PRESS RELEASE

Voting negatively? Europeans may decide who not to vote for in EU-Elections

An analysis by the Bertelsmann Stiftung of the European elections has revealed that many Europeans take a negative stance. A majority could therefore vote against certain parties in May, rather than voting for a party. At the same time, supporters of the extreme and Eurosceptic margins are more strongly mobilised than the political centre, which still suffers from voter fatigue. This could shape the election results and make it difficult to form positive majorities in the new EU Parliament.

<u>Berlin, 26 April 2019</u>. When it comes to the possible turnout in the 2019 European elections, the data is encouraging for democracy: two thirds of all Europeans surveyed (68 percent) want to take part in the European elections. In Germany, this figure even reaches three-quarters of all voters (73 percent). But the majority of Europeans could be guided by their rejection of certain parties when deciding how to vote. This is the result of a recent study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, based on a large-scale survey asking how Europeans will vote in the 2019 European elections. 23,725 eligible voters in twelve countries were surveyed for the study "Europe's Choice".

Europe's populist critics are benefiting from voter fatigue in the political centre

According to the study, supporters of Eurosceptic parties on the political fringes are more strongly mobilised than the political centre, which still suffers from voter fatigue. "The level of turnout will be decisive for the outcome of the elections and the future of Europe. Europe needs working majorities in the new European Parliament. Mobilising the predominantly pro-European center is an important prerequisite for this," says Aart De Geus, Chairman of the Bertelsmann Stiftung Executive Board, commenting on the results.

But the study also shows that populists are united only in their EU-scepticism and their criticism of democracy. In on concrete issues, left-wing and right-wing populist voters are even more divided than the voters of mainstream parties. For the new EU Parliament, this means: consensus and positive majorities require even larger coalitions of the mainstream parties than before. "The stronger the populist and extremist margins become, the more this forces the mainstream parties to reach a consensus. If the mainstream parties fail to build this bridge, negative majorities may lead to self-imposed deadlock and stagnation," says Robert Vehrkamp, co-author of the study and democracy expert at the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Voting against: Rejection of parties could dominate voters' choices

The survey results also reveal a certain negative stance on the part of Europeans. "Many citizens no longer choose a party, but vote against those parties that they reject most strongly," explains Vehrkamp. On average, only about six out of every 100 voters (6.3 percent) identify positively with a party. In contrast, almost one in two (around 49 percent) has a negative party identity, i.e. completely rejects one or even several parties.

Of particular interest are the levels of rejection or approval for individual parties on the political margins. On the one hand, the extremist and populist parties have the highest rejection rates, at around 52 percent. At the same time, right-wing populists have the highest positive party identifications, at around 10 percent, and left-wing populists, at around six percent, also have very high values. "The populist parties have managed to create a stable voter base for themselves in a relatively short period of time. But their simultaneously high rejection values also show how dangerous it would be for other parties to imitate the populist parties," says Vehrkamp. According to the authors, the mainstream pro-European parties should instead use the widespread rejection of populist parties even more actively for an anti-populist counter-mobilisation of voters.

Poor representation causes populism

But what are the causes of populism? For the first time, the study also investigated the causal relationship between representation and populism. The results show that a lack of representation causes populism. "The more people feel poorly represented by politics, the more receptive they become to populist messages and the more likely they are to elect populist parties," says democracy expert Vehrkamp: "Whoever wants to prevent the further spread of populist attitudes should therefore make sure that all voters are represented as well as possible. Good representation is the best insurance against populism." In addition, election campaigns always offer particular opportunities for dialogue between voters and politicians.

Additional information

The study "Europe's Choice - Populist attitudes and voting intentions in the 2019 European election" is based on a multinational online survey. The national samples of respondents are representative of the population eligible to vote in the 2019 European elections in each of the twelve countries surveyed. The survey was conducted by YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung in a survey wave in January 2019. A total of 23,725 respondents from twelve EU member states were interviewed: Germany (1,995), France (1,949), Greece (2,027), United Kingdom (2,133), Italy (1,952), the Netherlands (1,924), Austria (1,984), Poland (1,911), Sweden (1,976), Denmark (1,973), Spain (1,949) and Hungary (1,952).

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