



FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

# CAN INFORMATION INCREASE TURNOUT IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS?

The perks of political conversation for the  
uninterested

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## Abstract

Direct elections to the European Parliament have been held since 1979 and turnout has steadily decreased with each election. The turnout rates vary considerably between member states, but the overall trend is diminishing participation from the citizens of Europe. It is well established that politically interested citizens vote in larger numbers, but what can influence the not so politically interested to actually turn out to vote? The aim of this thesis is to study if exposure to more information about the European Union (EU) and the European Parliament can make politically uninterested citizens more likely to vote in the European elections, and to compare different sources of information. The hypotheses are tested using logistic regression and data from the European Election Survey 2014. The results show that uninterested individuals who gained more information in the last weeks before the election were more likely to vote, even when controlling for several common determinants for turnout. The study also comes to the conclusion that the information source that has the strongest effect on turnout is personal conversations, which indicates that citizens are more influenced by what their friends and family members say than by what they see on television or read in the newspapers.

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# 1. Introduction

In the beginning of the European integration project it was foremost an intergovernmental organisation based on indirect representation. It was generally presumed that the majority of citizens viewed the then European Community as a good thing, and they had no direct representation in the organisation. The European Parliament consisted of members from national parliaments and was just an advisory institution which had no real influence over decision making. But in an effort to make citizens feel closer to the union and engage more in European politics the European Parliament was reformed and is since 1979 the only European Union (EU) institution that is directly elected. It was also an action meant to increase the democratic legitimacy of the organisation (Marsh & Mikhaylov, 2010, p.5). The European Parliament has successively gained more powers through several treaty changes, and now has greater influence over the legislative process and the appointment of the European Commission. Nowadays the ordinary legislative procedure, where the European Parliament has equal powers as the Council of ministers, is used in the absolute majority of legislation issues.

The next given question is of course if these reforms have succeeded in their goal of making EU citizens more enthusiastic about the European Union. It appears as though this is not the case. The average turnout in all member states in the first elections to the European Parliament was 62% and it has steadily decreased in each of the 7 elections since then. Most recently in 2014 it only amounted to 42,6%, and in every member state turnout in the European Parliament elections is much lower than in national general elections (European Parliament, 2014). But why is this the case and what factors influence citizens' probability to turn out and vote? Many scholars have tried to identify the determinants of turnout in the European elections. This study will contribute to the existing literature by bringing in a focus on politically uninterested citizens and the effect of information exposure on turnout. Some work has already been published concerning information factors, but what is new here is the inclusion of the more recent EU member states and the comparison of different information sources in the European Parliament context.

## 1.1 The role of information – a prerequisite for voting

An extensive amount of research has been dedicated to explaining why the citizens of the EU do not turn out to vote on European election day. One of the most well established theories is the second order election model, which predicted that turnout to the European Parliament elections would be low because the issues in EU politics do not matter as much to voters as national political issues (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Some scholars have found that certain individual traits affect the probability to vote, such as age, income, education, political interest and Eurosceptic attitudes (Clark, 2014; Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Hernández & Kriesi, 2016; Söderlund, Wass & Blais, 2011). Others have pointed to structural and contextual explanations, like electoral laws, party systems and the timing of the European election in relation to national elections (Flickinger & Studlar, 2007; Wessels & Franklin, 2009; Marsh & Mikhaylov, 2010). But the thesis at hand will focus on informational aspects.

There are indications that a lot of voters simply do not have enough knowledge and information about the EU and its institutions to be comfortable to vote (Clark, 2014, p.345). EU citizens get most of their information about the EU through different media outlets such as TV, newspapers and radio, which makes it important to study how visible the EU is in the flow of news and how it is portrayed (Schuck, Xesonakis, Elenbaas, Banducci & de Vreese, 2010; Nardis, 2015). This may differ substantially between member states. Another probable source of information is conversations with friends and family who know more about the subject, and who might in turn have gained this knowledge from the media. But there is an important distinction to make here which concerns the information available in relation to citizens' level of political interest and their propensity to assimilate said information.

Individuals who have a personal interest in politics will probably actively search for election information themselves, but politically uninterested citizens are not likely to make the same effort and instead rely on the information that is given to them. Turnout rates hint at the consequences of this; research has shown that politically uninterested citizens are less likely to turn out to vote and that this tendency is even stronger in European elections than in national elections (Söderlund et al, 2011). But some still think that they have enough information to make a choice and feel confident enough to vote. It is therefore important to study if more information about the election can make politically uninterested citizens decide to cast their vote in the European Parliament elections, and if some sources of information are more influential than others in this regard. There are some scholars that examine the media

and news coverage in relation to European elections; the amount of EU news and differences between media outlets and countries (de Vreese, Semetko, Banducci & Boomgaarden, 2006; Schuck et al, 2010). But few connect this directly to turnout rates and even fewer consider the additional information source that is personal conversation. In today's increasingly connected world the importance of media and the Internet can hardly be overstated, but it is interesting to include interpersonal conversations in the discussion and analyse their continued relevance in a society where a large share of both private communication and public debate take place online.

In 2004 ten new member states joined the EU in the biggest enlargement so far and they have since been joined by three more<sup>1</sup>. All of the first ten countries voted to join with clear majorities in separate national referenda during 2003 with relatively high turnout. The 2004 election to the European Parliament was held shortly after the accession but many were surprised by the low turnout rates in many of the new member states (Fauvelle-Aymar & Stegmaier, 2008). In the two subsequent European Parliament elections they have continued to account for some of the lowest turnout rates in Europe, especially the countries with a history of communist regime. Research on voting behaviour has since showed that the second order model does not fit as well in the new as in the old member states (Marsh & Mikhaylov, 2010), and several studies indicate that the determinants of turnout may be different in these countries (Flickinger & Studlar, 2007; Wessels & Franklin, 2009). The reason for why some theories about voting behaviour do not apply to the eastern member states is still to be determined. But what is apparent is that since these variations can greatly affect the results, variables should be tested separately in an eastern and western context. Otherwise important results may be either underrated or exaggerated, when applied to the EU as a whole. Of course the division is not clear cut, there is also diversity within each block. But the averages are still far enough apart to motivate the categorization. Additionally, the information exposure factors of interest in this study have not previously been explored in the more recent EU member states.

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<sup>1</sup> EU accessions:

2004: Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Cyprus, Malta.

2007: Romania, Bulgaria.

2013: Croatia.

## **1.2 Purpose and disposition**

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether exposure to more information about the European Parliament elections can increase the possibility that an individual with low political interest goes to cast a vote. Different sources of information - such as television, newspapers, the Internet and personal conversations - will be compared to see if some are more effective than others in this regard. There will also be a specific focus on possible differences between the established western member states and the post-communist Central- and East European states that have gained EU membership since 2004.

The thesis continues with an overview of the existing literature on determinants of turnout in the European Parliament elections. This will lead to a few precise hypotheses being presented, which will then be tested empirically with data from the 2014 European Election Survey. The study then concludes with an analysis of the results and a discussion on how to move forward.

## **2. Theory and earlier research**

During the almost 40 years that have passed since the first European Parliament election an extensive amount of research has been devoted to the determinants of both turnout and other aspects of the elections. The union has gone through many changes during this time, such as treaty changes and several rounds of enlargements. In 1979 the EU consisted of 9 member states and in 2014 it encompassed 28, and the European Parliament has gained more powers in decision making. The second order election model is the most prominent one in this field of research, and it will be included in this chapter because it is still relevant today. Apart from that the aim is to mostly review studies from the last three European elections, since one of the points of interest is the difference between old and new member states. This makes studies published since the 2004 enlargement the most relevant to include.

### **2.1 The second order election model**

Reif and Schmitt (1980) presented this model after the very first European Parliament election, but it has been tested and developed by many subsequent authors and is still discussed today (Hix & Marsh, 2011). They originally put forward the theory that national general elections are first order elections and all other elections are second order elections. This includes local elections, referenda and European Parliament elections. What these second order elections have in common is that they are usually concerned with issues of lesser salience to citizens. Key issues that concern citizens' everyday life (like healthcare, education, law and order, pensions and taxation) are still primarily governed at the national level. Also, the outcome of the European Parliament elections does not lead to government formation, rendering the consequences of the election less impactful. Because less is at stake in the second order elections many citizens do not care enough about them to go to the poll, and turnout is therefore lower than in first order elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). The campaigns also tend to concern domestic rather than European issues and some scholars argue that the citizens who do vote only take national issues into account when voting, either unable to separate the national level from the EU level governance in this multi-layered governmental system or using the European elections strategically to affect the main national political arena (Reif & Schmitt, 1980).

However, more recent research questions this assumption. For example, Clark (2014, p.342) points out that the prominent debates surrounding several referenda in different countries during the last years indicate an engagement with EU issues. Clark & Rohrschneider (2009) could show that citizens do care about EU issues and evaluate the EU separately from national institutions. They find support for both the hypothesis that citizens “transfer” opinions and attitudes about national institutions onto the EU and the opposite hypothesis that citizens evaluate the EU independently of national institutions. They use individual-level data, and argue that aggregate studies are biased towards the transfer hypothesis at the expense of the EU evaluation hypothesis. It seems that the behaviour to transfer opinions is stronger in the context of the European Parliament elections than at other times, and the authors’ explanation for that is the structure of the elections. National parties play a pivotal role in European elections, which naturally gives more attention to national issues during the campaign and makes it harder for voters to separate opinions about party performance on the national and the EU level (Clark & Rohrschneider, 2009, p.658-660). It might be that one reason turnout is low, despite citizens caring about EU issues, is that they think European elections do not matter. The outcome of a referendum is obvious and has significant consequences, therefore generating higher turnout rates. But when it comes to European Parliament elections many citizens do not see any connection between their vote and the outcome of the election and perceive the political system as ineffective (Schmitt & van der Eijk, 2007, p.146). They do not think that it matters which parties win or lose, rendering the elections rather pointless in their opinion (Wessels & Franklin, 2009).

Reif & Schmitt’s prediction of low turnout has proven to be correct; in all member states the turnout in European Parliament elections is lower than in national elections. But there is more to the explanation for this than only the theory of low salience to citizens. There is quite some debate among scholars regarding the causes for the depressed turnout patterns, as will become apparent in the following sections.

## **2.2 Contextual factors**

### ***Information***

Most of the research on information and voting behaviour concerns party choice and issue salience rather than turnout. For example Hobolt & Wittrock (2011) show that citizens are more likely to take EU issues into consideration when choosing a party after being given more

information about party positions on the EU integration dimension. In light of their results it is not unreasonable to assume that information could also increase citizens' will to go vote at all, since they gain more knowledge and can make an informed choice. A few studies have examined the direct effect of information on turnout, which seem to support this.

Hogh & Vinaes Larsen (2016) describe some difficulties with measuring the effect of information, which might explain why there is limited research on the subject. In any given study it is hard to empirically separate information from other factors that might influence voters' propensity to gather more information themselves, such as education. Furthermore, choosing higher education might in turn be dependent on socio-demographic factors (Hogh & Vinaes Larsen, 2016, pp.1496 & 1498). To circumvent this and single out the information variable, they conduct an experiment involving a homogenous group of eligible Danish high school students. Some of the students had to participate in a mandatory one-day workshop on the EU just before the 2014 European Parliament elections, while the rest did not. Afterwards the ones who received the extra information about the EU were more likely to report vote intention in the upcoming European election. The students were about the same age and with similar backgrounds, and even when controlling for the minor socio-demographic differences at hand the effect of information remained unchanged, so the authors can argue with confidence that the effect shown is indeed because of information (Hogh & Vinaes Larsen, 2016).

The above cited study examined a small sample and a rather unusual information source (workshop), so more research is needed to confirm their results. Information about the EU and the European Parliament elections can be gained in many different ways. A person might watch news programs on television, read an article in a newspaper, listen to a politician at a meeting, read party programs on the internet, stumble across news in their flows on social media or have a conversation with a more knowledgeable friend or family member. Very little research has focused on comparing these sources of information to discover if some have a greater influence on voting behaviour and turnout than others.

One of few articles to have a closer look at this is by Schönbach & Lauf (2002) who examine if a so called "trap effect" exists for television media. The theory assumes that television would be the most effective media outlet to capture and influence politically uninterested citizens. But in the end they find no support for this, and watching more television does not seem to increase the propensity to vote. But they do find that having personal conversations

about the elections with friends and family has a significant effect on turnout for the politically uninterested. Schönbach & Lauf (2002) argue that it is probably their more politically interested friends who initiate these conversations but that they can have a substantial impact by persuading their friends to vote. The authors point out that it is also harder to avoid a conversation with another person than for example just changing the channel on television or skipping a page in the newspaper. De Vreese & Boomgaarden (2006) also find that interpersonal communication boosts turnout in their study of news coverage in Denmark & the Netherlands. They point to previous research concerning voting behaviour in other contexts than European elections which suggests that personal conversations are closely connected to political participation (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006, p.333). This confirms that apart from media outlets, personal conversations are a central source of information for many citizens, and should be included in studies of information.

However, the study by Schönbach & Lauf uses data from the 1999 European Parliament elections and it is hard to know if their results are still valid. The European Union looked very different in 1999 compared to 2014. The European Parliament has much greater powers today and their role in the EU has changed significantly. There has also been an almost revolutionary change in media environment during the last 15 years. In 1999 social media did not exist, the Internet was still relatively new and not at all such a natural information source in people's everyday lives. Most people were limited to watching a few public and commercial broadcast television channels and reading mainstream press publications. The possibility to personally customise your own news and media consumption that is now taken for granted was very limited in 1999. Also, the post-communist states had not yet joined the EU so Schönbach & Lauf's (2002) analysis is based on only 12 western European countries. But no similar studies have been published since then, so a new take on the role of information and media for politically uninterested citizens is much needed in the modern context of 2014. This study hopes to contribute to this gap in the literature.

### *News coverage and media*

The media, especially news sources, have a unique possibility to have an impact on how citizens form their opinions and attitudes towards the EU and its institutions. Many voters get most of their information about the European Parliament and the elections through different media outlets, such as TV, newspapers, radio and the Internet. This gives media actors the power to portray some issues as more important than others and to frame the EU in different contexts (de Vreese et al 2006; Schuck et al, 2011). During a national election campaign the

reporting is massive in most countries and every political candidate is under close scrutiny. This means that even voters who are not particularly interested in politics will probably pick up some information about the election and party positions on important issues. But in the weeks before a European election fewer news sources publish content on the election, and if they do it usually concerns domestic rather than European issues. The candidates to the European Parliament are not at all as visible to citizens as the parties' candidates to the national parliament (de Vreese et al, 2006).

According to Anderson & McLeod (2004) this might not be the fault of the media, but instead a consequence of the European Parliaments poor skills in communication. They found that the press and information directorate of the European Parliament and their several national and regional offices lacked appropriate funding and were understaffed (Anderson & McLeod, 2004). But despite this the amount of EU news does seem to be increasing with time. Media studies from three consecutive elections (1999, 2004, 2009) analysing the news coverage during a few weeks before the elections show that the visibility has increased from each election to the next. For example, the amount of EU news on television was twice as large in 2009 compared to 2004 as it went from 9,8,% to 20,15% (de Vreese et al, 2006; Schuck et al, 2011). There is unfortunately no similar study from 2014, but it is still possible to see a trend of increasing coverage during the 2000s.

However, the increase is not even across the EU member states or across media outlets. Since there is no developed European public sphere it is up to national media to report on EU issues, which renders the media environment very different in member states (de Vreese et al, 2006; Schuck et al, 2011). Both studies from 2004 and 2009 also find that there is generally more news about the EU in newspapers than on television, but that the EU is somewhat more visible in public broadcasts and least visible in commercial television outlets (de Vreese et al, 2006; Schuck et al, 2011). These variations across countries and outlets might of course affect the amount of information that reaches citizens. De Vreese & Boomgaarden (2006) find somewhat differing results that suggest there is more EU news on both public and commercial television than in broadsheet newspapers and tabloids, but they only study two countries and not all EU member states. But what is more important in their study is that they link media exposure to political participation, and find that watching more television news (both public and commercial) and reading the newspaper increased the propensity to vote in Denmark & the Netherlands (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006, p.330).

In addition to the amount of news some scholars have studied what kind of image is being transmitted and how it affects voting behaviour. Hobolt & Spoon (2012) could show that not only the politicisation of the EU issue in the media is important, but also the level of polarisation in opinions on EU issues amongst national parties. In some member states party positions on EU issues range from very negative to very positive, while in other countries the opinions expressed by parties are less divided. According to Schuck et al. (2011) media coverage of the EU increases if parties are polarised on EU issues. A high level of politicisation and party polarisation should therefore provide more information about party positions and increases the salience of EU issues to voters. Hobolt & Spoon (2012) argues that this makes the distance in opinion on the EU integration issue between a voter and their usually preferred party more important, which has a significant effect on the tendency to abstain or switch party in European Parliament elections. The increase is especially large in countries with negative media coverage of the EU (Hobolt & Spoon, 2012).

### ***Electoral laws and timing***

Previous research has shown that one of the strongest predictors of turnout is if a country has compulsory voting laws (Flickinger & Studlar, 2007; Wessels & Franklin, 2009; Marsh & Mikhaylov, 2010). There are two EU member states that actively enforce compulsory voting, Luxembourg and Belgium, and they are persistently at the top of the turnout league. Two others, Greece and Cyprus, have compulsory voting laws but there are no legal consequences for non-voters. Still, the laws can be seen to create a social norm of voting which enhances turnout (Rose, 2004, p.5). Belgium is of course also where most of the central EU institutions are located, and hosting an EU institution also gives a turnout boost (Marsh & Mikhaylov, 2010). Another important factor for turnout is when the European Parliament election takes place in relation to the national election. If a European Parliament election is held shortly before a national general election it is often seen as an indicator of how parties will fare in the next national election, which raises interest both among voters and among politicians who are in the middle of a national election campaign and want to mobilise the public. If a national election was held recently turnout in the European election is lower (Flickinger & Studlar, 2007; Wessels & Franklin, 2009; Marsh & Mikhaylov, 2010). These contextual factors have mostly been studied in aggregate studies and are hard to control for in an individual level analysis. In an attempt to circumvent a part of this problem an additional regression is presented in the appendix where the countries using compulsory voting laws are excluded.

## 2.3 Individual factors

### *Opinions and attitudes*

To begin with, citizens with an interest in politics have a higher propensity to vote. Söderlund et al (2011) compared the effect of interest in both European Parliament elections and national elections and found that interest in politics is even more crucial for turnout in European elections. They argue that this is because of the low salience of European Parliament elections. When an election is considered to be very important (like a national election) mobilisation efforts are greater, persuading even uninterested citizens to go vote, but in European elections mobilisation is much weaker and do not engage citizens with low interest in politics (Söderlund et al, 2011, p.691). Therefore, having a closer look on the determinants of turnout for politically uninterested citizens is important.

Political trust in an institution can be described as by Grönlund & Setälä (2007, p.402): “*institutional trust refers to the fulfilment of an individual’s normative expectations towards institutions*”. In other words, if citizens have trust in institutions, they believe that they will do what is right and represent voters’ interests, which is important to give legitimacy to the representative character of most modern democracies. While a small amount of distrust can be healthy, to remind politicians of accountability, high levels of distrust for long periods of time can greatly damage the relationship between voters and their representatives (Nardis, 2015, p.47). Whether political trust affects turnout is somewhat debated, but recent research on the specific European Parliament context indicates that it does have an effect. Several authors have come to the conclusion that trust in the European Parliament is positively correlated with turnout in the European elections, using both aggregate and individual-level data (Cox, 2003, p.767; Nardis, 2015; Clark, 2014). It is important to separate this trust in institutions from trust in political actors. A voter may distrust a certain representative, but still have trust in the democratic system and its institutions, and might therefore be inclined to vote to see that particular representative replaced (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007, Nardis, 2015).

Rose (2004, p.5) argues that not only trust in European institutions matter for turnout but trust in national institutions and actors might be even more important, since members of the European Parliament are nominated by national parties and elected in national elections. Rose measures trust in parties and trust in government and find the former to be more important than the latter, but he does however not include trust in national parliaments. Nardis (2015, p.59) finds that trust in national parliaments is equally important for turnout as trust in the

European Parliament, but that trust in the national government and the European Commission were not significant. This highlights the importance of separating trust in political institutions and political actors, and only trust in parliaments will be included in this study.

Another disputed aspect is Euroscepticism, or EU support. Schmitt & van der Eijk (2007) argue that abstention is not a sign of Euroscepticism and in their study of the 1999 European elections they find no support for the theory that Euroscepticism influences turnout rates (Schmitt & van der Eijk, 2007). However, Hobolt & Spoon (2012, p.714) could show that an individual's satisfaction with the EU does affect turnout, citizens who are dissatisfied with the EU are more likely to abstain from voting. Both Hobolt & Spoon (2012) and Hernández & Kriesi (2016) argue that it is reasonable to assume that the Eurosceptic sentiments are more important for voter behaviour in party systems where parties are divided on the issue of European integration. When voters are given real choices and their Eurosceptic attitudes are represented by one or several parties, it is possible that they choose to express their disapproval by voting for a Eurosceptic party rather than by not voting at all. But Hernández & Kriesi (2016) identify another important aspect that influences this connection, namely voters' ideological opinions on the traditional left-right dimension. Only if there is a party that represents a citizen's positions on both the EU and left-right dimensions, he or she is more likely to show their disapproval of the EU by voting instead of abstaining. This means that in member states where there are both right-wing and left-wing Eurosceptic parties, the negative effect of Euroscepticism on turnout is smaller than in countries where there is limited politicisation of the EU issue or where Euroscepticism is biased towards only one end of the left-right political spectrum (Hernández & Kriesi, 2016).

A turnout determinant that has not received much focus in the European Parliament context, but is often included as a control variable, is partisanship or party attachment. Feeling close to a specific party is likely to encourage voters to turn out to support their preferred party. For example, Schmitt (2005, p.658) finds party attachment to be the strongest predictor of electoral participation in the European elections.

Bartkowska & Tiemann (2015, pp.206-207) show that economic perceptions can have an impact on turnout. Most importantly, they suggest that the mechanism differs between more or less politically knowledgeable and interested citizens. The authors argue that to cast an "economic vote" in the European elections an individual must have a rather extensive knowledge about the European institutions and their responsibilities, as well as be able to

distinguish between financial effects of national governmental actions, EU legislation and external shocks from the global market (Bartkowska & Tiemann, 2015, p.204). Someone who fits this description and who has negative perceptions of the economic development can make an informed choice in the European elections based on financial preferences, but a dissatisfied individual who lacks interest or knowledge in economics is instead more likely to abstain from voting altogether (Bartkowska & Tiemann, 2015, p.207).

### ***Demographic aspects***

When it comes to age, middle aged citizens are more likely to vote than others (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012). Younger voters have not yet established a voting habit and are occupied with major changes in life, and older voters might not be as socially active and engaged in society as in their younger days. But in addition to age there is a generation effect that enhances the difference between younger and older voters, since generations born before the 60s vote in larger numbers than later generations (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012).

Individuals with a higher education and income are also more likely to vote. According to the withdrawal hypothesis a person who is struggling to fulfil their basic needs will not prioritise voting over other activities that might improve their living conditions. In Fauvelle-Aymar & Stegmaiers (2008) aggregate study of the post-communist member states they found that this was only true for unemployment, which had a strong negative impact on turnout rates. Their other economic measures, GDP per capita and average regional GDP growth, had no effect on turnout (Fauvelle-Aymar & Stegmaier, 2008).

## **2.4 The eastern paradox**

As has been described earlier, the post-communist member states have lower average turnout rates than the established EU-15 members. This does not apply to Cyprus and Malta; they joined the EU at the same time as many post-communist countries but can boast higher turnout rates in the European elections. There is of course variation; excluding Cyprus and Malta the 2014 turnout rates for the new member states range from 47% in Lithuania to 13% in Slovakia. Lithuania's 47% is higher than for example Portugal, UK and the Netherlands which all have turnout rates between 30-40%. But the averages show a significant difference, the average turnout in the established EU-15 member states was 52% and the average for the

post-communist member states was only 29% (European Parliament, 2014). So there is obviously a regional difference.

Recent research indicates that some explanation models for voting behaviour do not apply as well to citizens in the post-communist countries. To begin with, there is the issue of political trust. In most established EU-15 member states the average political trust in the European Parliament is lower than the trust in their national parliament. Citizens are likely more acquainted with their national institutions and trust them more than the distant European ones. But in the post-communist states this relationship is reversed. Citizens have more trust in the European Union than the national institutions, and there is quite a gap between these trust levels (Nardis, 2015). As Cox (2003, p.761) points out, political trust and participation suffer where “*the state does not rule by law but by repression*”, referencing the legacy of communist rule and the distrust and fear of national institutions that it generated.

Clark (2014) argues that citizens judge supranational institutions, like the EU, by comparing them to their national counterparts. If a person lives in a country where they perceive the government and parliament to be responsive, representative and transparent it is very possible that they find the European institutions to be unresponsive and less democratic in comparison. But citizens in a country with weaker national institutions might not have as high expectations on the EU and perceive them as rather functional and responsive (Clark, 2014, pp.343-344). This would explain the very different levels of trust in the European Parliament compared to the national parliaments, but it still leaves questions about voting behaviour unanswered. In the end, Clark (2014) does find that perceptions of the European Parliament influences turnout, but fails to prove that this is affected by comparing the EU to national institutions. Some scholars have found that a high level of political trust in the European Parliament should affect turnout positively, but despite having the highest trust levels in the EU the post-communist member states have very poor turnout rates. Rose (2004) suggests that it is precisely the low levels of trust in the national institutions that are responsible for the depressed turnout rates, which is partly supported by Nardis (2015) but has also been contradicted by Wessels & Franklin (2009).

Nardis (2015) specifically look at political trust as a mediating factor and theorises that it is the character of news coverage that forms levels of political trust, which in turn affects turnout. More positive news about the EU fosters trust, while negatively framed news corrodes it. He finds support for this and in addition discovers that the link between news

coverage and political trust in the European Parliament is stronger in the eastern member states, which could partly explain the regional differences (Nardis, 2015). Research from the 2004 elections show that there is less attention to the European Parliament elections in national media in the established EU-15 states than in the post-communist states. This means that the same level of news consumption equalled more exposure to EU news in the Central and East European states. The reporting was also more negative amongst the established members (de Vreese et al, 2006). But this regional pattern seems to have diminished by 2009. Schuck et al (2011) still find considerable variation in EU visibility among countries but it is harder to distinguish an east-west division. There is no research which covers how this has developed since then. But Hobolt & Spoon (2012) point out that party polarisation on EU issues is higher the west than in the east, which often leads to more negative coverage of the issue, and as mentioned in previous sections party polarisation can increase turnout and issue salience.

Flickinger & Studlar (2007) studied many turnout factors on aggregate level and their results suggest that some national level concerns (such as trust in government and satisfaction with democracy) was more important in the new member states, but some EU-level concerns mattered more to citizens in established member states (Flickinger & Studlar, 2007, p.397). Schmitt (2005, p.668) suggests that party attachment is lower in the post-communist states, which contributes to higher party volatility. He also finds that political information, as measured by newspaper reading and political knowledge, is a stronger turnout predictor in the new post-communist than in the western member states (Schmitt, p.658). Regarding party choice, Koepke & Ringe (2006) found that the central second order behaviour of protest voting, i.e. signalling disapproval with the incumbent government by voting for an opposition party, is not nearly as common in the post-communist states as in the established member states. Voters in Central and East Europe tend to vote more sincerely. The second order model thus may not fit as well in the new member states (Marsh & Mikhaylov, 2010).

All the differences mentioned in this section indicate that there might be specific determinants of post-communist voting behaviour. This motivates the decision to test the regions separately in this study.

### 3. Hypotheses

Voters who are politically interested are likely to already know something about the EU and are also more likely to independently search for information when deciding if and who to vote for. They might change their behaviour before the election and for example read more news articles than usual, and we already know from previous research that they are more likely to turn out to vote in European Parliament elections (Söderlund et al, 2011). But what about the not so politically interested? This study proposes to separate the politically uninterested from the rest of the eligible voters to study if more information can persuade them to vote in the European elections, even if they do not actively search for information out of interest. The politically uninterested account for a large part of the electorate and even though many are inclined to stay at home during an election some still turn out to vote. It is therefore important to get a better understanding of the determinants of turnout for this specific group.

Citizens have different habits concerning their news media consumption, and will have different reasons for their choice. But the more an individual reads the newspaper and watches the news on TV, the more likely they are to be exposed to information about the European Parliament elections, even if they are not particularly interested in them. They can also become engaged in conversation about the elections with a more interested friend and acquire information from them. Research indicates that more information about the elections increases the probability that an individual chooses to cast a vote (Hogh & Vinaes Larsen, 2016). If this is the case, turnout should be higher amongst citizens who are exposed to more information through media consumption or conversation. There is also some evidence pointing towards conversations being more influential than other sources of information in increasing voting (Schönbach & Lauf, 2002). In light of previous research, two hypotheses are formed and tested.

H1: Individuals with low interest in politics are more likely to vote if exposed to more information about the European Parliament elections via television, newspapers, the Internet or personal conversations.

H2: Such information is most efficient if conveyed through personal conversation rather than a media outlet.

The hypotheses will both be tested in all EU member states jointly and separately in the established EU-15 countries and the more recent eastern member states to see if the results differ between the regions. Malta and Cyprus are excluded from the group of new member states at this stage of the analysis, since they do not have the post-communist character that the others share and have significantly higher turnout rates.

Information exposure for politically uninterested citizens has not yet been studied in the eastern member states, so there is no empirical evidence concerning information aspects that can provide a reason to assume that the effect of information on turnout is stronger in one region or another. But some other turnout predictors, including some of the control variables used in this study, seem to be working differently in the post-communist member states. Also, media environment differences might affect the results since three of the four information sources studied here are media outlets. Because of the lack of previous research on this specific topic no hypothesis is formed regarding which of the established or post-communist states would show a stronger information effect, but any regional differences will be observed in the analysis.

## **4. Method and material**

### **4.1 Logistic regression**

The aim of this study is to find general patterns in many countries, using large quantities of data. Therefore, it is suitable to use a form of statistical analysis to test the hypotheses. The research subject is turnout, which is a dichotomous variable. An individual either voted or did not vote. Because of this the method used will be logistic regression analysis. A linear regression would require the dependent variable to be a continuous scale, but that is not the case here (Djurfeldt & Barmark, 2009).

A logistic regression, like any quantitative method, provides the opportunity to generalise the result. This is an important attribute since we want to be able to draw conclusions about the population voting behaviour across the EU and not only the sample that is tested. To achieve that, the sample needs to be randomly selected and representative of the population. This is virtually impossible using any kind of qualitative method. If a qualitative method was used, a stronger argument could have been made about the motivations behind voting behaviour and what aspects voters take into account when deciding to vote or not, but because of sample size and representation issues it would not be certain that this was applicable to any other voters than the ones interviewed or observed. With logistic regression analysis one can only test the strength of correlations and regression coefficients, but if significant results are found one can argue with greater confidence that they are generally applicable to the population.

### **4.2 Data – EES 2014**

The hypotheses will be tested using data from the Voter Study of the 2014 European Election Survey (EES) (Schmitt, Hobolt, Popa & Teperoglou, 2014). The survey was conducted in all 28 member states after the election during the period 30<sup>th</sup> of May - 27<sup>th</sup> of June 2014. The sample size in most countries was just over 1000 individuals, but in three countries with small populations (Malta, Cyprus & Luxembourg) only around 535 people were interviewed and in two large countries (Germany & United Kingdom) the sample size was closer to 1500. All the interviews were conducted face to face and in the relevant national language. This survey has been done since 1979 and is often used in research on European voting behaviour. The

advantages of using individual data when studying voting behaviour, as opposed to aggregate data, are the much larger sample size and the greater validity of the correlations. Even if a correlation between variables is found using aggregate data, there is no way to be certain that it is the same individuals that have reported high values on both variables (Hobolt & Wittrock, 2011, pp.29-30).

Since the focus of this study is on politically uninterested citizens all others are filtered out from the data. In the questionnaire the statement “*You are very interested in politics*” can be responded to with the four alternatives “Yes, totally” and “Yes, somewhat”, “No, not really” and “No, not at all”<sup>2</sup>. All respondents who chose one of the two latter options are the base for the regressions, while the rest are excluded. It might be of importance to highlight that the uninterested account for more than half of all respondents, so the sample is large (15 260 individuals out of a total of 30 064 respondents across the EU).

As with all survey data there might be a risk of subjective answers. There might be translation issues or wordings that make respondents interpret questions in different ways, which render them harder to compare and analyse. There is also the trouble of respondents over-reporting. Even if they did not vote in the election, they may say they did. The self-reported turnout in the surveys is always higher than the actual turnout in the elections. Depending on who agrees to be interviewed, there may also be a problem with representation. There is a risk that for example elderly or politically interested citizens are overrepresented in the sample, since they might be the ones most likely to have the time and interest to participate in the study.

## 4.3 Variables

### *Dependent variable*

The dependent variable in this case is turnout in the European Parliament elections, and it is measured through the self-reported turnout in the survey. Respondents were asked “*European Parliament elections were held on the (date of election). For one reason or another, some people in (country) did not vote in these elections. Did you yourself vote in the recent European Parliament elections?*” 57,3 % of the respondents reported that they voted and 42,5 % that they did not. Some said that they did not know, but they were few and their answers

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<sup>2</sup> A list of all variables used in this thesis can be found in Appendix 2, together with the exact question wording in the EES 2014 Voter Study.

will not be included in the analysis, making the variable dichotomous. The actual average turnout in the 2014 European Parliament elections was 42,6%, and to make sure that the over reporting in the survey does not skew my results, I include a weighting variable. The weighting variable also mitigates the impact of the fact that the survey sample is not completely representative of the population at large, and Popa et al. (2014) recommend that it is included in any analysis made with the EES 2014 data.

### ***Independent variables***

The independent variable is information exposure, including the different information sources TV, newspapers, the Internet and personal conversations. The survey question is:

*“How often did you do any of the following during the four weeks before the recent European elections. How often did you...*

- 1. Watch a programme about the European elections on television?*
- 2. Read about the European elections in a newspaper?*
- 3. Talk to friends or family about the European elections?*
- 5. Read about the European elections on the Internet (websites, social media, etc.)<sup>3</sup>*

The respondent is asked to pick one out of three alternatives that matches their habits for each information source, “Never” (1), “Sometimes” (2) or “Often” (3). Since the purpose of the study is to examine the effect of information in general on turnout, but also compare information sources, separate measures for each of the four sources will be included as independent variables. They are used as they are in the survey, trichotomous, by simply excluding the “don’t know” answers. These are of course not the only information sources that exist, but some of the most common ones. Including these four gives an insight into individual media habits and a general image of how exposed to information about the EU and the European elections they might be, even if they do not actively search for it out of interest.

Using all three answers rather than just two allows for more variation in the results. There is however always a problematic issue with using ordinal variables in regressions since there is no way of guaranteeing that the space from one step to the next will be equal between all steps. How much more news about the EU does one have to watch to qualify into the “often” category instead of answering “sometimes”. This is rather subjective and will differ somewhat depending on the respondents’ judgement. But since the independent variables are the focus of the study it is important not to lose any of the variation in the results. There is an

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<sup>3</sup> Number 4 concerns attending a public meeting or rally about the European elections and is not included since it does not measure neither a media outlet nor personal communication.

alternative to using the ordinal variables as they are, which is dummy coding all the answer alternatives for each variable. Some might consider this a more precise coding, but here the ordinal variables are used because they are more easily presented and interpreted. For robustness, a version where the independent variables are dummy coded is presented in the appendix where readers can see that both coding options produce very similar results. This ensures that the use of ordinal variables has not distorted the results of this study.

### ***Control variables***

To be sure that the potential correlations that are found are really the effect of the independent variable and not of other factors, a number of control variables are included. In line with previous research some are attitudinal variables, while others are of a demographic character.

Political trust in the European Parliament has previously been shown to affect turnout (Nardis, 2015; Cox, 2003) Trust is measured in the survey by the interviewer making the statement “*You trust the institutions of the EU*” and the respondent answering what alternative that corresponds with his or her opinion out of four alternatives. This is recoded so that the alternatives “Yes, totally” and “Yes, somewhat” are combined and the alternative “No, not really” is put together with “No, not at all” to form a dichotomous variable that signals a high (1) or low (0) level of trust in the EU. By separating the alternatives into only two groups the above mentioned problem with guaranteeing equal steps in ordinal variables is avoided, since there is only one step between 0 and 1.

Political trust in the national parliament is not as thoroughly researched as trust in the European parliament, but Rose’s (2004) findings imply that it is especially important for turnout in the post-communist countries. The variable is measured in the same way as trust in the European parliament, namely by the statement “*You trust the national parliament (use proper name for lower house)*” and four alternative answers ranging from “Yes, totally” to “No, not at all”. The coding is identical to the one for trust in the European parliament, making it a dichotomous variable.

Euroscepticism is also a much debated factor. Hernandez & Kriesi (2016) have shown that some of the disagreement might originate from a previous failure to identify certain contextual aspects that modify the effect of Euroscepticism on turnout. But in some cases it seems to have an impact, so it is therefore included. To measure Euroscepticism the following survey question is used: “*Generally speaking, do you think that our country’s membership of the EU is a good thing, a bad thing or neither a good thing nor a bad thing?*” To capture the

most strongly felt disapproval of the EU and to make the variable dichotomous, the answer “*A bad thing*” (1) is separated from the other two which are combined to show a positive or neutral position (0). A negative effect is expected for this variable.

Many scholars suggest that parties have a great impact on citizens’ propensity to turn out and vote. The intricacies of party systems are not closely examined here, but a control variable measuring partisanship will be included. If an individual feels closer to or is a member of a certain party, he or she is more likely to develop a voting habit and turn out to support their preferred party in all elections (Schmitt, 2005). In the EES survey respondents are asked “*Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular political party?*”. Everyone who answered that they did were also asked to name the party they preferred, but that is not of interest to this study. All respondents who answered “Yes” are therefore coded into one group (1), and all who answered “No” into another (0), forming a dichotomous variable.

Bartkowska & Tiemann (2015) show that negative perceptions about the economic situation lead to different reactions from politically interested citizens and the politically uninterested, where the former are more likely to make an informed party choice to impact the future economic development and the latter are likely to abstain. Since this study examined the voting behaviour of specifically politically uninterested citizens, economic perceptions are included as a control variable by measuring their thoughts on the future economic development in their country. The survey question is “*What do you think about the economy? Over the next 12 months, how do you think the general economic situation in (country) will be?*” and the answers available are “get a lot better”, “get a little better”, “stay the same”, “get a little worse”, “get a lot worse”. The last two options are coded to mean a negative view (1) and the rest are grouped together to signal a positive or neutral view (0) of the economy. A negative effect is expected.

Age has been proven to have a strong connection to turnout rates, and the recurring pattern is that middle aged voters turn out in greater numbers than younger and older citizens. There is also a generation effect which show that in the generations born before the 60’s a larger share of citizens turn up at the poll than in the younger generations (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012). Therefore it is important to control for age, and the variable used is the simple question “*How old are you?*” Since the answers make up a scale variable it could be used at it is, but to adapt the data to the idea of the active middle aged voter the respondents are grouped into 3 age

cohorts (young, middle aged and old) where the group consisting of 45-64 (middle aged) year olds is used as a reference category.

Highly educated citizens are more likely to vote than others, in both national and European elections, and education should thus be introduced as a control variable. However the design of the only variable available in the EES 2014 data is not optimal for the needs of this study. Instead of asking the respondent how many years of full time education they have completed, the question is “*How old were you when you stopped full-time education?*” The alternative “20+” will be coded as high education (1) and the remaining alternatives combined as low education (0), including the alternative “Still studying”. There is a risk that this is misleading, since some of the respondents who answered “Still studying” might be going through a higher university education that is still not completed, but will still fall into the category low education due to the choice of coding. However, the share of respondents who chose this alternative is quite small so even if some individuals will be coded into the wrong category it will not have too great an impact on the results. There is also a possibility that some who report an old age for quitting full-time education did not actually study at university level, but were rather completing missing grades from secondary school or high school later in life. But this is the only education variable available, so it will have to suffice despite its shortcomings.

According to the withdrawal hypothesis, an individual who is struggling to make ends meet will not prioritise voting over activities that might improve their living standards (Fauvelle-Aymar & Stegmaier, 2008). For example, someone who is unemployed will probably think that their time is better spent looking for work than travelling to a polling station. Therefore, an unemployment variable is included and is measured by the survey question “*What is your current occupation?*”. The respondents who answered “Unemployed” (1) are separated from the rest who are either employed, retired or studying (0). A negative effect is expected from this variable.

## 5. Results

Firstly the independent variables are tested without any control variables in Model 1 and then all the control variables are added in Model 2.

### 5.1 Model 1

As can be seen in Table 5.1, information received through television, newspaper or personal conversations have a significant effect on turnout, supporting hypothesis 1, but the Internet does not. To see how great the effects are it is recommended to look at the odds ratios presented in the table, since the B-coefficients are not as easily interpreted as in an OLS regression. The odds ratio shows the percentual change in the odds (probability) that the phenomenon measured in the dependent variable will occur (in this case voting), when the independent or control variable of interest is increased by one step. An odds ratio of 1 means that the dependent variable is not affected, while a value lower than 1 means the odds are decreased and a value higher than 1 means that the odds are increased (Djurfeldt & Barmark, 2009). For example an odds ratio of 1,304 for newspapers shows that the odds for a person casting a vote in the European Parliament elections is increased by 30,4% if their reported newspaper reading about the elections increases from “Never” to “Sometimes”.

In the western countries, and in the EU over all, conversations seem to be the source of information that is most likely to persuade a politically uninterested person to turn out to vote. This is in line with hypothesis 2. The odds ratio for conversations is just shy of 2 in EU-15 countries which indicates that an advancement of one step on the ordinal scale for conversations almost doubles the odds that an individual casts a vote. It appears that people are more inclined to listen to what a friend or family member says than what someone they don't know personally says on the TV or in the newspaper. Television is the second most effective. But in the post-communist countries television is the strongest predictor, even though conversations are still important. Earlier research from the 2004 election showed that there were more EU news on television in the more recent member states, which might be a reason for the higher importance of television in that region (de Vreese et al, 2006). But later research has not been able to confirm the continuation of this pattern and there is no media study from 2014 available, so that is only speculation. Newspaper is significant, but weaker than both conversations and television in all regions.

Pseudo  $R^2$  Nagelkerkes is 0,21 and 0,23 for the EU-15 and post-communist states respectively. Unlike  $R^2$  in OLS regressions, Nagelkerkes  $R^2$  cannot be said to represent the percentage of explained variance. But it can still be used to compare the strength of different models, so the results suggest that the information aspects have a slightly larger impact in post-communist states than in the western established member states (Djurfeldt & Barmark, 2009).

**Table 5.1. Model 1 - Independent variables**

Model 1	EU-28		EU-15		Post-communist	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
<b>Television</b>	0,459***	1,583	0,494***	1,639	0,690***	1,994
<b>Newspaper</b>	0,265***	1,304	0,108*	1,114	0,139**	1,149
<b>Internet</b>	0,031	1,032	0,108*	1,114	0,036	1,037
<b>Conversation</b>	0,564***	1,757	0,641***	1,898	0,541***	1,717
<b>Intercept</b>	-2,117		-1,488		-2,512	
<b>Nagelkerkes <math>R^2</math></b>	0,152		0,214		0,229	
<b>n</b>	14 830 (missing: 2,8%)		7 505 (missing: 2,2%)		6 793 (missing: 3,6%)	

Significance levels: \* =  $p < 0,05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0,01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0,001$

Source: EES Voter Study 2014, GESIS data archive.

Dependent variable: turnout. Weight: wexpol.

## 5.2 Model 2

Next, the control variables are included to see what effect they have on this explanation. The rates of missing answers goes from around 3% in Table 5.1 to around 30% in Table 5.2, but that is because only the respondents who answered all of the questions used as variables are included. Any that answered “don’t know” or refused to answer any question are removed from the analysis. Nagelkerkes pseudo  $R^2$  is higher in all three regressions, and scores the highest number in the post-communist region with 0,315. Here the gap to the 0,259 for EU-15 is more pronounced than in the previous model, which indicates that this set of variables is more effective in explaining turnout rates in post-communist countries than in the western member states, and that some of the difference can be found in a few of the added control variables. A quick look at Table 5.2 suggest that it is primarily the two variables trust in the

European Parliament and the dummy for older voters that are responsible for the better model fit in the Central and East European states.

Conversation is now the strongest of the independent variables in all regions. The coefficients and odds ratios for personal conversations are surprisingly stable as the control variables are included. Television is still significant at the highest level in all regions, but the effect has decreased somewhat after the inclusion of control variables, most notably in the post-communist countries. Newspapers are no longer significant in the regional regressions, but still are when including all countries. The effect of getting information on the Internet has increased somewhat compared to the first model and is now significant in all regions. But overall, the effects of conversation and television are superior to both newspapers and the Internet.

Moving on to the control variables, it is apparent that political trust in the EU does influence turnout and it is interesting to see that the effect is much larger in the post-communist countries. In that region citizens with high political trust in the EU are twice as likely to vote as those who distrust the European institutions. The effect of political trust in the national parliament is less impressive, but still significant. Euroscepticism has a slight negative effect on turnout. The effect is about the same in both regions, but it is statistically significant at the highest level in EU-15 and only at the lowest in the eastern member states. It is however not statistically significant when analysing all of the member states together. As described earlier, the effect of Euroscepticism is dependent on the party system context (Hernández & Kriesi, 2016). No measure for party system is included in this analysis, which might explain the somewhat irregular pattern here.

Partisanship is the strongest determinant for turnout of all the ones included in this study. Apparently the mobilising effect of feeling close to a party is almost equally important in all of Europe and it doubles the odds for citizens to cast a vote compared to those who do not have a preferred party to support. Regarding negative economic perceptions, they do not seem to have any significant effect, contradicting Bartkowska & Tiemann's (2015) results which indicated that they generate lower turnout among the politically uninterested. When it comes to age it obviously influences turnout, but the generational effects described by Bhatti & Hansen (2012) might be even stronger. Younger citizens are less likely to vote all across Europe, but it seems as though the elderly are even more likely to vote than the middle aged. In EU-15 there seem to be no significant difference at all between the middle aged and the

**Table 5.2. Model 2 – Independent and control variables**

Model 2	EU-28		EU-15		Post-communist	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
<b>Television</b>	0,325***	1,384	0,381***	1,463	0,528***	1,696
<b>Newspaper</b>	0,118**	1,126	0,010	1,011	-0,031	0,969
<b>Internet</b>	0,118**	1,126	0,125*	1,133	0,145*	1,157
<b>Conversation</b>	0,562***	1,754	0,595***	1,814	0,558***	1,747
<b>Political trust in EU</b>	0,417***	1,517	0,413***	1,512	0,801***	2,227
<b>Political trust in NP</b>	0,312***	1,366	-0,108	0,898	0,196*	1,217
<b>Euroscepticism</b>	-0,019	0,982	-0,253***	0,777	-0,243*	0,784
<b>Partisanship</b>	0,790***	2,204	0,863***	2,370	0,861***	2,365
<b>Economic perceptions</b>	0,087	1,091	0,093	1,097	0,055	1,057
<b>Dummy young (18-45)</b>	-0,418***	0,659	-0,469***	0,626	-0,225**	0,798
<b>Dummy old (65+)</b>	0,229***	1,258	-0,075	0,928	0,375***	1,455
<b>Education</b>	0,188***	1,207	0,025	1,025	0,196*	1,217
<b>Unemployment</b>	-0,097	0,908	-0,294**	0,745	0,042	1,043
<b>Intercept</b>	-2,471		-1,421		-3,062	
<b>Nagelkerkes R<sup>2</sup></b>	0,223		0,259		0,315	
<b>n</b>	10 575 (missing: 30,7%)		5 451 (missing: 29%)		4 804 (missing: 31,8%)	

Significance levels: \* =  $p < 0,05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0,01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0,001$

Source: EES Voter Study 2014, GESIS data archive.

Dependent variable: turnout. Weight: wexpol

elderly. This result should however be interpreted with caution, since it might be affected by the choice of coding. The age cohort 45-64 was coded as middle aged, but the results might look differently if another age span was chosen. Education has the expected positive effect in all member states, but it is rather weak and even more so in EU-15 where it is not even significant. Unemployment is only significant in EU-15 and not in the post-communist member states. This is surprising since Fauvelle-Aymar & Stegmaier (2008) found strong

support for the connection between unemployment and turnout in specifically the post-communist countries.

It is not possible to control for country-level variables, such as compulsory voting, in this analysis but for robustness an additional model is presented in the appendix, where the countries that implemented compulsory voting laws at the time of the 2014 European elections are excluded. The results show that when the compulsory voting factor is removed the effect of many other variables increase, indicating that compulsory voting is an important determinant in countries that implement it which suppresses the effect of other factors. But it is not possible to know precisely how big the effect is.

To connect these results to the hypotheses it is now possible to confirm that support is found for both hypothesis 1 and 2. Exposure to more information about the EU and the European elections does increase the propensity to vote in European Parliament elections for citizens with low interest in politics. But this is conditioned by the source of information; while television and personal conversations seem to be able to persuade citizens to participate in elections, the Internet and newspapers are less effective.

## 6. Discussion

This thesis has been able to show that exposure to more information about the EU and the European elections can persuade politically uninterested citizens to go vote. But it has also become apparent that not only the amount of information that reaches citizens is important, but also the source of it. Personal conversation was the most important factor for turnout in this study, and the effect stayed strong even when introducing control variables. This indicates that people are more inclined to listen to a friend or family member than the media; interpersonal communication and social accountability provides greater incentives to vote than information from media outlets. It also gives credibility to Schönbach & Laufs (2002) argument that a conversation is not as easily avoided as skipping certain media content, even when one does not find the subject interesting. This suggests that if the goal is to boost turnout in a European election, electoral campaigns might be more effective if directed towards the politically interested with a message of encouraging their friends to vote.

An interesting finding is the relatively weak effect of the Internet. Political communication is increasingly transferred to the online sphere and parties and other political actors are learning how to use social media to reach voters. The Internet is also where many actors engage in opinion formation and where propaganda is spread, so a greater impact of online information could be expected. But it might be that citizens are sceptical of messages received online, if the awareness of distribution of false information and manipulated photos and videos is increasing. Another reason could be that it is easier to customise your media consumption online and that people who are not interested in politics simply do not visit or follow sites that provide political content. But this is just speculation, and future research could further explore the reasons behind the weak effect shown here.

Another possible subject for future research is to view parties as an information source and of themselves. Even if their message is often conveyed through the media, politicians also hold public meetings and debates, and some electoral campaigns involve approaching potential voters in the street or over the phone. The magnitude of these activities is likely weaker during European than national elections (except if they are held shortly after each other), but it could still be included as an additional information source in future studies.

The results show regional differences in some variables, but most are relatively small. The control variable that stands out is political trust in the EU, which is more important for turnout

in the post-communist member states. But this is not a new finding, it only confirms indications from previous research. The contribution here is the results on information sources, where it is clear that television has a greater impact on turnout in the east than in the west. To get a better understanding of why this is the case, a media study for the 2014 election should be made since data on media content, EU visibility in different media outlets and tone of the coverage is not available at the time of writing. It might be that contextual factors like media environment or party systems can explain some of this difference. Since many of the control variables in this study seem to have similar effects in both EU-15 and post-communist states it could also be that contextual factors would be better in explaining the lower turnout rates in the second region, than the individual factors studied here.

Contextual factors are obviously important for turnout, but in this individual-centered study it is hard to properly control for that dimension. Attempts were made to check the robustness of the findings by excluding or comparing certain countries that are known to be affected by contextual variation according to previous research, but it is not possible to precisely measure these effects here. Future researchers would gain from using a multi-level approach and connect the individual-level determinants explored here with the country-level variables identified by previous research. This would help to get an overview of all the known turnout determinants and how they are interrelated.

In conclusion, this thesis has contributed to the existing literature by studying the effects of information exposure in the post-communist states where it was not previously explored, and updating the information research on the EU-15 member states. The importance of studying politically uninterested citizens has also been highlighted, and this can hopefully be developed further in future work. Personal conversations have proven to be the most effective information source for turnout of the four studied here, which confirms the importance to include it alongside media information. But this field of research will hopefully expand to explore the mechanisms behind these results more closely, bringing in for example interpersonal trust and the role of parties in media.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1. Turnout European Parliament Elections 2014*

The turnout rates for the 2014 European Parliament elections by country. Presented in order of accession.

<b>Country</b>	<b>Turnout</b>
Belgium	89,64%
Luxembourg	85,55%
Netherlands	37,32%
Germany	48,10%
France	42,43%
Italy	57,22%
Denmark	56,32%
United Kingdom	35,60%
Ireland	52,44%
Greece	59,97%
Spain	43,81%
Portugal	33,67%
Sweden	51,07%
Finland	39,10%
Austria	45,39%
Estonia	36,52%
Latvia	30,24%
Lithuania	47,35%
Czech Republic	18,20%
Poland	23,83%
Hungary	28,97%
Slovenia	24,55%
Slovakia	13,05%
Malta	74,80%
Cyprus	43,97%
Romania	32,44%
Bulgaria	35,84%
Croatia	25,24%

Source: European Parliament

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html>.

### *Appendix 2. Variables from EES 2014 used in the thesis*

<b>Variables in thesis</b>	<b>Variable from EES 2014</b>	<b>Question wording</b>
Political interest Yes=1 No=0	QP6_9	You are very interested in politics /QP6- For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion.

Turnout Yes=1 No=0	QP1	European Parliament elections were held on the (insert correct date according to country). For one reason or another, some people in (our country) did not vote in these elections. Did you yourself vote in the recent European Parliament elections?
Television information Never=1 Sometimes=2 Often=3	QP11_1	Watch a programme about the European elections on television. /QP11- How often did you do any of the following during the four weeks before the recent European elections? How often did you...?
Newspaper information	QP11_2	Read about the European elections in a newspaper. /QP11
Internet information	QP11_5	Read about the European elections on the Internet (websites, social media, etc.) /QP11
Conversation information	QP11_3	Talk to friends or family about the European elections. /QP11
Political trust in EU Yes=1 No=0	QP6_2	You trust the institutions of the EU /QP6
Political trust in NP Yes=1 No=0	QPP9_1	You trust the (Nationality parliament) /QPP9-For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion.
Euroscpticism Bad=1 Good or neutral=0	QP7	Generallt speaking, do you think that (our country)'s membership of the EU is...?
Partisanship Feeling close to a party=1 Not close=0	QPP21	Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular political party?
Economic perceptions Worse=1 Better=0	QPP16	What do you think about the economy? Over the next 12 months, how do you think the general economic situation in (our country) will be?
Age 18-44=Young 45-64=Middle aged 65+=Old	D11 (d11r2)	How old are you?
Education High education=1 Low education=0	D8	How old were you when you stopped full-time education?
Unemployment Unemployed=1 Occupation=0	C14	What is your current occupation?

Source: EES 2014 Voter Study, Master Questionnaire.

**Appendix 3. Alternative coding for the independent variables.**

The independent variables are here dummy coded and the answer “Never” is used as reference category. Only results for EU-28 are shown here, since the point is simply to show that the results are very similar when using this coding option instead of the one used in the study. Compare this table to the first column of Table 5.2 above.

Model 2 Alternative coding	EU-28	
	B	Exp(B)
Television sometimes	0,424***	1,529
Television often	0,509***	1,663
Newspaper sometimes	0,039	1,040
Newspaper often	0,410***	1,506
Internet sometimes	0,076	1,078
Internet often	0,345***	1,412
Conversation sometimes	0,636***	1,889
Conversation often	0,952***	2,591
Political trust in EU	0,413***	1,511
Political trust in NP	0,313***	1,368
Euroscepticism	-0,010	0,990
Partisanship	0,798***	2,221
Economic perceptions	0,088	1,092
Dummy young (18-45)	-0,411***	0,663
Dummy old (65+)	0,229***	1,257
Education	0,190***	1,209
Unemployment	-0,092	0,912
Intercept	-1,393	
Nagelkerkes R <sup>2</sup>	0,225	
n	10 575 (missing: 30,7%)	

Significance levels: \* =  $p < 0,05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0,01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0,001$

Source: EES Voter Study 2014, GESIS data archive. Weight: wexpol.

#### Appendix 4. Compulsory voting

Since the study is made with individual-level data it is not possible to control for the effect of compulsory voting in the regression. But several authors have found such electoral laws to have a great impact on turnout. Therefore, a regression is presented here where the four EU member states having compulsory voting laws in place at the time of the 2014 European election (Belgium, Luxembourg, Greece and Cyprus) are excluded from the analysis to see if it changes the results in any significant way.

Model 2	EU-28		Excluding compulsory voting countries	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Television	0,325***	1,384	0,355***	1,427
Newspaper	0,118**	1,126	0,157***	1,170
Internet	0,118**	1,126	0,136**	1,146
Conversation	0,562***	1,754	0,591***	1,806
Political trust in EU	0,417***	1,517	0,504***	1,655
Political trust in NP	0,312***	1,366	0,257***	1,292
Euroscepticism	-0,019	0,982	-0,026	0,974
Partisanship	0,790***	2,204	0,765***	2,148
Economic perceptions	0,087	1,091	-0,021	0,979
Dummy young (18-45)	-0,418***	0,659	-0,476***	0,621
Dummy old (65+)	0,229***	1,258	0,287***	1,333
Education	0,188***	1,207	0,126**	1,134
Unemployment	-0,097	0,908	-0,031	0,969
Intercept	-2,471		-2,811	
Nagelkerkes R <sup>2</sup>	0,223		0,232	
n	10 575 (missing: 30,7%)		9 334 (missing: 31,2%)	

Significance levels: \* =  $p < 0,05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0,01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0,001$

Source: EES Voter Study 2014, GESIS data archive. Weight: wexpol.

As can be seen above some slight differences are visible. The significance of the variables does not change but the effect increases for several of them. This indicates that compulsory voting laws is an important explanatory factor for turnout in the countries that implement

them. Trust in national parliaments is one of few variables that decrease when excluding compulsory voting, which might suggest that compulsory voting is one of the factors that connect trust in parliament to turnout. But in this individual-level study it is not possible to know precisely how big the effect is.

### *Appendix 5. Malta & Cyprus*

To see what effect the choice to exclude Malta and Cyprus from the group of new member states had on the results, a table is presented here comparing the results with and without the two countries. As can be seen below the results are quite similar. The samples from both Malta and Cyprus are small, so even if some mechanisms are different in those countries, a great impact on the results is not expected.

Model 2	All 10 new member states		Only post-communist	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
<b>Television</b>	0,496***	1,643	0,528***	1,696
<b>Newspaper</b>	-0,042	0,959	-0,031	0,969
<b>Internet</b>	0,138*	1,148	0,145*	1,157
<b>Conversation</b>	0,565***	1,760	0,558***	1,747
<b>Political trust in EU</b>	0,776***	2,173	0,801***	2,227
<b>Political trust in NP</b>	0,278***	1,320	0,196*	1,217
<b>Euroscepticism</b>	-0,152	0,859	-0,243*	0,784
<b>Partisanship</b>	0,812***	2,253	0,861***	2,365
<b>Economic perceptions</b>	0,013	1,013	0,055	1,057
<b>Dummy young (18-45)</b>	-0,251**	0,778	-0,225**	0,798
<b>Dummy old (65+)</b>	0,356***	1,427	0,375***	1,455
<b>Education</b>	0,214**	1,239	0,196*	1,217
<b>Unemployment</b>	-0,046	0,955	0,042	1,043
<b>Intercept</b>	-2,900		-3,062	
<b>Nagelkerkes R<sup>2</sup></b>	0,319		0,315	
<b>n</b>	5 124 (missing: 32,5%)		4 804 (missing: 31,8%)	

Significance levels: \* =  $p < 0,05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0,01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < 0,001$

Source: EES Voter Study 2014, GESIS data archive. Weight: wexpol.