

# Digitization as a way to increase voter turnout in the 2024 European Parliament elections?

# EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY: THE REQUIRED INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

## DIGITIZATION AS A WAY TO INCREASE VOTER TURNOUT IN THE 2024 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS?

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The paper starts by providing a general overview of the electoral law at European Union level and the digital transformation, placed in the current context of the digital revolution and the debate on wider EU institutional reform. Then, the paper discusses digitization, particularly E-voting, as a way to (possibly) increase voter turnout in the 2024 European Parliament elections, looking both at legal frameworks and voting tendencies. In a nutshell, E-voting can be understood as a complementary voting channel next to traditional/analogue ones. The end goal is to formulate policy recommendations meant to increase participation and strengthen democratic resilience, but also to suggest new lines of academic inquiry on a hotly debated topic.

Our guiding research questions are:

- How can Member States minimize the risks and maximize the opportunities for these new technologies to strengthen the rule of law and ensure free and fair elections?
- Can (increased) digitization of the voting processes in Europe enhance efficiency and/or credibility?

The research methodology mainly consists of critically analysing primary and secondary sources, mixing both qualitative and quantitative methods, with a comparative case study research design.

## Social Media summary

The paper critically discusses the potential role of increased voting digitization as a way to increase voter turnout in 2024 European Parliament elections.

## Keywords

#digitization #democracy #reform #e-voting #elections #turnouts

## Short bio

Mădălina TEODOR is a PhD. Lecturer collaborator at the Faculty of Geography, University of Bucharest and counsellor within the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure of Romania.

Her scientific interests mainly aim to correlate various aspects of emerging technologies with societal development in Romania, but not only. She is dedicated to identifying solutions for developing digital techniques and exploring ways in which to increase life quality through the smart use of new technologies.

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<b>AI</b>	Artificial Intelligence
<b>CEF</b>	Connecting Europe Facility
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>eID</b>	Digital Identity
<b>EP</b>	European Parliament
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development Fund
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EVS</b>	European Value Studies
<b>MS</b>	Member State
<b>MEPs</b>	Members of the European Parliament
<b>MFF</b>	Multiannual Financial Framework
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>RoL</b>	Rule of Law
<b>RRF</b>	Recovery and Resilience Facility
<b>SEE</b>	Southeast Europe
<b>SMEs</b>	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

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## FROM VOTING TO E-VOTING

The history of voting and electoral culture stretches back far in human history. Since approximately 508 B.C., Ancient Greece has implemented the earliest form of electoral (although limited) democracy. Voters could only be male land owners (Raaflaub et al, 2007). The early ballot system meant that voters would write their choice of ruler on broken pieces of pots. In the Medieval period, during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Venetian state solidified and elected a Great Council and the so-called "approval voting" was implemented. Nowadays, the right to vote is an essential feature of democracy, a human right to be upheld by any country that presents itself as such. The proportion of adult citizens who exercise that right in free, fair, and frequent elections is one measure of democratic health.

In some countries (Argentina, Belgium, Basil, Chile, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, North Korea, Turkey, Greece, Thailand and others), voting is compulsory by law. In others, the obligation to cast a ballot was repealed (Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Guatemala, Italy, Lebanon, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, Georgia, Venezuela and others). Inside the European Union (EU), as it happens with other sensitive political areas, diversity is the keyword when looking at the national legal frameworks regulating elections and voting.

In Belgium, for example, voters can vote in an embassy if they are abroad or can empower another eligible person to cast the ballot in their name. Belgian voters who repeatedly fail to vote in elections may be subject to voter disqualification (disenfranchisement). In Greece, goods and services provided by public offices may be denied to those failing to vote.

Voting and elections, by providing the alternance between those who rule and those who are ruled upon, represent a basic democratic safeguard, especially during an era of surging autocracy (Levitsky S. et Ziblatt D., 2018). The more people participate in elections and exercise their right to vote, the more important it is for politicians to represent voter interests (Lula, 2022). If people do not participate, politicians will not be motivated to listen because their positions are not at risk. An active voting population protects democracy (Soken-Huberty, 2023).

In recognition of the world's megatrends and part of the European Union's twin transition (digital and green), more and more technologies are being developed with multiple functionalities and equities across the "Old Continent". For the digital revolution, one such functionality and stake can lead to an increased participatory

and deliberative democracy by facilitating online voting for better inclusiveness, accountability and transparency.

In order to include large numbers of citizens in participatory processes, governments, technology companies and civil society activists have introduced a variety of digital technologies (The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2023). Arguably, the most obvious difference between e-voting and standard/analogue voting is that the former can be done in the privacy and security of one's home, using one's personal laptop or desktop, rather than in the usual polling stations/booths. A noteworthy aspect is that, in most EU Member States, e-voting itself became a general term including diverse ways of voting – from remote electronic voting via Internet (i-voting) to voting machines like the ones they use in American elections (Vinkel et Krimmer, 2017). Scholars seem to use interchangeably terms like “remote electronic voting,” “internet voting,” and “i-voting” to describe technologies allowing casting votes from remote environments, both controlled and uncontrolled (Rodrigues-Perez, 2022). What is certain is that the debate on the perks of e/i-voting as a way to enable democratic innovation and increase voter turnout is so far undecided (Borucki and Hartleb, 2023). We will explore the reasons for this *status quo* later in the paper.

## THE ELECTORAL LAW AT EU LEVEL

The European Union is a political and economic union of 27 member states that are party to the EU's founding treaties, and thereby subject to the privileges and obligations of membership. They have agreed by the treaties to share their own sovereignty through the institutions of the EU in certain aspects of government. State governments must agree unanimously in the Council for the union to adopt some policies and for others, collective decisions are made by qualified majority voting. These obligations and sharing of sovereignty within the make it unique among international organisations.

As a *sui generis* polity on the world stage, the EU takes pride on its normative power, on the way it can shape international relations by setting standards of acceptable behaviour and by regulating key fields. Another unique feature of membership are the commissioners of the EC, who are appointed by each of the governments of the MS but do not represent their member state but instead work collectively in the



interests of all the member states. European elections are consequently one of the most important features of the EU's institutional cycle. The procedures for the election of the European Parliament (EP) are the result of a mix of European legislation – the Treaty on European Union, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and Charter of Fundamental Rights. These define the common rules for all Member States (MS), to which specific national provisions, which vary from one MS to another, are added.

In Belgium (The Belgian House of Representatives, 2021), Luxembourg (Luxembourg Parliament, 2023) and Greece (Hellenic Parliament, 2019) voting is obligatory (Figure 1).

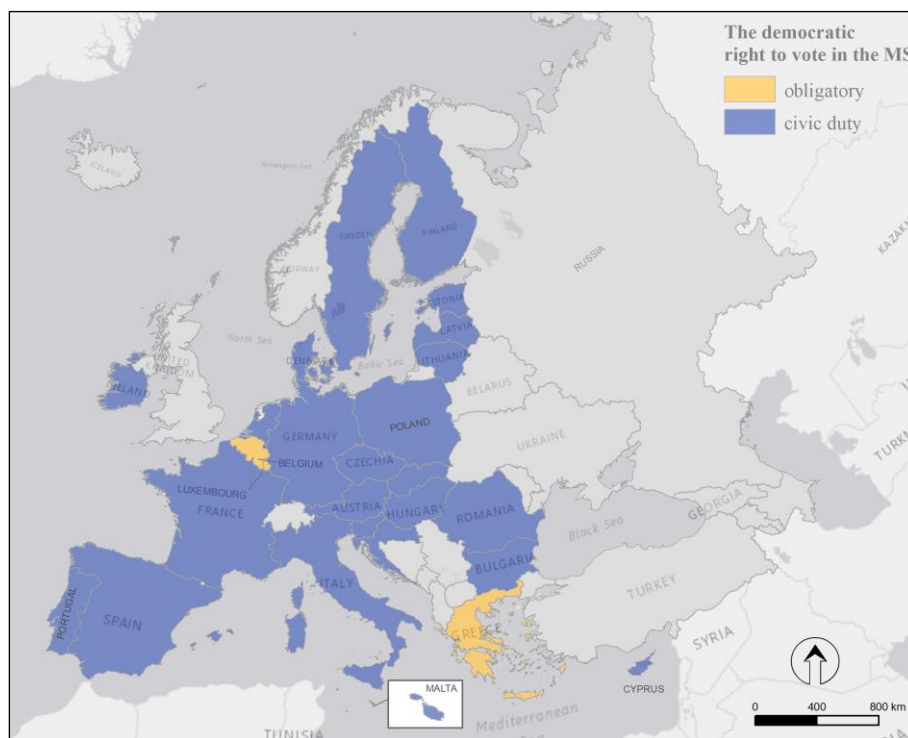


Figure 1. Voting as a democratic right and an obligation in the MS.  
Source: author's own construction

In Cyprus, the compulsory voting was introduced after independence from the British Empire in 1960 and was repealed in 2017, after having been inactive for many years. In Cyprus, the turnout for EP elections was continuously decreasing from 72.5% in 2004 to 59.4% in 2009, 43.97% in 2014 and with a very small increase until 44.99% in 2019.

In Italy, the obligatorily voting was between 1945 and 1993. The repealed of the law can be observed in the EP turnout that decreases from 85.91% in 1989 to 73.60% in 1994

The electoral system used and the number of constituencies are regulated by national legislation. The common provisions establish the principle of proportional representation, rules regarding thresholds and certain incompatibilities with the mandate of a deputy in the European Parliament (Sokolska, 2023).

According to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012d), anyone who is a national of an EU Member State is automatically a citizen of the Union. This is perceived as a key factor in developing a European identity, complementary to the national one.

The European Parliament is composed of representatives of the Union's citizens. Representation of citizens is ensured by manner of proportionally decreasing, with a minimum threshold of six members for each MS. The maximum allocated number of seats for a state is ninety-six, with Germany being the sole MS to reach this cap so far. (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012a).

From 1 July 2019 to 31 January 2020, 751 MEPs served in the European Parliament, as laid down in the Lisbon Treaty. The withdrawal of the UK from the European Union reduced that figure to 705 MEPs as of 1 February 2020 (Figure 2), leaving room for possible future enlargements. The European Parliament is made up of 705 Members elected in the 27 Member States of the enlarged European Union plus the President (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012a).

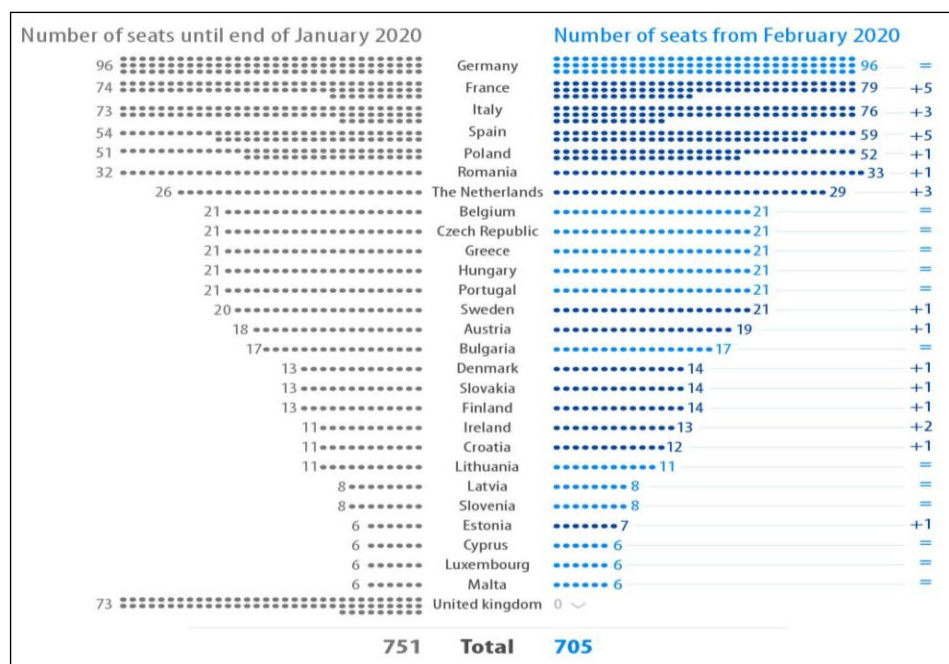


Figure 2. Distribution of sets in the European Parliament after the UK's departure from de EU at the end of January 2020. Source: European Parliament

The basic principle of the electoral system in a democratic state is that all citizens of the Union have the right to vote and to stand as candidates in elections to the European Parliament (Official Journal of the European Communities, 2000) and in municipal elections in their MS of residence (Official Journal of the European Union, 2007), under the same conditions as nationals of that State (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012d). In the European Parliament elections, in the national law were to reduce the age of voting by 18 to 16 in Austria, Malta, Germany and Belgium and by 18 to 17 in Greece (Figure 3).

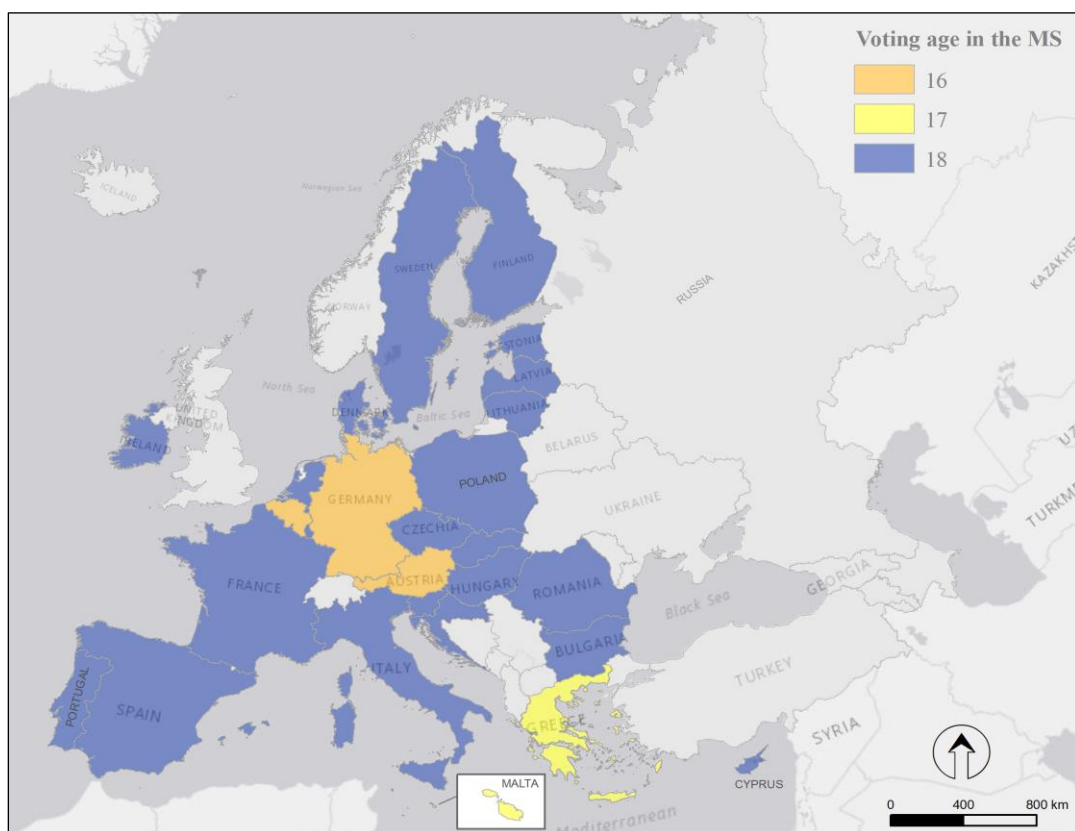


Figure 3. Voting age in the Member States. Source: author's own construction

European Parliament lawmakers are elected every five years, in what have to be the largest transnational elections in the world. The vote also marks a very important stage in shaping the future of the European project. The role of the EP has been gradually expanded since the early '90s. Most recently, with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, codecision entered a new era, significantly enhancing the weight of EU lawmakers in setting the European agenda.

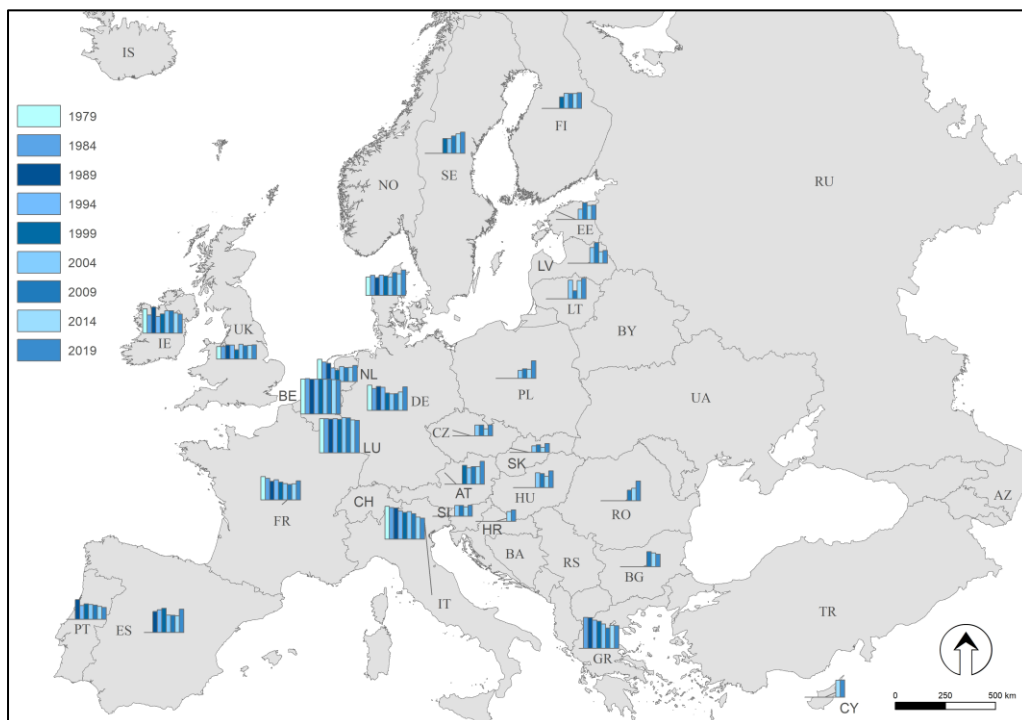
That is why the exercise of democratic rights becomes very important by giving the Parliament the legitimacy it needs to perform its duties. Following the elections,

Parliament votes to elect the new head of the EC, which can by and large be conceptualized as the EU's executive body, and to approve the full team of commissioners.

Starting from the first such elections held in 1979, voter turnout shrunk from 61.99% to 55.41% in 1989. The trend was briefly reversed in 1994 (56.67%) only to plummet down to 45.47% in 2004. Voter participation was a mere 42.61% in 2014. It then rose to 50.66% in the most recent EP elections – 2019 (European Parliament in collaboration with Kantar Belgium, 2019).

In the period analysed (1979-2019), the higher turnout was registered in Belgium followed by Luxembourg in all years except for 2004 and 2009, when Luxembourg surpassed Belgium with 0.34%, respectively 0.54%. Although in 2019 the turnout decreased the most, the gap of 4.23% was the biggest between Belgium and Luxembourg (Figure 4).

The smaller rate was noted in UK in the 1979-1999 period (from 24% in 1999 to 32.43% in 1994), except for 1994 when Portugal saw the smallest turnout – 35.5%. In the 2004-2019 period, the smaller rate was registered in Slovakia (between 13.03% and 22.74%) (Figure 4).



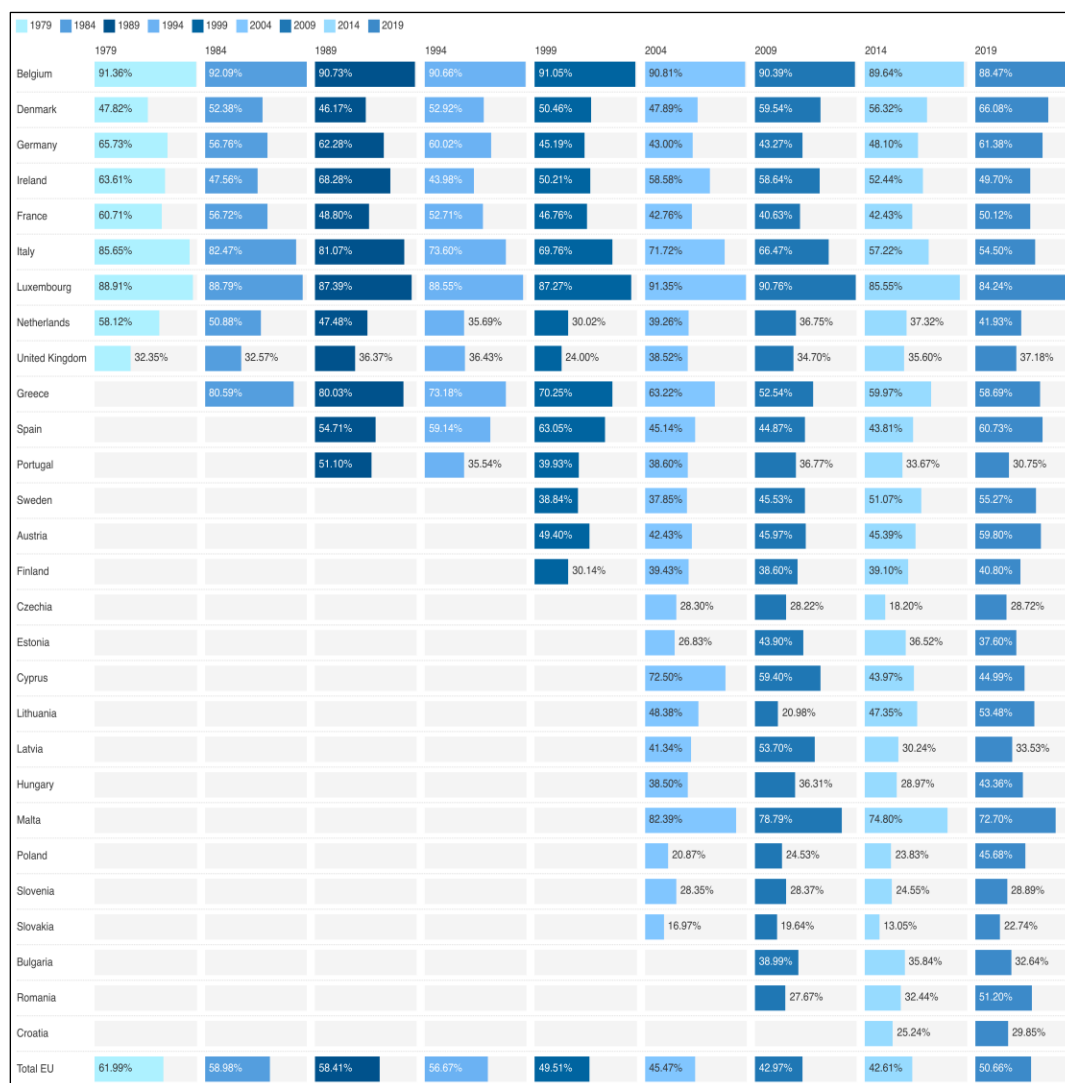


Figure 4. Turnout by country (%) at EP election.  
Source: own construction, data source: European Parliament, 2019

In 2019, from 28 countries, only 12 they exceeded the EU average of 50.66% (Figure 5).

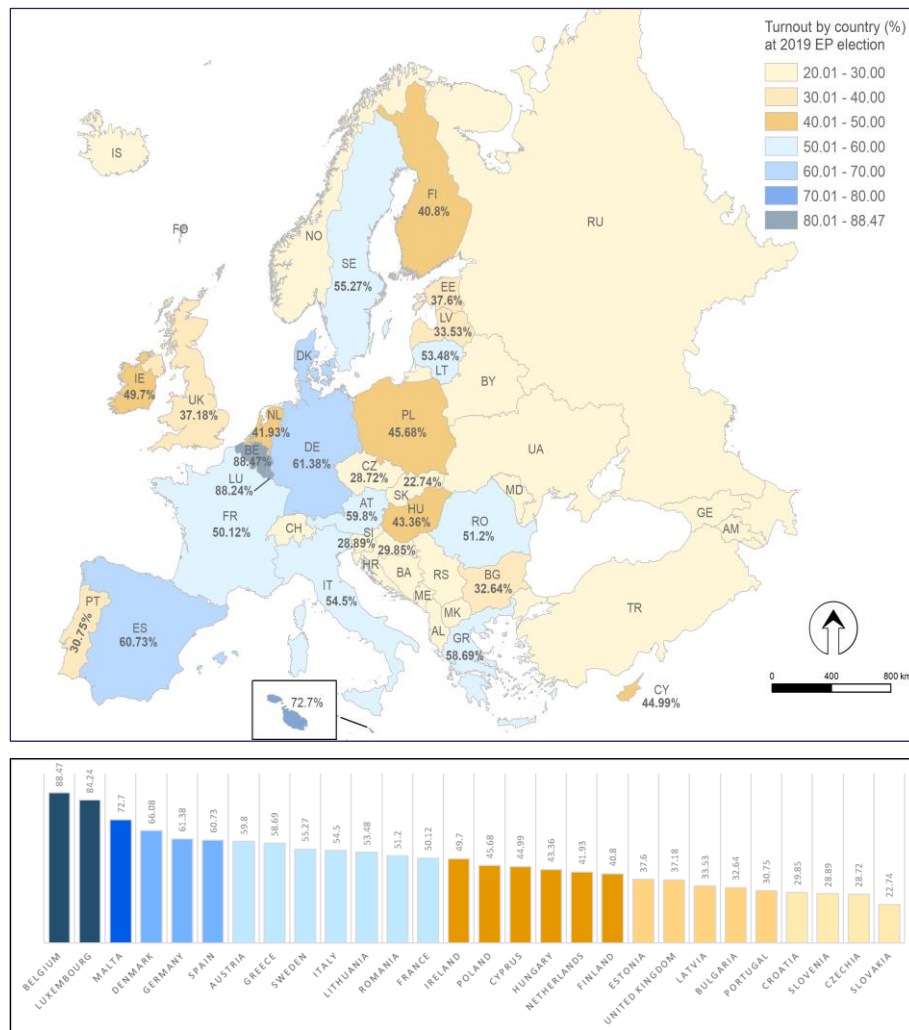


Figure 5. Turnout by country (%) at EP election in 2019.

Source: author's own construction, data source: European Parliament, 2019

Analysing the graphic below (Figure 6), one can tell that the range of turnout varies a lot between countries. The higher voter turnouts were recorded in Belgium with over 90% from 1979 to 2019, and in Luxemburg with over 84% from 1979 to 2019. In both cases, we can see that the percentage was dropping in the last four election years since 2004 to 2019.

We also saw that the higher turnout was registered in 2019 EP election in Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania and Croatia. In Germany, France, Italy and Netherlands the high turnout was registered in 1979 and in Belgium and Greece the high turnout was registered in 1984.



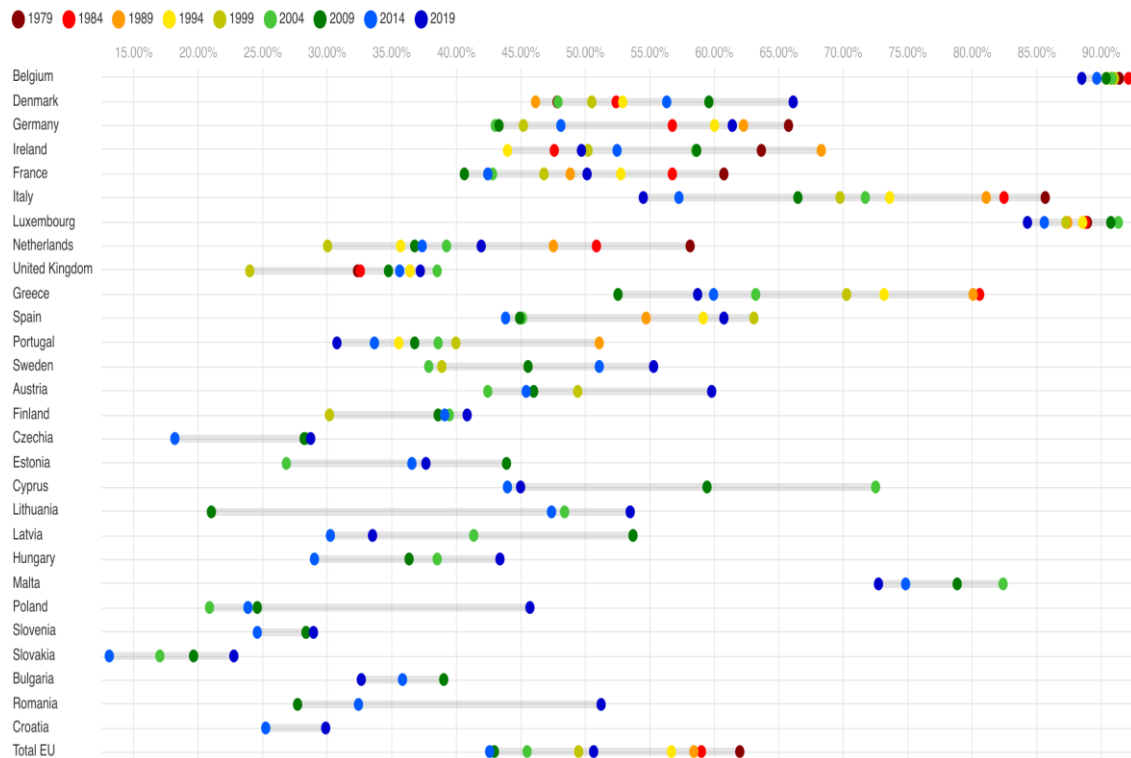


Figure 6. The range of turnout by country (%) at EP election in 1979 – 2019 period.

Source: author's own construction, data source: European Parliament, 2019

Also, it is observed that in several countries like Cyprus, Malta and Bulgaria the turnout was continuously decreasing from the first year of voting until 2019 and at the opposite pole, in Romania and Croatia, the turnout has increased since the first participation in the EP until 2019 (Figure 6).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century ended amid educated hope that the world, and especially developing and transitional countries, may be heading toward liberal democracy, the rule of law, and a more consistent respect for human rights. Turnout decline was a rather constant feature of European Parliament elections in recent decades, against the backdrop of a more general loss of faith in liberal democracy. Simplifying the electoral process may boost political participation and reverse these trends that benefitted autocrats and illiberal populists. But is digitization the way to it?

# GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE EU DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The digital transformation is very important at any level of the society and it is not possible without strong support for science, research, development and the scientific community, which are the driving forces of the technological and digital revolution (European Commission, 2022a).

To deliver on the EU's goals for digital transformation, the EU's long-term EU budget boost digital technologies and aid in recovery from the pandemic. The digital sector is crucial to build a sustainable future that supports people and businesses and to ensure a strong recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2022b).

The entire budget of the new MFF stands at €1.21 trillion (European Commission, 2022b). There are many EU budget programmes such as Digital Europe Programme, Connecting Europe Facility – Digital, Horizon Europe, InvestEU, Creative Europe MEDIA, EU4Health, Recovery and Resilience Facility, Next Generation EU (Figure 7). Regional policy (ERDF) includes digital projects and is the EU's main investment area, covering one third of the EU budget.

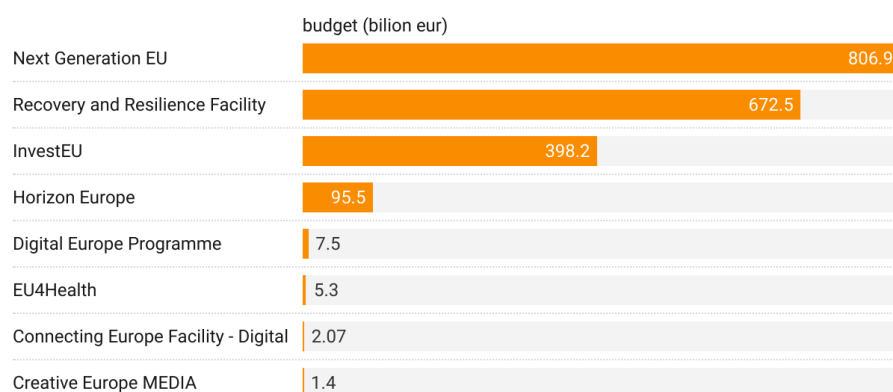


Figure 7. EU budget for Digital in the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework.  
Source: author's own construction, data source: European Commission, 2022a

**The Next Generation EU** is the EU's plan to emerge stronger and more resilient from the current crisis and feed into Invest EU programme and some other digital strands with the amount of €806.9 billion (Figure 7) (European Commission,



2023b). The digital plan is to be connected everywhere with 5G and EU-wide ultra-fast broadband, to receive an eID, making it easier to access online public services and giving more control over personal data, to make the cities smarter and more efficient (European Commission, 2023b).

**The Recovery and Resilience Facility** is a programme, linked to the European Semester, that offer financial support for investments and reforms, including in relation to the green, digital transitions and the resilience of national economies (European Commission, 2023b) (Figure 7).

**InvestEU** provide support to companies in the recovery phase and ensure a strong focus among private investors on the EU's medium- and long-term policy priorities, in particular, the European Green Deal and digitalisation. At least 10% of the programme will feed into digital goals (Figure 7) (European Commission, 2022b).

**Horizon Europe** funds vital research in health, resilience and the green and digital transitions (European Commission, 2021). The programme has €95.5 billion to develop research and high-end innovation in enabling technologies, such as: AI, next generation Internet, high performance computing, big data, key digital technologies, 6G (European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency, 2022).

**Digital Europe Programme** with the budget of € 7.5 billion, aims to accelerate economic recovery, research and developing digital technology (European Commission, 2023b). The Programme fund investments such as: supercomputing and data processing capacities, AI, cybersecurity, advanced digital skills, support to the digitalisation of businesses and public administrations.

**Connecting Europe Facility – Digital** is investing in broadband networks, as a part of the EU's wider efforts to build infrastructure that can handle emerging and future processes and applications and has a Worth €2.07 billion (European Commission, 2023b).

The governments in Europe are trying to find innovative ways to strengthen the effectiveness and representativeness of their democratic systems (The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2023), aiming to more coherently engage with citizens and stimulate active citizenship. As such, E-voting may be used to simplify the voting procedure in EP elections. However, it is connected to fears of manipulation or foreign interference (European Union, 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted all fields of human activity. It delayed and disrupted elections, but it also forced previously analogue activities to be streamlined into digital ones. The European countries find themselves in different stages of development regarding the digitalisation, in general, and of e-voting processes, in particular. The countries that have developed legislative frameworks providing citizens with rights to access enhanced forms of political participation, embedding practices such as consultations, participatory budgeting, referendums and citizen panels by using the digitalisation technologies in election process are Estonia and Netherlands, but only at the national institutional and regional level, not at the EU Parliamentary Elections level. Estonia, in particular, is a trademark case study of a digital pioneer in e-governing in Europe, and also the country that advanced the farthest in deploying I-voting.

## DIGITIZATION AS A WAY TO INCREASE VOTER TURNOUT IN THE 2024 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

How can the EU keep the 2019 momentum going and further stimulate voter turnout in the upcoming EP elections? One lane that merits further investigation in this context is the digitization of the voting process on a non-discriminatory and inclusive basis (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1994). The digital transformation has the potential to consolidate our democracies and empower our citizens (Official Journal of the European Union, 2022b). With the EU institutional reform in mind, it has the potential to reduce the democratic deficit across a continent that found renewed unity and purpose against the backdrop the Russian military aggression launched in February 2023 (Paska, 2021).

The first electronic voting took place in the United States in 1974, India in 1982 and in Belgium in 1991. During the late 1990<sup>s</sup> the idea of modernizing elections by providing for remote forms of voting, such as internet voting, took root in many European countries. Internet voting was experimented with by both the United Kingdom and France in the mid-2000s, with mixed results. Both countries have

virtually gave up on the process, mainly due to security concerns. (Dandoy, R. et Kernalegenn, T., 2021).

Most implementers of online participation, deliberation and voting currently operate at the local level, but national and international participation initiatives are growing (Marcu, 2022), like the Conference on the Future of Europe, national citizen participation projects in France and the Rahvakogu platform for legislative initiatives in Estonia (Conference on the future of Europe, 2023).

Surveys such as the European Value Studies (2023) show that the majority of European citizens wish to be more closely involved in political decision-making. As a consequence, more and more national and international organisations, think tanks and consultancies are providing governments with data and guidelines on how to implement online participation (The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2023).

On the other hand, the studies find out that social pressure, guilt or shame can certainly increase voting (Serdült, 2015). Several recent field experimental studies show that social pressure raises the likelihood of turning out to vote in elections. People who received information about their own voting behaviour in the past seemed to increase their propensity to vote in an upcoming election (Panagopoulos et al., 2014). Bond et al. (2012) showed in their study that people tend to vote more in an election when they see that those close to them are also voting, and this behaviour can spread through social networks.

Research suggests that instilling emotions like gratitude and civic pride may help increase voter turnout (Suttie, 2018). Identity politics comes into play here (Fukuyama F., 2018). As recent years have shown, an important source of polarization was identity, building on cultural arguments to fuel resentment and anger among the disenfranchised and the so-called “losers of globalization.” The fact that the global village became an almost tangible reality thanks to the rapid expansion of social media and new technology is part of a complex equation that mixes political, economic, cultural and geopolitical factors in order to show how our enhanced interconnectivity is both a blessing and a curse, not only during pandemic times. In his latest book, Mark Leonard, Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, considers “disarming connectivity” as the challenge of our age (Leonard M., 2021).

The Council of Europe adopted in 2017, in the context of the 1289<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies, recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member

States on standards for e-voting, together with Guidelines on the implementation of the provisions of the recommendation (Council of Europe, 2017).

The MS use e-voting for multiple reason: enabling voters to cast their votes from a place other than the polling station in their voting district, increasing voter turnout by providing additional voting channels (Asier, 2022), widening access to the voting process for voters with disabilities or those having other difficulties in being physically present at a polling station, bringing voting in line with new developments in society and the increasing use of new technologies as a medium for communication and civic engagement in pursuit of democracy, reducing the overall cost to the electoral authorities of conducting an election or Referendum, delivering voting results reliably and more quickly, providing the electorate with a better service, by offering a variety of voting channels (Council of Europe, 2017).

Online voting in general elections and national referendums is still a rare occurrence in Europe, but online voting at regional or institutional level is growing fast (Maurer, 2022). In order to safeguard European values and genuine democratic electoral processes, the EU's institutions and member states must pay greater attention to domestic challenges. The EU should also consider establishing an instrument for monitoring elections in MS. (Banuta et al, 2020). In Europe, E-voting were used on national and municipal level in Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia and France by citizens abroad, but it is implemented in Belgium since 1999 and in Germany and in Estonia since 2007 EP election (Figure 8).

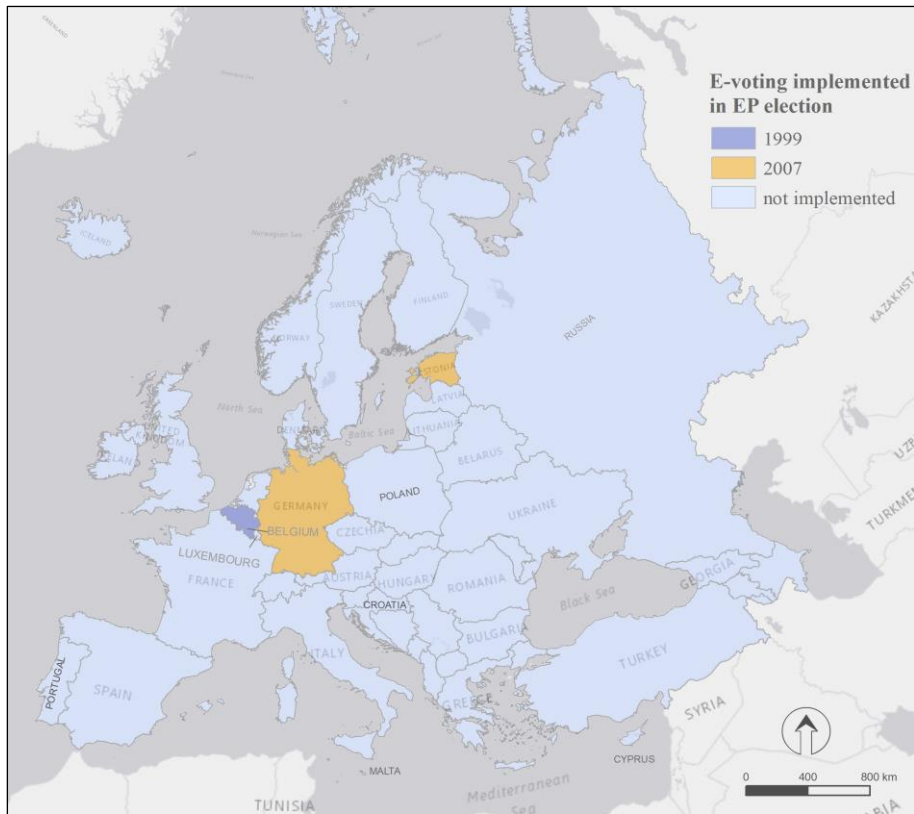


Figure 8. Map of the parliamentary elections e-voting implemented.

Source: author's own construction

Electronic voting technology has direct impact in the speed of the counting of ballots, it reduces the cost of the process and can provide improved accessibility for disabled and foreign voters (Cook, 2016). Also, very important is that the results can be reported and published faster compared to manual counting. Voters save time and cost by being able to vote independently from their location (abroad, in rural area, in vacation or away from polling station) and all of this has the potential to increase overall voter turnout.

**Belgium.** All Belgians of age (+18) have the right to vote. Since 1894, the Belgian Constitution stipulate that voting is obligatory and that the ballot is secret (The Belgian House of Representatives, 2021).

Belgium is the fourth EU member state to reduce voting age from 18 to 16 for European Parliament elections after Austria, Greece, and Malta (Figure 3). Interior Minister Annelies Verlinden said in May 2022 that the lower voting age was one of the demands of the Conference for the Future of Europe.

In 1991, Belgium was one of the first countries to test on-site electronic voting for political elections. Since then, the country has continuously used e-voting in all of its

compulsory elections, from the local to the European Parliamentary (Dondoy, 2021). One of the systems tested was based on a touch panel. The other system was based on a magnetic card and an electronic ballot marking device with a light pen. The law of 16 July 1991 to permit this experiment was passed by an absolute majority with no opposition at all. In 1994, the electronic voting experiment was extended from around 22% up to 44% of the Belgian population (Dondoy, 2021).

In 2003, a new e-voting system was introduced to try to convince citizens that the system was safe. In 2004, for the EP elections, all the tests were ended and all of the 44% of the population already voting electronically did so with the magnetic card. Since 1999, no further locations migrated from paper to e-voting (Figure 9).

These measures led Belgium to record the highest voter turnout in the EU (from 88.5 up to 92.3) (Figure 9).

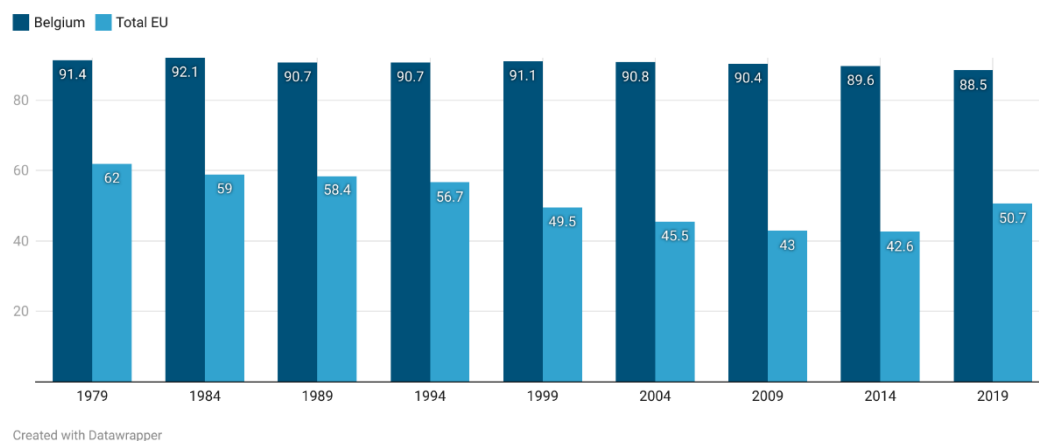


Figure 9. Comparative analysis regarding voting attendance in Belgium and the EU average.  
Source: author's own construction, data source: European Parliament, 2019

**Germany** had tried the first electronic voting in Cologne city in 1998. The trial was seen as successful and in 1999, Cologne used electronic voting machines for its entire European Parliament elections. After that, other cities followed and by the 2005 general election nearly 2 million German voters were using electronic voting. After the 2005 general election, two voters brought a case before the German Constitutional Court after unsuccessfully raising a complaint with the Committee for the Scrutiny of Elections. The case argued that the use of electronic voting machines was unconstitutional and that it was possible to hack the voting machines, thus the results of the 2005 election could not be trusted.

The German Constitutional Court upheld that under the constitution, elections are required to be public in nature and that all essential steps of an election are subject to the possibility of public scrutiny unless other constitutional interests justify an

exception (NDI, 2009). The legislature is not prevented from using electronic voting machines in elections if the possibility of a reliable examination of correctness, is safeguarded. This decision by the German Constitutional Court, stressing the need for transparency in the electoral process without specialist technical knowledge, stopped Germany's use of electronic voting for a period of time.

In June 2023, Germany applied online voting for social security elections by using Smartmatic's election technology, TIVI that has been successfully used for online votes in Norway, the United States, Canada, among other countries. Approximately 22.3 million voters were eligible to participate online using the online voting system and voters were able to cast a digital ballot in a matter of minutes from anywhere and at any time (Smartmatic, 2023). The public was able to verify the online voting from end to end to ensure its accuracy and validity.

As it can be seen in the Figure 10, these practices did not lead to an increase in the voter turnout for the EP elections from 1999 to 2014, but an increase of 13.3% is observed in the 2019 elections compared to 2014 EP elections.

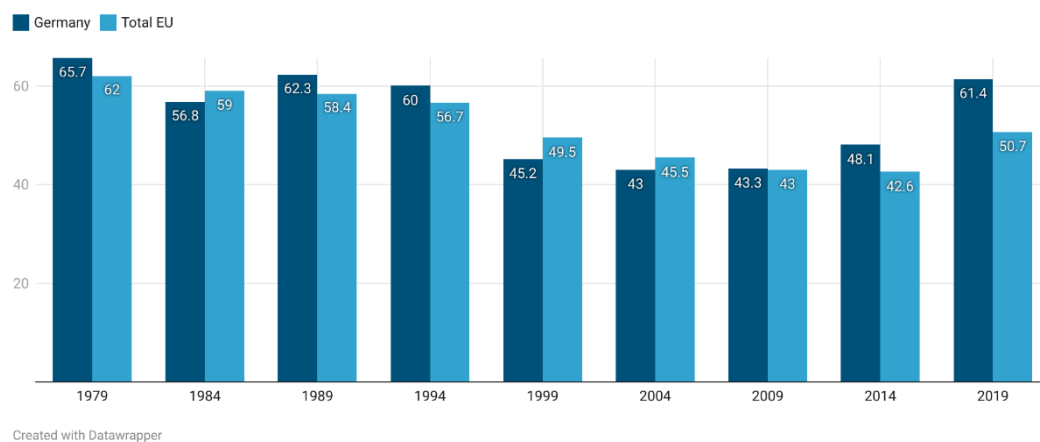


Figure 10. Comparative analysis regarding voting attendance in Germany and the EU average.  
Source: author's own construction, data source: European Parliament, 2019

## Estonia

Estonia has established the necessary legal and technological framework for online voting in 2005 with the intention of increasing the participation of voters by making voting easier. Since then, has successfully organized national, regional and institutional elections using digital technology. Because e-voting is more accessible, more flexible and saves time, the result has been an increase in voter turnout. Compared with traditional voting in which a person must go to the polling station, a process that takes about 44 minutes, e-voting requires only 6 minutes (Tsahkna, 2013). Estonia became the first country to have legally binding general elections

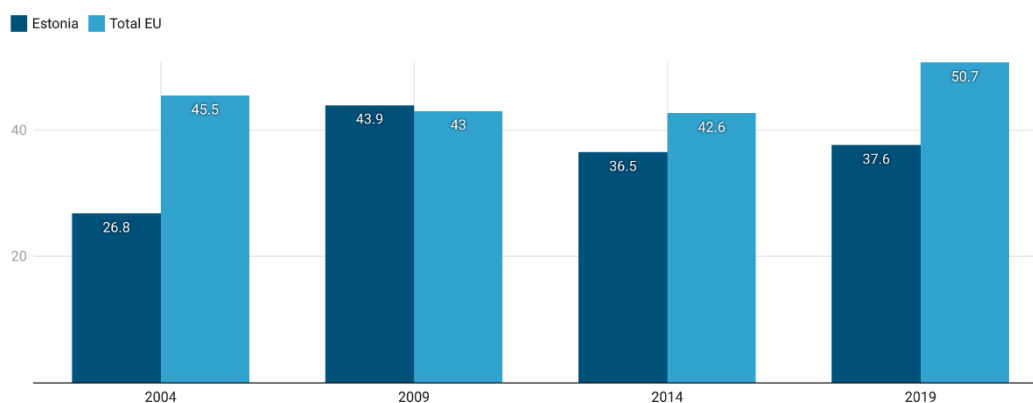


using the Internet as a means of casting the vote. The option of voting via the Internet in the local election is available nationally.

Over the past 20 years, Estonia has developed a complete, well-functioning and secure estate (Estonian National Electoral Committee, 2010), IT solutions developed within the construction of the estate constitute a part of our government administration. In Estonia 94% of people file their taxes electronically (Tsahkna, 2013).

In 2007, Estonia held the world's first national Internet election. The goal of e-voting was to make electoral participation easier for voters and so increase their participation. In 2005 and 2007, I-voting was available on three days and between 2009 and 2019, I-voting was available on seven days (Valimised, 2023). In the 2019 parliamentary elections, 43.75% of all participating voted using the Internet. Estonia joined the election observer programme, organized by State Electoral Office, together with election observers, election experts, policy-makers, and media (Figure 11) (e-Estonia, 2019).

Research in Estonia showed that internet voting is less expensive than other voting channels. However, the number of votes in the European Parliament is below the EU average (Figure 11). As it can be seen on the Estonian example, since 2019 EP when the e-voting was used, the role of digitalisation did not have a significant impact in increasing the number of voters, but has a big potential to increase the voter turnout in the in the near future. The Estonian experience could certainly serve as a blueprint for implementing E-voting in other EU member states if the governments of those states were inclined to do so.



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Figure 11. Comparative analysis regarding voting attendance in Belgium and the EU average.  
Source: author's own construction, data source: European Parliament, 2019



## CONCLUSION

Some measures taken in certain EU countries led to an increase in voting attendance. Belgium, Luxembourg and Greece are the countries in Europe where the participation in elections is compulsory. This obligation is very well identified in the increased rate of votes for European Parliament elections in Belgium (88.5% – 92.1%) and Luxembourg (84.2% – 91.4%) and not very well in the case of Greece (80.59% - 58.69%) where voting attendance was continuously decreasing (Figure 4, Figure 5).

Another measure to increase the voter turnout for EP elections was to reduce the age of voting by 18 to 16 in Austria (2007), Malta (2018), Germany (2023) and Belgium (2022), by 18 to 17 in Greece (2014). In Austria, the voter turnout increases from 42.43% in 2004 to 45.07 in 2009, 51.07% in 2014 and over the total UE, up to 59.80%. In Malta, this measure did not have a positive impact on increasing voting attendance for EP elections (the turnout was 74.8% in 2014 and slightly drop to 72.70% but remaining well above the EU average of 50.66%). It is worth following the evolution of voting attendance in Belgium, but especially in Germany (with 61.28% in 2019) at the next EP in 2024.

Probably the measure that holds the most untapped potential, also observed during the Covid Pandemic, is the digitization of the voting process. The advantages of using e-voting are numerous: convenience because of the location of the voter and time independent way of vote, increasing participation by offering to the people an alternative way of voting for those who may not be able to use the traditional way (absent, busy, disabled, ill, or old citizens), increasing efficiency by accelerating the process and prevent the invalid polls, reducing costs of the voting process in time, after the high investment with the infrastructure and training the people, the cost will be reduced in a few years and the process cost would get lower compared to the traditional process (polls or postal ballots, the cost of the people involved in the polling stations and counting the ballots).

Of course, this line of action also holds considerable challenges: at least starting with the 2016 Brexit referendum, and in a host of other recent elections, what clearly transpired was that fair election processes could not be taken for granted, even in mature EU member states; the “digital divide” is still very present both between MS, but also within them (rural areas vs. big cities); the ambivalent role played by local authorities in facilitating the process; the perverse way of using social media and

identity politics by anti-pluralist political forces; a plethora of national legal frameworks illustrating different democratic and rule of law traditions.

The recommendation of the Council of Europe was that MS introduce e-voting in a gradual and progressive manner, after the introduction of the required changes to the relevant legislation. The relevant legislation shall regulate the responsibilities for the functioning of e-voting systems and ensure that the electoral management body has control over them. Also, it is very important that MS shall be transparent in all aspects of e-voting and the voters to be informed well in advance of the start of voting, in clear and simple language. (Council of Europe, 2017).

Balancing ease of access and secure authentication of citizens remains an area where further development is required, and represents a potential risk of democracy technologies. It is necessary to have more support for the national governments when it comes to introducing and improving online participation, deliberation and voting (The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2023). Also, perceptions of e-voting matter because of the omnipresent digital transformation and discussions about how democracies (could) digitalize. E-voting represents a bottom-up part of top-down e-government and, through this, digital transformation (Borucki et al, 2023).

Also, it is not enough to use digitalisation only for the election process. It is very important to find ways to use the digital technology for increasing peoples trust in the political system and to promote the importance of voting for the society. As the Estonian case showed, trust was the central currency to enforce digital tools and e-services, part of a broader embrace of e-governance. In this sense, the EU is upgrading the current rules governing digital services by introducing the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act, which will create a single set of rules applicable across the EU with more control over the online content (European Parliament, 2023b).

Digital technology has many benefits in terms of economic and accessibility but the governments need to concentrate their efforts in implementing a better cyber security, data protection, and A.I. regulation. The digitization exercise determined by the Covid-19 crisis and the forced adaptation of the population to new technologies marked a positive development that consolidated societal resilience. As a spillover effect, it will likely positively influence voter turnout for the EP elections in 2024.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Authorities (both national and European) should be carrying out information campaigns, organizing debates and conferences, handing out informative materials to increase awareness among the European citizens regarding the importance of voting. They should use the digital technologies and social media (very popular especially with young people) to disseminate relevant information. Well-informed citizens will be more aware of the importance of voting.
- The institutions should apply for funds available in the budget of the Multiannual Financial Framework in order to develop digital instruments for citizen involvement in European Parliamentary elections. The digital sector is crucial to build a sustainable future and to ensure a strong recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- For an efficient use of electronic voting, it is necessary for the authorities to train the population in advance and to increase their “cyber hygiene” in order for them to navigate safely through the election process. A step forward was taken by adopting on 5 July 2022 the landmark digital rules that should be used for the creation of a safer, fairer and more transparent online environment.
- The Council of Europe’s recommendations on standards for e-voting with a focus on the creation of tools for developing e-voting, e-counselling, and e-participation must be implemented by all MS states. The positive experience of Belgium, Estonia and Germany of implementation of online voting for EP election should become a best practice on using e-voting and finding digital and innovative solutions to increase voter turnout in the 2024 European Parliament elections.
- Digital infrastructure has proven to be particularly useful in times of crisis, including during the Covid-19 pandemic, being an accelerator of digital transition. Encouraging the peaceful use of emerging technologies on a large scale could play a key part in increasing voter turnout in the 2024 European Parliament elections.
- The measure of making voting compulsory may have increased results (as Belgium, Luxemburg, Greece and Cyprus) if non-compliance is sanctioned.

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