

## Yves Bertoncini, European elections: the abstention trap

**Caption:** In his policy paper of 13 May 2014, Yves Bertoncini, Director of Notre Europe–Jacques Delors Institute, outlines the possible causes for the phenomenon of abstention in the European elections.

**Source:** Notre Europe. European elections : the abstention trap. Bertoncini, Yves. Policy Paper 110. [ON LINE]. [Paris]: Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, [26.05.2014]. 13.05.2014. <http://www.notre-europe.eu/media/electionsabstentiontrap-bertoncini-ne-jdi-may14.pdf?pdf=ok#page=1&zoom=auto,0,848>.

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# EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: THE ABSTENTION TRAP

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## SUMMARY

The constant rise of abstention since the first European election is monopolising the attention of observers and players in EU life to the point where it is overshadowing most of the aspects in the political and institutional contexts analysed below.

### 1. The turnout rates at European elections: an illusory drop?

- The initial voter turnout reading was particularly high (61.99%), doubtless due in part to the effect of compulsory voting (26% of the electorate in 1979, only 4% in 2009).
- The drop registered ever since then has not been steady: the turnout rate dropped in 10 out of the 25 EU member states between 2004 and 2009.
- This drop is largely caused by the declining trend in the EU's eight most heavily populated countries - the United Kingdom has always dragged the average down considerably, and so did Poland and Romania in the recent years.
- The evolution of the turnout rate can be linked to the holding of national or local elections on the same day as the European elections.

### 2. Low turnout rates linked to a "civic deficit"?

- The MEPs represent between 5 (The Netherlands) and 13 times more inhabitants (Denmark) than the national deputies.
- With voting based on lists, organised in a context of large national or macro-regional constituencies, MEPs are called on to represent millions or tens of millions of voters, where national deputies represent only a few tens of thousands.
- This change of scale impacts the intensity of the links established between MEPs and their electorate, and it may well prompt voters to be less inclined to vote in the European elections.

### 3. A natural turnout level for "subsidiary" elections: the European Parliament's power deficit

- MEPs today wield far greater powers than they did back in 1979, but which remain limited: EU is not responsible for 80% of the national laws and its spending accounts for just over a mere 2% of overall public expenditure in Europe.
- The European elections results do not modify all the balance of powers in Brussels - can the nomination of candidates to the presidency of the European Commission have a stronger impact?
- The low turnout rate at the European elections is comparable to the one of the Switzerland and USA federal elections (roughly less than 50%).
- The Europeans could vote more in May 2014 due to particularly intense debates on EU affairs in the recent years at the national and European levels.

“THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS SUFFER FROM A PROXIMITY DEFICIT, BUT NOT A LEGITIMACY ONE”

Rather than giving in to the superficial temptation to put the blame on those citizens who abstain, there is a need to put into perspective the low level of the turnout rate at European elections, which suffer from a proximity deficit, but not from a legitimacy one.

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## INTRODUCTION

### COMPARING TURNOUT RATES OVER AREA RATHER THAN TIME

With the benefit of hindsight, it is fascinating to note that 62% of the electorate mobilised in 1979 for the first election of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) with what were only extremely limited powers at the time, and in the context of an “European economic community” (EEC) with only modest areas of authority and intervention. By the same token, it is ironic that turnout rates for European elections have regularly dropped since then while the European Parliament’s powers and the EU’s areas of authority and intervention have been beefed up by every subsequent treaty. Yet is the current turnout level so surprising, in view of the European elections’ subsidiary nature?<sup>1</sup>

Sure enough, abstention is a normal occurrence for an election taking place at a “federal” level, i.e. less close to the man in the street than the national and local levels. But its constant rise since the first election in 1979, despite individual upswings in the turnout rates in many EU countries, is monopolising the attention of observers and players in European parliamentary life to the point where it is overshadowing most of the aspects in the political and institutional contexts analysed below.

It is not by comparing turnout and abstention rates in European elections over time that one can best grasp their root causes, but by comparing them in terms of geographical areas, i.e. :

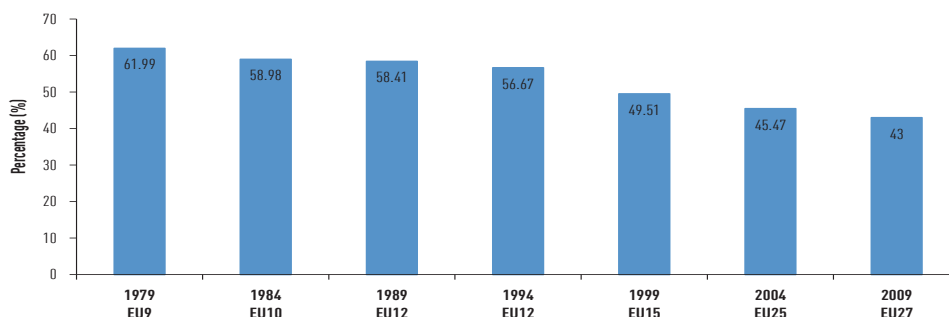
- with European public space(s) on one side, as it (they) gradually emerge(s) in the context of the “European Federation of Nation States” evoked by Jacques Delors, within which European elections remain a “subsidiary” event;
- and with more or less comparable “federal” public spaces on the other, particularly in the United States and in Switzerland, where roughly half the electorate mobilises for the election of its deputies, in view of the fact that they wield powers which are important yet not crucial for a majority of the citizens concerned.

## 1. The trend in turnout rates at European elections: an illusory drop?

At the level of the EU as a whole, the declining trend in the turnout rate in European elections has been ongoing ever since 1979 (see *Graph 1*): it gradually dropped from 61.99% in 1979 to 43% in 2009; in other words, it has dropped by 19 points in 30 years. The initial voter turnout reading was particularly high, doubtless due in part to the effect of compulsory voting, but the drop registered ever since then has not been steady, and it is largely caused by the declining trend in turnout rates in the EU’s eight most heavily populated countries, so that it can probably be explained by both external and internal factors.

1. This Policy Paper develops the elements of analysis to be found in Yves Bertoncini, “European Elections : less abstention, more populism?”. *Tribune, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, November 2013.

**GRAPH 1** ▶ The trend in the turnout rate at European elections from 1979 to 2009



Source: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/%A0Taux-de-participation-%281979-2009%29.html>

**Legend:**

1979 - EU9 - 9 member states: Germany, France, Italy, The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland  
 1984 - EU10: 9 member states + Greece in 1981  
 1989 - EU12: 10 member states + Spain et Portugal in 1986  
 1994 - EU12: 12 member states  
 1999 - EU15: 12 member states + Austria, Sweden, Finland in 1995  
 2004 - EU25: 15 member states + Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Cyprus and Malta in 2004  
 2009 - EU27: 25 member states + Bulgaria, Romania in 2007

## 1.1. An initially high turnout rate caused by the compulsory vote?

**COMPULSORY VOTING CONCERNED 26% OF THE ELECTORATE IN 1979, ONLY 4% IN 2009.”**

It is worth pointing out that the turnout rate in European elections has been determined in part by changes in the number of voters subject to... compulsory voting (see Table 1). One-third of the nine members of the EEC had compulsory voting in 1979, including Italy (until 1993) which accounted for 26% of the overall electorate at the time (with a turnout rate close to 80%). When Greece joined, four of the EEC’s ten member states had compulsory voting in 1984 (in other words, 29% of the electorate involved), and that became four out of twelve in 1989. There have been only three since 1994, and at this juncture four countries out of the twenty-eight member states (Belgium, Cyprus, Greece and Luxembourg) in other words some 17 million potential voters) that still have compulsory voting, and they account approximately for only 4% of the overall electorate. This drop – both relative and absolute – in the number of “compulsory voters” has probably played a major role in the decline in the overall turnout rate in European elections.

**TABLE 1** ▶ Proportion of the European electorate subject to compulsory voting

YEAR	MEMBER STATES INVOLVED	PROPORTION OF MEMBER STATES	SHARE OF EUROPEAN ELECTORATE
1979	Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg	33% (3/9)	26%
1984	Belgium, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg	40% (4/10)	29%
1994	Belgium, Greece, Luxembourg	25% (3/12)	6%
2009	Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Luxembourg	14% (4/28)	4%

Source: Data Eurostat and International IDEA - Calculations by Yves Bertoncini (on the basis of the number of registered people for the European elections of the years concerned).

## 1.2. An uneven drop in the turnout rate at European elections

### THE TURNOUT RATE DROPPED IN ONLY 10 OUT OF THE 25 EU MEMBER STATES BETWEEN 2004 AND 2009.”

While the downward trend in the turnout rate at European elections seems to have been steady since 1979, it does in fact cover different trends in different countries, as we can see from the trends recorded between 2004 and 2009 (see *Table 2*).

Thus between the last two European elections we can see that the turnout rate:

- has dropped in ten countries;
- has risen in seven countries;
- and has stabilised in eight countries.

So all in all, the turnout rate dropped in less than half the EU member states between 2004 and 2009, and indeed we can detect the same coexistence between higher and lower rates in other, previous European elections.

**TABLE 2** ► Trend in the turnout rate at European elections between 2004 and 2009

EVOLUTION	NUMBER OF COUNTRIES	COUNTRIES CONCERNED
Rise	7	Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia
Stable	8	Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Spain, Finland, Czech Republic, Slovenia
Drop	10	France, Italy, The Netherlands, United Kingdom, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta

Source: Data European Parliament - Calculations by Yves Bertoncini (a turnout rate is considered “stable” when it’s in the same percent, for example 51.3 instead of 50.8 or 39.5 instead of 40.4).

## 1.3. The ambiguous impact of turnout rates in the most heavily populated countries

It is the turnout and abstention rates observed in such countries as Germany, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and the United Kingdom that will prevail in May 2014, since these eight countries account for more than three-quarters of the voters and 63% of the seats of the European Parliament.

**TABLE 3** ► Turnout rates in the eight most heavily populated countries in the EU

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009
Germany	65.73	56.76	62.28	60.02	45.19	43.00	43.30
France	60.71	56.72	48.80	52.71	46.76	42.76	40.63
Italy	85.65	82.47	81.07	73.60	69.76	71.72	65.05
The Netherlands	58.12	50.88	47.48	35.69	30.02	39.26	36.75
United Kingdom	32.35	32.57	36.37	36.43	24.00	38.52	34.70
Spain			54.71	59.14	63.05	45.14	44.90
Poland						20.87	24.53
Romania							27.67
Average Eight “Biggest” Countries	60.51	55.88	55.12	52.93	46.46	43.03	39.44
Average European Union	61.99	58.98	58.41	56.67	49.51	45.47	43.00

Source: European Parliament - Calculations by Yves Bertoncini (on the basis of an unweighted average for the eight most heavily populated member states).

An analysis of the turnout rates recorded in the eight most heavily populated countries in the EU (*see Table 3*) allows us to note that:

- the unweighted average of their turnout rates is systematically a few percentage points lower than the overall average;
- this average would have been higher than the overall average if it had not included the United Kingdom: the particularly low turnout rates recorded in this country, the third most heavily populated country in the EU (with a low of 24% in 1994) have dragged the average down considerably, both for the EU's most heavily populated countries and for the broader EU as a whole;
- recently, the turnout rates below the 30% mark recorded in such countries as Poland and Romania, which together account for a population comparable to that of the United Kingdom, have also dragged down the average for the EU's most heavily populated countries and for the broader EU as a whole.

#### 1.4. Turnout rates can be determined by both exogenous and endogenous causes

It can be tempting to equate the weak turnout at European elections with a rejection of the European institutions and of the EU as a whole. But while an explanation of this kind may seem to be convincing for a country such as the United Kingdom, where the public debate is often highly critical towards the "Europe of Brussels", it does not sound convincing for such countries as Romania or Poland where, on the contrary, the EU enjoys a positive image, in fact even a very positive image, and where it is more likely to be the relative consensus that exists for European policy in general prompting citizens to demobilise when European elections are held.

Thus we may also turn towards more external factors to explain the drop and the low level in turnout for the European elections, highlighting the fact that they are consistent with (*see Table 4*) both:

- the low turnout level at general elections recorded in such countries as Romania, Poland, and also France, and
- the downward trend in turnout levels at general elections in most of the EU countries (this drop being higher than 10 points in such countries as France, Italy, Poland, Romania and the United Kingdom).

“THE UNITED KINGDOM  
HAS ALWAYS DRAGGED  
THE AVERAGE DOWN  
CONSIDERABLY”

This comparison allows us to assert that the disenchantment affecting the European institutions is less strong than that affecting national institutions in almost every member country in the EU<sup>2</sup>. But it should not be allowed to overshadow the fact that, while they may be part of a general trend towards higher abstention in parliamentary elections in general, the turnout rates in European elections have still dropped more substantially over the past twenty years (other than in France).

2. As observed by the Eurobarometers surveys. On this topic, see as well Daniel Debomy, "EU no, euro yes? European public opinions facing the crisis (2007-2012)", Policy Paper n°90, Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, March 2013.

**TABLE 4** ▶ Turnout rates in national general elections in the eight most heavily populated countries in the EU

	PERIOD FROM 1989-1993 (%)	PERIOD FROM 2010-2013 (%)	GENERAL ELECTION TURNOUT TRENDS OVER TWENTY YEARS (NUMBER OF POINTS)	EUROPEAN ELECTION TURNOUT TRENDS FROM 1989 TO 2009 (NUMBER OF POINTS)
France	68	55	- 13	- 8
Germany	77	71	- 6	- 19
Italy	87	75	- 12	- 16
The Netherlands	80	74	- 6	- 11
Poland	62	48	- 14	-
Romania	76	41	- 35	-
Spain	70	68	- 2	- 10
United Kingdom	77	65	- 12	- 2

Source: Data International IDEA - Calculations by Yves Bertoncini (on the basis of the legislative elections organised during the two periods in the 8 countries concerned).

Before seeking to explain this high abstention rate in more endogenous terms, it is worth pointing out that the evolution of the turnout rate can be linked to the holding of national or local elections on the same day as the European elections, an event which has occurred with a certain frequency in the past – and as is frequently the case in such countries as the United States. In May 2014, Belgium, Ireland, Greece and Lithuania are due to hold other elections between 22 and 25 May, a fact which should help to prompt voters to turn out for the European elections as well – although of course that selfsame fact could overshadow the terms of the debate on the EU. Germany is also going to be holding elections on 25 May in ten of its Länders (which has turnout rates that customarily top the 50% mark), as opposed to seven in 2009, involving almost two-thirds of the country's electorate, given that Rhineland-Westphalia is concerned. The same will be true of another “major” EU member state, namely the United Kingdom, which will be holding broader local elections on 22 May 2014 than it held in 2009 (and in which the turnout rate is frequently below the 40% mark). All in all, we should not underestimate the potentially positive impact of all of these parallel elections on an overall rise in the turnout rate in the European elections in 2014. But we should not necessarily assume from this that these upswings in the turnout rate reveal renewed enthusiasm for the EU, just as a low turnout rate does not necessarily mean rejection of the European construction.

Aside from these circumstantial developments, we need to take a closer look at the structural causes of the relative “turnout shortfall” for the European elections, which does not reveal a “deficit of democracy” in the EU so much as a kind of “civic deficit” (or a deficit of “demos”) on the one hand and, above all, a deficit of powers (a deficit of “kratos”) on the other.

## 2. Are low turnout rates linked to a “civic deficit”?

The relative shortfall in the turnout for European elections probably reveals a kind of deficit in civic bonding on the part of MEPs. In principle it is absolutely right to highlight the fact that they are the only representatives directly elected by the citizens at the European level, and that they therefore enjoy full legitimacy in the exercise of the powers mandated to them. In practical terms, however, they have to cope with a lack of civic bonding caused by the structural difficulty involved in establishing local links between citizens and their MEPs due both to the low number of MEPS assigned to each country and to the voting method adopted.



## 2.1. A deficit in civic bonding linked to the weight of numbers

MEPs' deficit in civic bonding is due first and foremost to the concrete impossibility of establishing a local link at the Community level of the same intensity as that which exists between citizens and their national deputies or MPs.

“THE MEPS REPRESENT BETWEEN 5 AND 13 TIMES MORE INHABITANTS THAT THE NATIONAL DEPUTIES.”

For instance, a national deputy can represent (*see Table 5*) anywhere between 8,950 inhabitants (in Luxembourg) and 133,508 inhabitants (in Spain). Establishing a local bond of the same intensity at the level of the EU as a whole, even if we were to take the case of Spain as our yardstick, would lead to the election of over 5,000 MEPs, because the EU has a population of over 500 million. The material impossibility of adopting such a measure has led to the adoption of a far lower ceiling on the number of MEPs

(currently set at 751), divided up among the member states on the basis of the degressive proportionality principle. This pragmatic decision does not work in favour of the establishment of local links between the MEPs and their electorate, since they represent between five (The Netherlands) and thirteen times more inhabitants (Denmark) than they do at the national level. It may well prompt voters to be less inclined to vote in the European elections than they are in their own national general elections.

TABLE 5 ► Number of inhabitants per national deputy and per European deputy

COUNTRY	NATIONAL DEPUTIES	NUMBER OF INHABITANTS PER NATIONAL DEPUTY	EUROPEAN DEPUTIES	NUMBER OF INHABITANTS PER EUROPEAN DEPUTY
United Kingdom	650	98,301	73	875,288
Germany	631	127,612	96	838,789
Italy	630	94,738	73	817,605
France	577	113,654	74	886,200
Poland	460	83,768	51	755,554
Spain	350	133,508	54	865,331
Romania	334	59,940	32	625,627
Denmark	179	31,299	13	430,971
The Netherlands	150	111,863	26	645,368
Belgium	150	74,410	21	531,506
Lithuania	141	21,077	11	270,173
Luxembourg	60	8,950	6	89,506

Source: Data : National Parliaments and European Parliament for the number of seats - Eurostat for the population of the mMember states (at the 1st of January 2013) - Calculations by Yves Bertoncini.

## 2.2. A deficit in civic bonding due to national or macro-regional election lists

The deficit in MEP's civic bonding is also due to the voting procedure used in the European elections. This voting procedure is not uniform but it is based on certain common principles, particularly on the use of a proportional system<sup>3</sup>. However, there are two sides to this very democratic coin: it permits the broad representation of minority party forces, but at the same time it prompts most EU member states to resort to voting based on lists, and what is more, those lists are organised in a context of large national or macro-regional constituencies. These voting methods are at odds with the use of the first-past-the-post voting system on a local basis

3. By virtue of Council of Ministers decision no. 2002/772.

currently adopted in numerous EU member states for other elections, a method which allows those elected under such a system to forge closer local civic bonds.

The use of list-based voting is in force in every member country in the EU except for Ireland and Malta (and Northern Ireland). It is accompanied by corrective mechanisms in about ten EU countries, allowing voters to express their preference, thus choosing to promote one candidate rather than another (in Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden). Yet all in all, list-based voting leads to weaker identification and a weaker proximity bond between the MEPs and their electorate.

**“VOTING BASED ON LISTS, ORGANISED IN LARGE NATIONAL OR MACRO-REGIONAL CONSTITUENCIES, WEAKEN THE LINKS ESTABLISHED BETWEEN MEPS AND THEIR ELECTORATE”**

The organisation of European elections in the context of large national or macro-regional constituencies has also had the effect of heavily weakening the proximity bond between MEPs and their electorate. This, because the adoption of a single national constituency is given priority in most of the EU member states, only a handful of them having opted to establish macro-regional constituencies, which number four in Ireland and in Belgium, five in Italy, eight in France, twelve in the United Kingdom and thirteen in Poland (see Table 6). Consequently, MEPs are called on to represent millions, or tens of millions of voters, where national deputies or MPs represent only a few tens of thousands. This change of scale has also impacted the intensity of the links established between MEPs and their electorate, and it may well prompt voters to be less inclined to vote in the European elections than they are in their own national general elections.

**TABLE 6** ► Number of citizens per constituency (arithmetic mean)

COUNTRY	EUROPEAN DEPUTIES	NUMBER OF CONSTITUENCIES	NUMBER OF CITIZENS ON ELECTORAL ROLL	CITIZENS PER CONSTITUENCY
United Kingdom	73	12	45,597,461	3,799,788
Germany	96	1	61,903,903	61,903,903
Italy	73	5	46,905,154	9,381,030
France	74	8	43,233,649	5,404,206
Poland	51	13	30,762,931	2,366,379
Spain	54	1	35,779,491	35,779,491
Romania	32	1	18,423,066	18,423,066
Denmark	13	1	4,079,910	4,079,910
The Netherlands	26	1	12,689,810	12,689,810
Belgium	21	4	7,767,552	1,941,888
Lithuania	11	1	2,438,641	2,438,641
Luxembourg	6	1	239,668	239,668

Source: Data: National parliaments EP for the number of seats and constituencies and data International IDEA for the number of citizens on the electoral roll (at the most recent national general election) - Calculations by Yves Bertoncini on the basis of arithmetic means (on the basis of the size of the macro-regional constituencies chosen, MEPS may represent more or fewer inhabitants than the figures shown above).

### 3. A natural turnout level for “subsidiary” elections: the European Parliament’s power deficit

“MEPs TODAY WIELD FAR GREATER POWERS THAN THEY DID BACK IN 1979, BUT WHICH REMAIN LIMITED”

The primary cause behind the relative shortfall in the turnout for the European elections is probably due to the European Parliament’s “power deficit”. If we look at the situation from a historical and a European viewpoint today, we cannot help but highlight the fact that MEPs today wield far greater power than they did back in 1979, within an EU which,

itself, has greatly extended its areas of competences. But if we consider the reality of the powers and areas of competences from the citizens’ standpoint and in a geographical perspective, we cannot help but be struck, on the contrary, by the almost logical nature of the low turnout level in the European elections because they are at once both “subsidiary” and “mid-term” elections.

#### 3.1. A turnout in line with the extent of the EU’s areas of competences

The European elections are subsidiary first and foremost on the political level, given that most of the decisions impacting the European man in the street’s daily life are taken at the national or even local level, in particular with regard to education and training, housing, social protection, taxation and security (see *Tables 7 and 8*)<sup>4</sup>.

TABLE 7 ► Proportion of laws of European origin in seven EU countries

COUNTRY	PERIOD	% OF LAWS OF EUROPEAN (EU) ORIGIN
Spain	1986-2007	35
Luxembourg	1986-2006	28.8
Germany	1986-2005	28.7
Austria	1992-2007	26
France	1986-2007	18.75
The Netherlands	1981-2009	12.3
Finland	1995-2009	11.8

Source: Data S. Brouard, O. Costa and T. Konig, *The Europeanization of domestic legislatures*, Springer, 2012.

Of course, the EU can “change the life” of farmers and fishermen (and indeed farmers and fishermen are fully aware of that fact); it can take decisions with a major impact on European citizens’ lives, for instance in the fields of enlargement, trade agreements, deepening the single market, consumer and environmental protection, the framing of national budget or industrial policy or the funding of networks and projects with a transnational character. The EU has recently increased its bail-out and oversight powers in respect of the EMU, though this does not mean that it “governs” its member states<sup>5</sup>. It is those kinds of decisions and powers that need to be highlighted and debated if we are to kindle voter interest in May 2014.

4. On this issue, see for example Yves Bertoncini, “What is the impact of the EU interventions at the national level?”, *Studies & Reports n° 73, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, May 2009 and Yves Bertoncini, “The EU and its standards: a prison of peoples or chicken coops?”, *Policy paper n°112, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, May 2014.

5. On this topic, see Yves Bertoncini, “Eurozone and democracy(ies): a misleading debate”, *Policy paper n°94, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, July 2013.

**TABLE 8** ▶ The Europeanisation of national laws in eight European countries, broken down by sector from 1986 to 2005

PROPORTION	POLICY AREAS
Between 30 and 40%	Agriculture Banking & Finance Environment
Between 20 and 30%	Energy Technology International Affairs Transportation Macroeconomics Foreign Trade Health
Between 10 and 20%	Civil Rights Labour Government Operations Law
Between 0 and 10%	Public Lands Education Social Welfare Housing Defence

Source: Data Thomas Konig and Lars Mader, in S. Brouard, O. Costa and T. Konig, *The Europeanization of domestic legislatures*, Springer, 2012. The eight countries assessed in this book are Germany, Austria, Spain, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

But the EU is not responsible for 80% of the laws in force in member states, as a legend fuelled by its opponents and even by some of its more zealous supporters claims<sup>6</sup>. Its spending accounts for just over a mere 2% of overall public expenditure in Europe (*see Table 9*). Thus it appears pointless, not to say downright counterproductive, to “oversell” the EU’s importance to its citizens who, when all is said and done, are clear-headed enough about what to expect from the EU, and more especially from the MEPs, in the normal course of events.

**TABLE 9** ▶ Shareout of public expenditure between the central and regional/national levels

%	USA	SWITZERLAND	EU
Central level (Community level for the EU)	63.9	31.3	2
Regional level (National level for the EU)	36.1	69.7	98

Source: Amélie Barbier-Gauchard<sup>7</sup>, data 2011 for the USA and the EU, data 2006 for Switzerland.

This reference to the EU’s relatively subsidiary areas of competences should unquestionably prompt us no longer to compare the trends in the turnout rate for European elections over time but by geographical area. This would allow us to observe turnout rates in other, more or less comparable “federal” public spaces, particularly Switzerland (*see Table 10*) and in the United States (*see Table 11*), where roughly less than half the electorate tends to mobilise for the election of deputies to the central level.

6. On the 80% myth, see Yves Bertoncini, “National Laws of Community origin: dispelling the 80% Myth”, *Policy Brief n°13, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, May 2009; Yves Bertoncini, “The EU and its standards: a prison of peoples or chicken coops?”, *Policy Paper n°112, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, May 2014 and Sylvain Brouard, Olivier Costa & Thomas Konig, *The Europeanization of domestic legislatures – The empirical implications of Delors’ myth in nine countries*, Springer, 2012.”

7. See Amélie Barbier-Gauchard, “European public expenditure – Community level and national level”, Briefing note for the European Parliament, April 2014 and *Scoreboard of public expenditures in the EU and its member states*, Centre d’analyse stratégique, October 2009 (with Yves Bertoncini).

**TABLE 10** ▶ Turnout rate for the Swiss National Council elections (1979-2011)

YEAR	TURNOUT RATE (%)
Average for 1979-2011	46.3
2011	48.5
2007	48.3
2004	45.2
1999	43.3
1995	42.2
1991	46
1987	46.5
1983	48.9
1979	48

Source: OFS/National Council Elections statistics - Calculations by Yves Bertoncini

“THE LOW TURNOUT RATE AT THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IS COMPARABLE TO THE ONE OF THE SWITZERLAND AND USA FEDERAL ELECTIONS”

Turnout rates in Swiss federal elections oscillated thus between 42% and 49% between 1979 and 2011. Those turnout rates, rather than the rates observed in national or local elections, are unquestionably a more advisable yardstick to adopt when comparing past and future European elections, even for people militating in favour of boosting that turnout. In any event, it would more useful to do that than to moan in advance about mass abstention, while arguing that that abstention will undermine the future MEPs' legitimacy, when no one really disputes the principle of US or Swiss parliamentarians' legitimacy on that basis.

### 3.2. A vote with a limited impact on the European balance of powers?<sup>8</sup>

European elections are also subsidiary from an institutional viewpoint: they do not lead directly to any profound change in the balance of forces at the Community level the way general elections (or a presidential election in France) do at the national level. The European elections are not going to change the overall composition or political inclination of the European Council or of the Council, which exercise crucial authority in “Brussels”. They are not going to have any visible impact on the functioning of the ECB, which has played a crucial role in recent months and is likely to continue to do so. They certainly do have a direct impact, on the other hand, on the appointment of the President of the Commission and his team, a fact which deserves to be highlighted more effectively. And they result in the election of MEPs whose powers are now very substantial after they were beefed up again under the Lisbon Treaty. All in all, however, the outcome of these elections is not going to lead to changes in all of the political balances in the Community's “institutional trapezium” comprising the Commission, the European Council, the Council and the European Parliament, so the European man in the street will quite rightly see them as less structuring than his national elections.

The turnout rate recorded in other federal elections can once again provide us with a useful yardstick in this connection. For instance, we might look at the rate recorded in federal elections in the United States (*see Table 11*), because both the general perception and political reality in “Washington” share certain similarities with those of “Brussels”. The US turn rate oscillated between 53% and 55% at the last congressional election, but settled at less than 40% for the mid-term elections - while the turnout rate for the three last presidential elections hovered around the 55% mark.

8. For further discussion of the points mentioned below, see Yves Bertoncini and Thierry Chopin, “Faces on divides: the May 2014 European elections”, *Studies & Reports n° 104, Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*, April 2014.

**TABLE 11** ▶ Turnout rate for the election of US Congressmen (1982-2012)

YEAR	TURNOUT RATE (%)
"Final Term" Average	53.05
"Mid Term" Average	37.4
2012	53.6
2010	37.8
2008	56.8
2006	37.1
2004	55.3
2002	37.0
2000	51.3
1998	36.4
1996	49.1
1994	38.8
1992	55.1
1990	36.5
1988	50.1
1986	36.4
1984	53.1
1982	39.8

Source: US Congress - Calculations by Yves Bertoncini. It should be noted that the turnout rates in the United States are calculated on the basis of the adult population of voting age rather than of the citizens on the electoral roll - if the electoral roll were used as a basis, the turnout rate would be higher.

The differences seen in turnout levels for mid-term and final-term elections in the United States shed light on the ongoing debate over the innovation entailed by the nomination of candidates to the presidency of the European Commission by the EU's leading political parties. The designation of these nominees makes as of right now a positive contribution to personalising the European election campaigns, thus reflecting current political custom at the national and local levels. It also helps to put "faces to the divides" at work at the Community level, as long as the parties make an effort to effectively underscore that which distinguishes them over and above merely being for or against the EU. It can also make the European elections less "mid-term" and more central in changing the balance of powers in Brussels.

The provisions of the Treaty on European Union (article 17.7 and declaration n°11), which have been in force since the approval of the Lisbon Treaty, state explicitly that the heads of state or government have to propose a candidate for the post, who will then require a vote of investiture from the new MEPs, "taking into account the elections to the European Parliament". What that means in concrete terms is that they are going to have to choose a candidate to the presidency who looks likely to garner the support of whatever coalition holds a majority in the Strasbourg assembly (for example European People's Party (EPP) - Party of European Socialists (PES), or EPP - Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) - conservatives, or PES - ALDE - Greens) while they will continue to have a free hand in their choice of candidates reflecting the majority in office at the national level, to send to Brussels for posts on the Commission.

The European Council, however, is under no legal obligation to appoint one or other of the aforesaid nominees; its primary obligation is to conform to the new European Parliament's majority political inclination and to propose a candidate reflecting that inclination, whether or not he or she was a candidate in the first place. But

it is highly likely that the new MEPs will be anxious to establish a balance of forces that is going to be all the more favourable if the campaign fosters in-depth debates on the designated candidates. That is probably the condition to fulfil for the European elections to come across as being slightly less “mid-term” and more as the only election with any direct bearing on the renewal of an important section of the Community’s “political personnel”. With the appointment of the future European Council president also being included in negotiations on the major renewal in the offing, there may then be an increase in the European man in the street’s interest in the May 2014 elections.

### 3.3. A key factor: the intensity of the debate on European issues

#### “THE EUROPEANS COULD VOTE MORE IN MAY 2014 GIVEN THE CONTEXT OF CRISIS”

The main reason why the people of Europe may mobilise more than usual in May 2014, however, is political in nature. This, because it is customary to qualify the European elections as “subsidiary national elections”, and thus their outcome is determined first and foremost by debates on national

issues. But the crisis in the euro area having recently prompted national public debates and political agendas to focus on, or even to be shaped around, European issues, might that crisis not spawn an unprecedented form of political crystallisation and mobilisation next spring?

Debating on the EU has been far more intense than usual in a fair number of European countries in recent years. It has focused, in particular: on the aid plans for countries in difficulty and on the implementation of the “memoranda of understanding” signed by those countries as an offset; on the strengthening of EU monitoring over national economic and social policies (the reform of the Stability pact and the adoption of the “Fiscal compact”); on the EU’s contribution to support for growth (ECB intervention, internal and external deregulation, the adoption of the multiannual financial framework and so forth); and more recently, on EU ties with the southern countries, with Russia and with the United States... A number of these debates have regularly been settled by national parliamentary elections and have sometimes been at the heart of general elections, particularly in countries benefiting from aid programmes, but also in such diverse countries as Italy and Finland. The turnout rate at the elections in May 2014 may show an increase due to this political context.

A comparison with the context of the European elections in June 1994 appears to bear out that possibility. Back then the EU was experiencing a major economic crisis and the memory of the lively debates in parliament and ahead of referenda occasioned by the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty was still fresh, while the external situation was marked by the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. All of this resulted in an increase in the turnout in several EU member states, including Denmark and France where the debating had been especially intense: the turnout was indeed 4 percentage points higher in France (with 52% of the electorate going to vote in 1994 as opposed to only 48% in 1989).

By the same token, might the unprecedented increase in the intensity of the public debate on the EU not result in an upswing in overall voter turnout at the European elections? Bearing in mind the deterioration of the EU’s image, the answer to that question would be negative, of course, if we were to consider abstention to be primarily an expression of mistrust. But if we consider that the level of abstention in the European elections also betrays a certain indifference, then we may well see it drop in May 2014 (although we should remember, of course, any additional votes may just as easily be critical towards the European construction as in favour of it).

## CONCLUSION

### A PROXIMITY DEFICIT, NOT A LEGITIMACY DEFICIT

In bringing this analysis to a close, one is tempted to stress that abstention at the European elections is first and foremost a trap for those Europeans who opt not to go and vote, simply because in so doing they will be depriving themselves of their right to influence the European Parliament's decisions and guidelines in the construction of Europe between now and 2019. But rather than giving in to the superficial temptation to put the blame on those citizens who abstain, the observers and players in European political life would be well advised to put into perspective the level of the turnout rate at European elections, both ahead of the vote and when the commentaries following the announcement of the results start to pour in.

The "abstentionist party" is not going to be the European elections' big winner, first of all because it will not have taken part in them, but above all because it is not a party. It is the voters who choose how to apportion responsibility to the various parties running for election who are going to determine the balance of forces on the basis of which the MEPs will be reaching their decisions over the next five years, the election outcome looking set to be particularly undecided between the left (PSE) and the right (EPP). The May 2014 European elections will suffer, just like previous elections, from a proximity deficit, but not from a legitimacy deficit.

It is necessary, in any event, to make one final point in order to wind up this discussion of turnout rates and predictable abstention in the European elections in May 2014. Even if only 43% of the electorate were to vote, as was the case in 2009, that figure would still represent over 160 million citizens mobilising in the context of national and European campaigns, who provide as many opportunities for fuelling a public debate of unparalleled breadth on the EU's functioning and on its future. Thus rather than moaning in advance and almost without thinking about a turnout rate that is going to be limited by its very nature, it is necessary first and foremost to fuel that public debate and to play an energetic role in it, including in the last few days before the election is held.



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