

# **THE 2019 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: HAVE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS ENTERED A NEW DIMENSION?**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The European Parliament's Post-Election Eurobarometer is one of the most comprehensive quantitative surveys publicly available analysing citizens voting behaviour and motivation in European Parliament elections. As five years ago<sup>1</sup>, the 2019 post-electoral survey was conducted by Kantar for the European Parliament in the weeks following the recent European Parliament elections from 23–26 May 2019.

Starting from the significant increase in voter turnout in the 2019 elections, this report looks in detail at who voted in the 2019 European elections, analysing the variations between EU countries, socio-demographic and socio-professional groups. The much higher turnout in many countries is shown to be stemming from the greater participation among younger people. A sense of civic duty has become more ingrained in Europeans when they think about European Parliament elections, while increasingly favourable views of the EU have also impacted on voter turnout.

For the first time, the report, drafted by experts from Kantar, Parliament's official Eurobarometer contractor, also analyses respondents' concrete voting decisions (asked as voting recall questions in the survey) in the context of voting behaviour and motivation, with the full data volumes allowing for unrestricted further cross-examination with all other Eurobarometer key indicators.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/post-election-survey-2014>

## The highest turnout in the last 20 years

The overall turnout at the recent European Parliament elections was 50.6%. This is the **highest turnout since the 1994 elections** and is a striking increase from 2014 (when the turnout was 42.6%).

The overall increase in turnout is mirrored in **19 Member States**, with **large increases** since 2014 in Poland, Romania, Spain, Austria, Hungary and Germany, as well as substantial increases in countries with the lowest turnout, such as Slovakia and Czechia. Turnout fell in eight countries, but by no more than 3 percentage points.

Despite the increase in turnout, large differences remain between individual Member States, ranging from 88% in Belgium to 23% in Slovakia. It is important to bear in mind that voting is compulsory in five countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Cyprus, and Greece.

Although the turnout in 2019 was higher among all groups of the population, the increase was led by the **younger generation**, with large increases among people aged under 25 (+14 pp) and aged 25–39 (+12 pp). The cross-section of voters in 2019 appears to be **more highly educated** than in 2014, while the declared level of **political interest** has increased among both voters and abstainers. This insight offers a promising starting point for further increasing turnout in future years.

## Most voters made the decision to vote well in advance of the elections

The vast majority of voters made the decision to vote some time before the elections: four in five (79%) say they always vote, and a further 15% decided at least a few weeks before the elections. Just 6% decided to vote only on the day of the elections or a few days beforehand, although this was higher in Czechia, Croatia, Slovakia and Cyprus.

Two thirds (66%) of voters in the recent European Parliament elections say that they were **always sure which party to vote for**, while a third (33%) say that they hesitated between different parties. Analysis indicates that citizens voting for Green parties were more likely to hesitate between different parties, while citizens voting for far-right or anti-European parties were more likely to be sure of their decision.

The choice of party was made either based on party's proposals on **European issues** (43%) or **national issues** (42%). The other main reasons for choosing a party were that the respondent always votes for them (40%) and because of the party's proposals on specific issues (38%).

The decision to vote for a particular party or candidate was usually made at least a few months before the European Parliament elections (43% always vote for the same party, while 23% decided 'a few months ago'). One in six (17%) only decided in the days before the election or on the day itself. These findings are very similar to those seen in 2014.

In general, older voters are more likely to have been sure of their chosen party, and to have always intended to vote, whereas younger people decided to vote closer to the elections and were less sure for whom to vote.

## Civic duty and favourable opinions of the EU have gained in prominence as reasons to vote

The most common reason for voting in the recent European Parliament elections was because people felt it was their **duty as a citizen** (52%), and this has gained in importance since 2014 (+11 pp). Compared with 2014, respondents are also more likely to say that they are **in favour of the EU** (25%, +11 pp) and because **voting can make things change** (18%, +6 pp). Other main reasons were that the **respondent always votes** (35%, -6pp) and to **support the political party** they feel close to (22%, no change).

Overall, turnout has been boosted by a greater sense of **civic duty**, reflecting a greater importance and salience of the recent elections, and an indication that European Parliament elections are now viewed more as a central part of democratic life. The rise in the sentiment that **voting 'can make things change'** also suggests an enhanced sense of importance in these elections, and a recognition that concrete European solutions are expected from the European Parliament which have a real impact on EU citizens' daily lives.

There has also been an increase in **positive support for the EU** as a reason for voting. Respondents are now much more likely than in 2014 to say that they voted because they are in favour of the EU. Levels have increased in all 28 Member States, most notably in Ireland, Spain, Germany, Italy, the UK and Slovakia, indicating a stronger pro-European aspect to the recent European Parliament elections, with positive opinions of the EU having helped to increase the turnout. This is in line with general attitudes towards membership of the EU, which are at historically high levels (as described below).

The 2019 post-electoral survey also shows a relative decrease in the proportion of voters claiming that they 'always vote'. This is a reflection of the higher overall turnout, brought about by the inclusion of more 'transient' voters to the overall voter population – confirming the success of the European Parliament's communication strategy for the European elections 2019, which *i.a.* specifically encouraged voting participation among those who were previously 'soft abstainers'<sup>2</sup>.

## Economy and growth remain key in the decision to vote

The main issues that encouraged citizens to vote in the recent European Parliament elections – observed on average at EU level – were economy and growth (44%), combating climate change and protecting the environment (37%), promoting human rights and democracy (37%), the way the EU should be working in the future (36%) and immigration (34%). The **economy and growth** was the biggest issue for voters in 16 Member States, while **climate change and the environment** was the main issue in eight countries.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this exercise, population segments who predominantly cited 'non-ideological', i.e. technical or personal reasons for not going to vote, were defined as 'soft abstainers'. It was considered that such population segments could be motivated to go to the polls if they were convinced of the importance of voting and informed about all available options to overcome their specific 'technical difficulties'.

## The decision to abstain varied in its timing

Turning now to the 49.4% of Europeans who did not vote in the recent European Parliament elections, three in ten (30%) say that they never vote, while 16% decided not to vote a few months before the election. However, 15% made the decision only a few days beforehand and 15% decided not to vote only on the day of the election.

In comparison with 2014, there has been an increase in the proportion that say they never vote (+6 pp) and a decrease in the proportion that say they only decided on the day of the elections (-4 pp), suggesting a reduction in the number of 'soft abstainers'.

## Non-voters cite negative perceptions of politics and practical constraints

The two main reasons for not voting in the recent EU elections, observed at EU level, are a **lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics** in general (22%) and a **lack of interest** in politics (18%). Other reasons are the belief that a vote has no consequences or does not change anything (14%), that respondents rarely or never vote (13%) and that respondents were too busy or had no time (11%). The reasons for not voting show only minor changes from 2014.

The reasons for abstention can be divided into four broad categories: firstly, those who exhibit a **hostility towards politics**, including those who lack trust in or are dissatisfied with politics, lack interest in politics, or who rarely or never vote. The second category covers those who report a **lack of information**, including respondents who say they do not know much about the EU, the European Parliament or the European Parliament elections. A third category covers those who say their vote has no consequences or who feel that '**voting is useless**'. The fourth category covers those who did not vote for **technical reasons**, considered as 'soft abstainers' for the purposes of the European Parliament's institutional communication strategy. This includes those who were too busy, were away from home or sick.

Respondents in the countries with the highest rates of abstention are also most likely to give answers associated with a hostility towards politics. In Bulgaria, Portugal and Slovakia, lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics is the most common reason, while lack of interest in politics is the highest-ranking reason in Slovenia, Croatia and Czechia.

## Just under half recall messages encouraging them to vote

In total, 44% of Europeans recall seeing or hearing messages from the European Parliament encouraging citizens to vote in the European Parliament elections. Recall ranged from 85% in the Netherlands to 24% in Bulgaria. **Recall is highest among respondents who actually voted in the elections** (50%), yet there is also a reasonably high level of recall among non-voters (39%). This indicates that Parliament's institutional campaign messages have indeed been seen and heard by a plurality of Europeans and in many cases have had a bearing on their participation in the elections.

## Brexit had some impact on voting behaviour, although this varied by country

Just under a quarter of Europeans (22%) say that media coverage and discussions about Brexit had an impact on their decision as to whether to vote or not to vote, at least 'to some extent'. In the UK, just over half of respondents say that Brexit had an impact on their decision on whether to vote (52%), as did 38% of respondents in Ireland and 32% in Austria. However, less than one in ten said it had an impact in Latvia, France, Sweden and Estonia.

Analysis suggests that the impact of media coverage and discussions on Brexit has been to **encourage citizens to vote**, rather than to abstain.

## Increasingly positive views on democracy in the EU

The survey shows an **increase in satisfaction with a range of aspects of democracy** in the EU since September 2018, reinforcing the impression of strong democratic values associated with the increased turnout. Europeans are most satisfied with free and fair elections (75% very or fairly satisfied, +5 pp), freedom of speech (74%, +5 pp) and respect for fundamental rights (73%, +8 pp). The lowest levels of satisfaction are seen in relation to the fight against disinformation in the media (48%, +8 pp) and the fight against corruption (43%, +7 pp).

Combining the results for the various aspects of democracy covered by the survey, respondents are most satisfied in Ireland, Denmark, Portugal and Poland. The lowest levels of satisfaction with various aspects of democracy are registered in Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovakia, France and Czechia.

## An increasing number of Europeans feel that their voice counts in the EU

More than half of Europeans (56%) agree that their voice counts in the EU, a 7-point increase from February–March 2019, and the **most positive result** since this question was first asked in 2002. While this result confirms previous research highlighting a peak in this indicator at the time of European elections, it also reflects a longer-term increase over the last 10 years.

Respondents are most likely to agree that their voice counts in the EU in Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany (75%), but are least likely to agree in Latvia, Greece and Estonia. Large increases on this measure are seen in Romania, Czechia, Poland, Italy and Belgium.

There is a link between thinking that one's voice counts in the EU and voting in the European Parliament elections, and the voter profile now includes more citizens who feel that their voice counts than in 2014; this indicates that **voters are now a more confident, empowered and engaged group**. The relationship between these two issues is likely to produce a 'virtuous cycle', in which the view that one's voice counts is likely to increase voter participation, which in turn is likely to reinforce the view that one's voice counts.

## Support for European membership remains at a historically high level

Just under six in ten Europeans (59%) see their country's EU membership as a good thing. This level of support is unchanged since February–March 2019, but fell slightly since the historical high level recorded in September 2018 (62%). However, the **long-term trend is positive** since 2011 and in particular since autumn 2014, after the previous European elections.

Respondents are most likely to have a positive view of EU membership in Luxembourg, Ireland, Germany and the Netherlands, while the lowest levels are recorded in Czechia, Italy, Greece,

Croatia, Slovakia and the UK. Younger and more highly educated respondents are generally the most positive towards EU membership.

In the EU28 overall, more than two-thirds of respondents (68%) think their country has benefited from EU membership, the **joint highest level recorded since 1983**. A majority of people in all Member States – except for Italy – share this view.

There are four main reasons why EU membership is seen as beneficial: increased co-operation between Member States (34%), maintaining peace and security (also 34%), contribution to economic growth (31%) and new work opportunities (also 31%).

These positive views are of primary relevance to the turnout in the European Parliament elections. As we have seen, a favourable view of the EU has gained in prominence as a reason for voting, and one of the main perceived benefits of the EU is its **contribution to economic growth** – also the main issue that made citizens vote in the elections.

## Methodology and data presentation

This Post-Election 2019 Eurobarometer was conducted for the European Parliament by Kantar. Fieldwork took place from 7 to 26 June 2019 in all 28 EU Member States. 27,464 respondents, drawn as a representative sample from the general population aged 15+, were interviewed face-to-face<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to the weighting procedure based on socio-demographic variables, the results of most questions of this post-election survey were weighted according to the results of the last EE2019. The purpose of this weighting procedure is to correct any deviations in the sample as to bring it in line with the observed participation and party results at national level. In doing so, these weights ensure that our national samples accurately reflect the voting behaviours at the time of EE2019.

The full report, including national factsheets, data annexes and results volumes can be found online on <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/>

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<sup>3</sup> 26,971 respondents of voting age: aged 18+ in 25 EU Member States, 16+ in Austria and Malta, and 17+ in Greece. Some questions were asked to the full sample of 27,464 respondents aged 15+