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European Parliament Elections:

Structural Factors and Voter Turnout 1979 to 2014

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Abstract

Has turnout in European Parliamentary elections decreased over time? While this certainly appears to be the case in absolute terms, a more nuanced analysis, replicating a study presented by Mark Franklin in 2001, reveals a more complex picture. When 'structural factors' such as compulsory voting, the effect of EP elections being held for the first time in an EU member state, 'electoral salience' (measured as the temporal distance to the next national parliamentary election) and the share of post-2004 countries in the total EU membership are accounted for, our analysis reveals that these can partially explain the observed lowering in real turnout rates. The explanatory power of the models capturing the situation in the aftermath of the 1999 EP elections are, however, lower than when they are applied to earlier EP elections. This leads to the additional observation that while structural factors offer a plausible explanation for the decline in EP turnout rates over time, their relative influence is gradually decreasing.

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1. Introduction

In 1979, the European Parliament (EP) held its first general elections.¹ The average turnout across the EU, in 1979, was 67.2 percent.² In 2014, when general elections to the EP were held for the eighth time, EU average turnout, had declined to 43.3 percent. This came as no surprise, since voter turnout had decreased with each successive EP election. When average voter turnout declined in the framework of the 1999 and 2004 elections, various authors had already attributed this to decreasing levels of support for the EU among the European public (see Adshead and Hill, 2005: 545). Subsequently, the continued absolute decline in 2009 and 2014 was widely seen to simply corroborate this argument. But was this really the case? Can decline in voter turnout indeed be explained by declining support for the EU? Franklin (2001) and Wessels and Franklin (2009) rebutted some of the criticism of EP election turnout, demonstrating that structural factors had a large influence on voter turnout in the EP elections of 1979 to 1999/2004.³ After having accounted for structural factors, such as compulsory voting, first EP elections, electoral salience, he showed that voter turnout actually remained quite stable for the period that his analysis covered. This paper seeks to replicate and extend Franklin's earlier research by utilizing his methodology to analyze the last three EP elections, i.e. 2004, 2009 and 2014. Thus, it aims to explore whether the further decline in voter turnout in the EP elections between 2004 and 2014 can also be attributed to structural factors.

There exists a substantial volume of academic work, often with an empirical orientation, which seeks to assess the reasons why people turn out to cast a vote and, from a more comparative point of view, explain the considerable variation in voter turnout in the Postwar period around the world. Several variables have been included into such analyses. Geys (2006), who offered a meta-analysis of various socio-economic, political and institutional explanations of voter turnout in national elections, points to the potential relevance of core elements, such as electoral systems, population size and election closeness among others. For EP elections, however, other variables may be significant. In this study, we will build on the earlier research conducted by Franklin (2001) and

¹ Please note that we will use the term 'EU' throughout this article, even if we refer to membership of the (earlier) European Community (EC).

² Including Greece, where citizens voted two years later in an off-year election, after Greece in 1981 had joined the EU.

³ Franklin (2001); for effects in later EP elections, see Franklin (2007) and Franklin and Hobolt (2011).

Wessels and Franklin (2009) who pointed to potential 'structural factors' that can influence lower turnout rates over time.

The paper is structured as follows. In section two, the theoretical framework for which the earlier research on structural factors and EP turnout was based, is presented. Section three describes the data and methods employed in this paper. Section four, in turn, offers a replication of Franklin's earlier research and provides new analyses for the more recent EP elections. The final section provides an evaluation of our results and offers conclusions.

2. Structural factors and turnout in EP elections

Over time an absolute decline in turnout rates has been observed with regard to the general elections of the EP.⁴ Turnout declined from 67.2 percent as an (unweighted) average across the EU in 1979, to 43.3 in 2014.⁵ This gives an average decline of 3.4 points per electoral round. Changing turnout rates for individual countries, as well as average EU rates, are shown in table 1.

⁴ Føllesdal and Hix (2006) provide an overview of ways in which electoral contestation in the EU could be increased and EP elections made more 'salient' to voters across the EU.

⁵ For an analysis of the background to -- and forecasts for -- the 2014 EP elections, see Stratulat and Emmanouilidis (2013).

Table 1. Voter Turnout in European Parliament Elections, 1979-2014 ¹

Member State	1979	1981	1984	1987	1989	1994	1995	1996	1999	2004	2007	2009	2013	2014	Average
Austria								67.7	49.0	42.4		46.0		45.4	50,1
Belgium	91.4		92.1		90.7	90.7			91.0	90.8		90.4		89,6	90,8
Bulgaria											29.2	38.9		35,8	34,7
Croatia													20.8	25,2	23,0
Cyprus										72.5		59.4		43,4	58,4
Czech Republic										28.3		28.2		18,2	24,9
Denmark	47.8		52.4		46.2	52.9			50.4	47.9		59.5		56,3	51,7
Estonia										26.8		43.9		36,5	35,8
Finland								57.6	30.1	39.4		40.5		41,0	41,7
France	60.7		56.7		48.7	52.8			46.8	42.8		40.6		42,4	48,9
Germany	65.7		56.8		62.3	60.0			45.2	43.0		43.3		48,1	53,0
Greece		78.6	77.2		79.9	73.2			71.5	63.2		52.6		60,0	69,5
Hungary										38.5		36.3		29,0	34,6
Ireland	63.6		47.6		68.3	44.0			50.2	58.6		57.6		52,4	55,3
Italy	84.9		83.4		81.0	73.6			69.8	71.7		65.1		57,2	73,3
Latvia										41.3		53.7		30,2	41,8
Lithuania										48.4		21.0		47,4	38,9
Luxembourg	88.9		88.8		87.4	88.5			87.3	91.3		90.8		85,6	88,6
Malta										82.4		78.8		74,8	78,7
Netherlands	58.1		50.6		47.2	35.7			30.0	39.3		36.8		37,3	41,9
Poland										20.9		24.5		23,8	23,1
Portugal				72.4	51.2	35.5			39.9	38.6		36.8		33,7	44,0
Romania											29.5	27.7		32,4	29,9
Slovakia										17.0		19.6		13,1	16,6
Slovenia										28.4		28.3		24,6	27,1
Spain				68.9	54.6	59.1			63.0	45.1		44.9		43,8	54,2
Sweden							41.6		38.8	37.9		45.5		51,1	43,0
United Kingdom	32.3		32.6		36.2	36.4			24.0	39.2		34.5		35,4	33,8
EU Average ²	67.2		65.0		62.8	58.0			52.5	46.5		45.2		43,3	

¹ Based on data derived from <http://www.idea.int/vt/index.cfm>

² Includes elections of new members in off-year elections before the next regular EP election. The average is calculated on the basis of the same weight for each country (Franklin, 2001: 310). An alternative could be to weight turnout by member states' population size.

In 2001, Franklin reminded readers “that the European Union of 1999 is not the same place as the European Economic Community of 1979”, and that this point was “neglected by virtually everyone” (Franklin, 2001: 310). Franklin argued there were at least three structural factors that had influenced voter turnout in the EU during the period 1979 – 1999: a) the number of EU states with compulsory voting; b) the influence of the first EP election in a member state and c) electoral salience, measured as time between the EP elections and the next national elections. These three factors will now be briefly discussed.

As far as compulsory voting is concerned, in the framework of the first EP election in 1979, of the total of nine member states three applied the system of compulsory voting: Belgium, Italy⁶ and Luxembourg. Similarly, Greece upon becoming an EU member in 1981 stipulated compulsory voting in EP elections.⁷ Together this amounts to just under half of the EU states at the time having employed compulsory voting. Since 1981, eighteen countries have become members of the EU, but only one of them (Cyprus) has applied compulsory voting for EP elections. The result is that, nowadays, citizens are obliged to vote in the framework of EP elections in only 14 percent of EU states.⁸ As Franklin observed, the increase in turnout due to compulsory voting amounts to approximately 30 percent and hence, has a considerable effect on voter turnout at the European level. Accordingly, if fewer countries apply compulsory voting, average voting turnout in EP elections, naturally, decreases (Franklin, 2001: 310).

A second consideration that effects turnout rates is whether it is the first time that an EP election has taken place in any given member state. Franklin (2001: 311-312) noted “that in most countries (Belgium, Denmark, and Britain appear to be the main exceptions) the first EP election ever conducted sees a ‘first-time boost’ to turnout, which has been assumed to be due to the excitement surrounding a novel experience” this in turn artificially boosts the overall average EU turnout. Whereas in 1979 all participating states would have witnessed a ‘first-time boost’, this ‘boost’ occurred in only two of 12 member states in 1987, three of 15 in 1994, twelve of 27 in

⁶ Since the 1994 elections, voting in Italy is no longer compulsory.

⁷ On compulsory voting and democracy, e.g. see Engelen (2007).

⁸ This ratio will change again in case ‘Brexit’ gets implemented.

2004, one of 28 in 2009 and none in 1999 and 2014.⁹ A decline in the number of states experiencing this so-called 'boost' was stated as another leading explanation for declining voter turnout in EP elections over time.

A third structural factor deemed to have the potential to influence turnout is the timing of EP elections compared to the national election cycle.¹⁰ If EP elections occur shortly after a national election, attention for the EP will be lower than if they are conducted just before the national-level elections (Franklin, 2001: 315-316). In the latter case, domestic politicians will put more emphasis on the EP elections and there generally is more media attention; moreover, EP elections in this case may constitute a 'barometer' for the level of popularity of domestic political parties. More emphasis on EP elections according to this pattern is likely to also increase turnout rates. Therefore, when assessing turnout rates in EP elections, the timing in relation to national elections should be considered.

While Franklin (2001) demonstrated that these three structural factors are able to explain the decline in voter turnout between 1979 and 1999, a more recent study by Wessels and Franklin (2009: 614) demonstrated that these three structural factors are not as good in explaining the decline in voter turnout when the period of analysis is extended to 2004 and the new EU member states are included. This is derived from the fact that the goodness of fit for a model assessing data with 10 new members and for the EP elections from 1979 to 2004 drops significantly; namely R-squared drops by approx. 0.12 points as compared to the model which deals with EU-15 between 1979 and 1999. Consequently, the authors introduced a fourth structural factor: post-communist country, capturing transitional economies of Eastern Europe, which typically register lower turnout rates as compared to more mature democracies.¹¹ A possible explanation for low

⁹ Each of these 'time points' also encompasses elections of new member states to the EP as held between two regular (general) EP elections. This issue will be further discussed in our methodology section.

¹⁰ The study of the relation between domestic elections and EP elections, terming the latter 'second-order national elections', has been initiated by prominent studies such as Reif (1984) and Reif and Schmitt (1980). For work on how to make EP elections potentially more salient in domestic politics, e.g. see Hix and Marsh (2007), or Hix and Hagemann (2008).

¹¹ Wessels and Franklin (2009) in fact also proposed an alternative for this structural factor: 'low turnout country'.

turnout in post-communist member states could, for example, be the extent and existence of ‘the habit of voting’ (Franklin and Hobolt, 2011: 75). A factor influencing whether people vote in a specific election may quite simply be that they voted also in a previous election; voting, in this sense, can be like a ‘habit’. Accordingly, in countries in which voting is still a relatively new experience, turnout may suffer from a ‘lack of routine’. When more states characterized by a historical absence of the ‘habit of voting’ become EU members, this can negatively influence voter turnout for the EU on the aggregate level. With the inclusion of this fourth structural factor in Wessels and Franklin’s analysis, the goodness of fit of the model explaining the voter turnout for EU-25 in the period 1979-2004 increased and was comparable to one observed in the model covering years 1979-1999. Will the explanatory power of the model remain high if we extend the sample to 28 countries and cover subsequent EP elections of 2009 and 2014? That is the question to which we now turn.

3. Data and methods

Since 1979, EP elections have been conducted at regular five year intervals. Accounting for the number of member states in all EP election years – 1979, 1984, 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 – there have been 147 national EP elections in total. Accordingly, in this paper, voter turnout for each country in each EP election is analyzed, resulting in a total of 147 cases. Since the first (direct) EP elections in 1979, EU membership has gradually expanded. Upon becoming an EU member, some countries held EP elections in between two (regular) general EP elections. These co-called delayed elections were held in Greece in 1981, Portugal and Spain in 1987, Sweden in 1995, Austria and Finland in 1996, Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and finally, Croatia in 2013. Since the effect on voter turnout can be expected to be similar to first-time effects in the framework of regular EP elections, we will categorize these cases into the year in which the closest preceding EP general elections were held (controlling for these delayed elections via dummy variables does not change the main results; see table A1 in appendix). This procedure leads to the following classifications: ten EP elections in 1979, 12 in 1984 and 1989, 15 in 1994 and 1999, 27 in 2004 and finally, 28 in 2009 and 2014.

Building on Franklin's insightful work on earlier EP elections, the dependent variable in our study is voter turnout in each of these (147) elections. For most cases included into our analysis, voter turnout rates were obtained from the website of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, which has a special section providing data about voter turnout.¹² For a few cases, however, the required data could not be extracted from this website and hence, was obtained from other (official) online sources.¹³ As in earlier analyses on this issue, voter turnout will be assessed in terms of the actual number of votes in relation to the number of registered voters in each EU member state.

For our analysis, the four main independent variables were selected; three correspond to the variables employed by Franklin (2001) – 'compulsory voting', 'first election', 'electoral salience' – and one originates from Wessels and Franklin (2009) – 'Eastern enlargement', capturing the post-communist EU member states. First, we determine in which EU member states compulsory voting is applied. This is the case for Belgium, Cyprus, Greece and Luxembourg (Engelen, 2007: 26). We code these compulsory voting countries as 1, while non-compulsory voting is coded as 0. In Italy, voting ceased to be compulsory in 1993.¹⁴ We therefore treat Italy as a country with compulsory voting only for the EP elections of 1979, 1984 and 1989. We also performed the analysis with an alternative coding of compulsory voting in Italy. Similar to Wessels and Franklin (2009), we assumed that, when voting ceased to be compulsory, its effect was phased out gradually rather than abruptly. Hence, we treated Italy as 0.875, 0.75, 0.650, 0.5 and 0.375 of a compulsory voting country in 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014, respectively. The analysis performed with this alternative coding for Italy did not provide substantively different results (see table A2 in appendix).

¹² The webpage is <http://www.idea.int/vt/index.cfm>.

¹³ For Germany in 1979 data were extracted from http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/de/europawahlen/fruehere_europawahlen/ew1979.html, for 1984 from http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/de/europawahlen/fruehere_europawahlen/ew1984.html, for 1989 from http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/de/europawahlen/fruehere_europawahlen/ew1989.html and finally, for Croatia in 2013 from http://www.izbori.hr/2013EUParlament/rezult/r_00_0000_000.html?t=1365972717300.

¹⁴ Engelen (2007: 42).

The independent variable 'first election', in our study, is coded as 1 for the first EP elections held in each respective EU member state and 0 for all subsequent EP elections. Accordingly, for the 1979 general elections all ten member states scored 1 for this variable. The number of states having a score of 1 for this variable in each subsequent EP election is as follows; 1984 - two, 1989 - zero, 1994 - three, 1999 - zero, 2004 - twelve, 2009 - one, 2014 - zero.

The independent variable 'electoral salience' is measured in years and fractions of years (assessed to three digits) with respect to the next parliamentary national election that took place. The procedure to code this variable was as follows. On the basis of information obtained from the Parline database (available on the website of the Inter-Parliamentary Union),¹⁵ our study assessed the days from the date on which EP elections were held to the next domestic election.¹⁶ However, measuring the real time to the next national election day can prove problematic. Ideally, this would reflect the expected number of days between EP elections and domestic parliamentary elections. For example, at the time EP elections were held in a specific member state, domestic-level parliamentary elections may have been scheduled for three years later. In this case, the EP elections are not really a 'barometer' for national elections. Media attention and voter turnout during EP elections are then unlikely to increase as a result of this perceived 'national pre-election'. However, the static nature of this mode of analysis cannot account for 'snap' domestic elections. For example, if, hypothetically, the day after the EP elections, new national elections are called, possibly taking place one month after the EP elections, the electoral salience in the dataset should have been coded as very high, while in practice, it was not. This is a disadvantage of the way 'electoral salience' is assessed in our analysis. It is almost impossible to accurately account for such

¹⁵ The webpage is <http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/parlinesearch.asp>.

¹⁶ Since Croatia has not had domestic parliamentary elections since elections to the EP were held, for this (new) EU member in 2013, the day of the next scheduled election (in 2016) has been used instead. The Croatian domestic elections were indeed held on 11 September 2016. This assessment method is slightly different from Franklin's analysis in similar cases, as he used the average time between two national elections to 'predict' the time of the next national election (Franklin 2001: 316). The same applies to most countries with respect to the next national election held after the 2014 EP elections.

future anomalies at the time EP elections were held. Accordingly, the approach chosen is deemed to be the most objective operationalization available.

The fourth independent variable is 'Eastern enlargement'. In our study, it is coded as 1 for the Eastern European countries that participated for the first time in the 2004 or 2009 elections.¹⁷ For the other countries, this variable is coded as 0.

To calculate the adapted turnout rates for EP elections, following Franklin's earlier approach, we first conduct a multiple OLS regression analysis, using voter turnout as the dependent variable, while the variables 'compulsory voting', 'first election', 'electoral salience' and 'Eastern enlargement' constitute our independent variables. The first two variables, as well as the 'Eastern enlargement', are dichotomous in nature, whereas the 'electoral salience' is assessed on an interval scale (years and fractions thereof until the next election took place). Our analysis is performed on data for 28 EU member states and for eight different points in time, as well as various country and time period subsamples. Accordingly, we use a pooled cross-section study design (Franklin, 2001: 313). Due to the fact that regular standard errors stemming from pooled OLS are typically underestimated, it is advisable to use panel-corrected standard errors (see Beck and Katz, 1995), which we will do in the subsequent analysis. Following Franklin's earlier approach, the coefficients resulting from the multiple regression analysis applied to our empirical data provide the weights to calculate corrected turnout rates, which take these four 'structural factors' into account.

4. Main results and robustness checks

We start our analysis by replicating the results from Franklin (2001) and Wessels and Franklin (2009). Model A in table 2 shows, in line with Franklin (2001), that three structural factors, namely 'compulsory voting', 'first election' and 'electoral salience', are able to explain a vast portion of variation in voter turnout in the EP elections held before 2004, and thus for the old EU member states (compare our results with model A in table 1 in Franklin [2001]). Model B in table 2 validates these results for the old EU member states and for the time period including the 2004 EP elections

¹⁷ This applies to the following states: Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia.

(compare our results with model A in table 1 in Wessels and Franklin [2009]). Subsequently, model C demonstrates that extending the sample to include EU-27 in the 2004 elections leads to a much lower predictive power of the model and to a loss in terms of statistical significance for the 'first election' and 'electoral salience' variables (compare our results to model B in table 1 in Wessels and Franklin [2009]). Model D, in turn, shows that adding the 'East enlargement' structural factor restores the predictive power of the model and statistical significance of all explanatory variables. All these results are therefore substantively comparable to results found in Franklin (2001) and Wessels and Franklin (2009).

Table 2. Voter turnout in EP elections: main regressions

	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D	Model E	Model F
Compulsory voting in country	31.14*** (3.715)	32.37*** (3.302)	35.11*** (3.459)	31.33*** (3.956)	33.02*** (2.362)	29.83*** (2.172)
First EP election held in country	7.613*** (1.830)	8.154*** (1.787)	-1.071 (4.574)	8.981*** (1.972)	9.058*** (1.760)	6.389*** (1.922)
Electoral salience	-3.363*** (1.235)	-3.014*** (1.030)	-1.744 (1.386)	-2.683*** (1.041)	-1.750* (1.009)	-1.255 (0.813)
Eastern enlargement				-27.92*** (2.435)		-21.21*** (1.937)
Constant	55.91*** (3.253)	54.36*** (2.770)	51.29*** (3.763)	54.03*** (2.947)	50.86*** (2.382)	51.30*** (2.102)
Number of countries	15	15	27	27	15	28
Time period: 1979-	1999	2004	2004	2004	2014	2014
Observations	64	79	91	91	109	147
R ²	0.731	0.720	0.609	0.734	0.685	0.676

OLS regressions with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

We now move to the most extended models. Models E and F in table 2 present the estimated coefficients for all EP elections held so far (up to the 2014 elections) for EU-15 and all 28 EU member states, respectively. Clearly, in accordance with Franklin's earlier analysis, 'compulsory voting' has a strong, statistically significant, positive effect on EP turnout rates. The effect of the independent variable 'first election' is also positive and significant. The effect of electoral salience, by comparison, is negative, since the further away national elections are, the lower turnout is in EP elections (this effect, however, is not statistically significant in the model for all EU member states and statistically significant at only a 10% level in the analysis including the EU-15). The fourth structural factor – 'Eastern enlargement' – is also found to be significant and has a strong negative effect. The explanatory power of the models for the old EU and all EU member states is quite large (R-squared 0.69 and 0.68 respectively), yet it is lower as compared to the models which consider the EP elections up to 2004. This may suggest that over time the explanatory power of structural factors is weakened. Before adding some nuance to this analysis, following Franklin's 2001 approach, we now calculate 'corrected turnout rates' for subsequent EP elections. To this end, we establish equations based on the OLS regressions in model E and F, i.e. for the EU-15 ('old' EU states) and the EU-28, respectively. The two equations, based on the OLS regression coefficients and additional information as provided below, are:

Equation 1:

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\textbf{Corrected turnout (EU15)} = \\
 &\textit{Actual turnout (EU15)} - 33.02 \times \textit{Compulsory voting} - 9.06 \times \textit{First election} \\
 &+ 1.75 \times (\textit{Electoral salience} - 1.815) + 6.60
 \end{aligned}$$

Equation 2:

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\textbf{Corrected turnout (EU28)} = \\
 &\textit{Actual turnout (EU28)} - 29.83 \times \textit{Compulsory voting} - 6.39 \times \textit{First election} \\
 &+ 1.26 \times (\textit{Electoral salience} - 1.815) + 21.21 \times \textit{East enlargement} + 4.26
 \end{aligned}$$

In the above equations, 'compulsory voting' reflects the percentage of EU member states in an EP election that use compulsory voting. 'First election', by comparison, stands for the percentage of EU member states for which it was the first election to the EP in the framework of an EP general election. 'Electoral salience' reflects the average duration for EU member states from a given EP election to the next national election. For both derived equations, the term 1.815 – deducted from 'electoral salience' – expresses the average duration in years until the next national elections took place, starting at the time of the first EP election of 1979. Hence, using this approach, for later EU elections, electoral salience is compared to the starting moment (1979).¹⁸ The constant term included at the end of the equations is "the increase in turnout we get from having 4 out of 15 countries with compulsory voting at the end of our period, rather than none" (Franklin 2001: 318); in the equation for the 15 'old' member states, in our analysis, this is three out of 15 member states; whereas in our own analysis, encompassing all current EU states, it is four out of 28. In the equation for all current member states, however, two more components are included: 'Eastern enlargement' stands for the percentage of Eastern European and new EU member states participating in an election. Interaction denotes the percentage of post-2004 member states holding their first EP election, in the framework of a given EP general election. This allows us to compute the corrected turnout rates given that the proportion of countries with compulsory voting remained constant, the average time to the next national election remained the same as in 1979 (i.e. 1.815) and there had been no first-election boost and no member state had a communist past.

Based on this procedure, Franklin (2001) indeed found three structural factors to explain the total decline in voter turnout between 1979 and 1999. Accordingly, his corrected calculations for turnout in EP elections were 53.9 percent for 1989 and 54.8 percent for the 1999 EP general elections. Based on the extended data set for EP elections between 1979 and 2014, results based on the two equations presented above can now be shown graphically and in comparison to Franklin's earlier findings.

¹⁸ In a multiple regression framework, using categories for independent variables, this would be the 'reference group'.

Figure 1. Actual and Corrected Turnout for all EU Member States, 1979-2014

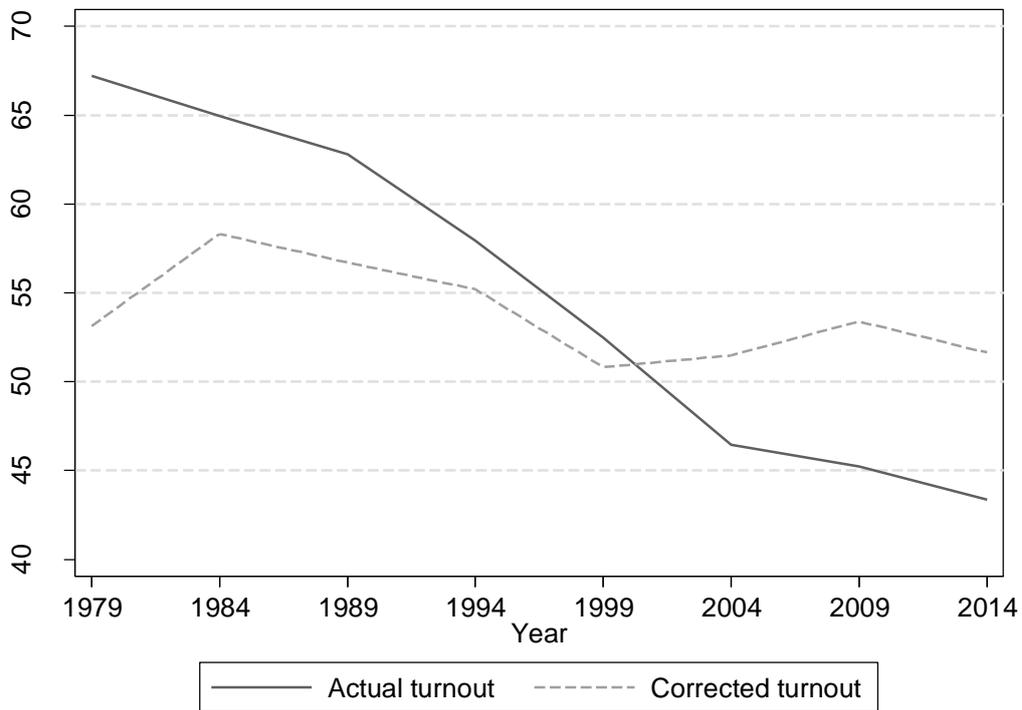
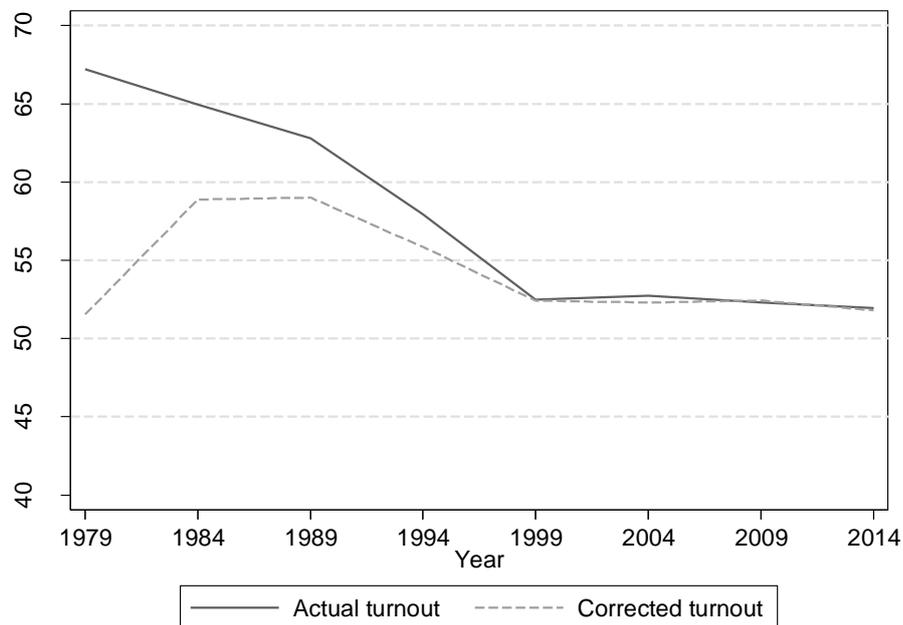


Figure 1 shows results for the EU-15, for EP elections conducted between 1979 and 2014. For this group, ‘corrected’ turnout rates in fact increased between the 1979 and 1984 EP general elections. However, since 1999, actual and ‘corrected’ turnout rates seem to have ‘leveled out’ at about 53 percent. The overall decrease in terms of actual turnout rates, between 1979 and 2014, was 15.2 percentage points, whereas the ‘corrected’ rates show an increase from 51.5 to 51.8 percent (i.e., by a small margin of 0.3 percentage points). The fact that actual and corrected rates are so close to each other from the EP 1999 elections onwards can largely be explained by the fact that the ‘first EP election’ and ‘compulsory voting’ effects are no longer relevant; it is only electoral salience that matters in practice. But since this latter effect is rather small, actual and corrected turnout does not vary much from the 1999 EP elections onwards.

Figure 2 shows actual and ‘corrected’ turnout rates for EP elections between 1979 and 2014, based on the current EU with 28 members. In line with the findings presented earlier (Franklin 2001), calculations on our extended data collection demonstrate that EP voter turnout is stable between 1979 and 2014 when structural factors are being accounted for. The overall decrease in actual rates between 1979 and 2014 is 23.9 percentage points. How much of this decline can be

explained by our model? Note that in 1979 40 percent of the countries, which held the EP elections, had compulsory voting legislation in place; in 2014 this share dropped to 14 percent, hence the drop by 26 percentage points. By multiplying 0.26 (the percentage point change in share of countries applying compulsory voting) by 29.83 (compulsory voting coefficient) we can learn how much of the decline in voter turnout can be attributed to a decreasing share of countries with compulsory voting. Overall, it is roughly 7.67 points. We should also note that while in 1979 all countries enjoyed the first elections boost, in 2014 this did not apply to a single one of the countries participating. Hence, the turnout should be reduced by another 6.39 points (see the coefficient next to the 'first elections' variable). Finally, in 2014 almost 40 percent of the countries which held EP elections were post-communist and these countries typically observe lower turnout rates as they are less habituated into voting. If we multiply 0.4 by 21.21 (coefficient next to the 'East enlargement' variable), this will give approx. 8.34 points and thus further explain turnout reduction. The impact of 'electoral salience' is minuscule as average times between EP elections to national parliamentary elections in 1979 (1.815 years) is very similar to the average times in 2014 (1.786). Altogether, these three structural factors, 'compulsory voting', 'first elections', and 'Eastern enlargement', give us a total of 22.4 points. Hence the model is able explain a vast chunk of the decline in the actual turnout between 1979 and 2014.

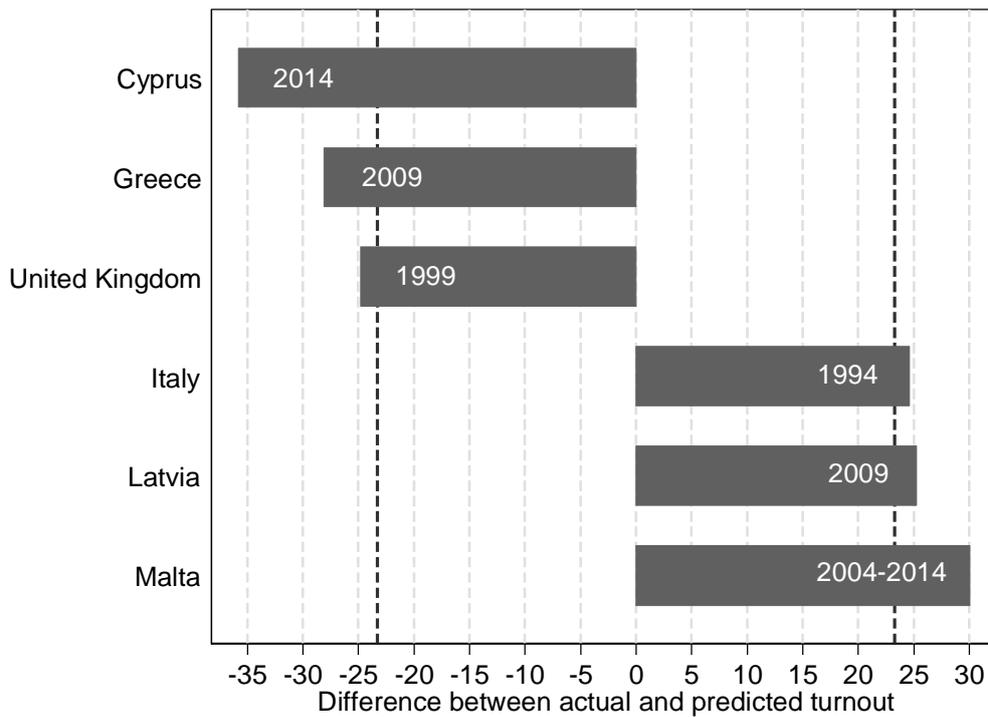
Figure 2. Actual and Corrected Turnout for the 15 'Old' (Pre-2004) EU Member States, 1979-2014



The analysis so far has been performed for the average turnout across all EU countries. Yet, it may also be revealing to make comparisons between the actual and predicted turnout rates per country-year. The residuals are computed based on model F in table 2. We subsequently identified eight outliers, whose residuals were larger than two standard deviations ($SD=11.64$) from the mean (see figure 3). On the overestimation side these are: Cyprus (2014), Greece (2009) and United Kingdom (1999). For Italy (1994), Latvia (2009) and Malta (2004, 2009 and 2014), the model underestimated the turnout rates. The case of Cyprus seems to be particularly puzzling as this is a compulsory voting country. Yet, the enforcement mechanism of compulsory voting is not very strict (Malkopoulou 2009: 7). Declining turnout rates could also be due to the Cypriot financial crisis of 2012-2013 and the conditional bailout by, among others, the EU institutions, which imposed a levy on all uninsured deposits. The vast overestimation of the turnout in the United Kingdom is arguably due to the change of the electoral systems for the EP in 1999 (Franklin, 2001: 319-320). British voters are likely unfamiliar with proportional elections as historically they are used to the first-past-the-post system, which enables a quick vote count and the immediate declaration of winners. Malta, on the other hand, is an outlier with a largely

underestimated turnout rate. It records turnout rates of not less than 74 percent, even though compulsory voting is not in force. Overall, the analysis suggests that some additional explanatory variables could have been taken into account to better predict certain cases.

Figure 3. Identification of outliers based on differences between actual and predicted voter turnout



Lastly, we perform two robustness checks. First, we verify whether the same structural factors, which are able to explain lower turnout rates in years 1979-1999, 1979-2004, and the entire time period 1979-2014, would also prevail in a subsample of 1999-2014, where turnout dropped by approx. 9 points. Second, we check how Euroscepticism would contribute to explaining lower turnout in a more direct way. It should be noted that the motivation of Franklin’s original paper was to demonstrate that decreasing overall turnout in EP elections could not be a reflection of Euroscepticism because it could almost entirely be accounted for by structural factors. We now aim to verify the effect of Euroscepticism more explicitly and therefore we control for ‘trust’/‘confidence’ in the EP across the EU member states. To be more precise, the trust/confidence in EP variable is measured as the share of positive opinions about the institutions,

i.e. people who declare that they tend to trust. The data originates from the Eurobarometer and is available since 1999.¹⁹

The robustness checks are presented in table 3. According to models G and H for the EU-15 and EU28, respectively, only 'compulsory voting' and 'Eastern enlargement' retain conventional levels of statistical significance, which means that these variables contribute to explaining the turnout rates across the EU countries in the EP elections in the years 1999-2014. The 'electoral salience' and 'first election' do not have any significant explanatory power in this time period. Turning to models I and J, which deal with the same country and time period subsample, it can be observed that adding the 'trust in EP' variable leads to an increase in the predictive power of the models and the variable itself attains a statistical significance of 1% level. This seems to suggest that structural factors may be important factors in explaining a decline in turnout in the years 1979-1999, yet in the period that followed a combination of both structural and non-structural factors seems to provide a more viable explanation of variation in voter turnout.

¹⁹ For more information about the trust data, see: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=sdg_16_60

Table 3. Voter turnout in EP elections: robustness checks

	Model G	Model H	Model I	Model J
Compulsory voting in country	34.47*** (1.762)	28.42*** (2.165)	31.90*** (1.978)	26.76*** (1.826)
Electoral salience	-0.549 (1.114)	-0.0646 (0.656)	-0.648 (0.943)	0.0106 (0.566)
First election		3.097 (3.133)		0.446 (2.403)
Eastern enlargement		-18.14*** (1.082)		-18.39*** (0.824)
Trust in EP			0.385*** (0.0828)	0.411*** (0.0873)
Constant	46.52*** (2.354)	47.42*** (1.207)	26.40*** (4.386)	25.45*** (4.169)
Number of countries	15	28	15	28
Observations	60	98	60	98
R^2	0.625	0.596	0.681	0.645

OLS regressions with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

5. Conclusions

This paper has focused on the question as to whether declining turnout rates in EP elections can still be explained by structural factors, as has been posited by Franklin (2001). In this paper we analyze, building on Franklin's earlier research, all EP elections that have been conducted between 1979 and 2014, correcting turnout rates according to four structural factors: compulsory voting, the effect of an EP election being held for the first time in an EU state, electoral salience measured as the temporal distance to the next national parliamentary election and the share of post-2004 countries in the total EU membership. Our analysis reveals that structural factors do still contribute to explaining a decline of turnout rates for EP elections in the more recent past. The explanatory power of the models capturing the situation after the 1999 elections is, however, lower than when applied to the EP elections before that period; this may indicate that, while structural factors offer a plausible explanation for the decline in EP turnout rates over time, their relative influence does appear to be decreasing. Furthermore, by analyzing voter turnout in more recent EP elections, we were also able to directly contrast structural factors with variables, which capture confidence in the EU institutions and the EP in particular. The results suggest that next to structural factors, such as 'compulsory voting' and 'Eastern enlargement', the trust/confidence in the EP is another important factor explaining variation in turnout rates. To fully comprehend developments with respect to EP turnout rates, we call for integrating structural factors along with political, socio-economic and institutional factors, typically found in the electoral studies, into respective analyses.

Given the observational nature of this study, we abstain from making causal claims and over-interpreting the correlations we observed in the dataset. Since we are not able to account for all confounders, it is possible that other, 'structural' and 'non-structural' factors may have influenced voter turnout in EP elections (see Geys, 2006). Among other possible 'structural' explanations are factors such as the age and generational location of voters (e.g., Bhatti and Hansen 2012: 271) and whether elections are held on the weekend or not (Mattila 2003). It is also possible that there are, due to various incentives and constraints, 'low turnout countries'. In this paper, we decided to use a 'post-2004' ('Eastern enlargement') dummy variable to capture the effects of low EP turnout rates for Eastern European countries. An alternative for our 'Eastern enlargement' variable, more theoretically driven, could therefore be a variable capturing whether a member state is a 'low

turnout country' or a 'habit of voting' variable, but these factors are probably more difficult to operationalize and/or justify. The upcoming (2019) EP elections bring another opportunity to tackle some of these suggestions and further test the application of structural and non-structural factors in explaining voter turnout.

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Appendix

Table A1. Voter turnout in EP elections: controlling for delayed EP elections

	Model A'	Model B'	Model C'	Model D'	Model E'	Model F'
Compulsory voting in country	31.32*** (3.633)	32.53*** (3.179)	35.33*** (3.311)	31.37*** (3.819)	33.15*** (2.275)	29.85*** (2.105)
First EP election held in country	6.415*** (2.179)	6.843*** (2.268)	-2.794 (4.085)	8.774*** (2.087)	7.586*** (2.684)	6.284*** (1.934)
Electoral salience	-3.317*** (1.254)	-2.975*** (1.027)	-1.674 (1.366)	-2.672*** (1.010)	-1.719* (1.006)	-1.253 (0.805)
Delayed EP elections	2.988 (4.000)	3.270 (4.691)	5.870 (4.361)	0.580 (3.997)	3.665 (6.001)	0.322 (4.240)
Eastern enlargement				-27.81*** (2.084)		-21.20*** (1.854)
Constant	55.77*** (3.237)	54.25*** (2.729)	51.10*** (3.689)	54.00*** (2.839)	50.77*** (2.369)	51.29*** (2.056)
Number of countries	15	15	27	27	15	28
Time period: 1979-	1999	2004	2004	2004	2014	2014
Observations	64	79	91	91	109	147
R^2	0.732	0.722	0.614	0.734	0.686	0.676

OLS regressions with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table A2. Voter turnout in EP elections: alternative operationalization of compulsory voting

	Model A''	Model B''	Model C''	Model D''	Model E''	Model F''
Compulsory voting in country	32.00***	33.60***	36.16***	32.54***	34.24***	31.00***
<i>Alternative operationalization</i>	(0.655)	(1.422)	(2.329)	(2.217)	(0.976)	(1.533)
First EP election held in country	8.684***	9.326***	0.283	10.07***	10.19***	7.037***
	(2.035)	(1.648)	(4.358)	(1.621)	(1.443)	(1.995)
Electoral salience	-3.316***	-2.903***	-1.661	-2.576***	-1.982***	-1.389**
	(0.738)	(0.646)	(1.127)	(0.670)	(0.637)	(0.652)
Eastern enlargement				-27.51***		-20.23***
				(1.807)		(1.857)
Constant	54.51***	52.65***	49.59***	52.36***	49.85***	50.31***
	(1.600)	(1.760)	(3.258)	(2.049)	(1.477)	(1.599)
Number of countries	15	15	27	27	15	28
Time period: 1979	1999	2004	2004	2004	2014	2014
Observations	64	79	91	91	109	147
R ²	0.776	0.779	0.656	0.778	0.750	0.710

OLS regressions with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$



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