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# Why vote at an election with no apparent purpose? Voter turnout at elections to the European Parliament

## Abstract

Elections to the European Parliament (EP) famously fail to excite the interest of voters. The result is low turnout at these elections, particularly in some post-communist EU member states. Low turnout is blamed in this paper on the low salience of elections at which little is at stake. At such elections the main force bringing voters to the polls is party loyalty – a commodity that is particularly lacking among young voters and in new democracies, where parties have not yet had time to generate such loyalties. Turnout also appears to have fallen over time, but this not so much due to turnout decline in individual countries as to the changing composition of the EU, as this paper explains. Nevertheless, EP elections have been shown to socialize voters into patterns of low turnout, with deleterious consequences for national elections as well. The paper ends with recommendations for addressing these problems.

## 1 Introduction

Elections to the European Parliament present us with a number of puzzles relating to voter turnout, but commentators customarily focus on just two: (a) why is turnout so low in EP elections? (b) why has it declined over time? Answers to these questions are generally focused on the idea that turnout somehow serves as a ratification or justification for the election concerned. Low and declining turnout is often supposed to call into question citizen commitment to the electoral regime, suggesting ignorance about the issues at stake and even alienation from the democratic process. An important book in this vein was published over fifteen years ago, entitled *People and Parliament in the European Union: Participation, Democracy, and Legitimacy*. Its authors, Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson (1998), equate low turnout at these elections with indifference and even disaffection towards the European project (1998: 235–6).

At the time that these authors were writing, this interpretation certainly seemed reasonable to many, but later events raised important questions about it. In particular, if low turnout signals disaffection then presumably high turnout would signal commitment. But in that case, why was EP election turnout in 2004 particularly low in the post-communist countries that had recently acceded to the European Union soon after holding referendums at which commitment to the EU was affirmed by large majorities? Surely, if turnout is a measure of regime commitment, citizens in those countries should have shown particularly high voter turnout. Their countries had acceded so recently (only five months earlier) that it is implausible to suppose that enough time had elapsed for disillusionment to have set in.

Indeed, the conclusion that low turnout at EP elections is a symptom of disaffection from the European regime

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runs counter not only to the behavior of voters in post-communist EU member countries but also to many other research findings (for a review see Smets and Ham 2013) suggesting that turnout is not so much a matter of “things about people” but rather a matter of “things about elections” (Franklin 2004). According to the latter school, low voter turnout is not a symptom of disaffection from the regime within which elections are held but rather an indication that the elections themselves were less than compelling. This view goes back to the dawn of empirical research into voter turnout when Boechel (1927) suggested that high turnout would occur in elections at which “matters of national concern” were presented to voters.

The idea that elections to the European Parliament are less than compelling lies at the root of an approach that sees these elections as “Second Order” elections. These are elections, like local elections in many countries, at which national executive office is not at stake. Reif and Schmitt (1980) contrast these elections with what they term “First Order” elections that determine the complexion of the national executive and the policies that executive will pursue. At Second Order elections political parties and candidates do not focus on the true objects at issue (local affairs or European affairs) but rather see the elections as opportunities to remind voters of their national party allegiances. Because parties take this view, voters are led to do the same and such elections become quasi-referendums on the standing of parties at the national level – particularly on the standing of governing parties.

This approach, viewing European Parliament elections as having (or as being allowed to have) little importance in their own right, seems to accord with experience. At the time of European Parliament elections, voters are not presented with statements (even statements lacking clarity, as is often the case in national elections) regarding what the different parties stand for in European terms or the consequences in policy terms that would flow from increased support for one party

or another. Parties thus miss an important opportunity to educate voters about European affairs. In the words of Reif and Schmitt (1980), at such elections “less is at stake”. Indeed one could go further and say that, in the eyes of voters, at such elections nothing is at stake. Of course scholars and policy-makers know well that EP elections serve the vital function of populating the European Parliament with representatives who have important contributions to make to the governance of Europe, but this role of EP elections is not apparent to voters. For most voters, these are elections without purpose.<sup>1</sup>

But if nothing is at stake at EP elections this rather turns the puzzle of low voter turnout at these elections on its head: at elections with no apparent purpose, why would anyone vote? Why is turnout not zero (or very close to zero)? Why do more countries not exhibit the indifference to these elections that we see in some post-communist EU member states?

In this paper I will approach the puzzles of voter turnout at EP elections from this perspective, asking (1) Why does anyone vote in an EP election? (2) Why has voter turnout declined in EP elections over time? and (3) Why is voter turnout particularly low at EP elections held in some post-communist countries? My answers to these questions are quite mundane. There is no drama here, just the normal workings of electoral politics. But starting from the view that European Parliament elections are not elections of the same kind as elections at which national executive office is at stake can be very informative about the nature of such First Order elections in nation states. The view I take of Second Order elections helps us to understand why First Order Elections work the way they do. This view also clarifies the ways in which EP elections fail to serve the functions that elections are supposed to serve, giving rise to what is often referred to as a “democratic deficit” in the conduct of European affairs. Concerns about a democratic deficit have fueled many reforms particularly aimed at giving more influence to the European

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<sup>1</sup> When people were asked why they failed to vote at the EP elections of 1994, 30% on average across the then EU member countries said it was because they lacked information about the EU and/or the European Parliament elections. A further 30% said it was because they had no interest in politics generally or in these elections specifically (Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson 1998). But it is hard to discover from survey research why interest in EP elections is so lacking. It is only by contrasting these elections with elections in which everyone votes that it is possible to establish that what makes the difference is whether elections provide voters with an opportunity to change the course of public policy in ways that are meaningful to them (Franklin 2004).

Parliament, which now has “co-decisionmaking” power equal to that of the Council of Ministers in most areas. But such concerns have not yet led to changes in the way in which EP elections are conducted.

Reforms prior to the EP elections of 2014 do for the first time address the question of how these elections appear to voters, trying to make them more compelling by allowing parties to associate themselves with putative presidents of the European Commission. The idea here is that votes for parties would indirectly (as at Parliamentary elections in member states) serve as votes for a particular individual to become the Commission President. In the right circumstances this reform could lead to elections for the European Parliament becoming just as consequential as elections for national parliaments. In such reformed EP elections it is possible that parties would actually care about the outcome and would attempt to mobilize voters by active campaigning. Indeed, the reform has the potential to link EP electoral contests to domestic political concerns, motivating parties to make persuasive arguments regarding why votes matter – especially given that, with the Eurozone crisis, EU policies have become matters of national concern in several member states. In May we will see whether this actually occurs. At the end of this paper I will provide some reasons to doubt that it will.

## 2 Why vote?

One strand in the turnout literature asserts (more often just implies) that turnout levels reflect social-structural factors, with older better-educated and wealthier individuals being more likely to vote. These regularities exist, but they are not causal factors in the determination of turnout levels. We know this because in countries where virtually everyone votes there are no such social differences (this is a logical requirement – if everyone is voting there cannot be differences between groups). Moreover, countries with more educated, richer and older populations do not see higher turnout. Indeed, at the country level, increasingly educated populations correlate negatively with turnout (the negative correlation is stronger than  $-0.9$  in Switzerland, firmly negating the expected link between education and turnout – see Franklin 2004). Social differences emerge only as turnout falls, with the youngest, poorest and least educated (often these

are the same individuals) dropping out first as turnout declines. Social differences thus reflect rather than cause turnout decline; nevertheless they are still a matter for concern if those who do not vote are concentrated in particular groups whose needs differ from those of groups with higher turnout (we will return to this point below). First we must ask: if social differences do not account for turnout differences, what does? I have already argued that the major spurs to voting are “things about elections” and in EP elections many of those things are absent.

Why vote at an election with no evident purpose? Three things bring people to the polls at these elections. First, some people are obliged to go out and vote because of a legal requirement to do so (compulsory voting), which exists in four countries that are members of the EU. Second, some people feel sufficient loyalty to a political party that they will support that party at any opportunity, or at least they will respond to the appeals of a party leader to help him demonstrate the strength of the party and its viability in forthcoming national elections – they are mobilized.<sup>2</sup> Individuals mobilized in this way are generally referred to as “party loyalists”. Appeals to party loyalists will be more successful as a European Parliament election is held in closer proximity to an upcoming national election, reason why turnout at EP elections tends to be greater at EP elections held only a short time before a national election. In contrast, EP elections held at a greater temporal distance from the next national election see lower turnout (Franklin 2005; Franklin and Hobolt 2014). Finally some will turn out in order to punish their party or the government by voting for a candidate or party that their usual party (or the government) will hate to see receive support – such voters are motivated to demonstrate their preference for a policy that the party they normally support does not propose, in hopes that their party will get the message and take that policy on board. Members of this last group are generally referred to as “protest voters”.

Though there is much talk of protest voting at EP elections, the proportion of those switching parties at European Parliament elections is small – about a quarter of those voting at EP elections, so about an eighth of all voters, with a very slight increase in numbers over time (Franklin and Hobolt 2014). Most protest voters have to be included in this group and, given the motivations

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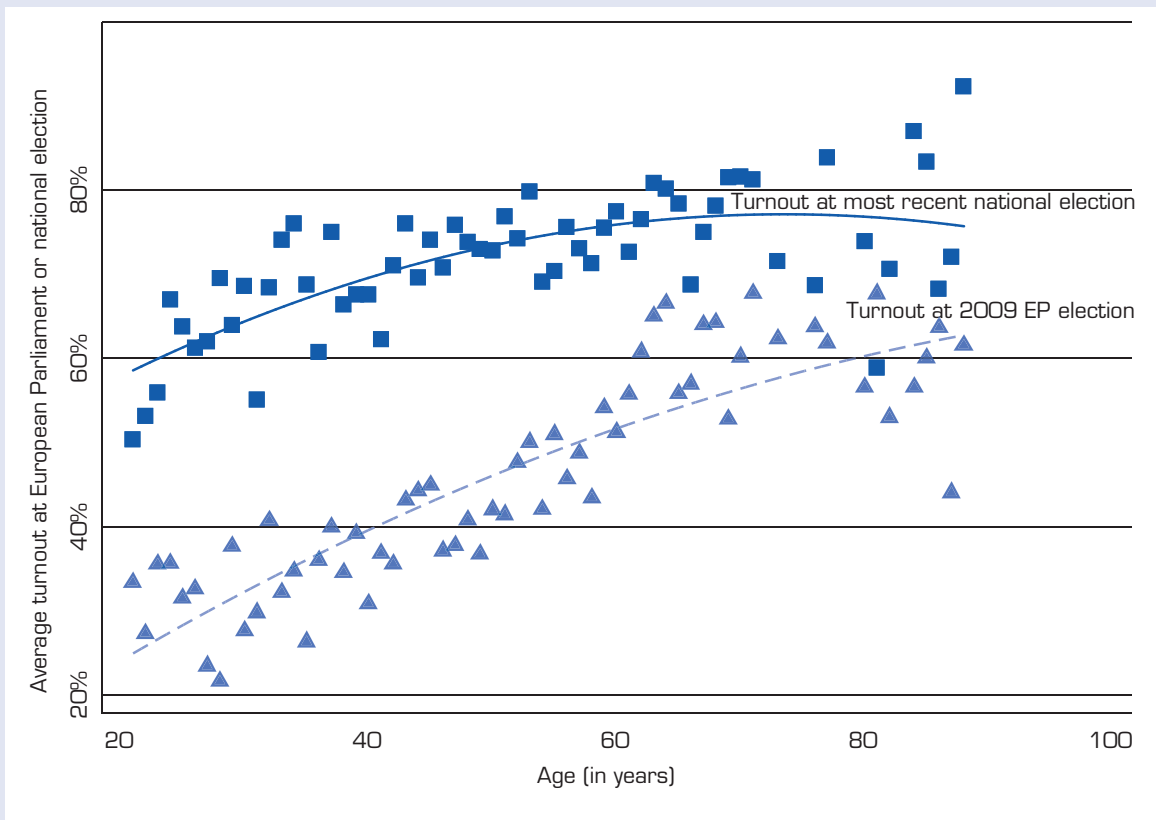
<sup>2</sup> Potential for mobilization is hard to distinguish from habitual support, which also plays a role.

mentioned above, many will also be party loyalists who would have voted anyway. So most of those who turn out to vote at EP elections must be party loyalists. Therefore the turnout level at EP elections depends largely on the proportion of party loyalist in each electorate. More loyalists means higher turnout, other things being equal.

However, loyalists are created by the experience of voting. The more often someone votes for a party at national elections the more likely they are to continue voting for that party. This idea has been asserted at least since Butler and Stokes (1975) first pointed out the empirical regularity involved, but it has only recently been confirmed by experimental evidence (Dinas 2012).

Because it takes many years for a voter to become a loyalist, it follows that the largest gap between average turnout rates at national and at EP elections occurs for young voters, as shown by the difference between the solid and broken lines in Figure 1 (below). This graph also shows (using squares and triangles) the average for each age-point, and it can be seen that these averages hardly overlap – and not at all below the age of 70. Those who do not vote at EP elections are largely the young. Figure 1 displays the familiar curve that characterizes the “start-up” and “slow-down” (Verba and Nie 1972) phases in the turnout life-cycle at national elections (solid line) but also that this curve hardly shows itself among those voting at EP elections (broken line).

**Figure 1 Turnout at national and European Parliament elections by age of voter in 2009 (symbols show turnout rate at each age, omitting compulsory voting and post-communist countries)**

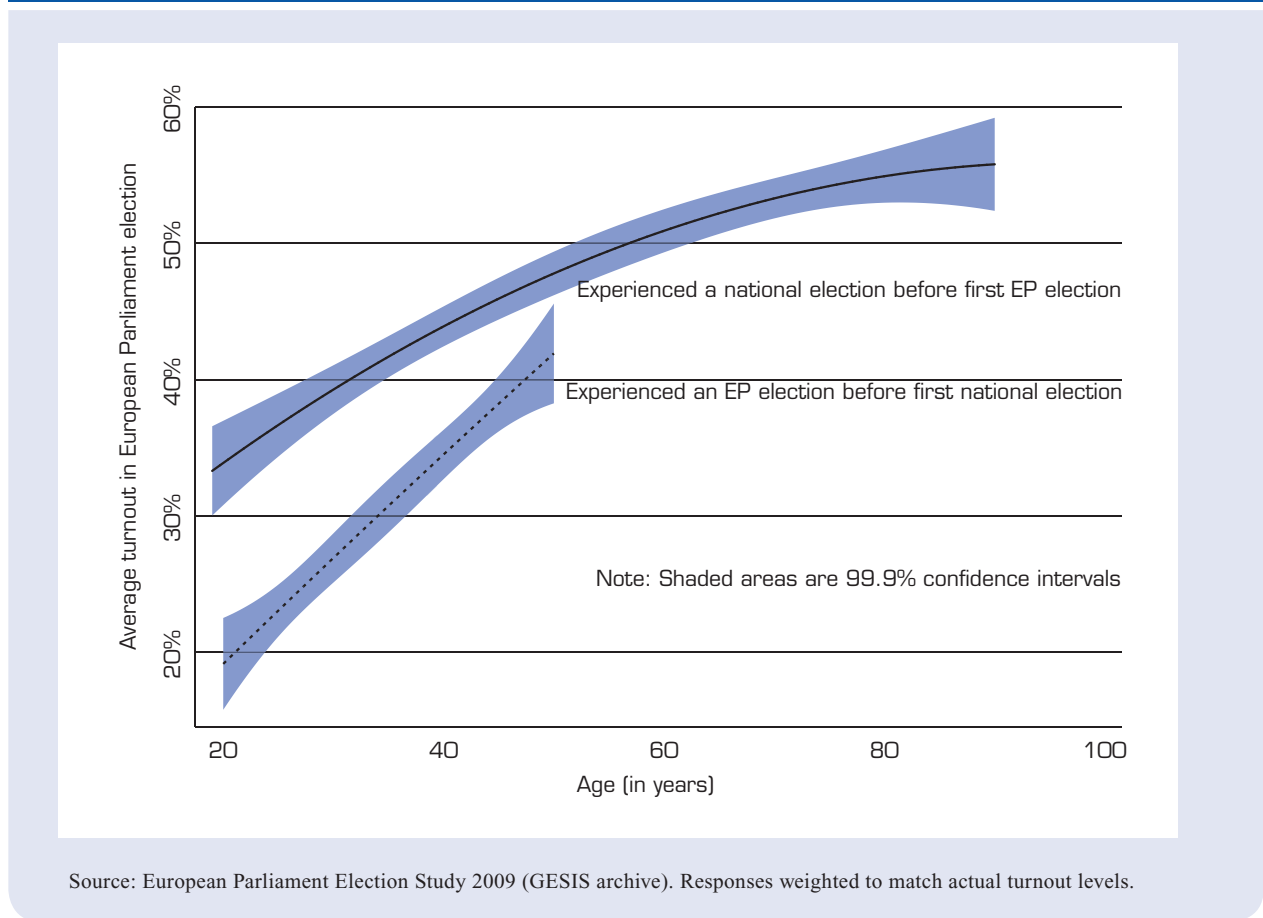


Source: European Parliament Election Study 2009 (GESIS archive). Responses weighted to match actual turnout levels.

The picture is complicated by the fact that experience of voting at an EP election itself has an effect on turnout. It appears that not only does turnout at EP elections depend on habits created at the national level but, ironically, EP elections also get in the way of the acquisition of such habits. For citizens who have not yet acquired the habit of voting, the experience of *not* voting at an EP election apparently is itself habit-forming, helping in the acquisition of a “habit of non-voting” (Plutzer 2002). Or perhaps this experience simply makes more difficult the acquisition of the habit of voting. At all events, those who experience a European Parliament election before they have had the chance to experience a national election are considerably disadvantaged when it comes to later turnout.

Figure 2 (below) focuses only on EP voting and distinguishes between those (still the majority of EU citizens) who experienced a national election before their first opportunity to vote in an EP election (solid line) and those (broken line) who were unlucky enough to first be faced with a European Parliament election. No-one over the age of 50 in 2009 had been given the opportunity to vote in an EP election before being faced with their first national election, but for countries that were members of the EU at the time when EP elections were first instituted in 1979, all of their citizens too young to have voted at the previous national election will have experienced at that EP election their first nation-wide electoral contest. We see in the figure (as is documented extensively in Franklin and Hobolt 2011)

**Figure 2 Turnout over the age cycle in the 2009 EP elections, by formative electoral experience (omitting compulsory voting and post-communist EU member states)**



that these individuals (along with those born later whose first nation-wide electoral experience also occurred at an EP election) vote at a lower rate. Moreover, even if their turnout rate as they age does appear to be converging somewhat with the turnout rates of those who experienced a national election before their first EP election, it is clear that through most if not all of their lifetimes they will have been voting at a lower rate than those lucky enough to have had the opposite formative experience.

Because there is considerable intermixing of age-points on this graph, these are not displayed (as they were in Figure 1). Instead I show the 99.9% confidence intervals above and below each line in the graph. Such confidence intervals will also be used in the only other graph in this paper that involves survey data. Evidently, with survey data there is a “margin of error” in the answers we get and confidence intervals tell us what is the range of this possible error. In our case there is only a one-in-a-thousand chance that the true results fall outside the ranges shown (when reporting actual turnout rates, as we do in the very next graph, we are not using survey data and there is no margin of error).

### 3 Why voter turnout has declined in EP elections

What of turnout decline? There is no question, if we simply look at the average turnout over all members of the EC/EU at the time of each EP election, that the turnout we see in later elections progressively declines. Turnout was 68 percent in 1979 over the ten EC members sending MEPs to the Parliament elected in that year.<sup>3</sup> In 2009 turnout was 46.5 percent over the 27 countries that sent MEPs to the Parliament elected in that year.<sup>4</sup> However, as should be evident from the careful phrasing of the above sentences, the European Union

of 2009 was a very different place from the European Community of 1979. In 2009 there were 17 more member countries with very different characteristics than the 1979 member countries. In particular, these new members were almost all of them countries whose turnout at national elections was lower than the average turnout of existing members.<sup>5</sup> So, other things being equal, inclusion of these additional member countries should have lowered overall average turnout just as a matter of arithmetic (Franklin 2001). As shown in Figure 3 (next page), the original ten countries that voted in the first EP elections (a group generally known at the time as the EC10 but that we label in the graph “EU10”) needs to be divided into two subgroups – four countries that employed compulsory voting at elections to their own national Parliaments and applied this rule in elections to the European Parliament (Belgium, Greece, Italy and Luxembourg)<sup>6</sup> and six that had no such rule (Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). As shown in the graph both these groups have seen slight falls in turnout over the seven-election history of elections to the EP, but neither of these declines is such as to cause concern. Indeed, taken together, these two groups of countries saw a slight rise in turnout between 2004 and 2009.

A second large group of countries that has seen no significant decline in turnout are the post-communist countries that acceded to the EU in 2004. Indeed, these countries also saw a slight rise in turnout between 2004 and 2009. That leaves five countries, divided into two groups, where turnout has clearly declined over the history of their participation in EP elections. Austria, Finland and Sweden saw a very significant fall in turnout following their inaugural EP elections in 1995 for reasons that commentators sometimes associate with the elimination of a “first election boost” that

<sup>3</sup> Greece’s election was held a year later, but turnout at that election is customarily averaged in with the turnout of other countries that sent MEP’s to the Parliament elected in 1979. The same is true for Spain and Portugal in respect to the EP election held in 1984 and of Austria, Finland and Sweden in respect to the EP election of 1994.

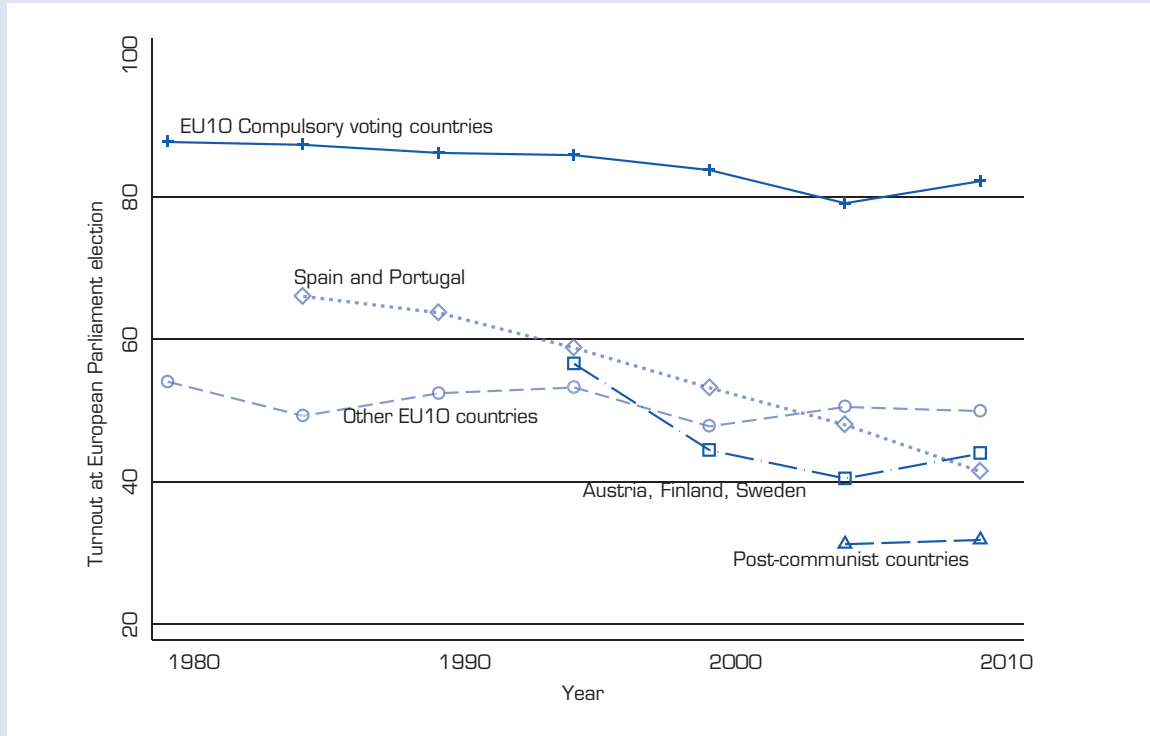
<sup>4</sup> These figures are obtained by averaging the relevant country turnout figures from the table on the EP website [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdd9d4/Turnout-\(1979-2009\).html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdd9d4/Turnout-(1979-2009).html), accessed on April 6th 2014. Note that the totals given in the bottom row of that table are less than the average of the individual country turnout figures given for the same years in the same table (by 3% for 2009). We have been unable to account for this discrepancy but it does not affect the graphs presented in this paper, which are all based on individual country turnout figures.

<sup>5</sup> The exceptions are Cyprus and Malta, whose turnout at EP elections was actually quite high by comparison. These two countries both saw declining turnout between 2004 and 2009, echoing the experience of other late-joining western countries in appearing to have experienced a “first election boost” (see below).

<sup>6</sup> In 1992 Italy abolished the compulsion to vote, removing it from this group. However, the accession of Cyprus (a compulsory voting country) in 2004 returned the number of compulsory voting countries to 4, balancing Italy’s departure from the group.



**Figure 3 Turnout at different EP elections for groups of countries acceding to the EC/EU at different times (omitting Bulgaria, Cyprus, Malta and Romania).**



Source: European Parliament website ([www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament)).

also might have been evident in 1979 among non-compulsory-voting countries (Franklin 2001). The idea that “founding elections” see higher turnout is sometimes referred to as “euphoria” (Kostadinova 2003), but why the euphoria (if such it is) should have proved so great in Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995 is unknown. More importantly, there is no real sign of a euphoria effect either in the post-communist accession countries of 2004 or in Spain and Portugal, where there was a decline in turnout following their initial EP elections but that decline was actually *less* than at succeeding elections.

Indeed, Spain and Portugal are the only EU member states to have shown a sustained and progressive decline in turnout at EP elections, such as is often asserted to be evident over the EU as a whole. Why this should be the case is unclear, but it matches a decline in voter turnout also seen at national elections in these countries (Turner 1993), so the decline should not be viewed as a reflection of disenchantment with or alienation from the EU specifically.

Of course the changes we have noted in turnout of groups of EU member states do not exhaust the variations that occur from election to election in particular member states. Much country-specific turnout variation has been “averaged out” in Figure 3. Moreover, four countries (as noted in Figure 3’s title) were omitted because they do not fit within any of the groups for which change from election to election could sensibly be gauged. But concerns have usually been expressed regarding “turnout in general” and our focus on country groups was all that was needed to make it clear that there has been no general decline in turnout across the countries of the EU.

#### **4 Why is turnout so very low in post-communist countries?**

What about post-communist countries? Why do they see lower turnout at EP elections than any other set of countries? The answer flows directly from my analysis of why people are led to vote at all when it comes to such elections. All the reasons I gave are bound up with the idea that many citizens have a party that they

are accustomed to supporting and that can to some extent call on their loyalties when it comes to European Parliament elections – or that evoke motivations to protest that can show themselves at EP elections. But attachment to a party only becomes widespread over the passage of time. Younger voters are much less likely to have the necessary attachments, as we have seen. A pre-condition for older voters to show the necessary attachments to parties is that those parties should have been in existence when the voters were young. In the case of post-communist countries none of the parties were in existence for more than 20 years before the 2009 EP elections that are the focus of this paper. For new voters it takes decades for loyalties to build and, in post-communist countries in 1990, in a certain sense it could be said that all voters were new (for an expanded treatment see Wessels and Franklin 2009).

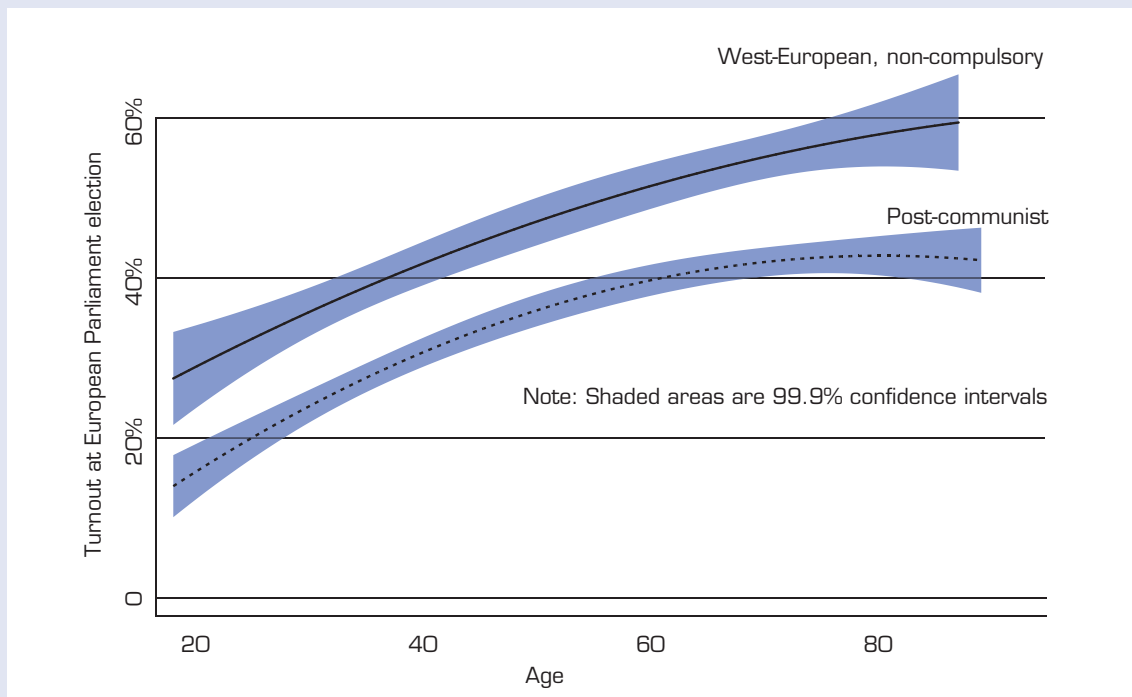
Figure 4 (below) shows the difference between turnout in post-communist as opposed to West European countries as people age. In post communist countries turnout reaches its peak at a younger age and is hardly

rising after the age of 50. These are countries in which even the oldest voters barely reach at EP elections the turnout rates seen for 40-year-olds in other countries. So post-communist turnout at EP elections is particularly low because those are new democracies whose parties do not yet evoke the loyalties that promote even the low turnout we see at EP elections elsewhere.

## 5 Discussion

Should we be concerned about low voter turnout at EP elections, and at the apparent further decline of this turnout with the passage of time? The latter is largely artifactual, generated by the changing composition of the EU over time. The former is something that of course we should be concerned about, but not for the reasons customarily given. Low voter turnout at elections to the European Parliament does not call into question citizen commitment to the electoral regime, suggesting alienation from the democratic process. Nor is it a sign of Euro-scepticism (Schmitt 2008). What it rather tells us is that these elections do not empower voters to make potent choices, and that voters realize this. Low voter

**Figure 4 Turnout by age for Western and post-communist EU member states, 2009 (omitting compulsory voting countries).**



Source: European Parliament Election Study 2009 (GESIS archive). Responses weighted to match actual turnout levels.



turnout at EP elections is a sign that these elections are not giving citizens reason enough to go to the polls. Indeed, I have argued that EP elections do not provide most voters with *any* real reason to go to the polls. Unfortunately, those who do not vote are concentrated in particular social groups (young, less-educated, lower status), as already pointed out. This suggests that, to the extent that voters play a role in determining the complexion of the European Parliament (which there is no doubt that they do, even if this role mainly serves to replicate national party preferences), these particular groups of voters are under-represented. This gives rise to a very real concern regarding a very precise type of democratic deficit – in contrast to the more nebulous democratic deficit often conjured up by hand-wringing commentators. At a time when economic stringency is largely supported by the right and opposed by the left, under-representation of groups that tend towards left-voting might have had very real consequences for the way in which the EU responded to the recent economic crisis. It is true that the EP hardly played any role in governing this response, giving rise to yet another type of very real democratic deficit in the EU, but one reason the EP stood aside from these debates might have been its overly right-wing complexion compared to that of EU citizens taken as a whole. A more representative EP might have had considerably more to say about the austerity imposed on poorer and especially younger EU citizens.

Turning to declining turnout, even if this is hardly appreciable as yet for all but two countries, it is a symptom of the failure of EP elections to evoke the motivations that, by bringing people to the polls, inculcate skills and habits needed for democratic citizenship.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, EP elections appear, according to other research (Franklin and Hobolt 2011), to stand as impediments to the acquisition of these skills and habits – impediments that, unless removed, are likely to lead to considerably greater turnout decline both at future EP elections and at future national elections in EU member countries. As argued many years ago (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) elections that do not serve the functions that elections are supposed to serve will instead acquire other functions, unanticipated and often undesirable. Those who create new electoral

institutions need to be aware that the process is not risk-free. More importantly, given that this institution already exists, the realization that an electoral institution is mal-functioning brings with it the obligation to do something constructive to address the problem. Those who put in place the institution of elections to the European Parliament have largely disregarded the symptoms, or mis-interpreted them. Many may have found it useful to take these symptoms as indications that the European Parliament lacked power, and used them as supportive evidence in an argument to enhance the EP's powers. This was perhaps a good thing in itself, but it did not address the problem at issue. Additional parliamentary powers did nothing to clarify the choices facing voters or their ability to influence by their votes the uses made of the new parliamentary powers. And, without the possibility of influence, the casting of votes can appear quite pointless.

In 2014 this problem is finally being addressed, though not as directly as would have been desirable. At this election European party groups – the entities that serve the function in the European Parliament that political parties serve in national parliaments – are being encouraged to endorse candidates for the presidency of the European Commission, thus providing citizens with the opportunity to influence by their votes the direction taken by the team of commissioners that will direct the affairs of the European Union for the next five years. This is a reform that sounds superficially as though it addresses the problem at issue. Unfortunately there is still a disconnect between the voters and the exercise of power. European party groups do not campaign in European Parliamentary elections. It is national parties that campaign. National parties are members of these European party groups, but they are not in any way directed by them. So whether national parties actually do campaign on the platforms selected by candidates for President of the European Commission is entirely up to them. If they do so, the European Parliament elections of 2014 may for the first time take on the aspect of real elections. If they do not then nothing will have changed.

We have yet to see how these matters turn out, but European party leaders have in the past proved adept

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<sup>7</sup> Many intervening variables play a role here. Interest in these elections is low partly because there is little in the way of campaign excitement; and media coverage of what campaigning takes place is lackluster at best. But then campaigns would be more interesting if more was at stake so that parties cared more about the outcome; and the media on the whole reports things that will be of interest to voters, so more interesting EP elections would get more media coverage.

at ensuring that nothing about European Parliament elections poses any threat to the supremacy of national parties. The arrangements made for the elections of 2014 do not provide any assurance of blunting this supremacy. Given this supremacy, national parties would need to be motivated to direct voters' attention to the candidates for European Commission President, and to the policies that those candidates propose. But it is not clear what would motivate national parties to do this. So while the changes appear to address the problem, just as many past changes have appeared to do, in practice they seem fatally flawed. I hope I am wrong. But there is little reason to doubt that the national politicians who designed an eviscerated electoral process for the European Parliament knew exactly what they were doing, and in permitting reforms to this process there is little doubt that they still know exactly what they are doing. The alternative is to presume that they do not understand how elections work – unlikely given their demonstrated success at winning them. I will gladly revise this opinion if the 2014 elections really do turn out to prove that “this time it is different.”

It is hard to imagine genuine reforms to the EP electoral process except in response to a wave of public sentiment so great that elected national politicians would fear to ignore it. But no such wave exists and it is hard to see how such a wave could be generated. So, for the foreseeable future, I expect European Parliament elections to continue to be lack-luster affairs that fail to arouse motivations for voting that go beyond those described in this paper. And the failure of those elections to provide voters with genuine powers to direct the course of European policy-making will continue to be signaled by the low voter turnout that is the result.

Meanwhile national political processes are suffering the consequences, as demonstrated not only by falling turnout at national elections (on average over the EU as a whole and over the long term) but also by the inflation of national party systems with new parties founded to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the existence of EP elections (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). Like global warming, these processes are slow and subject to temporary reversals, but EP elections appear to serve as an agent that socializes European electorates into lower turnout than would otherwise be seen, even at national elections (Franklin and Hobolt 2011) and also to serve as “midwives to new parties” (Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996).

For the moment the most that I hope for is that some in influential positions (in ministries, in interest groups, among party rank and file, and in the media) may be persuaded by arguments of the kind presented here to take their political leaders to task when these leaders support reforms that will likely prove ineffectual. In the more immediate future such individuals could play a role in making the existing reforms more consequential, by shaming party leaders into meaningful attempts to mobilize voters behind one or another candidate for Commission President. Party leaders need to focus on what difference a victory by one or another candidate would make to the future course of EU policy-making on issues that citizens care about (the environment, world peace and economic prosperity, to name just three).

Civil servants, group leaders and commentators are regularly asked what could be done to raise voter turnout at EP elections. Well, here is the answer. Give citizens something real to vote about!

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