

Common Misconceptions about Elections to the European Parliament

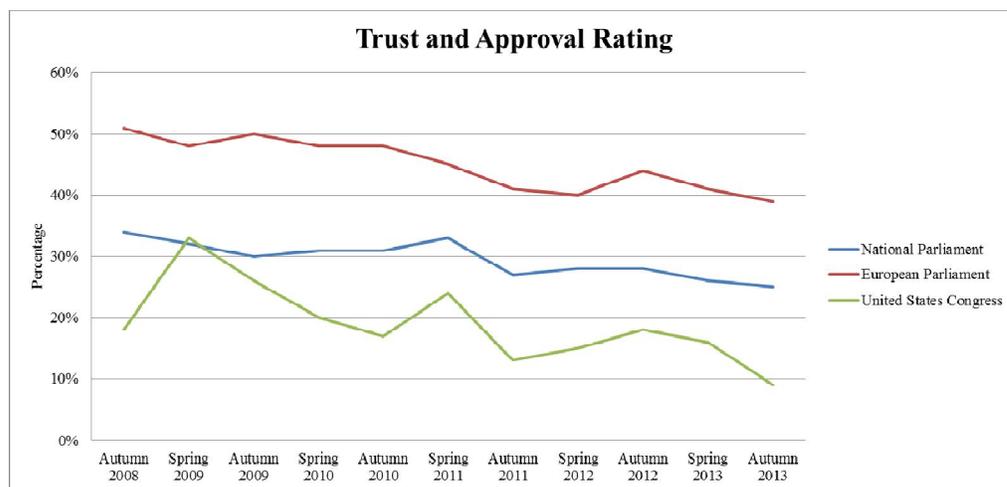
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Much commentary on the EP elections has followed the line that the European Parliament somehow has less democratic legitimacy because the participation rate is low, and that these elections are taken less seriously because people's trust in the EU institutions in general and the European Parliament in particular is low. However, both arguments lose much of their validity if the numbers are judged in a wider context.

Is there a trust deficit?

It is true that opinion polls show that trust in the European Parliament has fallen in recent years. But this should be seen in the context of a general lack of trust in political institutions. Trust in national parliaments has also declined across the EU; the European Parliament still enjoys more trust than, on average, national parliaments. This EP advantage has somewhat declined in the last few years, but even the continuing recession, which is often blamed on austerity and the euro, has only marginally reduced the difference between the trust expressed in national parliaments and the EP (see figure below). The only exceptions to this general trend are Austria, Finland and Sweden. Moreover, it is also apparent that the EP is appreciated much more than the US Congress, whose approval ratings are now below 10%.



Sources: Author's elaboration using data from: http://www.gallup.com/file/poll/166841/Congress_approval_140114.pdf and http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb80/eb80_first_en.pdf

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Indeed, post-election surveys from 2009 indicate that a lack of trust in politics in general (not in the EU in particular) is the answer most often given as the reason for not voting, especially in some member states (e.g. Greece, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Romania). Only in Sweden and Austria does lack of interest in and information about EU issues appear to be more relevant.¹

Nevertheless, voter turnout in the national elections – despite generalised mistrust in politics – remains higher than in the elections to the European Parliament, probably because national governments have a much stronger influence on people's daily lives than the EU. Indeed, the picture is similar on the other side of the Atlantic.

Is there a participation deficit? A transatlantic perspective

In the US the House of Representatives is fully renewed every two years² together with the presidential elections or half-way through a President's term. In the US one also observes a difference in participation rates between the elections during which the President is chosen and the so-called mid-term elections when only Congress is chosen (plus one-third of the Senate, which will happen again in November of this year).

There is thus the other misconception about the EP, namely that the low turnout reduces its democratic legitimacy. It is true that the turnout for these elections has been falling for the years (although the Parliament has acquired much more influence over the decades) to about 43% in 2009 and is typically about 20 percentage points lower than those for national elections. But if one looks across the Atlantic one finds that the turnout for the elections to the EP is about the same as that for the mid-term congressional elections.

Moreover, those who vote for the EP are much more representative of the overall population than those who vote for the mid-term congressional elections. This is particularly true for young people, who are often said to be disaffected and uninterested in Europe. The participation rate of first-time voters is indeed rather low in Europe; about 30% in 2009, but it is actually significantly higher than in the US, where only about 25% of young people voted in the 2010 mid-term congressional elections. In the US there is usually a much larger gap than in Europe between the participation rates of the better educated and the rest of the population. The EP elections are thus much more representative of the general population than are some US elections (see table below.)

Participation rates compared

	US (mid-term 2010)	EP (2009)
Young	24%	29%
Old	70%	50%
Average	45%	43%

Sources: Author's elaboration with data from the US Census Bureau and http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/28_07/FR_EN.pdf

¹ Special Eurobarometer 320 Post-election survey (www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/28_07/EB71.3_post-electoral_final_report_EN.pdf).

² But only one-third of the Senate seats is up for election every two years.

Conclusions

The participation rates in the EP elections appear to be satisfactory if one uses the US as a comparator. The generalised drop in the trust in parliamentary institutions at both national and EU level as depicted above would *a priori* lead one to expect an even lower turnout for this election. It remains to be seen whether the ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ (lead candidates) and the extreme salience of the euro crisis have convinced more citizens to vote, despite their dissatisfaction with politics in general.³

³ See Sonia Piedrafita and Anne Lauenroth (eds) “Between Apathy and Anger: Challenges to the Union from the 2014 Elections to the EP in Member States”, EPIN Paper No. 39 / May 2014, who argue that the European political parties’ initiative to nominate candidates for Commission President and upgrade these otherwise ‘mid-term’ elections could have helped to mobilise voters. It seems, however, that the initiative has had a very limited impact on the election campaigns in member states, whereas dissatisfaction with the crisis might translate into a rise of eurosceptic parties (<http://www.ceps.be/book/between-apathy-and-anger-challenges-union-2014-elections-european-parliament>).