



European Parliament Elections: Low Interest or Low Trust?

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Summary

Compared to national elections, European Parliament (EP) elections in general experience considerably lower turnout. In addition, especially Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) have a low turnout in EP elections. The presumed underlying reason for low turnout in EP elections is that voters believe that little is at stake compared to national elections, due to the lack of a government formation-process. This second-order election (SOE) theory has been the starting point for many studies on voting behaviour. However, recent developments have weakened the less at stake argument on which the theory rests. Given the fact that CEE countries share a communist past, this research examines whether an alternative to the SOE theory might be more appropriate. Based on survey data from Eurobarometer, a congruence analysis was performed to examine whether the Second-order Election (SOE) theory or the communist legacy best explains low turnout in EP elections in CEE countries. The results showed that although the people who experienced communist regimes are more sceptical towards the EU, they are also more likely to vote than younger generations. Moreover, sufficient information provision does not necessarily lead to high turnout. At the same time, low political interest is generally matched with low turnout in EP elections, while this effect is not observed in national elections. These results suggest that political interest is an important factor in the level of turnout. Therefore, policymakers should not only focus on the provision of information, but also at methods to spark people's political interest in order to stimulate people to vote.

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Abbreviations

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
EP	European Parliament
FOE	First-order Election
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
SOE	Second-order Election
WE	Western Europe

Summary

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Abbreviations

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1. Introduction

European Parliament (EP) elections are arguably the most important way in which European citizens can voice their opinions about EU politics. Nevertheless, the right to vote in the EP elections is something relatively few Europeans make use of. Especially compared to national elections, there seems to be a large difference in turnout, where participation in EP elections is generally lower (Schäfer, 2021). Reif and Schmitt (1980) described this phenomenon in their theory of 'second-order' elections (SOEs). They argue that voters believe that little is at stake in European elections compared to national elections due to the lack of a government-formation process. As a result, they are less likely to participate in the electoral process, which subsequently explains the low turnout in these elections.

The SOE-theory has been the main starting point in numerous studies explaining voting behaviour in European elections (Hix and Marsh, 2011; Schmitt, 2005; Marsh, 2009). However, since its introduction, there have been several developments that significantly changed the EU. Since the first EP elections in 1979, the number of member countries has tripled and the policy scope of the EU as well as its legislative authority increased. Especially the Eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004 has changed the composition of the EU, as ten new countries with a combined population of almost 75 million people joined (Fauvelle-Aymar and Stegmaier, 2008).

Since the enlargement, there has been a discussion among scholars whether the SOE-theory still applies in the EU. Especially with regard to CEE countries there seems to be a lack of consensus. Some scholars have argued that the SOE-model does not seem to apply as well in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries as in West European (WE) countries (Koepke and Ringe, 2006; Hix and Marsh, 2007). High party fragmentation and high levels of electoral volatility would make elections in CEE countries deviate in such a way that the predictions from the SOE-theory do not correspond with election outcomes. On the other hand, there are multiple studies that present strong indications of second-orderness in CEE countries (Ehin and Talving, 2021; Schakel, 2015). These scholars highlight the need to further specify and modernise the model rather than to abandon it.

Although the SOE-model has been dominant, there have also been other explanations for the low turnout typical to CEE countries. One of these perspectives highlights the shared communist past of Eastern Europe, and argues that this experience has had, and continues to have, a strong impact on citizen's electoral behaviour (Linek and Petrúsek, 2016). Some authors emphasise the low civic participation in post-communist countries (Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2011) and high levels of electoral volatility (Hix and Marsh, 2007). Other studies show that post-communist countries are more sceptical towards democracy and that party membership is low (Van Biezen et al., 2012). Consequently, this political and social reality could also be an explanation for the low turnout in EP elections in (post-communist) CEE

countries, which will serve as the starting point for this thesis. The present study will investigate whether the SOE-theory or communist legacy can best explain the low turnout in EP elections in CEE countries.

1.1 Research Aim and Research Question

The research question that will guide the investigation of this thesis is as follows:

Does the Second Order Election (SOE) model or 'communist legacy' best explain the low turnout in European Parliament elections in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries?

The purpose of this research is to provide scientific-based insights in the explanatory value of the SOE-theory compared to the communist legacy. Recent studies point to the potential explanatory deficiency of the SOE-theory when applied to CEE countries. The communist legacy on the other hand, might potentially be a better explanation for the low participation, as the CEE countries with low turnout all share this communist past. Through the use of a congruence analysis, this research will therefore assess which theory is best suited to explain the low turnout in the EP elections in CEE countries.

1.2 Theoretical and Societal Relevance

According to Lehnert, Miller and Wonka (2007), research that contributes to the specific scientific discourse and to the advancement of the knowledge produced by it is considered theoretically relevant. This study aims to contribute to the theoretical debate about the explanatory value of SOE-theory while also examining alternative explanations (Hix and Marsh, 2007; Franklin and Hobolt, 2010). Therefore, this research seeks to build upon a well-established body of literature exploring voting behaviour in EP elections. By analysing two theories that claim to explain voting behaviour in EP elections, this thesis contributes by revealing which theory can best explain this phenomenon. The outcome of this study thus enriches the scientific discourse on this particular topic.

Research is considered socially relevant when it furthers the understanding of social and political phenomena which affect people and make a difference with regard to explicitly specified evaluative standards (Lehnert, Miller and Wonka, 2007). This study focuses on the explanation for low turnout in EP elections in CEE countries. Therefore, the outcome does not only affect political scientists and politics, it also affects citizens in CEE countries and the EP. Low turnout in elections questions the democratic legitimacy of the EP as it does not accurately represent the views of a community. As elections have consequences for future political decisions that affect citizens' lives, it is important that the outcome of the elections represent the population as best as possible. Proper representation is necessary to uncover the

problems a community collectively faces. Dewey (1927: 207) notes: 'The man who wears the shoe knows the best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied'. Thus, the answers I hope to get from this research should be of value in order to find ways to increase the legitimacy of the EP, as well as to increase democratic representation in CEE countries.

1.3 Research Structure

The structure of this research is as follows. The purpose of chapter 2 is to provide background information on the EP and to present a brief overview of the research that has been conducted on voting behaviour in EP elections. Subsequently, chapter 3 will present the existing theories and concepts after which several propositions are derived for further analysis. Chapter 4 will then provide the research design in which the researchers choices are justified. Next, an analysis of three subsequent EP elections will follow in chapter 5 in which the propositions are tested based on the gathered data. The findings from this analysis will then be discussed in chapter 6. Finally, a conclusion will be given in chapter 7 while also providing an answer to the central research questions followed by several recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 The European Parliament

The European Parliament is a co-legislator together with the Council of the European Union. It has the power to adopt and amend legislation, decides on the annual EU budget and it supervises the work of the Commission and other EU bodies (European Parliament, n.d.a). The vast majority of EU law is passed through the ordinary legislative procedure (OLP), which is the standard EU legislative decision-making procedure, giving equal weight to the EP and the Council.

The democratic nature of Parliament was established in 1979, when the first elections of the EP took place (European Parliament, n.d.b), making it the only democratically elected institution of the EU. Since then, the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have been directly elected every five years by EU citizens through universal suffrage. Through these elections, the composition of Parliament—consisting of 705 seats—is determined. Each member state returns a fixed number of MEPs, ranging from six for the smaller member states (e.g., Malta) to ninety-six for Germany, the largest member. The allocation of seats is laid down in EU treaties, where countries with larger populations are assigned more seats than smaller ones. However, thanks to the principle of degressive proportionality, countries with smaller populations are allocated more seats per capita than bigger member states (European Parliament, n.d.c). Methods for electing MEPs are determined by each member state themselves, although there are some common EU rules, e.g., the requirement of proportional representation.

After the elections, MEPs organize in political groups, although this is not a requirement (Hix and Hoyland, 2011). These groups bring together MEPs from different Member States on the basis of their political affinities and ideologies (European Parliament, n.d.d). The political groups are composed of national parties and/or individual members, of which the latter have the exclusive right to campaign during elections. Contrary to many national governments, the EP does not form a government in the traditional sense. Instead, in the absence of a permanent coalition, legislative coalitions of the different political groups are formed vote by vote (Hix and Hoyland, 2011).

2.2 European Parliament elections

The fact that elections to the EP are different from elections to national parliaments in EU member countries has been evident from the first election that took place in 1979. Compared to national parliament or presidential elections, the EP elections tend to be characterized by a low turnout, electoral losses for major parties, higher success rates for smaller and newer parties and lower media attention (Boomgaarden, Johann and Kritzinger, 2016). Moreover, since the first elections in 1979, the low turnout has not remained stable but showed a

downward trend, with every subsequent EP election reaching a lower turnout than the previous one (European Parliament, 2019). Where the first elections enjoyed a voter turnout of 61.99%, the absolute low was listed in 2014, with just 42.61%. There are multiple explanations for this decline in turnout.

One of the most influential theories that tries to encapsulate voting behaviour in EP elections was introduced by Reif and Schmitt (1980). Their SOE-theory suggests that there is a qualitative difference between different type of elections depending on the perceptions of its participants of what is at stake. FOEs are elections to the main political arena which determines the distribution of political power through the establishment of some form of executive government. Therefore, these elections are deemed more important as its outcomes are perceived to impact citizens' daily lives more directly. In contrast, SOEs are seen to be less important because the stakes are lower: they are secondary to the FOEs. These SOEs do not determine the composition of a government and thus will have less influence on political decision-making. As the EP does not form a government in the traditional sense, the EP elections are a prime example of a SOE.

This 'less at stake' argument forms the basis of Reif and Schmitt's theory, which leads them to several broad predictions about the outcomes of EP elections. First, because the stakes are lower in SOEs, people are less incentivised to go out and vote, leading to lower turnout compared to FOEs (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Moreover, SOEs pose brighter prospects for small and new political parties. Voters in FOEs do not always vote for the party closest to their genuine views but vote on mainstream parties with better prospects. As Marsh and Franklin (1996) show, larger parties are more attractive to voters because they are more likely to have an impact on policies compared to smaller parties. However, in SOEs, the lower stakes make people refrain from these kinds of tactics. Because no government is formed, people are more likely to vote sincerely based on their ideological views. This is also the argument for another prediction, which is that national government parties perform worse, especially when the elections take place during the mid-term of the national election cycle. Voters tend to use the EP-elections to signal their discontent with the national government's performance or to apply pressure on the government. For example, a voter might choose a small party to show support for the policies espoused by that party in the hopes that the voter's preferred party might be induced to adopt them (Myatt, 2015).

Lastly, the exact outcome of these predictions—turnout, small parties win, government parties lose—is dependent on the timing of a European election relative to the national election (Reif, 1984). If a European election is held in the build-up to a new national election, parties will be motivated to spend more time and money in the election campaign, and citizens will be motivated to vote to influence the upcoming national election. However, when a European election is held in the middle of a national election cycle, voters have already been able to form

an opinion on government's policies. This makes government parties more likely to lose votes as they are at their most unpopular (Hix and Marsh, 2007).

Multiple studies since the introduction have used the SOE-model as starting-point when analysing EP elections (Schmitt, 2005; Marsh, 2009; Schakel, 2015). Hobolt and Wittrock (2011) demonstrate the importance of first-order national considerations to vote choice. Voters are likely to base their EP vote choices on sincere preferences relating to the dominant dimension of contestation in national politics. The importance of national politics is also apparent from the fact that negative information about national government performance has considerable impact on vote choice. It seems that voters base their votes in EP elections on national issues rather than European issues. This notion is supported by a study from Hix and Marsh (2007) which shows that voters use EP elections to voice their concerns about national politics. Meanwhile, Hobolt and Wittrock (2011) also find that more information about the EU will lead to a greater impact of EU attitudes on EP vote choice. This would mean that improving the provision of information to people will lead them to base their voting behaviour more on European issues rather than national ones.

2.3 Turnout in EP elections

Whereas the low turnout has been confirmed with every EP election, and while the turnout gap has been steadily increasing, there is no consensus about the causes for this phenomenon. Regarding the overall downward trend in turnout, it is argued that this is caused by the fact that in most countries the first EP election conducted sees a so-called 'first-time boost' to turnout, which has been assumed to be due to the excitement of the novel experience (Franklin, 2001). This first-time boost has generally been followed by a drop-off at the subsequent election.

The effect of the first-time boost relates to a study by Franklin and Hobolt (2010) that looked into voting habits as explanation for declining turnout in European Elections. They tested the proposition that the experience of voting for the first time in a second-order EP election has a negative socializing effect. They found that for most people, about the only reason to vote is the fact that they had already acquired the habit of voting in EP elections. Generally, it has been theorized that it takes three successive national electoral experiences to lock down this habit. For those people who have not acquired this habit, the EP elections are not interesting enough to spark enthusiasm under EU citizens as there is too little at stake. This effect is also generational and cumulative, as new generations acquire the habit of voting at a lower rate than older cohorts did (Franklin and Hobolt, 2010).

Whereas Franklin and Hobolt (2010) studied the nature of EP elections and what effects it has on voting habits, Nonnemacher (2021) approaches it from a different perspective. He argues that it is not the nature and outcome of EP elections, but the frequency of elections

that depresses turnout. His results suggest that numerous elections between two EP contests is associated with lower turnout in the subsequent EP election. As the number of elections increases between two contests, turnout decreases in the latter of the two contests. Moreover, that increasing electoral frequency between two contests contributes to a lower likelihood of voting is even stronger when political interest decreases. Meanwhile, his study partly supports the findings of Franklin and Hobolt (2010) as he found that the number of elections has no significant relationship on voting habits among people with high political interest or habitual voters. This would present a pessimistic image for the democratic legitimacy of the EP as the election outcome only represents a small portion of European citizens. Gosselin and Henjak (2004) show the impact of a better-informed electorate on EP election outcomes. When every citizen entitled to vote is brought up to the information level of the 15% best informed, there would be changes in the election outcome of up to ten percentage points, mostly in favour of social and green parties.

The democratic legitimacy of the EU is also subject for the declining trend in a study by Stockemer (2011). He found that citizens' opinions about the EU matter for their participation in EP elections. Compared with high pro-EU countries, states with below-average EU approval ratings have lower citizen participation in EP elections and a higher turnout gap between national and EP elections. Thus, Stockemer (2011) concludes that citizens who do not support their country's membership in the EU are more likely to abstain. Clark (2014) draws a similar conclusion by examining the role of political trust in EU institutions and how this affects voter turnout. He argues that doubts about the representation of the public's view in EP and whether the EP holds influence in EU decision-making explains public apathy toward EP elections. He finds that while some voters do abstain due to lack of interest in EU politics, doubts about the EP may slightly better explain the low levels of turnout in EP elections. Therefore, the lower turnout would be because people feel not represented by the European Union.

It is however not entirely clear to what extent attitudes towards the EU affect participation in the EP elections (Gaus and Seubert, 2016). According to Steinbrecher and Rattinger (2012), European attitudes are not important predictors of the level of turnout at the EP elections. They show that the low participation rate is not caused by either Euroscepticism or alienation from the EU's political system, which partly contradicts Clark's (2014) findings. Stockemer (2011) on the other hand, shows that a higher level of public support for European integration in a member state is translated to higher turnout in EP elections. This is also confirmed in a study by Torcal (2012) which shows that the degree to which EU endorsement affects turnout depends on whether European integration is subject to national political disputes. If EU integration is subject to national political disputes, then people are more inclined to turn out and vote, even when the support for the EU is weak.

The importance of issues like EU integration for electoral participation is also subject to a study by Braun and Schäfer (2022). They explored whether and through which mechanisms policy issues affect electoral participation by looking at four different issues: economy, immigration, environment and European integration. They found three different effects of issue relevance. First, the more relevant a person perceives key policy issues, the more likely she feels incentivized to participate in European elections. Second, the impact of personal issue importance is enhanced by the systemic salience that the respective policy issues had during the election campaign. In other words, people feel more incentivized to participate when the issue they perceive as most relevant is also publicly salient in their country. This shows that the national context is highly relevant for people to mobilize in European elections. Third, Braun and Schäfer found that having a strong opinion on either economy, immigration and environment has no mobilizing effect in the EP elections. However, they did find this effect for EU integration. Based on this finding, they conclude that citizens use EP elections to express their views on the European integration process. In other words, the EP elections are only used by the electorate to express their views on issues specifically related to the EU.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework will present two theories that will be used for the analysis. From these theories, propositions are derived which will be compared to empirical observations to assess their explanatory value. The theories that will be discussed are the SOE-theory and the communist legacy theory.

3.1 Second-order Election theory

In this section, the SOE-theory will be discussed. First, the general theory will be presented, after which the low turnout in CEE countries will be discussed. Finally, several propositions will be presented that are derived from the SOE-model.

As already mentioned, the dominant explanation on voting behaviour in EP elections is the SOE-theory. It suggests that there is a qualitative difference between different type of elections depending on the perceptions of voters of what is at stake (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). FOEs are perceived to have the highest stakes, because it determines the distribution of political power. These are generally national elections that establish some form of executive government. In contrast, SOEs are perceived to be less important because the stakes are lower. They do not determine the composition of government and thus will have less influence on political decision-making. The EP elections are a prime example of an SOE, as Parliament does not form an executive government in the traditional sense.

The literature on SOEs distinguishes three types of voting. First, a *strategic* vote is for a party (candidate) that is not the preferred one, motivated by the intention to affect the outcome of the election. This definition is based on the presumption that a strategic vote is based on a combination of preferences and expectations about the outcome of the election and on the belief that one's vote may be decisive (Blais et al., 2001). For a vote to be defined as strategic, it needs to satisfy two conditions. First, the voter must have chosen a party which differs from the most preferred one, and second, he/she must have done so because of the expectations about the outcome of the elections. Second, a *sincere* vote is a voter's genuine choice for a party of his/her preference. This is the case when a person chooses a party that is closest to his/her ideological beliefs, and which best represents the voter's interests (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Thus, this vote is entirely on the basis of party identification, and not at all on the basis of expectations about the outcome of the elections (Blais et al., 2001). Finally, a person can vote *expressively* to make a statement or convey a message (Koepke and Ringe, 2006). This type can be seen as protest voting, which serves to express dissatisfaction with the national government's performance or decision-making. Expressive voters do not base their vote on ideologic beliefs or expectations about the outcome of the elections, but rather switch to a less preferred party to signal a demand for change in policies of their most preferred party (Alvarez, Kiewiet and Núñez, 2018).

Because voters perceive SOEs to be elections where little is at stake, they tend to show different voting behaviour compared to FOEs. Based on this assumption, the SOE-model offers three broad predictions about the outcomes of SOEs. First, SOEs experience a lower level of participation (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Since less is at stake in SOEs, there is less incentive for voters to cast their vote, leading to lower turnouts than first-order national elections. Second, SOEs pose brighter prospects for small and new political parties. Large parties receive a high number of votes in FOEs from voters whose actual views differ but who base their decision on strategy—for example to prevent a ‘wasted vote’ on a small party. During SOEs however, the fact that less is at stake makes voters more likely to ‘vote by heart’, opting parties that are closer to their genuine views, which falls under the above-described *sincere* voting type. Third, parties in national governments perform worse, especially when the elections take place during the mid-term of the national election cycle. Voters tend to use the EP-elections to signal their discontent with the national government’s performance or to apply pressure on the government. For example, a voter might expressively vote for a small party to show support for the policies espoused by that party in the hopes that the voter’s preferred party might be induced to adopt them (Myatt, 2015).

Thus, according to the SOE-model, turnout in SOEs is low, government parties tend to lose support, and because voters are more likely to vote sincerely, opposition parties gain support. Moreover, this is all based on the argument that the stakes in SOEs are lower.

3.1.1 SOE and CEE countries

While the SOE-model has remained the starting point for analysing EP elections, several developments in the past decades have weakened the ‘less at stake’ argument on which it rests. Since the first EP elections in 1979, the number of member countries has tripled, the policy scope of the EU has been amplified and parliament’s legislative authority has increased. Following these developments, one could argue that the stakes in EP elections have become considerably higher. However, between 1979 and 2014, participation in EP elections has remained relatively low. Even more so, voter turnout has been steadily declining, reaching its record low of 42.6 percent in 2014 (European Parliament, 2019). But given the increasing role the EU plays in everyday life of EU citizens, why do these voters still abstain in EP elections?

Schmitt (2005) examines why the developments in the EU have failed to change the nature of EP elections as second-order. He observes that most citizens do not fully realise how important the EU is in policy decisions, how these affect their lives, and what the role of the EP is in these decisions. Moreover, he makes another interesting observation which is that the election cycle is perhaps a less mighty determinant in the new and larger EU, referring to the Eastern enlargement in 2004.

This observation has proven to be an impetus to an important discussion within SOE literature. There is a difference between member states in the level of participation. Moreover, when considering the overall results, there seems to be a pattern where turnout in CEE countries is lower compared to WE countries. In fact, since the first Eastern European EU enlargement in 2004, on average, turnout has been more than twenty percentage points lower in Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe (Petričević and Stockemer, 2019). Additionally, the turnout gap between national and European elections has been bigger in the East.

One of the striking findings in recent literature is that the SOE-model does not seem to apply as well in Central and Eastern Europe as in Western Europe (Koepke and Ringe, 2006; Hix and Marsh, 2007). Koepke and Ringe (2006) test the application of the SOE-model after Eastern enlargement and conclude that the applicability of the second-order framework to CEE countries would be at least questionable. Additionally, they found that voters in the newer member states do not cast protest votes against their incumbent national government in SOEs, contradicting one of the main assumptions of the model. Meanwhile, multiple scholars found evidence that show that the model does apply in Eastern Europe. Träger (2015) finds that the EP election of 2014 was characterized by strong indications of second-orderness all across Europe. Likewise, Ehin and Talving (2021) tested the performance of the SOE-model after EU expansion while incorporating a measure of party system fragmentation. They conclude that there is no clear pattern that confirms the proposition that the SOE-model performs better in less fragmented systems.

Schakel (2015) argues in support of these findings by stating that the model still applies, but that it needs to be updated. Because the initial model has been developed for elections in two or two-and-a-half party systems, the application on multiparty systems has consequences for phenomena like protest voting. Subsequently, he shows that the impact of the state of the economy affects each party type to a different extent, where main opposition and new parties gain the most vote share as a result of a worsening economy. Thus, by specifying the SOE-model, he finds additional explanations for electoral gains and losses.

Schmitt et al. (2020) present one of these additional explanations. According to Campbell et al. (1966) there is a certain group of voters that are likely to abstain in low stimulus elections due to a lack of mobilisation. This group is characterised by low political interest and a low degree of partisanship. In order for this group of people to go out and vote, they need a particular incentive to participate, where others need less incentives as they already identify with a party or have acquired the habit of voting (Franklin, 2004). Regarding the motivations of abstention from this group, SOE scholars argue that this primarily reflects a lack of electoral mobilisation (Schmitt and Van der Eijk, 2008; Franklin and Hobolt, 2010). SOE abstentions could therefore be explained by the lack of mobilisation, namely that voters with no

partisanship and no interest in the electoral campaign are more likely to abstain than others. Meanwhile, this could also explain the low turnout in CEE countries. Several studies have shown that CEE countries are characterised by lower levels of party membership (Van Biezen et al., 2012), and lower proportions of individuals with party identification compared to WE countries (Dalton and Weldon, 2007). Based on the above, the following proposition is formulated:

The low turnout in Second-order EP elections in CEE countries is a problem of mobilisation caused by low levels of partisanship and low levels of interest in politics.

Hobolt, Spoon and Tilly (2008) also came to the conclusion that the SOE-model needs to be further specified. They observed that governing parties may lose votes because of the disconnect between major governing parties and their voters on the issue of EU integration. This disconnect causes governing-party voters who are more sceptical about further European integration defect or abstain, which explains the lower turnout. Media coverage plays an important role in this regard, as it increases the importance of the party-voter distance on integration in causing defection. Additionally, more hostile coverage towards the EU results in greater defection from governing parties.

The importance of the role of media coverage has been confirmed by several scholars. Petricevic and Stockemer (2019) state that one of the possible explanations for the differences in turnout is that people are less informed about issues that take place at the European level. They highlight that this phenomenon is specifically present in Eastern Europe, where the EP elections are perceived as unimportant. This leads people to have less knowledge about the candidates and parties, which directly translates in the low turnout. This is at least partly caused by a low level of media coverage and election campaigns' inability to pay close attention to the Parliament elections. Hobolt and Wittrock (2011) draw similar conclusions about the role that the provision of information plays in voting behaviour. They introduce the role of information as an extension of the SOE-model, by positing that more information about the EU will lead to a greater impact of EU attitudes on EP vote choice. Their findings confirm this hypothesis and show that when participants were given more information about party placements on the EU dimension, they were more likely to vote on the basis of their EU attitudes. This suggests that voters may be less likely to vote on the basis of first-order consideration when they are given more information about EP elections.

Taking these findings into consideration, it appears that a possible explanation for the low turnout in EP elections in CEE countries could be due to a relatively low information provision on these elections. This expectation would be in line with the argument that the EP elections are SOEs where less is at stake, making them less newsworthy. This causes people

to be less informed about the elections, making them less likely to mobilize. The argument for this is as follows. First, it is assumed that elections generate a mutual relationship between electors and elected. Whereas the electors consider their options and vote on a candidate, the elected/candidates provide the public with information about their political views. The interest for political actors to provide information is twofold: they show their political offerings compared to other actors, and they mobilize people to go out and vote (Wessels and Franklin, 2009). An election campaign is a good example of such an occasion: it provides citizens with crucial information, it motivates them to seek out additional information about the elections, and it mobilizes them to go to the polls.

However, following the less at stake argument, if the political actors do not care about an election, they will not make an effort to inform their electorate and people will thus not be encouraged to go out and vote (Wessels and Franklin, 2009). Campaign efforts of competing parties in EP elections have notoriously turned out to be shallow (Schmitt and Popa, 2016). Moreover, Cutts and Haughton (2020) found that direct contact with voters is lower in CEE countries compared to the rest of the EU. Additionally, previous findings suggest that campaigns have a stronger influence on turnout in SOEs compared to FOEs (Lefevere and Van Aelst, 2014). This would mean that the absence of an election campaign might amplify the effects on turnout when compared to countries where the EP elections are more salient. Lastly, country-level studies have shown that the EU does not matter as much in CEE countries. This does not only hold true for voters, but also parties, politicians and the media (Charvát, 2017; Gyárfášová, 2017). Thus, because the stakes in EP elections are perceived to be lower, the provision of information about EP elections is low. As a result:

People in Eastern European countries are not aware of European issues and party stances in EP elections making them less inclined to turn out and vote in the EP elections.

3.2 Communist past

Another common theme in studies of voter turnout in CEE countries is that the legacy of communism influences political participation. The following section will discuss the various findings from this approach as well as present the proposition that will be tested.

The way in which citizens interact with their political environment has long intrigued political scientists and in recent years has contributed to a growing body of research that analyses political behaviour in post-communist countries. Within this body of literature, a strong consensus has emerged that post-communism did not simply represent a so-called 'tabula rasa' (Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2011). According to this perspective, the communist experience has had, and continues to have, a strong impact on the electoral behaviour of post-communist citizens. More and more studies point towards the importance of considering the effects of communist *past* experiences in studying political attitudes and behaviour in post-communist countries (Pop-Eleches, 2007; Wittenberg, 2006).

There are several ways in which the effects of the communist legacy are empirically observable. Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2013) observe that the communist legacy has caused a deficit in civic participation. The assumption behind this is that post-communist citizens approach civic participation differently than WE citizens because the former were socialized under the communist regime. This political socialization describes the process by which citizens crystalize political identities, values and behaviour that remain relatively persistent throughout the individual's life (Neundorf and Smets, 2017). During the communist era, civic organisations were thriving as participation was mandatory and regulated by the state. This caused distrust of the public sphere which left an attitudinal legacy, undermining the interpersonal and institutional trust that is necessary for civic participation. After the fall of communism, credible civic infrastructure was lacking, leading people to be more susceptible about civic participation.

The communist legacy has also shown its marks in other areas of democracy. Ceka (2012) argues that the communist legacy of the one-party system has caused an aversion to political competition. Decades of monopolization of the electoral arena by communist parties have made Eastern Europeans not used to vigorous competition. Especially vocal and critical opposition exposing government scandals have convinced Eastern European citizens that political parties are run by self-interested politicians. This has even caused competition to depress trust in political parties, which in turn depressed political participation.

Similar effects have been shown by Karp and Milazzo (2015). They found evidence which suggests that many citizens in Eastern Europe remain sceptical about democracy, and that this scepticism about democracy is linked to lower participation in EP elections. This would be caused by the fact that individuals socialized in communist societies were indoctrinated not to challenge the actions of the government. These attitudes have been ingrained in society,

which became apparent after the transition to democracy, making people more sceptical about democratic institutions. The low support for democracy in post-communist countries is confirmed by Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2011).

Apart from the higher scepticism towards democracy, there are also other differences in political behaviour between the post-communist CEE countries and WE countries. Van Biezen et al. (2012) have highlighted the low levels of party membership in post-communist countries. Although party membership has been in decline in the whole of Europe, the most pronounced declines have been in Central and Eastern Europe, with four of the five sharpest drops being recorded by post-communist democracies. Additionally, post-Communist European countries also show higher levels of electoral volatility (Powell and Tucker, 2014).

3.2.1 Communist legacy and low turnout

Considering the above-described findings, it seems that the post-communist context presents different outcomes in political behaviour than the rest of Europe. Countries that experienced communist rule tend to have lower support for democracy, a lower degree of civic participation and lower turnout in general. The next section will focus on explanations on the lower turnout and how the communist legacy might explain this phenomenon.

The first possible explanation for the lower turnout in CEE countries is based on the concept of political socialization. Again, political socialization describes the process by which citizens crystalize political identities, values and behaviour that remain relatively persistent throughout an individual's life (Neundorf and Smets, 2017). Therefore, it is the actual process of living through communism and acquiring certain behaviours during this period that matters.

There are two ways in which socialization can be approached. An *early socialization* approach is based on the idea that once certain behaviour is fixed, it tends to stay that way over the course of one's life (Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2013). For example, if people under communist rule 'learned' to be sceptical towards the government, this scepticism will also be present in the later stages of that individual's life. Alternatively, from a *cumulative socialization* approach, it is believed that socialization happens in a cumulative fashion over one's lifetime. Behavioural patterns are not necessarily fixed but are strengthened the more time one spends living under communism (Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2013). Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2011) showed that the historical legacy of communism results in lower levels of political trust and support for democracy, which could suppress interest in democratic politics. Additionally, lower turnout among Eastern member states suggests that there may be attitudinal differences among voters in different regions of the EU that influences their decision to vote (Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2014). This includes the interest in and satisfaction with democratic politics in the EU. Moreover, Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2011) highlight that personal exposure to

communism leads to lower satisfaction with democracy and to lower support of democratic values. It is therefore expected that:

Political socialization in a communist regime results in weaker internalization of pro-democratic values which consequently results in lower voter turnout.

The reasoning behind this expectation is that citizens of communist regimes did not experience meaningful elections, as there were no real options between candidates (Linek and Petrúsek, 2016). Moreover, the goal of the elections was to show unity to the citizens under the communist regime, and voting was therefore mandatory. The lack of competition and the mandatory voting may possibly have caused a negative attitude towards elections among people that lived under communism, which has still persisted after the transition to democracy. This also causes people to abstain in the EP elections, resulting in a low voting turnout in Eastern European countries.

4. Research design

This section discusses the details of the design of this research. First, the differences between a quantitative and qualitative approach will be discussed. Next, the choice to do a congruence analysis is substantiated and its application in this research is further specified. Following this, the data sources are discussed as well as the operationalisation of the propositions and the selected cases. Finally, the reliability and validity of the research are discussed.

4.1 Selection of designs

4.1.1 Qualitative Design

The present thesis will consist of a qualitative research design. Qualitative designs are characterized by small-N samples of cases. Rather than trying to find a correlation between a broad set of cases, qualitative research seeks to explore the possible causes and effects of certain political phenomena in a specific context. In general, the use of few cases to conduct the research leads to a low external validity. Therefore, the findings of qualitative studies are not to be generalised to other contexts, as the causes, relationships, and effects of the phenomena under study are only applicable to the bounded system in which they were studied.

First, this research seeks to find out which of two theories has the highest explanatory value regarding low turnout in CEE countries. To examine this, a qualitative research design will be used, meaning that it will have a small-N design. This approach has been chosen instead of a quantitative large-N design for multiple reasons. First, as the number of available cases (CEE countries) is only ten, a large-N design would not be possible, making a qualitative design the obvious choice. Moreover, the advantage of small-N research is the ability to collect a broad and diverse set of observations per case and the ability to reflect intensively on the relationship between the observations and abstract concepts (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). Additionally, the diversity of observations makes it possible to connect empirical cases to a large set of theories which might be connected to different paradigmatic camps. This makes small-N studies appropriate for comparing divergent theories giving room for theoretical innovation. Thus, as small-N studies use a much broader set of observations for testing the congruence between theoretical expectations and empirical reality (Blatter and Haverland, 2012), it is more appropriate for testing which theory has the highest explanatory value.

4.1.2 Congruence analysis and selection of theories

Congruence analysis is a small-N design in which the researcher tries to provide empirical evidence by using case studies to examine the explanatory value or relative strength of one theory compared to another (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). There are two subtypes of the congruence analysis: 1) a competing theories approach; and 2) a complementary theories approach. The first approach presupposes that we can use empirical information to judge the

relative explanatory power of a theory by comparing observations with expectations derived from one theory, which are compared to the expectations derived from another theory. The assumption is that different theories lead to contradictory empirical implications from which the best theory can be identified (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). The second sub-type implies that a variety of theories provides the basis for theoretical. In contrast to the competing theories approach, this approach assumes that different theories provide more sophisticated explanations, presenting new explanatory insights. Although this research aims to assess which theory best explains low turnout in CEE countries, it is also assumed that the two subtypes of congruence analysis are ideal types. Therefore, it is expected that the two theories subject to this research might both show strong differences in some areas while overlapping in others.

According to Blatter and Haverland (2012), a congruence analysis needs two methodological elements of control to prevent epistemological relativism. A vertical element of control consists of deducing specific propositions from abstract theories and comparing these with empirical observations. A horizontal element of control is to demonstrate that the correspondence of a theory's implications with empirical observations provides a greater explanatory value than other theories. Blatter and Haverland (2012) stress that a good theory-oriented study involves empirical information and (at least) two different theories. Regarding the present research, the theories that have been chosen are the SOE-theory and the communist legacy theory. The former has been the dominant theory in explaining voting behaviour in EP elections. However, several developments in recent decades (e.g., the Eastern enlargement of the EU) have called into question the applicability of the theory in CEE countries (Schakel, 2015; Hix and Marsh, 2007; Schmitt, 2004). The aim of this research is therefore to examine whether a communist legacy is better suited to explain low turnout in CEE countries as several studies have shown its potential (Pop-Eleches, 2015; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2013; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2014; Linek and Petrúsek, 2016).

4.2 Data collection methods

Data collected for this study is mostly derived from primary sources from Eurobarometer. These are the official polling instruments used by the EP, the Commission and other EU institutions and agencies to monitor public opinion in Europe on issues related to the EU (Eurobarometer, n.d.). The analysis consists of three different elections, namely the 2009, 2014 and 2019 EP elections. Data for the 2009 EP elections was derived from a post-electoral survey on voting behaviour in the EP elections, conducted between 12 June and 6 July, and involving 26.830 European citizens (Eurobarometer, 2009). For the 2014 elections, a similar post-election survey was used carried out by TNS Opinion, with the aim to improve understanding of the reasons why EU voters participated or abstained (Eurobarometer, 2014).

Lastly, the 2019 elections were analysed based on a pre-election (Eurobarometer, 2019a) as well as a post-election survey (Eurobarometer, 2019b). Both elections involved answers of roughly 28.000 respondents with the aim to better understand public opinion and participation in EP elections. Additionally, several secondary sources were used to allow for a better understanding of the results from the primary data. These sources are mostly scientific reports that analysed the different EP elections.

4.3 Operationalisation

After having previously deduced the propositions from the relevant theoretical perspectives, the next section establishes how they are operationalised.

The first proposition is derived from the SOE-theory and considers low turnout as a problem of mobilisation caused by low levels of interest in politics. To test this proposition, data was derived from Eurobarometer (n.d.), which contains survey questions regarding political interest. The analysed outcomes regarded for example whether people reported to have interest in the candidates or political parties participating in the EP elections. Moreover, the survey also contains questions regarding general political interest and for what reasons people did or did not vote in the EP elections.

The second proposition is also derived from the SOE-theory and expects not only from the voter that it perceives EP elections as having low stakes but also from political parties. The difference with P1 is that this proposition not necessarily assumes that citizens have low interest in politics, but that they are not informed. To examine whether this is the case, the analysis considered data from Eurobarometer (n.d.), which contains questions regarding the perceived salience of EP campaigns, whether people feel sufficiently informed about the EP elections in order to make a choice and whether people were aware of any campaign messages. Moreover, it also contains questions regarding the issues that people base their vote on.

The third proposition is deduced from the communist legacy theory. To assess this, it was first established which group was socialized under a communist regime by looking at age. Next, an overview per age group was created of survey data from Eurobarometer (n.d.). The questions that were analysed considered participation in EP and national elections, attitudes towards the EU, trust in EU institutions, and whether people feel represented by the EP. Next, based on the results of the different age groups, it was assessed whether patterns could be identified where the groups socialized under communist regimes were less likely to participate in elections and were more likely to have low trust in EU institutions, be more negative towards EU membership and feel less represented by the EP.

Proposition	Expectations
P1. The low turnout in EP elections in CEE countries is a problem of mobilisation caused by low levels of interest in politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a low level of partisanship in CEE countries • Citizens in CEE countries are not interested in politics and have little general knowledge about national and/or European politics • CEE citizens do not care about which party/candidate wins in EP elections • CEE citizens are not actively gathering information about EP elections
P2. As a result of low information provision, CEE citizens are not aware of European issues and party stances in EP elections making them less inclined to turn out and vote in the EP elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEE citizens feel insufficiently informed about the EP elections • In case CEE citizens do participate in EP elections, their choices are based on national issues • Low campaign intensity is followed by low turnout • CEE citizens are not aware of the candidates participating in EP elections
P3. Political socialization in a communist regime results in weaker internalization of pro-democratic values which consequently results in lower voter turnout	<p>Compared to people not socialized in a communist regime, CEE citizens socialized in a communist regime:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have a more negative attitude towards democracy, elections and or democratic politics • are less inclined to participate in EP elections • do not believe voting makes a difference • are more sceptical towards the EU • feel not represented by the EU

Table 1: Propositions

4.4 Case selection

A congruence analysis uses case studies to make a deliberative and reflective contribution to the theoretical discourse within the social sciences. In congruence analysis, the selection of one or more cases is done according to the ex-ante 'likeliness' of cases with respect to the chosen theories (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). First, the EP elections of 2009, 2014 and 2019 were selected, based on data availability from Eurobarometer. Next, selective sampling was used with the focus on post-communist countries with low turnout. Additionally, countries with high deviation in turnout were also considered, in order to examine the possibility of different conditions in the same country as a cause for low turnout. According to Blatter and Haverland

(2012), selective sampling is an appropriate method for congruence analysis, as the cases are selected after the selection of theories. A disadvantage of selective sampling, however, is that it might possibly lead to selection bias, which causes the cases to be not representative for the entire population which decreases the external validity of the study.

Considering turnout in the EP elections between 2009 and 2019, the cases selected were Czechia and Hungary (table 2). The former has experienced one of the lowest average turnout rates in the EU after Slovakia. However, compared to Slovakia, Czechia has had a greater degree of variation of high and lows in turnout rates. In addition, Hungary has a higher average turnout, but also shows large differences between elections.

	2009	2014	2019
Czechia	28.22%	18.20%	28.72%
Hungary	36.31%	28.97%	43.36%

Table 2: European Parliament (2019)

4.5 Validity and Reliability

The internal validity of a research refers to the degree to which a study establishes a trustworthy cause-and-effect relationship (Yin, 2014). Internal validity of a congruence analysis can be achieved by adhering to two elements of control (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). Vertical control can be achieved by explicitly separating the deduction of propositions from theory from the comparison of these expectations with empirical observations. Therefore, the theoretical framework and deduction of propositions has been done before the empirical analysis. Another important aspect is concept validity, which refers to whether the predicted observation should correctly express the meaning of the abstract conceptualization (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2010). The more precise the propositions are, the easier it is to assess the congruence between observation and proposition. Additionally, this thesis has used propositions that vary greatly to avoid mismatching with empirical observations in order to meet this requirement. Moreover, as this thesis is based on a pluralist theoretical framework, it meets the requirements for horizontal control.

The external validity of a research refers to whether a study’s findings can be generalized beyond the specific research context (Yin, 2014). Because this research uses a congruence analysis, it is not necessarily the goal to generalize to other cases. The aim is rather to establish the congruence or non-congruence between the deduced propositions and the empirical observations (Blatter and Haverland, 2012).

Reliability concerns itself with the transparency and replicability of the research (Yin, 2014). As the evidence in this research design was retrieved from a survey database, the same data can be retrieved and reviewed. However, as this study has a small-N design, the

outcomes could be influenced by the researcher. Therefore, different researchers could have different results.

5. Analysis

5.1 Political interest in Czechia

The following chapter analyses political interest in Czechia in relation to turnout.

Elections 2009

The Czech EP elections of 2009 took place in the middle of a political crisis. The main two parties, the Civic Democrats (ODS) and the Social Democrats (CSSD), struggled for a parliamentary majority of the governing coalition which led to an intense campaign (Kárníková, 2010). After eight months of political vacuum, a coalition was created—including ODS while excluding CSSD—with only 101 seats out of 200. However, on 24 March 2009, the government collapsed after failed negotiations with the opposition over a truce before the start of the Czech EU Presidency—two months before the EP election.

The fact that Czechia held the Presidency in 2009 led to speculation that the public would be more engaged with European politics and consequently be more motivated to vote (Rovná, 2010). However, with a turnout of 28.22% these speculations were not realised. Even more so, this was one of the lowest turnout rates in Europe. In line with the low turnout, figure 1¹ shows the different forms of interest in politics. A majority does not attribute much importance to which members are elected and which parties have the most MEPs. This disinterest in politics was not only apparent regarding European politics, but also more in general. Three out of four Czechs indicated not to be interested in politics, which is the highest of all EU countries (Eurobarometer, 2009). Nevertheless, while political interest in general was low, almost twice as many people participated in the national elections (56.1%), indicating that the low turnout was typical to European elections.

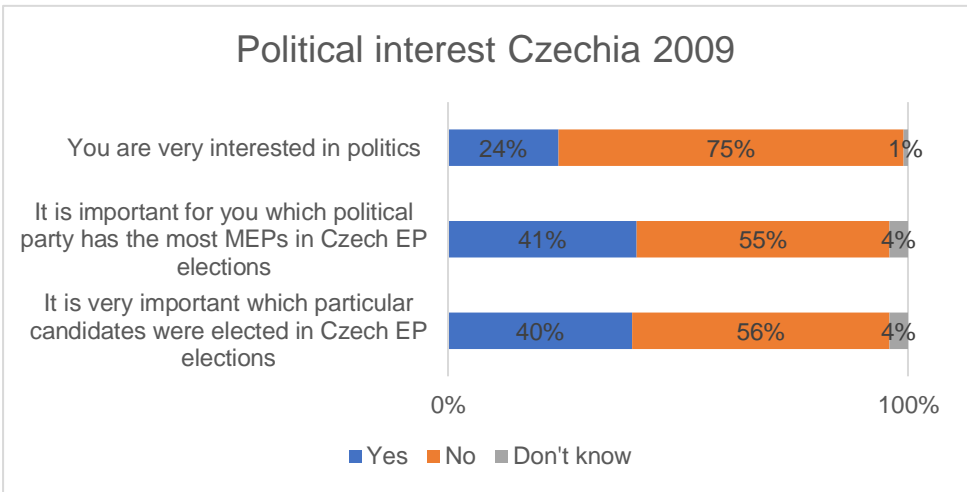


Figure 1: Eurobarometer (2009)

¹ All figures were made in Excel based on Eurobarometer survey data

The main reason for people to abstain was a lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics (39%) (Eurobarometer, 2009). This might be because the political conflicts had led to significant fragmentation, radicalisation and increased euro-scepticism in the Czech political landscape (Kárníková, 2010). Furthermore, the second most important reason for people not to participate was a lack of interest in politics (22%) together with the conviction that a vote does not change anything (22%).

Thus, there seems to be a low level of interest in the 2009 EP election. This is not necessarily specific to EU politics but also politics in general. However, turnout in national elections seems to be less affected by low interest than EP elections. This combination of low interest in politics and low turnout confirms the proposition. This is supported by the fact that most people abstained because of a lack of interest in politics or a lack of trust in politics. This might also explain the difference in popularity between national and EP elections, as the disinterest and lack of trust could be specific to the EU.

Elections 2014

The EP election of May 2014 was already the third election in fifteen months. In January 2013, the presidential elections took place, which was the first direct presidential election in Czechia after the parliament had agreed on its introduction in 2012 (Kaniok, 2014). Moreover, in October 2013, an early election to the Chamber of Deputies was held, while elections for the Senate and local authorities were scheduled in October 2014 (Charvát, 2017). The high frequency of elections in such a short period of time might possibly be one of the main reasons that people were not interested in the EP elections, the so-called voter fatigue (Nonnemacher, 2021).

The low interest was confirmed by the turnout of 18.2%, the lowest recorded in Czechia. Additionally, the turnout gap—the difference between the first-order and EP elections—had now increased to 41.3% (Volby, n.d.). Moreover, whereas 40% found it important which particular candidates had been elected in the 2009 EP elections, in 2014 this number had now dropped to 32% (figure 2). Similarly, most respondents thought it was not very important to know which particular party had the most MEPs in the EP elections. Thus, compared to 2009, interest in the specific parties/candidates in EP elections had clearly dropped. In contrast, general interest in politics had gone up, although this might be because of the high frequency of elections causing people to be more exposed to political matters. Nevertheless, it was still

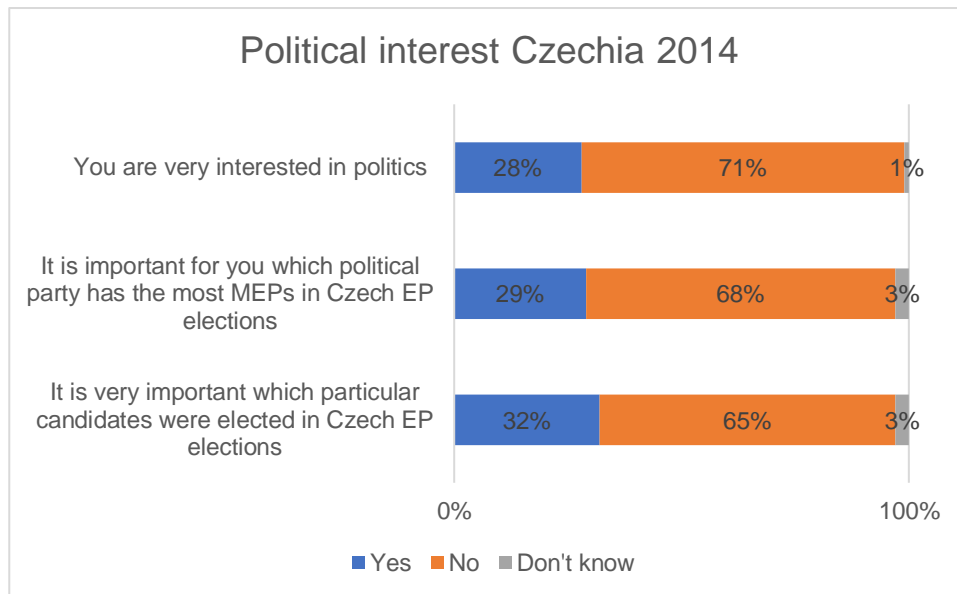


Figure 2: Eurobarometer (2014)

a large majority that indicated not to be interested in politics (figure 2) and it can therefore be stated that overall political interest was still low.

Apart from the high frequency of elections, one out of four people reported that they abstained due to a lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics, which is a drop of 14% compared to 2009. Moreover, 23% indicated to have no interest in politics as such and therefore did not vote. Furthermore, few people voted because of reasons specifically related to the EU (Eurobarometer, 2014). This might also point towards the voting fatigue causing people to lose interest in the content of the elections.

Concluding, the 2014 EP elections enjoyed the lowest recorded turnout in Czechia's history. The considerable drop in turnout is mirrored by a drop in interest in parties and candidates in the EP, which corresponds with the proposition. Meanwhile, general interest in politics increased, although still low. However, as the national elections are still much more popular, this might indicate that the low interest is specific to the EP, confirming the proposition. This is further substantiated by the fact that one in four people abstained due to a lack of interest.

Elections 2019

The 2019 EP elections in Czechia took place in a time of high economic prosperity (Havlík, 2019). Meanwhile, the political landscape had changed severely in the past decade, with the emergence of anti-establishment parties and political fragmentation in national parliament. Moreover, trust in the EU was low, and Czechia was one of the most Eurosceptic nations in the EU. This was also shown by the low average turnout in EP elections. Before the 2019 EP

elections, Czechia's average turnout was 24,9%, one of the lowest of all EU countries (European Parliament, 2019).

Especially after the record-low turnout of just 18.2% in 2014, turnout in the 2019 EP elections was one of the biggest questions. Although record-high, the turnout of 28.72% was still no reason to call the election a success. One of the possible explanations might be the low interest of Czechs in the EP elections. Prior to the elections, 83% indicated to have no interest in the upcoming EP elections, while 61% said it was unlikely that they would participate in the elections. At the same, only 14% of Czechs reported to have a strong political interest. However, compared to the EP election, the national elections had been far more popular (60.84%) (Czech Republic, 2017). Interestingly however was that the turnout gap decreased and was now 32.12% compared to 41.3% in 2014.

What was this time the reason for people not to participate? Most people that abstained reported that this was due a lack of interest in politics (20%). Meanwhile 19% felt like a vote would not make a difference and 18% abstained due to a lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics in general. Thus, throughout the three EP elections, the lack of trust had now gone from 39% to 18%, while the lack of interest had remained relatively stable.

In short, while turnout increased compared to 2014, it was still fairly low. Similarly, interest in the EP elections prior to election day is remarkably low, with 83% indicated to have no interest. Moreover, the national elections are far more popular which indicates that the low interest is specific to the EP elections. One factor that might aggravate these effects is the high frequency of elections, causing people to lose interest. Lastly, the main reason for people to abstain was a lack of interest in politics. These findings all seem to support the proposition as the low interest goes together with low turnout.

5.2 Political interest in Hungary

Elections 2009

The 2009 Hungarian EP elections were held amidst considerable political turbulence ushered by the animosity between the governing Socialists (MSZP) and the main opposition party Fidesz (Batory, 2010). During the national parliamentary elections of 2006, the two parties held fierce campaigns. Although the Socialists eventually won, the budget deficit of 9% forced them to implement unpopular measures at the cost of the government's approval ratings (Batory, 2010). Subsequently, the financial crisis of 2008 hit the country hard, forcing it to rely on an IMF-led bailout. The resulting fall of the national currency caused a rise in monthly mortgages putting a burden on many households. Eventually, the rising discontent with the economic situation caused the Socialist Prime Minister to resign just months before the EP election. The political and economic situation made Hungarians extremely pessimistic about their future and the EU, which was exactly the focus of the EP campaign of Fidesz: mobilising discontent (Pap and Horvathy, 2010).

The dire situation might explain why people did not participate in the EP election. People mainly indicated to abstain due to a lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics in general (36%), followed by a disinterest in politics (29%) and the feeling that voting did not change anything (22%) (Eurobarometer, 2009). The bad performance of the government and the lack of trust might have caused people to lose interest, especially when they felt voting did not change anything. This could also be linked to Fidesz, which presented an alternative to government policies. Fidesz received 56.4% of the votes, electing the most MEPs in the 2009 EP election.

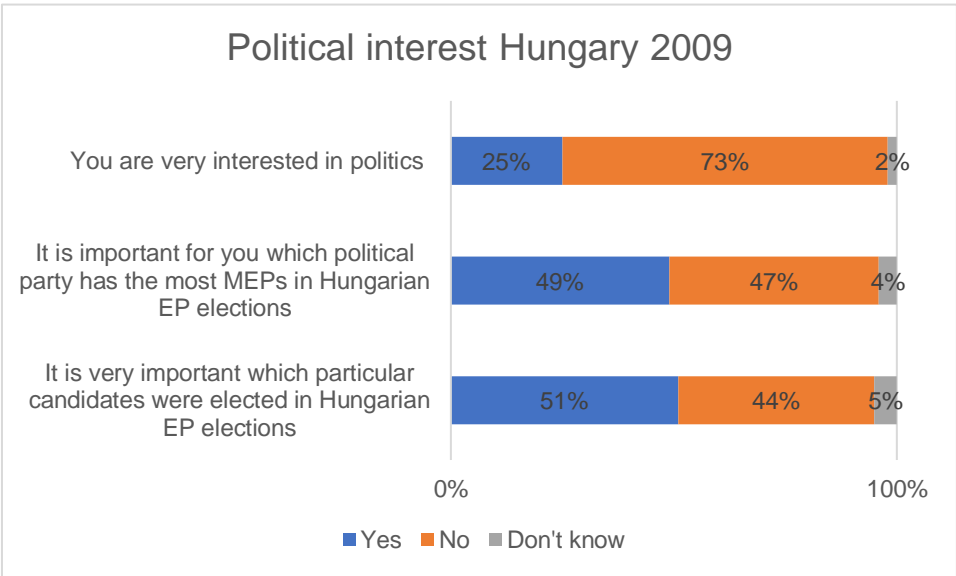


Figure 3: Eurobarometer (2009)

Regarding the political interest, figure 3 shows the degree to which Hungarians were interested in political matters related to the elections. A considerable difference is observed between general interest in politics and interest in political matters related to the EP, where the latter is more popular. This could possibly be explained by the fact that people in general were not interested in politics but were now more engaged with the elections due to the intensity of the EP campaign. This increase in interest was however not completely matched with participation as turnout was 36.31%.

Thus, while interest in politics was low, Hungarians were interested in which candidates and parties were elected to the EP. It seems that the campaign might have temporarily sparked people's interest, although this was not fully translated into participation. Reason for this could be a lack of trust and a feeling that voting does not change anything, as abstainers mostly noted. Thus, although interest in the EP increased, this was not enough to make people actually participate and the low level of interest therefore supports the proposition.

Elections 2014

Between 2009 and 2014, the political landscape in Hungary considerably changed. The centre right coalition Fidesz-KDNP won the 2010 parliamentary elections, obtaining a two-thirds majority. Meanwhile, the socialist MSZP fell apart as a result of their defeat in the 2010 elections, leading to further fragmentation of the opposition (Vegetti, 2014). During the first term of Fidesz-KDNP, multiple institutional reforms were implemented. In 2012, Hungary changed the method for counting votes and decreased the number of seats in parliament from 386 to 199. This meant larger incumbent parties gained higher degree of control (Dooley, 2021).

Following the institutional changes, the year 2014 was a decisive year because three elections were held. The EP election followed less than two months after the victory of Fidesz-KDNP in the parliament elections. Moreover, most parties exceeded the limits of campaign spending in the first elections (Koller, 2017). These circumstances—proximity to national elections, clear outcome of the election and lack of financial means—led to speculations that

the EP elections would be less salient, and mobilisation of the electorate would be low (Dobos and Várnagy, 2017).

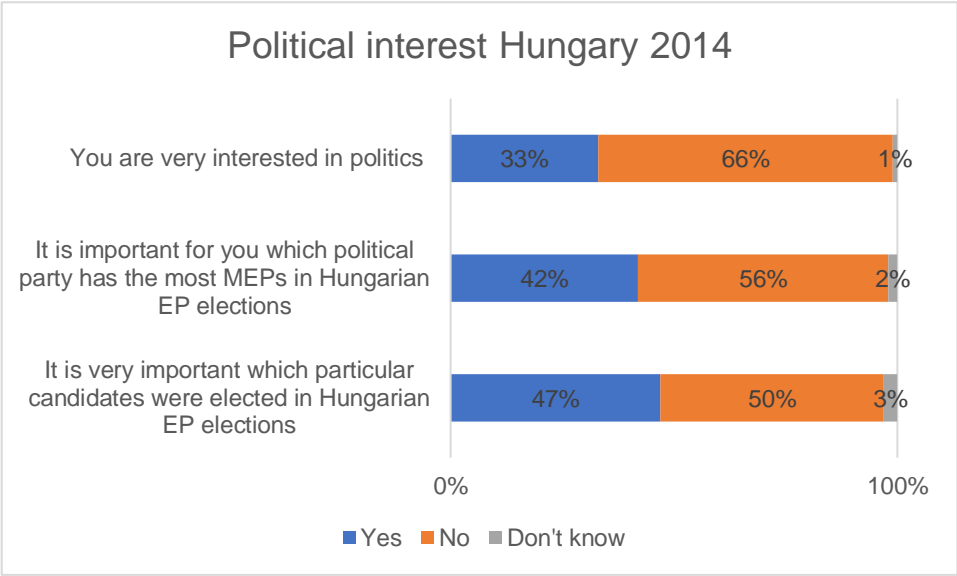


Figure 4: Eurobarometer (2014)

This was confirmed by the lowest turnout in Hungarian EP elections (28.97%). Interestingly, general interest in politics had increased, although still low (figure 4). Interest in the parties and EP candidates was however higher than general interest. Nonetheless, comparing turnout in the national and EP elections shows that the national elections were far more popular (61.8%) (OSCE, 2014). This gives reason to believe that the low turnout in the EP election can be attributed to voter fatigue, as it was the second election in two months' time, causing people to lose their interest and willingness to participate. A lack of interest was also the main reason for people to abstain (32%), which supports the proposition. Other reasons were no time to vote (17%) or a lack of interest in European matters (14%).

In 2014, the lowest turnout in Hungary's EP elections was recorded. Meanwhile, turnout and political interest show two different stories. Comparing the numbers, more people were interested in which candidates were elected to the EP than people generally interested in politics. However, comparing EP and national turnout shows that the latter is more popular. Meanwhile, the main reason for people to abstain in the EP election was a lack of interest in politics, which supports the proposition. A possible explanation for the low turnout in EP elections could then be the high frequency of elections, causing people to lose their willingness to participate.

Elections 2019

Since the Fidesz-KDNP alliance won the national elections in 2010, there had been a move away from liberal democracy (Győri, 2020). Institutional reforms were implemented, electoral

law was manipulated, and media outlets came under government control (Susánszky and Kritzinger, 2020). Meanwhile, the government party won both the national and EP elections of 2014 and 2019, which contradicts the theoretical notions that government parties lose, and opposition parties gain votes in EP elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980).

Prior to the elections, half of people indicated to be interested in the upcoming elections (Eurobarometer, 2019a). Moreover, only 32% said it was unlikely that they would vote in the EP elections. This trend was also developing regarding political interest, which may have resulted in the higher turnout. Whereas Hungary reached its lowest turnout in 2014, the 2019 EP elections experienced a record-high with 43.4%. Similarly, the first-order general elections closest to the EP elections had also seen a record turnout (Deloy, 2018), while the turnout gap still decreased. Therefore, the EP elections had become more popular relative to the general elections. Meanwhile, the main reason to abstain was still a lack of interest in politics (28%) (Eurobarometer, 2019b).

Did a low level of interest result in low turnout? After the drop in 2014, the 2019 EP elections experienced a new high in turnout. This went hand in hand with a high level of interest in politics, both generally and in the EP. Interestingly, the turnout gap decreased, meaning that the EP elections were relatively more popular compared to 2014. Moreover, the group that is in favour of the EU is also growing. As the proposition assumes a low turnout, it does not fully hold in the 2019 EP elections—although turnout is still not high. Also, the main reason to abstain was again a lack of interest in politics. It seems that there is a trend where higher levels of political interest are matched with higher turnout. This causal relationship is however not established in this study and should therefore be approached with caution.

Conclusion

By looking at three different elections in Czechia and Hungary, this chapter focused on low turnout as a problem of mobilisation caused by low levels of interest in politics.

In 2009, political interest was low in both countries, while people did find it important which candidates were elected. Meanwhile, national elections enjoyed higher turnouts, meaning that the translation of low political interest to low turnout is specific to the EP. In 2014, both countries recorded their lowest turnout in EP history, while the national elections remained much more popular. This shows that low turnout is specific to the EP elections. Meanwhile, general interest in politics increased compared to 2009. In 2019, both countries experienced their highest turnout in EP elections, although still low in Czechia. At the same time, the main reason for people to abstain was a lack of interest in politics. Moreover, national elections again enjoyed higher turnouts. One additional factor that was not considered prior to the analysis is that high frequency of elections might have a negative effect on turnout in EP elections.

The most tangible similarity between the empirical observations and the proposition is that a lack of interest in politics was the main reason for people to abstain. Moreover, while varying between countries and elections, a minority of people is interested in which candidates/parties win in EP elections. This is however still higher than interest in politics in general. The latter affected turnout in EP elections more than national elections. Therefore, there seems to be a European effect where the translation of low interest in low turnout is specific to the EP. Given these findings, it seems that the proposition holds.

5.3 Provision of information in Czechia

Elections 2009

Turnout in the 2009 EP elections in Czechia was 28.2%, meaning that 71.8% of registered voters abstained (European Parliament, 2019). From the proposition, we would expect that this occurred because the public had not been sufficiently informed about the elections. Figure 5 shows that about half of Czechs felt sufficiently informed about the elections. Meanwhile, 75% remembered having seen campaign messages encouraging people to vote in the EP elections. The latter might seem to contradict the low turnout of 28.2%. However, there was a pro-turnout campaign which was intensely present in public (e.g., on billboards and TV) which explains the high percentage of people having seen such messages. At the same time, the topics that were covered (i.e., consumer protection and environmental issues) were not popular among Czechs and people were not sufficiently motivated (Kárníková, 2010).

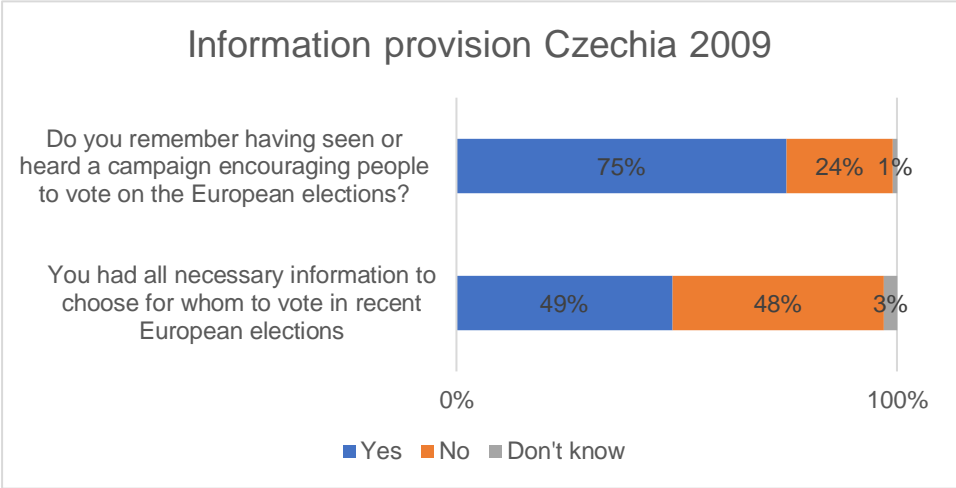


Figure 5: Eurobarometer (2009)

Additionally, while electoral law states that campaigning may begin 16 days before voting, in practice the campaign had already begun after the fall of the government in March and the decision to hold the general elections in October (Rovná, 2010). In this sense, the EP election worked as a prelude to the upcoming general elections in October. Nevertheless, the polls showed that most of the candidates remained unknown to the voters until the elections had started, while there were many candidates that had already worked in the EP (Kárníková, 2010). This shows that the Czechs were not aware of the candidates in the EP.

Furthermore, people that vote in SOE's primarily base their choices on national issues. From the proposition it is expected that the public is not sufficiently informed about European issues, and national issues are therefore most salient. In Czechia, the top issues—which made people vote firstly—were all related to the performance of the economy. The most important issue to cast a vote was economic growth (18%), followed by the future of pensions (15%) and

unemployment (14%). This also corresponds with the topics that were mainly present in all the election manifestos, namely a solution to the economic crisis (Rovná, 2010). The issues emerging during the campaign were thus closely bound to the national economic situation. Interesting to note is that European values and identity scored considerably higher (15%), meaning that people were to some degree engaged with European matters, which contradicts the proposition. A possible reason is that Czechia held the Presidency which was largely covered by Czech media. Moreover, the Civic Democrats emphasised their performance on economic issues during the Presidency, stressing the connection between the EU and Czech affairs (Kárníková, 2010).

Thus, although the election campaign was strongly present, this did not necessarily lead to higher turnout which refutes the proposition. Therefore, visibility does not automatically result in more votes. This might be because the topics that were issued—the information provision—did not resonate among the population, and therefore people were not motivated to participate. Furthermore, while people were mainly motivated by national issues, this is not because of low information provision, but because the campaign is dominated by national issues. Considering the strong presence, low turnout and emphasis on national issues, the proposition does not hold for the 2009 elections.

Elections 2014

The EP campaign in Czechia in 2014 more or less resembled the characteristics of an SOE (Charvát, 2017). When evaluating the campaign, experts labelled it as content empty, invisible, and with low media coverage (Kaniok, 2014; Havlík, 2014). One of the reasons was the tight financial budget given the fact that this was the third election at national level in sixteen months (Kaniok, 2014). In January 2013, Czechs voted for their first directly elected president after which an early parliamentary election took place in October. Following these two elections, the intensity of the electoral campaign in terms of visibility and media coverage was much lower (Havlík, 2014).

The low salience and low media coverage in the 2014 election is confirmed by respondents' experiences. Only 44% felt like they had all the necessary information to choose a candidate for the EP election (figure 6). Additionally, the group that remembered any campaign messages encouraging people to vote had now decreased to 54%, while it was 75% in 2009. It thus appears that the EP campaign had been less extensive or at least had not reached the broader public. Subsequently, turnout in the 2014 EP election was 18.2%, one of the lowest in EP history. This would confirm the proposition as the low provision of information goes together with a low turnout.

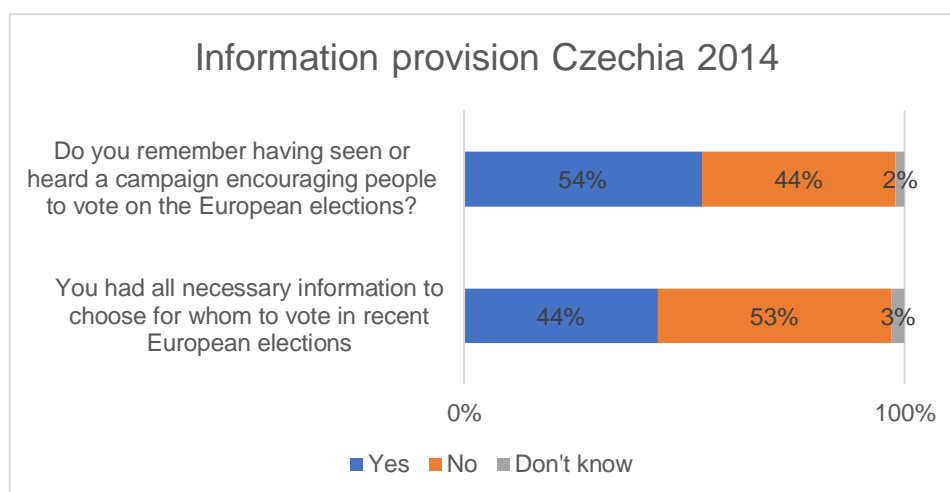


Figure 6: Eurobarometer (2014)

From the proposition, it is expected that the low information provision leads people to base their votes mainly on national issues. In 2014, voters were mainly motivated by the issue of economic growth (18%), followed by the future of pensions (14%) and unemployment (12%). Although this is hardly a surprise given the ongoing context of the economic recession, it does show that the European context is absent. Given the fact that the low intensity of the campaign and the lack of sufficient information goes together with a focus on national issues by the electorate gives reason to believe that the proposition holds.

Being the third election in 2014, the EP campaign remained largely invisible. A minority felt sufficiently informed, while only half of people had seen any campaign messages. The low intensity of the campaign is matched with one of the lowest turnout in EP history. Moreover, the lack of sufficient provision of information goes together with a focus on national issues by the electorate. Therefore, it seems that the proposition holds.

Elections 2019

In 2019, most of the parties started their campaign only by the beginning of May, just few weeks before election day. Moreover, the 2017 parliamentary election campaign had exhausted most parties' financial reserves (Hloušek and Kaniok, 2020). Given the experiences of previous EP elections and its low popularity among Czechs, most parties were unwilling to invest substantial amounts of financial means in the 2019 EP campaign.

Two months before the election, almost three out of four people could not remember any campaign messages encouraging people to vote. Moreover, only 38% could correctly answer when the EP elections were going to take place (Eurobarometer, 2019a). This shows that the campaign had not really started, and that people were unaware of the upcoming elections. An additional reason for the low awareness of the EP elections in Czechia might be

the lower political profile of the EP candidates across the party spectrum. Most parties chose EP candidates that were already experienced as MEPs. As this type of politician generally prefers a rather consensual approach, it had a moderating effect on the election campaign (Hloušek and Kaniok, 2020). The lack of campaigning was accompanied with a focus on national issues by the electorate. Respondents mentioned immigration (19%) and the fight against terrorism (14%) as most important issues (Eurobarometer, 2019a).

After the elections had taken place, it was now 56% that could not remember a campaign message encouraging people to vote (Eurobarometer, 2019b). Thus, the election campaign had most likely slightly intensified near the EP elections. While the campaign intensity changed, the electorate became more EU-focused. About one in four people thought the way the EU should be working in the future was the most important (24%), followed by the promotion of human rights and democracy (12%). Reasons for the more EU-focused issues was most likely the strong criticism of the EU during the campaign (Havlík, 2019). Almost all parties stressed the need to defend Czech national interests, framing the EU as a threat. Furthermore, 16% based their party choice on the party's proposals on European issues, while the same number of people based their choice on the party's proposals on national issues (Eurobarometer, 2019b).

In short, prior to the elections, people were unaware about any campaign messages or the candidates. Moreover, as the most important themes were mainly national, it seems that there was a low information provision about European issues. After the elections, much more people could remember campaign messages, indicating that the campaign had intensified. Moreover, the electorate was now also more focused on EU-related issues, showing that the EP campaign might actually influence people's perceptions. However, turnout was still low. Therefore, the proposition holds for the 2019 elections in Czechia.

5.4 Provision of information in Hungary

Elections 2009

The 2009 EP election was characterized by a fierce political battle between Fidesz and the Socialists (MSZP). Especially Fidesz held an intensive campaign, trying to turn the population against the Socialist government. It suggested that a vote for Fidesz could force the government to resign and to hold new domestic elections (Pap and Horvathy, 2010). The intensity of the campaign was also felt by Hungarians. A large majority remembered campaign messages encouraging people to vote (figure 7). Moreover, 59% felt they had had the necessary information to choose their candidate. This shows that there was a relatively intense

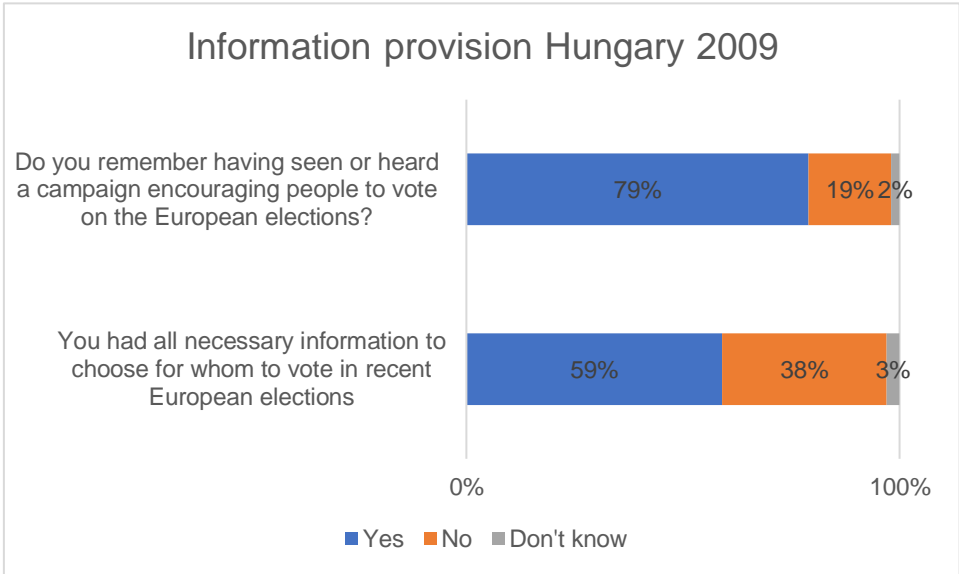


Figure 7: Eurobarometer (2009)

campaign providing much information. Based on the proposition, we would therefore expect turnout to be relatively high. However, it was still considerably lower than EU average, indicating that the proposition does not hold.

The proposition states that low information provision leads voters to base their vote on national issues. However, while the 2009 campaign was strongly present, most party manifestos were mainly revolved around national issues. Although some parties included a wide range of EU-level policies, these were rarely addressed during the campaign (Pap and Horvathy, 2010). Additionally, while Fidesz—which had been especially critical of EU policies—included EU policies in their manifesto, they were largely silent on European issues (Batory, 2010). In essence, the campaigns were mainly focussing on the combination of an unpopular government and the ongoing financial crisis. This is also reflected by voters. The issues that were most important to Hungarians were economic growth (27%), unemployment (20%) and the future of pensions (17%). Meanwhile, European issues were among the least popular (Eurobarometer, 2009). Thus, while voters mainly based their vote on national issues,

this was most likely not caused by low information provision, but rather by the nationally oriented EP campaign.

Did low information provision lead to low turnout? The large number of people that could remember campaign messages shows that the campaign was strongly present. Moreover, a majority felt sufficiently informed to choose their candidate showing that the information provision was sufficient. However, turnout was still relatively low, especially compared to national elections. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that the proposition holds, as it cannot be established that low information provision leads to low turnout.

Elections 2014

The 2014 EP elections took place short after the parliament elections, which led to speculation that campaigning would be less intensive than during the general elections (Koller, 2017). This was confirmed by Orbán's campaign strategy. Whereas in 2009 Fidesz had prepared a detailed document addressing a wide range of EU-policies, in the 2014 EP campaign neither Fidesz nor KDNP published an EP election program (Vegetti, 2014). Moreover, while Orbán had vigorously campaigned against the government during the 2009 EP elections he now avoided the main political debates (Koller, 2017).

Additionally, several institutional reforms by the Fidesz-KDNP alliance had restricted media access during the campaign for all political parties—although not for the government. This caused the electoral campaign to remain low-profile, as the opposition had limited media access (Vegetti, 2014). Following the proposition, this would mean that the 2014 elections also experienced a particularly low turnout due to the low intensity of the campaign. However, figure 8 shows that there is still a reasonable majority that could remember messages encouraging people to vote, although it had decreased considerably (-11%). Interestingly however, the group that felt they had had sufficient information to choose their candidate had remained stable at 59%. Additionally, 14% had been contacted by a political party about their vote, which is above EU average (Eurobarometer, 2014). Thus, although less people could remember any campaign messages compared to 2009, a similar number of people felt sufficiently informed. Meanwhile, turnout in 2014 dropped with 7.3% to 28.97%. This contradicts the proposition as the group that was sufficiently informed remained stable, while turnout dropped.

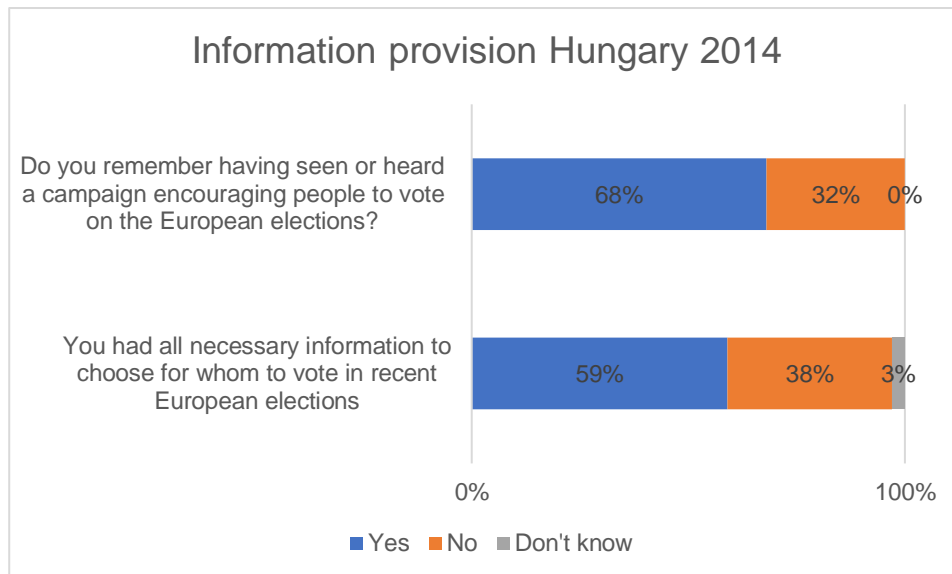


Figure 8: Eurobarometer (2014)

Similar to the 2009 elections, economic issues were the main reason for people to vote in 2014. The most important issues were unemployment (21%), economic growth (21%) and the future of pensions (15%). EU-related issues were again less popular, although the popularity of some issues increased slightly. The low popularity of EU related issues might be because Orbán’s campaign mostly echoed the national election campaign, and therefore paid little attention to European issues (Vegetti, 2014).

Although the campaign was not really intense—especially compared to 2009—and less people could remember campaign messages, the group that felt sufficiently informed remained stable. Interestingly, the two largest parties did not publish an election program, which is illustrative for low information provision and might explain why EU issues were not popular. Meanwhile, the drop in turnout contradicts the proposition, as is expected that a stable number of people feeling sufficiently informed would also lead to stable turnout.

Elections 2019

Contrary to 2014, Fidesz-KDNP held an extensive campaign starting early in the year with several billboards targeting European elites (Susánszky and Kritzinger, 2020). Just the billboards alone, posted in the first three months of 2019, had cost almost forty million Euros. While Orbán made extensive use of government resources to spread his message, the fragmented opposition lacked similar financial and human resources. Most of the opposition parties concentrated their campaigns only in the last month before the elections. Their campaigns were mostly focused on the government’s performance and the advantages of a European Hungary (Arató, 2020). This was in stark contrast with Orban’s strategy, who emphasized the intrusive practices from ‘Brussels’.

The early start of the campaign is confirmed by the fact that already before the elections more than half of respondents remembered having seen or heard campaign messages. Moreover, 57% could correctly answer in which month the elections would take place, which is 19% higher than the EU average, demonstrating the high awareness. Interestingly, after the elections only 44% remembered campaign messages encouraging people to vote. From the proposition, it is expected that low-profile campaigns cause turnout to be low. Therefore, it is interesting to see whether turnout increases when visibility of a campaign increases. It seems that this is the case as turnout in 2019 was a record 43.3% (European Parliament, 2019).

Throughout his three terms, Orbán had become more Eurosceptic which was apparent from the Fidesz-KDNP campaign solely targeted on immigration and the power of 'Brussels' (Dúró and Bókay, 2021). Already in 2016, a broad advertising campaign was started, presenting the issue of immigration as a threat to Hungarian society, which was allegedly supported by the European Commission (Tóka, 2019). The focus on immigration in the Fidesz-KDNP campaign was however not fully reflected by voters. Although the most important issue that made people vote was immigration (16%), it was followed by the promotion of human rights and democracy (13%) and the way the EU should be working in the future (12%). Additionally, of the people who participated in the 2019 elections, 19% voted because people liked the party proposals on the European issues that were most important to them. 15% voted because the party proposals on national issues were the closest to their ideas or values. Thus whereas second-order elections are usually dominated by national issues, in 2019 the focus shifted to European issues.

Did low provision of information lead to low turnout? The 2019 EP election deviates from other EP elections because of several reasons. First, the campaign was strongly present. Second, the campaigns content was mainly focused on European issues. Third, turnout was considerably higher than previous elections. Considering the proposition, it is observed that the strongly present campaign is followed by high turnout. Although the proposition focuses on low turnout, there is a similar relation observed between information provision (campaign intensity) and turnout. In that sense, the proposition is confirmed. However, as the predictions (table 1) do not match the empirical observations, the proposition needs to be rejected.

Conclusion

This chapter analysed whether low turnout could be explained by the low provision of information in EP elections.

In both countries, the 2009 EP campaigns were strongly present and people felt sufficiently informed. Meanwhile, this did not result in high turnout, although Hungary enjoyed a considerably higher turnout than Czechia. Moreover, both campaigns were mainly focused on national issues, which was reflected by voters' interests. In 2014, both campaigns were much less intense. While less people felt sufficiently informed in Czechia compared to 2009, in Hungary this number remained stable. Nevertheless, turnout was low in both countries. Finally, in 2019 the campaigns differed from each other. In Czechia, the campaign was not visible and subsequently followed by low turnout. It did however cause people to become more EU focused. In Hungary on the other hand, the campaign was strongly present, mainly focused on EU-related topics and turnout was high.

The findings show that the congruence with the proposition differs between countries. In Hungary, people feel more often sufficiently informed, and are better aware of the elections, as the campaigns are more visible. However, in two out of three elections, turnout is still low. This contradiction—high visibility/awareness, low turnout—shows that the proposition does not hold in Hungary. Meanwhile, in Czechia people feel more often not sufficiently informed. Similarly, the campaign intensity is also lower in the different elections, and people are less aware of the event. Additionally, the resulting turnout is also much lower. Therefore, as the information provision is low and followed by low turnout, the proposition holds in Czechia.

5.5 Communist legacy in Czechia

With the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, a new era was introduced in Europe, characterized by the democratization of CEE countries. The following chapter will analyse whether the people that were politically socialized under a communist regime are also less likely to vote in the European Parliament elections.

Elections 2009

It is expected that because of the political socialization under communism the older cohorts are more sceptical towards democratic practices and will thus be less likely to vote in the EP elections. Figure 9 shows that this is not confirmed. On the contrary, it is instead the youngest group of voters who show this behaviour. Meanwhile, respondents in the 55+ are most likely to cast a vote and are also the least likely to abstain (Eurobarometer, 2009).

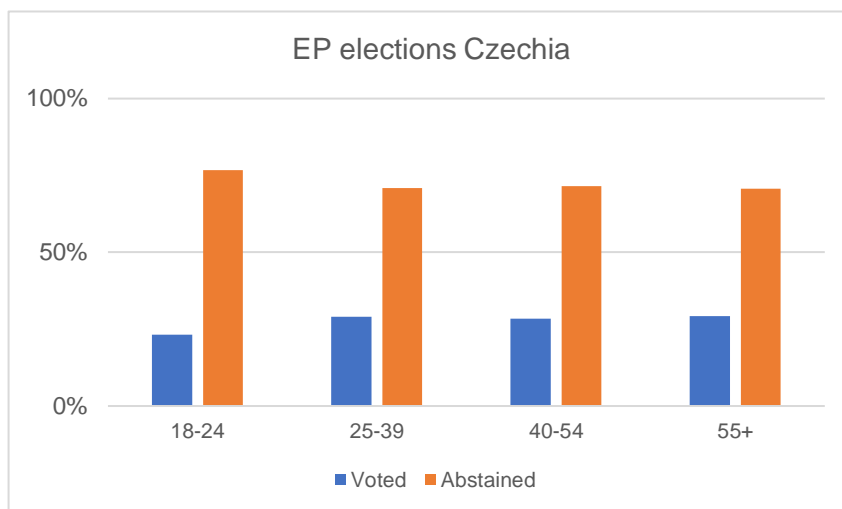


Figure 9: Eurobarometer (2009)

To examine whether this trend is exclusive to the EP elections, figure 10 shows turnout in the national elections. It is expected that as the older age cohorts are politically socialized in a communist regime, they never experienced meaningful elections and therefore developed

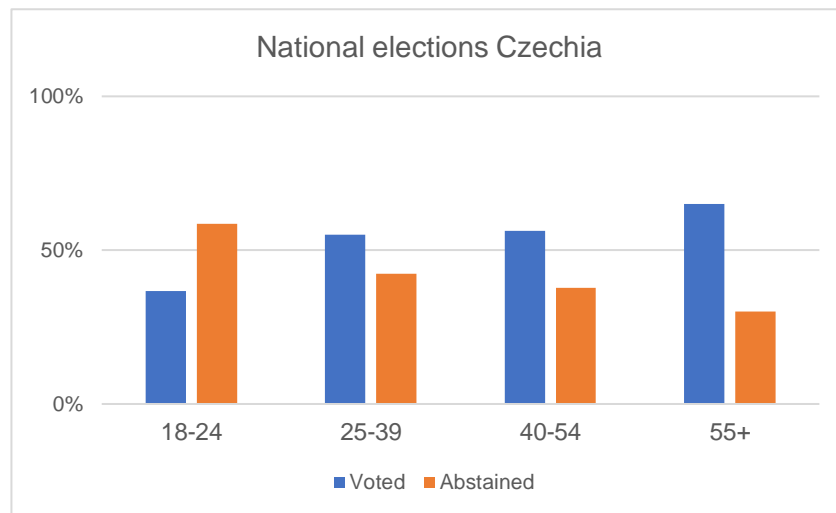


Figure 10: Eurobarometer (2009)

negatives attitudes towards this democratic practice. Contrary to this expectation, it is the younger age cohort that is least likely to vote. Upon first consideration, this would mean that for the 2009 EP election in Czechia, the proposition needs to be rejected.

One could wonder whether the proposition then holds regarding scepticism towards democratic values and practices. Apart from the fact that a lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics was the main reason for people not to vote, it is also the oldest age cohort that is most likely to abstain for this reason (45%). Thus, the lack of trust is mostly felt among older people. Considering this lack of trust in politics, figures 11 and 12 show trust in EU institutions and whether people believe that the EP takes into consideration the concerns of EU citizens. Half of Czechs indicate not to have trust in EU institutions, of which the 55+ age group is most represented (57%). Moreover, it is also the oldest group that is least likely to believe that the

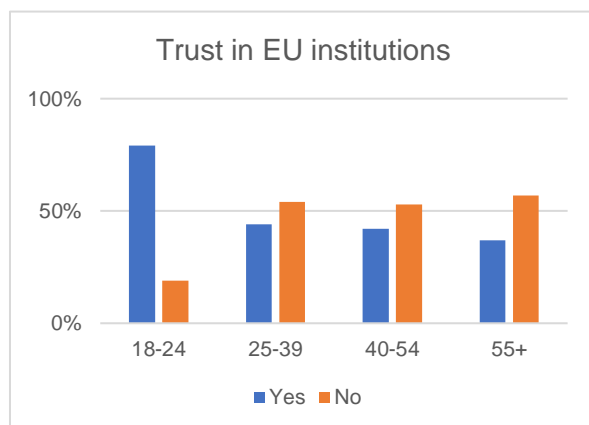


Figure 11: Eurobarometer (2009)

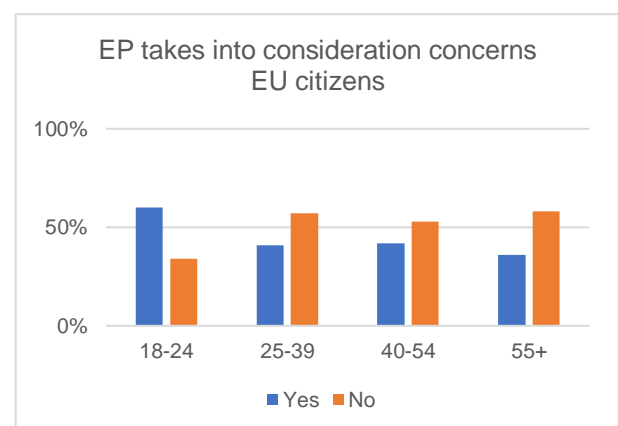


Figure 12: Eurobarometer (2009)

EP takes into consideration the concerns of EU citizens. Thus, while the older generations are most likely to vote, they are also more sceptical towards the democratic representation of their concerns in the EP, while also having the least amount of trust in EU institutions. Interestingly, the 40-54 group—the youngest group to have experienced communism—are more likely to

believe that the EP takes into consideration their concerns than the 25-39 group (Eurobarometer, 2009).

It could be argued that a lack of trust towards the EU also means that more people have a negative attitude towards EU membership. However, 62% of Czechs are positive about EU membership, although this is least supported among people aged 55+, supporting the proposition. Moreover, this is also the group that feels least connected to the EU. This might be because young people think of EU membership as an opportunity to improve their living conditions in the future (Karnikovka, 2010), in contrast to the feeling of dissatisfaction among older Czechs.

Nevertheless, this section has shown that there is a low level of trust among the Czech population. This low level of trust is mostly observed among older generations, while these are also the people most likely to participate in elections. Based on this first section however, the proposition would have to be rejected as there are no signs of abstaining among older generations that would cause the low turnout.

Elections 2014

In 2014, the group that had participated in communist elections was at least 45 years old. The groups above age 45 were more likely to turnout than the younger groups (figure 13), contradicting the expectations from the proposition. Additionally, there is an increase among people aged 75+ which again cannot be explained by the set proposition. It must be noted however, that the differences between the groups are relatively small. In contrast, turnout in national elections (figure 14) show a more obvious pattern throughout the generations. In the

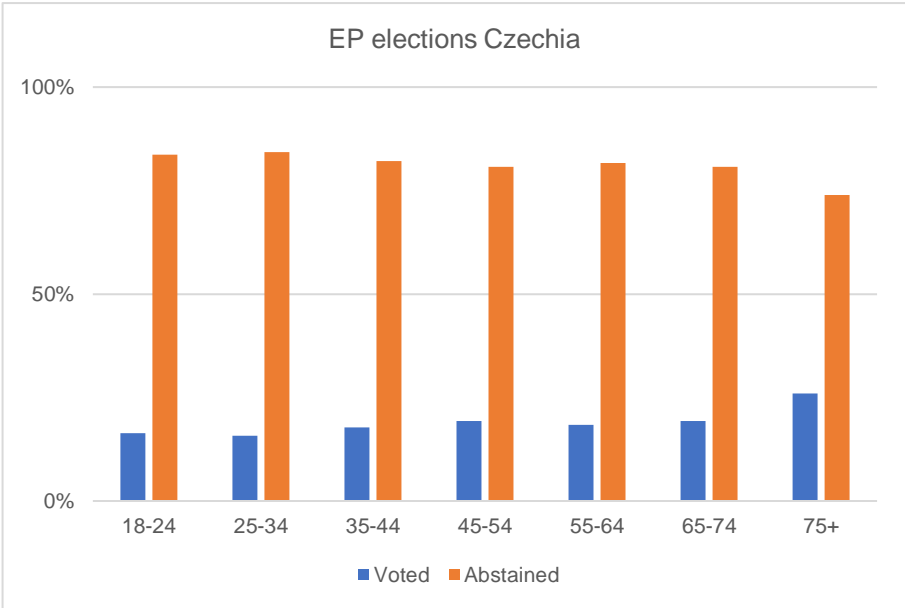


Figure 13: Eurobarometer (2014)

national elections the people above age 45 are considerably more likely to vote compared to the people below age 45. Thus, solely based on turnout, the proposition would have to be rejected.

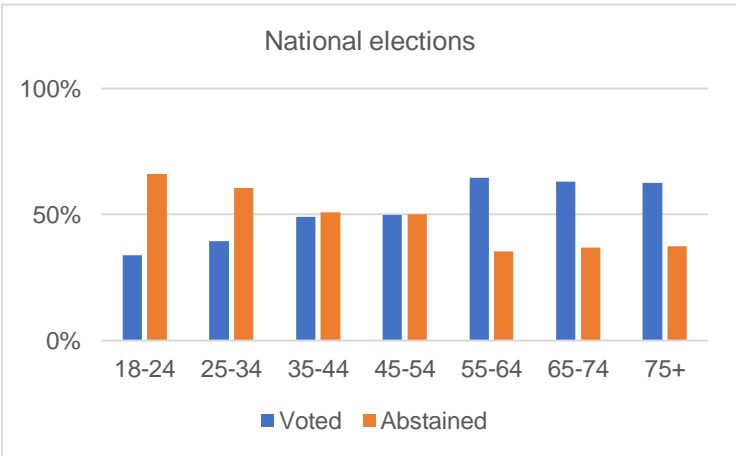


Figure 114: Eurobarometer (2014)

It is worthwhile to also examine the trends concerning trust in politics and the EU. In 2014, there were less people that abstained because of dissatisfaction and a lack of trust in politics (25%) compared to 2009. Nevertheless, lack of trust was still the main reason for people to abstain, and the older cohorts were again the most likely to abstain for this reason. Remarkably, while distrust in politics among abstainers was less present in 2014 (-14%), the lack of trust in EU institutions had considerably risen, where 71% (+21%) indicated to have no trust. Additionally, trust was lower among the older cohorts (figure 15). Moreover, overall believe that the EP takes into consideration the concerns of EU citizens had also dropped (-15%) (figure 16). This scepticism was more present among people aged 45+, which is in line

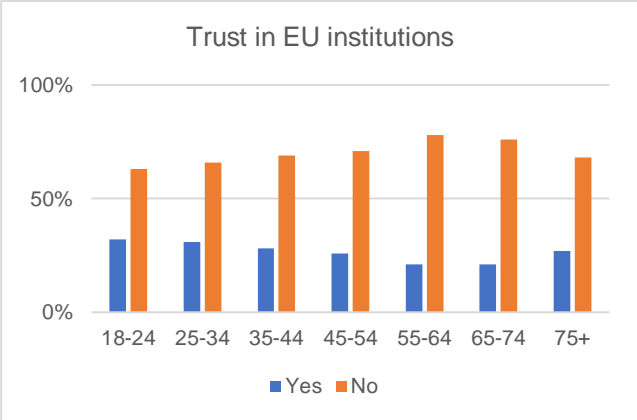


Figure 15: Eurobarometer (2014)

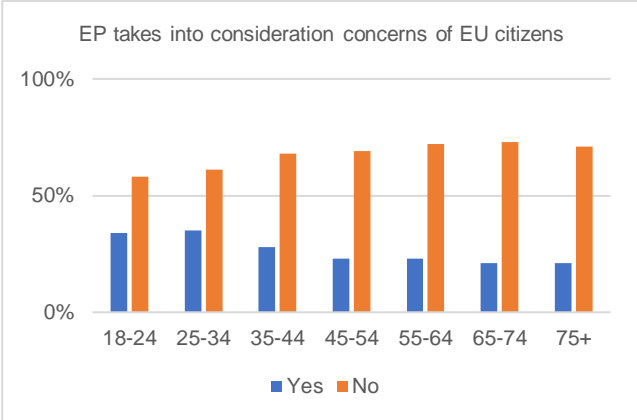


Figure 16: Eurobarometer (2014)

with the proposition. Lastly, figure 17 shows people’s attitude towards EU membership. Again, the people older than age 45 are more likely to have a negative attitude, while the younger generations are more positive towards EU membership (Eurobarometer, 2014).

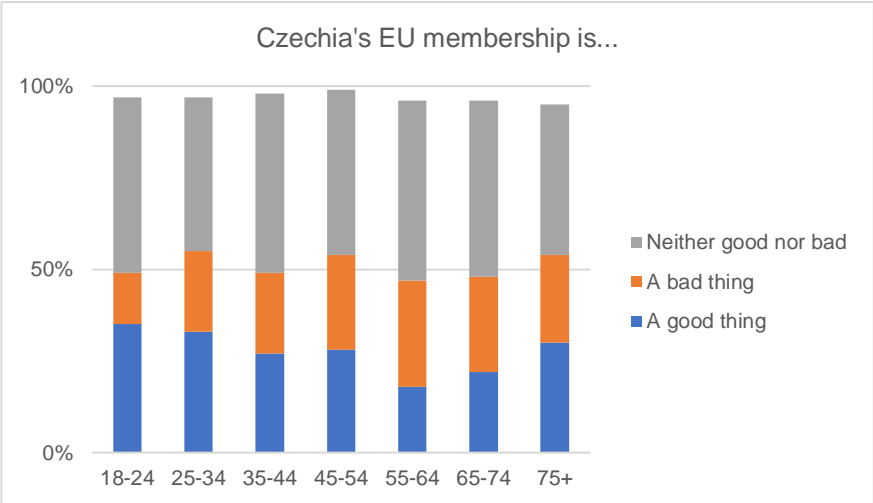


Figure 17: Eurobarometer (2014)

Similar to 2009, there is a low level of trust in politics among Czechs. This is most present among people socialized in a communist regime. Meanwhile, these people are also more likely to participate in the elections, although the differences between age groups in the

EP elections are negligible. The national elections show a much clearer pattern however. The fact that these people are more likely to participate in the elections means that they cannot cause low turnout in EP elections, contradicting the proposition.

Elections 2019

In 2019, the people that had experienced communist Czechia as adults were now at least 50 years old. Therefore, it is possible that the 45-54 age group might deviate from any identified pattern, as half of this group has not been socialized under a communist regime, while the other half has been.

Prior to the 2019 EP elections, Czechs showed little interest in the event. Only 16% indicated to be interested in the EP elections (Eurobarometer, 2019a). Similar to previous EP elections, the older generations were more interested (figure 18). There is also an observable difference between the people above age 55 compared to the people below age 55. The group of 45-54 deviates slightly from the pattern, which was already somewhat expected.

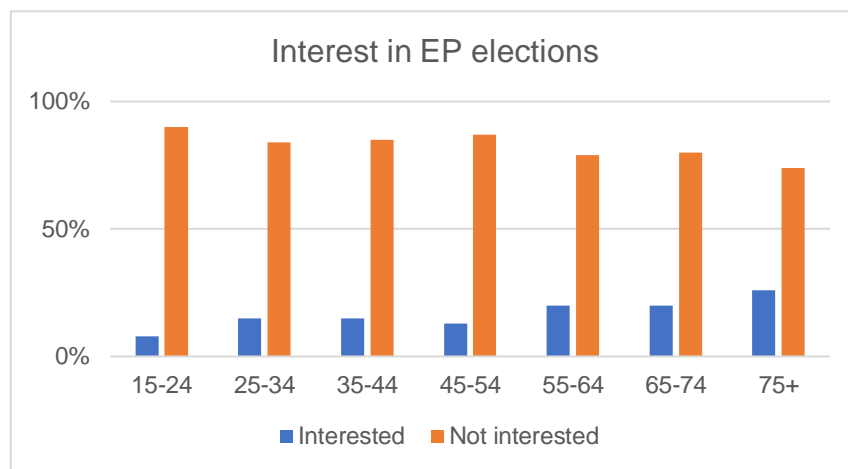


Figure 18: Eurobarometer (2019a)

Similar to the 2009 and 2014 EP elections, it are again the older generations that are more likely to cast a ballot (figure 19). Therefore, in all three EP elections in Czechia, turnout contradicts the proposition. Furthermore, this observation is not only specific to the EP

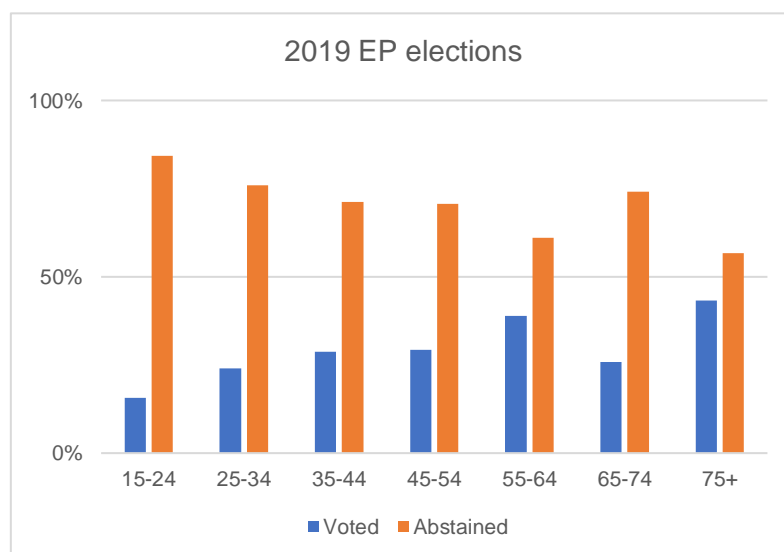


Figure 19: Eurobarometer (2019b)

elections. As figure 20 shows, the older generations are more likely to vote. Thus, while it was

expected that people that were politically socialized under a communist regime would be less likely to participate in elections, this expectation does not hold in the 2009, 2014 and 2019 EP elections in Czechia.

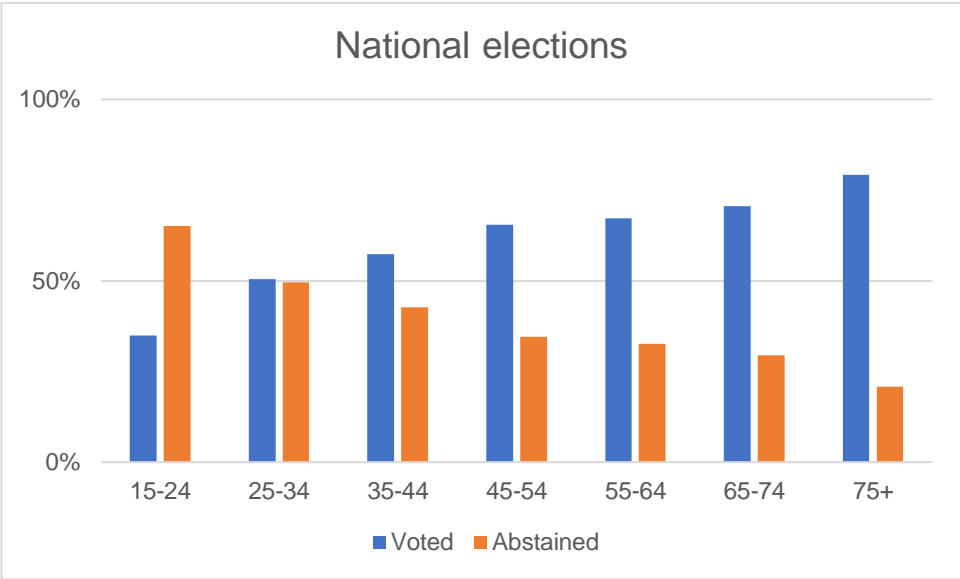


Figure 20: Eurobarometer (2019b)

In contrast to the previous elections, a lack of political trust was not the main reason to abstain, though it was second most important (18%). Nevertheless, it were again the people older than 55 that were most likely to abstain for this reason. Thus, in several aspects, the people socialized in a communist regime were more sceptical about politics, but at the same time also more likely to vote.

There are therefore two main patterns to be identified. First, people politically socialized in a communist regime have considerably lower trust in politics and the EU. Moreover, they also feel less represented in the EP and have a more negative attitude towards EU membership. Meanwhile, this group is also more likely to participate in elections. The latter means that the proposition is rejected, as this group cannot be responsible for low turnout.

5.6 Communist legacy in Hungary

The next chapter focuses on three different EP elections in Hungary.

Elections 2009

Apart from the large difference between abstainers and voters, the differences between age groups in the 2009 Hungarian EP elections are modest (figure 21). The differences between the three oldest groups are negligible, which would reject the proposition. However, the negligible difference in the EP elections is not seen when considering turnout in the national

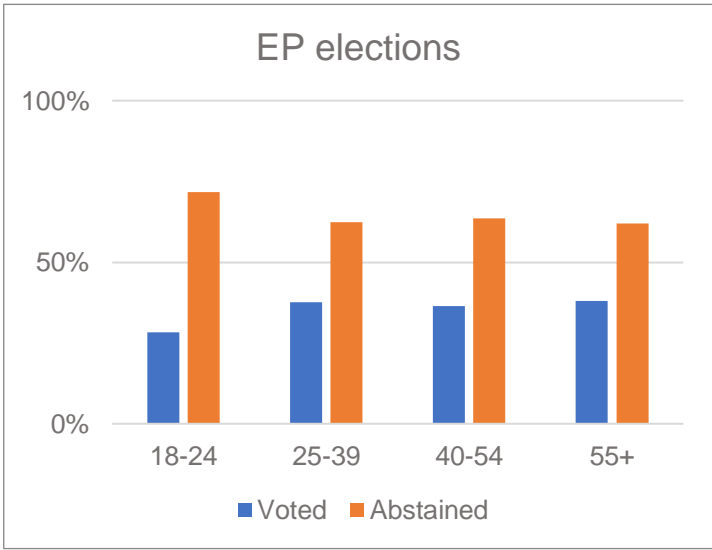


Figure 21: Eurobarometer (2009)

elections (figure 22). Here, the trend is more obvious, and it appears that the older cohorts—40-54 and 55+—are the most likely to turnout in the national elections. Thus, there is no ‘European’ effect as expected, where the older generations were less likely to participate in the EP elections.

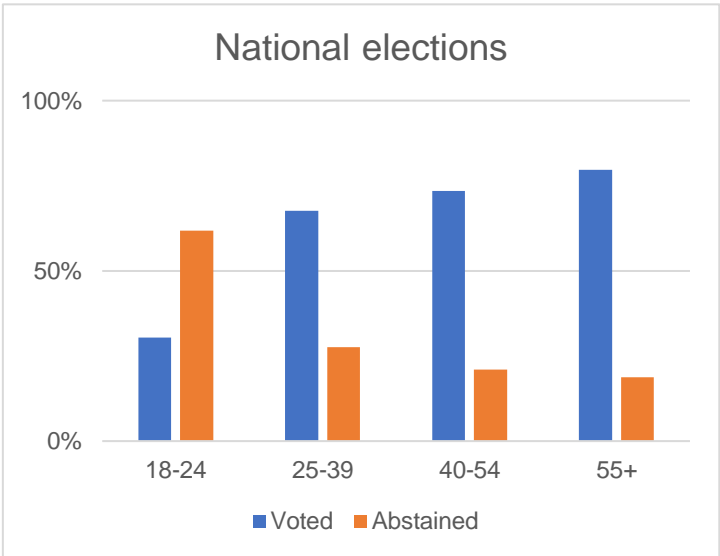


Figure 22: Eurobarometer (2009)

In 2009, the main reason for Hungarians to abstain was because of a lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics (Eurobarometer, 2009). The people socialized under a communist regime are considerably more likely to abstain for this reason (figure 23) which supports the proposition. Figures 24 and 25 show trust in EU institutions and whether people believe that

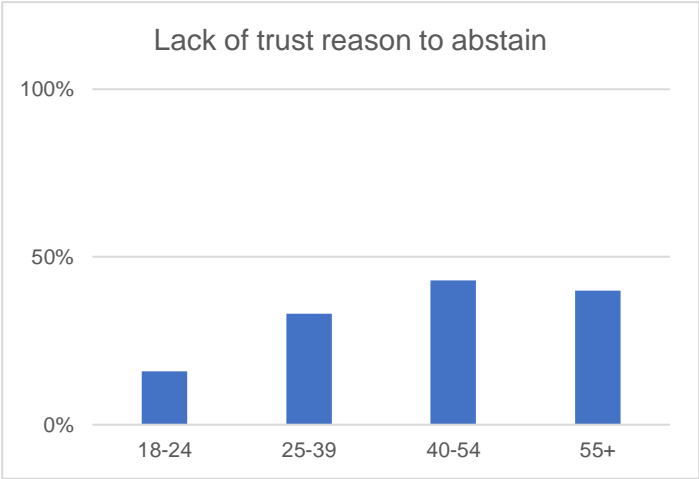


Figure 23: Eurobarometer (2009)

the EP takes into consideration the concerns of EU citizens. 55% indicated that they trust the institutions of the EU. This is lowest among the group aged 40-54, which supports the proposition. However, the level of trust increases again among people older than 55. Additionally, figure 25 shows that people older than age 40 are less likely to believe that the EP takes into consideration the concerns of EU citizens, which most clearly corresponds with the proposition.

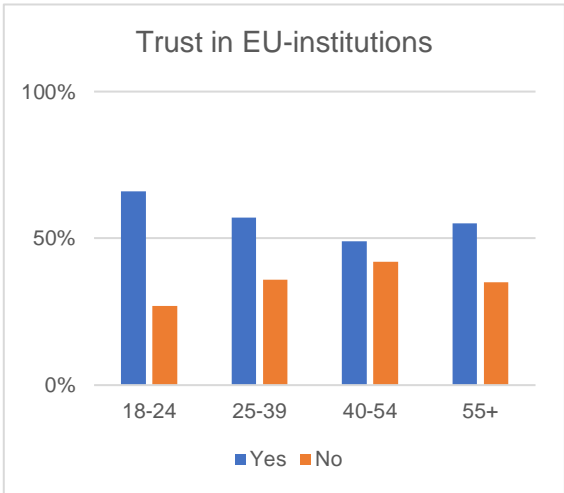


Figure 24: Eurobarometer (2009)

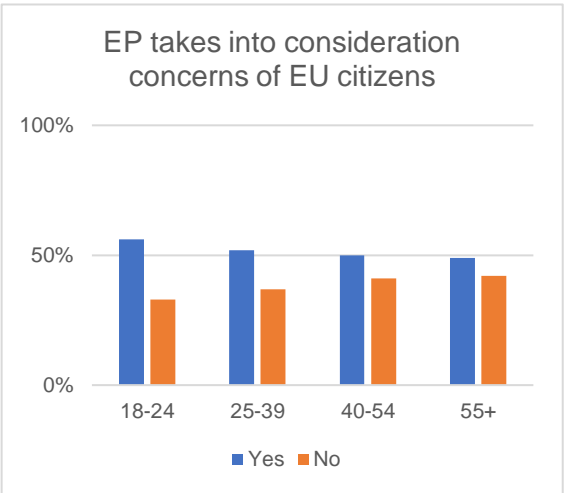


Figure 25: Eurobarometer (2009)

Finally, a lack of trust could go together with a negative attitude towards EU membership. In Hungary, there is a clear difference between the age groups, where people older than 40 are considerably more negative towards EU membership. Meanwhile, these are also the people that are least likely to feel like an EU citizen (Eurobarometer, 2009). This shows that the older generations are less connected to the EU compared to younger generations.

In short, the three oldest groups show no noteworthy differences in EP election turnout. However, in national elections, younger generations are more likely to abstain, contradicting the proposition. Meanwhile, political trust is considerably lower among people older than 40. While the proposition is rejected based on turnout, socialization in a communist regime does seem to affect attitudes towards the EU.

Elections 2014

People that had participated in communist elections were now at least 45 years old. In contrast to the 2009 election, this election shows a clearer trend throughout the different age groups, where people above age 45 are more likely to vote than people below age 45 (figure 26). This pattern thus contradicts the proposition. Furthermore, while in 2009 turnout in EP elections showed no clear pattern, in 2014 this is the case for the national elections. In this sense, there

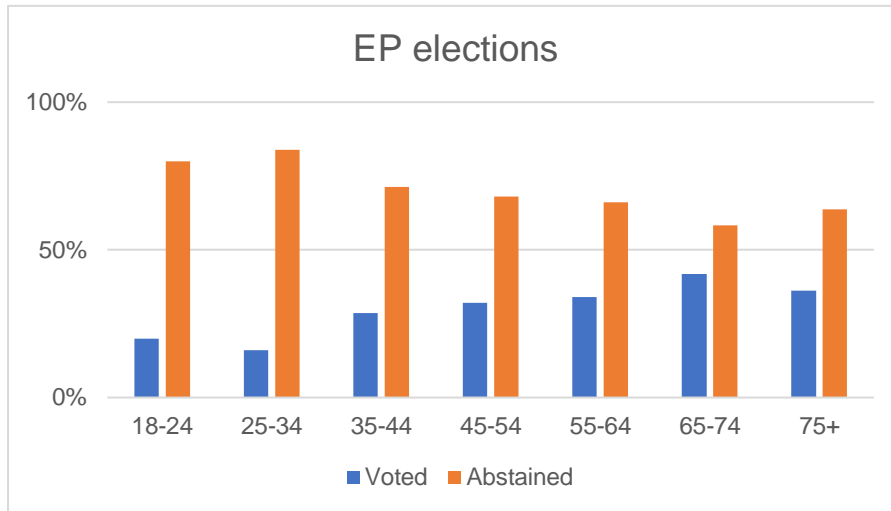


Figure 26: Eurobarometer (2014)

might be a 'European' effect in 2014, which is opposite to the proposition. Therefore, based on turnout in the EP election, the proposition would be rejected.

Next, the overall trust in politics. While in the 2009 EP election Hungarians mainly

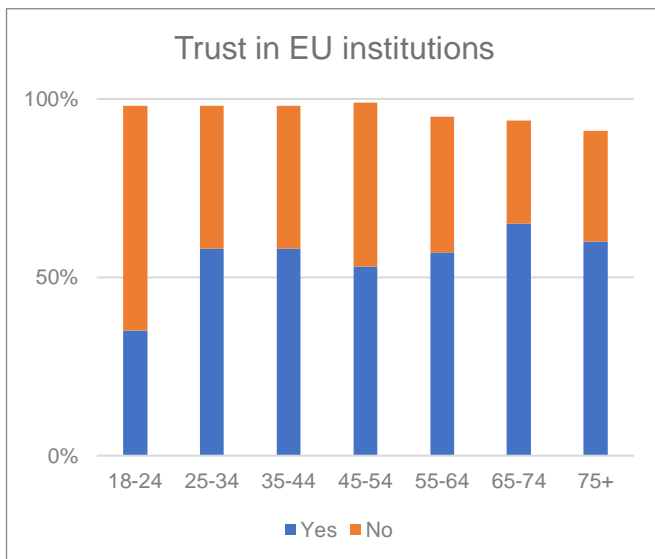


Figure 27: Eurobarometer (2014)

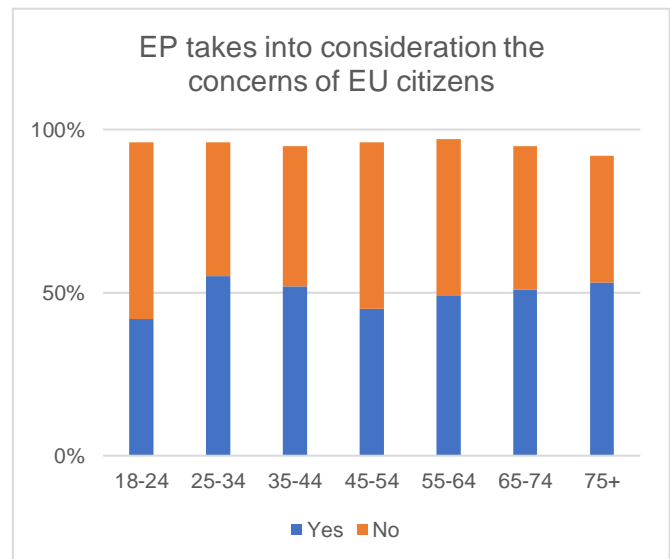


Figure 28: Eurobarometer (2014)

abstained because of a lack of trust in politics (36%), this had now dropped to just 12% in 2014 (Eurobarometer, 2014). The group that was most likely to abstain for this reason was 45-54. However, in general, the younger generations were more likely to abstain due to this reason, contradicting the proposition. Compared to 2009, trust in the institutions of the EU had remained stable. However, the 2014 EP election introduced a new sceptical group, namely the

youngest voters (figure 27). A clear majority in this group indicated to have no trust, while a majority also did not believe that the EP takes into consideration the concerns of EU citizens. Additionally, the expectation that people above age 45 would be more sceptical than people below it also does not seem to be satisfied. These observations all seem to contradict the proposition, as the younger generations show the behaviour that was expected from the older generations. This is also the case for EU membership. The groups above age 55 are all more positive about Hungary's EU membership compared to the people below age 55. Interestingly, there are no large differences regarding whether people feel they are a citizen of the EU (Eurobarometer, 2014).

While turnout showed a clear pattern where older generations were more likely to turnout, this is harder to establish regarding trust in politics. The most obvious observation is that the youngest generation shows a considerable degree of distrust towards the EU. However, a clear pattern in which people above age 45 show anti-democratic behaviour could not be established. Therefore, the proposition is rejected.

Elections 2019

Finally, the 2019 Hungarian EP elections. In 2019, the people that had experienced communist Hungary as adults were now at least 50 years old. Therefore, it is possible that the 45-54 age group might deviate from any identified pattern, as half of this group has not been socialized under a communist regime, while the other half has.

Prior to the EP election of 2019, half of Hungarians reported to be interested in the elections. Similar to the 2014 elections, the youngest cohort showed the least interest in the elections. Furthermore, interest in the elections seems to increase by age group, except for the oldest group (figure 29). The low interest among youngsters as well as the fact that interest increased by age both contradict the proposition.

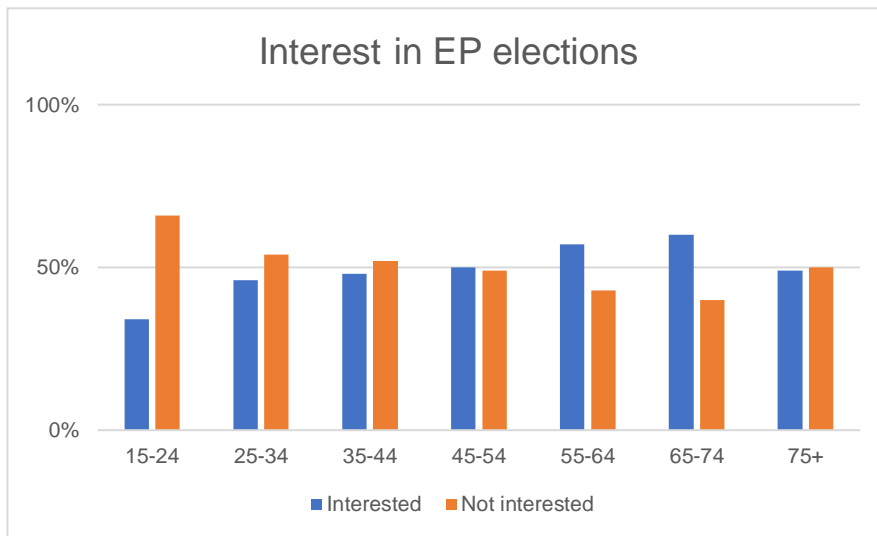


Figure 29: Eurobarometer (2019a)

Turnout in the EP elections broadly followed the same trend as interest (figure 30). The groups older than 45 are all more likely to turnout, which contradicts the proposition. Whereas this trend can be observed for the EP elections, the national elections are less clear (figure 31).

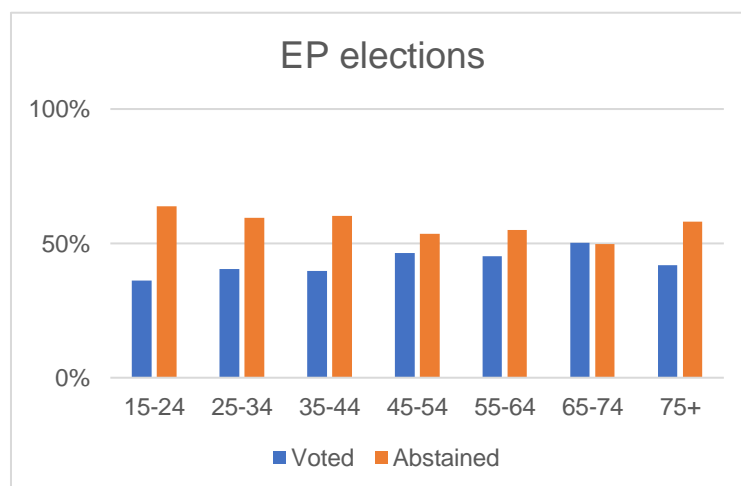


Figure 30: Eurobarometer (2019b)

In the national elections, the group 35-44 is most likely to turnout. Apart from this exception however, the national elections show the same trend where older generations are more likely to turnout.

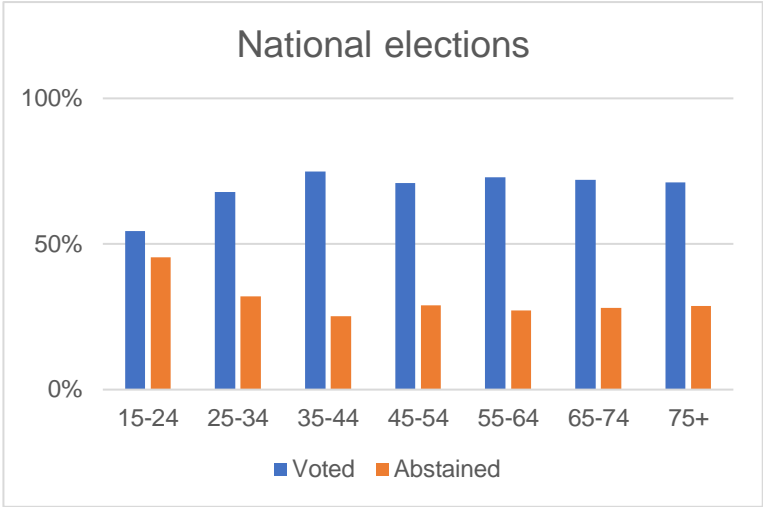


Figure 31: Eurobarometer (2019b)

Compared to 2014, more people abstained because of a lack of trust in politics (19%) (Eurobarometer, 2019b). Interestingly, while the group of 45-54 were most likely to abstain for this reason, the older groups were considerably less likely to do so. In contrast, people between 25 and 54 are all similarly likely to abstain for this reason, which contradicts the proposition.

Thus, similar to most previously analysed elections, the people politically socialized in a communist regime are more likely to participate in the elections. Based on this fact, the proposition is rejected.

Conclusion

This chapter analysed whether low turnout could be explained by weaker internalization of pro-democratic values as a result of political socialization in a communist regime.

The findings show a similar pattern either between the two countries as well as the different elections. In general, the people that are politically socialized in a communist regime have a more negative attitude towards democratic politics. This is seen in the lack of trust in the EU institutions and the fact that this group feels less represented in the EP. Moreover, this group is also more negative towards EU membership and are least likely to feel they are an EU citizen. Interestingly, the 2014 elections in Hungary show that the youngest generation has the lowest trust in the EU. Nevertheless, based on these findings, the proposition would hold as the generations socialized in a communist regime have a weaker internalization of pro-democratic values. However, the findings also show that these generations are considerably more likely to participate in elections. Although the patterns are clearer in some elections than others, it can be established that in EP elections as well as national elections, the people socialized in a communist regime are more likely to turnout. As the proposition states that these people are less inclined to participate, resulting in overall lower turnout, the proposition is rejected. The fact that these generations are more likely to vote means that they cannot cause the effect that was expected from the proposition.

6. Discussion

Following the analysis and conclusions on each proposition, this chapter puts the findings in a broader context, by relating it to previous research, while also going into the (non)congruence of the propositions with the empirical observations.

First, one of the major findings of this thesis is that people that are politically socialized in a communist regime are in general more sceptical towards politics, have less trust in EU institutions, and are less likely to believe that the EP takes into consideration the concerns of EU citizens. Meanwhile, this group is also more likely to participate in elections than people socialized after the fall of communism. While it was expected that trust would be lower, the fact that the same group is also more likely to turnout is contrary to the proposition, and it is therefore rejected as such. On the one hand, this finding contradicts the claims by Clark (2014) who states that perceptions of the EP have a significant effect on turnout in EP elections. This can however be explained by the fact that Clark only focuses on the 2009 EP elections, which in the present thesis also showed only modest differences in turnout between age groups. On the other hand, the findings support the study by Steinbrecher and Rattinger (2012) which shows that low turnout in EP elections is not caused by either Euroscepticism or alienation from the EU's political system. They argue that European attitudes are not important predictors of the level of turnout in EP elections, which would be in line with the findings of this thesis. In order to provide further clarity, future studies could examine the effect of attitudes towards the EU on turnout by looking at multiple EP elections.

Second, by looking at interest in politics, the analysis showed that in general low political interest goes hand in hand with low turnout in EP elections. Additionally, trends in interest also seem to correspond with trends in turnout, indicating that the proposition holds. Furthermore, in all but one election, the main reason to abstain was a lack of interest in politics and it also seems that specifically in EP elections, low interest translates into low turnout, as turnout in national elections was much less affected by interest. While this is the most clear sign that P1 holds, it is also a confirmation of the second-orderness of EP elections as Reif and Schmitt (1980) described. The fact that turnout in national elections is less affected by political interest than turnout in EP elections shows that the former are perceived as more important. Moreover, it is also in line with studies by Träger (2015) and Ehin and Talving (2021) who show that the SOE-model indeed applies to CEE countries—although an answer to this matter is beyond the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, the 2009 EP election in Hungary seems to confirm Schakel's (2015) argument that the model gains explanatory value when it is further specified (e.g., the role of economic performance). The worsening economy as a result of the financial crisis was followed by high gains of the opposition party Fidesz in the EP elections. Future studies could focus on the different ways in which the SOE-model could be extended.

Additionally, a factor that seems to influence turnout is the frequency of elections. If there are multiple elections in a single year, it appears that turnout in EP elections is lower. The most illustrative example of this is the 2014 EP election. In Czechia, this election was the third in fifteen months, while in Hungary the EP election followed two months after the national parliamentary elections, while a third election would take place later that year. Turnout in the EP elections was for both countries the lowest recorded in all past EP elections. In other words, it seems that high frequency of elections is matched with low turnout in EP elections. This finding is in line with several studies on the effect of multiple elections on voter fatigue. Nonnemacher (2021) for example finds that frequent elections is associated with diminishing turnout in second-order elections. Moreover, it also diminishes democratic participation in the long term. These findings are also supported by Fauvelle-Aymar and Stegmaier (2008) who found that timing of an EP election relative to the next national election and the frequency of elections affects turnout. Future studies could explore the ways in which the planning of the election might enhance election participation.

Third, this thesis examined whether low turnout could be explained by low provision of information and low campaign intensity. Contrary to the expectation, the analysis shows that when a majority of people feels sufficiently informed, this does not necessarily result in high turnout. The same goes for the visibility of a campaign, in other words, high visibility does not automatically lead to high turnout. A possible explanation for this is that the issues raised in the campaign must resonate with the population in order to motivate people to vote. This relates to the study by Braun and Schäfer (2022) who found that perceived relevance of key policy issues determines whether people are incentivized to participate in EP elections. Therefore, not only the provision of information itself is what matters, it is also about the content of the information that affects whether people turn out. Nevertheless, the fact that on multiple accounts sufficient information provision can go hand in hand with low turnout means that the proposition does not hold.

The importance of content also relates to the notion that in SOEs voters mainly base their choice on national issues (Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011). The analysis showed that on the one hand, low information provision leads people to base their vote on national issues. On the other hand, sufficient information provision might also lead people to base their vote on national issues when the content of the campaign has a mainly national focus. When the campaign is more EU focused however, this is also reflected by voters. This somewhat contradicts the study by Hix and Marsh (2007) as it states that voters use EP elections to voice their concerns about national politics. This thesis showed that this depends on the content of the campaign, which is in line with Hobolt and Wittrock's (2011) findings that more information about the EU will make people base their vote more on European issues.

Concluding, this thesis has examined three propositions to determine whether the SOE-theory or a communist legacy can best explain low turnout in EP elections in CEE countries. First, while the communist legacy theory based on socialization has provided fruitful ground for future implications, the proposition did not hold as a result of the high participation of the older generations in EP elections. Second, the analysis showed that sufficient information provision in EP campaigns can go together with low turnout. Therefore, this proposition did not hold. However, the analysis also showed that the EP elections had multiple characteristics resembling SOEs. Moreover, it seems that in general low interest in politics is matched with low turnout in EP elections. Meanwhile, this effect is less visible in national elections, confirming the second-orderness of the EP elections. Therefore, the proposition that low political interest results in low turnout in EP elections holds. This leads to the conclusion that the SOE-theory is better able to explain low turnout in CEE countries.

7. Conclusion

By analysing three different elections in two CEE countries, this thesis aimed to assess whether the SOE-theory or a communist legacy best explains low turnout in EP elections in CEE countries. Through the use of a congruence analysis, three different propositions were formulated. For the SOE-theory, it was examined whether low turnout could be explained by low levels of interest in politics as well as whether low turnout could be explained by low information provision. For the communist legacy, it was examined whether people politically socialized in a communist regime were less inclined to participate in the EP elections. Based on post-election survey data as well as additional sources, the analysis resulted in the following findings.

First, low political interest is generally matched with low turnout in EP elections. At the same time, this does not apply to national elections which are less affected by low interest, something which is typical to SOEs. Therefore, this proposition holds. Second, people that feel sufficiently informed about the EP elections do not necessarily participate. Moreover, high campaign intensity and high information provision can still be followed by low turnout. Therefore, the proposition does not hold. Third, while the findings showed that people politically socialized in a communist regime have lower trust in EP institutions and are less positive about EU membership, they are also the most likely to turnout in EP elections. Although the former is in line with the expectations, the latter rules out that this causes low turnout in CEE countries. Therefore, the proposition does not hold. From these findings, it is therefore concluded that the SOE-theory is better able to explain low turnout in CEE countries than the communist legacy.

The present thesis possesses several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, congruence analysis relies on the interpretation of empirical information. Although I based my judgement on comparisons between theory (predictions) and observations, theoretical relativism cannot be fully overcome as the interpretations of the findings are subjective. Second, the used data consisted of post-election surveys, meaning that respondents provided answers based on their memory and perceptions. This could potentially lead to inconsistencies between perceptions and reality. Third, the data for the 2019 EP elections contained an age group of 45-54, while the proposition focused on people older than 50. This might have led to inconsistencies in the interpretation of the data. Finally, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to establish causal relationships between variables. It therefore needs to be emphasised that the findings should not be read as causal, but as suggestive evidence.

Finally, some suggestions for further research. First, although the third proposition did not hold, the data showed clear differences between people socialized before and after the fall of communism. Further research could explore whether these effects can be linked to the communist legacy, or whether the observed trends are typical to older generations.

Furthermore, a general trend in turnout was observed where both countries followed the same line throughout the elections. The 2014 elections experienced record-lows while the 2019 elections experienced record-highs. Further research could focus on the causes for the general trends, and whether these apply to the whole of Europe.

The practical implications of this research relate to the ways in which governments try to convince people to participate in EP elections. The findings suggest that in order to gain better representation through high turnout, campaigns should not only focus on sufficient information provision. Rather, policymakers should explore ways in which people with low political interest are reached and how these people can become excited about political matters.

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