

Indicator 4: Electoral participation

How far and how equally do citizens participate in elections that determine the composition of the legislature and appointments to leading executive offices?

Amongst relevant measures of electoral participation are: voter turnout in elections, that is, turnout in European parliamentary elections, comparison of turnout in European and national elections, and proportion of voters who participate in both national and European elections, national elections only, European elections only, or neither (4.1); reasons for voting in European elections (4.2); information and awareness about European elections (4.3); and feeling of closeness to a political party (4.4).

4.1. Voter turnout in elections

Table 4.1.a. simply shows how many voters took part in each European election since 1979. Although the powers of the European Parliament have increased – notably, through the introduction of extensive powers to co-decide legislation with the Council and a veto on the appointment of both the President of the European Commission and the College of Commissioners – voter participation has declined in each European election since 1979. There is also huge variation across member states in how many voters participate.

Table 4.1.a. Voter participation in European elections since 1979

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009
AT	-	-	-	(67.73)	49.40	42.43	45.97
BE	91.36	92.09	90.73	90.66	91.05	90.81	90.39
BG	-	-	-	-	-	(29.20)	38.99
CY	-	-	-	-	-	72.50	59.40
CZ	-	-	-	-	-	28.30	28.20
DE	65.73	56.76	62.28	60.02	45.19	43.00	43.30
DK	47.82	52.38	46.17	52.92	50.46	47.89	59.54
EE	-	-	-	-	-	26.83	43.90
EL	(81.48)	80.59	80.03	73.18	70.25	63.22	52.61
ES	-	(68.52)	54.71	59.14	63.05	45.14	44.90
FI	-	-	-	(57.60)	30.14	39.43	40.30
FR	60.71	56.72	48.80	52.71	46.76	42.76	40.63
HU	-	-	-	-	-	38.50	36.31
IE	63.61	47.56	68.28	43.98	50.21	58.58	58.64
IT	85.65	82.47	81.07	73.60	69.76	71.72	65.05
LT	-	-	-	-	-	48.38	20.98
LU	88.91	88.79	87.39	88.55	87.27	91.35	90.75
LV	-	-	-	-	-	41.34	53.70
MT	-	-	-	-	-	82.39	78.79
NL	58.12	50.88	47.48	35.69	30.02	39.26	36.75
PL	-	-	-	-	-	20.87	24.70
PT	-	(72.42)	51.10	35.54	39.93	38.60	36.78
RO	-	-	-	-	-	(29.47)	27.67
SE	-	-	-	(41.63)	38.84	37.85	45.53
SI	-	-	-	-	-	28.35	28.33
SK	-	-	-	-	-	16.97	19.64
UK	32.35	32.57	36.37	36.43	24.0	38.52	34.70
EU ave	61.99	58.98	58.41	56.67	49.51	45.47	43.00

Note

Figures in brackets show European elections held in member states which joined the Union during the course of a European Parliament.

It is, of course, possible that low participation in European elections is just the product of a general problem of voter turnout in all kinds of election. The special Eurobarometer report for the 2009 elections (EB 71.3: 12) notes that there is, indeed, a high correlation (0.78) between individual voters who turn out to national elections and those who vote in European elections. Yet even the high correlation noted by the Eurobarometer translates into a significant gap in aggregate levels of participation in the two elections.

Table 4.1.b. shows that on average across the Union, 25.4 per cent fewer voters participated in the 2004 European elections than in immediately prior national elections. In 2009 the gap was much the same: 24.6 per cent. Moreover, variation across member states is huge. In the Netherlands, for example, the difference in participation in the two elections exceeded 40 per cent in both 2004 and 2009.

Table 4.1.b. Voter participation in European and national parliamentary elections compared

Turnout in European and immediately prior national parliamentary elections ¹		
	2009	2004
BE	- 0.91 (91.30→90.81)	- 1.09 (91.90→90.81)
LU	- 0.95 (91.70→90.75)	+ 4.85 (86.50→91.35)
RO	- 2.53 (30.20→27.67)	-
LV	- 7.28 (60.98→53.70)	- 30.06 (71.40→41.34)
IE	- 8.39 (67.03→58.64)	- 3.99 (62.57→58.58)
MT	- 14.51 (93.30→78.79)	- 13.31 (95.70→82.39)
IT	- 15.42 (80.47→65.05)	- 8.28 (80.00→71.72)
BG	- 16.81 (55.80→38.90)	-
EE	- 17.10 (61.00→43.90)	- 31.41 (58.24→26.83)
FR	- 19.79 (60.42→40.63)	- 21.66 (64.42→42.76)
EL	- 21.54 (74.15→52.61)	- 12.38 (75.60→63.22)
EU ave	- 24.60	- 25.40
UK	- 26.60 (61.30→34.70)	- 20.88 (59.40→38.52)
DK	- 27.05 (86.59→59.54)	- 39.11 (87.00→47.89)
FI	- 27.60 (67.90→40.30)	- 30.27 (69.70→39.43)
LT	- 27.60 (48.58→20.98)	+ 2.30 (46.08→48.38)
HU	- 28.08 (64.39→36.31)	- 35.00 (73.50→38.50)
PT	- 28.24 (65.02→36.78)	- 22.88 (61.48→38.60)
PL	- 29.35 (53.88→24.53)	- 19.70 (40.57→20.87)
CY	- 29.60 (89.00→59.40)	- 19.30 (91.80→72.50)
ES	- 30.42 (75.32→44.90)	- 30.52 (75.66→45.14)
AT	- 32.83 (78.80→45.97)	- 38.05 (80.48→42.43)
DE	- 34.40 (77.70→43.30)	- 36.10 (79.10→43.00)
SI	- 34.77 (63.10→28.33)	- 32.30 (60.65→28.35)
SK	- 35.03 (54.67→19.64)	- 53.09 (70.06→16.97)
CZ	- 36.27 (64.47→28.20)	- 29.70 (58.00→28.30)
SE	- 36.43 (81.99→45.53)	- 42.25 (80.10→37.85)
NL	- 43.65 (80.40→36.75)	- 40.74 (80.00→39.26)

Note

¹ Participation in European elections minus participation in immediately prior national elections. Numbers in brackets indicate voter turnout in national and European elections, respectively.

Source

Special Eurobarometer 320/Wave 71.3, 'Post-electoral survey 2009', June-July 2009: 12.

The last table, Table 4.1.c. shows the difference in *aggregate* participation of voters in national and European elections in each member state. It is, however, also possible to investigate the relationship between voting in the two kinds of election at the level of *individual* voters. Thus the study of the 2009 European elections conducted by Eurobarometer asks respondents whether they voted (1) in both the European elections and the last national election, (2) whether they voted only in the European elections, (3) whether they voted only in the last national election, and (4) whether they voted in neither. Perhaps the key finding is that only three per cent of voters voted in the European elections only. This suggests that turnout to European elections is dependent on turnout to national elections. Only where voters are prepared to extend the habit of voting in national elections to participation in European elections will they vote in the latter. Note, though, that even this is only a necessary, and not a sufficient condition, for participation in European elections. There are many who vote in national elections only.

Table 4.1.c. Proportion of voters who participate in both national and European elections, national elections only, European elections only or neither

	Yes, did vote in European elections	No, did not vote in European elections
Yes, did vote in national elections	39 %	33 %
No, did not vote in national elections	3 %	22 %

Source

Special Eurobarometer 320/Wave 71.3, 'Post-electoral survey 2009', June-July 2009: 18.

4.2. Reasons for voting in European elections

The Eurobarometer study of the 2009 European elections also tried to investigate more closely the reasons for voting in those elections. Respondents were offered a range of possible motivations from which they could choose up to a maximum of three. The results demonstrate that turnout to European elections depend overwhelmingly on (a) a feeling of civic obligation that voting is a duty of citizenship and (b) habitual behaviour amongst citizens who always vote as a matter of course in any election for which they are registered. Neither of these, however, is a feature of the European Union's own political system. Indeed, even the third most important factor – feeling of proximity to a political party – depends mainly on features of domestic political arenas to the extent that it is national parties which structure voter choice in European elections. Only the fourth, fifth and sixth most important reasons for voting relate directly to the European Union itself. Note here that the number of those who vote because the EU is important in their daily lives is even lower than those who take part in European elections because they identify with Europe.

Also of note are important variations across member states. Thus the extent to which participation in European elections benefits from a perception that voting is a civic duty varies from Cyprus (78 per cent), Malta (74 per cent) and Romania (73 per cent) on the one hand to the Czech Republic (29 per cent), Hungary (30 per cent), and Italy and Austria (both 35 per cent) on the other. Likewise the positive contribution of parties is nowhere very high. Yet the willingness of people to vote because they feel close to a political party varies from Bulgaria (45 per cent), Cyprus (42 per cent) and Slovakia (42 per cent) to Portugal (10 per cent), Poland (14 per cent) and Spain and Luxembourg (both 17 per cent).

Table 4.2. Reasons for voting in European elections

	Duty: It is your duty as a citizen	Habit: You always vote	Partisanship: To support the political party you feel close to	Effectiveness of voting: You can make things change by voting in European elections	Identification with Europe: You feel European/like a citizen of the EU	Importance of EU: The EU plays an important part in your everyday life
AT	35	31	30	26	16	7
BE	37	31	24	10	13	6
BG	63	43	45	18	10	3
CY	78	53	42	17	5	10
CZ	29	48	23	17	15	5
DE	40	42	34	23	23	7
DK	64	59	21	24	17	9
EE	55	46	18	13	15	3
EL	60	29	31	13	8	6
ES	57	27	17	21	6	6
FI	54	54	20	18	16	5
FR	65	44	18	20	23	4
HU	30	44	30	23	9	5
IE	68	47	19	19	5	8
IT	35	39	22	19	10	8
LT	62	51	23	12	10	3
LU	60	19	17	21	24	9
LV	61	34	20	15	8	2
MT	74	34	36	22	11	10
NL	43	49	31	22	18	6
PL	44	34	14	10	13	3
PT	43	43	10	15	6	5
RO	73	33	31	18	7	8
SE	71	39	29	42	14	5
SI	63	47	26	15	11	5
SK	63	34	41	22	13	6
UK	41	51	21	12	4	4
EU ave	47	40	24	19	13	6

Source

Special Eurobarometer 320/Wave 71.3, 'Post-electoral survey 2009', June-July 2009: 54.

4.3. Information and participation in European elections

Lack of information is sometimes given as a reason for not voting in European elections. Even where it does not deter participation altogether, an informed choice is presumably preferable to one based on slender information. Given that European elections are contested in member states, it is useful to get some measure of how 'information rich' is each national debate. The Eurobarometer study of the 2009 elections provides two useful measures. On the one hand it asks respondents whether they simply felt they had enough information to vote. On the other hand, it asks them whether they were even aware at all of a 'campaign encouraging people to vote' in European elections.

Table 4.3. compares the answer to those questions across member states with the eventual levels of voter participation in the 2009 European elections. It shows the ranking of each member state by (a) information, (b) awareness and (c) participation. Belgium and

Luxembourg are excluded from the ranking, since voting is compulsory in those countries. In the case of several countries the three rankings are fairly closely – if far from exactly – connected. However, there are some anomalies. It is possible for voters to feel informed without that producing high levels of voter participation. Slovakia is an example of this. Conversely, Italy provides an example of high levels of participation in spite of low voter awareness of the campaign.

Table 4.3. Information, awareness and participation in the 2009 European elections

	Those claiming to have had sufficient information to vote		Awareness of election campaign		Participation	
	Per cent	Rating	Per cent	Rating	Per cent	Rating
MT	90.0	1	89.0	1	78.8	1
CY	79.0	2	78.0	7=	59.4	4
LU ¹	75.0		74.0		90.8	
EE	71.0	3	80.0	4	43.8	11
FI	70.0	4	71.0	15	38.6	15
BE ¹	69.0		53.0		90.4	
EL	68.0	5	66.0	18=	52.6	7
IE	67.0	6	72.0	12=	58.6	5
LV	66.0	7	66.0	18=	53.7	6
SK	63.0	8	82.0	3	19.6	25
AT	62.0	9	72.0	12=	46.0	8
DK	60.0	10=	79.0	5=	59.5	3
IT	60.0	10=	60.0	22	65.0	2
SI	60.0	10=	75.0	10=	28.4	20
HU	59.0	13	79.0	5=	36.3	18
SE	58.0	14	86.0	2	45.5	9
LT	57.0	15	72.0	12=	21.0	24
DE	56.0	16	69.0	16	43.3	12
ES	54.0	17	76.0	9	44.9	10
EU ave	53.0		67.0		43.0	
NL	53.0	18	78.0	7=	36.8	16=
BG	49.0	19=	45.0	25	39.0	14
CZ	49.0	19=	75.0	10=	28.2	21
FR	49.0	19=	66.0	18=	40.6	13
RO	49.0	19=	62.0	23	27.7	22
PT	44.0	23	67.0	17	36.8	16=
PL	42.0	24	66.0	18=	24.5	23
UK	42.0	25	54.0	24	34.8	19

Notes

Respondents were asked the following two questions: (1) Did you have all the necessary information in order to choose for whom you were going to vote in European elections? (2) Do you recollect a campaign encouraging people to vote in recent European elections?

¹ Belgium and Luxembourg are omitted from the rankings because they use compulsory voting.

Source

Special Eurobarometer 320/Wave 71.3, 'Post-electoral survey 2009', June-July 2009: 39, 42.

4.4. Party identification and participation in European elections

The evidence shows clearly that voters who identify closely with political parties are much more likely to vote in European elections. Eurobarometer 71.3 notes there is a 0.56 correlation between feeling of closeness to a political party and participation in European elections. There is also evidence that politicisation matters. Abstention is much higher amongst those who are self-positioned in the centre of the left-right scale (59%) than amongst those who are polarised to the left (45%) or right (39%) (EB 71.3: 15).

Possible implications of this include the following. First, if parties are key mobilisers, participation in European elections could benefit from reforms that increased confidence in political parties. Second, participation could likewise benefit from changes that motivated political parties to contest European elections more energetically and with more differentiated platforms.

Table 4.4. Closeness to a political party and participation in 2009 European elections

	Yes, did vote in the last European election	No, did not vote in last European election
Yes, do feel close to a political party	63 %	36 %
No, do not feel close to a political party	25 %	72 %

Source

Special Eurobarometer 320/Wave 71.3, 'Post-electoral survey 2009', June-July 2009: 36.