

# This time I'm (not) voting: How campaign factors affect European citizens' turnout in EP elections



*Turnout in European Parliament elections declined in every vote held between 1979 and 2014. Ahead of the 2019 elections, the EU launched an initiative, 'This time I'm voting', in the hope of raising public interest. While turnout did increase in the 2019 contest, it remains an open question as to whether such campaign efforts help mobilise citizens. Drawing on a new study, [Franziska Marquart](#), [Andreas C. Goldberg](#) and [Claes H. de Vreese](#)*

*assess the role of individuals' passive exposure to and active engagement with the 2019 campaign, finding that not all campaign efforts helped to increase turnout, with some even serving to demobilise the European electorate.*

Although research has found that a number of factors play a role for citizens' participation in European Parliament (EP) elections, few studies assess the specific EP election campaign environment and its influence on turnout. Little information exists on whether or not, for example, online and offline exposure to political parties' advertisements or informational material, interpersonal communication, and active searches for information about the elections can contribute to mobilising the European electorate. While efforts such as the EP's 2019 'This time I'm voting!' initiative may be an important part of the information environment in the run-up to an election, empirical evidence on EP campaign effects remains scarce.

Election campaigns generally aim at increasing turnout through information and mobilisation efforts and are part of the larger information environment. Campaign efforts provide citizens with crucial information, motivate them to seek out additional information about the elections, and mobilise them to go to the polls. Citizens can be exposed to information about an election by different actors and through various (media) outlets, and they can decide to engage with the campaign themselves, for example by discussing politics within their personal network. European Parliament elections are a particularly relevant case in which to study the influence of such campaign factors, as research demonstrates that citizens' personal motivation plays a larger role for turnout on the supranational level because the initial level of participation is lower.



Credit: [CC BY 4.0](#): © European Union 2019 – Source: EP

In a [recent study](#), we measured citizens' exposure to and engagement with a large number of different election campaign activities before the 2019 EP elections, using original survey data from the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Sweden. We assessed how often citizens were exposed to party communication, political advertisements, and information about the 2019 EP elections in the news media, and how frequently they engaged with the campaign (e.g., by attending events or searching for election-related information online). We also measured how often they discussed EU-topics with family members, friends, and acquaintances, or tried to convince others (what) to vote (for). Our results paint a mixed picture of campaign effects for citizens' turnout in EP elections.

Contrary to our expectations, not all forms of campaign engagement increase the likelihood that EU citizens go to the polls. For instance, whereas passive exposure to political posters positively affects electoral participation, exposure to analogue media content depresses turnout; actively attending to party material increases the chances that citizens cast their vote, while sharing election-related content online decreases it. Political conversations with family members make electoral participation more likely, but interpersonal communication online demobilises the European electorate. Importantly, campaign effects are not uniform across voter groups, but vary for those citizens that had already decided to vote, abstain, or were indecisive about their electoral participation prior to the campaign.

Active engagement with the electoral campaign can change the minds of those individuals that had initially been certain they would abstain from voting, while mere reminders such as political posters are insufficient to provide an adequate boost for them. In other words, these citizens know the election is going to take place, but it takes a lot of effort to change their minds and have them go to the polls. In contrast, 'certain' voters may be demobilised from casting their vote if they discuss EU politics online. Since discussion networks on social media tend to be more heterogeneous than relationships that we have with people in our immediate environment, citizens with a positive EU attitude might encounter demobilising discussion partners online. Ultimately, such interpersonal discussion may lead citizens to abstain on Election Day – even if they initially had a strong intention to vote.

Attending events related to the campaign also strongly depresses turnout among initially 'certain' voters. One conceivable explanation may lie in a ceiling effect, assuming that those people who attend events are a highly motivated group of citizens already – their electoral participation, if moving in any direction, can only go down. Notably, 'certain' voters can also be further strengthened in their turnout intention, which highlights the necessity to consider them a relevant target group for campaigners. For them, seeing political posters (very) often seems to serve as a visual reminder of Election Day, and active searches for information online further strengthen their conviction. Presumably, the more effort one invests into finding information about the election online, the more one is convinced about the importance of casting one's vote.

Prior research indicates that campaign effects might be largest for those parts of the population that have not made up their mind about whether to vote or abstain in an election. Indeed, 'uncertain' respondents in our study were the most strongly affected in their decision to turn out – both positively and negatively. We observe negative effects for exposure to analogue media content and communication with others online, while active information search boosts turnout for 'uncertain' citizens. This group can also be persuaded to go to the polls through discussions with family members and close friends. These findings align with the large body of research highlighting the importance of discussion network characteristics and tie strength for politically relevant outcomes.

Our results further show that rather than looking at the simple offline/online dichotomy, we should consider the specific role of social media platforms. Whether citizens post something about the elections or mention their vote on social media; whether they see political parties' ads on social media or talk about EU politics with people online – all these forms of exposure or activity decrease the likelihood that citizens are going to cast their vote, and they do so across voter groups. Partly, these negative effects may be attributable to perceptions of so-called slacktivist participation, that is, the idea that social media activities alone are sufficient to make a meaningful political impact. As a result, people may feel that they have already 'done their part' and refrain from participating in politics offline.

The information environment can play a crucial role in mobilising the European electorate. However, contrary to the intention of the EU's campaign slogan 'This time I'm voting', not all efforts increase turnout on Election Day. Instead, mobilisation efforts are multifaceted, and we need to account for different forms of exposure and engagement to be able to provide a comprehensive picture of factors influencing turnout in EP elections.

**For more information, see the authors' accompanying study at [European Union Politics](#)**

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

---

## About the authors



### **Franziska Marquart** – *University of Amsterdam*

Franziska Marquart is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Political Communication and Journalism research group at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam. She works in the ERC-funded project EUROPINIONS, which investigates the antecedents and consequences of public opinion towards the European Union. She earned her PhD from the University of Vienna in Austria, where she was part of the Advertising and Media Effects research group. Her research focuses on political communication effects, experimental methods, and the impact of visual communication in various mediated contexts. She is on Twitter [@FranziMarquart](#)



### **Andreas C. Goldberg** – *University of Amsterdam*

Andreas C. Goldberg is a Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam. He currently works in the EUROPINIONS project, which analyses causes and consequences of change in public opinion about Europe. He previously worked at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Geneva, where he also obtained his PhD. His research interests include political behaviour, political communication, EU attitudes and survey research. He is on Twitter [@andigole](#)



### **Claes H. de Vreese** – *University of Amsterdam*

Claes H. de Vreese is Professor and Chair of Political Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, and Faculty Professor of AI, Data and Democracy. He directs the Center for Politics and Communication and is the principal investigator of the ERC-funded EUROPINIONS project. His research interests span from media, public opinion, and electoral behaviour to the role of data and AI in democratic processes. He is the current President of the International Communication Association and editor of *Political Communication*. He is on Twitter [@claesdevreese](#)