

A turnout like in 2009 but with many “Europes” within the EU

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The European Parliament (EP) elections that took place between the 22nd and the 25th of May 2014 (depending on the country) have gained a much higher relevance than in the past. This can be understood by looking at how many European citizens turned out to choose their representatives at the EP. In the field of electoral studies, EP elections have always been considered as a second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), i.e., elections in which the stakes are lower (or are perceived as lower) compared to general elections (in which the formation of the national government is at stake). As a consequence, turnout is lower compared to national elections. As already mentioned in a previous article,² over time, there has been a decrease in the turnout: in 1979, 62% of the voters went to the polls while 43% turned out in 2009, with a decrease of 19 percentage points. The first figure of these elections is that this decreasing trend in the turnout has stopped. In the entire European Union, the turnout has been 43.1%, which is almost identical to the percentage in 2009 (see Figure 1). This figure represents already a signal of how these EP elections have triggered an interest among EU citizens. However, the average figure at the EU level might conceal very different situations. It is therefore necessary to look at the turnout in the single EU countries and to compare it with the 2009 percentages.

Table 1 shows turnout rates for each EU country in 2009 and 2014, in addition to the difference in the turnout between the two elections. The first figure is the high heterogeneity, ranging from countries with very low levels of

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² See Maggini in this volume.

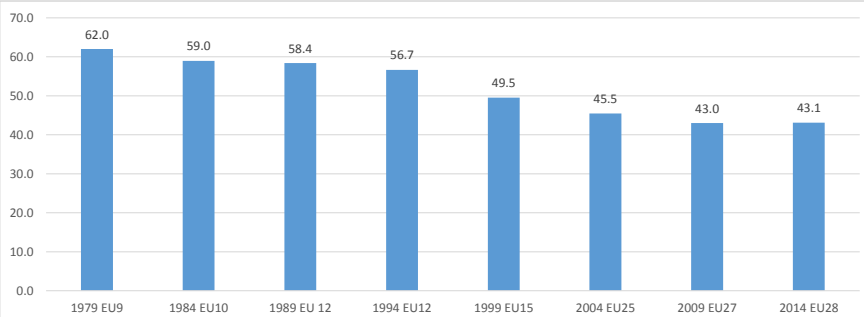
turnout to countries with very high levels. With regards to 2014, turnout levels significantly above the European average are highlighted in bold. Among the countries with the highest turnout levels, Belgium and Luxembourg stand out with around 90% of voters going to the polls, in line with the levels of 2009. These figures are certainly linked to the fact that voting is compulsory in these two countries, but fairly high levels of turnout can be observed also in Malta (74.8%), Greece (60%), and Italy (57.2%). Clearly above the average EU turnout are also Denmark, Ireland, Germany, and Sweden.

Among the countries with a low turnout (significantly below the average of 43.1% at the EU level) are most of the Eastern European countries, in particular, Czech Republic, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Croatia (a country that was not member of the EU in 2009) with turnout levels ranging from 13% to 30%. Low turnout levels can be observed also in Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Portugal, the Netherlands, and in one of the countries that during the first EP elections was already part of the EU, namely, the United Kingdom. In these countries, the turnout ranges from 32% to around 37%.

A comparison with 2009 confirms this high level of heterogeneity. There are countries in which turnout increases and others in which it decreases. Germany, France, the Netherlands, Greece, Spain, Sweden, Finland, Lithuania, and Romania belong to the first case. In some of these countries, however, turnout has increased only by few decimals of percentage points, thus remaining substantially stable. The countries in which the increase has been substantial are Sweden (+3.4 percentage points), Romania (+4.5), Germany (+4.8), Greece (+7.4), and especially Lithuania, where turnout has increased by a staggering 23.9 percentage points. In all other countries, turnout has either remained stable or decreased. In particular, decreases higher than 5 percentage points can be found in Slovakia (-6.6), Ireland (-7), Hungary (-7.4), Estonia (-7.4), Italy (-7.8), Czech Republic (-10), Cyprus (-15.4), and Latvia (-23.7). Thus, among the founders of the European Union, only Italy reveals a significant decrease in the turnout although it still remains among the countries where more citizens go to vote not only to national but also to European elections. The decrease in the turnout in Italy might be linked to the growing disaffection and disenchantment of the Italian electorate towards politicians—a trend that has been confirmed by numerous opinion polls. In this sense, over time EP elections in Italy tend to converge towards what has been postulated by theories of second-order elections with regards to turnout.

In line with what has been stated so far, the average turnout figure at the EU level concealed highly different levels of turnout for each country compared to 2009. As an additional evidence, the average turnout at the last two EP elections divided by country groups has been provided. Figure 2 shows

Figure 1 – Turnout in the European Union from 1979 to 2014 (%)



the average turnout for four country groups: the nine original members³ (all from Western Europe), the three countries from Southern Europe that joined the EU in the 80s (Greece, Spain, and Portugal), the three countries from centre-north Europe that joined the EU in the 90s (Sweden, Austria, and Finland), and, finally, the countries from Eastern Europe that joined the EU in the early 2000s (in this group, Malta has also been added even if it doesn't belong to the Eastern part). The first figure that comes out is the fact that the nine original members of the EU show in both elections a significantly higher turnout in comparison to the other groups: in 2009, the average turnout was 57.8% and in the recent European election has remained substantially stable (56.6%).

As already mentioned in another article,⁴ turnout in the Southern European countries (Italy excluded) has declined since 1999, thus widening the gap with the nine original members. Nowadays, this declining trend has stopped, and the average turnout has increased by 2 percentage points, reaching 46.6%. This result has been certainly driven by the significant increase in the turnout in Greece, which is one of the European countries most hit by the economic crisis and the austerity policies imposed by the EU. The impact of austerity policies decided in Brussels on everyday life has probably heightened the perception of the importance of the stakes in these EP elections, in which radical-left party Syriza—whose leader, Alexis Tsipras, run for the presidency of the European Commission to challenge austerity policies—has succeeded.

³ At the first elections in 1979, the country members were Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland.

⁴ See Maggini in this volume.

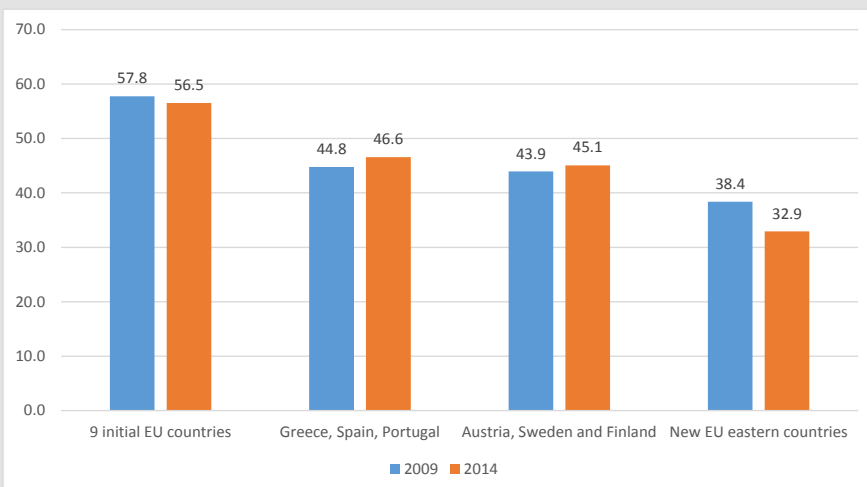
Table 1 – Turnout rates for each EU country over time (%)

	2009	2014	Diff.
 Austria	46.0	45.4	-0.6
 Belgium	90.4	90.4	0.0
 Bulgaria	39.0	35.5	-3.5
 Croatia	–	25.2	–
 Cyprus	59.4	44.0	-15.4
 Czech Republic	28.2	18.2	-10.0
 Denmark	59.5	56.4	-3.1
 Estonia	43.9	36.5	-7.4
 Finland	40.3	40.9	0.6
 France	40.6	43.5	2.9
 Germany	43.3	48.1	4.8
 Greece	52.6	60.0	7.4
 Hungary	36.3	28.9	-7.4
 Ireland	58.6	51.6	-7.0
 Italy	65.1	57.2	-7.8
 Latvia	53.7	30.0	-23.7
 Lithuania	21.0	44.9	23.9
 Luxembourg	90.8	90.0	-0.8
 Malta	78.8	74.8	-4.0
 Netherlands	36.8	37.3	0.5
 Poland	24.5	23.8	-0.7
 Portugal	36.8	33.9	-2.9
 Romania	27.7	32.2	4.5
 Slovakia	19.6	13.1	-6.6
 Slovenia	28.4	21.0	-7.4
 Spain	44.9	45.8	0.9
 Sweden	45.5	48.9	3.4
 United Kingdom	34.7	34.2	-0.5
 EU Total	43.0	43.1	0.1

Source: TNS/Scytll in cooperation with the European Parliament and Ministries of Internal Affairs

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Figure 2 – Average turnout at the EP elections by country groups (% , 2009–2014)



N.B. Percentages are unweighted averages of turnout at country level.

The average turnout in the other three-country group (Austria, Sweden, and Finland) is almost the same as the turnout in the Southern European countries, and has fairly increased compared to 2009, in line with an increasing trend started in 2004. Finally, the average turnout in the Eastern European country group is clearly the lowest (32.9%) and has gone down in comparison to 2009 (when the group didn't include Croatia), with a decrease of 5.5 percentage points. In 2014, the difference between the group with the highest average turnout (the nine original members) and the group with lowest average turnout (the Eastern European countries) accounts for a remarkable 23.6 percentage points (while in 2009, it was 19.4 percentage points). Therefore, it can be stated not only that there is a significant gap in the turnout between the group of the original members and the group of the new Eastern European countries but also that this gap has widened compared to 2009.

In conclusion, the analysis conducted so far has shown that there are different “Europes” within the EU when it comes to electoral participation. In some countries, turnout has increased compared to 2009. This can represent a signal of citizens' increased interest in EP elections, which, over time, might lose their feature of second-order elections and approach the turnout levels of general elections. In other countries, however, not only turnout is very low but it has even diminished also compared to previous EP elections. EU politics continues to be perceived by many Europeans as something that is not worth mobilizing for when the day of the elections for the European Parliament comes.

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