



European Parliament Elections: Turnout trends, 1979-2009

Standard Note: SN06865

Last updated: 03 April 2014

Author: Steven Ayres

Section Social & General Statistics Section

As time has passed and the EU has grown in size, European Parliamentary elections have seen a continual decline in turnout since the first direct elections took place in 1979. While turnout in that first election was around 62%, it had fallen to 43% by 2009.

This note looks at the scale of these developments since the first direct election to the European Parliament. It investigates trends that may underscore this decline, notably the relationship between age and voter turnout. It also draws comparisons with national turnout to try to determine whether the trend pertains exclusively to the European Parliament or to elections in general. Finally, it explores potential reasons as to why a smaller and smaller proportion of the electorate is opting to vote.

Contents

Measuring Turnout	2
European Parliamentary Elections, 1979-2009	2
Comparison with National Elections	4
Age and Turnout	7
Abstainers	9
Profiles	9
Reasons for Abstention	10

1 Measuring Turnout

For the purpose of this note, turnout is defined as the total number of valid votes as a proportion of the total electorate. Different election studies may record turnout in different ways, with some including spoilt ballot papers and other invalid votes in their measures. Voter registration may also affect turnout figures, as the extent to which the eligible population registers to vote is less than the proportion of those on the electoral register. For these reasons, differences may be observed between the figures featured here and those published elsewhere. It should also be noted that in certain European countries, e.g. Belgium, voting is compulsory.

2 European Parliamentary Elections, 1979-2009

In the 2009 European Parliament (EP) election, turnout in the UK ranked 21 of the 27 members. UK turnout has been consistently low relative to other members since the first EP election in 1979, although the gap appears to have closed since then due to falling turnout elsewhere.

Turnout at European Elections, 1979-2009

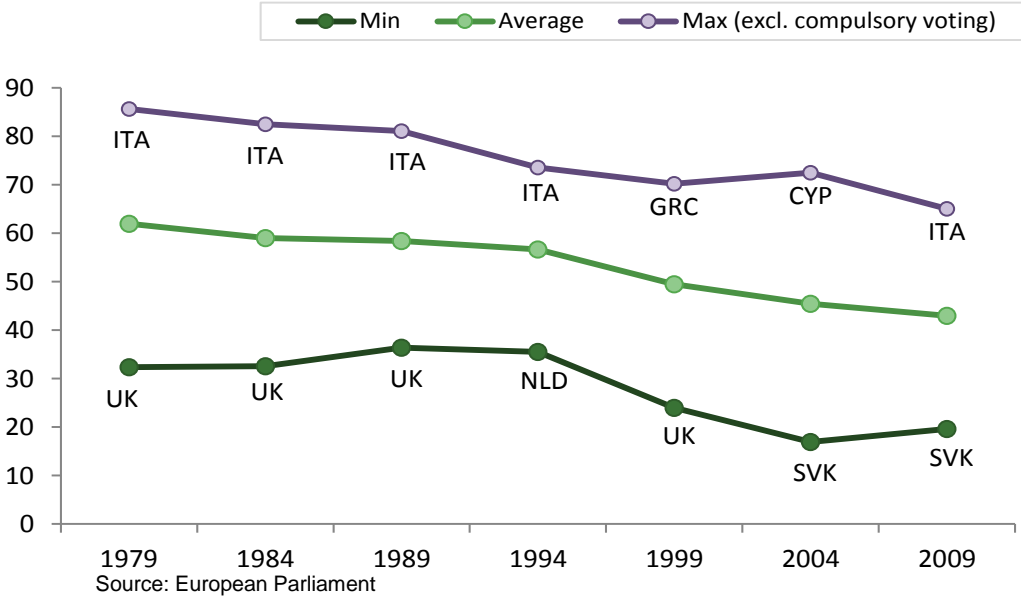
	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009
Belgium	91.4	92.1	90.7	90.7	91.1	90.8	90.4
Luxembourg	88.9	88.8	87.4	88.6	87.3	91.4	90.8
Malta						82.4	78.8
Italy	85.7	82.5	81.1	73.6	69.8	71.7	65.1
Denmark	47.8	52.4	46.2	52.9	50.5	47.9	59.5
Cyprus						72.5	59.4
Ireland	63.6	47.6	68.3	44.0	50.2	58.6	58.6
Latvia						41.3	53.7
Greece		80.6	80.0	73.2	70.3	63.2	52.6
Austria					49.4	42.4	46.0
Sweden					38.8	37.9	45.5
Spain			54.7	59.1	63.1	45.1	44.9
Estonia						26.8	43.9
Germany	65.7	56.8	62.3	60.0	45.2	43.0	43.3
France	60.7	56.7	48.8	52.7	46.8	42.8	40.6
Finland					30.1	39.4	40.3
Bulgaria							39.0
Portugal			51.1	35.5	39.9	38.6	36.8
Netherlands	58.1	50.9	47.5	35.7	30.0	39.3	36.8
Hungary						38.5	36.3
United Kingdom	32.4	32.6	36.4	36.4	24.0	38.5	34.7
Slovenia						28.4	28.3
Czech Republic						28.3	28.2
Romania							27.7
Poland						20.9	24.5
Lithuania						48.4	21.0
Slovakia						17.0	19.6
Total EU	62.0	59.0	58.4	56.7	49.5	45.5	43.0

Source: European Parliament

Note: Shaded countries (Belgium and Luxembourg) denote compulsory voting

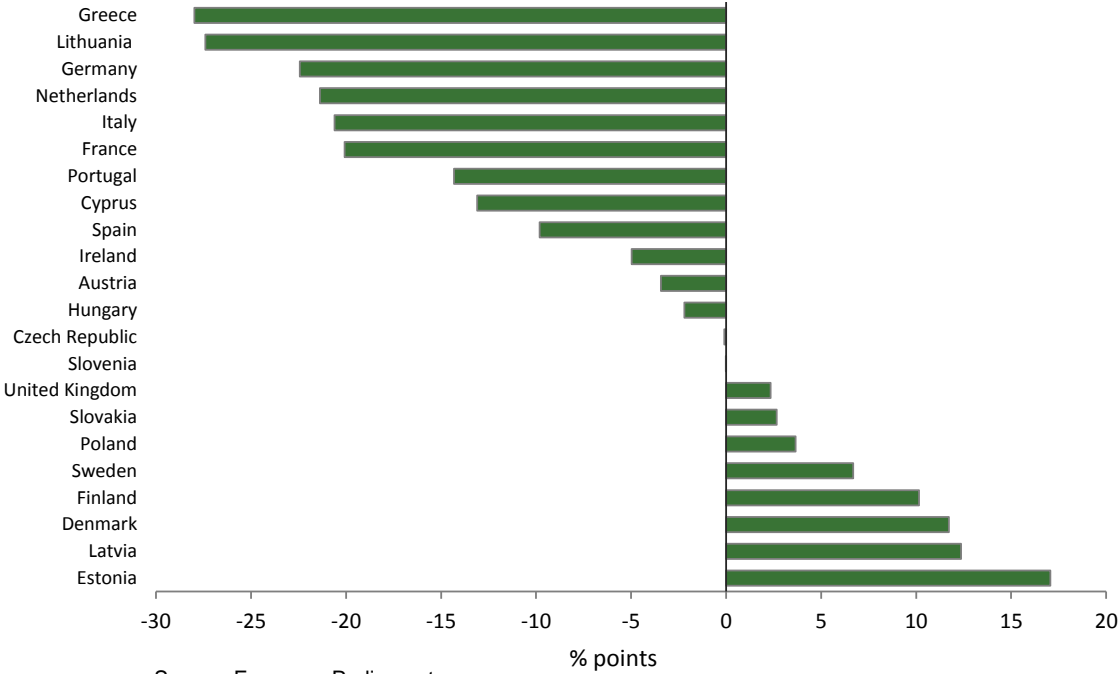
In the most recent EP election in 2009, turnout across the EU was at a record low of 43%. The average EU turnout has declined steadily since the first EP election in 1979, in which the UK represented the lowest turnout of the first nine members. The UK has seen the lowest turnout of all voting nations in four of the seven EP elections to date.

Maximum, minimum and average voter turnout at European Elections, 1979-2009



The main source of falling average EU turnout has not derived from the UK but from other countries. Six countries, including the EU's most populous country Germany, have seen a fall in turnout of over 20 points since the first EP election they participated in. In the 2009 election, the number of votes cast in Germany was 9.4 million fewer than in 1994.

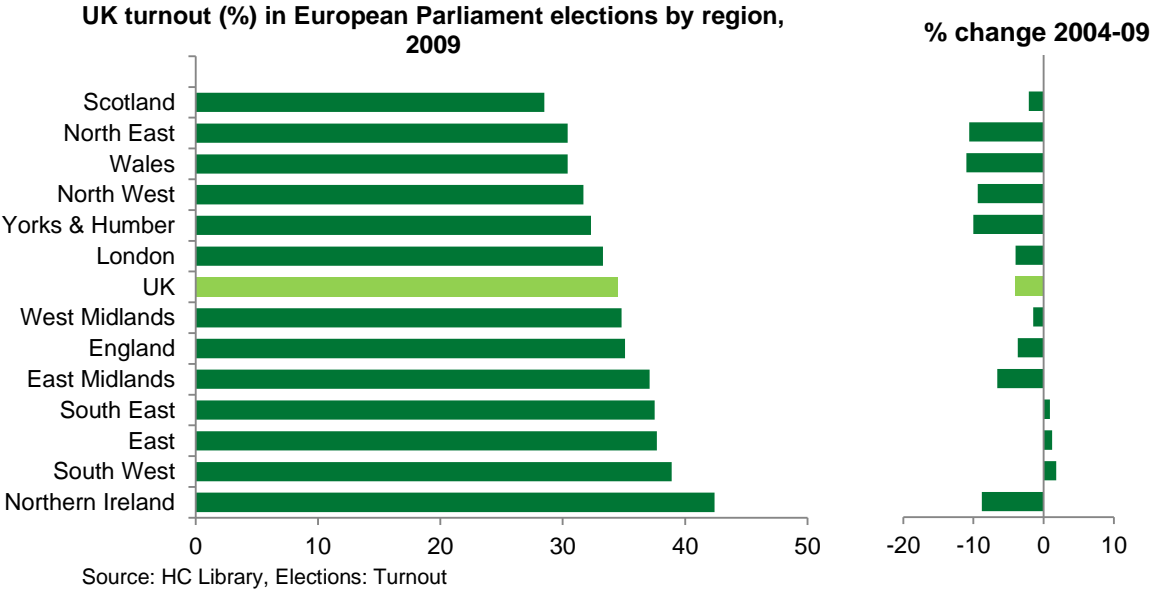
Change in turnout since first EP election participated in



The UK has had consistently low turnout since the first direct election in 1979, with the lowest point of 24% occurring in the 1999 election. Yet despite this, turnout has actually increased slightly over the years, with the 34.7% turnout in 2009 representing an increase of 2.5 percentage points when compared with the first EP election in 1979.

There has also been some variation in turnout within the UK, with a consistently greater proportion of the electorate in Northern Ireland choosing to vote. In each of the seven EP elections, Northern Ireland – where a system of Single Transferable Vote operates – has seen the highest turnout. In the 2009 EP election, Scotland saw the lowest regional turnout at 28.5%, with all but three of the thirteen regions of the UK seeing a fall in turnout compared to 2004.

In 2009, the highest local turnouts were found in the Isles of Scilly (53.8%) and South Lakeland (49.4%), and the lowest local turnouts found in Kingston-upon-Hull (20.7%) and Knowsley (21.5%).



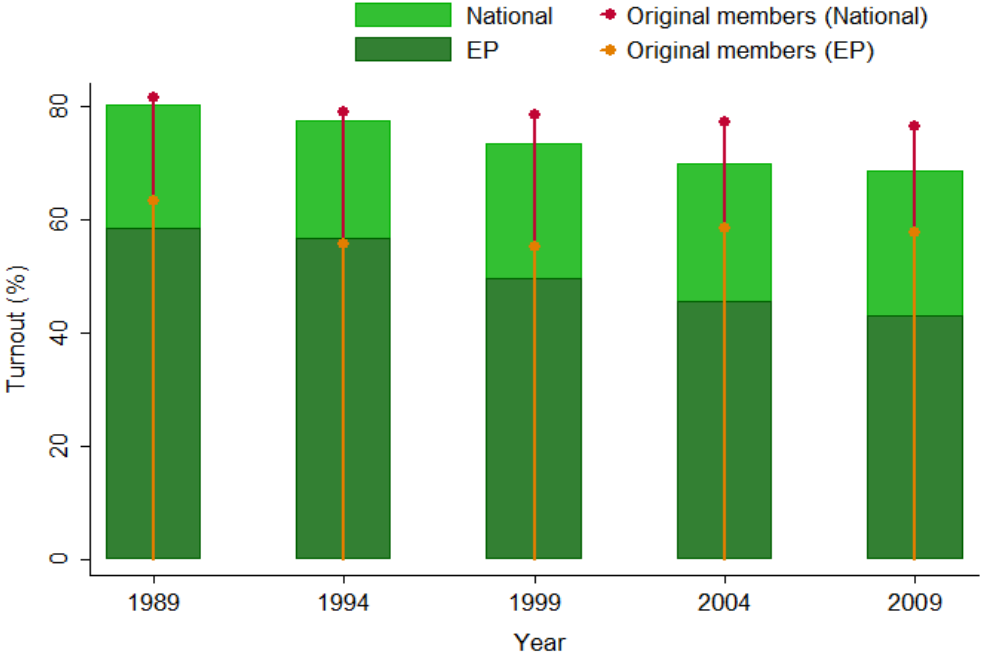
3 Comparisons with National Elections

Comparing the EP election turnout with that for national elections may indicate whether the downward trend in voters is due to general political apathy or alternatively that the European electorate is increasingly turning away from European politics in favour of political participation at the national level. While there are of course differences between Member States, the general trend across the EU has been a decline in turnout in both national and EP elections.

Average turnout at national elections among EU members has fallen from 80% in 1989 to under 70% in recent years. This fall in average turnout has been only marginally surpassed by the reduction in EP turnout from 58% to 43% between 1989 and 2009. Thus the approximately proportional fall in turnout might suggest that the declining turnout trend is not

exclusive to EP elections, but may represent a wider trend of lower voter turnout in elections in general.

Turnout in national and EP elections – comparisons between all members and original nine voting countries, 1989-2009



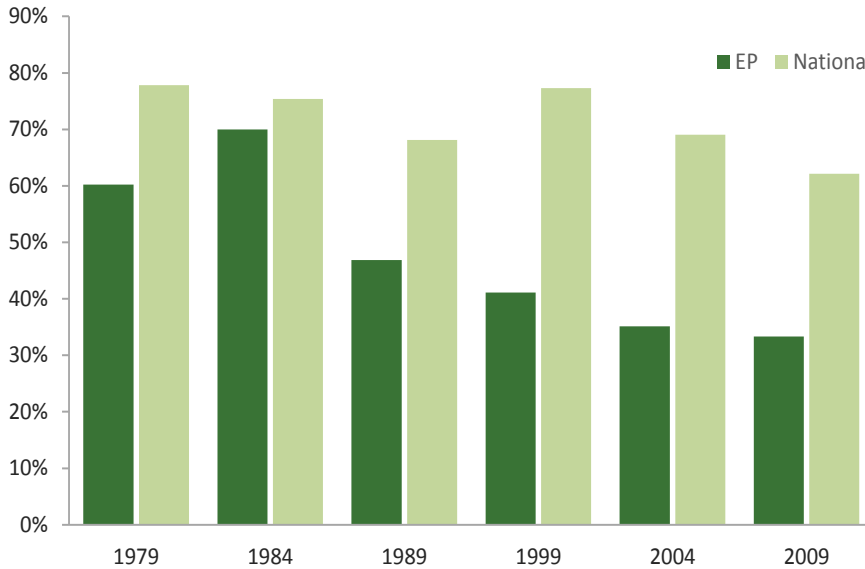
Source: Institute for democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)

The above chart also points towards certain structural factors that may play a role in the observed trend, as declining turnout may partly be a by-product of the EU enlargement process. While the bars detailing the total average turnout demonstrate a clear decline in both national and EP elections, the spikes within these bars represent the nine members¹ of the EU who took part in the first EP election in 1979. Excluding newer members reveals a higher turnout in both national and EP elections, and though turnout has still fallen it has done so at a slower pace. In both national and EP elections, turnout fell by approximately 5% for those nine countries, with EP election turnout actually showing a slight resurgence in recent years from a low of 55% in 1994 to 58% in 2009.

It appears that average turnout has been lower among those countries that joined the EU later. Looking at average turnout for countries based on the year of their first EP election, 60% of the electorate voted in those countries that took place in the first election in 1979, while at 33% turnout was almost half that among those countries whose first EP election was in 2009. The same is not really true of national election turnout, as despite a slight downward trend among more recently joined countries, the magnitude of this effect is not nearly as large. The bottom line is that EU members that have joined relatively recently have contributed significantly to falling turnout, yet this cannot necessarily be attributed to a weak culture of political participation among the electorate in these countries.

¹ Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands and the UK

Average turnout in national and EP elections by year of first election, 1979-2009

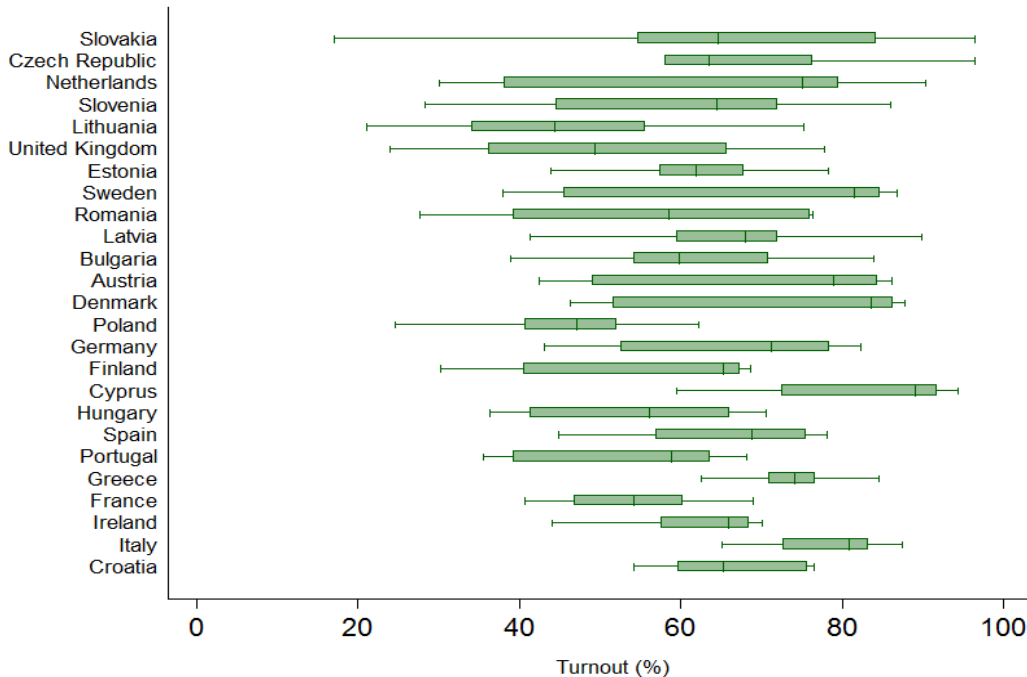


Source: IDEA

When considering turnout trends within the EU over the last few decades, it should also be noted that voting patterns differ vastly between members. For example, in Slovakia the largest turnout for a national election between 1989 and 2009 was 96% compared with the smallest EP election turnout of 17%. This represents a 79% points difference in the proportion of the electorate that voted. At the other end of the spectrum are countries like Croatia and Italy, with the largest difference being 22% points.

The chart below demonstrates this high turnout variability, with the line in the box representing the median, the ends of the box itself the upper and lower quartiles and the whiskers the range of values. Countries are ordered in terms of their variability showing Slovakia as the country with the highest turnout variability and Croatia the lowest.

Turnouts in both National and EP elections, 1989-2009

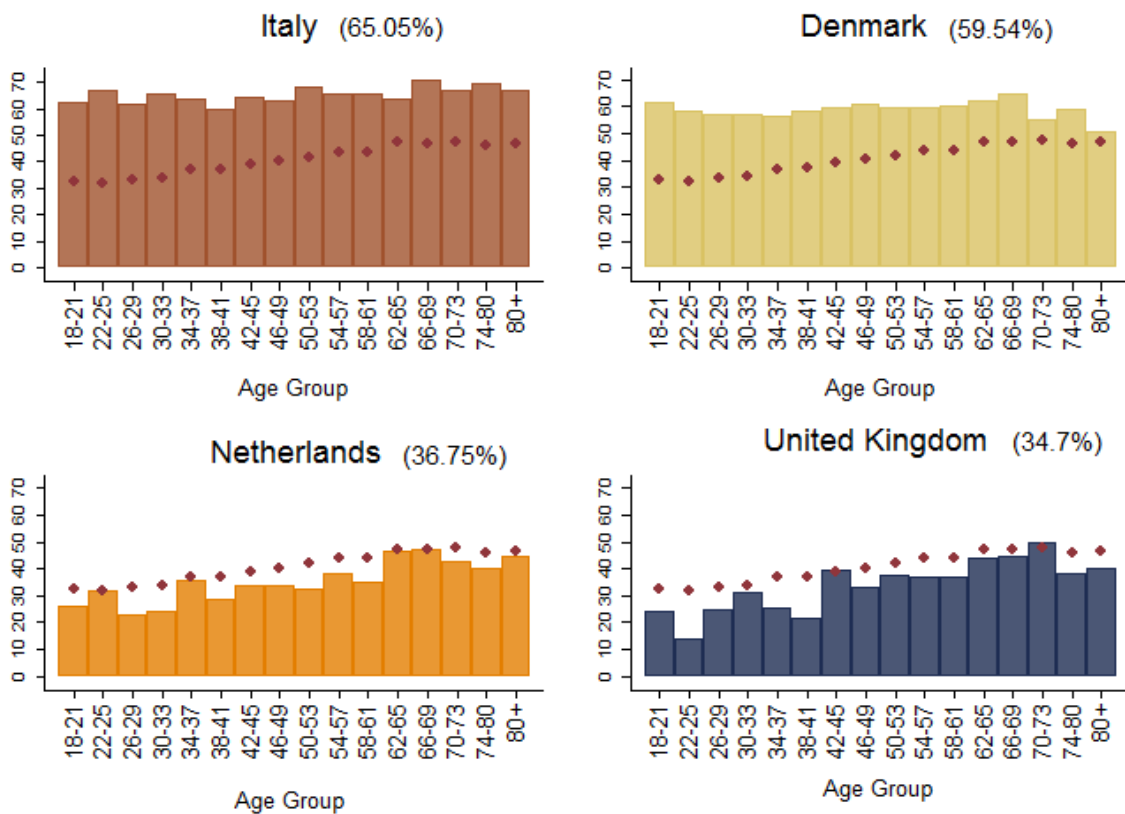


Source: IDEA

4 Age and Turnout

In certain European countries, age seems to play a significant role in a person's likelihood to vote. On average, the lowest turnout across the EU is among those aged 22 to 25 (31.9%) and the highest turnout among those aged 70 to 73 (47.6%). However, this trend is not apparent in all countries and is more evident in those that have lower overall turnout. The chart below depicts turnout by age for Italy, Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK (from highest to lowest overall turnout), showing that the relationship between age and turnout is stronger for relatively low turnout countries than relatively high turnout countries. The red markers represent the EU average for the given age group.

Turnout in European Parliament Elections by age group, 2009



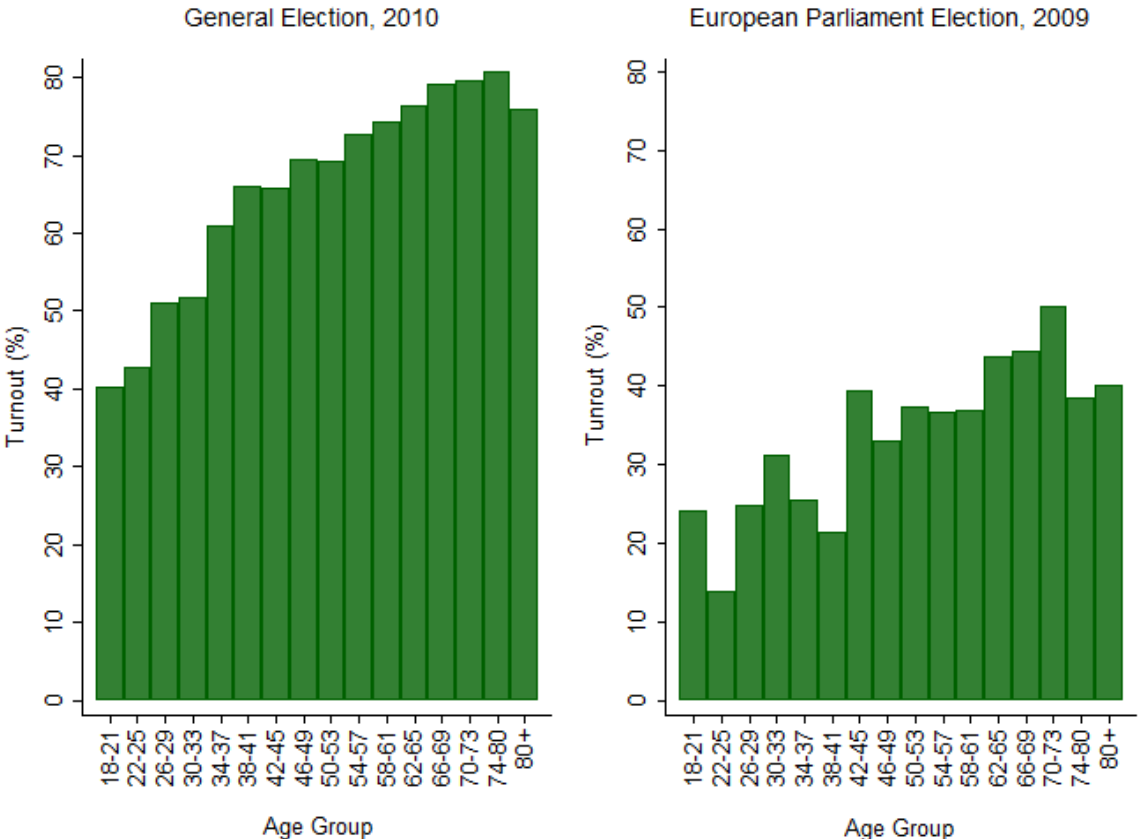
Source: European Parliament Election Study 2009

The question of whether this is general political apathy among younger age groups or just directed towards EP elections can be answered in part by comparing these figures from the 2009 EP election with those from the most recent general election. In the UK there is a clear difference in turnout between the 2009 EP election and the 2010 general election across all age groups, with people less likely to vote in EP elections in all cases.

However, the magnitude of the difference in turnout is not uniform across age groups. The turnout gap (difference between general election turnout and EP election turnout) appears to be larger among older voters. For older age groups, including those 50 and over, the average turnout gap is 35.8% while for voters younger than 50 it is 29.3% points.

This implies a number of things. Firstly, that across all age groups in the UK there appears to be a greater propensity to vote in national elections as compared to EP elections. Secondly, it suggests that the added motivation for voting in national elections appears to provide more of a boost to older age groups than younger age groups.

Turnout in UK general election 2010 and EP election 2007 by age

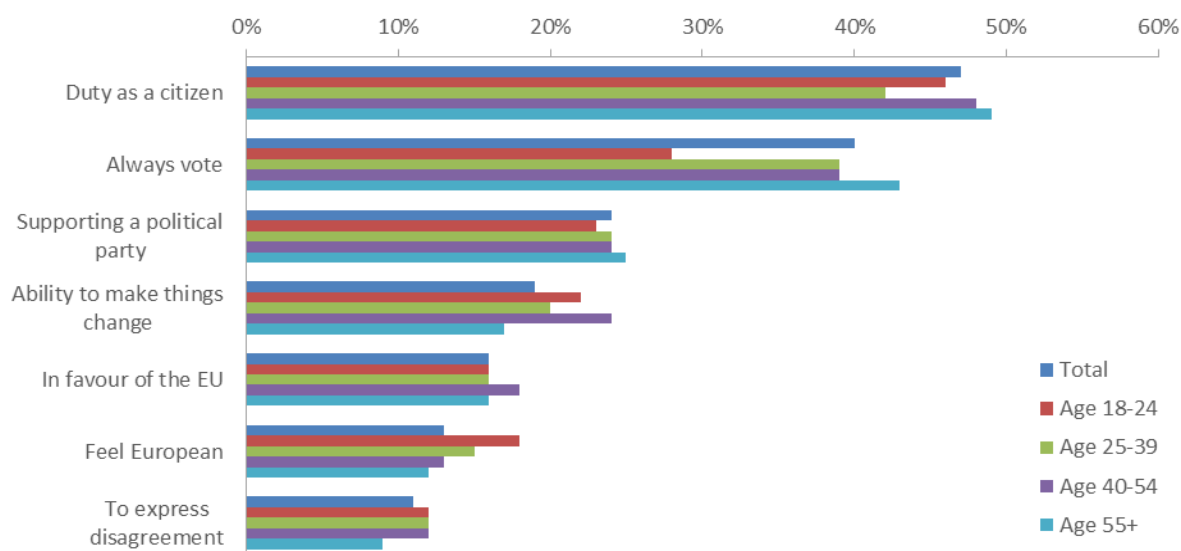


Source: European Parliament Election Study 2009 and 2010 British Election Study

Reasons for voting (by age)

It appears that while turnout differs largely among different age groups, the reasons for voting are broadly similar. For all age groups, the most widely cited reason for voting is that people perceive it as their duty as a citizen. While this is most true of older age groups, this view being most often given by those 55 and older, the variation between age groups is relatively minor. The same is true of the less frequently cited reasons, such as to support a political party the voter feels close to or the feeling that they can make things change.

Main reasons for voting in 2009 EP election



Source: European Parliament, Public Opinion Monitoring Unit

5 Abstainers

Given falling turnout, increasing attention has been devoted towards who is not voting and their reasons for not doing so.

5.1 Profiles

In a study that followed the 2009 EP election, abstainers were categorized by the time at which they made their decision. Interestingly, it seems that different types of abstainers reflect different socio-economic characteristics.

Profiles of different categories of non-voters

Category	Definition	Key characteristics	Reason for abstention
Impulsive Abstainer (26%)	They decided not to vote just a few days before the election or on the day itself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly women • Slightly younger • More educated • Mostly working people, particularly managers • Slightly more rural • Use the internet most frequently • 68% voted in last national election 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadly political reasons, 38% (53% of all non-voters) • Personal reasons, 53% (34% of all non-voters) • Reasons directly related to the EU, 12% (30% of all non-voters)
Unspecified Abstainer (30%)	They did not detail when the decision not to vote was taken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slightly more men • Slightly older • Slightly higher proportion of retired people • Fewer unemployed people and manual workers • Slightly more in urban areas • 73% voted in last national election 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadly political reasons, 25% (53% of all non-voters) • Personal reasons, 50% (34% of all non-voters) • Reasons directly related to the EU, 12% (30% of all non-voters)
Considered Abstainers (26%)	They took the decision not to vote weeks or months before the election	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher proportion of men • The oldest group of abstainers • Few differences in terms of education • More retired people • Slightly more in rural areas • Use the internet the least often • 58% voted in last national election 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadly political reasons, 64% (53% of all non-voters) • Personal reasons, 23% (34% of all non-voters) • Reasons directly related to the EU, 41% (30% of all non-voters)
Unconditional Abstainers (18%)	They never vote	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly men • The youngest group • Less educated • More manual workers and unemployed people • The most urban • 14% voted in last national elections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadly political reasons, 74% (53% of all non-voters) • Personal reasons, 14% (34% of all non-voters) • Reasons directly related to the EU, 29% (30% of all non-voters)

Source: European Parliament, Public Opinion Monitoring Unit

The table above reveals a number of these core characteristics. For example, young, educated women who frequently use the internet are more likely to decide not to vote close to the election, whereas old or retired men are likely to decide well in advance. Perhaps the most challenging group to engage in EP elections are the unconditional abstainers i.e. those who never vote. They account for 18% of non-voters and are typically young, male, less educated, located in urban areas and either working in manual occupations or are unemployed. Unspecified abstainers, those who did not state when the decision was taken, appear to contribute most to the differences in turnout between national and EP elections. 73% of people who fall within this category do vote in national elections compared with impulsive, considered and unconditional abstainers, among whom national turnout is 68%, 58% and 14% respectively.

5.2 Reasons for Abstention

Abstainers appear to take the decision not to vote based on a range of reasons, with these reasons being categorised in one of three broad categories. The most common reasons for not voting were mainly linked to politics in general (53%), followed by personal reasons (34%) and reasons directly related to the EU (30%).

Top 10 reasons cited for not voting in 2009 EP election, EU citizens

Reason	Percentage
1 Lack of trust in/ dissatisfaction with politics generally	28%
2 Not interested in politics as such	17%
3 Vote has no consequences/ vote does not change anything	17%
4 On holiday/ away from home	10%
5 Too busy/ no time/ work	10%
6 Do not know much about the EU/ EP or the EP elections	10%
7 Rarely or never vote	10%
8 Not interested in European matters	9%
9 Not really satisfied with the european Parliament as an institution	8%
10 Sick/ health problems at the time	7%

Source: European Election Studies, 2009 pooled file

- : Broadly political reasons
- : Personal reasons
- : Reasons directly related to the EU

More specifically, the most commonly cited reason for failing to vote in the 2009 EP election was a lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics in general. 28% of the electorate offered this as a reason for not voting, and coupled with 17% stating that they are not interested in politics this shows a broad dissatisfaction with or lack of interest in politics as a whole. This may help explain why both national and EP election turnout has fallen in many countries, as this feeling may not be focused solely on the EP but also towards political participation at the national level.

Top 10 reasons cited for not voting in 2009 EP election, UK citizens

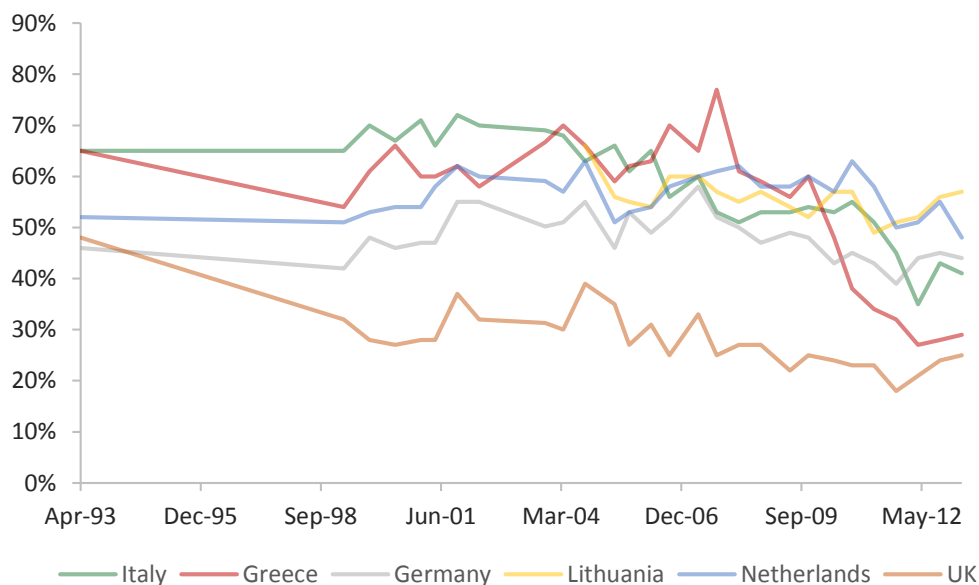
Reason	Percentage
1 Lack of trust in/ dissatisfaction with politics generally	20%
2 Too busy/ no time/ work	15%
3 Not interested in politics as such	14%
4 Rarely or never vote	14%
5 Do not know much about the EU/ EP or the EP elections	11%
6 Vote has no consequences/ vote does not change anything	9%
7 Not interested in European matters	9%
8 Not really satisfied with the european Parliament as an institution	9%
9 On holiday/ away from home	8%
10 Sick/ health problems at the time	4%

Source: European Commission, Post-Electoral Survey 2009

- : Broadly political reasons
- : Personal reasons
- : Reasons directly related to the EU

However, UK citizens appear to show quite different reasons for not voting. While the most frequently cited reason is a lack of trust in/dissatisfaction with politics generally, the proportion who offered this reason is ranked 22nd highest of the EU countries and is 8% points less than the EU average. Furthermore, the second most often cited reason was being too busy, having no time or due to work commitments. The UK and certain other countries (including the Netherlands and Slovakia) hold elections on a workday as opposed to a Sunday. These countries, all of which have turnout below the EU average, more often mention that they had no time or were too busy to vote. 15% of respondents in the UK, 19% in the Netherlands and 20% in Slovakia offered this as a reason. Another notable difference among the UK electorate is those who rarely or never vote. At 14%, more UK respondents gave this as a reason than the EU average, suggesting that many people who didn't vote are habitual abstainers who do not participate in elections.

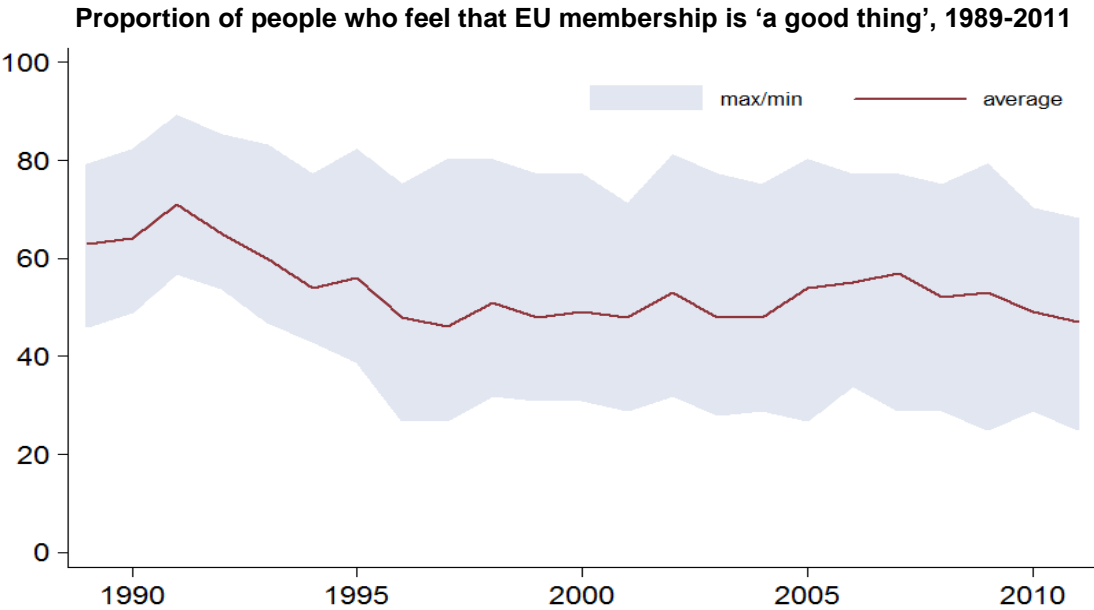
Proportion of people who 'tend to trust' the European Parliament, 1993-2013



Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer survey

Survey evidence since 1993 appears to confirm that trust may play a large role in falling turnout. Among the five countries that have seen the largest reduction in EP election turnout as well as the UK, there is a distinct downward trend in the proportion of those who ‘tend to trust’ the European Parliament. The most significant declines have been seen in Greece and Italy, where ‘trust’ has fallen from 65% to 29% and 65% to 41% respectively. The UK has also seen a significant decline from 48% to 25% over the same period. While decreasing ‘trust’ in the EP has also been seen in Germany, Lithuania and the Netherlands, it has not been to the same degree. Again, this would suggest that there are distinct differences between EU members in their reasons for a decline in EP election turnout.

An alternative reason may be that there has been a shift in public attitudes towards EU membership, and that growing pessimism among voters on the benefits of membership may discourage them from voting.



Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer survey

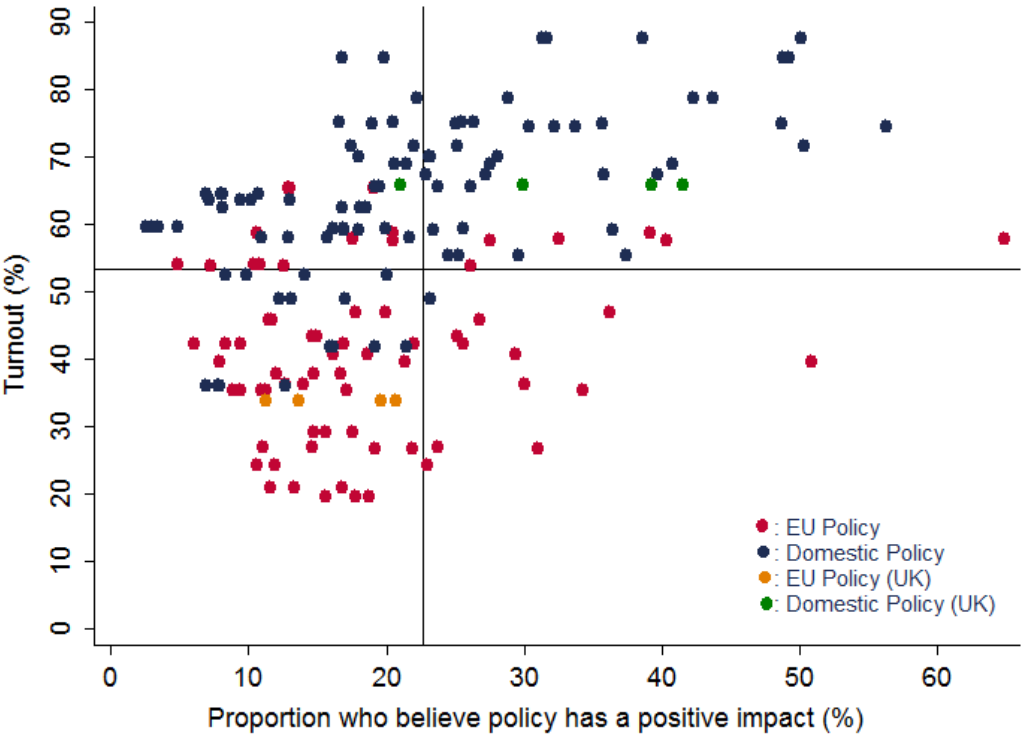
Again, a downward trend is evident, this being true among the both the countries with the highest and lowest turnout as well as on average. It has been suggested that in order for the electorate to turn up and vote, they have to view the perceived benefits of voting as greater than the costs.² Thus, a decrease in the perception of any benefits may contribute to a decrease in turnout.

Intuitively, one would expect the perceived impact of policy to play an important role in helping the electorate recognise the benefits of EU membership and thus encourage them to vote. If people do not believe policy has a positive impact on their lives it would be expected that they would be less likely to vote.

² <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2012/08/09/turnout-european-parliament/>

This seems to be represented in the available data, as the chart below suggests. Each point on the chart represents the proportion within each EU Member State that believes in the positive impact of either domestic or EU policy, plotted against the corresponding turnout in either national or EP elections. This has been done for four different areas of policy including economic policy, immigration policy, health policy and interest rate policy. The chart is separated into four quadrants divided by lines showing the median for perception of policy impact and turnout. The majority of the points corresponding to EU policy fall in the lower left quadrant, implying a relationship between a low proportion of people who believe that EU policy has a positive impact and low turnout in EP elections. The reverse is also somewhat true for domestic policy and national elections.

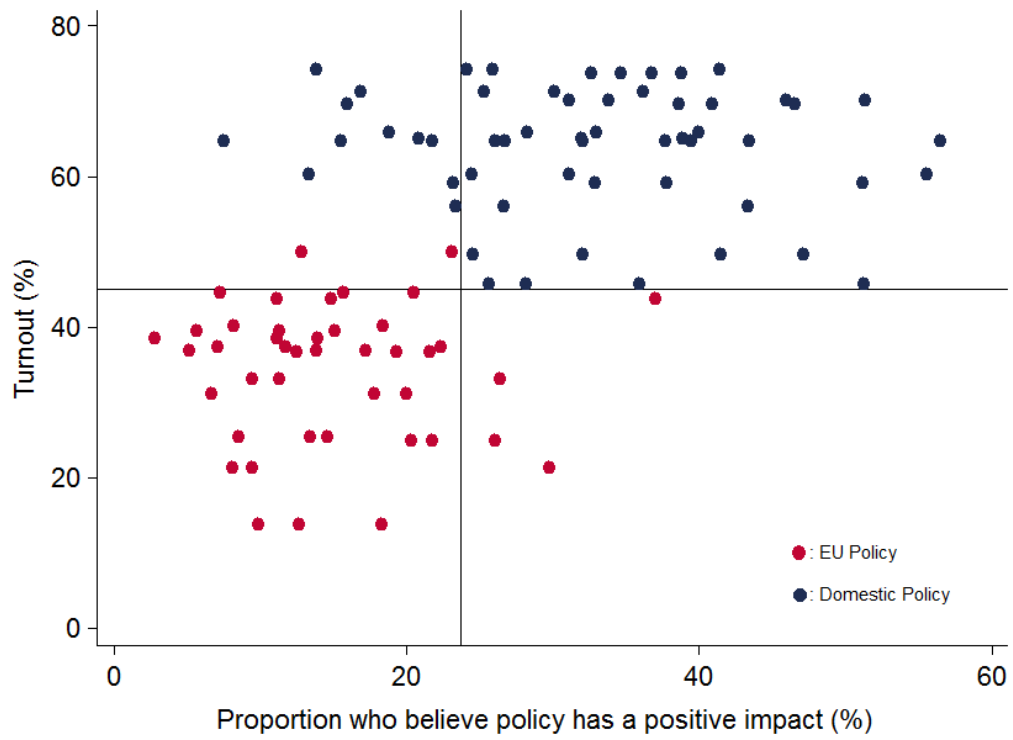
EP and national election turnout and the proportion who believe policy has a positive impact, 2009



Source: European Parliament Election Study 2009

The second chart shows the same relationship applied to the UK only, with the data disaggregated by age group. Here the relationship between perceived policy impact and turnout and the distinction between EU and domestic policy is even more apparent, offering some insight into the relatively low EP election turnout in the UK.

EP and national election turnout and the proportion who believe policy has a positive impact in the UK, 2009



Source: European Parliament Election Study 2009