

Youth Mobilisation in European Politics: Understanding the Rising Participation Trend in European Parliament Elections among Younger Generations

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The 2019 European Parliament (EP) election significantly departed from its downward turnout trend. Immediate analysis has partly credited the turnout to rising youth participation among younger generations. However, our understanding of the factors driving the surge in youth turnout in supranational elections remains limited. This paper addresses this gap by examining demand-side explanations of the rise in turnout among younger generations in European elections, employing hierarchical age period cohort (HAPC) models on repeated cross-sectional surveys, including the European Election Studies and the Eurobarometer over decades in 15 Western European democracies. It shows evidence that younger cohorts are more likely to participate in European elections than their generational counterparts partly because of more favourable attitudes and perceptions of the EU and EP elections. In contrast, exposure to the EP electoral campaign hardly explains increased youth participation among younger generations. These findings provide a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of political activism in the context of multilevel governance structures and challenge the applicability of the second-order election model to voting behaviour in EP elections among younger citizens.

Keywords: turnout, European Parliament elections, generations, voting behaviour, youth

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1. Introduction

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) election witnessed the highest participation level in the past two decades, revealing a first-time reversal of its downward turnout trend. This positive momentum carried into the 2024 EP election, which saw a further, albeit slight, increase in voter turnout. The overall increase in turnout at the EP elections departed from scholarly expectations based on demographic shifts (Dinas 2012, 2013; Franklin et al. 2004; Grasso 2016; Kostelka & Blais 2021; Smets & Neundorf 2014) and structural factors (De Sio et al., 2019:62). Immediate analysis of the 2019 EP election has partly attributed its increased turnout to rising participation among younger citizens (Becewe et al., 2019). Recent studies have suggested the role of the increased salience of European issues in public debates (Braun, 2021) and the mobilising effects of transnational policy issues (Braun & Schäfer, 2022).

Whereas our understanding of the factors driving or impeding citizens' engagement in elections is extensive (Smets & van Ham, 2013), we know little about the reasons behind the recent surge in youth turnout in supranational elections. To date, few studies have attempted to

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unpack the factors accounting for increased political activism among younger cohorts in European elections. The reasons driving the unexpected increase in turnout among younger citizens in EP elections remain a subject of inquiry. It prompts the question: Where did the increased turnout in EP elections among younger generations come from (Becewe et al., 2019) when younger cohorts are less inclined to participate in national elections partly due to a diminished sense of civic duty and political engagement (Blais et al., 2004; Blais & Rubenson, 2013; Dalton, 2009)?

This paper fills this void by examining multiple explanations of the surge in turnout among younger generations in European elections, emphasising demand-side changes related to shifting voter characteristics across various generations. It employs hierarchical age period cohort (HAPC) models to identify reasons behind the rising youth participation in supranational elections. Using repeated cross-sectional and cross-national surveys, including the European Election Studies and the Eurobarometer over decades in 15 Western European democracies, it shows evidence that younger cohorts are more likely to participate in European elections than their generational counterparts partly because of a greater sense of European identity, increased political efficacy in EU politics, and perceived importance of electoral results in EP elections. In contrast, factors related to support for EU membership, trust in EU institutions, exposure to EP electoral campaigns, and perceived EU competence explain little rising participation among younger generations.

The emergence of EU-related factors as key drivers of youth turnout in European elections undermines the applicability of the second-order election (SOE) model to voting behaviour in EP elections among young citizens. It provides an updated understanding of the evolving nature of political activism in the context of multilevel governance structures. In addition, amidst the backdrop of the 2024 election campaigns, discerning why younger individuals exhibit a greater inclination to engage in supranational contexts holds immediate relevance. These insights are pivotal for informing strategies aimed at enhancing youth political participation, strengthening democratic legitimacy, and fostering a more inclusive European policy.

This article commences by reviewing existing literature on turnout variations across cohorts. Following this, it delineates the theoretical framework and hypotheses proposing changes in voter characteristics among younger generations. Subsequently, it presents the data and method used. The results section analyses demand-side factors contributing to increased participation among younger cohorts in EP elections. Finally, it concludes by discussing the findings and their implications for the ongoing electoral landscape in supranational contexts.

2. Generational turnout disparities: Insights and explanations

The decrease in voter participation had been a dominant pattern in advanced democracies in the latter part of the 20th century, influencing both national elections (Gray & Caul, 2000) and EP elections (Flickinger & Studlar, 2007). Existing research has shown that turnout disparities across cohorts contribute to shaping the overall turnout trends over time, as these variations influence the aggregate turnout pattern through the gradual process of generational replacement (Franklin, 2004).

Prior research had discerned a preoccupying generational trend in electoral engagement, revealing a lower voting inclination among post-baby boomers. Analyses on pooled surveys of national elections in the United States, Canada, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Germany confirm this negative trend (Blais et al., 2004; Franklin, 2004; Gallego, 2009; Konzelmann et al., 2012; Wass, 2007). A marked discrepancy in turnout levels was also identified between pre- and post-baby boomers in previous EP elections from 1979 to 2009 across 11 EU member states (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012).

Scholars have been keen to pinpoint the reasons behind cohort variations in turnout. The investigation has been approached from demand-side analyses centring on changing voter characteristics or supply-side explanations highlighting shifting election characteristics. On the one hand, younger generations may exhibit varying levels of electoral participation because of distinct attributes, such as differing levels of political interest, compared to previous generations; on the other hand, varying turnout levels may be related to changes in factors associated with voting incentives, such as the competitiveness and significance of elections.

Regarding changes in voter traits across generations, Blais et al. (2004) suggest that the significant decline in turnout among post-baby boomers in Canada from 1969 to 2000 is associated with a diminished sense of civic duty and reduced political engagement, including less attention paid to political matters in media consumption, decreased political interest, and lower levels of political knowledge. In addition, using repeated cross-sectional surveys and panel data in the United States, Blais & Rubenson (2013) find evidence that decreased turnout in presidential elections among recent generations is explained by their weaker sense of duty and political efficacy. Furthermore, Fieldhouse et al. (2007) find evidence from the 2002-2003 European Social Survey that young people are less likely to participate in national elections across Europe, in part due to decreased group affiliations, institutional distrust, and weakened partisan allegiance.

Regarding changes in election characteristics, Persson et al. (2013), using the Swedish national election study from 1960 to 2010, find that the declining percentage of party membership in the electorate and increasing number of parties competing for votes over time are linked to lower turnout among younger generations. Furthermore, Smets & Neundorff (2014) demonstrate how cohorts socialised in a highly politicised environment during their formative years exhibit a greater inclination to participate in voting, irrespective of age or temporal influences. They provide evidence from the US General Social Survey spanning 1972 to 2010 that overall turnout rates and party polarisation during cohorts' initial two elections partially account for turnout disparities among various generations.

Yet, in light of the observed rise in turnout among younger generations in recent EP elections (Becewe et al., 2019), a crucial question arises: Why do younger cohorts demonstrate rising voting levels in EP elections compared to their generational counterparts? Surprisingly, studies have been scarce in identifying the reasons behind cohort variations in turnout in supranational elections. Understanding the reasons behind increased electoral participation among the youth in supranational elections holds theoretical and social relevance.

EP elections have been regarded as second-order arenas fought under the shadows of national dynamics since their first appearance in 1979 (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Although scholars still dispute the second-order character of contemporary EP elections (Schäfer, 2021; Schmitt et al.,

2020), the SOE model remains one of the dominant approaches to understanding voting behaviours in supranational elections. It continues to provide consistent explanations of aggregate electoral results in EP elections across EU member states (Hix & Marsh, 2011; Schmitt & Toygür, 2016). Whereas the SOE model posits that turnout decisions in these second-order elections have little to do with the European polity itself, EU-related factors have recently found increasing evidence in voting decisions in EP elections (Braun, 2021; Hobolt & Spoon, 2012; Schäfer & Debus, 2018). Suppose the increasing turnout in EP elections results from more positive attitudes and perceptions of the EU and EP elections among younger generations. In that case, it further questions the applicability of the SOE model to youth voting behaviours in these elections.

Additionally, young people represent the future of democracy. Their engagement in EP elections not only impacts the current political landscape but also shapes the trajectory of democracy in the long term. Understanding the factors driving their participation can inform policymakers in formulating strategies to cultivate electoral involvement in the context of multilevel governance structures.

3. Theoretical framework and hypothesis

Generational differences in attitudes and behaviours are attributed to the shifting socio-historical contexts to which individuals are exposed during their formative years. The theoretical framework is twofold. First, in terms of timing, late adolescence to early adulthood is considered a crucial period when political beliefs and opinions are formed, challenged, and solidified; in contrast, later life stages typically see a significant increase in attitudinal stability (Dinas, 2013). Second, regarding causes, generational effects are associated with varying contexts of political socialisation, leading to the crystallisation of different values, attitudes, and behaviours among cohorts. Differences across generations may result directly from specific socio-historical events (Mannheim, 1928), such as the student protests of 1968, which fostered political activism among those coming of age in Western Europe (Grasso, 2016). These differences can also emerge from broader social transformations during citizens' formative years (Inglehart, 1977). For instance, Kostelka & Blais (2021) demonstrate that affluent conditions in post-industrial societies have led to lower voter turnout among those who came of age during this period.

Once politically socialised, individuals tend to maintain consistent voting patterns, which can be seen as forming voting habits (Dinas, 2012) or reflecting stable attitudes (Kostelka & Blais, 2021). Although all cohorts at a given time experience similar political contexts shaped by socio-historical events, the degree of exposure varies. While such changes add layers to existing attitudes and habits among older citizens, they may leave a lasting impression on younger individuals without prior experience (Dinas, 2013). The significant impact of political socialisation during formative years on voting behaviour is supported by empirical evidence. For example, elections of low salience have been shown to lead to low turnout among the young, as early electoral experiences shape voting and non-voting habits (Dinas, 2012; Franklin et al., 2004; Smets & Neundorf, 2014).

Building on the theory of political socialisation, differences in socialisation experiences regarding the EU and the EP elections are posited as the primary source driving generational

variations in attitudes and behaviours in supranational elections. While earlier cohorts had been socialised in an era when the EU and EP elections held minor significance, the socialisation contexts in which younger generations come of age appear markedly different. In earlier EP elections, it was observed that 'those who participated went to the polls just because they are used to doing so on election day' (Schmitt & Mannheimer, 1991:31). The decisions to vote in European elections had little to do with choosing representatives at the EU level. Previous studies have indicated that citizens are less inclined to participate in European elections due to a variety of demobilising factors, such as apathy towards EU politics, Eurosceptic attitudes, perception of the low significance of EP elections, and distrust in EU institutions (Clark, 2014; Schäfer, 2021; Stockemer & Blais, 2019).

Whereas scholars continue to debate the second-order character of present-day EP elections (Hix & Marsh, 2007; Schäfer, 2021), there is widespread agreement that the EU and its parliament underwent significant transformations at the turn of the 21st century (Hix & Marsh, 2011; Schmitt, 2005; Studlar et al., 2003). The expanded reach of the EU and the increased significance of European issues in recent decades have arguably resulted in a more favourable socialisation environment fostering positive attitudes and perceptions towards both the EU and EP elections among younger generations.

The policy scope of the EU expanded significantly as younger generations reached adulthood amidst the shift to the 2000s. In contrast to the European Coal and Steel Community established in 1952, studies indicate that by the 1990s, Brussels had become the primary producer of significant legislation, surpassing any other national capital (Schmitt, 2005). The Maastricht Treaty notably enhanced the opportunity to live, work, and study in different member states compared to previous conditions, formally ensuring the freedom of labour movement within the EU (Down & Wilson, 2013). Several successive EU treaties, including those of Amsterdam, Nice, and Lisbon, were additionally enacted in the post-Maastricht era, with the establishment of the European Central Bank in 1998 and the introduction of the euro in 1999 marking significant milestones.

Consider the contrasting socialisation experiences a French citizen would have had with the EU during the 1960s and the 1990s. A person reaching adulthood in the 1960s encountered the early stages of the EU, then known as the European Economic Community (EEC). Integration efforts at that time were underway, but the process was still in its infancy, lacking clear symbols of unity and broader territorial reach. While freedom of movement within the EEC was gradually developing, it was not as extensive as in later years. In contrast, an individual coming of age in the 1990s was socialised with a European polity where major institutions and frameworks were established, enjoying tangible benefits such as unrestricted travel, work, and residency across dozens of EU member states. This era also witnessed the emergence of prominent symbols of European identity, including the EU flag, euro currency, passports, and driving licenses, fostering a more profound sense of belonging to a broader European community.

Moreover, the widened policy reach of the EU, coupled with the increased salience of European integration, has arguably contributed to the increased significance and Europeanisation of EP elections during the formative years of younger cohorts. Initially characterised as a 'sleeping giant' capable of inciting public debates in the late 1990s (Franklin & van der Eijk, 1996), the issue of European integration no longer fosters permissive consensus but instead constrains dissensus (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). The salience of European issues has grown throughout a series of EU-

related crises, such as the European sovereign debt crisis emerging in 2008 and the migration crisis peaking in 2015 (Hooghe & Marks 2018; Otjes & Katsanidou 2017). Additionally, the news coverage of the 2009 EP election witnessed an exponential increase in its visibility and Europeanness across EU member states (Schuck et al., 2011), contrasting poor media coverage of previous EP elections (De Vreese et al., 2006).

Research on generational differences in attitudes towards the EU underscores several evolving voter characteristics among younger cohorts. Down & Wilson (2013, 2017) show that individuals socialised after the 1970s exhibited mounting support for the EU membership, growing trust in EU institutions, rising regret for EU dissolution, and increasing agreement for the unification process. Moreover, when asked about their motivations for turnout and party choice in the 2019 EP election, younger respondents are demonstrated to be more inclined to attribute their participation to a desire for change and a sense of European identity; additionally, their party preferences show a higher susceptibility to party positions on European issues and the EP electoral campaign (Becewe et al., 2019).

Extensive research on electoral participation has identified various theories and rationales accounting for turnout variations across individuals (Smets & van Ham, 2013), which can inform the development of possible explanations for increased participation among younger generations in supranational elections. The civic voluntarism model, stemming from the standard socioeconomic model (SES), stands out as a prominent framework for understanding political participation in general. It underscores the significance of resources such as time, money, and civic skills in shaping political engagement (Verba et al., 1995). Yet, the civic voluntarism model expands beyond resource-based explanations for non-participation, suggesting that individuals may also refrain from political involvement due to a lack of psychological engagement with politics (García-Albacete, 2014:58). Drawing insights from this model, the increase in turnout levels in EP elections among younger cohorts may be attributed to positive attitudes towards the EU. These cognitive characteristics may include political efficacy, trust in institutions and personal preferences linked to expressive voting (Smets & van Ham, 2013).

H1: Positive attitudes towards the EU partly explain the increased probability of voting in EP elections among younger cohorts.

In addition, the rational choice model underscores the idea that voting entails a cost-benefit analysis, where the perceived benefits of voting should exceed the associated costs to motivate an individual to participate in elections (Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). A prevalent explanation for the lower turnout rates in EP elections compared to national elections is the general public's lack of interest in EU politics (Clark, 2014). European elections may have been regarded as 'low-salience competitions' (Hix & Marsh, 2011; Schmitt, 2005) because, in the earlier phases of European integration, it was the national governments, rather than the European Parliament, that made the majority or all of the political decisions within the EU. Furthermore, Moravcsik (2002) contends that the EU primarily handles tasks of minimal interest to the public (such as central banking and technical administration); in contrast, matters of high significance (such as healthcare, education, law enforcement, pension and social security policy, and taxation) are mainly dealt with at the national level. The EU and its parliament are thus seen as having trivial significance. If European citizens perceive that the outcome of supranational elections will have little or no immediate impact

on their lives, they are less likely to feel motivated to participate. I thus expect that the increased turnout among younger cohorts may be explained by more favourable perceptions of the EU and the EP elections.

H2: Favourable perceptions of the EU and the EP elections partly explain the increased probability of voting in EP elections among younger cohorts.

Lastly, according to the mobilisation model of voter turnout, the concept revolves around citizens being encouraged by parties, candidates, interest groups, and emerging social movements to engage in politics (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). These social networks lower the barriers to political participation by offering information about parties, candidates, and electoral procedures. I thus hypothesise that younger cohorts are more likely to participate in EP elections partly because of greater exposure to the European election campaign.

H3: Greater exposure to the European election campaign partly explains the increased probability of voting in EP elections among younger cohorts.

4. Data and methods

This study employs data from repeated waves of post-electoral surveys on EP elections, including the European Election Studies (EES) and the Eurobarometer (EB). The empirical analysis is performed on two combined datasets: one dataset harmonises data from the EES 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019, encompassing electoral participation in EP elections over two decades, while the other dataset combines data from the Flash EB 62, the EB 71.3, the EES 2014, and the EB 91.5, covering the EP elections from 2004 to 2019 (see Appendix Table 1 for comparison of data sources). Statistical models include survey-fixed effects to control for potential differences in survey design, sampling procedures, and data collection methods.

These EES and EB post-electoral surveys stand as pivotal resources for understanding citizens' electoral behaviour in supranational elections across EU member states while offering valuable information on public opinion and attitudes towards the EU and its institutions over time. The EES primarily focus on EP elections, providing detailed snapshots of voting behaviour during these electoral cycles; the EB covers a broader range of topics beyond elections, including public opinion on various EU policies, institutions, and social issues. The joint use of these two data sources allows for a more comprehensive examination of EU-specific factors, ranging from aspects such as the European election campaign to attitudes and perceptions regarding the EU and EP elections.

I utilise logistic regression models given that the dependent variable, turnout, is binary. Yet, self-reported turnout in these surveys typically suffers from over-reported participation due to social desirability bias. In other words, people tend to overstate their participation in surveys, especially when turnout rates are high, to appear more civic-minded or engaged than they actually are. However, the concern of overreporting is considered less critical in this study as the primary objective is not to interpret the turnout levels in absolute terms; instead, it aims to compare how including additional explanatory variables, accounting for varying cohort characteristics, affects the

estimation of relative cohort-level variance in turnout in EP elections.²

The analysis focuses on 15 Western European democracies that joined the EU before its enlargement in 2004. Previously grouped as the EU-15, these countries include Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom (withdrew from the EU in 2020), and Sweden. Countries from Central and Eastern Europe are not included in the analysis due to significant variations in turnout patterns in EP elections within this region compared to member states in Western Europe (Flickinger & Studlar, 2007).

This study employs a so-called age-period-cohort (APC) analysis to examine various demand-side explanations that may account for the increased turnout among younger generations in EP elections in Western Europe. Yet, as three temporal effects—age, period, and generation—are linearly interdependent (cohort = period - age), generational differences are hardly identifiable in statistical models without necessitating some theoretical assumptions regarding at least one of the three APC effects. The APC identification problem has prompted significant methodological discourse in recent decades, with several approaches suggested to address it (Smets & Neundorf, 2014).

The hierarchical age-period-cohort (HAPC) model, proposed by Yang & Land (2006, 2008), appears to be a potentially suitable modelling strategy for this study to disentangle the effects of age, period and cohort. This approach avoids the issue of multicollinearity between three temporal variables by modelling the effects of cohort and period as random effects, including random intercepts accounting for cross-classified grouping of observations. This strategy is particularly suited for analysis on repeated cross-sectional surveys, as each observation can be viewed as embedded within a contextual cohort and period unit. In addition, HAPC models allow for investigating the reasons behind differences between cohorts (or periods) (McLaren et al., 2021).

Similar to the modelling specification utilised in Down & Wilson (2013, 2017), I include random effects for cohort and country-year units as well as country-fixed effects to account for the dependencies within the data. Studies show that compulsory voting and other country-year-specific factors influence turnout decisions in EP elections (Franklin, 2001). These factors include the timing of EP elections relative to national elections, the turnout boost in first-time EP elections held in new member states, and the concurrence of significant domestic referendums with EP elections (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012). I include the continuous age variable and its squared term as fixed effects to control for the curvilinear impact of ageing on turnout observed in survey data (Smets & van Ham, 2013).

While determining the exact year cut-offs for dividing individuals into different cohorts can be somewhat arbitrary, I use a general classification commonly used in the literature (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Blais et al., 2004; Wass, 2007). This categorisation is based on general trends and events delineating different socialisation experiences between cohorts/ generations, extended from Bhatti & Hansen's (2012) study on generational differences in turnout at European elections. It is essential to clarify that this framework does not aim to classify 'political generations' in the sense

² The underlying assumption of logistic regression models is that variations in misreporting rates among different demographic groups remain consistent throughout the time period studied; potential bias in the results may occur if there are disparities in social desirability norms among different generations.

defined by Mannheim (1928).

Individuals are categorised into six broad cohorts/ generations: the Pre-war generation, the Baby-boomer generation, the 60s generation, the 70s generation, the 80s generation, and the 90/00s generation (see Table 1).³ The Pre-war generation, born before the end of WWII, entered early into the workforce, valued material security, and deeply considered voting as a civic duty. The Baby-boomer generation saw significant urbanisation and industrialisation, leading to improved living standards. The 60s generation, following the post-war reconstruction and early 1960s economic boom, experienced a relatively smoother life compared to earlier generations. The 70s generation grew up during the final stages of the Cold War and the rise of neoliberalism in Europe, characterised by pragmatism and increasing individualism (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Grasso, 2016).

The 80s generation witnessed increasing globalisation, spending most of their formative years during the post-Maastricht era, which saw substantial expansion in the EU's policy scope. The establishment of the European Central Bank in 1998 and the introduction of the euro in 1999 marked significant developments. The 90/00s generation experienced heightened attention to European issues in EP elections throughout a series of EU crises, including the 2008 sovereign debt crisis, the migrant crisis, and Brexit.

While some may advocate for classifications more tailored to specific contexts or countries, this general categorisation framework offers two key advantages. First, it allows for observing general trends in turnout among post-baby boomers while recognising the turnout disparities between pre- and post-baby boomers (Blais et al., 2004; Gallego, 2009; Konzelmann et al., 2012; Wass, 2007). Second, it facilitates a parsimonious comparison across EU member states, allowing the identification of pan-European development in EP elections in Western Europe.

Table 1. Categorisation of cohorts/ generations

	Pre-war	Baby - boomer	60s	70s	80s	90s/00s
Year of birth	- 1945	1946 - 1959	1960 - 1969	1970 - 1979	1980 - 1989	1990 -
Formative years	- 1963	1964 - 1977	1978 - 1987	1988 - 1997	1998 - 2007	2008 -

Compositional changes across cohorts in EU-related attitudes, perceptions, and exposure to the European election campaign are tested to investigate how varying voter characteristics may account for variations in turnout at the cohort level in EP elections. Regarding attitudes toward the EU and its institutions, I examine four aspects of attitudinal changes: support for EU membership, trust in EU institutions, European identity, and political efficacy in EU politics. Support for EU membership is assessed using the standard Eurobarometer question, which asks, *'Generally speaking, do you think that [country] membership of the European Union is..?'* Responses are coded as follows: *'Good thing'* = 1, *'Neither'* = 0, *'Bad thing'* = -1. Trust in EU institutions is measured by asking respondents whether they agree with the statement: *'You trust the institutions of the EU.'*⁴ European identity is assessed using

³ Although there is little agreement in the literature about the specific age at which political events imprint lasting impact on young adults (Smets & Neundorf, 2014; Grasso, 2014), an informative panel study conducted among Dutch adolescents and young adults indicates that the most influential period in shaping voting behaviour is around the age of 18 (Rekker et al., 2019).

⁴ Trust in EU institutions is the sole trust item consistently available in the post-electoral surveys of EP elections from 2004 to 2019.

two survey questions that inquire about respondents' attachment to Europe and their sense of feeling as citizens of the EU. Political efficacy in EU politics is measured by respondents' agreement with the following two statements: *'You had all the necessary information in order to choose who to vote for in the recent European elections'* and *'The European Parliament takes into consideration the concerns of European citizens.'*

In terms of perceptions of the EU and the EP elections, I include variables measuring perceived EU competence and the importance of EP results. Perceived EU competence is assessed via the most important issue question (MII), *'As of today, at which level do you think <the most important issue/ problem> is dealt with?'* Responses indicating 'European level' are coded 1, while all other responses (national/ regional levels or don't know) are coded 0. The importance of EP results is assessed through two questions inquiring whether candidate and party outcomes are important to respondents in supranational elections: *'It is very important for you which particular candidates have been elected as MEPs in the European Parliament elections in the [country]'* and *'It is very important for you to know which particular political party has the most MEPs in the European Parliament elections in the [country].'*

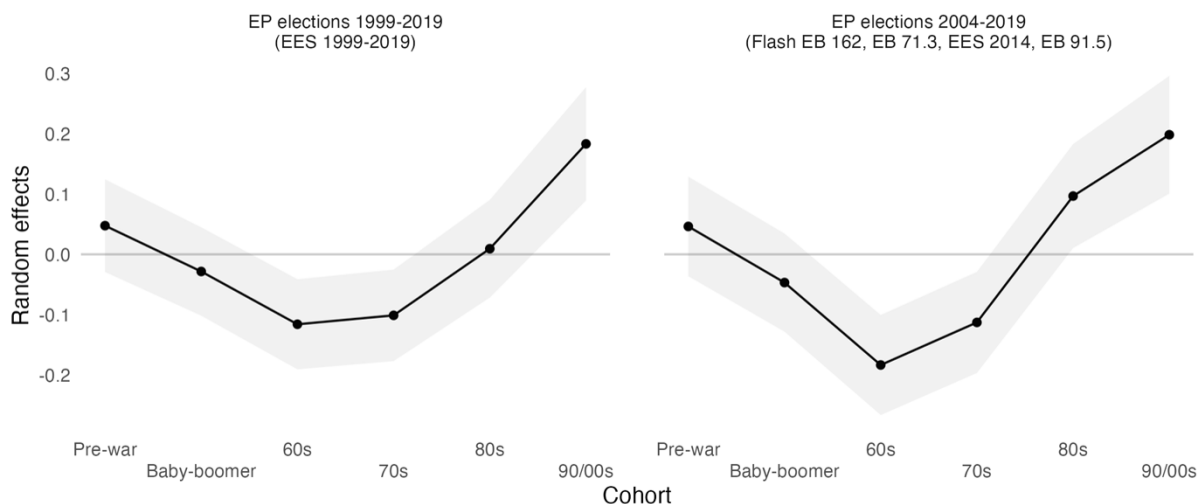
In terms of exposure to the European election campaign, I assess whether respondents have encountered campaigning efforts from the European Parliament and their level of media attention to the campaign preceding the EP elections. Exposure to the voting campaign is measured with the following question, *'Personally, do you remember having seen on TV, on the Internet or on posters, read in newspapers or heard on the radio messages from the European Parliament encouraging people to vote in the European Parliament elections?'* Media attention to the campaign is assessed through a question in the EES 2019 asking respondents to rate, on a scale from 0 to 10, *'How closely did you follow the campaign ahead of the European Parliament elections in the media or on social media?'* For earlier EP elections, this variable is measured through a sum index ranging from 0 to 10 via three EES items. Respondents in the EES 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 were asked the frequencies at which they *'watch a programme about the European elections on television'*, *'read about the European elections in a newspaper'* and *'read about the European elections on the Internet (websites, social media, etc.)'*. Responses indicating *'Often'* are assigned a value of 3.33, responses indicating *'Sometimes'* are assigned a value of 1.66, and responses indicating *'Never'* are assigned a value of 0 (see Appendix Table 2 and Appendix Table 3 for a summary of measures of explanatory variables).

Lastly, I include control variables accounting for the effects of compositional changes in social demography across generations, including gender, education, and occupational status. Party identification, union membership, religious attendance, and political interest are additionally controlled in the dataset combining the EES 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019, as these variables are not consistently available in the EB. While educational attainment and occupational status are linked to the resource model of electoral participation, party identification, union membership, and religious attendance are relevant to the mobilisation model (Smets & van Ham, 2013). All continuous independent variables are centred at the overall mean of the pooled data, aligning with the convention of HAPC models proposed by Yang & Land (2008). This approach enables the interpretation of random cohort effects as deviations from the grand mean.

5. Results

The HAPC models on two datasets of post-electoral surveys of EP elections point to an increasing likelihood of voting among younger generations in EP elections. Figure 1 plots the estimated random effects for cohorts on electoral participation in EP elections. It is observable that the 60s and 70s generations are significantly less likely to vote in supranational elections, echoing previous studies showing a general decrease in voting likelihood between pre-and post-baby boomers (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Blais et al., 2004; Franklin, 2004; Gallego, 2009; Konzelmann et al., 2012; Wass, 2007). Yet, a rising turnout pattern in supranational elections is observed among post-baby-boomer cohorts. Notably, the 80s and 90/00s generations socialised in a widened reach of the EU and the increased salience of European issues exhibited a growing tendency to vote in EP elections while controlling for the effects of age, period and compositional changes in social demography across cohorts. The results align with the observation of rising youth participation in recent EP elections (Becewe et al., 2019; Li, 2024).

Figure 1. Predicted random cohort effects on turnout in EP elections



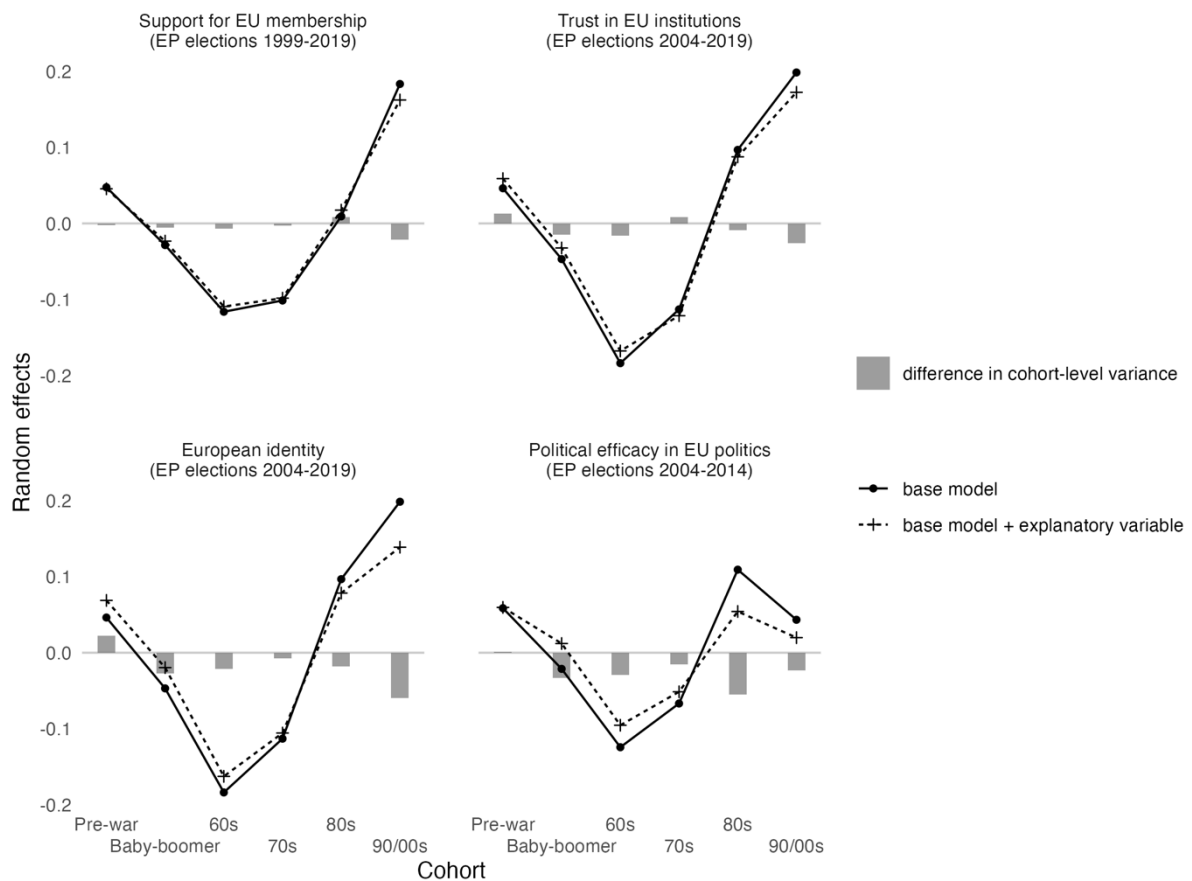
Note: The left panel contrasts the random cohort effects on turnout from Model 1 in Appendix Table 4, utilising data from the EES 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019. The right panel compares the random cohort effects on turnout from Model 1 in Appendix Table 5, leveraging data from the Flash EB 162, EB 71.3, EES 2014, and EB 91.5. The magnitude of random effects is represented by the best linear unbiased predictions (BLUPs), and the shaded area denotes the 95% confidence intervals.

The following analysis compares how including additional explanatory variables, accounting for compositional changes in voter characteristics related to EU attitudes, perceptions, and exposure to the European election campaign, affects the estimated cohort-level variance in turnout among younger generations. If younger cohorts are more inclined to vote in supranational elections, partly because of more positive attitudes towards the EU, controlling for compositional differences in EU-related attitudes should diminish the observed increase in turnout levels among younger cohorts.

Figure 2 compares the differences in cohort-level variance between two types of models: base models and those including EU-related attitudes. According to the results of HAPC models on turnout in EP elections, favourable support for EU membership, trusting EU institutions, a stronger sense of European identity, and political efficacy in EU politics significantly encourage

turnout in supranational elections (see Model 2 in the Appendix table 4 and Model 3, 4, and 7 in Appendix Table 5). However, compositional changes in support for EU membership and trust in EU institutions only marginally account for the heightened turnout among younger cohorts. In contrast, the heightened turnout levels observed among younger cohorts are attributed to a growing sense of European identity and political efficacy in EU politics among younger generations. Notably, a stronger sense of European identity, referring to feelings of EU citizenship and attachment to Europe, mainly explains the heightened turnout among the 90/00s generation. In addition, the increased turnout among the 80s generation is substantially linked to their growing sense of political efficacy in EU politics.

Figure 2. Differences in cohort-level variance between base models and models incorporating EU-related attitudes

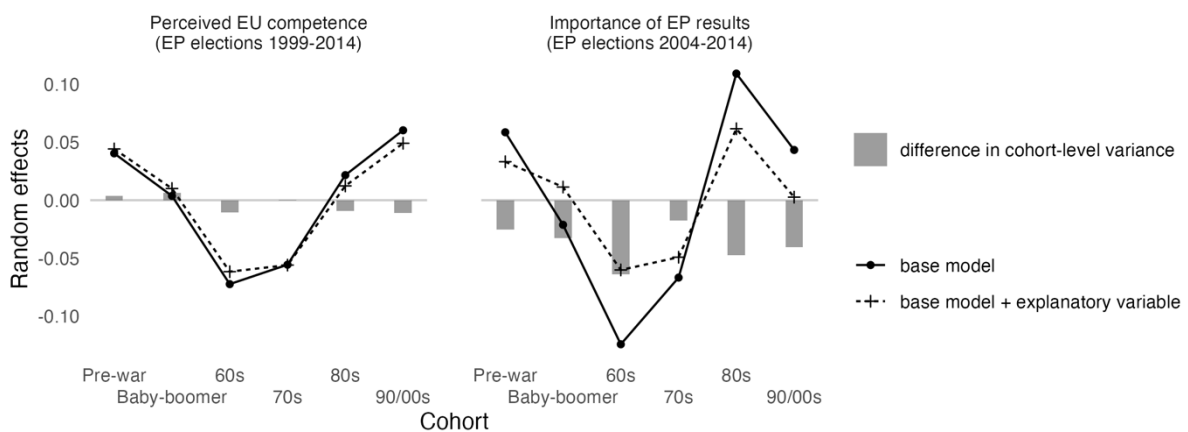


Note: The panels compare the estimated cohort-level variance between base models and those including additional explanatory variable(s) as fixed effects. Shaded area denotes the differences between variance estimated from two types of models. The panel regarding support for EU membership compares the estimations from Model 1 with those from Model 2 in Appendix Table 4. The panel regarding trust in EU institutions compares the estimations from Model 1 with those from Model 3 in Appendix Table 5. The panel regarding European identity compares the estimations from Model 1 with those from Model 4 in Appendix Table 5. The panel regarding political efficacy in EU politics compares the estimations from Model 6 with those from Model 7 in Appendix Table 5.

Figure 3 compares the differences in cohort-level variance between two types of models: base models and those accounting for changing perceptions of the EU and the EP elections. It is demonstrated that the perceived EU competence explains little increased turnout among younger generations. Furthermore, respondents who indicate that the most important issue is

dealt with at the European level do not demonstrate a significantly higher propensity to vote in EP elections (see Model 6 in Appendix Table 4). In contrast, respondents who indicate that the results of EP elections are important are substantially more likely to turn out in EP elections (see Model 8 in Appendix Table 5). Importantly, compositional differences in perceptions of the importance of EP results account for variance in turnout level observed across generations, particularly for the 60s, the 80s and the 90/00s generations. It provides evidence that the increased importance attributed to the results of supranational elections is one of the key factors contributing to the higher turnout among younger generations.

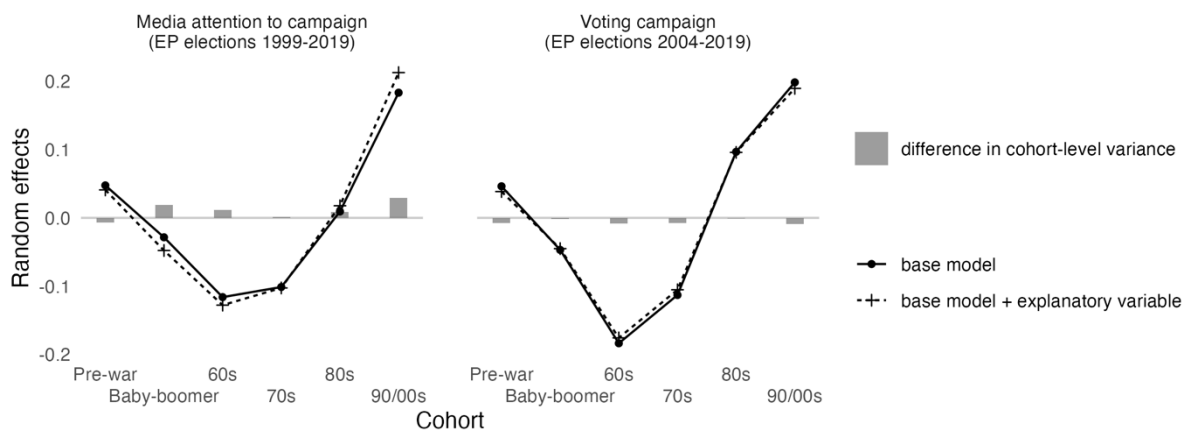
Figure 3. Differences in cohort-level variance between base models and models incorporating EU-related perceptions



Note: The panels compare the estimated cohort-level variance between base models and those including additional explanatory variable(s) as fixed effects. Shade area denotes the differences between variance estimated from two types of models. The panel regarding the perceived EU competence compares the estimations from Model 5 with those from Model 6 in Appendix Table 4. The panel regarding the importance of EP results compares the estimations from Model 6 with those from Model 8 in Appendix Table 5.

Figure 4 compares the differences in cohort-level variance between two types of models: base models and those incorporating exposure to the European election campaign. Regarding media attention to the campaign, respondents who closely follow the election campaign are more likely to participate in the EP elections (see Model 3 in Appendix Table 4). However, varying media attention to EP elections across cohorts does not reduce the heightened turnout levels among younger generations. In addition, although exposure to the voting campaign correlates significantly with turnout in EP elections (see Model 2 in Appendix Table 5), adjusting for this difference in composition across cohorts hardly explains the cohort-level variance in turnout in supranational elections. Therefore, exposure to the European election campaign does not appear to drive increased youth participation in EP elections.

Figure 4. Differences in cohort-level variance between base models and models incorporating exposure to the European election campaign



Note: The panels compare the estimated cohort-level variance between base models and those including additional explanatory variable(s) as fixed effects. Shade area denotes the differences between variance estimated from two types of models. The panel regarding the perceived EU competence compares the estimations from Model 5 with those from Model 6 in Appendix Table 4. The panel regarding the importance of EP results compares the estimations from Model 6 with those from Model 8 in Appendix Table 5.

6. Conclusions

The 2019 EP election significantly departed from its downward turnout trend, witnessing the highest level of participation in the past two decades. The 2024 EP election continued this momentum with a slight increase in voter turnout across EU member states. This notable rise in turnout, which deviates from previous patterns, challenges scholarly expectations based on demographic shifts and structural factors (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; De Sio et al., 2019). While immediate analysis of the election highlighted the surge in youth participation as a contributing factor (Becewe et al., 2019), the underlying reasons driving this phenomenon remained largely unexplored. This gap in understanding prompts the inquiry into the sources of increased youth turnout in European elections.

Using HAPC models on repeated cross-sectional and cross-national surveys of EP elections spanning decades, this study investigates demand-side explanations related to shifting cohort characteristics that account for the increased youth participation in recent EP elections in Western Europe. It sheds new light on the dynamics behind the rising voter turnout in supranational elections among younger generations, particularly in the context of the unexpected increase in turnout in recent European elections.

Previous studies have pointed to citizens' apathy toward EU politics and their perception of EP elections as being of low significance as critical factors driving low turnout in supranational elections (Clark, 2014; Schäfer, 2021; Stockemer & Blais, 2019). However, this article suggests a fundamental shift in how younger citizens view EP elections, which contributes to greater voter engagement in supranational contests among younger generations. It shows evidence that

the rising turnout trend among younger cohorts can be partly explained by their increasingly favourable attitudes and perceptions towards the EU and EP elections.

Whereas earlier research highlights younger cohorts' strong support for EU membership and greater trust in EU institutions (Bauer & Morisi, 2023; Down & Wilson, 2013), this study reveals that these factors alone do not fully account for the increased turnout observed in recent EP elections. Instead, the findings underscore the relevance of a more vital sense of European identity, political efficacy in EU politics, and the perceived importance of EP electoral outcomes as crucial motivators for younger voters. Additionally, the minimal impact of exposure to the European election campaign on this trend challenges common assumptions about the role of electoral campaigns in driving voter participation. These insights offer a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of political engagement among younger generations and challenge the applicability of the SOE model in understanding voting behaviour among young citizens in EP elections.

The supranational elections have traditionally been viewed as second-order battlegrounds operating within national dynamics (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). The SOE model remains a prevailing paradigm in EP election research, positing that turnout decisions are primarily unrelated to the European polity (Schmitt et al., 2020; Schmitt & Mannheimer, 1991). However, the uncovered association between the surge in turnout among young voters in EP elections and their favourable attitudes and perceptions toward the EU and EP elections prompts a re-evaluation of the applicability of the SOE model to youth voting behaviours in EP elections.

Moreover, by delving into the complexities of youth participation, the findings offer valuable insights that have implications for policymaking, electoral strategies, and efforts to promote a more vibrant and participatory European democracy. For instance, while younger generations are more likely to vote out of their sense of European identity and perceived significance of electoral results, efforts to mobilise youth vote in EP elections may yield greater effectiveness by appealing to young people's sense of EU citizenship and by providing easily understandable profiles of party and candidate positions in supranational contests.

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