

## The reasons of the low 2009 European Elections' turnout

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### Abstract

*This article discusses the European election behavior in the three smallest European member states, showing how the turnout in 2009 European elections varies in, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta. The article though, concentrates on Cyprus that had the lowest turnout from all three and analyses the reasons the led to the Cypriots low election turnout.*

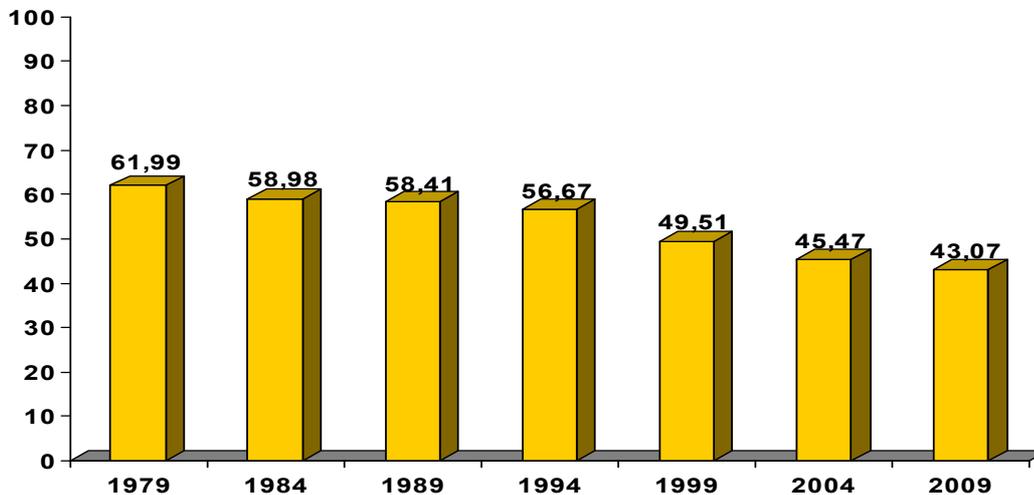
*This project portrays that low election turnout in the European Elections has come to be a serious problem around Europe. Research across Europe clearly shows that the main reasons cited by non-voters for their choice not to vote mainly relate to the wider political climate: a lack of confidence in politics in general, the view that voting makes no difference and a lack of interest in politics. Research also indicates that older citizens are more likely to vote than younger ones and that the rate of abstention is particularly high among people who say they have problems paying their regular bills. Cypriot non-voters cite as a first reason the lack of interest in politics in general and in addition the belief that voting makes no difference.*

**Keywords:** elections, turnout, european

### 1. Introduction

2009 European results have shown a strong result for the centre-right, collapsing support for the centre-left, and a boost for the far-right and other fringe groups. However, out of 375 million Europeans in 27 countries eligible to vote, fewer than half chose to do so, setting a new low for turnout.

The average turnout touched 43% in 2009 elections, following a downward trend since 1979 elections (62%). Overall turnout in the elections was down compared with the 2004 elections by 2.47 percentage points, a smaller decline than in the past.

**Table 1 – Average European Turnout**

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research type

Methodologically, the article is based on a combination of in-depth secondary analysis and in-depth exploration with the use of focus groups. Through the secondary analysis several analytical dimensions have been examined such as average turnouts by election year, country turnout, demographic characteristics and reasons for decrease in turnout. In addition, an in-depth exploration and understanding with the use of focus groups, the actual reasons for which turnout was decreased in Cyprus were uncovered.

### 2.2 Sample size and structure

Two focus groups were conducted consisting of 10 people, men and women all bound by a common characteristic, *non-voting*. The groups were homogeneous as to the objectives of the study. This ensured that members of the groups were not intimidated by others and that confusion was avoided. Focus groups were stopped being conducted where it was seen that no new input was coming in. On this ground the proposed sample size is enough to provide sufficient feedback and ensure that safe conclusions are made

### 2.3 Gathering data – (Interviewing method)

Focus group discussions were conducted by a focus group expert. Recruiting was conducted with a screener questionnaire that asked a series of questions to evaluate whether a contact was eligible to take

part. Contacts were Cypriots, aged 18-30, who have not turned out to vote at the last European Elections. A general outline of the issues to be covered during the discussion (discussion guide) was designed and used, based on the objectives of the project. Sessions were type-recorded by a typist enabling later reference and review of crucial aspects of the discussion during the analysis stage. Each group session lasted for approximately 1.5 hours.

## 2.4 Analysis

The method used to analyze the *focus groups* followed four flows of action: *data copying, data display, theme creation and conclusions and verification*.

Data were copied exactly as they were on transcripts so that they were more readily accessible and understandable, enabling the drawing out of various themes and patterns. Based on this process, various analytic conclusions were made.

Data display intends to convey that data are presented as an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusions to be analytically drawn. Emphasis was granted to the “Teaming” method. A diagram was used to aid understanding and to facilitate the ability to present major concepts. Teamed up were the most important reasons for not showing up to vote. This assisted me in understanding and observing certain patterns in the data. A graphical representation of the “Teaming” approach is shown later on.

The conclusions drawn were confirmed to assure that they are real and not biased by my own thinking. To provide some evidence of the degree of validity, the research design utilized *face validity*. Face validity refers to the subjective agreement of professionals that a scale logically appears to be accurately reflecting what it purports to measure and is just based on a close reading and study of the question. For validity reasons another researcher independently examined the data and drew his own conclusions (face validity). Our results were compared to ensure that our conclusions were similar.

## 2.5 Ethical Considerations

Great emphasis was given to the ethical aspect of the study. As Zikmund (2003) points out, ethical issues in survey research are of primary importance. As he notes, the respondent’s right to privacy, use of deception, the respondent’s right to be informed about the purpose of the research, the need for confidentiality, the need for honesty and objectivity in collecting and reporting data, and other issues are factors in the design and execution of surveys. Along these lines, participants were specifically informed that they were randomly selected to take part in the survey. Participants were also informed that taking part was voluntary and that in the case of refusal, no consequences would take place. On the other hand, it was explained to them that their participation was valuable because the findings would be greatly taken into consideration and assist for the understanding of the problem. Furthermore, the participants were told that anonymity would be strictly adhered.

### 3. Literature review

#### 3.1. Country profiles

After the first direct European elections in 1979, a kind of European elections apathy has slowly spread among political parties, the mass media, and the citizens, as reflected in low-key campaigns, relatively little media coverage, and citizens' fading interest in and empathy for the European Union.

**Table 2 – EU member states with population less than 1,000,000 - 2009**

	<b>Population</b>
Cyprus	801600
Luxembourg	491700
Malta	412600

#### Luxembourg

As of August 11, 2009, BBC News, country profiles, described Luxembourg as the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, a small country landlocked by Belgium, France and Germany that is a prominent banking centre and tax haven. With roots stretching back to the 10th century, Luxembourg's history is closely intertwined with that of its more powerful neighbors, especially Germany. Many of its inhabitants are trilingual in French, German and Luxembourgish - a dialect of German. Luxembourg's prosperity was formerly based on steel manufacturing. With the decline of that industry, Luxembourg diversified and is now best known for its status as a tax haven and banking center. In addition, Luxembourg's politics are characterized by stability and long-serving administrations.

On 2009, BBC News, country profiles, provided the following characteristics regarding Luxembourg:

- **Full name:** Grand Duchy of Luxembourg
- **Population:** 472,000 (UN, 2008)
- **Capital:** Luxembourg
- **Area:** 2,586 sq km (999 sq miles)
- **Major languages:** French, German, Luxembourgish
- **Major religion:** Christianity
- **Life expectancy:** 76 years (men), 82 years (women) (UN)
- **Monetary unit:** 1 Euro = 100 cents
- **Main exports:** Steel products, chemicals, rubber products
- **GNI per capita:** US \$75,880 (World Bank, 2007)
- **Internet domain:** .lu

- **International dialling code: +352**

Luxembourg has been participating in European Elections since 1979 and always reaches high levels of turnouts mainly because voting is mandatory and because those management offices are situated, making inhabitants more sensitive to the European Elections.

It averages extremely high turnouts since 1979 that touches 89% holding the 1<sup>st</sup> place among all member states. Important is the fact that Luxembourg's national turnout has been higher than the average European turnout in all European Elections.

**Table 3 - Luxembourg Turnout**

Election year	National turnout (%)	European turnout (%)
1979	88.91	61.99
1984	88.79	58.98
1989	87.39	58.41
1994	88.55	56.67
1999	87.27	49.51
2004	91.35	45.47
2009	90.75	43

*Source: European Elections. Results of the 2009 European Elections*

### Malta

According to BBC News country profiles on August 11, 2009, the Maltese archipelago includes the islands of Malta, Gozo, Comino, Comminotto and Filfla. It has a history of colonial control spanning centuries. Located south of the Italian island of Sicily between Europe and North Africa, it has been occupied by Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs and latterly France and Britain. Independence from Britain was achieved in 1964, after the Maltese people were awarded the George Cross for defending the island during World War II.

Forty years on Malta was the smallest of the 10 countries to join the EU in May 2004. It joined the eurozone in 2008. Since becoming an EU member, the tiny island has reported an increasing problem with immigration from North Africa and has requested more help to deal with it. Over the centuries, Malta's strategic position fostered its development as an important trading post and it remains a leading centre for container and freight transshipment. Malta is a popular holiday destination and tourism is the nation's main source of income.

On 2009, BBC News, country profiles, provided the following characteristics regarding Malta:

- **Full name:** Republic of Malta
- **Population:** 408,000 (UN, 2008)
- **Capital:** Valletta
- **Area:** 316 sq km (122 sq miles)
- **Major languages:** Maltese, English
- **Major religion:** Christianity
- **Life expectancy:** 77 years (men), 81 years (women) (UN)
- **Monetary unit:** Euro from 1 January 2008
- **Main exports:** Machinery and transport equipment
- **GNI per capita:** US \$15,310 (World Bank, 2007)
- **Internet domain:** .mt
- **International dialling code:** +356

Malta, has only participated twice in European Elections, 2004 and 2009. It averaged high turnouts both times with its national turnout been well above the average European turnout in both elections. Malta holds the 2<sup>nd</sup> place regarding turnout.

**Table 4 - Malta Turnout**

Election year	National turnout (%)	European turnout (%)
2004	82.39	45.47
2009	78.79	43

*Source:* European Elections. *Results of the 2009 European Elections*

### Cyprus

By legend the birthplace of the ancient Greek goddess of love Aphrodite, Cyprus's modern history has, in contrast, been dominated by enmity between its Greek and Turkish inhabitants. Cyprus has been divided since 1974 when Turkey invaded the north in response to a military coup on the island which was backed by the Athens government.

As of August 11 2009, BBC News country profiles, provided the following characteristics regarding Cyprus:

- **Full name:** Republic of Cyprus
- **Population:** 863,000 (combined) (UN, 2008)
- **Capital:** Nicosia (Lefkosia to Greek Cypriots, Lefkosa to Turkish Cypriots)
- **Area (combined):** 9,251 sq km (3,572 sq miles)

- **Major languages:** Greek, Turkish
- **Major religions:** Christianity, Islam
- **Life expectancy:** 76 years (men), 82 years (women) (UN)
- **Monetary unit:** Euro from 1 January 2008; Turkish lira used in north
- **Main exports:** Clothing, potatoes, cigarettes, pharmaceuticals
- **GNI per capita:** US \$24,940 (World Bank, 2007)
- **Internet domain:** .cy
- **International dialling code:** +357

Since its accession in the European Union, Cyprus has participated in European Elections twice. In 2004 the National turnout reached 72,5%, well above the European average, with Cyprus having the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest turnout among member states. In 2009 out of 500,000 registered voters, only 208,000 turned out to cast a vote. With a 13.1% decrease and a turnout of 59.4%, Cypriots preferred to have a coffee on the beach than turnout to vote, dropping Cyprus in the 7<sup>th</sup> place.

**Table 5 - Cyprus Turnout**

Election year	National turnout (%)	European turnout (%)
2004	72.5	45.47
2009	59.4	43

*Source: European Elections. Results of the 2009 European Elections*

#### 4. Results

Parliament has published a Eurobarometer survey of 26, 830 people across Europe carried out in the month following the 4-7 June European elections. Based on the results of European Parliament's opinion poll (2009), citizens were asked about the reasons for choosing whether or not to vote, and, if they did vote, what factors they took into account in deciding which party to vote for. More than two-thirds of those surveyed (67%), noted they remembered seeing, hearing or reading information material encouraging them to vote. The proportions are similar among different age groups and users of different media. According to the barometer, the main reasons cited by non-voters for their choice mainly relate to the wider political climate: a lack of confidence in politics in general (28%), the view that voting makes no difference (17%) or a lack of interest in politics (17%). By contrast, only 10% cited a lack of knowledge of the European Union, European Parliament or the elections and just 8% said they were dissatisfied with the European Parliament as an institution. The survey indicates that older citizens were more likely to vote than younger ones, and that those who had spent longer in education were more likely to vote than those who left school earlier. Those in senior or professional jobs were more likely to vote than those in low-paid work. The rate of abstention was particularly high (66.1%) among those who say they have problems paying their regular bills.

In light of the above survey our focus group study aims at validating that indeed the above reasons are true for Cyprus. Reasons cited at those focus groups are completely in line with Barometer findings.

The section that follows discusses the reasons that Cypriots did not turn out to vote, as derived by focus group sessions. Clearly, politics should have been an idea that represented everybody. Instead, the profile described by young Cypriots is of an idea that does not represent young people, and that even though is able to influence older people and drug them in the ballot to cast a vote, it is not good enough to influence younger people. Politics as they say, is able to manipulate older people and steal their vote, but cannot do this to younger people. There are several explanations for the traditionally low turnout at European elections, mainly focusing on the low interest with which voters pursue the elections. One important reason is the lack of interest, lack of knowledge, and lack of support. Considering such an environment, in comparison with National elections at which interest is a lot higher, Cypriot non-voters cite as a first reason a lack of interest in politics in general. They seem to be tired of politicians that appear in TV talk shows and all they do is to repeat the same things **“all they do is to blame each other” (woman 29)**. More over, they note that they have been in town during the Election Day but were not bothered to cast a vote, whereas others indeed preferred to spend the day on the beach rather than voting **“I was at Protaras because I am not interested in politics” (woman 24)**. Youngsters prefer to spend time on alternative entertainment **“instead of loosing time in politics, i prefer to watch a DVD or play on the computer” (man 23)**, and in general they do not bother being politically informed either by watching the news or any kind of a political talk show **“I read the New York Times, but I never read politics (man 23)**. A second reason is the view that voting makes no difference. Cypriots believe that no matter who gets elected nothing changes, therefore there is no reason to loose any time to cast a vote **“I believe that the same people get elected all the time, therefore we see no difference” (woman 24)**. In addition, they believe politics symbolizes lies and money and they see elections as a means for politicians to pass on their lies **“I did not cast a vote because I know that what I am told is not 100% accurate, its all lies” (man 24)**. They blame the system for not allowing new people with new ideas being involved. As they note, politicians fail to persuade people about their honest intentions and give no reason to young people to cast a vote. In a question as to whether Cypriots intend to stay away of the ballots in a future election day, they clearly note that if nothing changes and if the they do not see new people asking for their vote, they will definitely turn their back to politics again **“we understand how important the right to vote is, but if we see no quality people wishing to represent us, then we will not vote in the future ” (woman 29)**.

Cypriots wish to see new people with fresh ideas, who have knowledge and the ability to improve things and not people who all they care is get elected. What they want from politicians is to “look them in they eyes” and sincerely solve their problems, not just asking for their vote. In that case they will probably cast a vote.

## Table 6 - Teaming

### Reasons for low turnout

- lack of interest in politics
- voting makes no difference

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