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# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS IN THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF POLES

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## **Abstract**

The low turnout in the EP elections is puzzling, given the long-standing positive attitude of the majority of Poles towards EU membership. It is important to determine how Poles perceive the EP elections and whether this perception translates into voter turnout. The article hypothesizes that the high rate of voter absenteeism is caused by several factors, including the low participation of Poles in all types of elections, the perception of elections as unimportant and not directly relevant to voters' lives, and the lack of knowledge about the competences and influence of the European Parliament on the situation in the country. The research methods employed in the article include desk-based data analysis, empirical-statistical analysis, and historical analysis.

**Key words:** *Elections, Voter Turnout, European Parliament, Poles*

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the main priorities of the Polish authorities' foreign policy after 1989 was Poland's accession to the European Union (EU) [Parzymies 2001, Zięba 2005, Zięba 2010, Kuźniar 2012, Pawlikowska 2006, Zajączkowski 2006]. Formal accession negotiations between the Polish government and the then European Economic Community (EEC) began on 22.12.1990, to be followed over the years by successive

governments successively going through the various stages and implementing the necessary procedures and legal regulations established as part of the negotiations, as a result of which on 01.05.2004. Poland joined the EU as a full member, as evidenced by sources such as Wallas (2023), Domagała (2008), Kawecka-Wyrzykowska (1999), Kułakowski (1997), Chodubski (2001), and Stebelski (1999).

In November 1992, 80 % of Poles declared their support for accession to the EEC, while only 7% were against it and 13 % had no opinion on the matter [Komunikat 1990/42: 7; Komunikat 2004/75: 2]. According to surveys conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS), Poles have consistently shown support for EU accession, with the level of support never falling below 53 % between 1994 and 2001, and reaching a peak in June 2002 at 92 % [Komunikat 2023/55: 2]. In June 2003, one week before the accession referendum, 76 % of respondents were in favour of EU entry, while 13% declared that they would vote against it [Komunikat 2003/95: 1]. The nationwide accession referendum saw a participation rate of 58.85 % among eligible voters. Of those who voted, 77 % voted in favour, leading to the Supreme Court declaring the result valid and binding [PKW 2003].

Despite the long-standing positive attitude of the majority of Poles towards EU membership, the low turnout in the European Parliament (EP) elections is puzzling. High voter absenteeism is often considered as a symptom of a “broader phenomenon of waning involvement in community life. (...) is more a symptom of a deeper ailment of the political organism than the disease itself (...). Political knowledge and interest in public affairs are decisive determinants of more active forms of participation. If you have no idea of the rules of the game, don't know the players and don't care about the outcome, you are unlikely to try to play yourself” [Putnam 2008: 61].

Therefore, it is crucial to determine how Poles perceive the EP elections and whether this perception affects voter turnout. To test the hypothesis, we assumed that the high rate of voter absenteeism was due to several factors, including:

- low participation of Poles in all types of elections,
- the perception that elections are unimportant and have no direct impact on voters' lives,
- a lack of knowledge of the EP's competences and influence on the country's situation.

## **1. METHODS AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

To verify the hypothesis, we used the following research methods: analysis of found data [Johnston 2014, Heaton 1998, 2008], empirical-statistical, and historical. The

CBOS survey results on the EU and EP elections, which the foundation has been conducting since the early 1990s, were analyzed using the first method. CBOS conducts a monthly survey on 'Current issues and events', supplemented by special one-off surveys resulting from significant events and circumstances in the public space that affect the functioning of the state and society. The survey research is carried out using the method of direct computer-assisted interviews (CAPI) on representative random samples of approximately 1,000 adult inhabitants of Poland. Classified as a comparative method, the empirical-statistical method enables the establishment of statistically significant correlations between particular types of elections and successive EP elections held in Poland. This, in turn, leads to targeted conclusions regarding the electorate's voting behaviour. The rank of factors influencing the absenteeism of Poles in successive elections was determined through quantitative and comparative analysis of empirical data [Michalak 2016: 19–21]. Additionally, the genesis and political context of the evolution in the perception of the rank and interest in the EP elections was outlined using the historical method [Żebrowski 2019: 27–28].

The perception of government action is fundamentally influenced by the dynamically changing political reality. The electoral outcome is ultimately determined by the assessment that citizens give to decision-makers. Therefore, the level of civic awareness and legitimacy of the elected authorities can be inferred from the electoral activity of citizens in a democratic state [Markowski 1993: 57, Czeńnik 2009: 3–5].

Since the first free elections in 1990, there has been a discussion in Poland regarding the factors that influence voter turnout [Korzeniowski 1995: 154–155, Czeńnik 2010]. With the development of marketing techniques and the mediatisation of elections, the influence of media messages on voter attitudes has been analysed extensively [Cwalina, Falkowski 2006: 239–290, Michalczyk 2010: 268–278, Jeziński 2004, Furman, Kuca, Szczepański 2016].

In the context of Polish elections, there is a widely discussed issue of significant discrepancies between citizens' declarations of participation in elections and their actual participation. This phenomenon is connected, among other things, with the concealment of actual views and behaviours, which may be negatively assessed in a given community due to social desirability bias [Fisher 1993: 303–315, Holbrook, Krosnick 2010: 37–67]. Low voter turnout was observed in all types of elections in Poland. However, the European Parliament (EP) elections have the worst absenteeism rates, which negatively impacts their legitimacy index [Skarżyńska, Chmielewski 1993: 239–264, Żukowski 2001: 234–243, Raciborski 2003: 209–213].

When analysing the phenomenon of political participation of citizens [Żukowski 2010, Duch 1998: 195–228], it is impossible not to agree with the statement of Robert D. Putnam. He considered participation in elections as the most widespread form of political activity and the embodiment of the most fundamental democratic principle of equality [Putnam 2008: 60]. According to this statement, citizens should perceive elections as one of the most important events in the state, particularly in the election year, and participate actively with high interest. However, in the case of Poland (and beyond), this assumption is often only theoretical, as demonstrated by successive elections [Czeńnik 2009, Wiszniowski 2008, Żerkowska-Balas 2017].

## 2. ELECTION RANK AND VOTER TURNOUT

The Polish electorate has historically shown the greatest mobilisation during presidential elections. The voter turnout for the elections held before 2023 are as follows: 1990 – 60.6 % (53.39 % in the 2nd round), 1995 – 64.70 % (68.23 % in the 2nd round), 2000 – 61.12 %, 2005 – 49.74 % (50.99 % in the 2nd round), 2010 – 54.94 % (55.31 % in the 2nd round), 2015 – 48.96 % (55.34 % in the 2nd round), and 2020 – 64.51 % (68.18 % in the 2nd round).

The 2023 parliamentary elections saw an unprecedented mobilisation of the electorate, with a turnout of 74.38 %. However, it should be noted that earlier votes had lower turnouts than the presidential elections. The turnout for individual years was as follows: 1991 – 43.20 %, 1993 – 52.13 %, 1997 – 47.93 %, 2001 – 46.29 %, 2005 – 40.56 %, 2007 – 53.88 %, 2011 – 48.92 %, 2015 – 50.92 %, and 2019 – 61.74 %. Seymour M. Lipset argues that the sudden increase in the voting electorate may be a reflection of the tensions and serious malaise of the government [Lipset 1998: 233]. A similar view is also held by Andrzej Antoszewski, who argues that “while abstention from voting may be a testament to disillusionment with the political offer; it may also prove that all political parties (or the vast majority of them) are considered equally prepared to govern, and that their 'order of finish' does not matter much” [Antoszewski 2009: 49].

Local government elections between 1990 and 2018 had a relatively low turnout, with fluctuations in the following percentages: 1990 – 42.27 %, 1994 – 33.78 %, 1998 – 45.45 %, 2002 – 44.23 % (35.02 % in the second round), 2006 – 45.99 % (39.69 % in the second round), 2010 – 47.32 % (35.31 % in the second round), 2014 – 47.40 % (39.97 % in the second round), and 2018 – 54.90 % (48.83 % in the second round).

In contrast, the European Parliament elections had the lowest turnout. It is worth noting that these elections are ranked the lowest by voters. According to the 2019

survey, the social hierarchy of different types of voting has remained unchanged over the years, with “Poles invariably consider the local government elections closest to citizens' concerns to be the most important. Three-fifths of the total number of eligible voters perceive local government elections as very important for people like them and, according to a 10-point scale, rate their importance at 9–10 points (60 %). The second most important vote for compatriots is the presidential election. In terms of importance, they are only slightly ahead of the parliamentary ones. The European Parliament elections are considered to be the least important and inferior to the national ones” [Komunikat 2019/67: 1]. In subsequent years, surveys have established the following average score (on a scale of 1 to 10) that respondents attributed to the EP elections: 2003 – 6.40 points; 2004 – 6.23 points; 2009 – 5.80 points; 2010 – 5.60 points; 2018 – 5.64 points; and 2019 – 7.16 points [Komunikat 2019/67:3]. These figures correspond with the low voter turnout: 2004 – 20.9 %; 2009 – 24.53 %; 2014 – 23.83 %; and 2019 – 45.68 %.

When analysing this data, it is important to note that in 2019, there was an increase in the rank of all types of elections, with the greatest increase being observed for EP elections (an average increase of 1.52 points) [Komunikat 2019/67:3]. This increase was also reflected in voter turnout, which increased by nearly 22 %. It is worth noting that the trend of increasing voter turnout in this type of voting occurred in 21 EU countries, with 7 of them experiencing an increase of more than 10 %. Poland had the highest voter turnout rate in the 2019 elections [Wybory 2019]. The significance of the shift in voters' attitudes towards voting is demonstrated by the fact that, prior to 2019, Poles had one of the lowest electoral participation rates compared to other EU Member States. In 2014, only two EU countries (Slovak Republic – 13.05 % and Czech Republic – 18.20 %) had a lower turnout rate than Poland. In the 2019 elections, Poland ranked 15th among EU countries in terms of citizen participation in voting, according to the recorded turnout. The CBOS survey from 2019 also confirms that “the relationship between the rank attributed to elections and the willingness to participate in them is weaker for those to the Sejm than for those to the EP. (...) It can be said that EP voters are more likely to go to these elections because they think they are important than people who vote in Sejm elections” [Komunikat 2019/67:5].

### **3. REASONS FOR ABSENTEEISM VS. INTEREST IN ELECTIONS**

According to survey data, although there was high support for Poland's accession to the EU, this was not reflected in Poles' participation in the first EP elections.

Specifically, 68 % of those who declared support did not attend the elections, while 78 % of those who were against integration also did not participate in the vote [Komunikat 2014/96: 2]. It is worth noting that only 5 % of respondents explicitly stated that they did not vote because they were against membership. The largest group of absentees, comprising 43 %, declared that they were discouraged from participating in any election due to the state of affairs. It is important to note that at the time, out of the 25 societies of the EU countries, Poles were the least positive assessors of the functioning of democracy in their country. An analysis of the campaign conducted by the various groupings reveals that most politicians have not found a way to overcome these negative phenomena [Piasecki 2012: 183].

Research on voter absenteeism in successive EP elections has shown that dissatisfaction with the situation in Poland has gradually become less important as a reason for not participating in the vote. This trend is also observed for other reasons such as:

- ignorance of candidates;
- lack of suitable candidates;
- Ignorance of the programmes of parties and election committees as regards their planned activities in the EP;
- to regard the EP elections as unimportant and the low impact of this body on the situation in the country;
- opposition to Poland's membership of the EU (in 2019, this reason was not given by any respondent).

In contrast, an increasing number of respondents cited lack of time and being away from home on election day as reasons, as well as ill health making it impossible to vote. It is also significant that the number of people justifying their absence by a lack of interest in EU politics and affairs and a low level of knowledge of the European Parliament, its scope and powers remained stable (refer to Table 1).

In both 2014 and 2019, the primary sources of information about candidates and election committees for Poles were TV news and current affairs programmes, with 58 % and 63 % respectively. Election advertisements on radio and television were mentioned as the second most common source (53 % in 2014 and 52 % in 2019), followed by friends and family (27 % in 2014 and 39 % in 2019). Respondents also cited additional sources of information.

- billboards, election posters and leaflets (2014 – 30 % and 2019 – 35 %);
- radio news and current affairs programmes (2014 – 38 % and 2019 – 34 %);
- Internet (2014 – 16 % and 2019 – 26 %);

- newspapers and magazines (2014 – 27 % and 2019 – 22 %);
- their individual interviews with candidates (2014 – 5 % and 2019 – 5 %);
- rallies and election meetings attended (2014 – 2 % and 2019 – 3 %) [Komunikat 2019/86: 2].

Table 1

**Reasons for voter absenteeism**

Why did you not participate in the European Parliament elections?	Respondents' indications by survey date			
	2004 (N=678)	2009 (N=765)	2014 (N=679)	2019 (N=389)
	in percentage			
I had no time, I was away from home	14	18	26	31
I am not interested in politics at all	23	26	19	26
I was ill, I have a disability	9	8	10	19
I do not know enough about the European Parliament, what this institution does and what powers it has	14	15	12	11
What is happening in the country has discouraged me from taking part in any election	43	28	17	8
I did not know the candidates running in this election	25	16	15	6
There were no suitable candidates for whom I (could) have voted	18	13	16	6
I did not know the programmes of the various parties and election committees, I did not know what they wanted to achieve in the European Parliament	15	8	8	4
I have no interest at all in European Union affairs	5	4	5	4
It did not suit me that this election was treated by politicians as an opportunity to get well-paid jobs	21	19	18	3
I believe that these elections are unimportant, the activities of the European Parliament will have little impact on the situation in the country	7	3	4	2
Because I am against Poland's membership of the European Union	5	1	2	0
Another reason	7	6	7	7
Difficult to say	1	1	0	1

**Source:** Komunikat 2019/94: 13.

Therefore, it can be inferred that media coverage and electoral materials provided by staff compensated to some extent for the lack of knowledge about candidates and committees. However, this did not apply to knowledge about the European Parliament and the European Union. At the same time, according to respondents in 2019, “the information quality of the election campaign leaves much to be desired. Less than one in three respondents declare that they learned a lot during the campaign about the candidates running in their constituency (30 %, of which only 4 % learned a lot). Almost every second respondent (48 %) claims to have learned little, and every fifth (19 %) claims to have learned nothing” [Komunikat 2019/86: 3]. The aforementioned indications suggest that the electoral message is superficial and incomplete. However, the lack of interest in politics and EU affairs, as well as the associated lack of knowledge about the EP, is particularly concerning for the functioning of the state and the development of civil society. A lack of interest in politics, combined with a lack of knowledge about the citizen's state institution, may indicate the phenomena of anomie and political alienation. These concepts have been analysed in relation to Polish political reality [Szmajke, Bronowicka 1995: 149–163, Korzeniowski 1992, Schaff 1999], particularly in the context of successive elections and low voter turnout [Skarżyńska, Chmielewski 1995: 179–191, Bronowicka 1994: 25–45, Korzeniowski 1994: 93–100, Turska-Kawa 2012: 145–158]. Furthermore, CBOS multivariate analyses conducted in 2019 showed that “the main variable differentiating respondents' declarations of interest in the EP elections is the level of general interest in politics. The respondents who are interested are overwhelmingly those who closely follow what is happening in it, as well as those who only follow the main events. At the same time, it is worth noting that while among those who are interested in politics to a great or very great extent, the majority are those declaring a strong interest in the EP elections, among those who are moderately interested in politics, those claiming that they are rather interested in these elections dominate. The lower the interest in political issues, the less interested the respondents are in the May EP elections. As a result, among the respondents, whose attention is often not even drawn to important events, and among those who are not interested in politics, the majority declare a lack of personal interest in the EP elections, with more than half of those who are not interested in politics at all declaring a definite lack of interest in these elections” [Komunikat 2019/63: 3-4]. It is important to note that the level of interest in EP elections, as declared during successive campaigns, was significantly higher than the actual turnout in the respective elections (2004 – 20.9 %, 2009 – 24.53 %, 2014 – 23.83 %, 2019 – 45.68 %) (refer to Table 2). A similar phenomenon was observed

during the research on projected turnout. When asked if they would participate in the vote, respondents were more likely to indicate that they would (45 % in 2004, 36 % in 2009, 40 % in 2014, and 60 % in 2019). However, in reality, the level of absenteeism at the ballot box was much higher.

Table 2

**Level of interest in European Parliament elections**

Declared interest in European Parliament elections	Respondents' indications by survey date																	
	03	'04		'09						'14					'19			
	X	III	V	I	II	III	IV	7-13 V	20-27 V	I	II	III	IV	IV/V	V	II	III	IV
	in percentage																	
One is interested in	47	40	41	32	29	33	30	34	38	32	28	31	33	35	40	44	54	56
One is not interested in	49	57	57	66	68	63	68	65	59	66	70	68	66	64	59	54	44	42
Difficult to say	4	3	2	2	3	4	2	1	3	2	2	1	0	1	1	2	2	2

**Source:** Komunikat 2019/63: 3

## CONCLUSION

The data analysis shows that respondents consider the EP elections to be less important than other state authorities' elections, which leads to high voter absenteeism. However, it can be concluded that this assessment of the importance of the EP elections contributed to absenteeism at the ballot box, given the relatively low turnout in other types of elections (with the exception of the 2023 parliamentary elections).

The perception of the EP elections was influenced by several factors. Firstly, many voters lacked knowledge of the competences and powers of the EU and the EP, as well as information about the candidates and election committees. Secondly, a significant proportion of potential voters who did not participate were simply disinterested in politics, including the EU. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the reasons for the political alienation of this group of respondents to mobilise them to participate in future elections. In terms of voters who lack electoral knowledge, civic education should be advocated not only during the campaign but also outside of it, focusing on the EU, its bodies, and competences.

Attention should also be given to those who did not participate in voting due to dissatisfaction with the state of affairs. This group of respondents has gradually decreased in subsequent surveys, suggesting that the initial reason for absenteeism may have lost its significance or even motivated people to participate in voting in subsequent years (?).

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections saw a reversal in the trend of perception, interest, and participation compared to previous years. The rank of the EP elections has significantly increased, as reflected in the turnout rate, which rose from 23.83 % in 2014 to 45.68 % in 2019. The increase in voter interest is also evident, rising from 40 % in May 2014 to 56 % in April 2019. This trend suggests a shift in the civic attitudes of Poles, which was reflected in the mobilisation of the electorate during the 2023 parliamentary elections, resulting in a record turnout of 74.38 %.

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