



## European elections: now's the time

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A few days ago I was in Berlin, where the campaign for the European parliamentary elections is already visible on the streets. Passers-by are confronted with the faces of the leading German candidates on every corner. In the Frankfurt area, though, the campaign does not seem to have taken off – at least not yet. I hope we get started soon, too, because these elections are important!

Voter turnout in all EU countries has fallen almost continuously since the first European elections in 1979. At that time, it was 62%, compared to an EU average of 42.6% in 2014. A change in political culture, taking elections and democracy for granted too much or even disenchantment with politics and the feeling of having no influence are often cited as reasons for this. The latter argument, in particular, has been attributed to the younger generation in recent years. The current Europe-wide "Fridays for Future" demonstrations show, however, that something has obviously changed in this respect.

The European elections are the only means of directly electing an EU institution. Unfortunately, the voting age is not the same in all EU countries. Although everyone aged 18 and over can vote in almost all EU countries, in Austria, Malta and Greece they can do so at a younger age. Why don't young people in other EU countries demonstrate against this discrimination? This is something the EU could and should harmonise. A greater harmonisation of legislation is precisely what EU citizens want.

Many people consider the European elections to be a turning point. However, for the most part the focus is on the risks. But what would happen if the Brexit debacle made it clear, both in the UK and in the other countries, that the EU has something to offer that no country would ultimately want to do without? The economic advantages are obvious for many Britons, too. That is why, despite years of criticism of the EU, it is evidently difficult for them to actually bite the bullet and leave.

If they have not ratified the Withdrawal Agreement by 22 May, they will have to take part in the elections one more time. There is a possibility that pro-EU forces will be mobilised there on a large scale and siphon off votes from the established parties. This is because the dispute over Brexit has led to frustration among a broad section of the population and has raised public awareness of the risks it entails. This is also reflected in a survey conducted by the European Parliament which found that there was no majority in any country in favour of withdrawing from the EU. When asked how they would vote in a referendum, there was a majority everywhere – even in the UK – for remaining in the EU.

Of course, there is still a lot of work to be done. Opinion polls show that the public has clear preferences. Economic issues, in particular, but also the global problems of climate change and migration are regarded as urgent priorities. These are precisely the kind of issues that can only be solved on a supranational level. Therefore, everyone should take an interest in the European elections and the respective party manifestos, even though 16-year-olds are not yet allowed to vote in Germany this time.

If you want to know more about the European elections, the European Parliament, its responsibilities and powers as well as the opportunities and risks of this year's elections, I recommend our Country Focus: [European Elections – Seize the Opportunities!](#) ■

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