

European Parliament Elections Incentives for First-Time Voters: Evidence from the Secondary Schools

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Summary: The research deals with the phenomenon of low voter turnout in European Parliament elections. The article pays attention to young first-time voters who will encounter their first European Parliament elections in June 2024. It examines their attitude to polling in the context of school activities related to public affairs implemented in the school educational activities. Based on the qualitative survey conducted on pupils aged 17-18 attending secondary schools located in ten different member countries the research tackles the question whether the public secondary education may affect the incentives of first-time voters to cast their vote in the European Parliament elections. Consequently, the research focuses on the good practices and possible stimulus given by schools that may encourage to get to vote the representatives in the European Parliament. The outcomes of the research provide suggestions to enhance the formation of voting habits of young voters and increase their interest in both national and European public affairs.

Keywords: elections, European Parliament, first-time voters, schools.

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1. Introduction

Elections are supposed to serve as a fundamental mechanism through which citizens can express their will, choose their representatives, and hold their

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government accountable¹. The question of who is involved in political decision-making is one of the defining features that influence the future development of the country. Thus, responsible choice of a political party and participation in elections are essential for any functioning democracy. Despite this fact, not all eligible voters use their opportunity to influence the development of public affairs in their neither in their home country nor at the supranational level. The situation in which only certain groups participate in the decision-making process from which some groups exclude themselves due to their decision not to cast the vote imposes clear limits on democratic rule².

Since the 1980s, voter turnout has been declining in many advanced democracies; the studies have found out that the decline in turnout is particularly evident among the young people³. As for the situation concerning participation in elections when the European citizens may decide about their representatives in the supranational European institutions, until 2014, the turnout had steadily declined to a later uptick in 2019 which may seemingly put the pessimistic diagnosis into perspective⁴. The voter turnout statistics indicate that 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 Czechia⁵. The survey points out the fact that “large differences remain between individual member states, ranging from 88% in Belgium⁶ to 23% in Slovakia”⁷. In fact, the turnout varies strongly between countries, and also between election years within the same country which may be caused by different intersections: a significant part of the decline up to 2014 was due to the accession of new member states with rather low turnout numbers. Conversely, it is possible that in 2024 wide voter turnout may rise again for similar statistical reasons: it will be the first election without the United Kingdom, which traditionally has had a very high share of

¹ BARANÍK, K., HAMULÁK, O. In: Supporting Role Cast: The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Reflection of the EU Charter in the Adjudication of Slovak Constitutional Court. *European Studies – The Review of European law, Economics and Politics*. 2021, vol. 8, p. 72, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/eustu-2022-0065>

² FOWLER, A. G. *Five Studies on the Causes and Consequences of Voter Turnout*. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 2013 [online]. Available at: https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/11156810/Fowler_gsas.harvard_0084L_10773.pdf

³ BLAIS, A., RUBENSON, D. The Source of Turnout Decline: New Values or New Contexts? *Comparative political studies*. 2012, vol. 46, no. 1, pp. 98–106.

⁴ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. *Turnout by year* [online]. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Voting is compulsory in five countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Cyprus, and Greece.

⁷ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. *Have European elections entered a new dimension?* [online]. Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2312>

non-voters in EP elections⁸. This means that even if turnout remains unchanged in all other member states, the European average will mathematically increase⁹.

However, it's important to note that elections alone do not guarantee a fully functioning and healthy democracy, they are a significant part of a broader democratic framework. The point is that given the negative repercussions of the low representation, it is of utmost importance for further research to understand what are the aspects that impact young people to absent from the elections to the European Parliament. There is also agreement in the literature that if young people are not given adequate representation, their views on these important topics will likely be silenced¹⁰. This, in turn, might have dire consequences on young people's under-representation and support for democracy and their interest in participating in the political process¹¹. Yet, existing research has so far struggled to propose the determinants that could achieve a higher polling presence among young people. Existing research lacks a deeper understanding of what might boost interest in society and politics in Europe and raise the voting rate of young people in European parliamentary elections.

In the present research, a particular point of view is going to be explored and may bring new aspects to this debate. Whereas much of the previous research focused on the individual characteristics of the voters, the present research focuses on the positive incentives that might be given to first-time voters to engage them to exercise their right to vote. The main purpose is to carry out a survey to gain data about the attitude of first-time voters to polling in the European Parliament elections in June 2024. The point is to examine which factors sway the mindset of first-time voters about their choice to poll or not. Their decision-making process is considered to be largely affected by the social environment. This fact is crucial for the present research.

Based on the qualitative survey conducted on pupils aged 17–18 attending secondary schools and vocational schools from ten different member countries the research tackles the question of whether the public secondary education may affect the incentives of first-time voters to cast their vote in the European Parliament elections. Consequently, the research focuses on the practices and possible stimulus given by schools that may encourage them to vote for representatives in

⁸ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. *Closer to the Citizens, Closer to the Ballot* [online]. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/closer-to-the-citizens-closer-to-the-ballot>

⁹ MÜLLER, M. Two years to go. What to expect from the 2024 European Parliament elections. In Policy brief. Jacque Delors Centre. 2022 [online]. Available at: <https://www.delorscentre.eu/en/publications/2024-european-elections>.

¹⁰ See e.g. STOCKEMER, D., SUNDSTRÖM, A. Age representation in parliaments: Can institutions pave the way for the young? *European Political Science Review*. 2018. 10(3), p. 470–478.

¹¹ For more see WATTENBERG, P. M. *Is Voting for Young People?* New York: Routledge, 2015.

the European Parliament. The outcomes of the research provide a possible path to stimulate the formation of voting habits for young voters and increase their interest in public affairs. The point is to make the first-time voters cast their vote since they have not yet acquired a habit of abstaining and turning a blind eye to the elections.

Twenty schools from 10 member countries¹² are involved in the present research. From each country two schools were chosen: a grammar school and a vocational school, so the respondents represent a cross-section of the population. Only the first-time voters with the first right to vote were asked to fill in an online questionnaire. In total 579 full responses were collected. Consequently, the responses were analysed and illustrated in the charts. It complies with the reasoning line of the research to consider the limits of the research. The research is carried out only on a subset of the youth population and does not reflect the proportional representation of young people at schools. Furthermore, it is necessary to take into account the current mood of the respondents and impulsive responses especially when it comes to questions about voting, as socially desirable behaviour combined with important civic norms lead respondents. Another shortcoming of the present research is that it is not possible to observe and consider all factors that might be important to explain the non-participation in elections among young voters. Despite the above-mentioned limits the research reveals the outcomes that represent the trends and the stereotypes and gives some hints to take steps to change them.

Firstly, the legal framework of elections is explained, consequently, an overview of the voter turnout is given, followed by the findings of the study. The results are consequently explained and discussed by using inductive reasoning. Explanations of the study assess the position and the perception from a youth perspective about current European institutions.

2. The trends in European Parliament elections

In May 2024, the members of the European Parliament will be directly elected for the tenth time. The guidelines for European Parliament elections in the EU are established through European Union (EU) regulations and directives and national laws. A set of basic principles establishes certain fundamental rules that apply to all member states, such as the requirement for direct elections and the right to vote for EU citizens residing in another member state¹³. These legal instruments help to standardize and unify the common aspects of the electoral process in all EU member countries. They ensure a common framework for parliamentary

¹² Belgium, Czechia, France, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia.

¹³ Treaty of Lisbon imposes the right to vote and to stand as a candidate.

elections both at the EU and the national level. While the common provisions lay down the principle of proportional representation, set certain fundamental rules and principles, such as the timing of elections and the overall composition of the European Parliament¹⁴ and a number of incompatibilities between national and European mandates and the principle of proportional representation¹⁵. Statute and Funding of European Political Parties and European Political Foundations govern the status and funding of European political parties and foundations¹⁶, which can be involved in election campaigns for the European Parliament. Many other important issues, such as the exact electoral system used or the number of constituencies, are specified by national laws¹⁷. One of the most important amendments to the 1976 Electoral Act adopted a set of important provisions on the possibility of different voting methods, such as electronic or postal voting¹⁸. This can impact the overall composition of the legislative body. Other amendments concern the protection of personal data¹⁹. Since the penultimate elections in 2014 and the last in 2019 much has changed concerning new challenges facing disinformation and potential manipulation of voters through online communications²⁰. The recent amendments could make a significant contribution to higher interest in the elections. Chart 1 shows the turnout in the elections in 2019.

Except for Belgium, the voting turnout in the analysed countries reaches the average of EU or less, with Czechia and Slovakia being in the last positions. The figures on voter turnout for the population as a whole show only part of the problem, as abstention from voting does not affect all countries equally, nor does it affect all population groups within a society equally. Indeed, various studies reveal the statistics of voter absenteeism in EU member states in 2014, especially among the youngest group of eligible voters. In the 16-18-24 age group, abstention from voting at the EU level was over 70 percent and only slightly below 70 percent among 25-29-year-old young adults. This has changed for the 2019 European elections, but the trends demonstrating the widespread absence

¹⁴ Article 14 Treaty on European Union (TEU); Articles 20, 22 and 223 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), Article 39 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

¹⁵ Council Decision 2002/772/EC.

¹⁶ Regulation (EU) No 1141/2014.

¹⁷ See HAMULÁK, O. Penetration of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union into the Constitutional Order of the Czech Republic – Basic Scenarios. *European Studies – The Review of European law, Economics and Politics*. 2020, vol. 7, pp. 108–124, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/eustu-2022-0049>

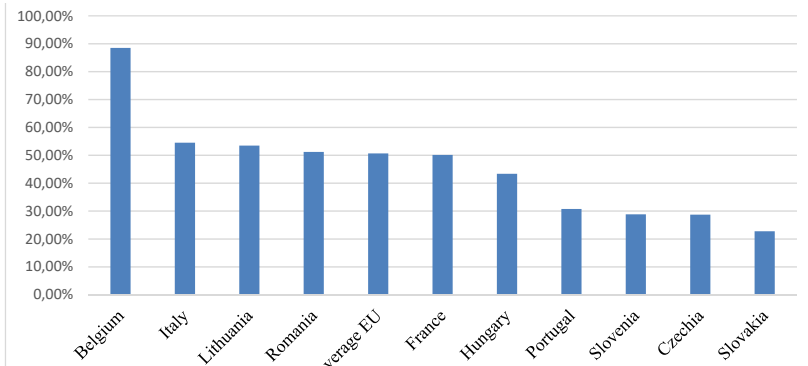
¹⁸ Council Decision 2018/994.

¹⁹ Cf. ANDRAŠKO, J., MESARČÍK, M., HAMULÁK, O. The regulatory intersections between artificial intelligence, data protection and cyber security: challenges and opportunities for the EU legal framework – Basic Scenarios. *AI & SOCIETY*, 2021, 36, pp. 623–636, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-01125-5>

²⁰ Regulation (EU) 2018/1725 on the Protection of Personal Data.

of youth from EU institutional politics are undeniable. The 2014 European Parliamentary election marked a new low in youth turnout. The result was that 72 percent of the electorate aged 18 to 24 abstained from the elections²¹.

Chart 1 Turnout in the elections to the European Parliament 2019



Source: *European Parliament, own processing*

The outcomes solidify a general trend towards less political participation among young voters in the EU that raises concerns among scholars and politicians. Yet, despite increased efforts to reach young voters through specifically designed campaigns, fewer members of the youngest generation of voters cast their votes than ever before at European elections. An abundance of research focusing on voter turnout has been carried out. Important studies are confirming the fact that those who exercise the right to vote are not a random sample of registered voters²². One persistent finding states that voting in one election is a potent predictor for turnout in subsequent elections²³. Some individual characteristics may correlate with voting, such as level of education, income, gender, race and ethnicity, marital status, geographic location, political ideology, trust in government and democracy, personal values, and last but not least civic engagement²⁴. Some research

²¹ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. Turnout by year [online]. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/>

²² See e.g. GERBER, A. S., GREEN, D. P., SHACHAR, R. Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment. *American Journal of Political Science*. 2003, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 540–550.

²³ DENNY, K., ORLA, D. Does Voting History Matter? Analysing Persistence in Turnout. *American Journal of Political Science*. 2009, vol. 53, no. 1, p. 30.

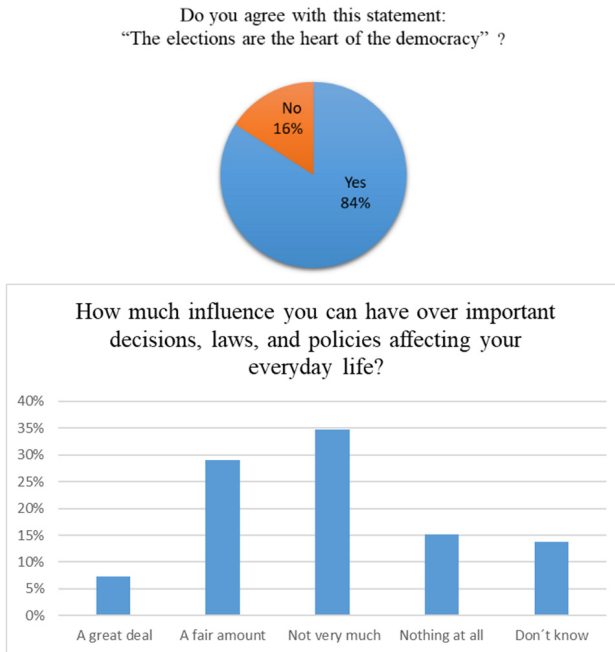
²⁴ ÖHRVALL, R. Growing into Voting: Election Turnout among Young People and Habit Formation. 2018 [online]. Available at: <https://liu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1238886/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

outcomes point out that individuals become habituated to voting in particular types of elections. The degree of persistence appears to vary by electoral context and by the attributes of those who comply with an initial inducement to vote²⁵.

3. Research outcomes

The following part of the paper presents the results of the survey. The results initiate a debate that will pursue this chapter. This chapter exhibits the answers regarding the attitude of young people to the elections to the European Parliament and their opinions on the possible influence on public affairs. Charts 2 and 3 show the attitude of the respondents towards the importance of the elections and their opinion about the influence on public affairs.

Chart 2, 3 Attitude of respondents towards elections, influence on public live

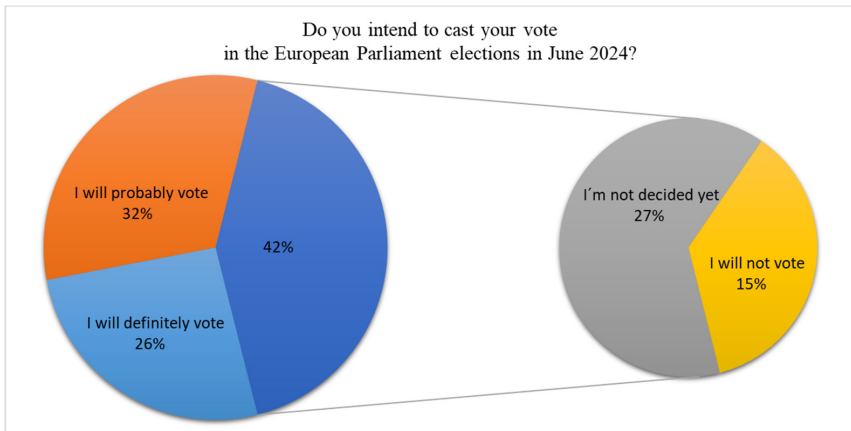


Source *Own processing*

²⁵ COPPOCK, A., GREEN, D. P. Is Voting Habit Forming? New Evidence from Experiments and Regression Discontinuities. *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 60, no. 4.

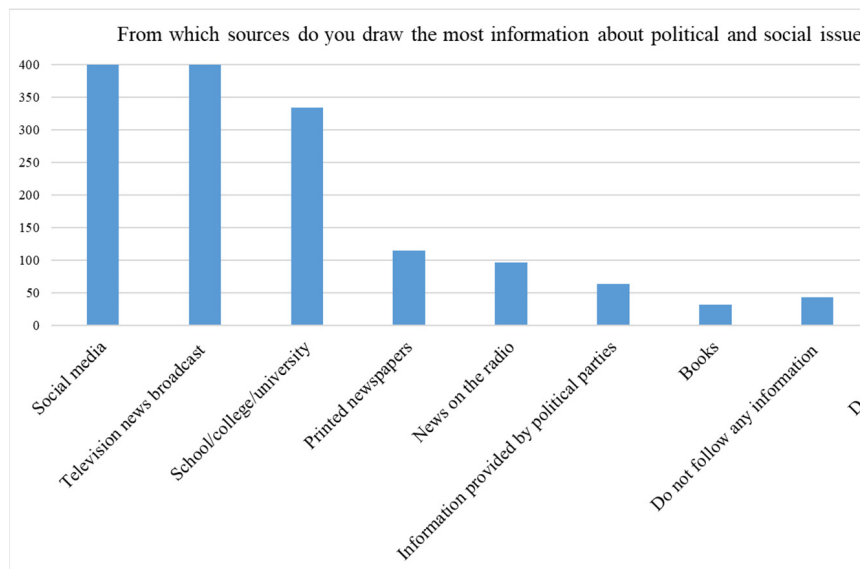
The first-time voters expressed a considerably high trust in the importance of the elections. Almost 85 percent consider elections to be an important tool for protecting democratic values. More than four-fifths of the respondents agree that elections are crucial for the democratic system. These opinions are in contradiction with the answers to the second question: How much influence you can have over important decisions, laws, and policies affecting your everyday life? One-third of the respondents answered, “Not very much”. This means that for one-third of the respondents, their vote seems to be powerless. Those who do not believe in the power of the vote probably expressed their choice to opt out of the elections or have not decided yet. Conversely, more than half of the respondents are likely to cast including 26 percent of the respondents who are decided to cast the vote, see Chart 4.

Chart 4 Intention to participate in EU elections



Source *Own processing*

These figures open up the question of what lies behind the uncertainty of young voters in the decision to participate or not in their first elections. The answers may be hidden in the sources and the way that young people get the information as well as how they proceed with information as well as the perception of the role of the European Parliament. The purpose of the next question was to find out where young people get their information from about politics and social issues. The respondents chose up to three sources they generally draw the most in order to get information about politics, economics, and social life. The answers are presented in Chart 5.

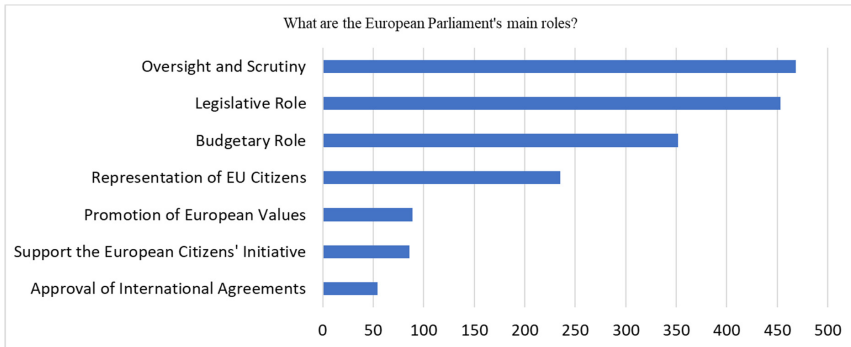
Chart 5 Sources of information

Source *Own processing*

Chart 5 shows that social media and television prevail in supplying the information. On the contrary, only a tiny fraction of the respondents draws information from traditional sources like books or news on the radio. An interesting piece of finding arises from the fact that only 63 participants responded that they gather information directly from political parties. The survey confirmed that cyberspace retains the top position. A big part of social life is connected with social media, facilitating access to both official and unofficial sources, and enabling different actors to carry out activities aimed at influencing public opinion, and social attitudes²⁶. Conversely, the direct contact with political parties is insignificant.

Another question finds the answers on how young voters perceive the role of the European Parliament. Young respondents expressed themselves by choosing up to three answers.

²⁶ HOLT, K., SHEHATA, A., STRÖMBÄCK, J., LJUNGBERG, E. Age and the effects of news media attention and social media use on political interest and participation: Do social media function as leveller? *European Journal of Communication*. 2013, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 19–34.

Chart 6 Perception of EU Parliament's main roles

Source *Own processing*

Youth see the main role of the European Parliament in the legislative and budgetary tasks. The delegate positions such as the representation of EU citizens or their international representation are for them marginalised. Young people do not perceive members of the European Parliament as their representatives who may be able to express and voice their opinions and positions.

The following set of questions concerns the usage of different sources for getting the information and is focused on what is happening at schools. The respondents ranked the school in third place in the rankings of “information providers” see Chart 5. Schools have an outstanding influence, what happens in the classes may significantly influence the attitude and position of young voters. Therefore, schools are supposed to provide a diverse and wide range of activities that lead young people to civic responsibility and engagement. The following charts give an overview of the activities involved during the educational process. Respondents were asked to choose one option that describes the most how frequently the activity is addressed in schools.

The most frequent activities run at schools is training in media literacy involving mainly working with the text and information. The discussions and structured dialogues are the second most performed activity. On the contrary, the activities that deserve more profound preparation and involvement of the participants such as the mock trials or student-moderated panels are never practiced by more than half of the respondents. Visiting the institutions or meeting the politicians belong as well to rarely used activities. It can be seen that schools have difficulties in organizing time-consuming events that require longer preparation, intensive cooperation, and more profound skills of students.

Chart 7 Activities run at schools

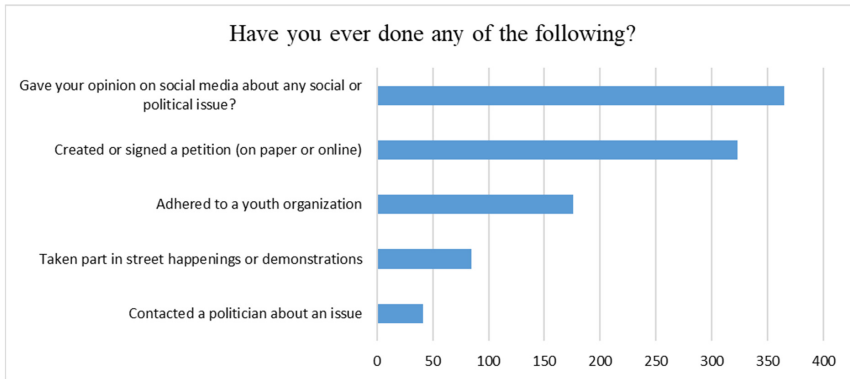
Source *Own processing*

Rather passive engagement of young people is displayed as well in Chart 8. It gives an overview of the engagement and activities that take place outside of regular school hours and that are related to public life.

Regarding personal activities, the answers reveal that young people are likely to express their opinions and they await and demand action from authorities. Moreover, social media and technology make it easier to spread opinions. Posting their opinions on social media seems to be the most acceptable way to express themselves. About two-thirds do not hesitate to manifest their point of view by signing or creating a petition. Far less frequent activity is to join an association for a common purpose or goal which stands for about one-third of

the respondents. Personal engagement seems to be convenient only for about 15 percent of the respondents.

Chart 8 Personal activities



Source *Own processing*

The outcomes of the survey open important topics for discussion on the direction in which the thinking and actions of young people are heading. A detailed analysis of the results and discussion is the content of the following part of the paper.

4. Discussion

The outcomes of the survey direct to the subsequent findings that are discussed as follows. Democracies depend on informed and engaged citizens²⁷. As a necessary condition for the existence of basic democratic principles, election participation ensures a suitable mechanism for the articulation of interests and provides a form of checks and balances on decision-makers, last but not least is directly related to the responsiveness of government²⁸. Consequently, democracy may hardly be sustainable unless it succeeds in continuously declining interest which leads to the lack of voter participation in the EU elections. Charts 2 and

²⁷ HELD, D. *Models of democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press UK, 2006, p. 6.

²⁸ O'NEILL, B. Democracy, Models of Citizenship and Civic Education. In: MURRAY, Print, MILNER, H. *Civic education and youth political participation*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 2009, p. 7.

3 discovered a significant effect that corresponds with the general belief among young people, for 84 percent of the respondents the elections are the heart of democracy. Furthermore, as a necessary condition for the existence of a democratic polity²⁹, citizen participation provides the best mechanism for the articulation of interests, affects life satisfaction, provides a form of checks and balances on decision-makers, and is directly related to the responsiveness of government.

The results of the survey (see Chart 4) show that 58 percent of respondents intend to cast their vote in the next European elections among which 26 percent expressed themselves to be already decided. The following lines deal with the undecided respondents and with the respondents who do not want to cast their vote. An important reason for not voting in the recent EU elections is a lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics in general and a lack of interest in politics. Another reason is the belief that a vote has no consequences or does not change anything which goes in compliance with other research³⁰ and with the answers (see Chart 3). Half of the respondents believe that their vote has no influence on public affairs. The reason for this predominant perception of no consequences of the voting uselessness may be hidden in particular reasons that are associated. More studies indicate that in particular in recent years reporting on the EU has shown to be predominantly negative³¹ with a focus on a threat to national economies³². During a typical election campaign, young citizens would hear or see relatively little about the EU and the parliamentary elections in the news media. Most of the news items that discuss European issues in depth concern international relations and abstract economic processes, information that is quite distant from the experiences of a young adult. If the EU is featured in the news, it is most likely in the context of national developments or general economic trends like the Euro-crisis³³.

On the other hand, a fair amount and a great deal of influence feel 29 percent, resp. 7 percent of respondents (see Chart 3). This indicates that campaign messages are seen and heard by the young Europeans and in some cases may have a bearing on their participation in the elections. Therefore, it is useful to focus on the main information sources (see Chart 5). Due to the changing and

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ DEŽELAN, T. *Young people's participation in European democratic processes. How to improve and facilitate youth involvement*. 2023 [online]. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU\(2023\)745820_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU(2023)745820_EN.pdf)

³¹ GLEISSNER, M. News about the EU constitution: Journalistic challenges and media portrayal of the European union constitution. *Journalism*. 2005, 6(2), pp. 221–242.

³² MICHAILIDOU, A. The role of the public in shaping EU contestation: Euroscepticism and online news media. *International Political Science Review*. 2015, 36(3), p. 324.

³³ MOELLER, J., KÜHNE, R., DE VREESE, C. Mobilizing Youth in the 21st Century: How Digital Media Use Fosters Civic Duty, Information Efficacy, and Political Participation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. 2018, 62(3), pp. 445–460.

fragmented media environment in the 21st century, the influence of the media on the development of political participation and civic norms has changed. Many young citizens choose to avoid political information or selectively attend to only the issues that appeal to them³⁴. The research results indicate a declining use of offline sources, whereas online news media prevail. This goes in line with the predominant use of online devices in this age group, but it might also be a consequence of the higher motivation to follow the news through social networks and related use of online applications as they provide unlimited access to their own devices depending on their own choice that informs on time and allow engage in the stories that seem relevant while merely scanning all other events³⁵. Consequently, the approach, way of presentation, and overall effect are crucial for the satisfaction of media-related needs and the motivation to pay attention to information and procession. Accordingly, consistent exposure to relevant news online is associated with the belief that an individual ought to partake in democratic processes, as well as more confidence in a young voter's ability to do so³⁶. Both factors are key factors in participating in the elections. Still, there are 27 percent of those respondents who have not decided yet (see Chart 5). These undecided young first-time voters may be influenced by the upcoming campaign as well as by a suitable set of school activities and information efficacy. Schools have a significant influence on the development of civic duty and information efficacy and consequently on political participation. Anyhow, it is important to stress that as per some studies, the internet and social media increase the activism of those who are already active³⁷.

No doubt, technological innovation and the widespread use of digital technologies have had a profound impact on changing habits, including voting habits. *The widely spread use of the internet is suitable for different forms of action and interaction in a digitally networked space, it is supposed to be accessible and user-friendly for young people – the digital generation of first voters.* Anyhow, the findings of the present research lead to the identification of the absence of an important method of communication with young voters. It is noticeable in Chart 7 that awareness-raising activities that may be organized by the schools are not sufficiently exploited. Results manifest in the young people's indecisiveness and

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ HOLT, K., SHEHATA, A., STRÖMBÄCK, J., LJUNGBERG, E. Age and the effects of news media attention and social media use on political interest and participation: Do social media function as leveller? *European Journal of Communication*. 2013, 28(1), pp. 19–34.

³⁶ MOELLER, J., KÜHNE, R., DE VREESE, C. Mobilizing Youth in the 21st Century: How Digital Media Use Fosters Civic Duty, Information Efficacy, and Political Participation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. 2018, 62(3), pp. 445–460.

³⁷ Ibid.

uncertainty about opinions, the sensation that things are too complicated to understand, or on the contrary, they see the world flattening in black and white. The political issues, public life, connections, dependencies, and relations are excessively intricate so that they can be understood with a single click on a mobile phone.

This aligns with the roles of the European Parliament for the young voters (see Chart 6). They do not identify their representatives in this institution to be their “ambassadors” and “spokespersons”. Less than half of respondents perceive the members of the EU Parliament to represent the EU Citizens. This role is in fourth place after oversights, legislative, and budgetary roles. Young people ignore the institute called Citizens’ Initiative where the EU Parliament may decide to debate further and adopt a resolution on these ideas.

A closer look at the data (Chart 8) also shows a significant disproportion of those who are involved in active actions concerning public affairs and of those who tend to express sluggishly their opinions about some public topic. Conversely, when it comes to having an opportunity to express their opinion, they do so. These findings confirm not only that young Europeans care about politics and public affairs they also tend to develop their perspective and there is a cleavage of the will to express themselves.

Clearly, these are some of the cases for the future educational setting. Schools play an irreplaceable role in access to information about politics, and public life. School activities are supposed to influence young people by shaping their thoughts about the contemporary world. They stand for the place for intrinsic goals of disciplinary knowledge, including learning about the political conceptions, and cultures through perspective, broadening students’ everyday understanding³⁸.

Chart 7 demonstrates the answers of the respondents on different school activities focused on data selection, increasing and developing their interest in public affairs. The activities concerning training in media literacy and access to a wide range of diverse and unfiltered information may be described to be sufficiently exploited. As for the other activities, the results of the survey suggest that the educational process is insufficiently focused on strengthening the activities leading to personal involvement in public affairs. Student-moderated panels, youth juries, mock trials, and other deliberative models of youth participation, guided tours or institutional visits, and debates with the politicians have never been undertaken for more than 50 percent of the respondents.

Therefore, it is highly important to support the proactive approach of schools in education on what European citizenship means and what are the benefits of

³⁸ SANDAHL, J. Studying Politics or Being Political? High School Students’ Assessment of the Welfare State. *Journal of Social Science Education*. 2019, 18. pp. 153–171.

European citizenship. The following lines give some proffering future-oriented proposals that may strengthen the voting turnover. The key areas of interest are acknowledging the ongoing processes of addressing the problem of youth participation in electoral politics and recommended actions in targeting the areas of information provision, and information processing capacity. These are the creation and support of tools for youth-friendly information-sharing and feedback. It is useful for schools to continuously promote different school activities aiming at searching, expressing, defending, and exchanging opinions using various deliberative models of youth participation, such as youth juries, mock trials, and moderated panels. An important tool to bring politics closer to young people and engage them in the decision-making process is to organize debates with the politicians. The politicians themselves must take into account the importance of direct contact with young voters and make an effort to visit the schools and organize discussions and meetings while respecting the rule of rather explaining than promising. At school, instead of relying on unrelated national issues, the politicians are supposed to focus on emphasizing the role of the EU, EU integration, and cooperation in the everyday lives of EU citizens as well as on the feeling of duty towards Europe.

Another important issue is the use of digital services in public administration. As per the results of the survey, the respondents seem to be engaged and motivated to express their opinions, and the interactive interfaces and informational resources provided electronically can help them better in some cases understand candidates and issues on the ballot. The survey confirmed a high degree of information dependence and accessibility to online sources of respondents. An effective digital transformation of various aspects is likely to promote higher voter turnout among young voters. E-voting, with its accessibility and convenience, has the potential to engage and empower younger generations who are often tech-savvy and digitally connected³⁹. First time voters *may be more motivated* to vote if elections are conducted electronically. E-voting is more convenient for those who are accustomed to digital convenience in their daily lives allowing them to vote quickly without travelling to a physical polling station⁴⁰. Anyhow, in connection with these facts, it is indispensable to grasp the potential risks, put the individuals and their rights and freedoms at the heart of the legal regulation, and capture them as the primary object of protection⁴¹. Social media will remain

³⁹ NORRIS, P. *E-Voting as the Magic Ballot?* Harvard University: Harvard Kennedy School, University of Sydney, 2002, pp. 5–18.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ ANDRAŠKO, J., MESARČÍK, M., HAMULÁK, O. The regulatory intersections between artificial intelligence, data protection and cyber security: challenges and opportunities for the EU legal framework – Basic Scenarios. *AI & SOCIETY*. 2021, 36, p. 632.

a key tool that can build effective new relationships between political actors and young people. This will not happen without the active involvement of politicians and the positive correlation between the political use of social media and political participation and representation during school activities.

To sum up, as for the upcoming and future elections, it would be short-sighted to let young Europeans rely on sources shared through social. Instead, it needs to be assured that information about the EU is available to young citizens in a form that is understandable, unbiased, and relevant to them. This kind of information can build their self-confidence in their voting decision and can lead to active participation. Yet, having more young people who regularly participate in elections could lead to a substantial and faster shift in policy priorities, given the different perceptions of the urgency of the current, relevant, and urgent matters.

5. Conclusion

Numerous variables condition the youth voter turnout in the elections. This research aimed to assess the attitude of first-time voters to polling in European Parliament elections in June 2024 in the context of school activities as well as extracurricular activities related to public affairs. In the present research, only first-time voters were questioned in the survey. A closer look at the results of the survey shows that a great deal of information that young people take in comes from cyberspace. The number of those who are influenced by information from social media is excessively high in comparison with more reliable sources like schools, printed journals or books. At the same time, it was found that the internet and social media may increase the activism of those who are likely to express their opinion, jointly it is much easier to express their opinions via social media which is often anonymous and in a straightforward context. In contrast, the respondents are not likely to participate actively in social and political issues.

It was discussed that, even if the internet and social media offer significant potential for mobilizing youth for issue-oriented campaigns, they cannot replace the personal attitude and school involvement in different activities and social engagement to connect students to active European citizenship. The role of the school is irreplaceable when facilitating the formation of the civic responsibility of young people. EU policy measures with significant impacts on member states have steadily become more complicated in recent years and European voters today may have difficulties understanding what is at stake. This lack of involvement hinders students' understanding of the democratic process and their civic responsibilities. Among the aspects of direct school influence on students that need to be utilized are exposure and direct access to official sources. It was

described that different actors involved in public life are supposed to carry out activities aimed at influencing citizenship responsibility and ensuring more effective exposure to political information leading to learning effects and an increase in traditional forms of participation.

The research discovered that the school and extracurricular activities have been so far underutilized despite their high availability and accessibility to increase interest in elections and strengthen the civic responsibility of the youth from the perspective of European citizenship. Schools often do not engage adequately in giving the opportunities to make young people think of the role, and policies and form their judgments. Encouraging active participation in political discussions by schools and providing unbiased information can help bridge this gap, fostering informed and engaged citizens. This opens an opportunity also for politicians and other publicly active individuals to engage in fostering young people's awareness of the importance of European institutions, especially not during an electoral campaign. Seemingly, it is essential to reach out to students personally with topics of common relevance that play a more important role than ever before.

An important conclusion arising from the research indicates young voters understand that political participation is essential for any functioning democracy. Despite this fact the European Parliament as one of the main European institutions stays distant from young people, they do not fully understand its role.

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