

The evolution of turnout in European elections from 1979 to 2009

Nicola Maggini

7 April 2014¹

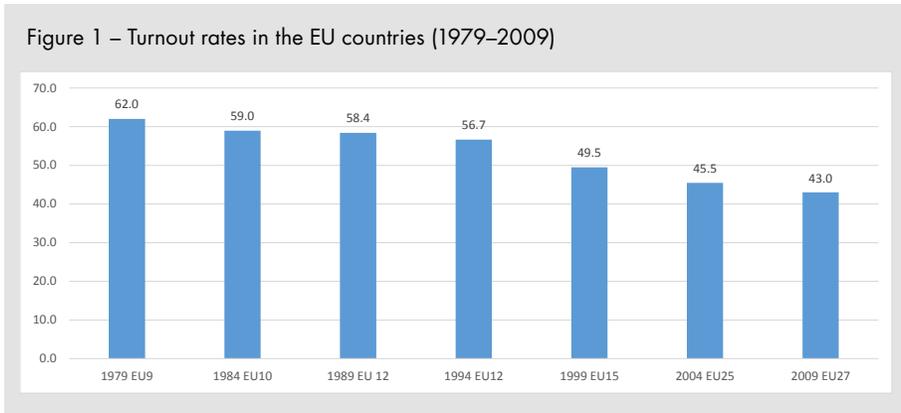
The European elections to be held between 22 and 25 May 2014 (depending on the country) may acquire, according to many observers, a centrality and significance much wider than in the past. To understand it, it is worth looking at how many Europeans go to the polls to elect their representatives in the European Parliament. In fact, in the field of electoral studies, European elections have always been regarded as “second-order” elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), i.e., elections where the stakes are lower—or perceived as such—than in the general elections—when the competition aims at the formation of a government of their own country—and consequently, the turnout is lower than in national elections.

To understand the results in terms of electoral participation of the upcoming European elections, it is therefore necessary to have a clear picture of the historical evolution of turnout levels in the course of the seven European elections, which were held between 1979 and 2009. Figure 1 shows, diachronically and in percentages, the turnout at each election in the EU countries. As it appears, there is a clear downward trend over time in the rates of participation; it goes from 62% of voters in 1979 to 43% in 2009, namely, a decline of more than 19 percentage points. The biggest drop is recorded between the elections of 1994 and those of 1999 when the percentage of voters in the EU declined from 56.7% to 49.5%. Therefore, since 1999 onwards, the absolute majority of Europeans have deserted the polls, further weakening the democratic legitimacy of the European institutions. This trend regarding the overall decline in turnout rates—yet not starting from particularly high levels— may actually

¹ This article was originally published in Italian on the CISE website. It appears in English for the first time in this book.

hide highly heterogeneous levels and trends of participation characterizing the different countries. In fact, it has to be emphasized that as during the historical period taken into account, the European Union has been enlarged to a growing number of member states, each carrying its own “tradition” in terms of voter turnout. At the first election of 1979, there were nine member states: Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland. Since the 1984 elections, Greece—who had joined the EU in 1981—also joined the group. At the elections of 1989 and 1994, 12 member states participated, given the entrance into the EU of Spain and Portugal in 1986. Member states then increased to 15 in the 1999 elections, thanks to the entry into the EU of Austria, Sweden, and Finland in 1995. Finally, since 2004, the citizens of Eastern European countries also took part in the European elections. In particular, 10 countries have joined the EU in 2004 (Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Cyprus, and Malta) and two in 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania). Hence, from the initial nine countries in 1979, the number has increased to 27 countries in 2009; as a consequence, political heterogeneity—also in terms of electoral participation—has increased in the EU in the time series considered here.

Table 1 reports turnout rates in each EU country over time. As it appears, the heterogeneity is very high; turnout values range from very high levels in certain countries to particularly low levels in other ones. Among the former find their place without any doubt Belgium and Luxembourg, with a turnout rate always around 90% between 1979 and 2009. This circumstance is undoubtedly due to the fact that in both countries, voting is compulsory. Quite high levels of turnout albeit with a decreasing trend over time are registered also in Greece—particularly until 1994—and, especially, in Malta and Italy. The second group of countries is contained most of the Eastern European countries: Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia; in particular, the participation ranges from 17% to about 30%. Low levels of voter turnout are registered also from the beginning in one of the countries that during the first EP elections was already part of the EU, namely, the United Kingdom (which stood always below 40% of the voters). In general, there is a downward trend in voter turnout over time, but this trend seems to have stabilized in the 2000s: most of the countries have reached a historic minimum in 1999 or 2004. There are some exceptions: France, Italy, Portugal, Malta, Cyprus, Hungary, and Lithuania have reached their historic minimum in 2009 (we do not consider countries with few decimal points of difference compared to 2004, and it should be noted that Malta, Cyprus, Hungary, and Lithuania took part in only two European elections). It should be noted, however, that the long-term trend seems to be that of a homogenization towards lower turnout levels. Finally, regarding the Italian case, it stands out the fact that until the European elections of 1989 (included), participation is very high, above 80%.



Italy in general, as mentioned earlier, is among the countries characterized by higher levels of turnout.

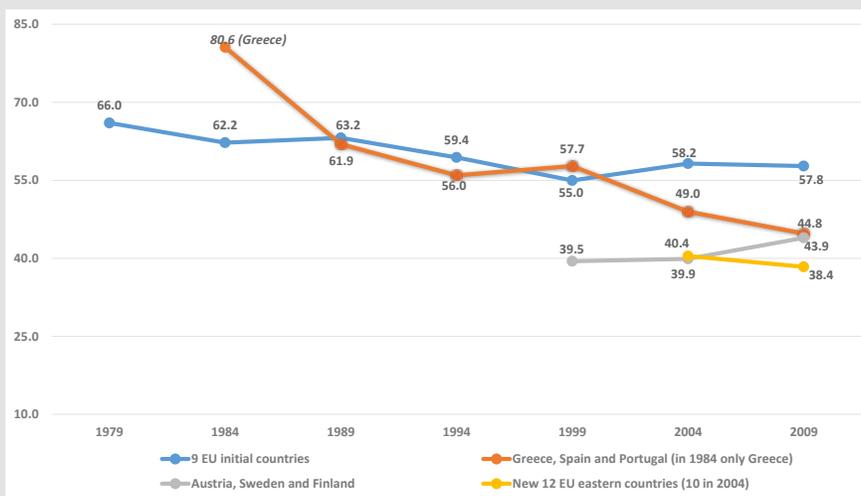
According to what has been said insofar, the value of electoral participation calculated in the European Union—as presented at the beginning of the article—was conflating levels and trends of participation differing sharply across countries. As further evidence of this fact, we reported the average turnout in the European elections separated by groups of countries. Figure 2 shows the average turnout across time, for four groups of countries: the nine initial countries (all being part of Western Europe), the three Southern European countries that joined the EU in the 1980s (Greece, Spain, and Portugal), the three countries of Central and Northern Europe that joined the EU in the 1990s (Sweden, Austria, and Finland), and, finally, the 12 Eastern European countries that joined the EU in the early 2000s (counting in this group Malta as well though not being in the East). The first fact that emerges is that looking at turnout rates for separate groups of countries, the almost linear decrease shown in Figure 1—considering the whole EU—cannot be detected. The nine initial countries register a starting average turnout of 66% in 1979 and reach their historic minimum not in 2009 but in 1999 (55% turnout); after 1999, turnout increases slightly, standing around 58%. The countries of Southern Europe (excluding Italy) start from a level of electoral participation very similar to the initial values of the first nine countries, namely, 62% in 1989 (in 1984 instead, there was only Greece, with a rate of 80.6%, well above that of the group of nine countries). During the 1990s, the average turnout in the three Southern countries considered is quite similar to that of the nine countries and in 1999 becomes even higher (57.7% vs. 55%). The gap between the two groups of countries in terms of electoral participation spread in the last two elections: in 2004, the participation in the three Southern countries is lower by almost 10 percentage points compared to the nine countries, and in

Table 1 – Turnout rates by EU country across time (%)

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

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Figure 2 – Average turnout rate at the European elections by group of countries (1979–2009)



Note: Reported turnout rates represent non-weighted averages of eligible voters at country level.

2009, it is smaller by 13 percentage points (touching the lowest level of 44.8%). The other group of three countries considered (Austria, Sweden, and Finland) starts from a very low level of participation (39.5% in 1999) and is significantly lower both than the group of nine countries and the three Southern countries (a difference of nearly 20 percentage points). However, the turnout trend in this group of countries is a slight increasing, reaching 43.9% in 2009, and then actually equalling the average turnout of the three Southern countries. Finally, the average turnout rate of the group of Eastern European countries is the lowest and decreases slightly between 2004 (when 40.4% was almost equal to that of the group consisting of Sweden, Austria, and Finland) and 2009 (the lowest value, 38.4%). In 2009, the difference between the group of countries with the highest turnout rate (the nine initial countries) and the group of countries with the lowest turnout (Eastern European countries) reached 19.4 percentage points. In conclusion, it can be argued that the sharp decline in turnout occurred since 1999 in the EU; it is caused particularly by the decline in the participation of the three Southern countries that joined the EU in the 1980s and—even more—by the entry into the EU of countries with low turnout levels at the European elections (Austria, Sweden, Finland, and Eastern European countries in general). In contrast, the average participation rate of the group of the nine initial countries remains fairly stable over time.

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