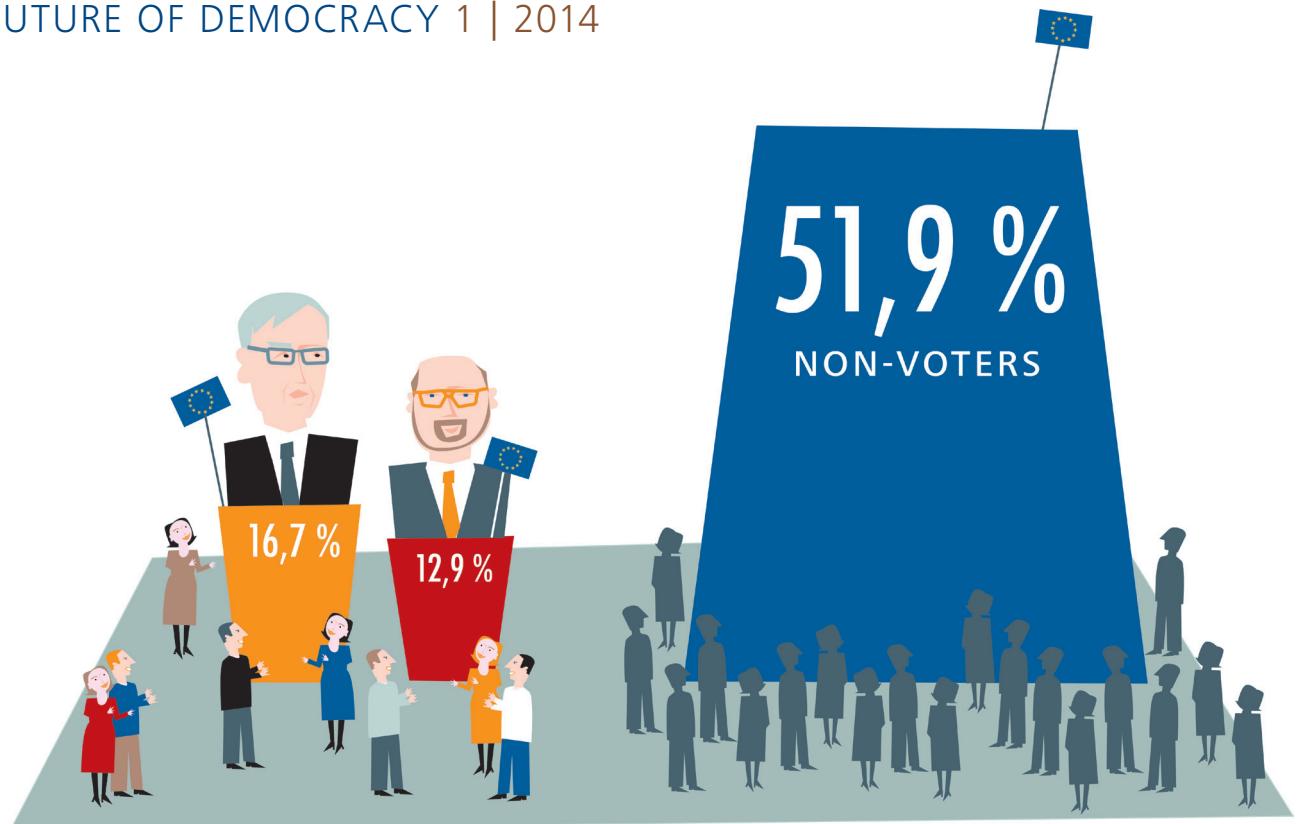


EINWURF

FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY 1 | 2014



2014 EU Election – Why Socially Divided Voter Turnout Hurts the EU

It already held true for Germany's 2013 federal parliamentary election: The more precarious the social living conditions, the lower the voter turnout. As a result, growing regional and social differences lead to political inequality (EINWURF 3/2013). The social divide in German society can be seen even more clearly with the 2014 European Parliament election: With voter turnout for it being significantly lower than that for the Bundestag election, social selectivity was more pronounced. Thus, the results of the EU election are even less representative than those of the Bundestag election.

Author



Jérémie Gagné
Jeremie.Felix.Gagne
@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Tel. +49 5241 81 81263

Sources

Data on voter-participation spreads in 400 voting districts derive from the election-day poll of Infratest dimap.

The author's calculations on voter turnout for the 2014 EU election are based on:

- www.bundeswahlleiter.de, the website of Germany's federal returning officer
- the websites of the statistical offices of the examined cities (Berlin, Bielefeld, Braunschweig, Bremen, Düsseldorf, Gelsenkirchen, Hanover, Leipzig, Mainz, Munich, Cologne, Krefeld, Stuttgart, Wiesbaden and Wuppertal)
- www.europarl.europa.eu, the website of the European Parliament

Socially Divided Voter Turnout for the EU Election

Already with the 2009 and 2013 elections for the Bundestag, Germany's federal-parliament, major spatial differences could be detected that reflected the differences in living conditions among voters. As it turned out, the more precarious one's living situation – in other words, the lower one's level of educational achievement and the lower the average income in one's neighborhood or voting district – the lower the voter turnout. The same pattern also emerged – and in an even acuter form – with the European Parliament elections held in May 2014: The social selectivity of the electorate was even more pronounced than it had been in the last two Bundestag elections.

The degree of differences at the level of small geographical areas was enormous: If one looks at voter-turnout rates in 400 voting districts across Germany and calculates an average for the highest and lowest voter-turnout rates of all of them (i.e., the top and bottom deciles), the spread for the 2014 EU election was about 37 percentage points. To be more precise, in the decile of all voting districts with the highest voter-turnout rates, average voter participation was at 66.5 percent, while only 29.3 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot in the decile with the lowest voter turnout. Thus, the difference between the areas with respectively high concentrations (or "strongholds") of voters and non-voters was about seven percentage points more pronounced than it had been for the 2013 Bundestag election.

„The same holds true for the 2014 EU election: The more precarious the living conditions, the lower the voter turnout.“

A similar pattern also emerges when one compares the individual neighborhoods of large cities (with "neighborhood," or Stadtteil, understood as a distinct, official subdivision of a district, or Stadtbezirk). If one analyzes voter turnout for the EU elections at the neighborhood level for a total of 15 large German cities (or altogether almost 480

neighborhoods), three aspects particularly stand out in comparison to the Bundestag election:

- With the EU election, a clear division between voter and non-voter strongholds could also be seen in large cities: In the top decile of neighborhoods, the voter strongholds, voter turnout was more than 33 percentage points higher than it was in the bottom decile, the non-voter strongholds. Accordingly, at the neighborhood level, the chasm between neighborhoods with the highest and lowest voter-turnout rates was even larger than it was for the most recent Bundestag election, held in September 2013. Back then, the gap in terms of voter participation between the top and bottom deciles of neighborhoods in these same 15 cities was 25 percentage points, or eight percentage points narrower.

EINWURF

- These spatial differences in voter participation follow in an almost one-to-one manner the social pattern of voter turnout for Bundestag elections. As was already the case for the Bundestag election, voter participation in socially precarious neighborhoods was decidedly lower than it was in those that are socially better off. Indeed, a neighborhood's social situation determines its voter-turnout level: The more residents belonging to a socially precarious milieu, the lower the voter-participation rate; and the larger the proportion of milieus in a neighborhood that are socially better off, the more residents there are who also cast a ballot for the EU elections.
- The overall lower level of voter turnout for the EU election intensifies the relative inequality of voter participation. This can be clearly seen with the following example using figures from the western German city of Cologne: Although voter turnout saw a greater gap between the EU election and the Bundestag election in the affluent neighborhood of Hahnwald (almost 23 percentage points) than it did in Chorweiler (17 percentage points), a socially precarious neighborhood, the relative inequality of voter participation for the EU election was still even more pronounced: While voter participation in Hahnwald was "only" a little more than twice as high as that of Chorweiler for the Bundestag election, voter turnout in Hahnwald was even more than 2.5 times as high as that of Chorweiler for the EU election (66 and 25.6 percent, respectively).

This rise in relative inequality can be observed in all of the 480 neighborhoods across Germany that were examined. For the Bundestag election, the ratio to emerge was roughly 50 percent voter turnout in the bottom decile of the 480 neighborhoods to about 80 percent turnout in the top decile. For the EU election, this ratio worsened from 50-80 to 30-60. In other words, while voter participation for the Bundestag election was "only" a bit more than 0.5 times higher in socially better-off neighborhoods as it was in socially precarious ones, it was twice as high for the EU election. This means that, on average, residents of affluent neighborhoods with the highest voter-turnout rates participated in the EU election twice as much as residents of socially precarious neighborhoods with low voter-turnout rates. As a result, the interests of socially better-off neighborhoods also enjoyed disproportionately strong representation in the election results vis-à-vis the interests of the socially precarious neighborhoods.

Thus, by virtue of the overall lower voter-participation rate, Germany's democracy was even more strongly socially divided for the EU elections than had already been the case for the Bundestag elections. What's more, this also means that the results of the 2014 EU election were even less socially representative than those of the 2013 Bundestag election.

Sources

All of the cited polling data on the EU election were taken from two representative surveys of the IfD Allensbach public opinion research institute, from May and June 2014.

All of the data on Germany's 2013 Bundestag election used in this text derive from the following Bertelsmann Stiftung studies: Petersen/Hierlemann/Vehrkamp/Wratil (2013): *Gespaltene Demokratie – Politische Partizipation und Demokratiezufriedenheit vor der Bundestagswahl 2013*.

Schäfer/Vehrkamp/Gagné (2013): *Prekäre Wählen – Milieus und soziale Selektivität der Wahlbeteiligung bei der Bundestagswahl 2013*.

Major Differences in Popular Attitudes towards the EU

This social division is also reflected in people's attitudes towards the European Union – and, in this case, it is at times reflected even more clearly than when it comes to attitudes at the national level. Indeed, when it comes to national politics, those who appear to be alienated from the system and indifferent are first and foremost individuals from precarious, economically weak backgrounds. There is a great chasm between their attitudes about Germany's democracy and those of individuals from the middle and upper social strata. Conversely, the differences among those in the upper two-thirds of society are rather minor. For example, 21 percent of individuals in the upper and upper-middle strata as well as 26 percent of individuals in the middle stratum generally consider political engagement to be pointless. Meanwhile, this figure stands at 44 percent among those in the so-called lower stratum.

However, when it comes to the European Union, the middle stratum is also increasingly skeptical: On this issue, the attitudes of individuals in the middle and lower strata are very close, while higher rates of positive attitudes are only to be found in the upper and upper-middle strata. Among those surveyed, 54 percent of respondents from the lower stratum and even 55 percent of ones from the middle stratum considered engagement in EU politics to be pointless. Conversely, this stance was only held by 38 percent of respondents from the upper strata. Likewise, whereas only 32 percent of respondents from the lower stratum and 30 percent from the middle stratum viewed having an interest in EU politics as a civic obligation, the figure still stood at 44 percent among members of the upper stratum.

Thus, while it is primarily individuals from the lower social strata who are turning away from politics at the national level, it is members of the upper strata who are disproportionately taking an interest in politics at the EU level. At the same time, the middle stratum is switching sides: When it comes to national (i.e., German) politics, its attitudes are closer to those of the upper stratum. But when it comes to EU politics, it has settled in close to the lower strata in terms of greater detachment and indifference. Consequently, for some time now, not only members of the more socially disadvantaged strata, but also members of the middle stratum have been joining the ranks of those who are rather disinterested in and skeptical of the EU. Indeed, the European Union threatens to become an increasingly exclusive concern of members of the upper social strata.

These stratum-specific differences in terms of interest in the EU are also reflected in voting intentions. Of respondents from the group with the highest average incomes, 48 percent said they were "absolutely certain" that they would go to the polls, while the figure was 42 percent for those from the middle income group. Conversely, it was only 36 percent in the lowest-earning group.

Social Surroundings Influence Individual Voter Participation

An individual's social surroundings also have an influence on the likelihood that he or she will go to the polls: Of survey respondents who indicated shortly after the EU election that they had voted, some 49 percent believed that the majority of people within their circles of friends and acquaintances had also voted. Likewise, around 34 percent believed that half had voted.

The opposite can be seen among those who claim not to have voted: Only 7.4 percent believed that the majority of their friends and acquaintances had voted. Conversely, over 45 percent of the non-voters thought that only a minority of people within their circles of friends and acquaintances had cast a ballot. Meanwhile, individuals from better social living conditions who live in an environment where participating in elections is a social norm exhibit a higher likelihood of casting a ballot. In contrast, in precarious living conditions where politics are hardly an issue, there is the threat of a self-reinforcing spiral of low voter turnout. Indeed, the decision regarding whether or not to vote depends to a large extent on one's social surroundings, circle of friends and family as well as on the intensity of the discussions about politics held within these contexts.

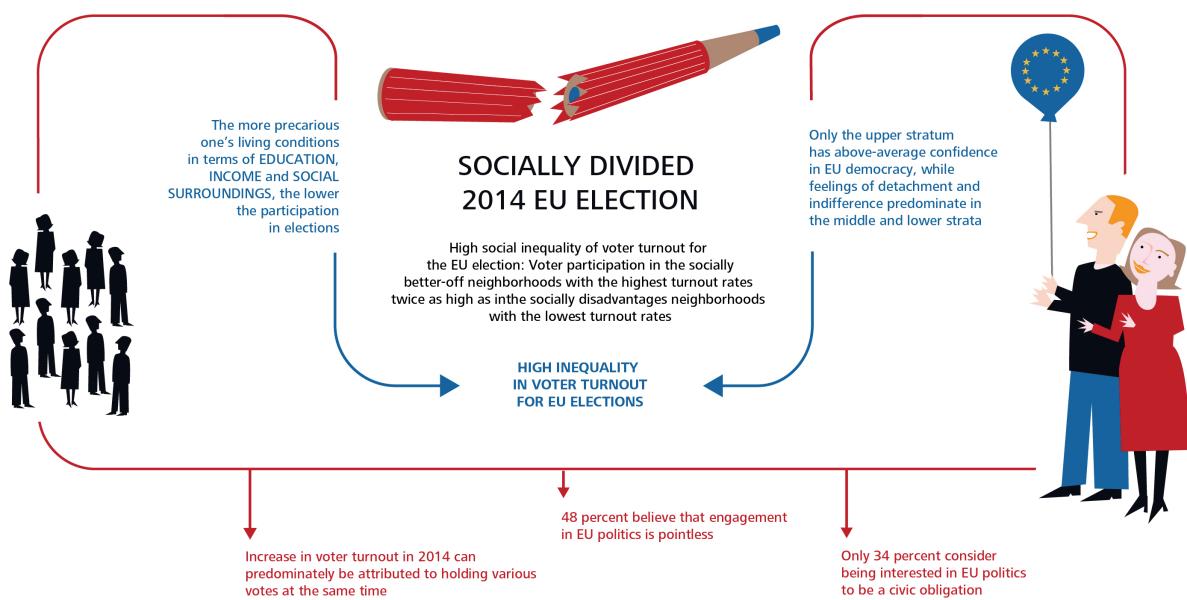
Higher Voter Turnout – but Why?

Still, given this correlation, how is one to explain the slight increase in voter turnout for the 2014 EU election? Does this already foreshadow a trend reversal from which a relativization of the democracy's social division can also be deduced in the longer term? Indeed, at first glance, it surely does appear that one could be rather satisfied with the level of voter turnout in Germany for the EU election held on May 25. After all, this time around, just under 3 million more voters cast a ballot than was the case five years earlier. In percentage terms, voter turnout rose from 43.3 percent in 2009 to 48.1 percent in 2014. As a result, for the first time in many years, the German

level was once again markedly higher than the EU average, which slightly deteriorated, from 43 percent in 2009 to 42.5 percent in 2014. Among the 27 other EU member states, only eight countries – including ones with compulsory voting, such as Belgium, Luxembourg and Greece (formal compulsory voting) – exhibited a higher voter-participation rate than Germany. Meanwhile, voter participation turned

„There was no positive trend reversal in German turnout for the EU election and therefore no reason to give an all-clear signal.“

out to be considerably lower in many other EU countries: In the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, it was 37 and 35 percent, respectively. Even worse, however, merely a fraction of eligible voters participated in the EU election in Eastern European states, such as Poland (23.8 percent), the Czech Republic (18.2 percent) and, at the very bottom of the list, Slovakia (13 percent). Measured against this yardstick, the German level at first seems like something to be happy about.

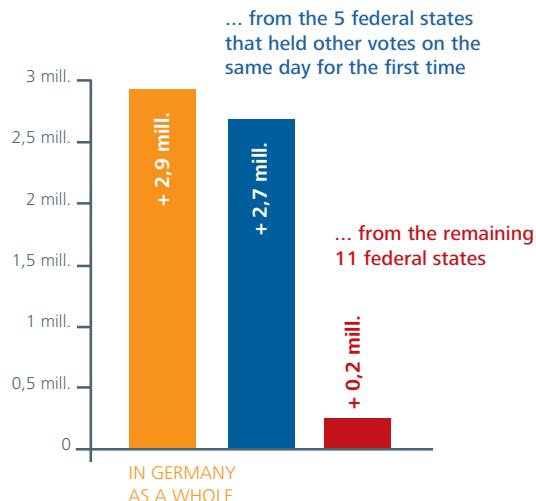


But what explains the rise in voter turnout? Of course, new elements in the EU election process could have led to a situation in which more Germans cast a ballot. For example, for the first time ever, there were “lead candidates” (the so-called Spitzenkandidaten) throughout the EU, and these two men – Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz – were even able to hold televised debates with each other in German. From these facts, one might deduce that this helped mobilize even higher voter turnout.

However, in addition to this, it is particularly worthwhile to take a look at the differences in voter turnout between Germany’s 16 federal states (Bundesländer). In 10 of these states, municipal elections were also held at the same time as the EU election; in another state, there were direct mayoral elections across the state; and in yet another one, there was a controversial referendum. Thus, in 12 federal states, residents had an additional reason to go to the polls. Already in 2009, seven states held municipal elections on the same day as the EU election, with the result being that they had significantly higher voter-participation rates for the EU election than the average national rate (50.3 percent combined versus 43.3 percent). In 2014, three more federal states – North Rhine-Westphalia, Hamburg and Brandenburg – scheduled voting for the EU and municipal elections for the same day. As a result, average voter turnout in just these three states jumped by 14 percentage points (from 37 to 51 percent), whereas the average increase for all 16 states stood at only 4.8 percentage points.

This causal correlation becomes clearer if one also takes into consideration the numerous direct elections in Lower Saxony as well as the controversial 2014 referendum regarding what to do with the grounds of Berlin’s decommissioned Tempelhof Airport, which prompted voter turnout in the city-state to jump by one-third. All of these were held on May 25, the same day as the EU election. Of the in total 2.9 million more German votes cast on that day, more than 2.7 million came from the five federal states that merged ballot-casting for the EU election with other elections or votes for the first time.

VOTER TURNOUT FOR THE 2014 EU ELECTION: Where the additional voters came from ...



Thus, there is some reason to suppose that the increase in voter turnout for the EU election predominantly resulted from the fact that it was held together with other votes. Subsequently a trend reversal regarding EU elections as such is not evident.

Even so, just this kind of trend reversal is urgently needed given that German voter turnout for EU elections has steadily declined since 1979, from 65 percent in that year to 43 percent in 2009. Granted, continually sinking voter-participation rates for EU elections reflect a trend that can also be seen for other votes and elections in Germany. Indeed, voter turnout for Bundestag elections has consistently fallen, from over 90 percent in 1972 to just under 71.5 percent in 2013. However, voter participation in EU elections has seen greater declines than voter turnout for Bundestag elections in both absolute and relative terms.

Germans and the EU – A Feeling of Detachment?

What are the reasons for such low participation, especially for the EU election? One theory holds that many Germans perceive the EU election as a “second-order election” and thereby as less important than the Bundestag election. Thus, the EU shares the same fate as elections for state parliaments and municipalities. As a result, while casting a ballot for Bundestag elections is in most cases viewed as a civic obligation, this same feeling of obligation is not as strongly anchored when it comes to other votes, which in turn leads to lower voter turnout. According to a recent survey of the IfD Allensbach, a leading public opinion research institute, roughly 73 percent of eligible voters in Germany view voting as a civic obligation. This figure matches up almost exactly with the actual voter-participation rate for the Bundestag election held in September 2013 (71.5 percent). In contrast, voter turnout for the 2014 EU election remained 25 percentage points below that.

A second theory posits that Germans’ lower rate of participation in the EU election can be explained by their attitudes about and assessments of the EU. Data from surveys conducted by the IfD Allensbach show that, when compared with their attitudes about democracy at the nation-state level, many Germans have a far more distant relationship with democracy at the EU level:

- 15 percent of those surveyed were “very satisfied” and 67 percent “reasonably satisfied” with Germany’s democracy, for a combined satisfaction rate of 82 percent.
- Only 7 percent were “very satisfied” and 55 percent “reasonably satisfied” with democracy at the EU level, for a combined satisfaction rate of 62 percent.

Further Reading:

Schäfer, Armin (2014): Der Verlust politischer Gleichheit. Warum die sinkende Wahlbeteiligung der Demokratie schadet. Frankfurt am Main: Campus (forthcoming).

Geißel, Brigitte (2011): Politische (Un)-Gleichheit und die Versprechen der Demokratie. In: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte 3/2011. Available online at: www.bpb.de/apuz/144109/politische-un-gleichheit?p=all

Petersen/Hierlemann/Vehrkamp/Wratil (2013): Gespaltene Demokratie – Politische Partizipation und Demokratiezufriedenheit vor der Bundestagswahl 2013.

- This impression was also confirmed when the question was asked in a negative form: 26 percent said they were “not satisfied” with democracy in the EU, as compared to only 11 percent in terms of democracy in Germany.

A comparable picture emerges when individuals are asked about their own engagement and involvement. In June 2014, almost half of surveyed Germans (48 percent) agreed with the statement that individual involvement in EU policy issues was pointless, while 46 percent disagreed with the statement. In contrast, during the run-up to the Bundestag election, only 27 percent of those surveyed said that political engagement was generally pointless, whereas a clear majority (60 percent) held the opposite opinion.

Similarly, only a minority of Germans considered having an interest in EU politics to also be a civic obligation. Only 34 percent counted this as being on the list of necessary traits of a “good citizen.” In contrast, 53 percent of respondents believed that having a political interest in developments within one’s own community was indispensable, and at least 44 percent thought it was necessary for one to stay regularly informed about political issues in general.

Bottom Line: Social Inequality Hurts Democracy in the EU

Thus, the following also emerges as an overall finding for EU elections: A low voter turnout is always a socially unequal voter turnout at the same time. Likewise, social inequality gives rise to a political inequality that in turn intensifies feelings of detachment and dissatisfaction, particularly among socially disadvantaged members of the electorate. It is precisely within these strata of our society that voter participation continues to decline. This is a dangerous spiral of low voter turnout, one that not only hurts Germany’s democracy, but also that of the EU.

Legally responsible for content

Bertelsmann Stiftung · Carl Bertelsmann Straße 256
D-33311 Gütersloh · www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Prof. Dr. Robert Vehrkamp
robert.vehrkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Tel. +49 5241 81 81526

Editors: Christina Tillmann, Dr. Dominik Hierlemann
Editorial assistance and inquiries:
gaelle.beckmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Tel. +49 5241 81 81105
August 2014 | ISSN: 2198-9796

EINWURF – A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

EINWURF is a policy brief of the Bertelmann Stiftung’s “Future of Democracy” program dealing with current topics and challenges related to democracy. It concentrates on the issues of political participation, the future of parties and parliaments, the sustainability of democratic politics as well as new forms of direct democracy and citizens’ participation. EINWURF is published 6-8 times per year on an unfixed basis.