

Europe Expands, Turnout Falls

When 25 countries voted to elect their representatives to the European Parliament by June 2004, it was the biggest democratic event in European history. But a majority of Europeans could not be bothered to vote. Only 45,5% of Europeans actually cast a ballot, the lowest percentage in the quarter-century history of the popularly elected Parliament. However, there were big differences in turnout between countries. In Belgium and Luxembourg more than 90 per cent of the electorate voted, while in Slovakia and Poland only a fifth or less could be bothered to vote. Such great differences cry out for explanation: why should turnout in European country be almost five times that in another?

The Euro Gap is the difference in turnout between the number of people who voted in their national election and the number who voted in the European ballot. This supplementary chapter addresses the following questions:

- Where is turnout lowest and where is it highest - and why?
- Is turnout in European Parliament elections really declining?
- How big is the Euro Gap, and what does it tell us about popular views of the European Union?
- What can be done to boost popular participation in the European Union?
- How many votes were wasted, meaning that they were cast for parties that did not win any seats?

The Voter Turnout Project at International IDEA

This first Regional Report on Voter Turnout is developed from the International IDEA global database on voter turnout. The database contains statistics from 170 countries for parliamentary and presidential elections since 1945 to date and is continuously updated on International IDEA's website (www.idea.int/turnout). The report has been produced as a lead in International IDEA's work on voter turnout, which started in 1996 by the production of the first global report, to be followed by two additional global reports in 1997 and 2002. International IDEA seeks to develop and disseminate tools which can provide those participating in the electoral process and the debate about change and improvement in democracy and electoral arrangements with solid information and knowledge about issues of voter turnout. The earlier reports are available from www.idea.int and have covered issues of voter registration, elections and technology, compulsory voting, access to polling stations, turnout by gender and age, several country case studies and other factors that have an effect on turnout.

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The Voter Turnout Reports may also be ordered directly from
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VOTER TURNOUT IN WESTERN EUROPE

A Regional Report

Voter Turnout in Western Europe – A Regional Report

Electoral participation is in general falling, at least as measured by voter turnout. Rising levels of public apathy or cynicism are of growing concern in both newer and older democracies, and are a particular focus of concern in Western Europe. At the same time, there are continuing obstacles and disincentives to participation that could be diminished by adapting electoral systems or encouraging easier electoral access for all. Not enough is yet known about which practical measures are effective in encouraging turnout, and which are not. Nor are the factors which breed apathy and discontent with democratic institutions themselves sufficiently understood.

There are currently very few tools available to assist the informed consideration of turnout questions. This report on voter turnout in Western Europe is designed to bring together and make available the data collected by International IDEA and to promote discussion on issues relating to voter turnout and participation. This report gives an unrivalled set of data on parliamentary, presidential and European elections and analyses the impact of factors affecting voter turnout trends in the region generally, ranging from choice of polling day to through electoral system choice to longevity of democracy. The report also considers the effects of compulsory voting and of the successes and limitations of the use of new technology in encouraging turnout.

Contents

Stages in the Electoral History of Western Europe

What were the landmarks on the way towards universal suffrage? This chapter walks you through the story of social conflict, the development of trade unions and political parties, and the road to full voter enfranchisement in Western Europe.

Voter Turnout in the European Union Member Countries

The body which has become the European Union was created in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome. With the expansion of powers of the European Union, the first direct elections of members to the European Parliament was held in 1979. What are the powers of the European Parliament vs the national governments, and what are the differences in turnout? The chapter analyses the differences in turnout between countries, and between different types of elections in Europe.

Compulsory Voting in Western Europe

Is voting a citizen's right or their civil obligation? This chapter offers a discussion for and against the practise of compulsory voting. It also contains detailed information about the introduction of compulsory voting, the sanctions that apply to non-voters and present status of compulsory voting in those European countries that practise it today, or have at some point in their history practised it.

Women and the Vote in Western Europe

Whether women or men turn out to vote more is an often debated issue. The main reason why this question does not have a single, correct answer is that very few countries offer disaggregated turnout data by gender or age. This chapter analyses the existing data as well as the way to full

suffrage for women, and attempts to draw conclusions on the same issues.

Innovative technology and its impact on Electoral processes

The initiatives of introducing more technology in the electoral process have increased in all regions of the world. Technology can be used in order to produce voter registers, to count votes or for the voters to cast their votes, to mention a few. Recently, the testing of voting from elsewhere than at the polling station have taken place in several countries. The chapter offers an overview of the initiatives and use of technology, as well as information about the recent developments in this field.

Will new Technology Boost Turnout? Experiments in E-voting and All-Postal Voting in British Local Elections

The use of technology in the electoral process have been tested to a wide extent in the UK, and so has the use of all postal ballots. Does the use of alternative methods such as technology and postal voting have an effect on voter turnout or not? This chapter reveals the results of some of the pilots that have been conducted in the UK.

The Euro Gap:

"The difference in turnout between the latest national election and the 2004 European Parliament election".

