

Jürgen Kalb: The European Parliament Election 2009 in school lessons

The didactic approach of "Deutschland & Europa" (Germany and Europe), a magazine published by the "State Agency for Civic Education in Baden-Württemberg" (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg)

Before the European elections 2009 those involved start becoming nervous. For instance, many people wonder how high the turnout of voters will be. The turnout in Germany could already in 2004 barely reach 43%, whereas in national elections we can record regularly a turnout of about 80%. In Slovakia it was not more than 16,6%, in Poland 20,4%. High turnouts were nearly only achieved in countries with compulsory voting.

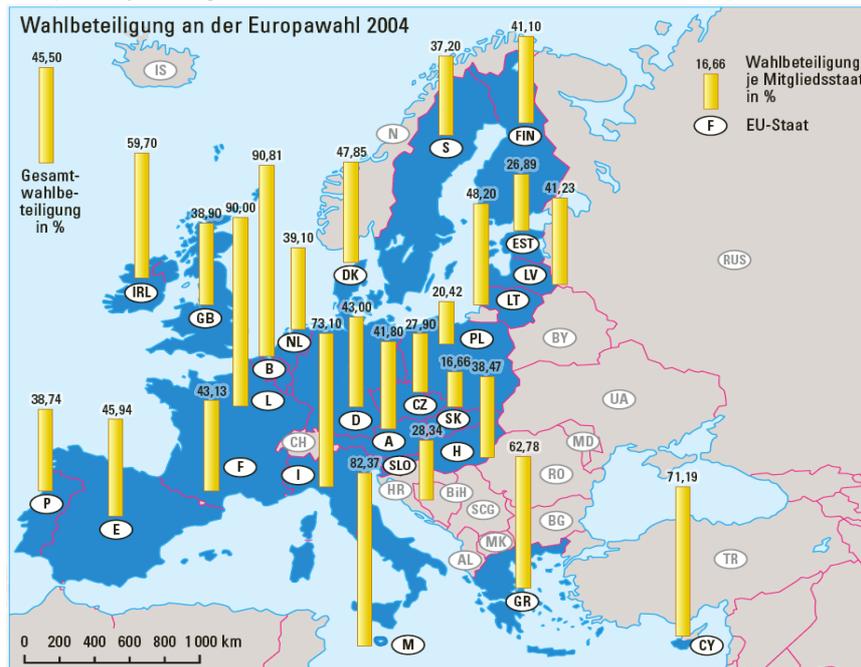


Abb 1: European election results 2004, © Bub-Kalb, Simone/Kalb, Jürgen (Hrsg.): Terra Gemeinschaftskunde Wirtschaft, Band 3, Ein Schulbuch für baden-württembergische Gymnasien, Klett-Verlag. Leipzig 2005, S. 16

So, since the last round of the European enlargement to the East problems obviously have not decreased.



Abb 2: © Horst Haitzinger, "Congratulations!", 14.12.2002

A key question concerns the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in the EU. Will really even Ireland with the constitutionally required referendum have waded it through today or at least by the end of 2008? What is going on in the United Kingdom where we have to face traditionally a strong European skepticism? -- The rejecting decisions in the French and Dutch referenda on the intended European Constitution in 2005 are still all-too well in our minds.

Is it possible to get the content and the purpose of the Lisbon Treaty across to a broad public? Can the complicated legislative process in the EU be conveyed, even though the European Parliament has been considerably strengthened. Is it really – as we all know from national elections – a fight between political camps? Does the voter really have influence on the composition and the leadership of the European Commission or the intended foreign minister, who is now no longer called minister but only "High Commissioner on Foreign Policy and Safety".

The far-away Brussels and the constantly repeated reproach of being bureaucratic do not become more popular simply because we are able to get across that already today nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ (three quarters) of all laws have their seeds in the EU. The work of the members of the European Parliament is not excluded from the manifold articulated problems of legitimation in the EU.

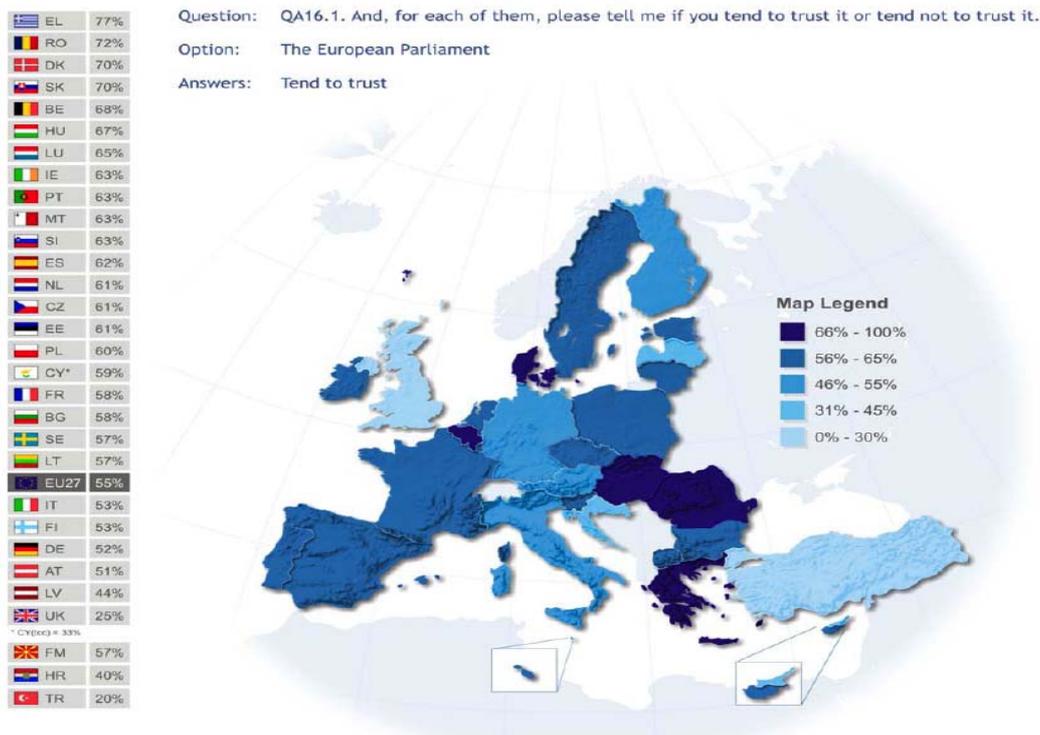


Abb 3: „Tell me if you tend to trust The European Parliament or not © Eurobarometer, Dezember 2007

Therefore almost all European politicians agree that in 2009 a special exertion is required to make the relevance of the European elections known to a broad public.

In Baden-Württemberg with its about 11,5 million inhabitants even the school holidays have been brought one week forward in order to make sure that the turnout is not too embarrassing.

The politicians recently have fortunately agreed on encouraging the instilling of the European Union in school lessons to make sure that it can start as early as possible. But how can that reasonably be put into practice?

The "European Union" in lessons

In the federal education system of the Federal Republic of Germany Baden-Württemberg has for example since 2004 started to allow much more room in its curricula for European political, economic or historical topics, Worth mentioning is here that the history lessons that were previously mostly focused on Germany, are now at the end of the 10th form programmatically directed at European topics.

Lessons on Europe are of course go beyond a mere cognitive examination of historical, political, economic and social questions in Europe.

Meanwhile international meetings and student exchanges have become a matter of course in virtually all schools. Though often initially organized on the basis of – by the way: legitimate - language or tourist interests, which may obviously bring about conflicts with the aims of political and social education. What is the preferred destination for the next school trip or field excursion? Who of you is not familiar with such questions when you think of your own school days. But on the other hand we can state: xenophobia or even mere exaggerated national pride as a criteria have no longer been up for discussion for a considerable time.

These encounters all play an important role. The impression they leave is definitely more intensive and sustainable than many a book our students read or even movies or documentary films on Europe. Only after such experiences some will show readiness to deal with the European unification.

But on the other hand personal encounters can turn out rather superficial, when for example at first the young people do not find common topics to communicate. Despite all contributions, records or logs of Live-chats or video conferences of European twin schools bear telling witness to that fact.

Encounters and the activation of cognitive skills as guidelines

International tests on the knowledge of Europeans – no matter whether adults or young people – about the EU always testify an alarming ignorance, even when asked only banalities or questions about institutions. So - not accidentally - people tend to change TV channels quickly when European topics appear in the news.

But anticipating the lack of interest of their students even numerous teachers seem to shy away from examining in depth specific European questions in their lessons.

European topics are not popular in the final exam thesis of trainee teachers. Thus, we get the impression that political education on European questions is all-too often reduced to the teaching of basic institutions, whereas in addition the few empirical studies on the European knowledge of students prove they cannot remember this factual knowledge for a long time, not to mention that it does not lead to cognitive activation.



Exemplary, problem-oriented and action-oriented learning

The concept of the magazine "Germany & Europe" as an academically oriented, methodic-didactic publication about and for civic education in school hence ensues some key demands of political didactics in Germany

(1) Exemplary and competence-oriented learning instead of expert knowledge about institutions

D&E (G&E) has committed itself to exemplary learning, which first of all means that we try to produce the reader's interest for the respective controversial question by dealing with specific and individual problems and conflicts with the selection of the case studies proving to be the biggest challenge: Can this single case be transferred on others? Is it the basis for the necessary abstraction? Can the individual case motivate the student to examine legal regulations or specific interests power structures? Abstraction and securing results are intended to follow as a second step. Here the approach of G&E differs clearly from traditional approaches for example in university textbooks. This approach is based on the so-called competence-oriented political education (...) and the standardized requirements for the Abitur exam (final exam in secondary education) in the school subject social studies/politics in Germany.

(2) Problem- and action oriented learning

A lasting and enduring interest in politics and a long-term motivation is developed, such is the approach of G&E, when unsolved problems of political conflict collide with entirely different interests. The aim of such a political dispute can then be an independent, even though fictitious development of a solution and the comparison with approaches of the established politics.

Thus, we do not focus on description and passive reception of the success-story of the EU, but an independent discussion of optional solutions and a perfectly critical evaluation of the findings. The more students can be activated to search actively for solutions in a discourse, the more lasting the learning success could turn out. In the process effortless and playful forms of acting are not applied as an end itself or as a fun factor without any effects.

The Achilles' heel of action-oriented learning is thereby always the evaluation. Cognitive activation starts with the comparison of the independently found solutions and real solutions but needn't stop there necessarily. Simulative actions can of course go beyond the scope of the lesson and lead to real political actions (e.g. letters to the editor, petitions etc), but needn't do necessarily. The aim of an

active, political citizen, the idea of becoming a citizen by means of school lessons has long been proved as an illusion.

(3) Controversy, prohibition of subjugation and giving weight to the personal interests of pupils

From the principles outlined above there can be drawn further conclusions: in order to enable the pupils to gain an independent judgement they need authentic and examining presentations. Political subjects that are controversial in science and politics must also appear controversial in the lesson and in the didactic magazine D&E. Guideline has to be always the present and future interests of the pupils. These principles, also known in Germany as the "Beutelsbach consensus in political education", have formed the basis and the heart of political education in Germany for many years and are for example adopted in the introduction to the Standardized requirements for the Abitur in the school subject social studies/politics in the federal republic.

The basis of the magazine is formed by the conviction that the discussion of European questions alone is promotion enough for Europe. Mere success reports still very often found in high-gloss brochures of ministries pursue a completely different aim and are only suited indirectly for lessons. Therefore, critics of Europe shall also have their say as well as euphoric supporters of a European federal state or e.g. supporters of a concentration on the domestic market within the European unification.

The format "Deutschland & Europa"

How does D&E put these principles into practice? The "State office for political education in Baden-Württemberg" has set itself a goal for more than 20 years now to publish D&E twice a year and thus campaign for the European unification. Before 1990 the magazine was called "The German question in school lessons" and intended to provide schools with information on the far-away GDR. But additionally it pursued the aim of not losing sight of the German unification. Consequently, it was not a mere advertising brochure.

Since the German unification a paradigm shift has taken place towards the subject of "Europe". However, the didactic principles have only slightly changed.

- (1) So for example in each of our editions several authors write articles that consist of two parts.
- (2) In the first part not only propose a thesis but also supply the reader with a general idea on the present state of discussion. Annotations containing books and essays even for students easily to obtain as well as internet links enable pupils to do research work thoroughly.
- (3) Unlike purely scientific publications, in the second part of the article material is published that can be directly used in the lessons for pupils not younger than about 15. Texts are supposed to not only support the given thesis but also to mirror the controversial discussion. Cartoons and pictures are not only supposed to illustrate what is said but also to comment provocatively on the texts or contradict them as a separate, telling source that often presents an independent, pointed opinion. Figures, data, facts in the form of graphs or tables shall give the pupil the opportunity to check and control what is said.

The great variety of authors is part of the program, but also their diverse perceptions and views. As a consequence there are university professors among our authors as well as teachers of public schools or instructors of other educational institutions or of ministries.

Alongside with the printed edition, which can be downloaded in the internet for free, D&E offers since 2006 direct methodic-didactic references and instructions for the implementation of the specific article

in the lessons. Thus, D&E demands of its authors always to take the mediation of the subject into consideration.

Plans in the run-up to the elections

Together with other europolitical and non-partisan organizations the "State office for political education in Ba-Wü" is organizing a series of events as e.g. (for example) lectures, discussions, seminars and excursions .

Background information especially of course for school lessons is provided for by 3 editions of D&E: (1) November 2008 edition 56: **"The EU – on the pathway to a citizens' union?"**:

A booklet for multipliers, especially teachers, but also students of higher secondary education or university with background information on the European Election. University professors, journalists and instructors of further education write about the unification process with and after the Lisbon Treaty. They sum up and evaluate the work of the European Parliament since 2004 and report about the possibilities and limitations of a European public. And what about public discussion in the member states? Articles on France, the United Kingdom and Ireland, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and the Federal Republic of Germany shall offer intercultural learning, last but not least stimuli for the growing/expanding bilingual lessons.

(edition 15.000, size 72 pages)

(2) February 2009 special edition D&E: **"The European Election 2009"**

The focus of this small publication is meant to be on election campaigns and electoral system as well as on a few important political questions of the future, which are regulated by the EU. The booklet is aimed at rather younger pupils of the age of about 14-16. The main interest is here as well the supply of basic knowledge.

(3) March/April 2009 edition 57: **"Young people and Europe"**

What does the EU today already offer young people? Alongside with a service part on exchange programs and possibilities of intercultural simulation games, here reports on different youth cultures in Europe will find their place. First contacts have been made with colleagues from Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and France.

Together with its internet offers, that e.g. contains methodic-didactic instructions for the usage of the different sources and texts in class, D&E here tries to set a useful and reasonable course.

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