

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



Young people's participation in the 2024 European elections

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January 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores young people's participation in the 2024 European Parliament elections, offering valuable insights into their voting behaviour, priorities and engagement. Building on prior research by the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership, the analysis highlights the pivotal role of youth in shaping the future of European democracy and identifies opportunities to further enhance their political inclusion.

While youth voter turnout saw a slight decline compared to 2019 – dropping 6% among voters aged 15 to 24 and 1% among those aged 25 to 39 – the report highlights that many young people remain actively engaged. Economic concerns, climate change and education emerged as key priorities for young voters.

The report also examines the ideological diversity of young voters, who are increasingly drawn to both progressive and far-right parties, reflecting a dynamic and pluralistic political landscape. Social media platforms play a significant role in mobilising and informing young voters, making them essential tools for future political outreach. Voting patterns further indicate that many young people prioritise alignment with specific issues over traditional party loyalty, underscoring their desire for meaningful representation.

One promising development is the impact of lowering the voting age, as seen in countries like Austria, Malta, Germany and Belgium. Early findings suggest that this policy can foster lifelong political engagement when combined with robust civic education and youth-targeted initiatives. The inclusion of younger voters provides an opportunity to broaden the democratic process and ensure that decisions reflect the perspectives of those most impacted by long-term policies.

Another area of focus is youth representation in electable positions. Increasing the presence of young candidates on party lists and in political offices not only strengthens generational diversity but also enhances innovation in policy making.

The findings of this report underscore the potential of young voters to shape European politics and provide actionable recommendations to further empower them. These include investing in comprehensive civic education programmes, supporting youth-focused political campaigns, enhancing accessibility to voting and creating pathways for young people to take on leadership roles. By addressing these areas, the EU can harness the energy and vision of younger generations, ensuring their active and meaningful participation in democratic processes.

INTRODUCTION

Youth participation in elections has been an important topic in discussions about the future of democracy in Europe. The 2019 European elections marked a milestone, with record turnout levels among young voters, including a participation rate among those aged 15 to 24 of 42% and of 47% among those aged 25 to 39¹ (European Parliament 2019). However, the 2024 European elections saw a slight decline in youth voter turnout, with a 6% drop among young people under 25 and a 1% decrease in the older cohort. This shift makes it essential to delve deeper into the dynamics of youth voting behaviour. As young people represent a significant portion of the electorate, their participation (or lack thereof) has far-reaching implications for political representation, policy development and the overall legitimacy of the democratic process in the European Union (EU). The 2024 European Parliament elections, while showing a slight increase in overall voter turnout (from 50.6% in 2019 to 50.7% in 2024), highlighted how young people's concerns (such as climate change, the economy and security) influence their political participation. As young people in Europe continue to face economic uncertainty, rising living costs and dealing with the consequences of climate change, understanding what drives or deters young people from voting is essential for future electoral strategies and policies.

This report provides an in-depth analysis of youth voting behaviour in the 2024 EU elections, based on post-election surveys and media reports. Specifically, it investigates several key areas. It begins with an overview of voter turnout trends and the role of youth participation in shaping electoral outcomes. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of ideological trends among young voters, including the rise of extremist parties and the fragmentation of the youth vote. It then delves into abstentionism and disengagement, examining the reasons why young people chose not to vote. These include a lack of interest in politics, distrust in political institutions and logistical barriers. The study also analyses youth concerns and priorities, focusing on the issues that matter most to young voters, such as economic instability, climate change and education, and how these concerns shaped their voting behaviour. Moreover, the report investigates political engagement by exploring the factors that motivated young people to participate in the elections, such as a sense of civic duty, belief in the efficacy of their vote and alignment with specific political issues or candidates. Finally, the impact of lowering the voting age is assessed, particularly in countries like Austria, Germany, Malta, Belgium and Greece, and exploring how and if this change influenced youth turnout. A separate section examines the role of young people in electable positions, focusing on their candidacies and their potential to foster political renewal. The report concludes with implications for future electoral strategies and youth engagement in European politics.

Existing research by the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership on youth political participation

This study on young people's participation in the 2024 EU elections builds and expands on the long-standing work of the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership in the area of young people's political participation. The most recent effort on this topic includes the outcomes of the [seminar “Young People's Political Participation”](#) held in 2023, and the subsequent [report](#) (Bárta 2024). Earlier

1. In the text, we refer to two age groups based on the socio-demographic categories defined by the European Parliament: the 15-24 age group, which we refer to interchangeably as the “younger group” or “younger cohort”, and the 25-39 age group, referred to as the “older group” or “older cohort”.

initiatives include the 2019 “The future of young people’s political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities” (Bacalso 2019;), which produced a range of insights documented in the event report, and the “Compendium of practices” (Yurttagüler and Martinez 2020). Significant additional studies have explored the challenges posed by anti-democratic standards and the shrinking democratic civic space for youth organisations (Dezelan and Yurttagüler 2021), the impact of Covid-19 on youth participation and spaces (Dezelan 2022) and contemporary forms of political engagement among young women (Lavizzari and Yurttagüler 2023).

In examining new forms and trends in youth political engagement, previous research has highlighted both conventional and unconventional modes of participation, including social movements and protest politics, youth interest in politics, trust in political institutions and the role of digital tools in their engagement (Crowley and Moxon 2017; Bárta, Boldt and Lavizzari 2021; Yurttagüler and Pultar 2023). The intersection of democratic transformations with youth participation has further addressed critical issues such as environmental justice, liberal democracy and youth representation (Dezelan, Bacalso, Lodeserto 2023). Collectively, these studies have enriched our understanding of youth political participation by highlighting access to rights, identifying what meaningful participation looks like for young people in various democratic contexts and documenting best practices for integrating both conventional and unconventional forms of engagement. They also bring to light the major challenges and patterns of inequality that shape youth participation.

BACKGROUND TO THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

Recent trends in EU elections have shown a steady, albeit slow, increase in overall voter turnout, with the 2024 EU elections recording a turnout of 50.74%, marginally higher than the 50.66% in 2019. Countries such as Hungary and Slovakia have seen notable increases, while Greece and Italy recorded their lowest turnouts in EU election history, falling below 50%. Croatia had the lowest turnout among the EU27 (European Parliament 2024a). Background surveys provide valuable insight into the intentions of younger voters. According to a pre-election Eurobarometer report conducted in April 2024, 64% of young people (aged 15 to 30) expressed an intention to vote, with notable national differences. Romania and Portugal had the highest levels of youth voter intent, surpassing 77%, while Luxembourg reported just 41%. Austria, where the voting age is 16, showed a relatively higher engagement among first-time voters, with 66% intending to participate (European Commission 2024).

Despite the positive intention-to-vote figures, youth turnout has historically lagged behind older age groups. In the 2019 elections, for instance, youth turnout increased from 28% in 2014 to 42%, thanks to campaigns targeting young people’s concerns, particularly around growth, the economy, climate change and human rights (European Parliament 2019). However, the gap between expressed voting intent and actual participation remains a critical challenge, reflecting young people’s disillusionment with conventional politics. Interestingly, however, is that while the voting turnout is often higher in national elections, the trust in institutions for many member states is lower than the trust in the EU. The Spring 2024 Eurobarometer shows that 54% of respondents state that they are satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU (European Commission 2024).

Although a majority of young people expressed a desire to vote, some remained undecided or reluctant to participate. Among those hesitant to vote in the 2024 elections, the reasons vary but often reflect a lack of political engagement or belief in the efficacy of voting. The most common reasons cited include a general disinterest in politics (19%) and the belief that voting will not bring about meaningful change (19%). Additionally, distrust in political systems (17%) and the perception that the EU does not address issues relevant to their lives (16%) are significant factors. Socio-demographic data show limited gender differences, though young women are slightly more likely than young men to express disinterest in politics. Educational background also plays a critical role: those with post-secondary education are more inclined to vote (72%) compared with those with secondary education or lower (55%) (European Commission 2024). These trends highlight the need for targeted political outreach and education to engage disillusioned or indifferent young voters.

Historically, youth participation in EU elections has been lower than that of other age groups, with a pattern of fluctuating engagement. In 1999, youth turnout was particularly low, and those who voted tended to support moderate, traditional parties. The global financial crisis in 2009 marked a turning point, as many young voters shifted their support to emerging and alternative parties, including both green and populist movements, in response to austerity policies. This trend towards alternative parties continued in 2014 and 2019, with youth support increasingly focused on climate action, social justice and democratic reform (Palomar i Baget 2024).

However, a growing polarisation of the youth vote has emerged in recent elections. While many young people still support progressive parties, there has been a noticeable increase in support for far-right movements. The Covid-19 pandemic's lasting economic effects, the increased cost of living and housing crisis, inflation, rising energy prices and concerns over mental health have deepened young people's sense of economic and social vulnerability. Additionally, the war in Ukraine and its geopolitical ramifications have heightened anxiety, particularly in Eastern Europe. These overlapping crises are contributing to a growing appetite for radical political solutions, both on the left and the right, reflecting a complex and evolving landscape for youth engagement in EU politics. In Germany, for example, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has gained ground among voters aged 16 to 24, while France's National Rally and Spain's Vox also show rising youth support. This polarisation reflects broader political shifts driven by a combination of economic insecurity, dissatisfaction with the political establishment and concerns over the socio-economic consequences of implementing the Green Deal.

IDEOLOGICAL TRENDS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE EU ELECTIONS

The 2024 European elections revealed relevant ideological shifts across member states, with a few key trends. A first trend is characterised by the intensification of the competition between centrist and extremist parties, where centre parties are facing challenges from both the far right and the far left, particularly among young voters. In several countries, traditional parties such as the Social Democrats (SPD) in Germany and Les Républicains (LR) in France saw diminishing returns among younger demographics. Second, overall, the 2024 elections demonstrate a fragmentation of ideological preferences among younger cohorts. Among the new directions taken by young voters, however, analysts and politicians have observed another key ideological trend across multiple countries: the radicalisation of preferences towards ideological extremes. In particular, extremist parties on the right have capitalised on growing dissatisfaction with the status quo. This signals a

trend towards the normalisation of far-right ideologies, especially as these parties effectively leverage social media platforms like TikTok to engage younger audiences (Serhan 2024).

For instance, in Germany the Alternative for Germany (AfD) nearly tripled its share of youth votes (up by 11%) compared to the 2019 elections, particularly among the youngest group aged 16 to 24, reaching 16%, and 18% in the 25 to 34 age group. However, as mentioned, young people vote across the spectrum, including for centre parties such as the Christian Democratic Union of Germany/Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CDU/CSU), which gained 17% of votes (up 5%) for the under 25s and 19% for the 25 to 34 age group, and the SPD with 9% in both groups. Still, centrist parties clearly performed best among the over 60s. The Greens, instead, as also reflected at the EU level, suffered the biggest losses among young voters, gaining only 11% (down 23%) in the 16 to 24 age group, although they did perform better in the 25 to 34 group, with 15%. This highlights a potential shift in focus among young voters from environmental concerns to economic challenges like the cost of living and housing. More importantly, youth showed a preference for small pan-European parties such as Volt (7%), Die Partei or Die Linke (10%), which all performed above the average (Schläger, Katsioulis and Engels 2024). This voting behaviour may reflect a preference among young people to choose the party that best represents their values, rather than relying solely on strategic voting for larger centre parties, following a logic of the “least evil”. By voting for smaller or new parties, young voters may be expressing a desire for alternative approaches to governance. This shift away from strategic voting and traditional parties may enhance political representation by bringing a wider range of perspectives.

Other examples of key ideological trends include Italy and France. In the first case, where the current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s far-right Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia) won the largest share of votes in the EU elections, the party also gained traction among young voters, particularly Millennials (28 to 43 year olds) with 27.4% of their votes, and 16.6% among the Gen Z (18-27) group. In this case too, while gaining ground among the youngest groups, it is in the older group where Brothers of Italy performs better, and particularly among the over 35s, where it performs best. In fact, despite Brothers of Italy’s success, overall Italian youth continue to lean towards the centre-left, with 62% of votes from Gen Z voters and 52% from Millennials, and especially among students, with 69%. The centre-left Democratic Party and the leftist Greens and Left Alliance (Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, AVS) managed to gain respectively 23.3% and 12.9% among Gen Z voters, and 21.7% and 9.9% among Millennials (Ipsos 2024a). Similarly to Italy, in France, 33% of the youngest voters (18-24) supported the left-wing France Unbowed (La France Insoumise) party, making it the most popular party among this demographic, while the far-right National Rally gained a considerable 30% of votes among the Millennials (Ipsos 2024b).

These trends raise important questions about how political parties can address the evolving concerns of young people, such as inflation and economic uncertainty, unaffordable housing and social divisions. While left-wing parties may appear to be more aligned with these issues, they are struggling to keep the youth vote across most European countries (Azmanova 2024). While young people are increasingly frustrated with the lack of political solutions, data from the latest post-elections Eurobarometer survey show a high degree of optimism concerning the future of the European Union. In fact, 68% of young people aged 15 to 24 hold a hopeful outlook for the future of the Union, followed by 66% in the 29 to 39 age group. However, a considerable minority (28% and 31% respectively) remain pessimistic. Notably, France and Greece stand out as the countries with the lowest levels of optimism. In France, just over half of the younger population are optimistic

(51%), and this figure drops sharply to 38% among the older group. Similarly, only 44% of young people aged 26 to 39 in Greece hold a positive view of the EU's future.

Looking broadly at young people's perceptions of the European Union, 47% of both the 15-24 and 25-39 age groups hold a positive view of the EU, showing broad but not overwhelming support among younger people (Figures 1 and 2). This consistency across both age groups indicates that younger voters generally maintain a favourable view of the EU (European Parliament 2024b). Countries like Portugal (85%), Lithuania (74%), Ireland (61%) and Denmark (58%) exhibit high levels of positive sentiment among the 15 to 24 age group. A significant portion of young people hold neutral views of the EU, with 38% of the 15-24 age group and 37% of the 25-39 group expressing ambivalence. Finally, 14% of the younger group and 16% of the older group view the EU negatively. While still a minority, this increase with age suggests a slight rise in Euroscepticism as young people grow older. The results of the survey show that Austria (23%), Germany (19%) and the Czech Republic (19%) have the highest levels of negative perceptions among the younger group, reflecting a stronger Eurosceptic sentiment in these countries, particularly in central and eastern Europe. For the 25-39 group, France (29%), Austria (24%) and Belgium (23%) also show higher levels of negativity, highlighting a growing dissatisfaction with the EU among older youth in these countries. These data reflect a fragmented outlook on the EU across member states, suggesting that while many young people view the EU positively, the practice of voting in the EU elections, particularly for more sceptical or disengaged voters, still needs to be developed. In this regard, policy interventions aimed at enhancing young people's understanding of the EU's impact on their life, as well as promoting the European identity among younger citizens, should be prioritised.

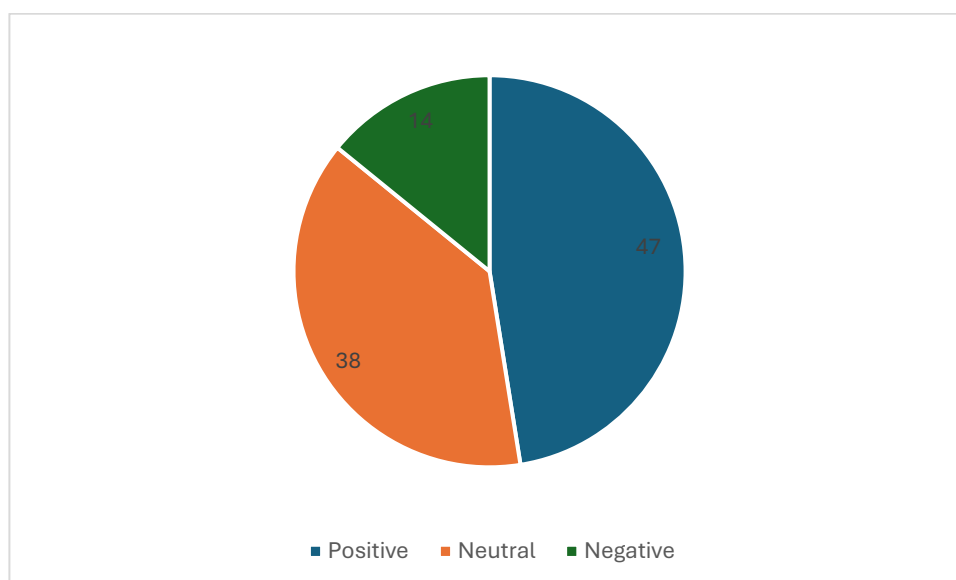


Figure 1: General perception of the European Union for the age group 15-24, EU27 average. Source: based on Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

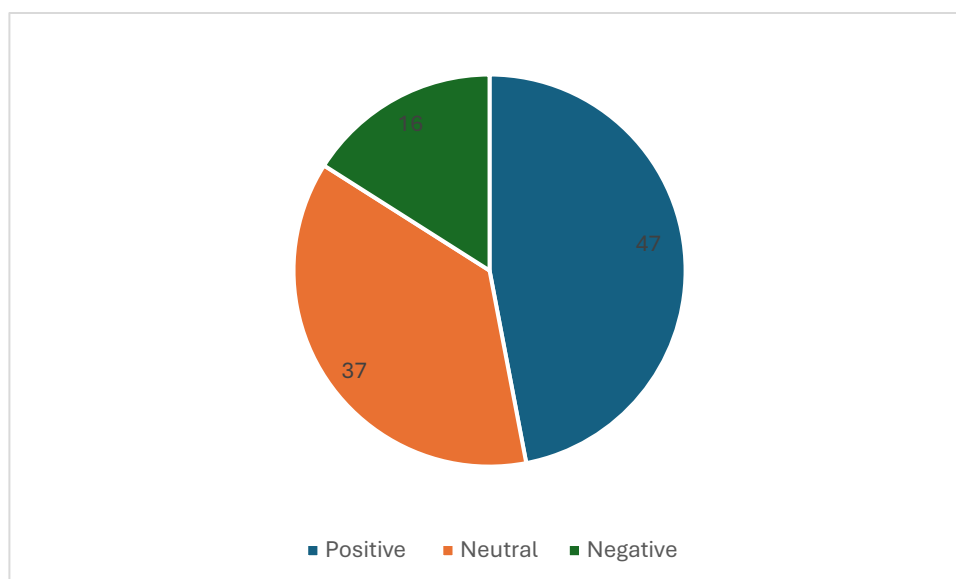


Figure 2: General perception of the European Union for the age group 25-39, EU27 average. Source: based on Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOTING BEHAVIOUR AND PREFERENCES IN THE 2024 ELECTIONS

Based on the Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024, disparities emerge among the 27 member states in terms of youth turnout and political preferences, reflecting the diverse economic, social and cultural contexts of each country. Overall, at the EU level, we observe a decline in youth voter turnout (down 6% for the age group 15-24 and down 1% for the 25-39 group), driven by factors such as a distrust in political institutions, including political parties, low levels of political efficacy² and a general lack of interest in politics. Young people who did participate in the elections were primarily motivated by key issues, especially in relation to the economic situation and rising living costs. The alignment between issues important to youth and political parties' proposals during the electoral campaign emerged as a major factor influencing their decision to vote for a specific party or candidate.

Abstentionism and disengagement: reasons not to vote, interest in politics and the EU's image

When analysing the voting of young people in the 2024 elections, the first significant aspect of the data is the level of abstentionism (Figures 3 and 4). According to the Eurobarometer survey, the voting rate of young people decreased by six points from 2019, to 36% in the age group 15 to 24 and 46% in the 25 to 39 group. While some countries still registered high levels of engagement, notably Belgium (85% and 90% respectively), Cyprus (61% and 50%), Malta (58% and 65%) and Sweden (56% for both), most of the countries failed to pass the 50% threshold, with significantly low turnout in Croatia (9% and 17%), Portugal (14% and 25%) and Lithuania (12% and 25%). In general, we note a slightly increased turnout in the older age group, double the percentages of the younger groups in several countries.

2. Political efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to influence political processes and outcomes.

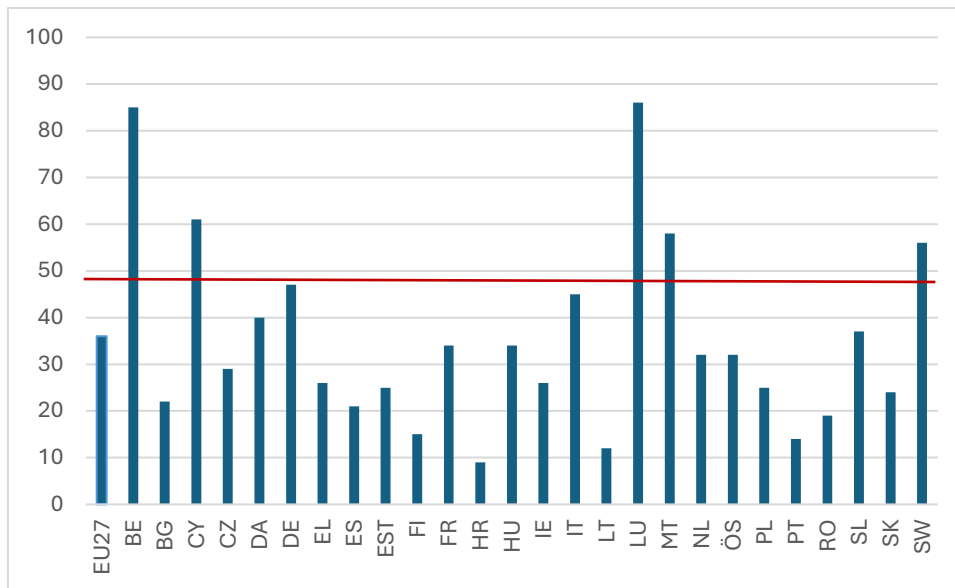


Figure 3: Decision to vote in the elections for the 15-24 age group. Source: based on Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

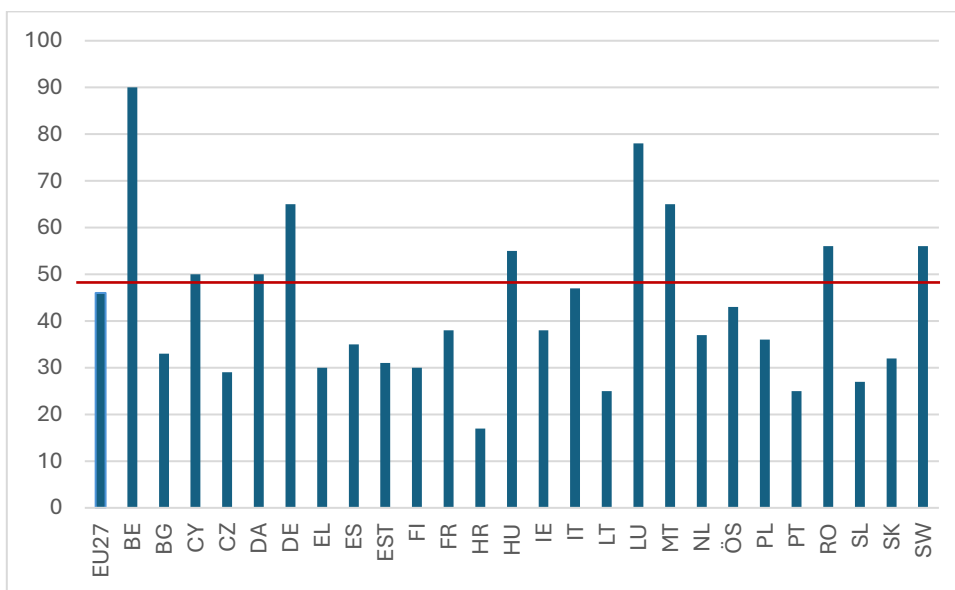


Figure 4: Decision to vote in the elections for the 25-39 age group. Source: based on Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

We can point to several factors behind the high level of abstentionism (Figures 5 and 6), in particular by looking at reasons why young people decided not to vote in the EU elections, revealing significant disengagement from the electoral process. A first factor concerns the general lack of interest in politics. For the 15-24 age group, 28% at the EU level did not vote because of a lack of interest in politics, making it the most cited reason for non-participation. This reflects a considerable level of disengagement and a sense that political matters may not be relevant to this age group. Similarly, 20% of the 25-39 age group shared this sentiment, showing that political apathy remains consistent across younger demographics. In countries like Hungary (51%), Cyprus (49%) and Portugal (46%), disengagement is especially significant for the very young cohort (15-24), as half or almost half of the youth population in this cohort claim not to be interested in politics.

Related to this finding, we observe that only 10% of young people aged 15 to 24 follow European Union politics most of the time, indicating low continuous engagement with EU political matters. Some 38% follow EU politics from time to time, meaning that a significant portion of young people engage with EU issues occasionally but are not consistently attentive. In addition, 28% and 24% say they rarely or never follow EU politics, suggesting that nearly a quarter of this age group has little to no interest in EU political developments. Engagement increases slightly in the older group, with 15% of people aged 25-39 following EU politics most of the time, 45% follow EU politics from time to time, showing higher sporadic engagement than the younger cohort, while 27% and 13% rarely or never follow EU politics, suggesting increased engagement with age. Portugal (47% and 39%) and Slovenia (38% and 29%) have the highest percentage of young people who rarely or never follow EU politics.

Another significant factor was lack of trust in politics, cited by 14% of the younger group and 18% of the older group. This distrust is particularly prominent in countries such as Portugal (28%) for the younger cohort and Malta (57%) for the older cohort, where high levels of disillusionment reflect deeper dissatisfaction with political institutions. Even though the percentages are not especially high, we must consider the implications. As largely demonstrated in the literature on young people's political participation, this may reflect a general trend towards youth dissatisfaction with institutional politics, and particularly political elites, thus also reflecting an appeal for populist rhetoric (Fernández Guzmán Grassi, Portos and Felicetti 2023). In the younger age group, Portugal (28%), Bulgaria (26%) and Malta (26%) show the highest levels of young people citing a lack of trust in political institutions reflecting significant disillusionment with the political system in these countries. On the contrary, Sweden (0%), Ireland (0%) and Lithuania (0%) show the lowest levels of distrust, suggesting higher levels of faith in political institutions or processes among young people in these countries.

A related factor concerns the perceived ineffectiveness of voting, namely a low level of political efficacy among young people. A tenth of the 15-24 group and 15% of the 25-39 group believe that voting does not lead to any meaningful change. This sense of political inefficacy is higher in Malta and Italy, where political systems may seem unresponsive to voter influence. Finally, in addition to disinterest or political disillusionment, 16% of the younger group and 17% of the older group reported being too busy or not having enough time to vote, highlighting logistical issues as a deterrent.

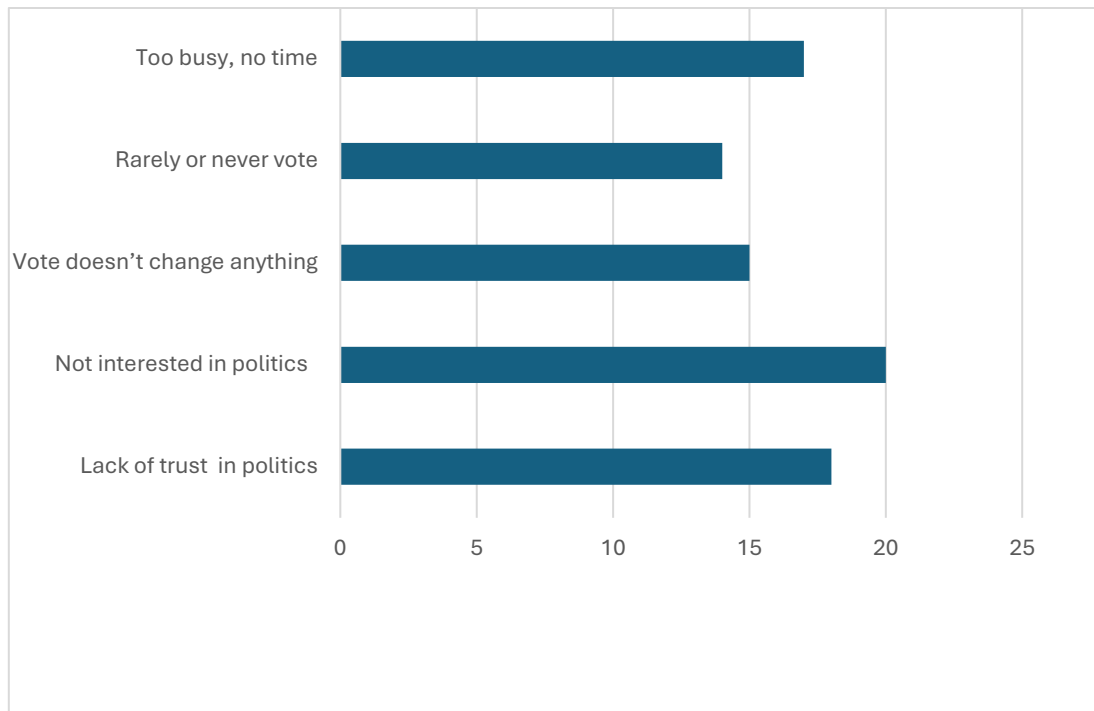


Figure 5: Main reasons for NOT voting in the EU elections for the 15-24 age group, EU27 average.
Source: based on Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

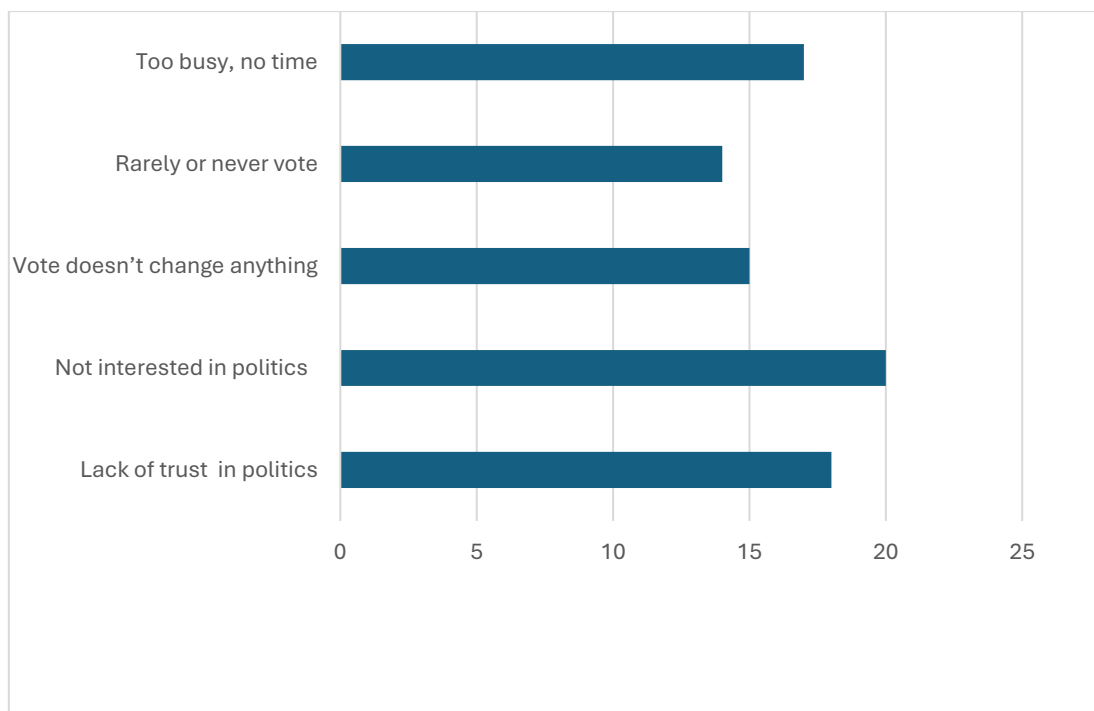


Figure 6: Main reasons for NOT voting in the EU elections for the 25-39 age group, EU27 average.
Source: based on Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

Concerns and priorities of young people

The results of the Eurobarometer survey highlight a complex mix of priorities among young voters in the EU. While economic concerns dominate as a result of immediate pressures like inflation and

the cost of living, there is also a clear focus on climate change, particularly in Sweden and Denmark. Education emerges as a key issue, reflecting young people's demand for accessible, high-quality learning opportunities. At the same time, international concerns highlight their awareness of broader geopolitical dynamics. Finally, the salience of migration and asylum policies in certain countries suggests that social cohesion and national identity debates are still relevant to many young voters, particularly in regions with higher immigration (Figures 7 and 8).

Across the EU, economic concerns dominate young people's priorities. Rising prices and the cost of living were the leading concerns for both the younger cohort, the 15-24 age group (38%) and the older cohort, the 25-39 age group (40%), with particularly high levels of anxiety present in countries like Greece (63%) and Ireland (61%). Similarly, the economic situation was a key issue for 36% of younger voters and 40% of older voters, reflecting widespread concern about inflation and financial stability. Similarly, unemployment remains a major issue, especially in southern European countries like Italy (33% and 28%) and Portugal (25% and 23%).

While these pressing material concerns have somewhat overshadowed environmental issues, climate change still ranked high among both age groups, with 32% of the younger group and 33% of the older group identifying it as a major concern. This issue was especially prominent in countries like Sweden (76%) and Denmark (57%), where younger generations maintain strong support for green policies.

Education (29%) and the international situation (31%) were also key concerns for younger voters (15-24), particularly in countries like Lithuania and Slovakia, where young people value education reform. Migration and asylum policies were a significant issue in Austria (50%) and Germany (41%) for the older youth cohort, reflecting the political salience of migration in these countries. Other issues such as gender equality do not rank as significant concerns for young people overall, though they still score higher than issues like crime or unemployment for the younger age group (14%). In certain countries, such as Slovenia, gender equality is a more prominent concern, with 28% of young people identifying it as a priority.

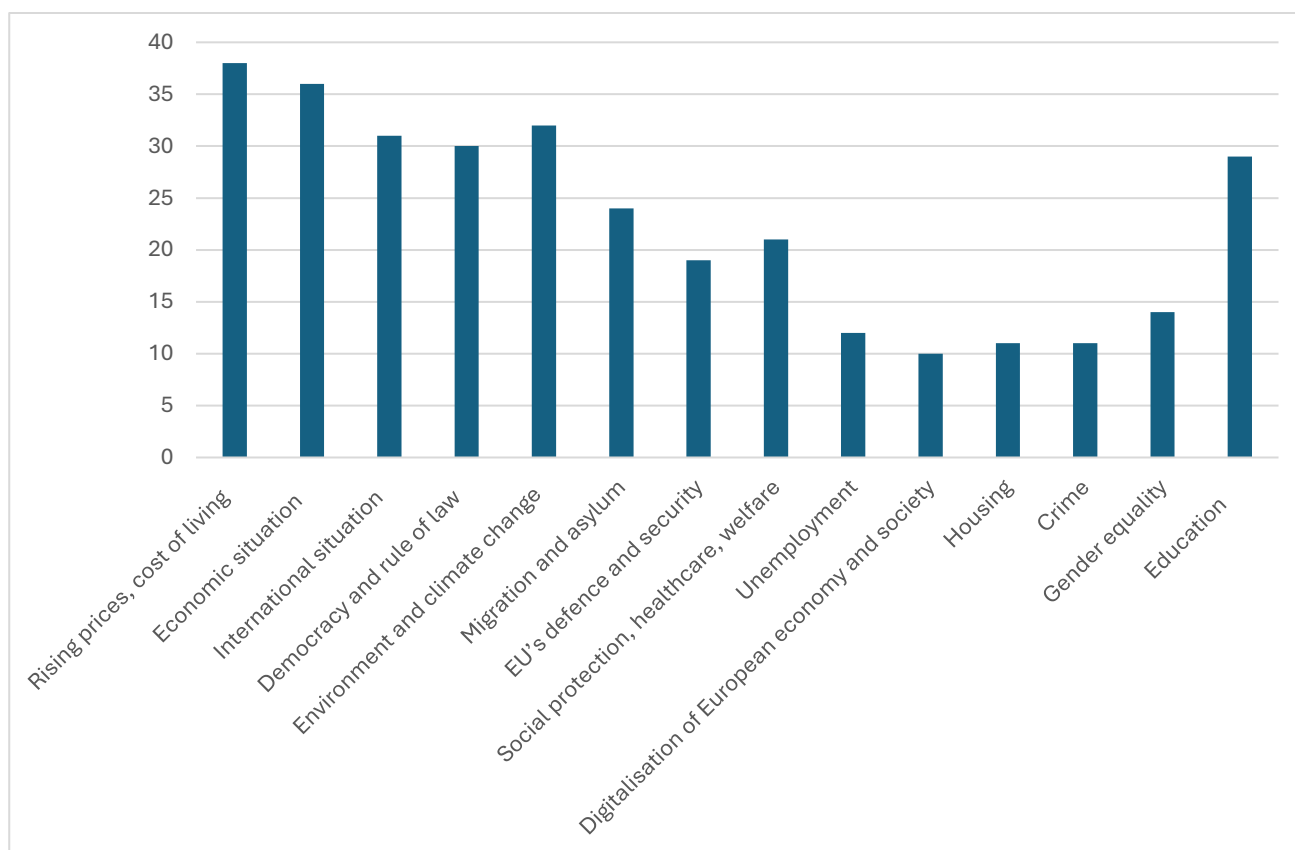


Figure 7: Main motivations for voting for the 15-24 age group, EU27 average. Source: based on Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

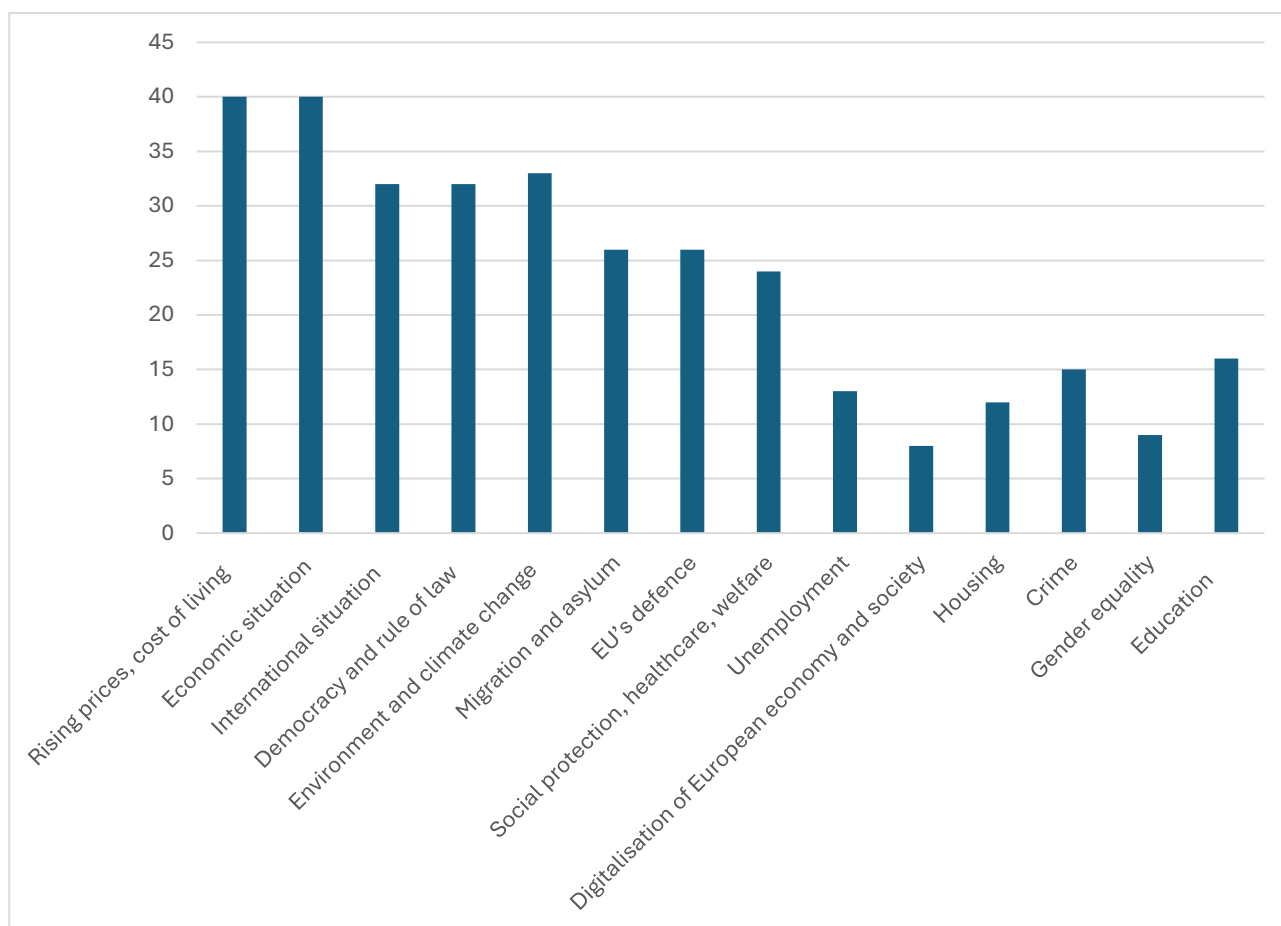


Figure 8: Main motivations for voting for the 25-39 age group, EU27 average. Source: based on the Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

Reasons for participating in the elections and choice of political parties

Despite the abstentionism noted above, many young people remain motivated to participate in elections for various reasons (Figures 9 and 10). Almost a third (31%) of young voters in the 15-24 group say they always vote, regardless of the election. This reflects a modest level of habitual voting behaviour among young people who have had the opportunity to participate, indicating that for about a third of young people, voting is a regular civic practice. Among the older youth group, 40% say they always vote, showing a higher level of habitual voting behaviour compared to the younger group.

Voting out of a sense of duty as a citizen was the most common motivation for young voters across the EU. Over a third (38%) of both the 15-24 and 25-39 age groups cited civic duty as the main reason they participated in the election, with particularly high levels in countries like Luxembourg (61%) and Belgium (51%, where voting is mandatory). In contrast with the low levels of political efficacy mentioned as a reason not to participate in the elections, belief in the power of their vote to create change was also an important factor. Almost a quarter (24%) of the younger group and the older group (23%) felt that voting in the EU elections could lead to meaningful outcomes. This sentiment was strongest in countries like Denmark (39% and 23%) and Sweden (48% and 43%), where high levels of political efficacy were recorded.

Another motivating factor was the feeling of being European, with 24% of younger voters and 19% of older voters citing this as a reason for voting. Malta (36% and 30%), Germany (33% and 23%) and Denmark (31% and 20%) had the highest percentages of young voters who felt a strong European identity, indicating that transnational solidarity plays a role in political engagement. In contrast, Cyprus (0% and 8%) and Sweden (9% and 6%) show the lowest levels of European identity as a motivation for voting.

Finally, only 16% of young voters (15-24) chose to vote in support of a specific political party, showing that party loyalty is relatively low among younger people, and they may be more issue-focused or disillusioned with party politics. Party support rises slightly to 19% in the 25-39 group, indicating a bit more alignment with political parties as people age, but still not a dominant reason for voting. The fact that young people are not driven by party loyalty when voting also reflects their lower levels of party affiliation, as the Youth Partnership's research and statistical survey on new forms of youth participation finds that only 5% of young people are members of political parties and 11% are engaged either as members or volunteers (Yurttagüler and Pultar 2023).

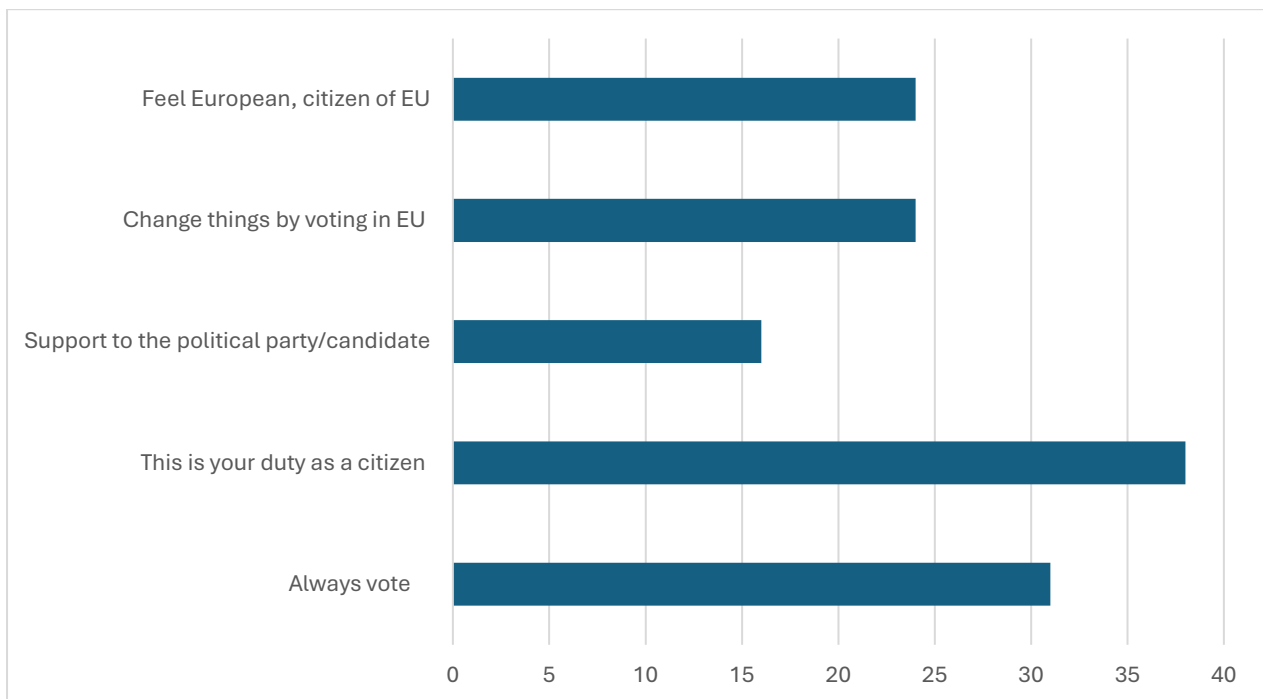


Figure 9: Main reasons for voting in the EU elections for the 15-24 age group, EU27 average.
Source: based on the Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

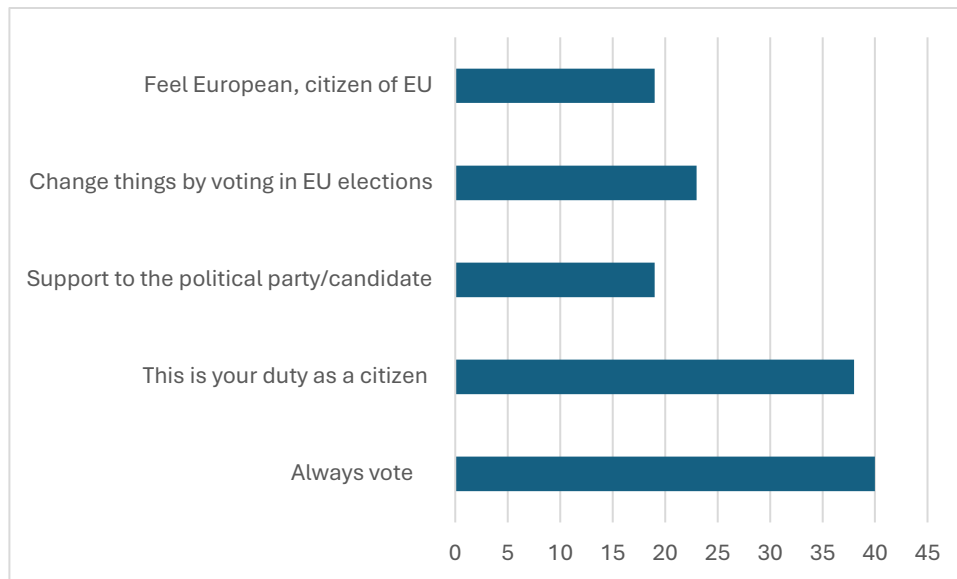


Figure 10: Main reasons for voting in the EU elections for the 25-39 age group, EU27 average.
Source: based on the Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

When looking at why young people decided to vote for specific parties, their choices reflect a combination of ideological alignment, issue-based voting and strategic considerations (Figures 11 and 12). First and foremost, young voters place significant importance on a party's alignment with both EU and national issues. For 48% of the younger cohort (15-24) and 49% of the older cohort (25-39), party choice was based on proposals on EU issues that aligned with their values. This was particularly true in Lithuania (77%) and Slovakia (72%), where young voters prioritise European-level policies. National issues were also a key factor for 45% of the younger group and 43% of the older group, showing that domestic concerns continue to influence voting behaviour, especially in countries such as Finland (67%), Spain (61%) and Greece (59%).

Another important factor is the alignment with single issues important to young people: 44% of both age groups were driven by specific important issues, with countries like Denmark (62%) and Portugal (58%) showing a strong focus on issue-based voting. This indicates that young voters are motivated by policies rather than party loyalty. In contrast, 30% of the younger group and 33% of the older group voted to avoid another party succeeding, with strategic voting most prevalent in Spain and Hungary. This reflects the tactical nature of some voters, especially in politically polarised environments. This strategic voting is also reflected in the 24% of young people in both age groups who followed a "least evil" logic, voting for a party simply because they disliked all other options in the list. Last, 29% of younger voters and 28% of older voters were influenced by liking specific candidates, particularly in Portugal (65%) and Finland (62%), showing that personal appeal and candidate characteristics matter to many voters.

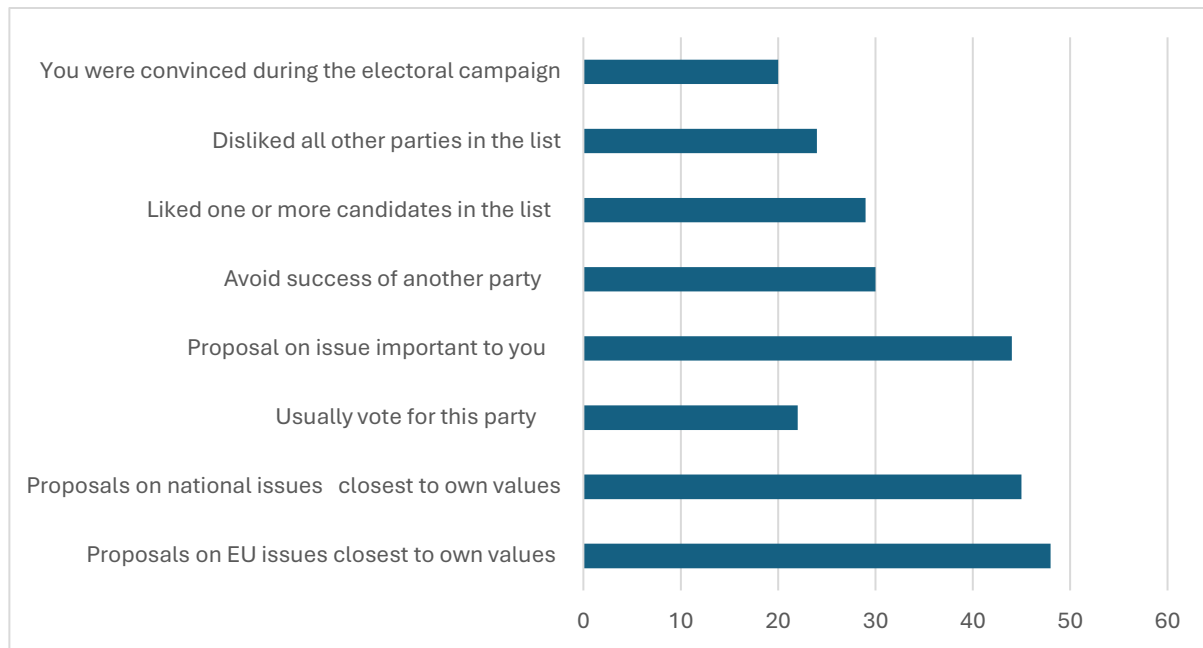


Figure 11: Reasons for voting for a specific party for the 15-24 age group, EU27 average. Source: based on the Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

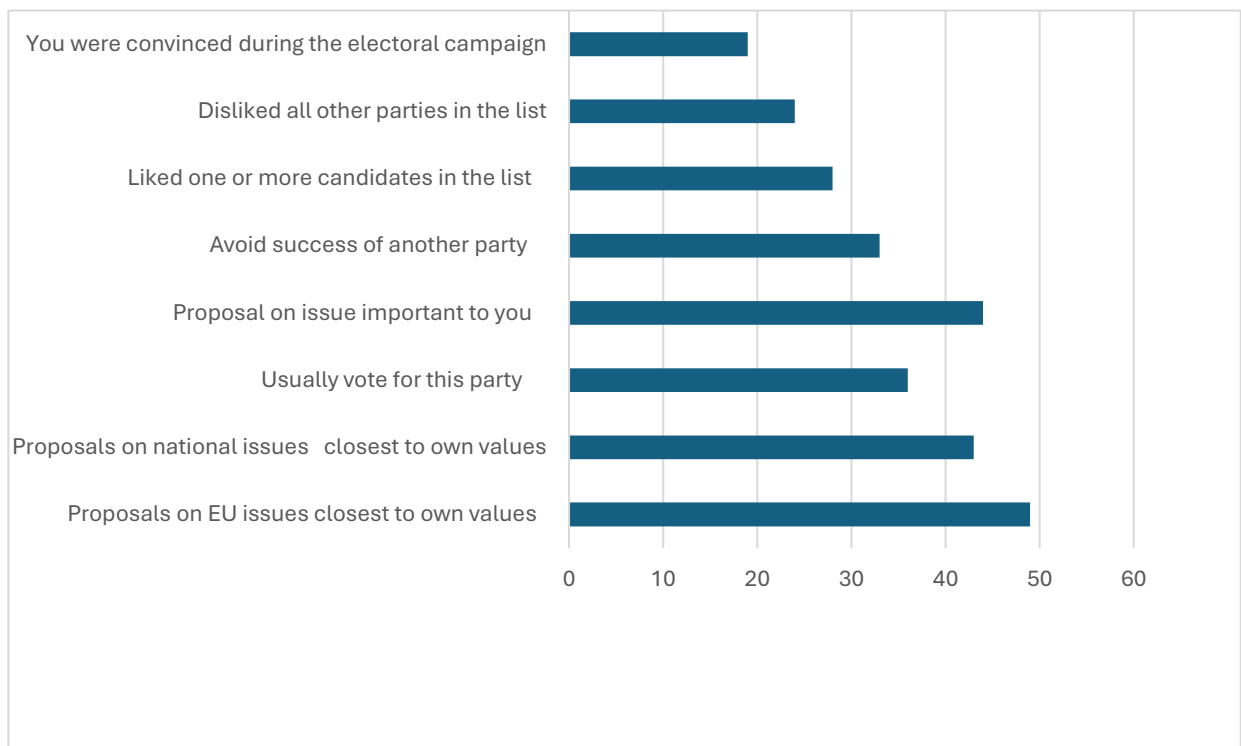


Figure 12: Reasons for voting for a specific party for the 25-39 age group, EU27 average. Source: based on the Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey 2024

IMPACT OF LOWERING THE VOTING AGE IN SOME EU COUNTRIES

Currently, some EU countries, including Austria, Belgium, Germany and Malta, allow 16 year olds to vote in European elections, while Greece set the voting age at 17 for the same elections. In recent years, debates about lowering the voting age have led to opposing views. Advocates argue that lowering the voting age helps to fulfil young people's political rights, while opponents question whether younger individuals are mature enough to make informed political decisions.

Primary concerns about lowering the voting age revolve around adolescents' capacity to engage with politics, especially the capacity for or awareness of informed decision making. Some also point to adolescents' potential vulnerability to manipulation, especially in the context of voting, though research shows that these vulnerabilities are not unique to young people (UNICEF 2024). Studies across various age groups suggest that voting behaviour is influenced by loyalties, identities and social influences rather than purely by rational consideration of policies. As such, younger voters may be no more susceptible to manipulation or misinformation than their older counterparts (ibid.).

Research indicates that granting adolescents the right to vote might encourage more political interest and engagement (Eichhorn and Bergh 2021). Early voting increases the likelihood that young people will cast ballots in subsequent elections, as voting is a habitual behaviour (Dinas et al. 2024). In addition, adults have no maximum voting age, allowing older generations to vote on policies that younger people, who will live with the long-term consequences of these decisions, have no say in shaping. Lowering the voting age would help address this imbalance and give young people the opportunity to participate in decision making, especially on issues with long-term implications like climate change and public debt (UNICEF 2024).

The practical impact of lowering the voting age has been mixed. In Austria, where the voting age was lowered to 16 in 2007, youth turnout in the 2024 EU elections reached only 32%, slightly lower than the EU average (36%) in the 15-24 age group. Malta, in contrast, saw an increase in youth participation after lowering the voting age in 2018, with 58% turnout in 2024. In Germany, where the voting age was lowered to 16 in some states and for the 2024 European elections, youth turnout in the 15-24 age group reached 47%, higher than the EU average but lower than the 25-39 age group (65%). Belgium, which introduced a voting age of 16 for the 2024 EU elections, possibly experienced higher youth turnout because of its compulsory voting system (85%). Finally, Greece saw a turnout rate of only 26% in the youngest age group. Thus, lowering the voting age has not led to significant increases in turnout in all cases. Political disinterest, a lack of civic education and logistical barriers can still limit youth participation, even with a lowered voting age. Countries that lack youth-targeted political campaigns or educational programmes may struggle to engage young voters effectively, especially first-time voters.

A parallel consideration to lowering the voting age is important. In some countries that lowered the voting age, populist parties, particularly the AfD in Germany, achieved significant success. The AfD garnered support from 16% of voters aged 16 to 24. As mentioned, one of the main criticisms of lowering the voting age is that young people are considered too easily influenced and manipulated, especially through the effective use of social media platforms like TikTok, where right-wing parties seem to have a high level of influence. Moreover, a significant portion of young voters make their decisions close to election day, influenced by the latest information and trends on social media. This leaves room for risks associated with disinformation campaigns as well as an opportunity for creative

ways of activating that vote. Looking at the Eurobarometer survey, we find out that 10% of voters aged 15-24 decided a few days before the elections, and 15% a few weeks before, more than any older group of voters. More specifically, the choice of a specific political party or candidate came a few weeks before the elections for 24% of young voters, while 18% and 11% decided a few days before or on the day of the elections.

REPRESENTATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN ELECTABLE POSITIONS

Young people are currently under-represented in national parliaments and the European Parliament. The average age of a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) is 49.5 years. While around 20% of Europe's population is between 18 and 35 years old, only 6% of MEPs fall within this age range. In contrast, the 51 to 65 age group makes up a similar 20% of the population but holds 42% of parliamentary seats, more than double their proportion (Maraffa 2024).

Despite ongoing discussions about youth inclusion in European politics, the average age of MEPs in the newly elected parliament remains 50, the same as in 2019. Notably, five countries – Belgium, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg and Romania – currently have no MEPs under the age of 35. Additionally, eight other countries have only one MEP under the age of 35 each, further highlighting the limited representation of younger politicians. Given that young people account for 25% of the EU population, this under-representation is a growing concern, as they hold only 10% of parliamentary seats.

The discrepancy in youth representation is even more pronounced when examining electoral strategies. The European Youth Forum's analysis shows that young candidates are often placed in less electable positions on party lists (Maraffa 2024). A troubling trend revealed in the analysis is that four of the 19 countries examined had no young candidates in electable positions at all, reinforcing the systemic challenges faced by younger politicians. In many European countries, being placed in a higher position on these lists – defined as having more than a 40% chance of election – is critical to securing a seat. However, younger candidates are frequently relegated to lower, non-electable spots. In some countries, such as Greece, Italy and the Netherlands, where voters have more direct influence on who becomes an MEP, party support and resources still play a significant role in determining the outcome. Even in countries where young candidates are present, their ability to secure seats is significantly diminished compared to older counterparts. This raises the question of why young candidates are consistently placed in lower-chance positions, even though their inclusion could enhance political diversity and bring fresh perspectives to the European Parliament.

Youth representation also varies across political groups. Data show that the Greens/European Free Alliance has the highest proportion of young MEPs under 35, with 20.75%, followed by the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) at 14.1%. In contrast, larger political groups like the European People's Party (EPP) lag behind, with only 4.79% of their MEPs being under 35. These discrepancies suggest that certain political parties are more proactive than others in promoting young candidates.

Promoting younger candidates has been shown to attract younger voters, creating a direct connection between the European Parliament and the youth electorate (Grahm 2024). In France, for instance, the left-wing party La France Insoumise includes 44% young MEPs and received significant support from voters aged 18 to 24. Similarly, Italy's Alleanza Verdi-Sinistra (AVS), with 33% of young

MEPs, saw a high turnout among students. Increasing the number of younger representatives could also help reduce the gender gap in politics. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union show that younger age groups tend to have more women in parliament. For example, in the 21 to 30 age range, the ratio of male to female MPs is roughly 60:40, and in the 31 to 40 group, it narrows to about 2:1 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021).

Countries with a younger delegation, such as Malta (with a median MEP age of 40.5), are better aligned with the general population's median age of 39.3. Conversely, Luxembourg, with the oldest delegation and a median MEP age of 62, represents a significant gap between the electorate and their representatives. Boosting youth representation not only enhances the political diversity of the European Parliament but also promotes policies that reflect the concerns of younger citizens. It is crucial for the future of European democracy that political parties prioritise the placement of young candidates in electable positions, allowing them to contribute their perspectives and connect with a diverse electorate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND FUTURE ELECTIONS

The analysis reveals that although many young people are interested in politics and are supporters of the EU, motivated by issues directly affecting their lives, such as economic challenges and climate change, high levels of abstentionism persist, largely due to distrust in political institutions, a lack of political efficacy, disinformation and logistical barriers to voting. Additionally, while some countries have successfully implemented policies like lowering the voting age, more could be done to strengthen civic education, improve youth-targeted outreach and enhance representation in political offices.

The following recommendations seek to address these gaps by proposing steps for policy makers and practitioners to increase youth turnout, support youth representation and make the political process more accessible and relevant to younger generations across the EU, even in between election periods.

1) Enhance civic education across EU member states

As stated by the EU on several occasions, citizenship education is a policy priority at the European level. To build political awareness and understanding, EU member states should implement or strengthen civic education programmes from secondary school onwards. This should include practical education on political systems, voting processes and critical thinking skills to help young people make informed political decisions. Member states should emphasise values like democracy and active citizenship in their national education policies. However, this focus has yet to be systematically implemented in practice. For instance, the European dimension should be given equal weight to the national dimension of citizenship in national curricula, including the functioning of the EU's institutions, integration process and values. To this end, a co-ordinated civic education programme should be implemented across member states.

Moreover, in order to equip young people with the critical skills to allow them to discern political information and prevent increasing trends towards polarisation and radicalisation, teacher training programmes should be designed to address contemporary challenges,

focusing not only on institutions but also on core democratic values, disinformation, radicalisation and extreme views. Consider, for instance, making use of the available resources provided by the EU, such as the [civic education package](#), to support the work of teachers and education professionals and specific [material prepared on European elections](#). More resources, including standardised educational resources and digital toolkits focusing on the EU, can be made available. In particular, the Council of Europe's [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture \(RFCDC\)](#), approved by European ministers of education in April 2016, provides education professionals with systems to equip young people with all of the competences that are needed to take action to defend and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law, to be active citizens, to participate effectively in a culture of democracy and to live peacefully together with others in culturally diverse societies (Council of Europe 2016).

In addition to these efforts, youth participation mechanisms, such as the EU Youth Dialogue and actions under relevant EU youth programmes, should be further promoted as tools to enhance young people's understanding and engagement with EU policy making. These initiatives, along with events like the European Youth Week 2024, which focused on raising awareness about the European Parliament elections, contribute to fostering a stronger sense of European identity and encouraging civic and democratic participation among young people. By integrating these initiatives into broader civic education strategies, the EU can strengthen youth engagement and ensure the inclusion of their voices in democratic processes.

2) Invest in youth-focused political campaigns and platforms

Political institutions and parties should develop targeted outreach strategies tailored to young people's communication habits. Engaging with youth on social media platforms, particularly TikTok and Instagram, can ensure that political messages are reaching this demographic. Political education campaigns could highlight the relevance of EU policies to young people's lives, covering topics like economic stability, environmental policy and educational reform. Candidates should craft messages that speak directly to young people's interests and focus on both current and future challenges, emphasising how EU policies impact their daily lives and address concerns like green job opportunities, accessible education and affordable housing. In order to address lower voter turnout, it is necessary to deliver essential voting information through user-friendly formats that make the voting process transparent and accessible. This includes using graphics, short videos and FAQs to demystify the electoral process.

Moreover, campaigns should identify messages that resonate specifically with undecided or disengaged youth voters, and candidates should engage in open conversations by meeting with young people and students to answer their questions, talk about elections and build trust. To enhance their participation in elections, and also in between election periods, political parties and candidates should encourage young people to take an active role in outreach strategies, allowing them to lead initiatives creatively and authentically, which can boost engagement among their peers. As observed in the outcome of the 2024 European Parliament elections, political parties and candidates differ considerably in their effective use of social media, having an impact on younger voters' choice. For this, candidates should invest in refining social media strategies and train campaign teams in effective youth

engagement tactics, ensuring a nuanced understanding of digital trends and platform-specific engagement strategies. Finally, it would be important to collaborate with social media platforms to monitor and counteract disinformation, ensuring that young people receive accurate information about elections, EU policies and candidates' platforms.

3) Support youth candidacies and leadership programmes

To foster the inclusion of young people in decision-making roles, the EU and its member states should support initiatives that encourage young people to run for office or participate in leadership programmes. Creating mentorship and leadership pathways for youth in political organisations, particularly targeting marginalised groups, can enhance political representation and renewal within EU institutions. Consider for instance promoting the establishment of EU-funded youth leadership programmes in member states, including training in public speaking, policy development and campaign management, with a focus on developing skills that directly support future candidacies. Fostering knowledge sharing on EU governance across generations could help bolster youth candidacies, through the creation of an EU mentorship network connecting experienced politicians and officials with young, aspiring leaders across member states. Finally, developing a dedicated EU fund to support young candidates running for EU-level elections, providing resources for campaign expenses and outreach strategies, could help to level the playing field for young people.

4) Consider expanding the lower voting age in EU-wide elections and enhance voting accessibility

Other EU member states might consider reducing their voting age for European elections to 16. This move could foster earlier political engagement and broaden the political participation base, helping create a more representative and forward-looking electorate across the EU. Moreover, making voting more accessible to young people can address problems with low turnout. Policies could include extending early voting periods, increasing online and mobile voting options and providing voting information in accessible, youth-friendly formats.

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