

Why Vote?

An investigation on the attitudes, challenges and views of youth on the vote for the European Parliament elections 2024



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Executive Summary

The general decline of voter turnout in recent decades worries policy-makers and intrigues researchers. Some speak of it as a 'crisis of democracy', others of a 'democratic deficit'. The decline is sharper amongst young people. The EU is not immune to this trend - in 2019, for the first time since 1994, voter turnout for European Parliament (EP) elections climbed back up reaching 50% of the total eligible voters in the EU (European Parliament, 2022). Hailed as a success, a small majority of eligible citizens voting poses a problem of legitimacy of both national and supranational political systems. But why is it that young people vote, on average, less than other cohorts?

This report aims to shed light on the challenges and motivations behind the choice to vote or abstain from voting in the next EP elections 2024. It focuses on influences and factors of turnout as exemplified in a literature review synthesising the findings of over 40 academic papers on the subject. Data informing analysis were collected through a quantitative survey involving over 2000 young Europeans aged 14 to 25 years old. Most of the data gathering was conducted a year ahead of the start of the election campaigns, in summer 2022.

The study finds the young people taking part in the survey to be interested in politics and active supporters of democratic life, disproving academic and media narratives portraying young people as disinterested in political and civic matters. Such interest, however, does not necessarily lead to the vote. Top reasons for abstention and/or uncertainty around the vote pertain to a lack of representation, as well as a lack of trust in political systems, and/or information environments. Indeed, many young voters do not feel equipped to make an informed choice - a role, we argue, that will need to be filled by collective structures such as youth organisations, students' unions and other forms of associationism. Top reasons for showing up to the polls remain strongly connected to moral considerations around citizen participation in democratic life. Casting an 'opposition vote' - meaning a vote taken against and not for a political force - remains more common than the vote for a specific political force. National-level political and information environments as well as variations in age are found to affect attitudes towards voting as well as the resources needed to engage potential voters.

To support young people in casting their vote, this report calls for a needs-based approach to campaigning for the EP elections of 2024 - to account for the specific needs of different types of potential voters. Amongst the most fundamental challenges to keep in mind is the knowledge gap on the EU and its functioning; the lack of confidence, or trust, in political institutions, as well as the lack of representation; and potential voters' low levels of political literacy.

Introduction

The general decline of voter turnout in recent decades worries policy-makers and intrigues researchers. Some speak of it as a 'crisis of democracy', others of a 'democratic deficit'. The decline is sharper amongst young people. The EU is not immune to this trend, with low attendance recorded in most EP elections held to date. In 2019, for the first time since 1994, the voter turnout for elections climbed back up reaching 50% of the total eligible voters in the EU (European Parliament, 2022). Hailed as a success, only a small majority of eligible citizens voting poses a problem of legitimacy of both national and supranational political systems. The EU has invested considerable resources in trying to reverse low turnout, focusing especially on its young constituents, a will that was exemplified by the White Paper: A New Impetus of European Youth (2001) that focuses on enabling participation and active citizenship of EU youth through mobility programmes, community projects and initiatives focusing on several different aspects of participation. As part of these efforts, the Co-Operation Youth Vote project (COYV) brings together various EU-level and grassroots organisations to foster youth engagement in EU political life, with a focus on electoral participation. To steer the activities towards the needs, views, and experiences of the project's target, this research project has the aim to investigate young people's motivations for and challenges of participation in formal politics of the EU. A systematic approach to inquiry required first an exploratory phase, taking the form of a literature review, to examine previous research on political participation of youth in the EU. The main findings and questions raised by the literature review informed the development and implementation of a quantitative survey, targeting first time voters and abstainers with EU citizenship rights. This report will present the outcomes of the survey, and briefly comment on some of the implications for fostering youth engagement and participation in the next EP elections 2024.

Methodology

The Literature review process

The starting point for our inquiry was a literature review driven by the research question: What are the main challenges and motivations of youth participation in the EP elections 2024? The review helped identify seminal theories in the academic literature on voting. It also included many original research papers, found through online academic search engines and journals such as the Journal of Youth Studies, Journal of Contemporary European Studies, Tandfonline, Sagepub and Google Scholar. *Keywords* employed were the following: EU, Europe, political participation, political apathy, political alienation, political interest, political socialisation, formal politics, voting, elections, EP elections, voter turnout, youth turnout, youth, young people, adolescents, active citizenship. Relevant results were narrowed down through content analysis of abstracts, according to previously set criteria. From the initial list of texts, yielding about 100 results, 41 texts were selected to feature in the review. When applicable, a snowball technique was deployed to select relevant references through the bibliography of previously selected studies and articles. Four criteria were applied for selecting the literature: the first was geographical, including EU member states, European (continental) or European (political); the second was demographic, focusing on and/or including young people (defined as anyone under the age of 25); the third was a focus on formal politics, and voting in particular; the fourth and final criterion was the year in which the paper was published, to ensure that research outcomes were still relevant for the youth concerned by the COYV project. For this reason, the majority of articles featured in the review were written after the year 2010, with a few notable exceptions. These were made also in terms of geography and demographics, but only where there was sufficient overlap in the text of the other criteria applied throughout the review.

Outcomes of the review

Many of the most convincing outcomes of the review are hardly actionable, as they pertain to the macro-contextual. A generalized lack of trust in institutions, political systems and its processes is partly behind the low turnout of recent years and even decades. There is little trust in the capacity of politics to achieve change and act swiftly in times of crises, while remaining free of economic influences, or scandals of various nature. The issue of representation features prominently, too, with many citizens, particularly young people, feeling that they lack representation in the political arena. Both lack of trust and representation, as Quintelier (2007) convincingly argues, determine a shift from a formal political repertoire to an informal one. In other words, seeing the lack of impact of voting and becoming involved in formal politics, many young

people resort to techniques and repertoires that they find more impactful, ranging from direct action networks and movements, to online activism, petition signing and mailbombing.

Other, more actionable outcomes were related to the individual and proximal factors determining turnout - such as political literacy and access to resources. According to Verba and Nie's Civic Voluntarism Theory, the enablers of political participation are resources of various nature. These range from time, to socio-economic background, to access to information - practical information, such as where the voting station is, and what, if any, are the administrative requirements to vote, as well as political and electoral information, such as how to read a political programme and choose a candidate. Therefore, youth groups, grassroots youth organisations, youth councils and similar collective structures are well-positioned to provide voters with the resources and motivation that they need to show up to the polls. In the particular case of EP elections, providing resources can be challenging seeing the diversity between EU countries, their electoral rules, their different attitudes towards the EU, as well as the perceived distance between citizens and EU institutions. Finally, it became clear that despite the academic tendency to categorize, youth is by no means an homogenous group. The matter of diversified start-up costs of voting, especially for first time voters and young voters from disadvantaged backgrounds, need to be taken into account if youth organisations are to design an effective get-out-to-vote campaign. This is why the more organisations are involved, the higher the probability of reaching different groups of young voters.

Survey development and description

Following the literature review, the survey had a double aim: on the one hand, to test the most prominent theories on voting behavior and formal political engagement of young people, as emerging from the literature review. On the other hand, its outcomes would support the project in identifying the needs of young people looking to vote (or not) at the EU elections of 2024.

Based on a brief overview of the review all partners were able to brainstorm on the content and structure of the survey at the first TPM. Amongst the issues discussed were how to measure demographics (age, income, education level) and how to adapt the survey to our target audience - 14 to 24 yo). It was agreed to restrict the age target to 14 to 25 year olds. To make the survey more accessible and friendly to our target demographic, survey questions were capped at 25 and translated in all EU languages.

This latter decision called for a quantitative approach, which despite its many limitations, was deemed the most apt to investigate psychological, individual, and proximal factors influencing voting intentions, with the strategic ultimate goal of fostering youth turnout. It was also agreed that a qualitative component will be developed further on in the project, with interviews and focus groups to complement this initial report. Starting from these inputs, OBESSU developed a first draft of the survey, while all partners activated to find volunteers to support with the various survey translations. Once the first draft of the survey was completed, a week was given for all partners to leave their input and feedback. This was then reviewed and finalized by OBESSU. Based on the previous experience of the partners, "SurveyMonkey" was chosen as survey software, as it allows for multilingual surveys, logical branching and provides a number of insightful, in-built analysis features.

The final version of the survey consists of 25 questions, 23 of which closed with the YES/NO option, Likert scales of agreement and frequency, as well as multiple choice.

Logic is applied to branch respondents in 3 questions. It is a mix of demographic questions, attitudes and values, knowledge and opinion questions, all aimed at investigating the literature's assumptions on youth voting, including: the role of family, peers, school and voluntary associations; concepts of political apathy and alienation; attitudes and knowledge of the EU; perceived levels of political efficacy and political literacy. A full glossary of the terms used in this report is available at the bottom of the document.

The first six questions are demographic questions (age, nationality, country of residence, area of residence, voting eligibility and mobility opportunities).

☆ Questions 7 to 10 want to identify the main influences in the respondents' lives when it comes to political activation: question 7 covers the role of parents, and questions 8-10 cover the role of school, university and voluntary associations.

☆ Questions 11-13 seek to assess respondents' levels of interest in politics as well as the top two political issues they are interested in.

☆ Questions 14-16 ask survey participants to agree/disagree with three statements, aimed at measuring their perceived levels of political efficacy and political literacy.

☆ Questions 17-20 pertain to the EU level - the respondents' self assessed levels of knowledge, as well as two knowledge questions on the functioning of the EU, to be scored and coded as basic levels of EU political literacy of respondents.

☆ Question 21 'Will you vote in the EP elections 2024?' has three possible answers: YES/NO/UNSURE. Each answer brings to a different follow up multiple choice question (22a, b and c) investigating the reasons for the answer.

☆ Questions 22a, b and c all have an 'other' option, which if selected, brings to the only open question of the survey, which asks to explain the reason for their choice (to vote, to abstain, or still indecisive) in a few words.

☆ Question 23 is an opinion question where respondents can pick the top three types of resources (election-specific, EU political, EU general, practical and motivational) which they think are more needed to support young people in voting.

☆ Question 24 allows participants to leave their social media handle in case they are interested in keeping up to date with the training and campaigning stages of the COYV project.

When the survey was finalized, a master document was shared with all volunteer translators with some tips and instructions for optimal translation. Once all translations were completed, OBESSU reworked them and uploaded them on surveymonkey.

The survey stayed open from July the 11th to October the 22nd for over 3 months. The survey deadline was extended twice to allow for the collection of more answers. All partners of the project participated in the dissemination efforts, sharing the link to the survey on social media and mailing lists, as well as seeking support of other youth organisations such as ESU - European Students' Union and reaching out to all branches of JEF - Young European Federalists. Following the closing of the survey, the work of analysis started through the in-built tools available on the SurveyMonkey software platform.

Sample description and limitations

Of 1928 survey takers, slightly less than half (41.7%) was below 18 years of age at the time of the survey; 37.6% was between the ages of 19 and 24, while the remaining 23.6% was aged 25 or over (Table 1).

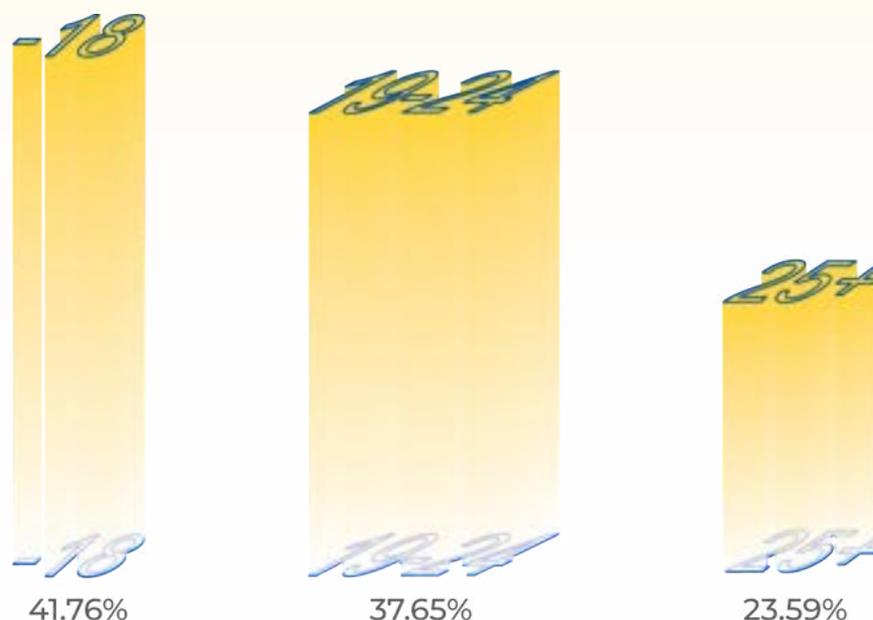


Table 1: Age of respondents

More difficult was to calculate how many underage respondents were eligible to vote at the EP elections 2024, as the legal voting age varies across countries. For most EU countries, the legal voting age to participate in the EU elections is 18. However there are a few exceptions, namely Austria, Belgium, Malta (16 years old) and Greece (17 years old). An approximate cross-calculation taking these factors into account shows that over a third (33.9%) of the survey sample is made up of first-time voters.

In terms of geographical distribution, the majority of respondents are of Romanian (32.2%), Portuguese (26.7%) and Italian (9%) nationalities (Table 2). All other EU nationalities are represented, most of them between 4% and 0.4% of respondents. Only Cyprus, Estonia, Denmark, Croatia, Luxembourg and Sweden have less than 6 respondents each. A number of non-EU nationals took part in the survey but their citizenship status remains unclear.

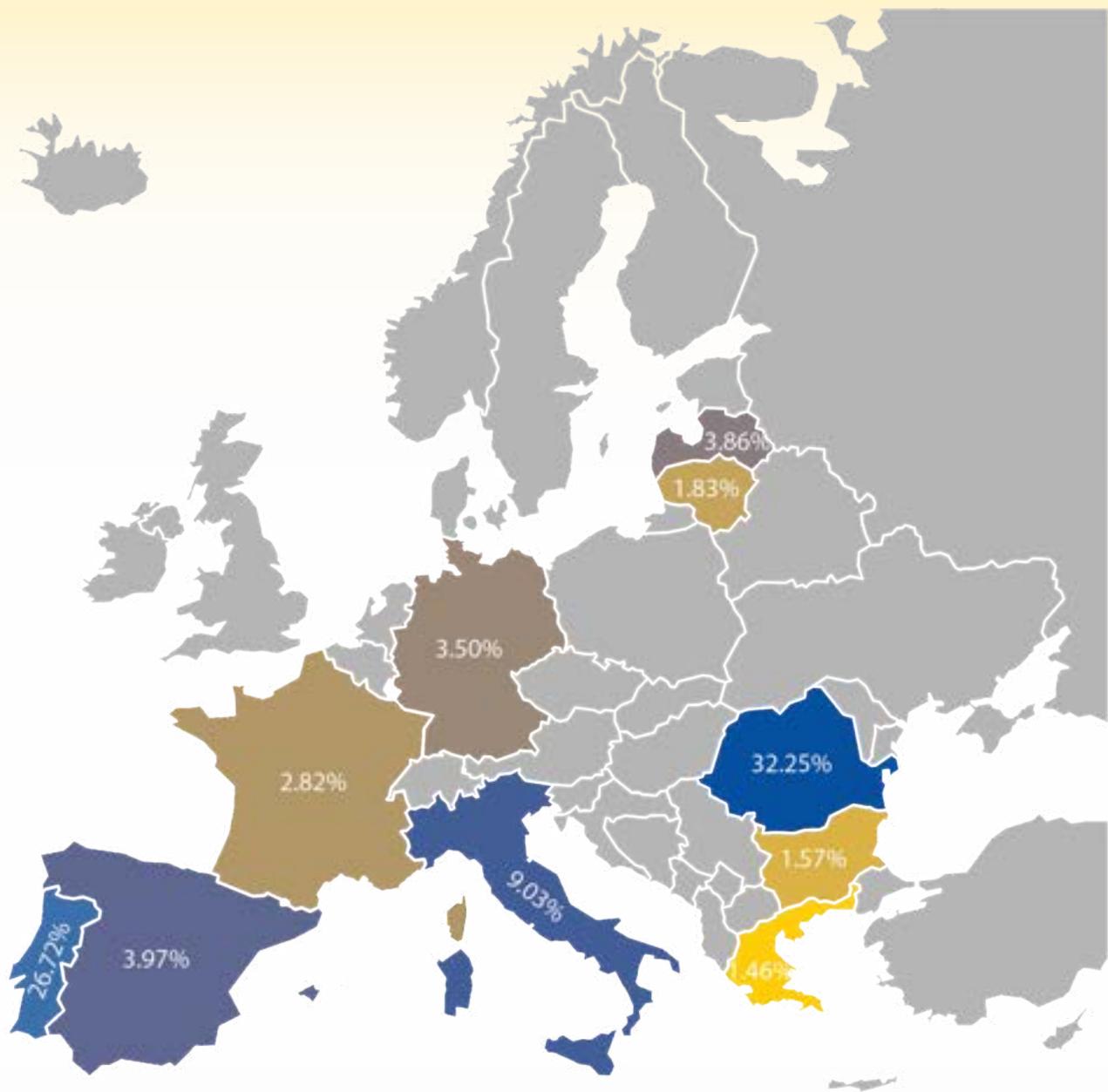


Table 2: Top 10 Nationalities

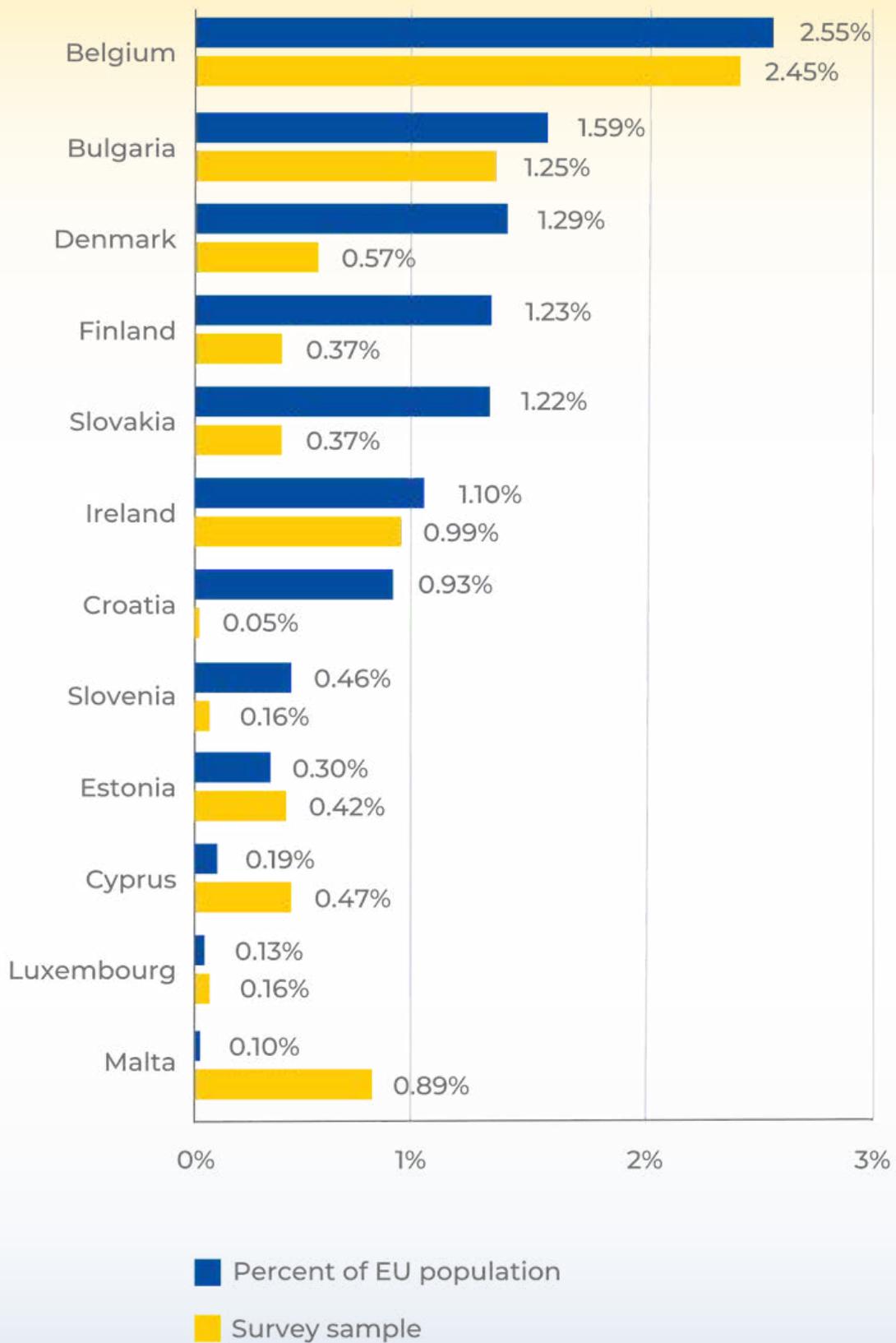


Table 3: Representativeness of sample, against average distribution of EU population per country

Divided according to the UN Geoscheme, an overwhelming majority of respondents is based in Eastern and Southern Europe, at 35.4% and 42.2% respectively:

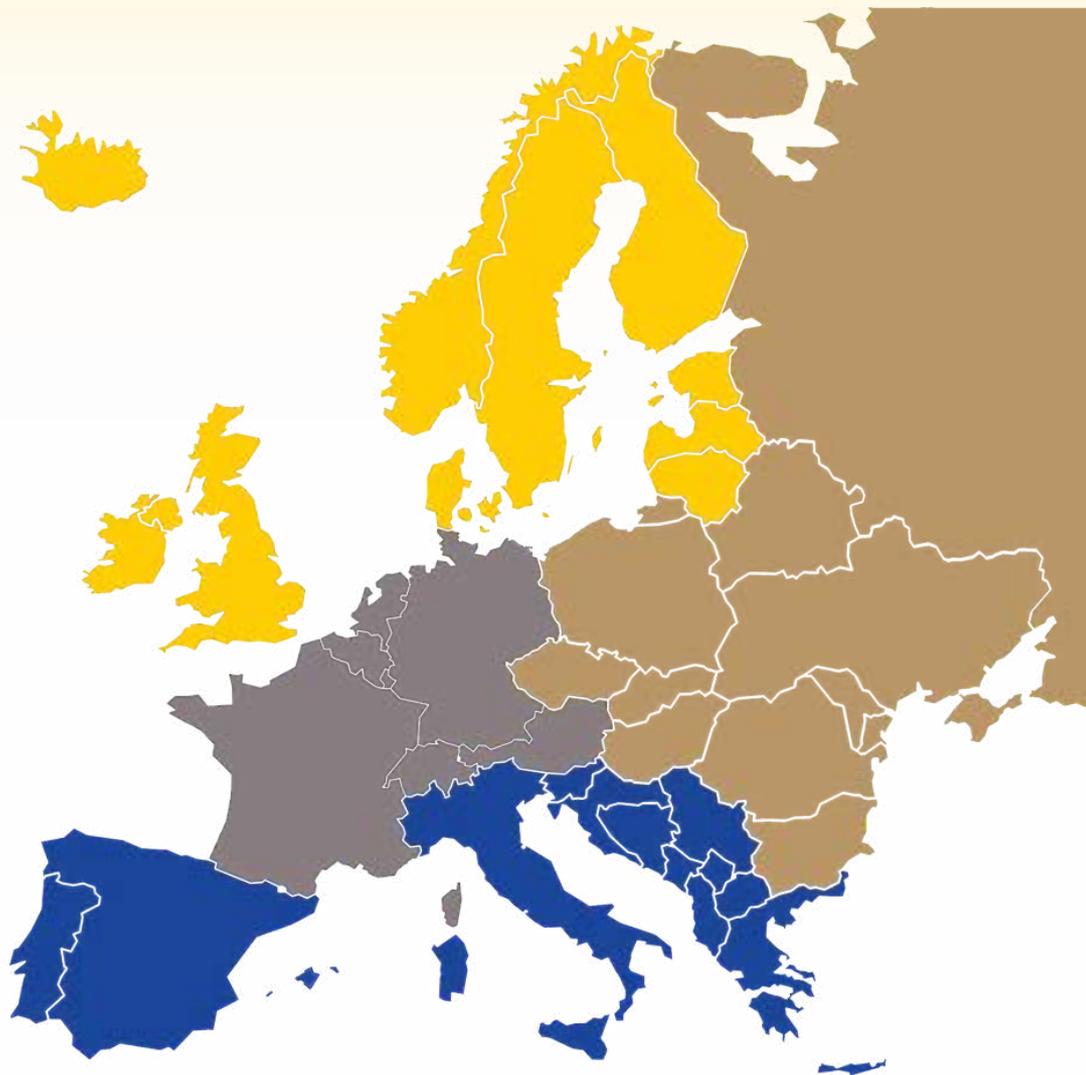


Table 4: Survey takers in various parts of the EU (UN Geoscheme)

■ Southern Europe **■ Eastern Europe** **■ Western Europe** **■ Northern Europe**

While in terms of urban/rural division, the sample is strongly skewed towards urban youth:

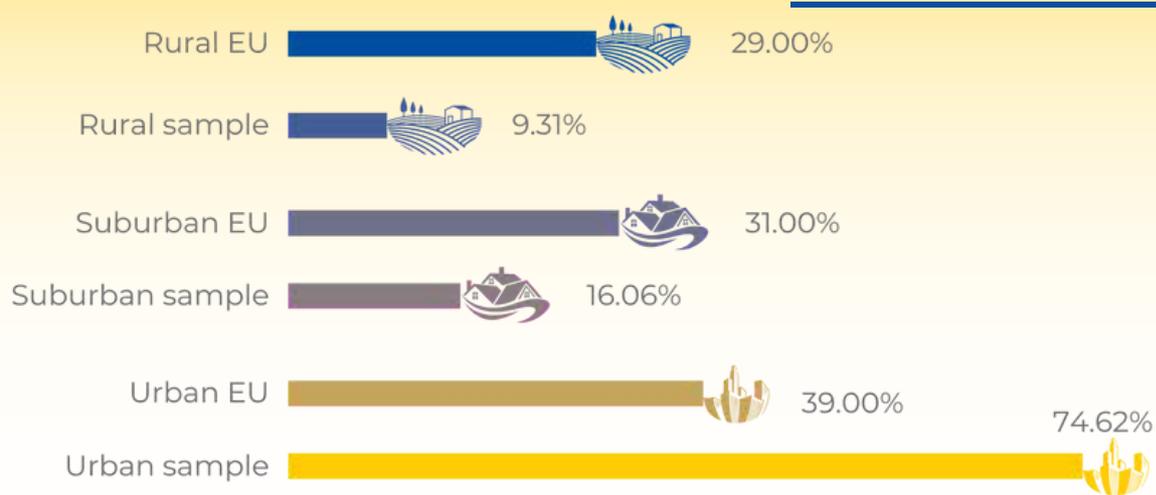


Table 5: Distribution of respondents by area, against EU average

A final demographic question was about travel opportunities. While not particularly enlightening as a proxy for socio-economic background, it does highlight how survey respondents are especially mobile, with over half of the sample declaring that they often or always have the opportunity to travel for work, study or leisure (Table 6).

Q6 You have the opportunity to travel in the EU for education, work, leisure or other reason:

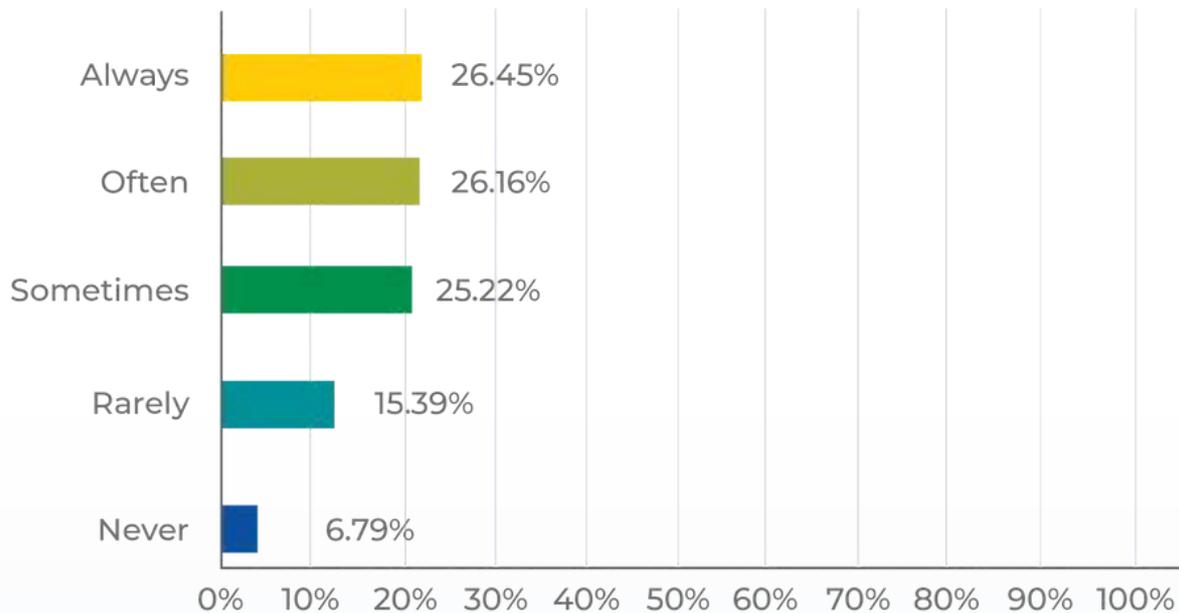


Table 6: Respondent's traveling opportunities

The sample scores well in some instances of representativeness - for example in terms of geographical presence and age distribution. Others (namely, the urban/rural divide, geographical distribution and above-average traveling opportunities) suggest however that survey takers are more closely involved and connected with the EU dimension than the average EU citizen. While the above has important implications for representativeness, i.e.: results cannot be taken to represent a micro-version of the EU, the results of the survey still shed a light on the main obstacles faced by youth in attempting to connect to the complex political dimensions of the EU.

Section 1: Influences on interest and participation in politics

Many influences affecting young people's intention to vote and interest in politics operate within their close social context (Plutzer, 2002). The influence of parents and/or family, peers, school and other forms of social aggregation (i.e. sports club, religious groups or voluntary associations) can be good predictors of voting intentions. In our sample, the majority of survey takers' parents (89.7%) are habitual voters:

Q7 Normally, do your parents and/or legal guardians go to vote?

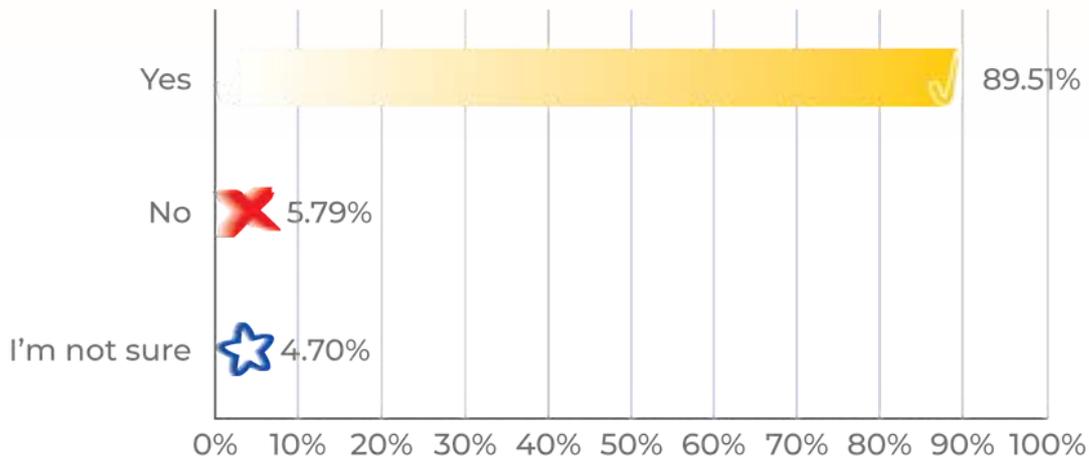


Table 7: Parent's voting habits

This is coherent with the literature on voting influences, according to which parents who vote are more likely to raise children who vote:

Q7 Normally, do your parents and/or legal guardians go to vote?

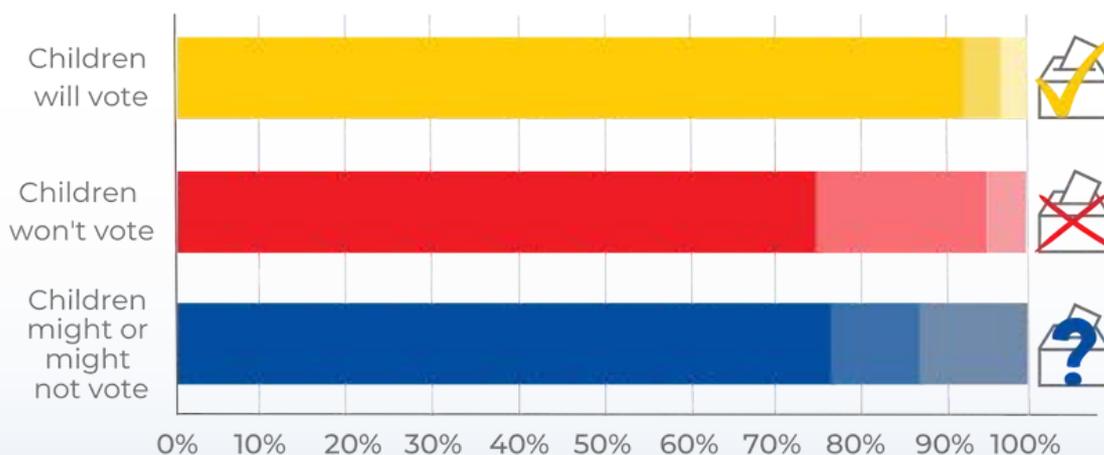


Table 8: Parent's voting habits, compared to their children

When it comes to the role of schools and voluntary associations in providing EU civic education, findings vary across countries. Voluntary associations are more likely to inform about the EU in Northern and Western Europe than the rest of Europe. Its overall role, however, is about 10 percentage point less prominent than that of schools:

I learnt the EU and/or how to vote in my local voluntary association, sports group or other non-formal setting:

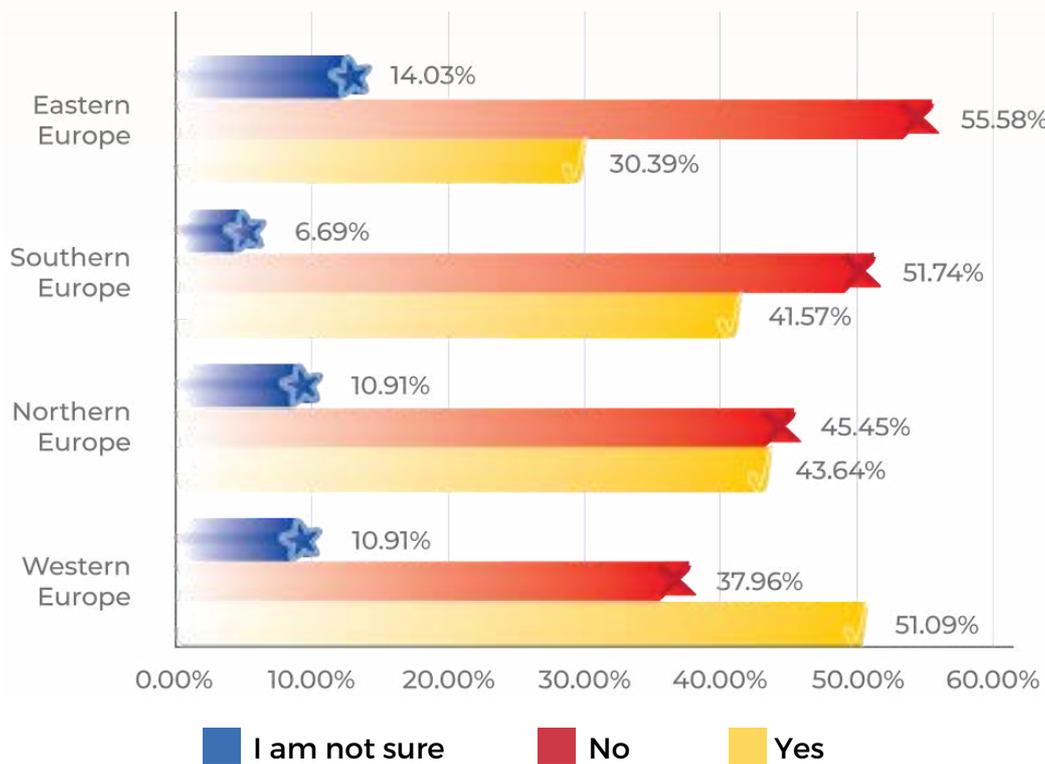


Table 9: Role of voluntary associations, divided by geographical areas

The role of school in fostering political participation is a debated issue in the literature on voting. In terms of notions and curricula, citizenship education and related subjects have been found to have little systematic impact on active participation in political and civic life (Manning and Edwards, 2013). This is not to mean that they have no impact, rather, that the quality of impact (negative/neutral/positive) strongly depends on delivery at classroom level. School climate, on the contrary, is generally recognized as positively impacting participatory tendencies of students, as well as their trust in institutions. (Claes et al, 2012, Manganelli, Lucidi e Alivernini, 2015, Quintelier and Hooghe, 2013 in Serek and Jugert, 2018) Because measuring any of these two influences closely would require a survey of its own, we have focused on the curricula dimension of EU citizenship education. We have divided the type of information about voting and EU politics in between theoretical (including, for example, history of institutions and division of powers) and practical (how to vote, functioning of institutions).

Survey respondents claim to have acquired mostly theoretical information about the EU through formal education (50.5% vs 29.8%, Table 10). Surprisingly, the average for both theoretical and practical information received rises with the age of respondents, meaning that 19 to 25 year olds are more likely to have learnt about voting and EU politics when they were at school than their 14 to 18 year old counterparts at the time of writing (Table 11).

Type of information on the EU received at school/university:

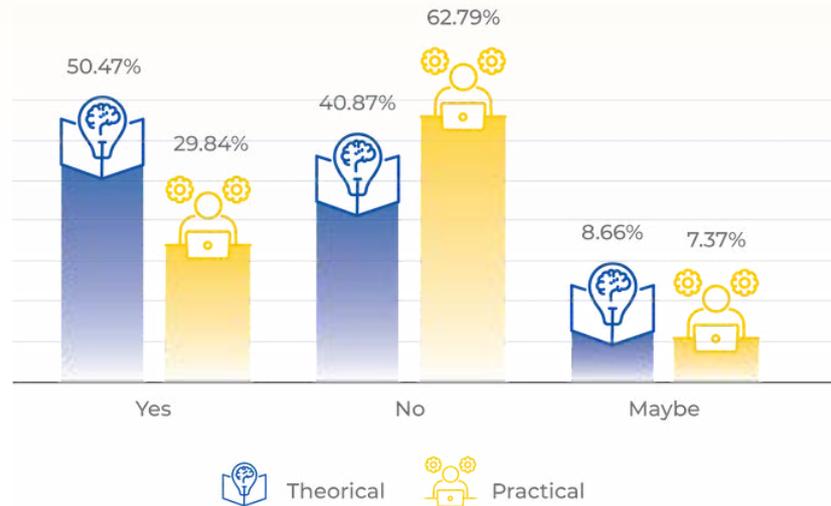


Table 10: Theoretical vs. practical voting information at school

At school and/or university, I learnt about the EU and voting:

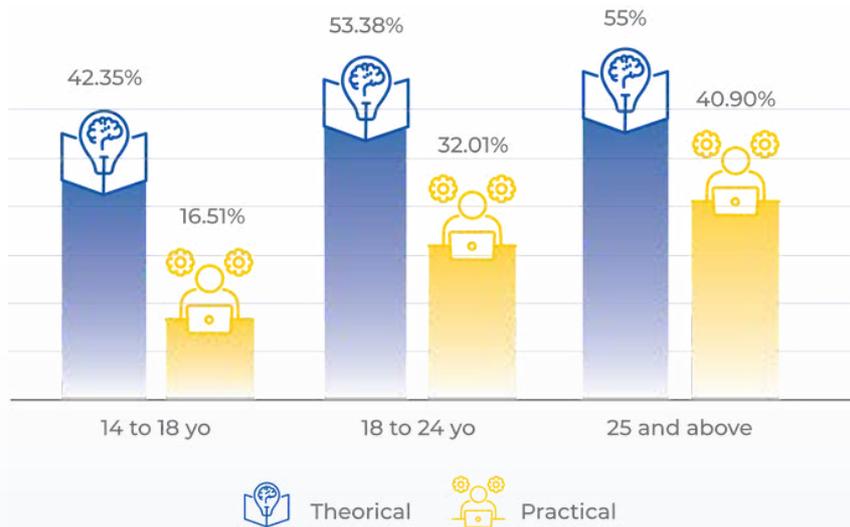


Table 11: Information received about the EU at school, by age of respondents

Overall, research findings confirm those of previous research about the weight of proximal factors in the development of political and civic interest. Parents' levels of interest play a prominent role, while the impact of school is mixed, and appears to be acknowledged mostly retroactively. Notably, associationism connected to the EU dimension is stronger in countries of Northern and Western Europe.

Section 2: Interest in politics

Interest in politics is a prerequisite, but not a determinant, of voting intentions. Investigating the levels of political interest amongst our survey respondents, the majority claims to be interested in politics: 42.5% is very interested, 30.7% interested, 18.9% neutral and 8% strongly or mildly uninterested (Table 12).

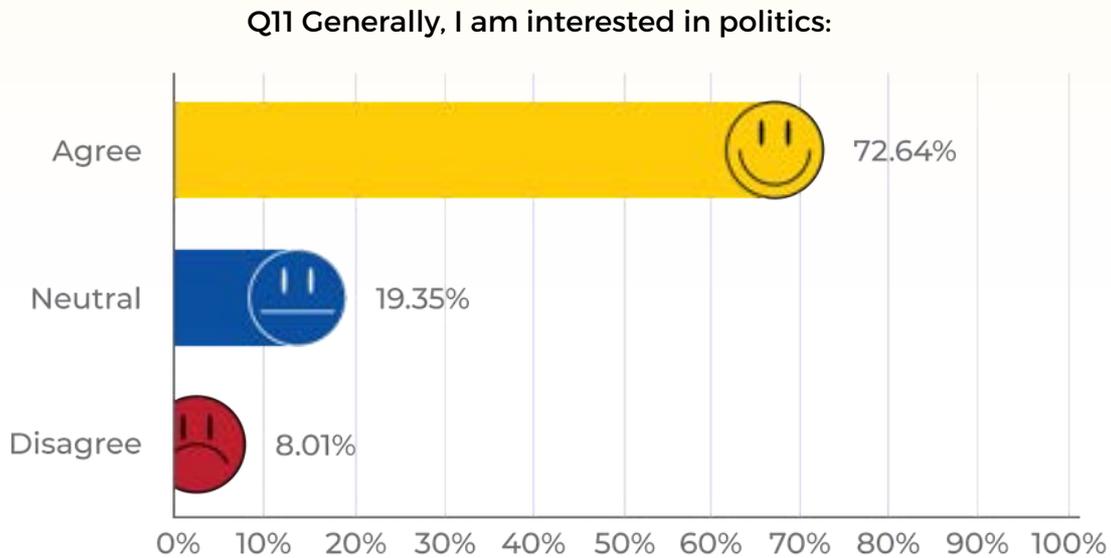


Table 12: Levels of political interest amongst survey respondents

As for associationism above, respondents in Western and Northern Europe are more likely to be interested in politics than their Southern or Eastern counterparts (Table 13).

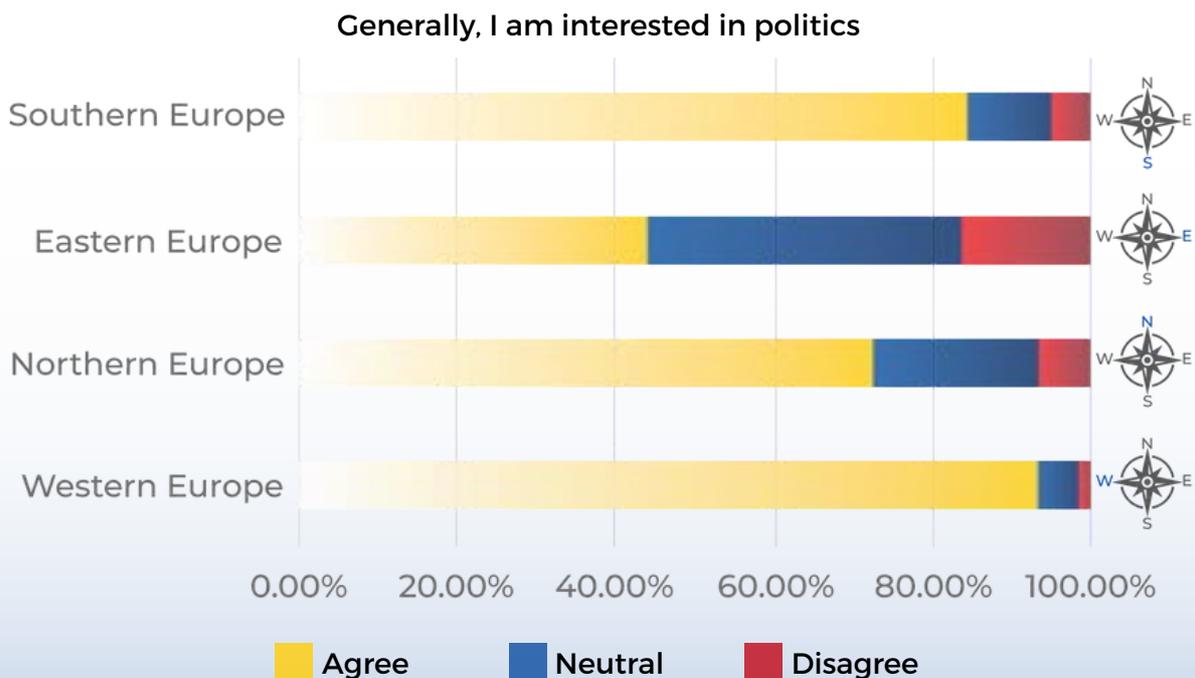


Table 13: Levels of political interest, by geographical areas

Almost half of 14 and 15 year old respondents are uncertain about their political interest (42.9% and 48.7% respectively) with around 25% claiming they are not interested at all. Otherwise, interest appears to increase with age, with the biggest rises at 16, 18 and 20 - where jumps of over 15 percentage points are recorded (Table 14).

Q11 Generally, I am interested in politics:

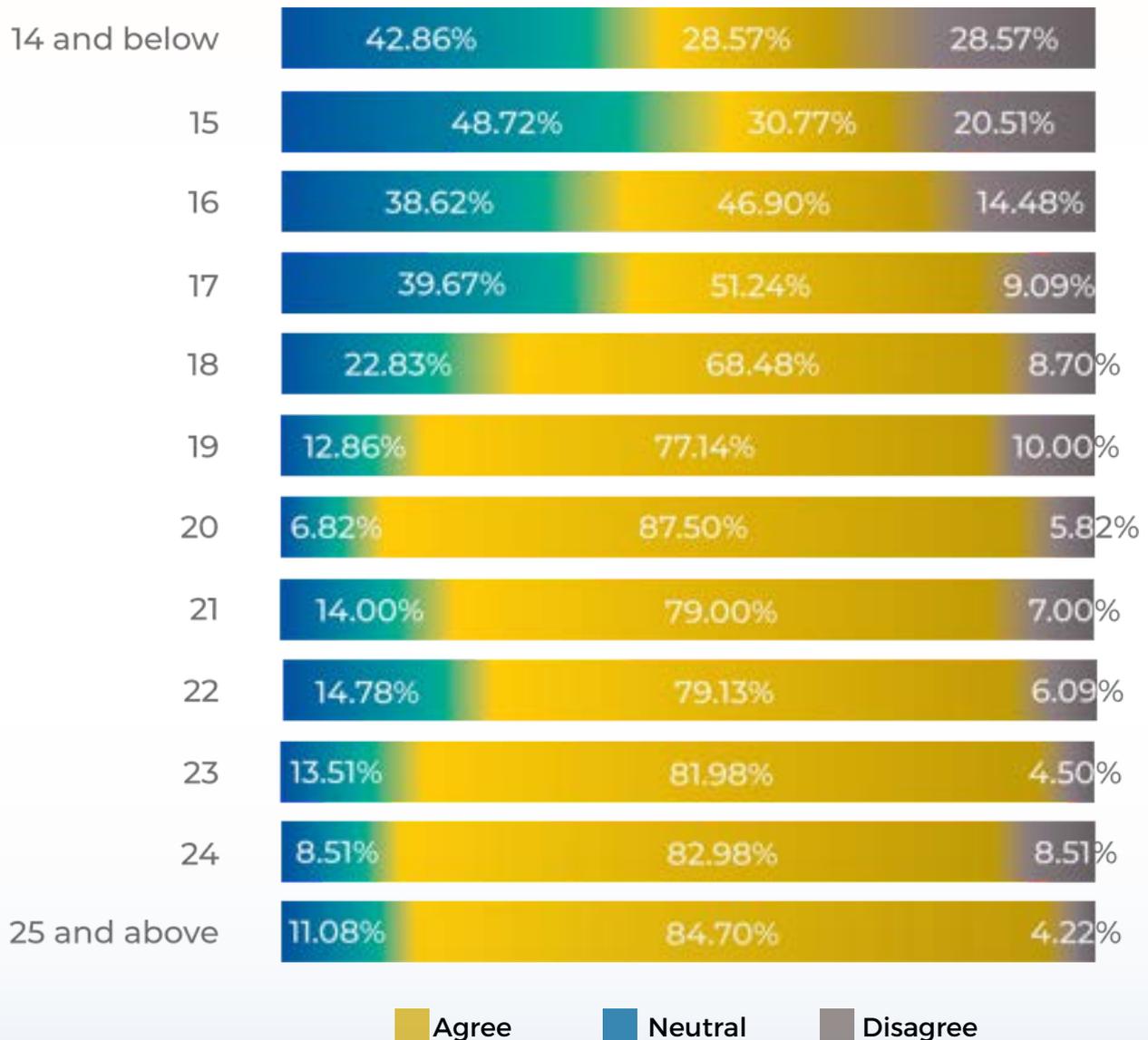


Table 14: Levels of political interest, by age of respondents

When asked how often they keep up with politics, only 10% of the sample rarely or never checks the news or other forms of media; about 20% checks occasionally, while the majority usually or always keeps up to date with it - 37% and 33.5% respectively (Table 15).

Q12 Generally, I keep up to date with politics through news and various types of media:

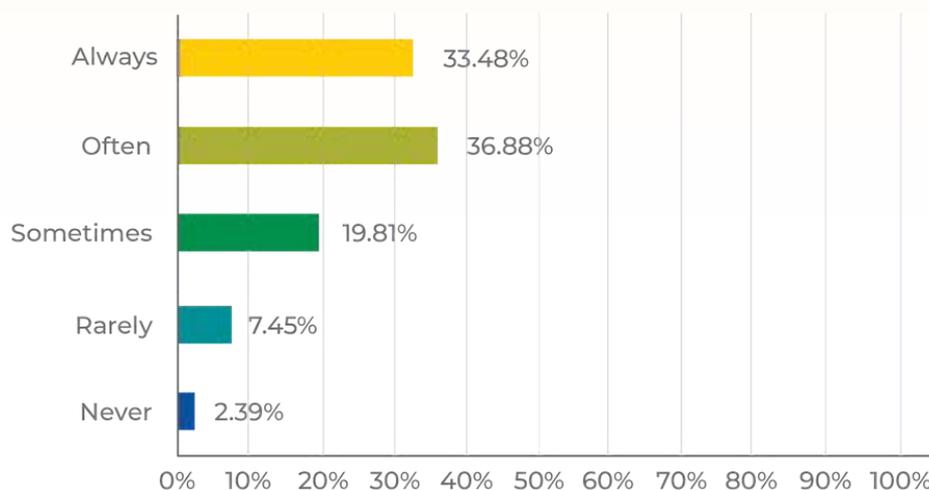


Table 15: Keeping up with politics amongst survey respondents

At first glance, this is consistent with the life-cycle hypothesis of voting - according to which increased interest in politics coincides with the gain of voting rights and entering adulthood. Further evidence in our sample - although not statistically significant - suggest that increased interest in politics comes with the gain of political rights, regardless of the age where this is gained. If differentiating, for example, the level of political interest - as expressed through news monitoring - amongst youngsters in vote@16 countries, that is higher and starts earlier than for young people in vote@18 countries:

Keeping up with politics in vote@16 and vote@18 countries:

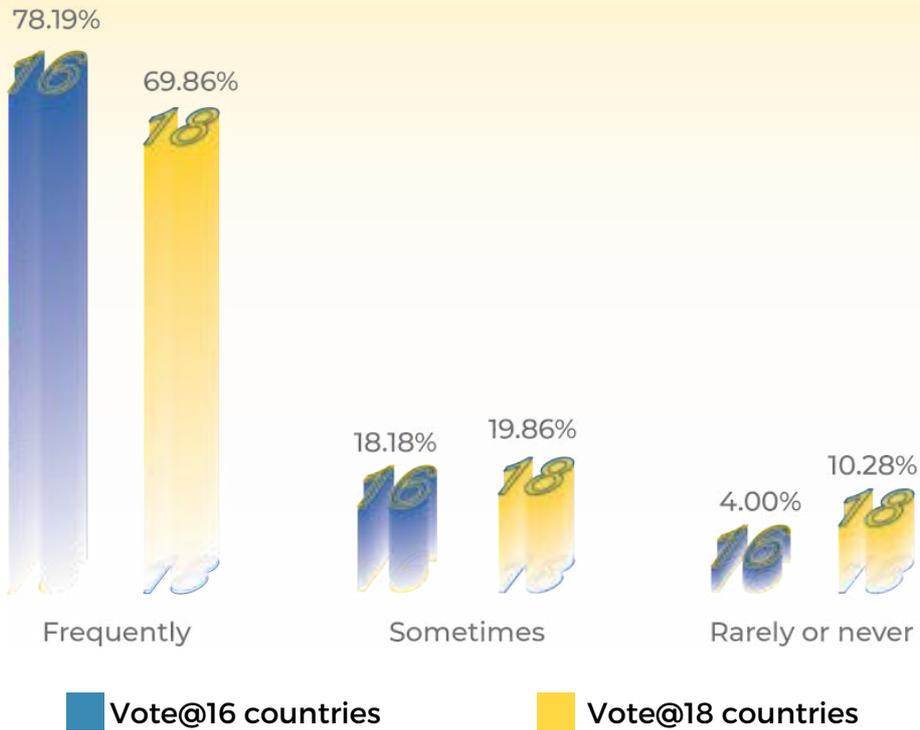


Table 16: Keeping up with politics in vote@16-17 and vote@18 countries

This is consistent with research conducted in vote@16 countries such as Malta and Austria about the role of rights acquisition in the development of political interest and engagement (Zeglovitz and Zandonella, 2013).

Interest in politics was investigated also in two more specific ways. We asked respondents about their top political issues of interest as well as their general interest in EU politics. Regarding the latter, survey respondents were overwhelmingly interested in EU politics, with 80.3% interested, 8.5% disinterested and 11% unsure (Table 17).

Q17 I am interested in European politics:

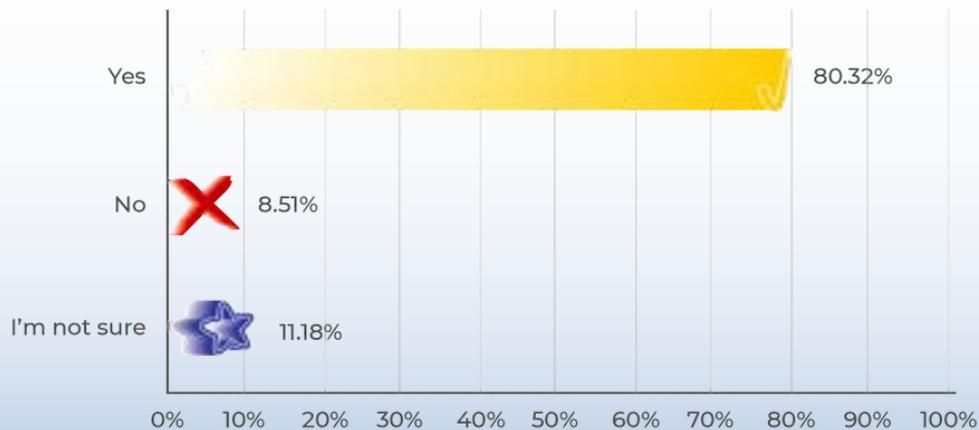


Table 17: Interest in EU politics

Interest in EU politics is higher than the overall interest in Western Europe (92.7%) Southern Europe (88.7%) and significantly lower than average - 61.3% - in Eastern Europe (Table 18).

Interest in EU politics, by geographical area:

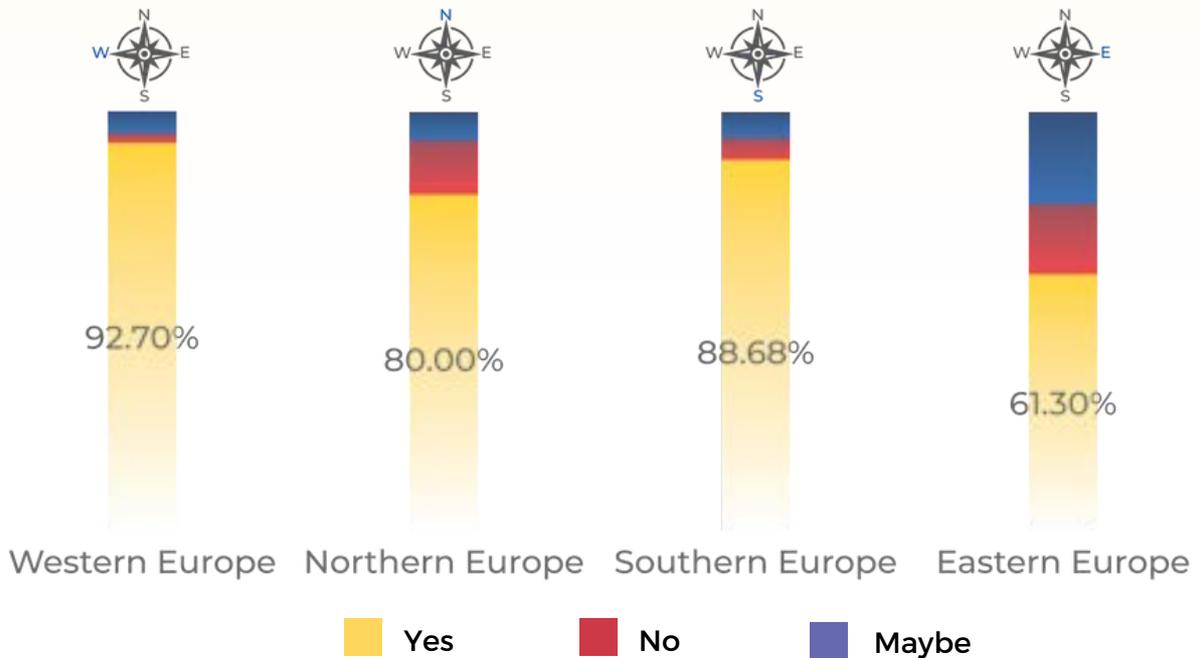


Table 18: Interest in EU politics, by UN geoscheme

In terms of age, the least interested demographic, as it was to be expected, was 14 years old and under (37%), while the most interested were 22 and 25 years old and over (91.2% and 91.3% respectively):

Q17 I am interested in European politics:

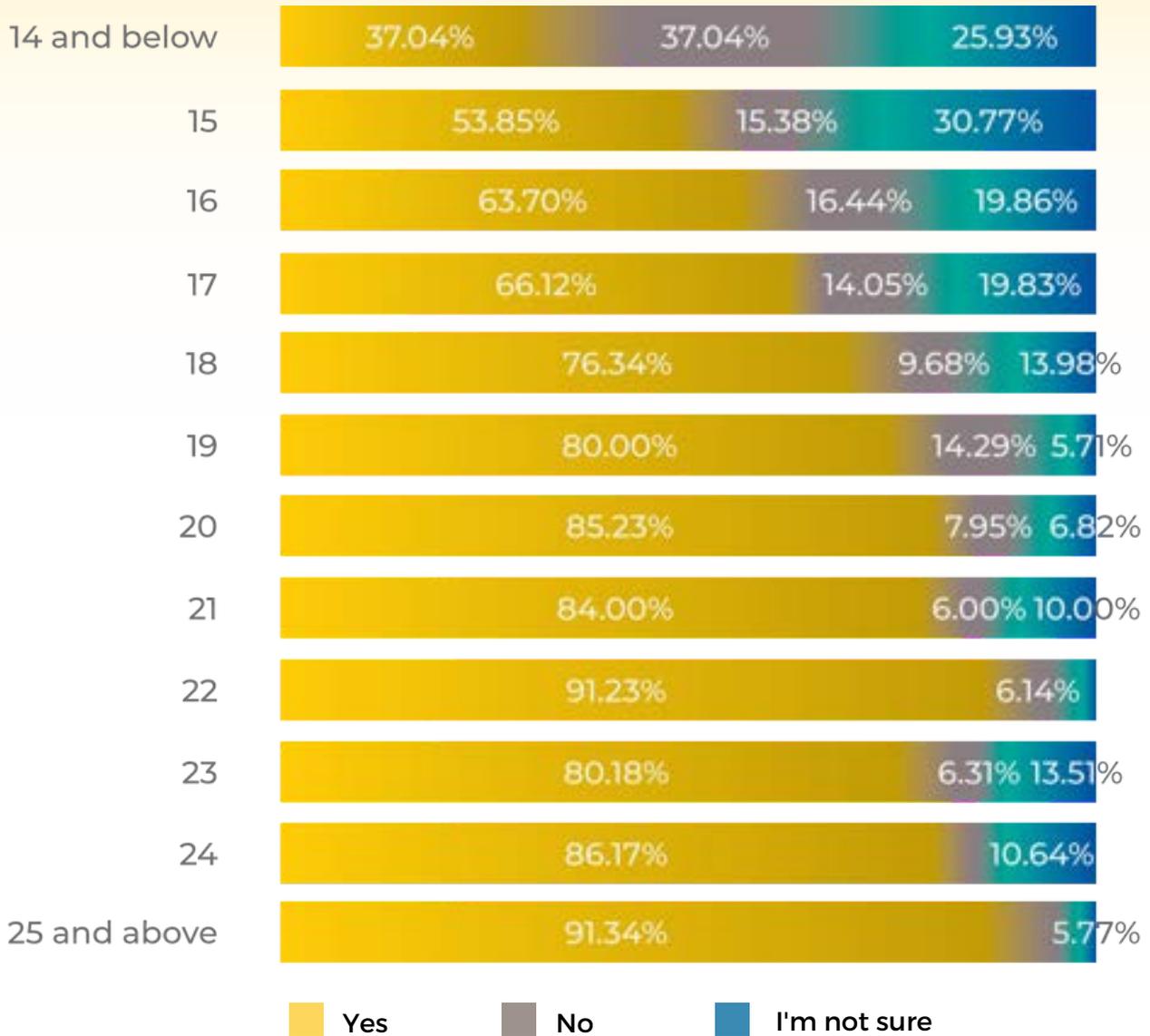


Table 19: Interest in EU politics, by age

In terms of the top political issues of interest, survey takers could choose two each from a list of 10 which included: Climate change, International affairs, Civil rights, Social affairs - employment and education, Populism and democracy, Rural/local development, Public health, Migration and Home affairs - justice and corruption. The most popular overall political issues were Climate change (41%) Civil rights (32.5%) and Social affairs (32%):

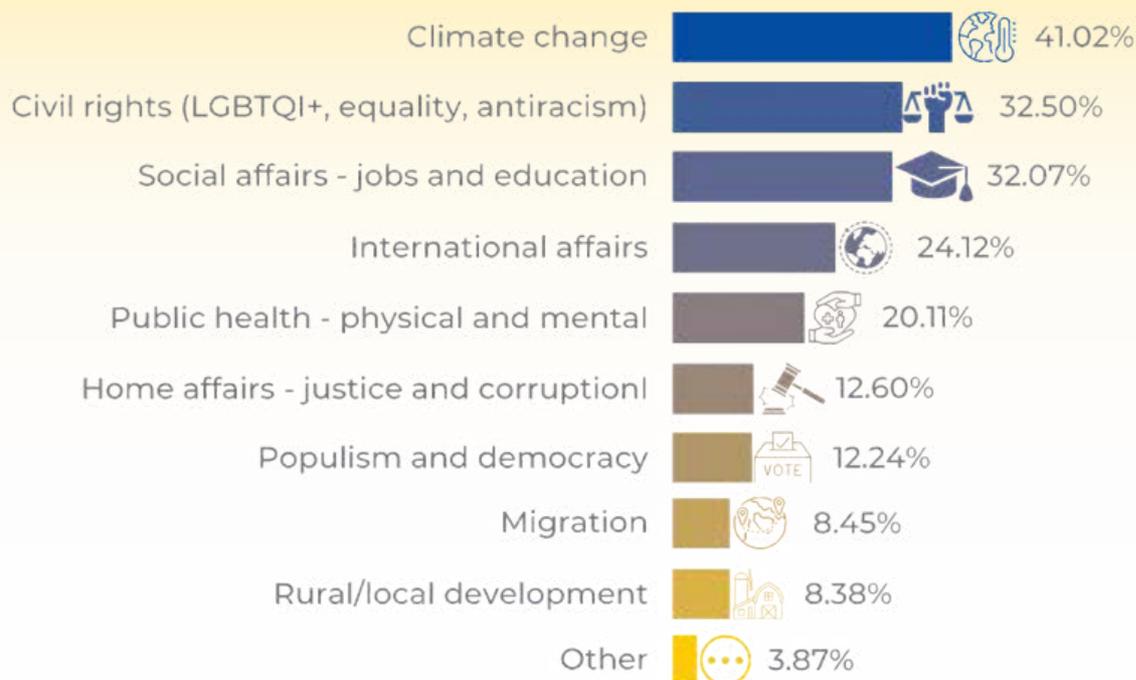


Table 20: Top political issues of interest amongst survey respondents

Isolating different demographics, it appears that political issues of interest are strongly connected to respondents' diverse backgrounds - respondents with migrant status or living abroad are twice as likely to be interested in migration; respondents from rural areas three times as likely to be interested in local development than respondents from urban and suburban areas. Age also affects the specificities of political interest. Civil rights is the top issue of interest for 18 year olds and below, while it is only 5th on the list for 25 year olds and above. Climate change is the most popular political issue amongst 19 to 25 year olds and over.

The last insightful finding relates to voting intentions. Those who are more concerned about Home affairs - justice and corruption are also the least likely to vote, suggesting that:

- a) national political environment strongly influences voting decisions, and
- b) that without trust in the political system, there is a heightened risk of abstention of voters also at EU level. Conversely, those who are interested in international affairs are more likely to vote for the EU election. (Table 21).

Q21 Are you going to vote in the next EU elections in 2024?

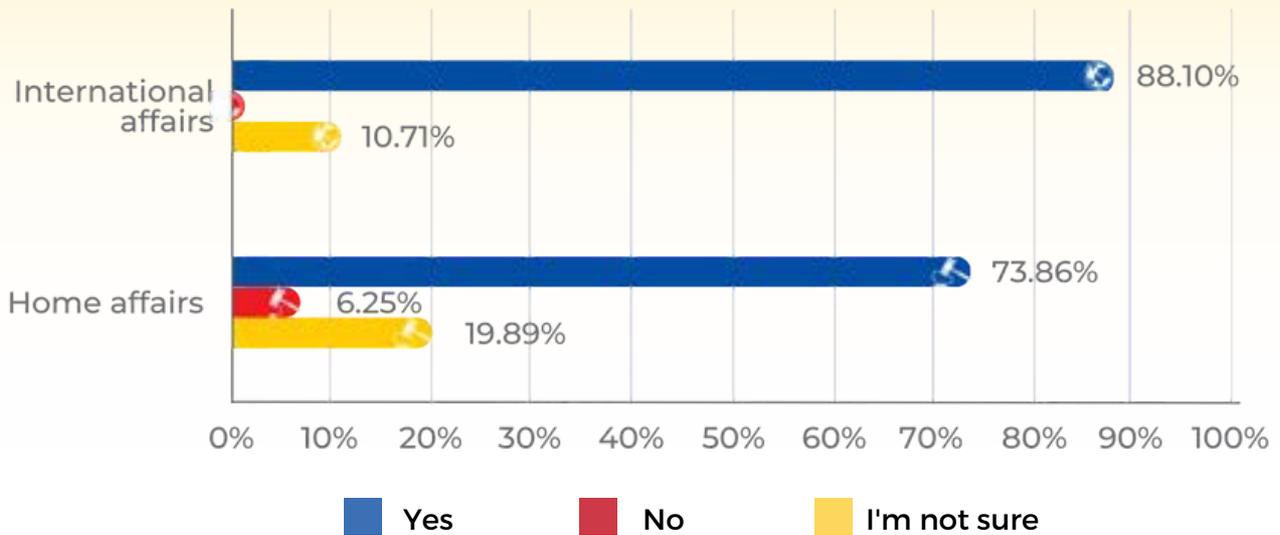


Table 21: Top political issues of interest amongst survey respondents

Generally, while political interest is not a strong determinant of voting intentions, its investigation can still shed light on the levels of political engagement expressed by our survey respondents. Top findings of this section are the top political issues of interest of respondents, which could support the development of campaigns and actions; the connection between respondents' background and the specificity of their political interest; the relationship between attitudes to political systems and voting intention, which is going to be looked at more closely in the next section.

Section 3: Efficacy of voting and political literacy

While political interest is not a strong determinant of voting intention, the perceived efficacy of voting, and levels of political literacy are, according to the literature, two of the most significant individual psychological factors influencing voting intentions. (Borg and Azzopardi, 2021) They can make the difference between showing up to the polls and staying home, and measuring them implies grappling with issues of representation, identification and attitudes to political systems.

The first two questions came in the form of statements that respondents had to agree or disagree with. When asked about the efficacy of voting, i.e. the extent to which showing up to the polls is an effective way to achieve political and social change, respondents were overwhelmingly positive, 82.5% in agreement, 13.8% neutral, and only 3.7% in disagreement (Table 22).

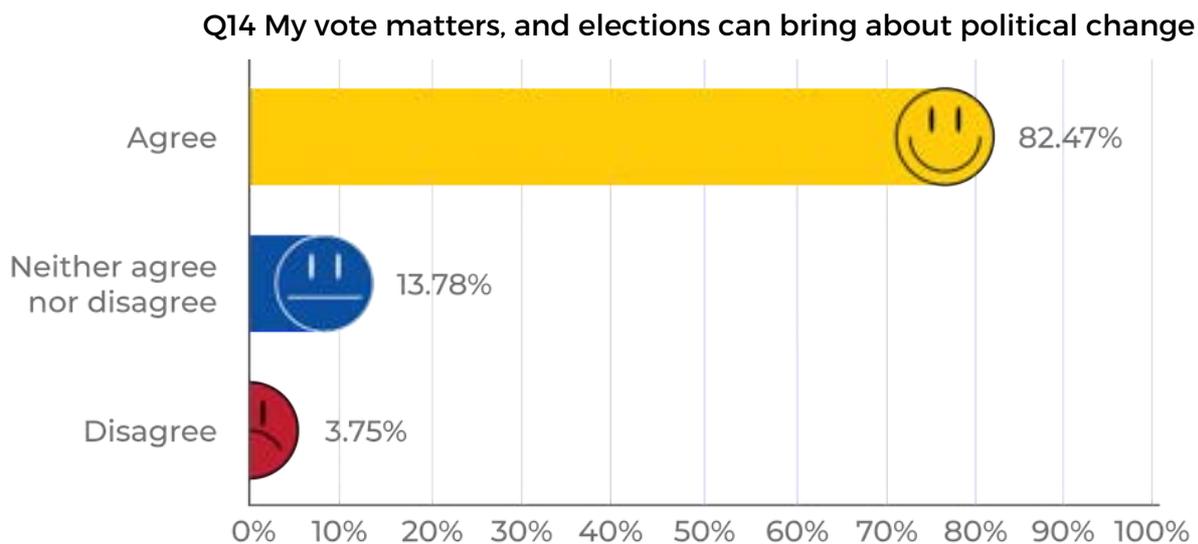


Table 22: Political and social efficacy of voting, as perceived by survey respondents

Asked about whether a national figure or party represents their view, answers were mixed, with only 40.6% of respondents identifying with a specific political party and/or a politician in their national context:

Q15 In my country, there is a party and/or a political figure that represents my views:

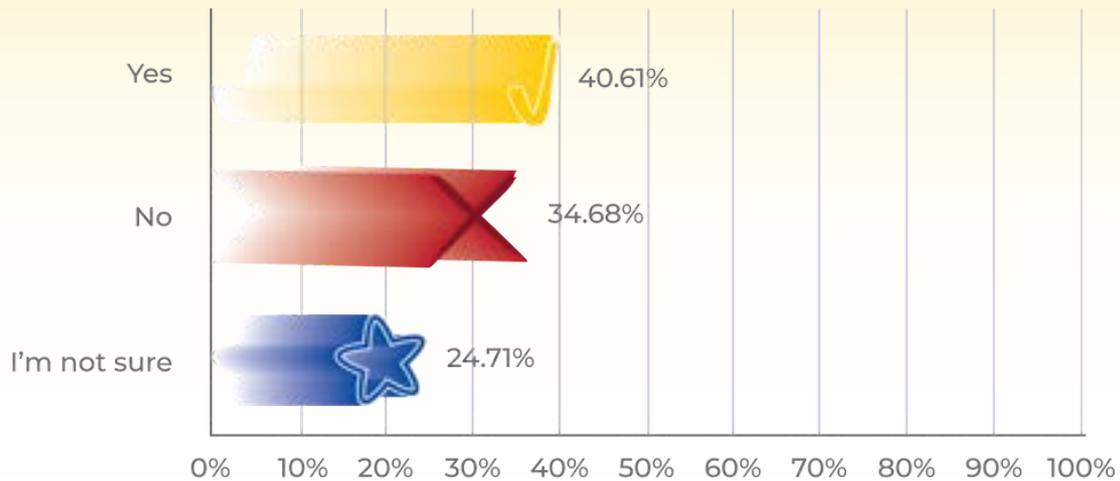


Table 23 Political representation (national context)

Once divided by age ranges, the results change considerably. Only 25.7% of respondents below 18 years old feel represented by a party or a politician at national level, and over 20% remain skeptical about the efficacy of voting:

In my country, there is a party or political figure that represents me:

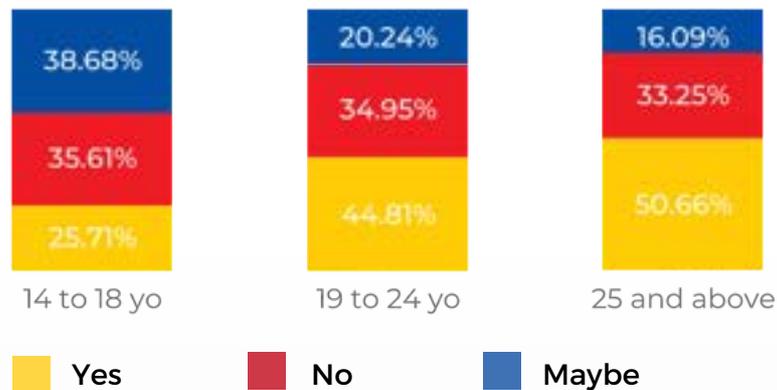


Table 24: Political representation, by age groups

Comparing geographical areas, respondents from Western European countries were more likely to feel politically represented than their Eastern counterparts by about 37 percentage points. Respondents from Southern Europe and Northern Europe occupy a middle ground, however, the former are more sure than the latter about not being represented at all, reaching a similar score to Eastern European respondents 37-39% (Table 25).

In my country there is a party or political figure that represents me:

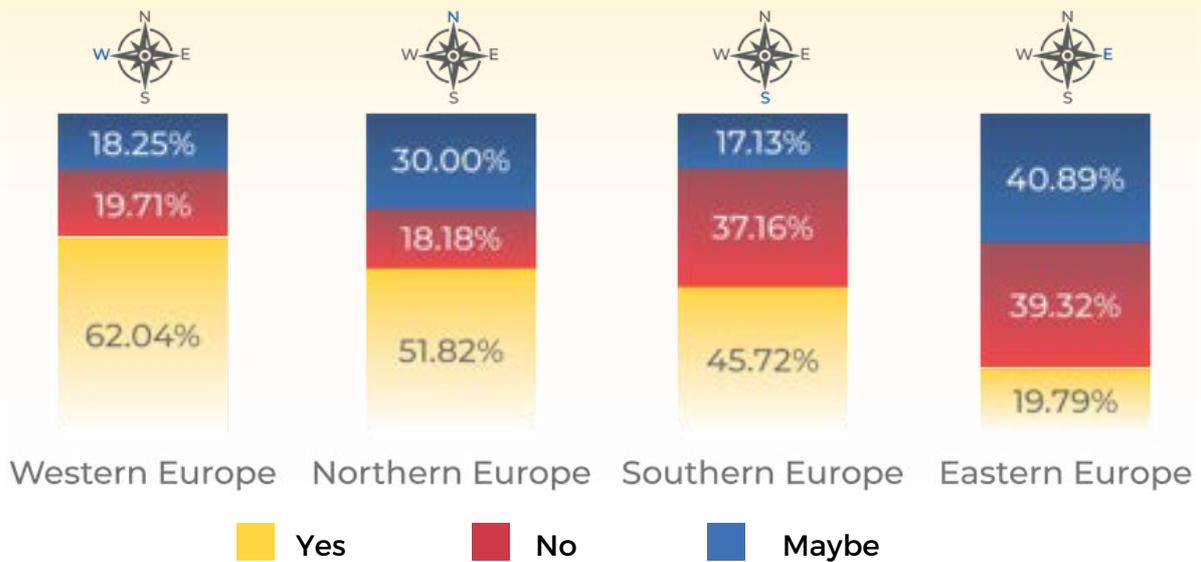


Table 25: Political representation, by geographical area

In what ways does voting efficacy and representation affect voting intentions? Amongst future voters, an overwhelming majority - 88% - recognizes the efficacy of voting. Results are more varied for abstainers and potential voters: only 17% of self-declared abstainers think voting is not effective, and 52% of them agree on principle about the efficacy of voting (Table 26). This apparently contradictory finding appears to corroborate those of Cammaerts et al. (2014) according to which there is a gap between democracy as a concept and its manifestation in contemporary societies. In terms of political representation, over a third of future voters (33%) do not feel represented at national level, against the 42.5% of abstainers and 42.7% of potential voters. It appears therefore that it is the lack of political representation, more than the distrust in the democratic process, to drive young citizens away from the polls (Table 27).

My vote matters, and elections can bring about political change:

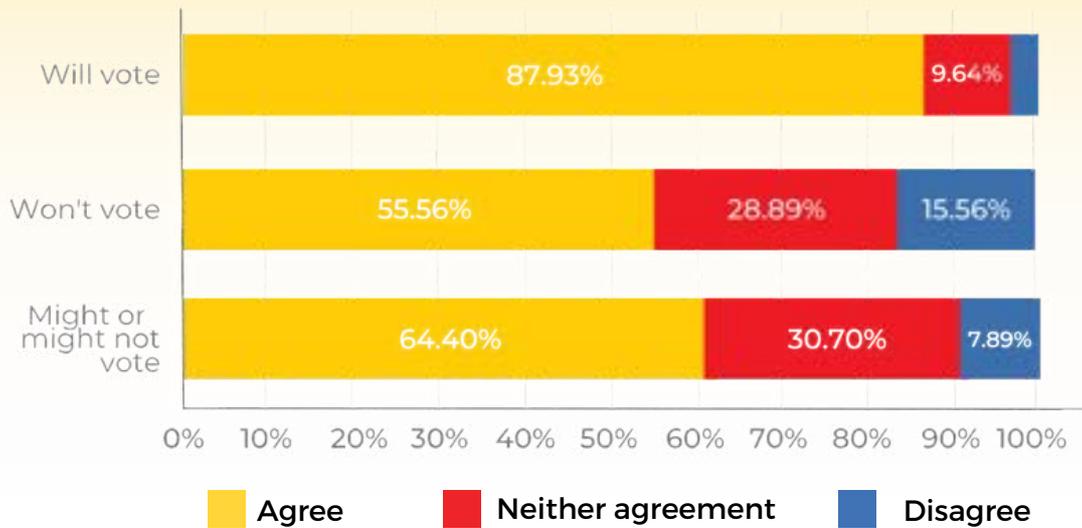


Table 26: Efficacy of voting, combined with voting intentions

In my country there is a party or political figure that represents my views:

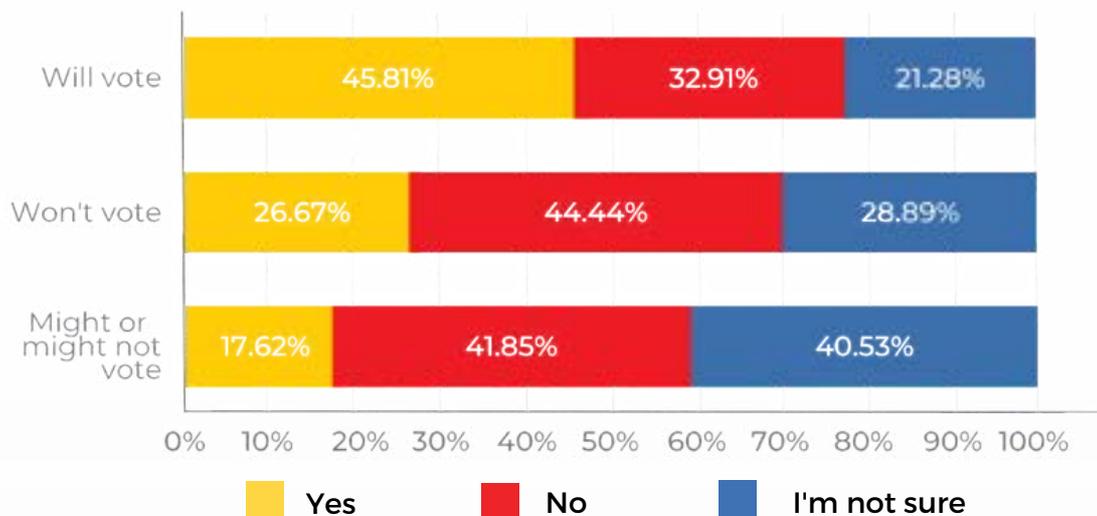


Table 27: Political representation, combined with voting intentions

The high number of “unsures” throughout this particular set of questions raises the issue of knowledge - of political systems, their functioning, efficacy, as well as their current representatives. In Verba and Nie’s resource theory, political literacy, understood as one of the resources needed to make informed political choices, is amongst the main determinants of turnout. (Verba and Nie, 1972) We asked survey respondents to assess their level of confidence in choosing a candidate based on their programme, as well as their level of knowledge of the EU.

The majority of survey takers is confident in their knowledge of the EU: around 35% knows a lot or a great deal about it; an additional 44% declares to know what they perceive to be a moderate amount. Only 2% admitted to knowing nothing or almost nothing about the EU (Table 28).

How much do you know about the European Union?

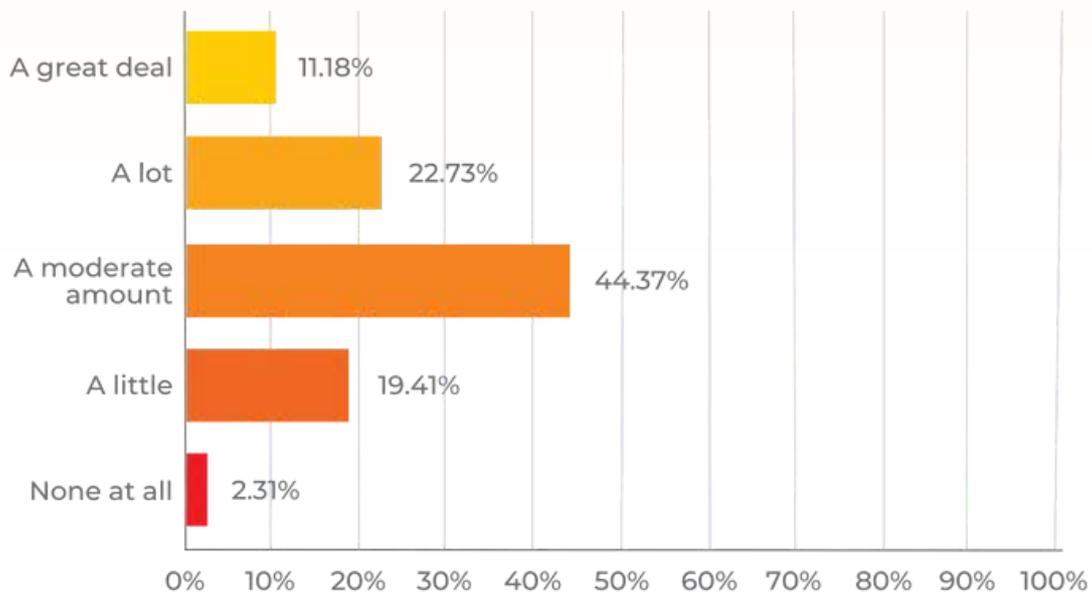


Table 28: Levels of knowledge of the EU amongst survey respondents

Similarly, 67% of the respondents would feel confident choosing a candidate based on their programme, against 13.8% that wouldn't, and a further 19.3% who is not sure:

During elections, I feel/I would feel confident in my ability to choose one or more candidates based on their program

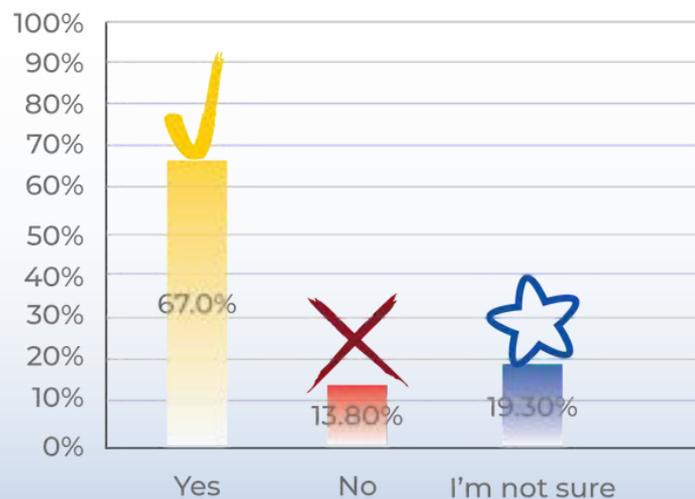


Table 29: Levels of confidence making an informed political choice

Furthermore, looking back at the data on political representation, it would appear that almost a third of respondents (27%), while confident enough to make a choice, simply do not have a party that represents them.

Q16 During elections, I feel/I would feel confident in my ability to choose one or more candidates based on their program:

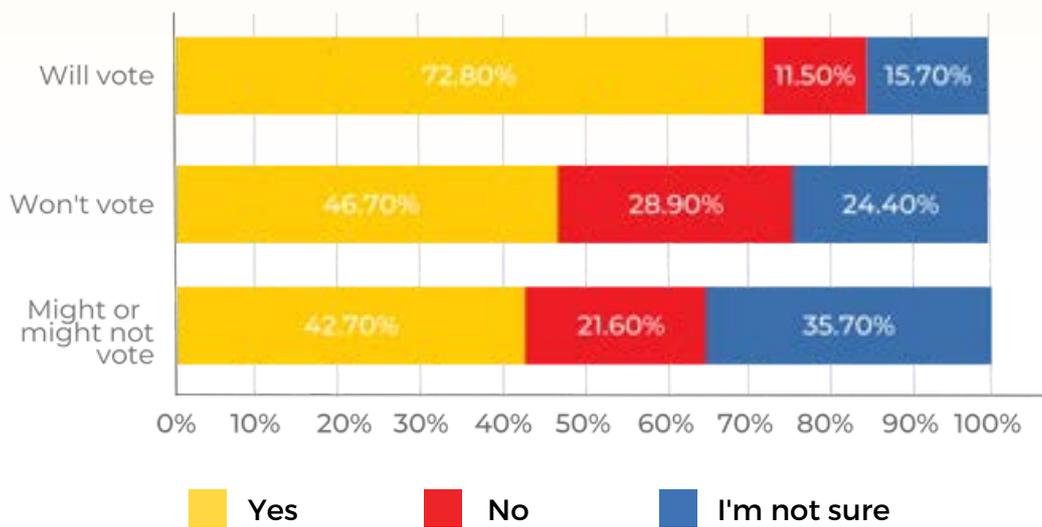


Table 30: Perceived political literacy, combined with voting intentions

Yet in this case confidence is only a measure of perceived capacity. It does not say much about actual knowledge. This is why after asking participants to self-assess their levels of political literacy and knowledge of the EU, the survey contains two knowledge questions on the functioning of the European Union. In both cases, levels of perceived knowledge are higher than the score quiz, meaning that survey takers overestimate their knowledge of the EU by at least 8 percentage points.

Perceived levels of knowledge about the EU vs. quiz scores:

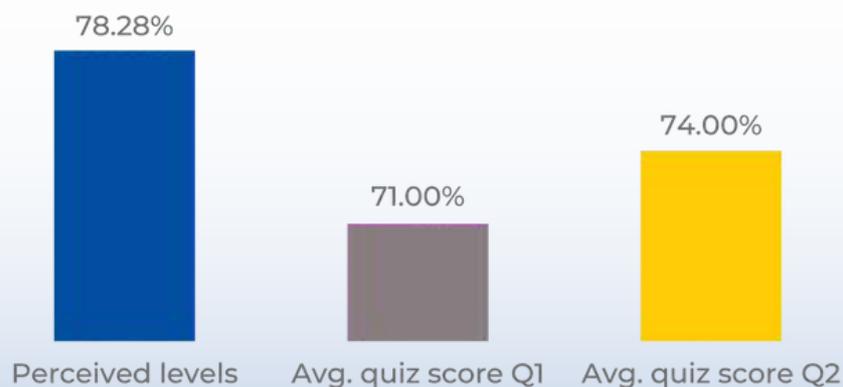


Table 31: Perceived levels of knowledge about the EU, vs. quiz scores

The findings from this section highlight most of all the mismatch between democracy in theory and democracy in practice: voting is agreed to be effective as a democratic tool in principle by a strong majority of the sample, yet not all those who believe in it have the intention of showing up to the polls. Overall, younger people feel less represented than older young people, and respondents from Southern and Eastern European countries feel less politically represented than their Northern and Western counterparts. Over a third of respondents (32.5%) do not feel confident in their ability to choose a candidate, and perceived levels of knowledge about the EU are higher than EU knowledge quiz scores of about 8 percentage points.

In the next section, we are going to look more closely at voting intentions and the reasons for voting or abstaining.

Section 4: Why vote?

So far, this report has looked at various factors and influences to voting intentions for the EP elections of 2024. Some, like that of the parents, or the school, pertain more to the respondents' immediate and proximate surroundings. Others, like attitudes towards politics, levels of representation, literacy and efficacy have more to do with the respondents' individual psychology. The upcoming section is solely focused on respondents' voting intentions and their reasons. It starts from the simple YES/NO/MAYBE question: Are you going to vote for the EP elections 2024? Here again an overwhelming majority of respondents (81.5%) is positive they are going to show up to the polls, against 15.4% of maybes and only 3% of nos (Table 32). It is worth signaling what social science researchers call "social-desirability bias" or the inclination by poll takers to lie about voting or wanting to vote to look like good citizens. It is therefore likely that of those 81.5% of self-declared future voters, a percentage between 10 and 20% will not actually show up to the polls (Plutzer, 2002).

Q21 Are you going to vote in the next EU elections in 2024?

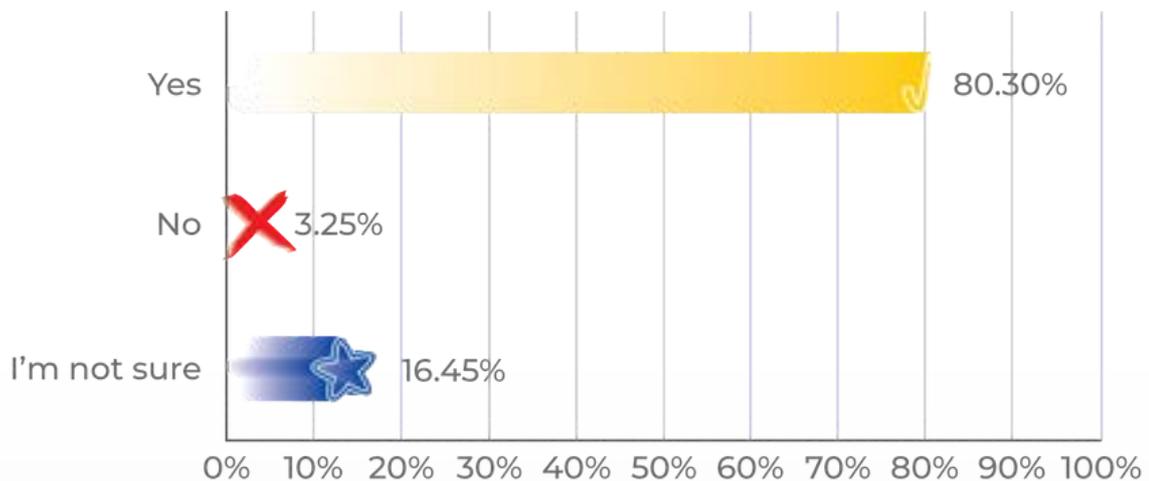


Table 32: Voting intentions

Depending on the survey takers' voting intention, the survey bifurcates and respondents can choose a reason for their answer from a scroll down list. If the option "Other reason" is selected, participants can input a few lines of text into a box to explain their reason for voting, abstaining or being still uncertain. The top three reasons for voting are:

- I vote because it is my duty as a citizen: 34%
- I want to vote to make a difference: 32%
- I will vote so I will use it, even though no political candidate represents me: 17%

Amongst the lower scores were opposition votes at 8.2% - voting against, as opposed as for, a particular party - and voting for a specific candidate 6.2% (Table 33).

I vote because it is my duty as a citizen	33.58%
I want to vote to make a difference	31.76%
I have to vote, so I might well use it, even though no political candidate represents me	17.51%
I will vote because I don't want a specific party to win more seats than it should	8.26%
I will vote because I have a candidate that represents me	6.72%
Other	1.63%
I will vote because my family and friends vote, too	0.54%

Table 33: Reasons to vote amongst survey respondents

Top three reasons for abstention are the following:

- I won't vote because I don't have the right to vote in the EU: 25%
- I won't vote because I don't feel represented by any candidate: 17.5%
- I won't vote because I don't trust the political system: 17.5 %

Other reasons not to vote were the lack of election specific information (15%) and disinterest in politics 12.5% (Table 34).

I won't vote because I don't have the right to vote in my country of residence	25.88%
I won't vote because I don't feel represented by any candidate	16.28%
I won't vote because I don't trust the political system	16.28%
I won't vote because I don't have enough information to make an informed choice	16.28%
I won't vote because I don't care about politics	11.63%
Other	11.63%
I won't vote because my family and friends don't vote, either	2.33%
I won't vote because the registration rules are too complicated	0.00%

Table 34: Reasons to abstain from voting amongst survey respondents

It is worth noting that the very low percentage of self-declared abstainers in our survey - only 3% of the total respondents - has very little statistical significance. More interesting could be the reasons for uncertainty around voting, expressed by 15.4% of survey takers. Their main reasons for uncertainty are the following:

- I do not have enough information on EU politics to vote: 39%
- There might not be any candidate or party that I want to vote for: 23%
- I don't feel confident in making an informed choice with my vote: 15%

I do not have enough information on EU politics to vote	38.39%
There might not be any candidate or party that I want to vote for	22.77%
I don't feel confident in making an informed choice with my vote	16.07%
Other	12.95%
I might have other priorities in 2024	9.82%

Table 35: Reasons for uncertainty around voting amongst survey respondents

Insights of interest coming from the “Other” section mainly pertain to this latter group, which mentions, amongst others, a lack of trust in their national information environment, as well as a lack of awareness of their voting rights, and/or administrative barriers such as low age and lack of EU citizenship status. Future self-declared voters expand instead on their views about the importance of voting in contemporary democracies. Here two respondents explain how despite the lack of representation, keeping undesirable parties away from power or manifesting dissent through a blank vote can also be democratic duties of citizens:

“I vote even though I don't have a political party that represents me in full because I vote as best as possible, and according to my opinion. I also vote not to empower extremist political forces totally opposed to my view.”

“I will vote, even if the vote is blank, because it is a right that I have.”

Another acknowledges the importance of transparency and fairness in the EU as a direct way to improve turnout and fight abstentionism:

“There will never be a political party that exactly matches individual views or ideologies. [...] the fight against corruption is the cornerstone of the EU's flexible balance. Otherwise, the electorate cannot and will not trust the system.”

To summarize the main findings of this section, it appears that for future self-declared voters, the act of voting still has strong moral connotations, whether understood as a civic duty or a right. It is also more common to vote against a party than for a specific party. This suggests that there is an ongoing crisis of political representation, but also a lack of election-specific and EU specific information available to potential voters at this time. In terms of abstention, the top reason - lack of rights - brings attention to the high number of non-EU nationals who live and work in the EU but remain without the right to vote. The subsequent two reasons, lack of trust and lack of representation, would appear to corroborate the findings by Henn et al (2005) and Cammaerts et al. (2014) about alienation, more than apathy, being the main driver of abstentionism amongst youth.

The closing survey question asked respondents to identify resources most useful in bringing young people to the polls. They could choose from a list including practical, political and general information, as well as motivation. The top scoring resources across the sample were the following:

- Election specific information - who are the candidates, what are their programs: 73%
- General information about the EU - why it matters, how does it impact your life: 65.7%
- Political information about the EU - main areas of action, what was done so far: 48.6%

The least useful resources according to survey takers were Practical information (when, where, and how to vote) and Motivation and reasons to vote (Table 36).

In your opinion, what are the most important information and resources that young people need in order to vote at the EP elections 2024?

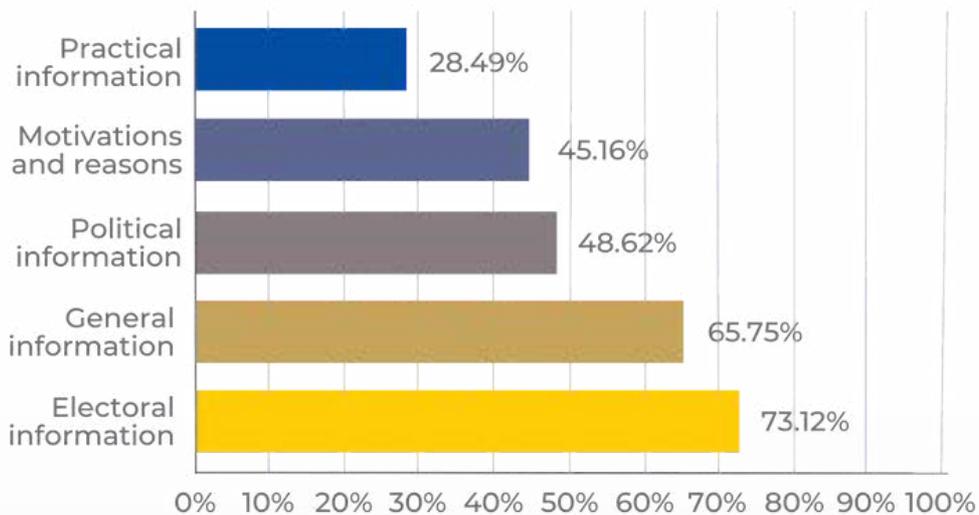


Table 36: Useful resources to encourage voting according to survey respondents

Interestingly, this varies across age groups, with half of all respondents aged 18 and below claiming they would want to receive motivations and reasons to vote over political information about the EU (Table 37).

Q26 In your opinion, what are the most important information and resources that young people need in order to vote at the EP elections 2024?

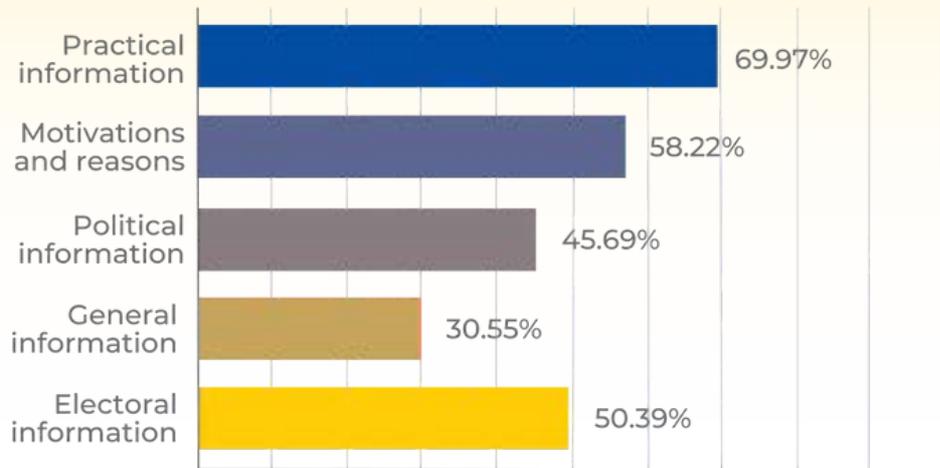


Table 37: Useful resources to encourage voting, according to survey respondents aged 18 and below

Results also vary slightly across geographical areas, with respondents from Eastern Europe also finding motivations and reasons to vote a fundamental resource to encourage voting (Table 38)

Q26 In your opinion, what are the most important information and resources that young people need in order to vote at the EP elections 2024?

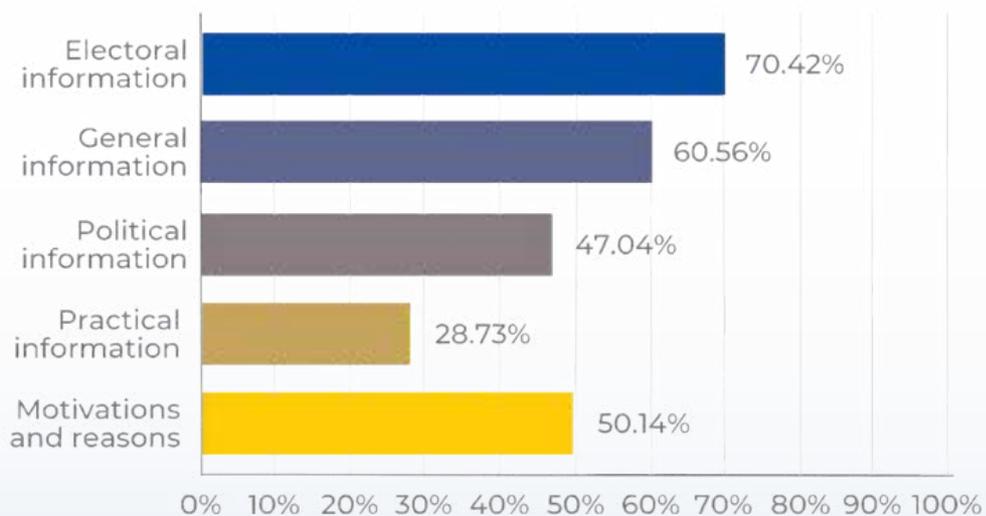


Table 38: Useful resources to encourage voting, Eastern European countries

Northern European respondents deem “Practical information about voting” the third most important resource to encourage turnout at 43.3% (Table 39).

Q26 In your opinion, what are the most important information and resources that young people need in order to vote at the EP elections 2024?

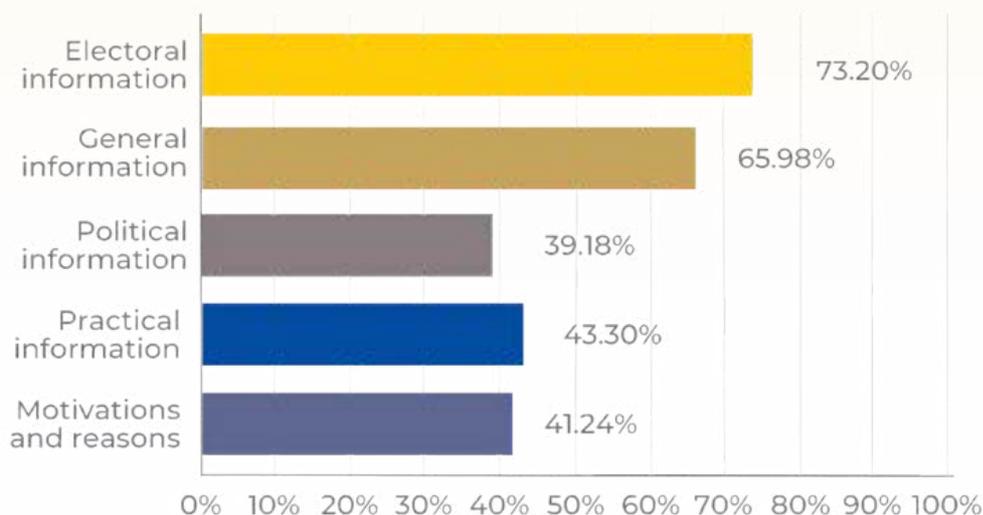


Table 39: Useful resources to encourage voting, northern European countries

It appears therefore that resource needs vary across countries, backgrounds and age of respondents. In countries and contexts where there is diminished trust in institutions and the political process, respondents struggle to see the utility and efficacy of voting. This mistrust permeates respondents’ conception of politics in general, thus affecting their perception and understanding of the EU. Young people, too, need extra support to see the utility of voting and to be compliant with administrative requirements as they reach the voting age. There seems to be a consensus, however, that to encourage participation in the EP elections 2024, general information about the EU - the way it impacts citizens lives at the micro-level - is more important than political information about the EU, and election specific information is above both, the prime resource that could support young people in their vote. It is worth highlighting here that as electoral campaigns for the EP elections kick off in summer 2023, plenty of electoral information will be available up until the opening of polls. What could be helpful for young voters at that time, therefore, is one or more resources to support them in navigating the information available - providing accessible, non-partisan and strongly fact-checked information on political programmes of candidates.

Conclusions

This report has focused on the issues, challenges and motivations of young people to engage with the EP elections of 2024, as investigated by a literature review and a quantitative survey.

The sample scored well in some instances of representativeness but not others. Countries such as Romania and Portugal together constituted around 50% of the total sample. Answers to some of the demographic questions (i.e. mobility and urban/rural divide) suggest that the survey takers we were able to reach are more closely involved with the EU dimension than the average EU citizen. While this means that results cannot be taken to represent reality closely, they still highlight the challenges of young people in attempting to connect to the complex political dimensions of the EU.

In terms of influences in voting behavior, research findings confirm those of previous research about the weight of proximal factors in the development of political and civic interest. Parents' levels of interest play a prominent role, while the impact of school is mixed, and appears to be acknowledged mostly retroactively. Notably, associationism connected to the EU dimension is stronger in countries of Northern and Western Europe.

Discussing political engagement, our survey respondents appear to be mostly interested in politics, and in particular in global transversal topics such as climate change, civil rights, social rights (decent jobs and education opportunities) and international affairs. As political socialization often develops from lived experience, the connection between respondents' background and the specificity of their political interest is a significant one and should be taken into account while devising campaigns meant to engage young people with EU politics. Attitudes to political systems are understood to act mostly negatively, meaning that if a national political system is perceived to be corrupt, this mistrust will more often than not permeate respondents' attitudes towards the EU, too.

In this regard, there seems to be a mismatch in the sample between democracy in theory and democracy in practice. What this means is that voting is agreed to be effective as a democratic tool in principle by a strong majority of the sample, yet not all those who believe in it have the intention of showing up to the polls. This skeptical attitude might change once potential voters are connected with the programmes and political candidates for the EP elections.

Indeed, political representation emerges as a prominent challenge, as younger people (below 18) feel less represented than people aged 20 and above, and respondents from Southern and Eastern European countries feel less politically represented than their Northern and Western counterparts. Over a third of respondents (32.5%) do not feel confident in their ability to choose a candidate, and perceived levels of knowledge about the EU are higher than EU knowledge quiz scores of about 8 percentage points.

In terms of voting intentions, a strong majority of the sample foresees showing up to the polls in 2024. For future self-declared voters, the act of voting still has strong moral connotations, whether understood as a civic duty or a right. It is also more common to vote against a party (opposition vote) than for a specific party. This corroborates findings elsewhere on the ongoing crisis of political representation, but also on a lack of election-specific and EU specific information available to potential voters at this time. In terms of abstention, the top reason - no voting rights - brings attention to the high number of non-EU nationals who live and work in the EU but remain without the right to vote. The subsequent two reasons, lack of trust and lack of representation, would appear to corroborate the findings by Henn et al (2005) and Cammaerts et al. (2014) about alienation, more than apathy, being the main driver of abstentionism amongst youth.

Finally, many of the challenges connected to low turnout manifest on the micro-level, but are ultimately caused by large-scale social, cultural and historical shifts. What youth organisations and civil society organisations in general might want to focus on going forward is:

- Connecting young people with the EU, highlighting the importance it plays in their day-to-day life, to foster their interest in EU affairs;
- Focus on the political issues that are most important for young people when organising events or activities that are meant to connect young people to the EU dimension;
- Provide accessible, clear and factual information on the elections: who are the candidates, what they stand for, to support young people in their choice and develop their political literacy further;
- Organise events that are broadly focused on practising democracy in various ways, to counteract alienating and apathetic attitudes to voting, yet ultimately allowing young people to discuss and voice their opinions, however negative;
- Tailor the type of engagement intervention according to the profiles of those involved - alienated voters, apathetic voters, and voters who lack confidence in their own decision making all need different support mechanisms to show up to the polls;

For many young people, participation in formal politics of the EU is still a privilege. To truly widen participation, all campaign strategies should start by investigating the target group for EP interventions and devising a needs-based approach to foster voter turnout. Amongst the most fundamental challenges to keep in mind is the knowledge gap on the EU and its functioning; the lack of confidence, or trust, in political institutions, as well as the lack of representation; and potential voters' low levels of political literacy.

Glossary of terms

Efficacy of voting refers to the citizens' trust in their ability to change the government and influence political affairs by casting their vote.

First-time voters is a term used to describe young people who have just reached voting age and are therefore voting in their first election. Less commonly, is it used to describe all those who vote for the first time, even if they had obtained the right to vote years prior.

Political socialisation is the learning process through which people develop an understanding of their political identities, opinions and behaviour.

Political alienation is an attitude towards (formal) politics, characterised by a sense of estrangement, mistrust and distance from political systems.

Political apathy is an indifferent attitude towards formal politics, characterised by a lack of interest and knowledge in politics, their processes and functioning.

Political literacy is a set of abilities deemed necessary to participate actively in political life. It can refer to understanding how governments work and how they take decisions; being aware of the most important issues facing modern societies; being able to critically assess a political program, candidate, etc.

Political repertoire(s) is a term coined by social scientist Ellen Quintelier. It refers to the "stock" of actions, activities and processes used to make or influence political decisions. It helps make a distinction between different kinds of political actions, i.e. joining a demonstration or casting a vote.

Political representation occurs when politicians speak on behalf of others in the political arena. Representativeness is the core of the majority of contemporary democracies with members of parliament and prime ministers who are directly elected by citizens. When citizens do not feel represented, it means that they feel nobody is speaking on their behalf, or defending their interests, in the political arena.

Start-up cost of voting is, according to the rational choice theory of voting, the initial "price" that first-time voters have to "pay" to go to vote. It refers to the time and resources necessary to obtain election specific and practical information necessary to show up to the polls.

Voter turnout is the participation rate in a given election. It can be high, or low, or refer to a particular group of people, i.e. youth turnout.

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