

European Conference  
**The European Union and the Promise of Democracy:  
What can Citizenship Education and Civil Society contribute?**

14-16 November 2013  
The Hague, the Netherlands

## Report

### Workshop 2 European Parliament elections 2014: How to increase voters' turnout?

by Anna Samel, University of Warsaw (Poland)  
Email-address: [ania.samel@gmail.com](mailto:ania.samel@gmail.com)

**Inputs:** Diego Garzia, European University Institute (Italy)  
**Moderator:** Petr Cap, Civic Education Center (Czech Republic)  
**Project presenter:** Jennifer de Nijs, League of Young Voters in Europe (Belgium)  
**Number of participants in the workshop:** 13 participants (incl. inputs, moderation and rapporteur)

#### Introduction:

The main objective of the workshop was to discuss the great challenge the European Union (EU) faces currently: How to increase voters' turnout during the European Parliament (EP) elections in 2014? The focus of the workshop sought to answer the question: What can citizenship education contribute in order to increase the public interest in political and electoral processes on the European level?

At the beginning, the moderator presented the agenda of the workshop and devoted a few minutes to an introduction round. All participants were asked to state their personal or professional interest in the topic of the workshop and how they anticipate, what voter turnout level (in numbers) can be expected at Europe-wide level in May 2014?

Participants in majority agreed that the voter turnout would remain more or less at the same level (43% in 2009). The proposed numbers standing as a level of expected voter turnout varied from 39% to 55%. It was noted that turnout might increase a bit because of the controversy in media surrounding the issue of the European economical crisis and rising euroscepticism. Many participants claimed that the change in the rate of voter participation within the next elections will be due to the larger engagement of the right-wing parties during the public debate and it is highly probable that radical political parties will win bigger representation in the EP.

The question about the level of voter turnout evoked a lively discussion. The participants highlighted that the aim of the activities carried out in order to increase the voting turnout level is also to increase the awareness of voters, to inform them why they should vote, and how the EP can influence their daily lives. Voting behaviour is affected by many factors. Nowadays, politicians, especially MEPs, are increasingly disconnected from the real life of the citizens, that is why trust in the EU and its institutions has collapsed. Thus, the issue of high absenteeism at the EP elections is at stake.

### First session:

During the first session the speakers gave their inputs. The first speaker was Jennifer de Nijs from the European Youth Forum (EYF), which is the European platform of youth organisations based in Brussels (Belgium). She presented the new initiative of the EYF called “League of Young Voters”.

At the beginning, Jennifer de Nijs pointed out that she started managing the project by conducting the research on youth participation in the EP election to find out why young people abstain from elections. Only 29% of young people voted during the EP elections in 2009. Jennifer de Nijs analysed political manifestos of the national parties and European fractions and election campaigns carried out in 2009. She also interviewed several MEPs. Her conclusion was that politicians don't try to reach young people by communicating and that they don't examine issues affecting the interests of young people. Politicians also don't focus on young people because they don't vote and don't participate in politics.

Findings from the research helped to design a communication strategy – EYF decided to involve the youth into politics, convincing them that if they don't participate there won't be a change at all. Young people have to vote for those who are interested in youth issues. Another aim of the project is to encourage young people to stand as candidates for elections. EYF is also lobbying for more youth-oriented electoral campaigns among European fractions. The project “League of Young Voters” is implemented at different levels: regional, national and European. Many youth organisations can collaborate and be recognised as a branch of “League of Young Voters” with their own activities, but the common purposes. The main project partners are:

- VoteWatch Europe which launched [www.myvote2014.eu](http://www.myvote2014.eu), a website in six languages aimed to inform young voters what the key decisions are that were taken by the EP in the last term and how particularly MEPs, European fractions and national parties voted on those issues;
- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), which prepared a study on youth participation and representation at the European elections (Preliminary findings can be found here: <http://is.gd/bsn5uB>).

The discussion afterwards mainly focused on the problems how to reach young people and how to persuade politicians to concentrate more on issues that concern young people. Jennifer de Nijs stressed that the “League of Young Voters” is also at a national level – many youth organisations are involved into it and conduct their own campaigns using the infrastructure provided by the European Youth Forum. However, the communication strategy focuses on a viral campaign, encouraging young people to leave their comment on the website: What is important for them and should be included into the agenda of decision-makers.

She also pointed out that political parties were quite interested in cooperation, as politicians are willing to learn how to address their messages to young people. Therefore, the official agreement with European political groups and their youth wings was signed in order to get their commitment that they will directly target young people in their campaigns.

The second speaker, Diego Garzia from the European University Institute in Italy, presented the outcomes of the research that examined the mobilisation effect of Internet-based Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) that provide people the relevant information about the political position of the parties on certain issues. First, he shortly introduced VAAs used in different countries and Vote Match Europe, which is a good example of transnational VAA, which will be widely promoted in time of the European elections 2014 (in 2009 it attracted 2.5 million users all around Europe).

Referring to the presentation of the previous speaker, Diego Garzia admitted that VAAs are particularly targeted at young people. One of the reasons why the youth is not engaged in politics is because they haven't developed a party identification to the certain party - many of them don't have any political affiliation. Thus, they have fewer reasons to vote. However, it

was discovered that VAAs could have an impact on the propensity of the young electorate to vote.

Diego Garzia pointed out that all countries in the world are facing the problem of declining turnout. Nowadays, political parties are not competing as much as they did in the past and voters are less politically affiliated. People, especially youngsters, have an access to the vast amount of information and very often feel overloaded. VAAs provide tailor-made information, which is super valued in the digital era.

The “low-information rationality” theory, which was presented by the speaker, explains the current voting pattern: Nowadays, voters use information shortcuts to minimise the costs of the decision. People want to understand politics with very little information. Therefore, VAAs reduce the cost of casting vote. Users don’t have to read party manifestos; it takes only 15 minutes to get the tailor-made information about which party stands closest to their own policy preferences. Indeed, VAAs can have a mobilising effect, what was proven by Diego Garzia. For instance, it was estimated that if Stemwijzer had not been implemented, the turnout would have been 3% lower in the Netherlands.

Diego Garzia also presented the outcomes of the experimental research conducted in Italy with 1000 people that were interviewed (representative group for the whole society). Half of them used specially prepared VAA before the elections. The research resulted in the estimation that if all eligible voters in Italy had used VAA, the turnout would have been 5,3% higher. The speaker concluded his presentation with the remaining question how to widely promote VAAs. Particularly important is to find out, how to reach young people with those tools.

Afterwards, the discussion started with the first question on the media’s role in the process of promoting those interactive tools. Diego Garzia admitted that in Germany in 2013 the media played a crucial role – the information about “Wahl-o-Mat” was advertised in newspapers and TV shows. The promotional campaign was incredible viral. However, he highlighted that in Germany “Wahl-o-Mat” was introduced by the Federal Agency for Civic Education, which is widely perceived as an authority and guarantees objectivity and non-partisan approach. In Italy, if one newspaper would support the idea, the others would be lost as media is connected with the certain party affiliation and people do not believe in their objectivity.

The next question was about that youth is not being taken seriously by the politicians. Young people need concrete answers, but there is a lack of reliable information – politicians abstain from making strict statements. Diego Garzia agreed that party politics is not working nowadays and that VAAs could result with the feedback that the user is closer to the party he or she doesn’t like the most. The ideological conflict between parties is no more bipolarized.

Another issue discussed was about the methodology of inventing the questions to the VAAs. Diego Garzia responded that there is no scientific standard for the questionnaires. Therefore VAAs are always subjective. However, the participants find the statements of political parties unreliable and rather irrelevant. The other point was that politicians don’t give true answers or abstain from giving concrete answer.

Diego Garzia stressed that VAAs are not replacing the political debate. The tool only should incentive the user who can compare his/her results with friends and discuss some topics with others. The aim of the VAAs is to keep people informed and to make them be aware of some topics, but not to force them to choose a particular party.

### **Second session and discussion:**

During the second session, participants were randomly divided in two smaller groups in which they discussed the main questions of the workshop:

- How does citizenship education accompany the EP elections?
- What practical approaches for voter’s empowerment and citizen’s participation do exist?

- What role will VAAs tools play as a transnational accompaniment to the European Parliament election?
- What is the role of media in raising the citizens' awareness of the electoral issues?

The outcome of the first-round of the discussion was that there is no sufficient education on the European electoral matters. Participants agreed that European institutions should be more involved in providing European dimension in citizenship education across all countries. Citizenship education should be a tool to motivate and encourage citizens to get involved in politics and to raise their awareness of crucial issues of the European Union, which will develop during the European electoral campaign. Participants suggested several practical approaches that could be implemented in this regard: simulation models, mock elections, free educational materials for teachers and educators, transnational projects, youth parliaments. The need of changing the electoral system and introducing e-voting was also indicated.

The participants of the workshop agreed that the VAAs could motivate young people to cast a vote during the elections. The VAAs are perceived as a good tool to simplify the complicated political issues and to involve people into politics. In the future, VAAs should be more promoted via social media and should also give an opportunity to select candidates. The role of media was emphasised – media should provide objective and detailed reporting and carefully choose topics to discuss on. Journalists have a responsibility for informing voters, although nowadays they focus more on scandals. It was exactly recognised that media determines public discourse so that they have to be objective and reliable.

To conclude all the discussions, the moderator applied the “Snow-ball effect” method. Petr Cap asked participants to investigate three key questions:

- How is the situation at the moment?
- What are the future perspectives?
- What has to be done by whom?

Firstly, participants had to answer those questions on their own. Afterwards, they were asked to discuss their findings in pairs. At the end, they formed two groups to come up with a final statement.

The outcomes of the workshop were the following:

The information about the activities of the EP is not sufficient. Therefore European institutions suffer from the lack of interest and trust of Europeans. The new European discourse should be introduced, particularly in order to increase the youth's interest in the EU elections.

Participants anticipate that there will be a wide support for extreme parties in the next EP elections. Therefore, in a long-term perspective, the EU institutions should invest more in introducing new forms of political participation at the EU level and also should focus more on civic education.

Lastly, participants agreed that the connection between the EP and citizens should be reinforced. There is a need for more bottom-up initiatives that could play a role of incentives for citizens to get involved in politics. Pedagogy by teacher, information by media, debates on alternative future scenarios by the political parties need to be introduced.

### **Conclusion:**

The atmosphere and the discussion during both sessions were very vivid. Participants were very active and engaged in debating. However, many of them presented different points of views and were a little dissatisfied that their personal insights were not included in the final statements and then – conference paper.