

Holding frequent national elections may lead to lower turnout in European Parliament elections

If citizens are frequently called upon to vote in elections, are they less likely to participate? Drawing on a new study, Jeffrey Nonnemacher investigates whether the number of national elections held in a country has an impact on turnout levels in elections for the European Parliament. He finds that when states hold several national elections across a short period of time, there is an observable decline in turnout in the following European Parliament election, particularly among low interest and low propensity voters.

In the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, turnout rose from a historic low in 2014 of 42.6 per cent to 50.7 per cent. Despite this increase, turnout is still low relative to turnout in national elections and varies drastically across the European Union, with some countries reporting upwards of 80% while others still struggle to mobilise more than a third of their population to participate.

The variation in turnout is particularly puzzling given the rising salience of the EU in the minds of citizens, with the Eurozone and refugee crises and Brexit all bringing the EU to the top of people's newsfeeds. These patterns raise important questions about who participates in EU elections and the conditions that influence turnout.

In a [recent study](#), I focus on one potential explanation for the variations in turnout: the frequency of national elections held between European Parliament elections. Do frequent elections disengage voters and depress turnout? Using data from 1979 to 2019, I find that a high frequency of elections is associated with a decline in turnout in European Parliament elections. Holding numerous national elections can have a particular impact on levels of disengagement among low interest, low propensity voters, but has little effect for high-interest voters.

Participating in European Parliament elections

It has been broadly observed in previous academic studies that voters perceive European Parliament elections to be 'second-order' elections that are lower in stakes and importance than national elections. This makes voters less interested in and much less likely to participate in European Parliament elections.

This raises the question of what happens when voters have been subjected to multiple rounds of high-stakes elections at the national level prior to the much lower stakes European Parliament elections. The short answer is fatigue. Each time a voter is asked to participate in an election, they are asked to make important decisions about the direction of policy. This requires the collection and processing of information and taking the time to make a decision. Ask voters to do this repeatedly, and the costs pile up.



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Assuming voters are rational actors who only participate when the benefits of their participation outweigh the costs, frequent elections should lead people to disengage as they become overburdened by the constant politics brought by multiple elections. This effect would particularly hurt turnout in European Parliament elections, which voters are already predisposed to skip.

However, not every voter responds to elections in the same way. For some voters, elections are highly stimulating, interesting affairs. For these voters, frequent elections are ideal, and the likelihood that they participate is high regardless of how many times they are asked to vote. Other voters, however, count down the days until the election is over and they can return to a life without campaigns. Their participation is already not guaranteed, and it is these voters that we might expect to be most likely to further disengage when the number of elections stacks up.

The disengaging effect of frequent elections

By counting the number of state-wide elections between European Parliament elections from 1979 to 2014, the results of my analysis confirm this expectation. Each time voters are asked to participate in another national election, turnout in the subsequent European Parliament election drops by an average of 1.5%. When there is one national-level election, as was the case in Denmark between 2009 and 2014, the predicted turnout is at 52%. At the other extreme, when there are seven national elections, such as Ireland or Slovenia from 2009 to 2014, the predicted turnout decreases to 42%. This is a substantial decline of ten percent and suggests that the number of elections could be the difference between majority and minority participation.

However, turnout actually increased from 2014 to 2019 *despite* frequent elections in several member states in the intervening years. For instance, Spain held three general elections to the Congress of Deputies in 2015, 2016, and a month before the 2019 European Parliament elections. The United Kingdom, which normally holds only one election between European Parliament elections, similarly held three: the general elections in 2015 and 2017 and the Brexit referendum in 2016. If anything, the five-year electoral calendar should have signalled a decline in turnout in 2019. This is what makes the 2019 elections an interesting case study to unpack whether elections have a negative effect on turnout, and among which type of voters.

Using data from the 2019 wave of the [European Election Study](#), I found that the number of elections held between 2014 and 2019 was associated with a lower likelihood that people participated in 2019. Most importantly, this negative relationship is particularly strong with low interest voters. Among these voters, the likelihood of participating drops from 79.9% when there are no elections, to 63% when there are seven elections. In other words, the likelihood that a low interest voter participates drops 16.9% as the number of elections increases from zero to seven. This is almost four times as high as the 3.9% decline among high interest voters.

These results have important implications for our understanding of why voters participate in elections and how their participation is influenced by the presence and frequency of other elections. On the surface, the lesson from these results is that EU member states should reduce the number of elections they hold if they care about reducing the democratic deficit of the EU. However, turnout in 2019 points to an alternative, more optimistic, takeaway.

Turnout increased despite the frequent elections and their negative effect, and high interest voters were unphased by the numerous times they were asked to participate. This suggests that engaging with citizens and increasing their interest in EU politics can combat the negative impact of numerous elections in the domestic arena. The increasing polarisation around the EU may actually be useful for mobilising Europeans to participate in the often-ignored elections for the European Parliament.

For more information, see the author's accompanying paper in [European Union Politics](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [CC-BY-4.0: © European Union 2019 – Source: EP](#)
