

ONE EUROPE, MANY FACES? Citizen Participation across the European Union

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As the Republic of Cyprus prepares to assume the presidency of the Council of the European Union, the in-tray appears to be overflowing. Significant geostrategic challenges across Europe, recalibrating alliances, and the competitiveness gap with contending markets figure high on the agenda. These conditions undoubtedly call for an agile Presidency, capable of liaising effectively and driving compromise towards mutually beneficial solutions.

Yet, beyond crisis management and technical dossiers, the Presidency will find itself having to deal with a separate, foundational challenge: re-activating the European Union demos.

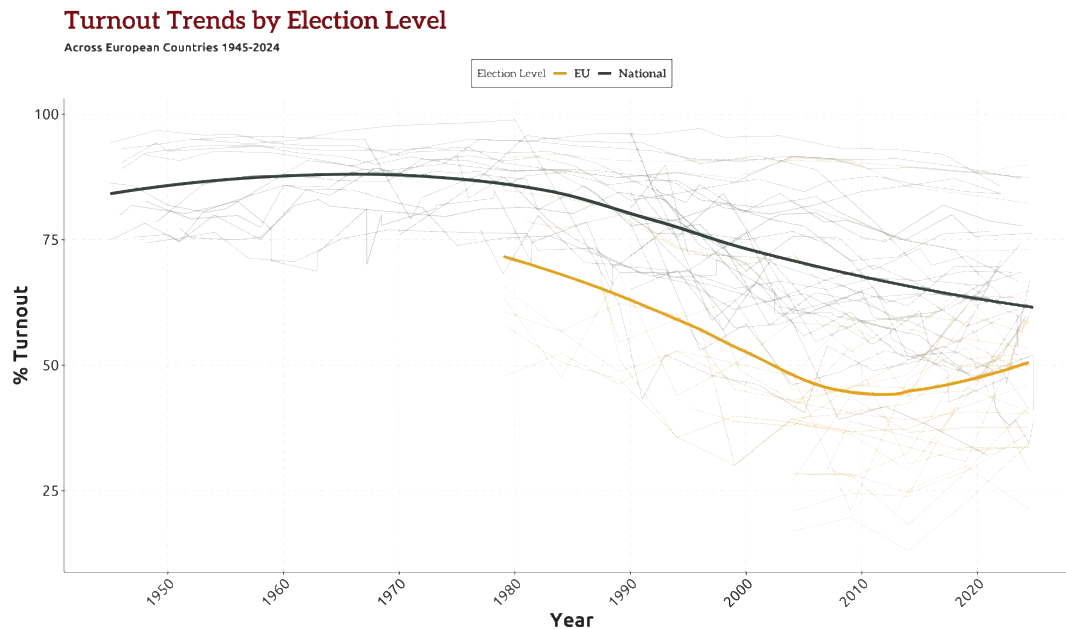
For European governance, such a focus on the citizenry can often be of secondary importance. Yet, in a multi-level governance system like the EU, political legitimacy is the key to both effective policy implementation and long-term political stability. Common wisdom paints the average European citizen, *the median voter*, as moderately distrustful and disengaged from politics. Yet, recent analyses from the ActEU Horizon Project challenge this caricature, to present a more nuanced portrait of European citizens—in plural, whose patterns of participation vary considerably.

An *Exit* from Politics?

Much of the discussion on citizens' mass exit from politics has been animated by concerns of tapering turnout trends. Indeed, the polling stations have emptied out. **Figure 1** illustrates the steady erosion of electoral participation, with turnout across EU member states declining by approximately 25 percentage points

between the 1980s and the late 2010s. Whereas typical turnout in the 80s hovered around 80 per cent, contemporary numbers sit around 55 per cent.

Figure 1: Turnout Trends in EU countries 1945-2024 (Gkotinakos & Teperoglou in Pamies, Morales, Ramiro, et al., 2024)



Note: Author's elaboration based on official turnout data drawn from IDEA database (2024).

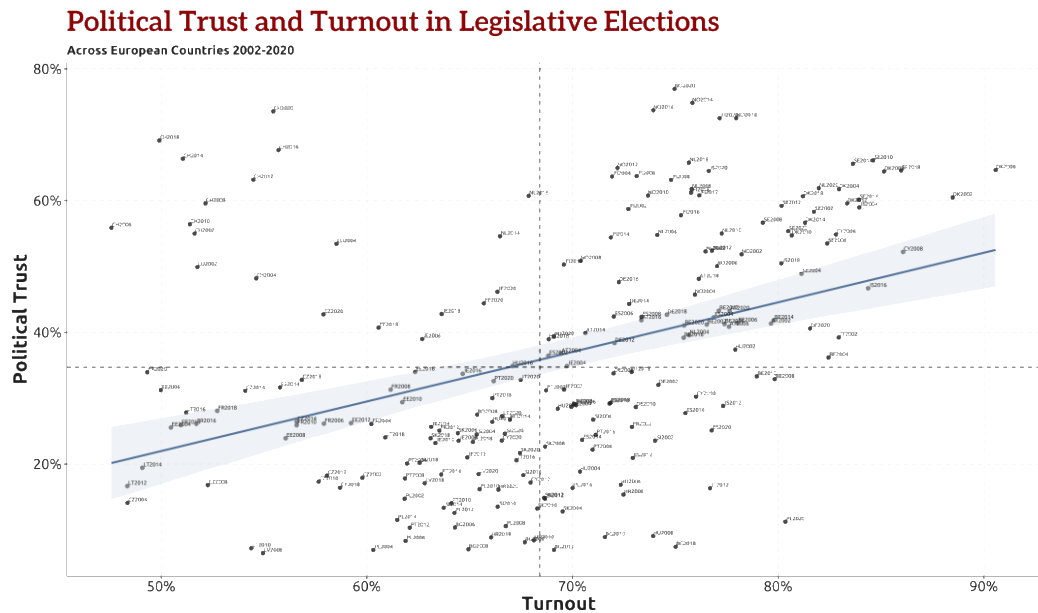
Perhaps most striking is the convergence between national legislative and European Parliament (EP) elections. The well-documented pattern of consistently lower turnout in EP elections typically translates to a wide turnout gap, to the detriment of the EP elections. Concerningly, this emerging convergence is not due to a process of *Europeanization* of the electoral process, whereby the EP elections gain traction and assume first-order election characteristics (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Rather, the trend better approximates a type of negative convergence, with national turnout drifting towards the historically lower participation rate of EP contests.

The Different Faces of Participation

Moreover, to end the discussion with this observation is to overlook other crucial aspects of citizen participation. Let's consider the relationship between political trust and turnout. It's often argued that high levels of trust are desirable, not only for normative reasons, but due to being conducive to political participation. By plotting the correlation of turnout and mean trust levels across European countries, **Figure 2** nuances this assumption, to highlight some, perhaps, paradoxical patterns. Based on this figure, trust and voting are positively

associated, with higher-trust countries also tending to have higher turnout. Yet, this relationship is far from perfectly linear.

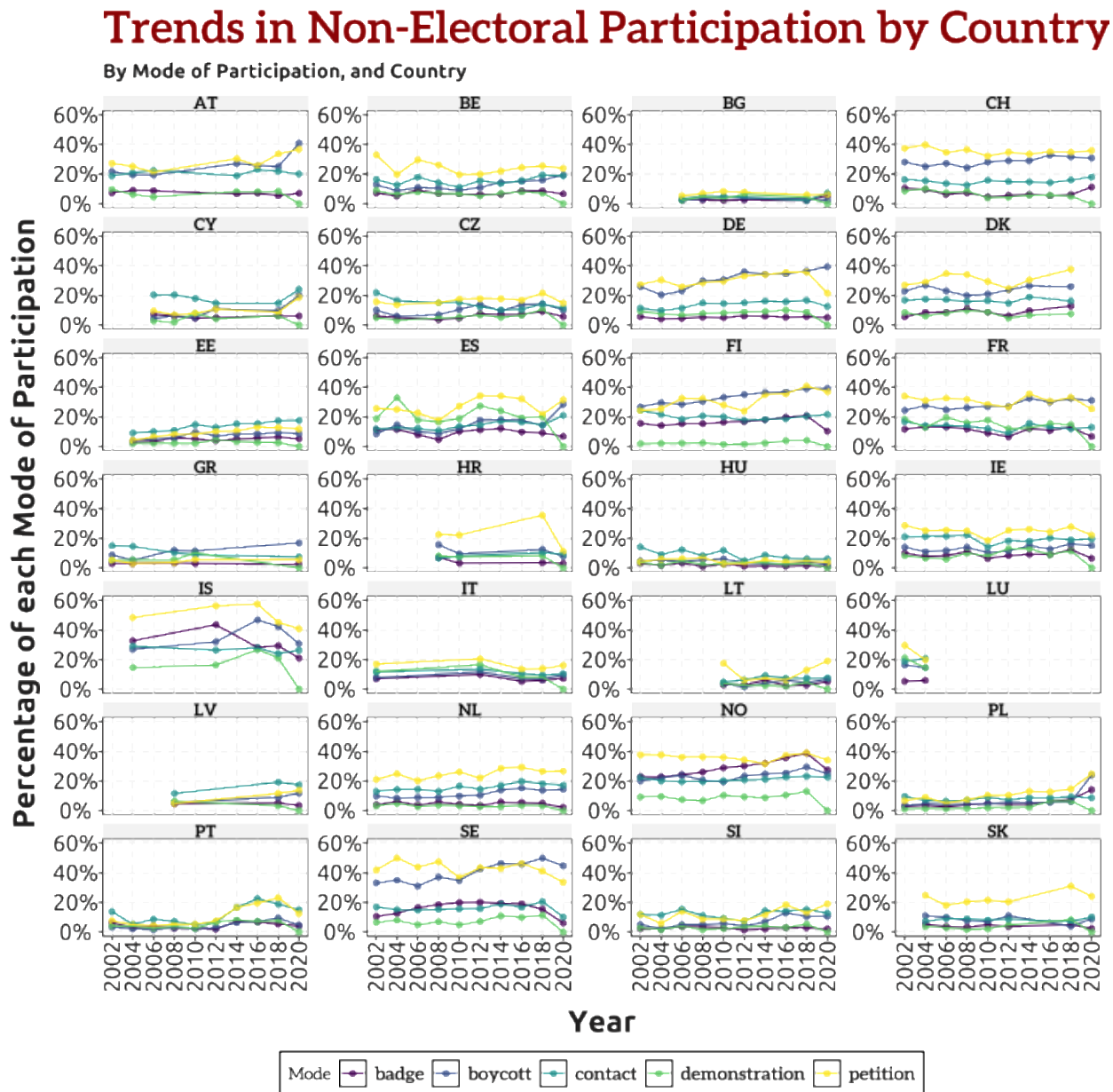
Figure 2: The Correlation between Turnout and Political Trust at the country level 2002-2020 (Gkoutinakos & Teperoglou in Pamies, Morales, Ramiro, et al., 2024)



Note: Author's elaboration based on European Social Survey data (2024).

Take Greece, or Cyprus, for example. Positioned in the lower right quadrant, they consistently combine low levels of political-institutional trust with high, above-average electoral participation rates. Oppositely, Ireland and the Czech Republic demonstrate the reverse pattern of high trust, but low turnout. These patterns can be traced back to the historical, cultural, and institutional differences among member states. Importantly, however, they underscore the underlying heterogeneity in political participation.

Figure 3: Trends in Non-Electoral Participation, by Country 2002-2020 (Gkotinakos & Teperoglou, in Pamies, Morales, Li, et al., 2024)



Note: Author's elaboration based on European Social Survey data (2024).

This heterogeneity becomes even clearer when examining preferences across different modes of political participation. Beyond the ballot box, citizens in today's democracies have an expanded repertoire of political engagement. Overall, over the last decade, signing petitions and boycotting products for political purposes have gained traction to comprise the two most popular political participation modes in the EU. On a by-country basis, moreover, considerable divergence in mode preferences remains.

Looking at **Figure 3**, it's easy to notice how participating in demonstrations is widespread in countries like Spain, France, and Italy, but not in Austria, Finland,

Sweden, or Norway. Likewise, directly contacting politicians is the modal political participation channel in Latvia, Estonia, Hungary, and Cyprus. It's clear then that turnout, despite the central importance of the electoral process, does not exhaust citizens' interaction with the political system. European voters may be turning out to vote at lesser rates, but they continue to express their political preferences through various channels that may evolve over time and tend to vary across countries. Identifying these shifting patterns of political participation can help bolster political legitimacy in the European Union.

Discussion: A Mandate for Re-Engagement

Among the many urgent concerns the Cypriot Presidency will have to wrestle with after taking the helm of the Presidency in a couple of short weeks, the disaffection of a large portion of EU citizens with their national and supra-national governance structures, and their resulting alienation from the political system, is central.

Against broad-brush assumptions that would have the European voter be a monolith of limited interest and avoidant of participating in politics, this short contribution has attempted to demonstrate that there is tremendous variation in how and why citizens express themselves politically. Empirical evidence from the last decades suggests that citizens are not completely withdrawing from politics. Despite the prevalence of disillusionment, citizens draw on an expanded repertoire of political action to give input to the political process.

In this context, it is crucial for policy makers and politicians to be inclusive in the signals they monitor during the policy design and implementation process to activate the European demos and strengthen the existing reservoir of political legitimacy. At the same time, it will likely be helpful to be cognizant of the differences in political participation and expression across time and space. In promoting a more engaged demos, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, because there is no uniform trend in the EU. Recognizing and responding to these diverse participation patterns through targeted engagement strategies will be key to a resilient, democratic Union. Ultimately, to hold the Union together, we must appreciate its inherent heterogeneity.

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