

# *How to make European elections more visible, accessible and representative to citizens?*



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# BACKGROUND AND KEY ASPECTS

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) led to the reallocation of its 73 seats in the European Parliament. In June 2018, the European Council decided ([Decision \(EU\) 2018/937](#)) to redistribute 27 of these seats among 14 member states, reducing the total number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from 751 to 705. The remaining 46 seats were reserved for potential future EU enlargement and/or the possible future creation of a transnational constituency.

This event reinvigorated discussions on introducing transnational electoral lists to enhance the EU's democratic legitimacy. These lists would allow EU citizens to vote not only for national parties, but also for pan-European candidates. It would promote the emergence of a genuine European political space.

Indeed, European Parliament elections are frequently perceived as second-order elections, often dominated by domestic political issues and characterized by lower voter turnout compared to national elections. Many citizens feel disconnected from the European decision-making process, and campaigns tend to lack visibility at the EU level. This perception undermines the representative function of the Parliament and contributes to a broader sense of democratic deficit within the Union.

In May 2022, the European Parliament adopted a proposal to reform the European Electoral Act, aiming to establish an EU-wide constituency for electing additional MEPs through transnational lists. Citizens would have two votes: one for national candidates and another for a pan-European list presented by European political parties. These lists would be the same across all member states, and seats would be allocated proportionally. The objective was to make elections more visible, inclusive, and representative of European political dynamics.

However, this proposal requires unanimous approval from the Council of the European Union to be implemented. As of 2025, the Council has not reached a consensus, with several member states expressing concerns over national sovereignty and the complexity of implementing such a system. Consequently, the 2024 European Parliament elections proceeded without transnational lists. Based on the 2022 proposal of the European Parliament to reform the European Electoral Act.

This policy brief aims to propose recommendations to improve the visibility, accessibility and representativeness of the European elections.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. REPRESENTATIVENESS

The European Parliament's 2022 proposal for electoral reform marked an important step toward enhancing representativeness in EU elections. Yet, despite gaining a majority in Parliament, the proposal has been met with persistent resistance from Member States. Against this backdrop, we argue that further-reaching proposals are still urgently necessary to revitalize the democratic legitimacy of the European Union and to adapt its institutional design to the needs of a transnational polity.

A structural reform concerns the composition of the European Parliament itself. We endorse the multi-tier electoral model with proportional compensation proposed by Müller (2021). This system introduces two votes: one for national party lists, determining national contingents, and another for EU-wide lists, which would not only allocate a transnational seat contingent but also adjust the overall seat distribution in the European Parliament according to the EU-wide vote share of European political families. This corrects the shortcomings of the 2022 parallel system, where national and transnational results remained disconnected and representation was skewed.

To function effectively, this system requires safeguards. A sufficiently large EU-wide seat contingent - around 76 seats (10% of the EP's total size) - is necessary to avoid overrepresentation through "overhanging seats." Moreover, all national parties should be affiliated with European party families to prevent strategic manipulation, and a transnational electoral threshold is recommended to avoid pseudo-lists aimed solely at exploiting national seats. Though expert consultations have raised concerns about the impact on small parties, studies indicate such a threshold is essential to ensure proportionality (Müller, 2021). Its exact level could thus be subject to further deliberation. Additionally, to address youth representation, we propose considering a flexible quota requiring that the share of MEPs under 35 reflects their proportion in the EU population, with enforceable safeguards to ensure its application (e.g., restrictions on public funding or rejection of non-compliant lists).

Finally, while the *Spitzenkandidat* process remains contentious, its democratic potential should not be abandoned. Even without a formal link to the Commission presidency, leading candidates should continue to act as public faces and parliamentary leaders of European parties, strengthening the connection between voters and EU-level politics.

Despite institutional resistance, the European Parliament has demonstrated that a broad majority for reform is possible. It is now time to build on that momentum with coherent, forward-looking proposals that bring European democracy closer to its citizens.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 2. ACCESSIBILITY

In May 2022, the European Parliament proposed a legislative act to harmonize the electoral system and procedures for the European elections. Regarding the organization of the elections, several key points of this proposal can be addressed.

To start with the election date, May 9 has been proposed as a common voting day across the EU, as it marks the anniversary of the Schuman Declaration (Diaz Crego, 2022). This idea could be taken further by introducing a public holiday to facilitate the elections. Such a measure would ensure that all EU citizens are available to vote while also increasing the visibility of the European elections and fostering a stronger EU identity. As a result, voter turnout would likely increase, and the day would become a symbolic occasion dedicated to the EU. However, some Member States may be reluctant to introduce an additional public holiday. Another of our proposals suggests holding EU elections on the first weekend of May, from Thursday to Sunday, every five years. The main objective behind establishing a fixed election date is to allow citizens to plan ahead and stay informed. This would also help institutionalize the EU elections and emphasize their significance. Given that the population of all 27 Member States is expected to vote, having a recurring election date in the calendar would make the process more predictable and accessible for all citizens.

Then, the European Parliament's 2022 proposal sets a minimum common age of 18 years to stand as a candidate in European elections and a minimum common voting age of 16, except in Member States where the constitutional order establishes a minimum voting age of 17 or 18 (Diaz Crego, 2022). We propose harmonizing the voting age at 16 and 18 for standing as a candidate for all member states, with the aim to empower young people to participate in the democratic process. It would bring new perspectives and diversity into the political debate and introduce innovative solutions.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

### 3. VISIBILITY

The harmonization of election campaigns is another key issue. For now, all the national political parties cannot benefit from the resources and materials of their Europarty. In some Member States, this is even prohibited (Anglmayer, 2021). We suggest making European election campaigns more “European” based on the 2022 proposal of the European Parliament. National political parties should include the logo of their Europarty on their campaign materials, not only on the ballot. During the campaigns they should use a common slogan in the European political parties, enhance pan-European events and create a common digital image on social media. This would make Europarties more relevant to citizens, as they play a crucial role in linking them with the EU. It would help reduce the fact that European election campaigns are mostly focused on national issues. Then conferences, events and public consultation with MEPs from different nationalities could be held in smaller cities. The goal would be to create a link with the population that is not interested in the EU elections. What could also strengthen interest in the EU would be to provide training in schools to explain how the EU works and the importance of the elections. Flyers, short videos or group discussions can contribute to the creation of a European identity.

While maintaining a strict legal framework, it could be interesting to encourage European political parties to raise part of their fundings from the private sector, with the aim of increasing their visibility in civil society.

Then, elections create a deliberative public space where citizens actively participate in democratic life. Nevertheless, EU elections are perceived as “second-order” elections by citizens. They are more interested in national elections and participate less. Hence, it is crucial to make EU elections more relevant to ensure representativeness through a European political space. To help citizens in their voting decisions, Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) were created. At the European level, the EU&I and ADENO apps provide a series of questions to the user, and based on their answers, they affiliate the citizen with a European and national party. While EU&I is not available as a smartphone app and is only an online tool, ADENO offers more information about the institutions and the functioning of the EU (IE University, n.d.). However, these tools are not well known. Indeed, the EU&I app reached only 1.28 million users during the 2019 EP elections (European University Institute, n.d.). VAAs should go beyond merely matching citizens with political parties. These applications should also provide practical information, such as voting procedures, polling station locations, and election dates, making the voting process simpler and more accessible. Additionally, integrating a real-time news section would centralize updates on campaigns and election-related changes, reducing the often bureaucratic nature of the process. As social media has become essential for reaching citizens, these platforms should be leveraged to share engaging content and interactive features, particularly targeting younger voters. Therefore, Member States should focus on promoting them more effectively, ensuring that these tools are visible.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, we propose to enforce a broadcasting time for European political parties, in order to give them more visibility and opportunities to defend their ideas. Starting from this idea, our proposal would be to push the principle even further and connect it to political debates. European-level size debates have been organized in the last years between the leading candidates (Spitzenkandidaten) of each political group or movement. We propose to strengthen those debates by broadcasting them on public national channels of each Member State. That way, European political debates would become an event in each country. It would be the opportunity to emphasize the European dimension of those elections, instead of the national dimension that prevails in national scale debates. Additionally to the leading candidate, several representatives could also become the faces of their political group. The debates could be spread over a week, through sessions on different themes and challenges that the Union must face. This week of debates could be held at the mid/end of April, soon before the election day.



## CONCLUSION - KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Representativeness

> **Improving transnational lists:** To better align the European Parliament's composition with the EU-wide vote share of European political parties, we propose a multi-tier electoral system with proportional compensation (Müller, 2021).

- Dual voting system consisting of a first vote, which determines national contingents' allocation, and a second vote, which allocates EU-wide seats and adjusts the overall representation in the European Parliament to reflect the EU-wide vote share.
- Safeguards against overrepresentation ("*overhanging seats*") should include a sufficiently large EU-wide contingent (e.g., 76 seats) and mandatory affiliation of national parties with European parties and a transnational electoral threshold.
- Youth requirement: a flexible percentage of MEPs under the age of 35 which reflects the share of under-35s in the EU population.

> While linking the **Spitzenkandidat mechanism** to the Commission presidency remains controversial, it could be retained by having leading candidates serve as public faces and parliamentary leaders for European parties.

### Visibility

> **Campaign materials:** National parties should display their Europarty's logo on all campaign materials, not only on the ballot.

> During the **campaigns**: use of a common slogan in the European political parties, enhance pan-European events, creation of a common digital image on social media.

> **Funding:** While maintaining a strict legal framework, it could be interesting to encourage European political parties to raise part of their fundings from the private sector, with the aim of increasing their visibility in civil society.

> Expanding transnational **Voting Advice Applications** (VAAs) with practical voting information, real-time news, and social media engagement. It could simplify the voting process and increase participation, especially among younger voters.

> **Broadcasting debates** : We propose to strengthen European-level size debates by broadcasting them on public national channels of each Member State. That way, European political debates would become an event in each country.

### Accessibility

> **Dates of the elections:** . We suggest making the 9th of May a compulsory public holiday to boost turnout and EU identity, though some Member States may resist. Alternatively, elections could be held on the first weekend of May every five years to provide predictability and enhance voter engagement across the EU.

> **Voting age:** Harmonizing the voting age at 16 and 18 for standing as a candidate for all Member States, with the aim to empower young people to participate in the democratic process.

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