey. First results: Focus on the vote by age group, EP 2009.

Civic education

The ICCS 2009 report revealed significant variations in European students' knowledge of detailed EU-related issues. Students in Finland and Sweden showed, on average, better knowledge than students from other European countries. The authors concluded that teaching about the EU as part of civic

and citizenship education should be improved in Europe.¹⁴

The EU and youth participation

Enhancing youth participation

Raising the civic and political participation of young people has been a priority of the EU's youth policy, which has gradually emerged since the 1993 Treaty of Maastricht.

The Commission's 2009 [EU Strategy for Youth](#) saw youth participation as an increasing challenge, in view of the gap between young people and political institutions. The Commission stressed that policy-makers should communicate in ways to which young people are receptive, and provide "quality information services".

Promoting young people's active citizenship in general and their European citizenship in particular is also an objective of the [Youth in Action programme](#) (2007 to 2013). This programme has supported numerous [projects](#) aimed at enhancing youth voter turnout.

The Erasmus programme

Building support for the EU among young people is one of the objectives of [Erasmus](#). More than 2.2 million students have participated in the programme since it started in 1987. Some [research](#) suggests however that the programme has no impact on participants' political views, at least not in the short term. Even before their Erasmus experience, participating students surveyed considered themselves considerably more "pro-European" than the control group. There was no significant change in the attitude of either group following the exchange.

The 2009 EP elections campaign

The 2009 elections campaign was the most expensive communication event of this kind ever launched by the EU institutions. It was led by Parliament with support from the Commission.

The campaign for young people and first-time voters focused on television, as well as internet-based new media such as MySpace, Facebook and Flickr, believed to be preferred by young people.

The Commission, working together with the MTV networks, carried out a multimedia campaign "Can you hear me Europe?" which included an interactive website and four TV spots encouraging young people to make themselves "heard" by voting in the EP elections.

In an independent post-election survey among MTV viewers covering 14 MS, 54% of respondents considered the campaign effective and 66% saw it as a good way to make young people vote. However, the Commission [concluded](#) that a short top-down campaign of this kind could not ultimately influence the attitudes and behaviour of youth, a difficult target group

characterised by either prejudiced opinion on the EU or little knowledge about it.

Main references

[European Elections 2009: Post-electoral survey. First results: Focus on the vote by age group](#) / European Parliament, December 2009.

[Comparing young voters' political engagement in the United States and Europe](#) / Esser, F. and De Vreese, C.H. American Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 50, no 9, pp. 1195-1213, 2007.

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Endnotes

- ¹ [Post-electoral survey 2009](#), p. 12. See also: [ICCS 2009 European Report: Civic knowledge, attitudes, and engagement among lower secondary students in 24 European countries](#) / Kerr, D. et al. IEA, 2010, pp. 30–31.
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- ¹³ [European Elections 2009 Awareness Raising Activities of the European Commission](#) / European Commission, 2009, pp. 16–18.
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