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VOTER TURNOUT IN THE 2014 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN POLAND

Abstract:

European Parliamentary election 2014 were the third elections for countries that joined European Union in 2004, including Poland. As we may observe from the very beginning of the EP's history, elections suffer constant drop in voter turnout, and since 1999 the turnout total for less than 50%. There are many theories explaining this state of affairs, with most notable “second-order elections” and democracy deficit theories. Polish profile of voter turnout in EP elections seems to fit into frameworks of these theories, and is positioned among EU's members with the lowest turnout. What is specific for electoral behaviour in Poland is stability: the turnout and support for political parties seems to stable and even petrified. This assessment seems to be supported by the results of election within past four years, both on aggregate and individual levels of data.

Keywords:

EP elections, voter turnout, electoral behaviour in Poland, petrification of political scene.

Introduction

European Parliamentary (EP) election, held on 25th May 2014, were third European elections since Poland joined European Union. Poland participated in EP elections for the first time in 2004, just after joining European Union, second EP elections took place in 2009. The main feature of these elections was exceptionally low voter turnout. In the 2004 EP elections voter turnout in Poland equalled only 21% and it was the second lowest rate among the EU countries in the 2004 EP elections (the only country with lower voter turnout was Slovakia, with 17%). In the 2009 EP elections voter turnout was also relatively low (25%), and it was again one of the lowest turnouts in Europe.

Voter turnout in Polish EP elections is also substantially lower than participation in other types of elections held in Poland. On the whole, Polish elections are characterised by rather low voter turnout rates, especially taking into account European standards [Cf.: Markowski 2006; Cześnik, Zerkowska-Balas, Kotnarowski 2013]. Average voter turnout in national (parliamentary and presidential) elections vary between 40 and 50%, therefore voter turnout in the EP elections is substantially lower.

The 2014 EP elections were held in a specific political context. They were the first elections in Poland after three-year period without any elections (with exception of early local elections or local referenda held in a couple of districts). The last nation-wide elections (held before the 2014 EP elections) were the parliamentary elections in autumn of 2011. Moreover, the 2014 EP elections were the first in the “four-election marathon”, which will last from spring 2014 to autumn 2015. Next are the local elections, scheduled for 16th November 2014, presidential election in the late spring 2015 and the parliamentary elections in autumn 2015. This timing must have had an impact on the 2014 EP elections campaign, on political parties’ strategies and voters’ preferences and behaviours (both parties and voters define this election as a “rehearsal” or “warm-up” before the most important elections, i.e. presidential and parliamentary ones).

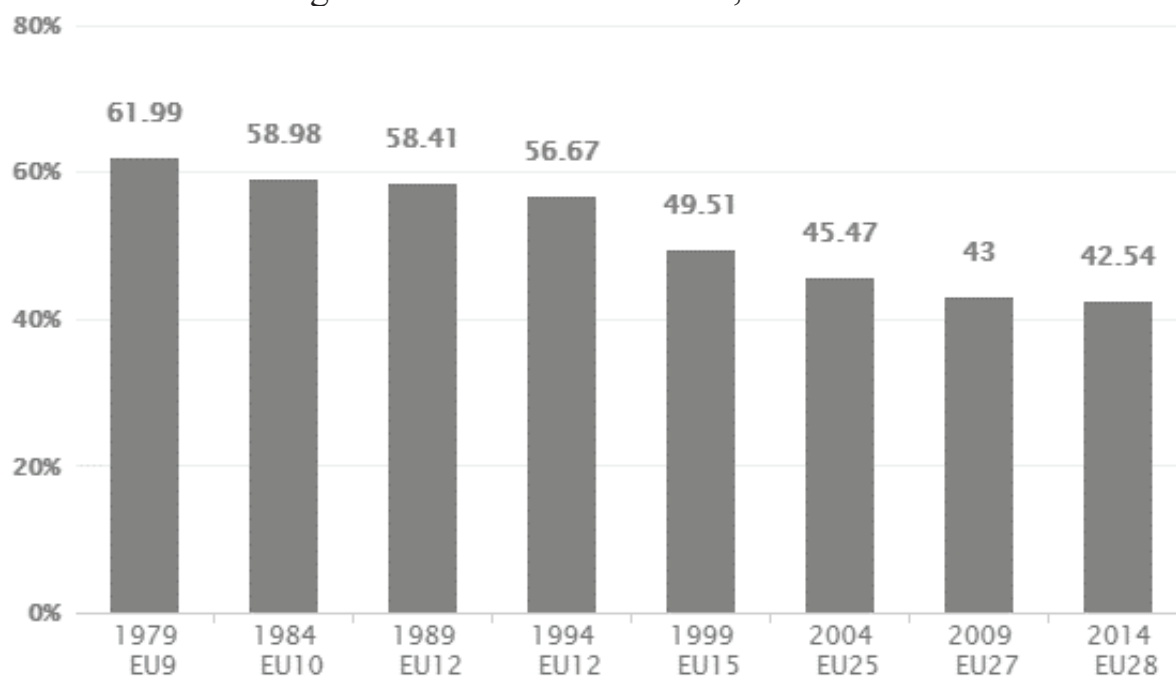
This article aims to address the issue of voter turnout in the 2014 EP elections in Poland. In the first section we briefly discuss theoretical background of our analysis and provide rudimentary facts and data. This section summarises also previous studies on voter turnout in EP elections, providing main explanations of observed trends. The second section investigates spatial dispersion of voter turnout in Poland, in case of EP and other elections. We analyse similarities/dissimilarities in voter turnout rates existing between geographically defined entities (constituencies). In the third part we investigate, using micro-level data, determinants and correlates of voter turnout. Discussion of the findings and conclusions end this paper.

Tendencies in European Parliamentary elections

The European Parliament was created in 1958, but the first elections to the EP took place in 1979, and since then it is the only European institution elected directly by the citizens of European Union. Together with The Council of European Union and European Commission, EP holds legislative power. It consists of 751 members (MEPs) and represents the second largest democratic electorate in the world (after India) and the largest international electorate in the world – 375 million voters [The EU and the World. Facts and Figures 2012].

In spite of growing importance in the law-making in the EU, both on trans-national and national level¹, EP elections suffer constant fall of voter turnout since the first elections in 1979. Since 1999 the turnout fell below 50% and reached the level 42,54% in the last, 2014 elections.

Figure 1. EP elections turnout, 1979-2014



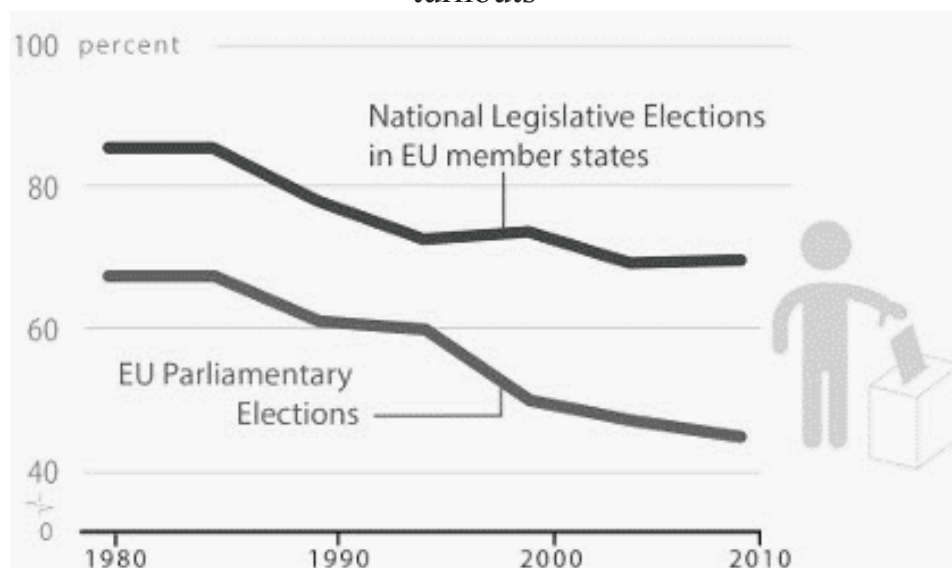
Source: TNS/Scytl in cooperation with the European Parliament.

There are different theories and hypotheses explaining the reasons of this trend. Probably the most notable explanation is the second-order elections theory [V.: Reif, Schmitt 1980]. The voters seem to be much less interested in the EP elections, because they perceive that there is less at stake, in comparison to national elections. They do not perceive the imminent effects of EP elections on their lives, as it can be easily noticed in case of national elections, resulting in formation of a national government. It is also argued that the lower turnout caused by lesser interest in European affairs, gives an overrepresentation to small protest-parties [European Parliament elections and EU governance]. It happens because EP electoral campaigns focus mainly on national issues and voters of protest parties use EP elections as an opportunity to express dissatisfaction with national governments and their policies². Following graph (figure 2) shows the earlier mentioned discrepancy in turnout between national and EP elections in time.

¹ Different estimates shows that the quantity of laws introduced in states originating from Brussels varies between 15% and 50%. V.: [How much legislation comes from Europe?].

² This thesis can serve as a partial explanation of relative success of Eurosceptic parties in 2014 elections.

Figure 2. Comparison between EP elections and national legislative elections turnouts



Source: www.idea.int/uid

Another explanation of declining turnout is connected with the process of demographic change. Previously observed higher turnout in EP elections was identified with the generation of baby-boomers and its commitment to European affairs [Bhatti, Hansen 2014]. The aging of this generation and its dropping activity (previously supporting high turnout) effects today in lower political involvement and turnout. Following generations seems to be more individualistic, and less interested in the public affairs in general, especially in European affairs that tend to be seen as vague [V.: Harris 2003].

Next major, structural theory trying to explain falling turnout is the democracy deficit theory [Moravcsik 2008]. Democratic deficit manifests itself in lack of politicians' accountability and European institutions, as they are rather appointed than elected. Structural changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty gave more powers to the directly elected EP, but still the structure of power's delegation within the hierarchy of EU's institutions seems to be very complicated for voters – it makes those institutions less accountable for them. The complexity of the structure alienates voters further, as they do not understand the links between these institutions and their everyday lives. In spite of ongoing process of empowering democratic accountability of the EU's institutions, the issue remains problematic. The main question behind democratic deficit seems to be the transfer of legislative and even executive power to trans-national bodies of the Union [Follesdal, Hix 2006]. It gives the voters an impression that the center, where the most important decisions are made, is taken further away from them (from the national government).

More current explanations of low turnout focus on the economic situation, which have deteriorated significantly due to the world economic crisis.

Some scholars connect turnout with trust in public institutions [Grönlund, Setälä 2007] – the higher the trust in the institutions, the higher the voter turnout. The theory adapted and modified for European circumstances, focuses on the public trust in the economic institutions, like European Central Bank. In this case EBC is perceived by European voters as the main responsible actor for the economic policy, *ergo* responsible for fighting against the economic crisis [McDougall, Mody 2014]. As the economic situation deteriorates, the trust in EBC falls, resulting in lower turnout in EP elections.

Empirical analysis: aggregate-level data

The aim of macro-level analysis is to determine similarities and differences between different types of elections. More specifically, we investigate spatial dispersion of voter turnout on commune (*gmina*) level. We use official electoral data, delivered by the State Election Commission (*Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza*, PKW). The dataset used in the article contains the official results of the EP elections in 2009 and 2014, the parliamentary elections of 2011 and the presidential elections of 2010. The data is operationalised on the commune level. We omit these communes that underwent changes impeding comparisons in analysed period, i.e. administrative changes involving shifting boundaries of communes, creation of new commune etc.

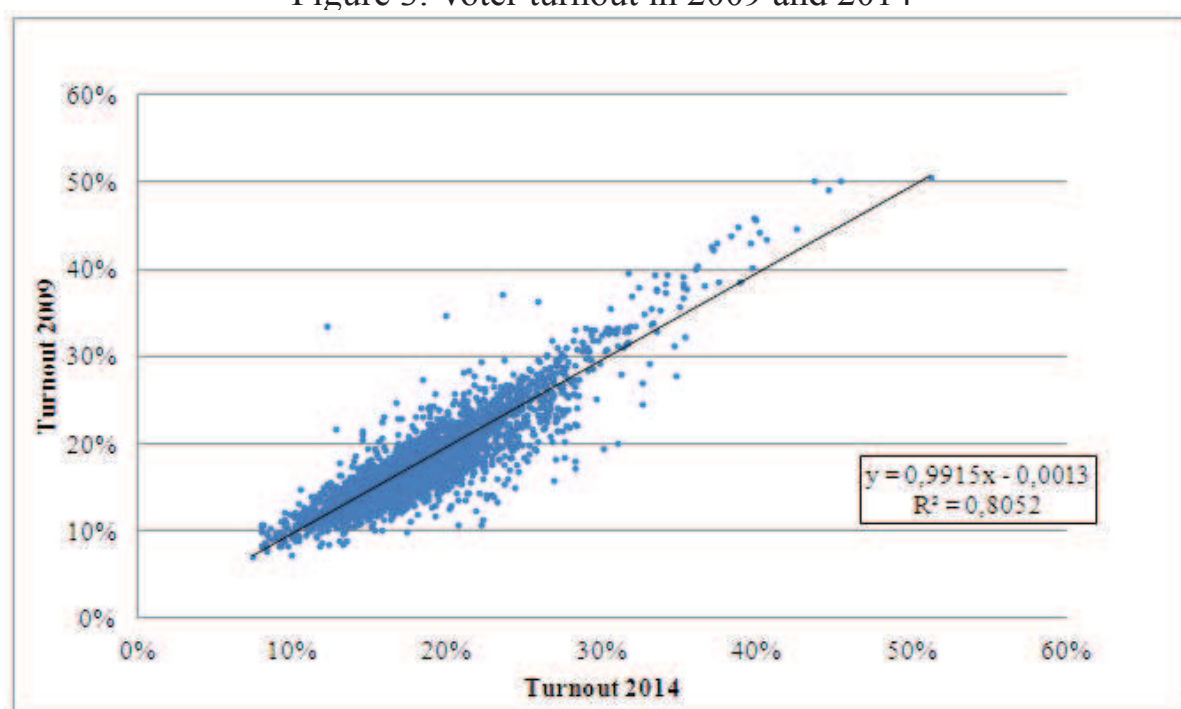
Table 1. EP 2004/2009/2014 in constituencies

	Voivodeship	Turnout		
		EP2004	EP2009	EP2014
Constituency no 1	Pomeranian	24,04%	28,05%	26,70%
Constituency no 2	Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship	18,70%	23,36%	22,59%
Constituency no 3	Podlaskie and Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship	17,62%	20,20%	19,34%
Constituency no 4	Warsaw	31,53%	38,92%	35,33%
Constituency no 5	Masovian (without Warsaw)	18,00%	19,74%	20,08%
Constituency no 6	Łódź	19,50%	23,55%	23,72%
Constituency no 7	Greater Poland	21,20%	24,13%	22,42%
Constituency no 8	Lublin	20,67%	22,04%	23,49%
Constituency no 9	Podkarpacie	21,60%	22,28%	23,99%
Constituency no 10	Lesser Poland and Świętokrzyskie	21,14%	26,11%	25,74%
Constituency no 11	Silesian	20,84%	25,26%	23,75%
Constituency no 12	Lowersilesian and Opole	19,30%	22,77%	21,73%
Constituency no 13	Lubusz and West Pomeranian	18,07%	20,84%	20,42%
TOTAL		20,87%	24,53%	23,83%

Source: own calculations based on PKW (State Election Commission) data.

We start our analyses with an overview of voter turnout in EP elections in Poland. Table 1 shows relevant information, i.e. general turnout in all EP elections in Poland. As one can see the constituencies with highest and lowest turnout are relatively stable, with Warsaw (the city) as the ‘top student’ in this field. Warsaw is the biggest, richest and most developed city in Poland, attracting especially young urban professionals, who tend to present more pro-active (than the rest of the citizenry) stance in public sphere. At the other end, with the lowest turnout one finds constituencies consisting of most rural voivodeships with lower GDP per capita, aging population and less educated population. The example of the Masovian Voivodeship (constituency number 5) is interesting, as its capital is Warsaw, but the capital forms separate constituency. Without the capital city, the whole province resembles the least developed voivodeships in Poland.

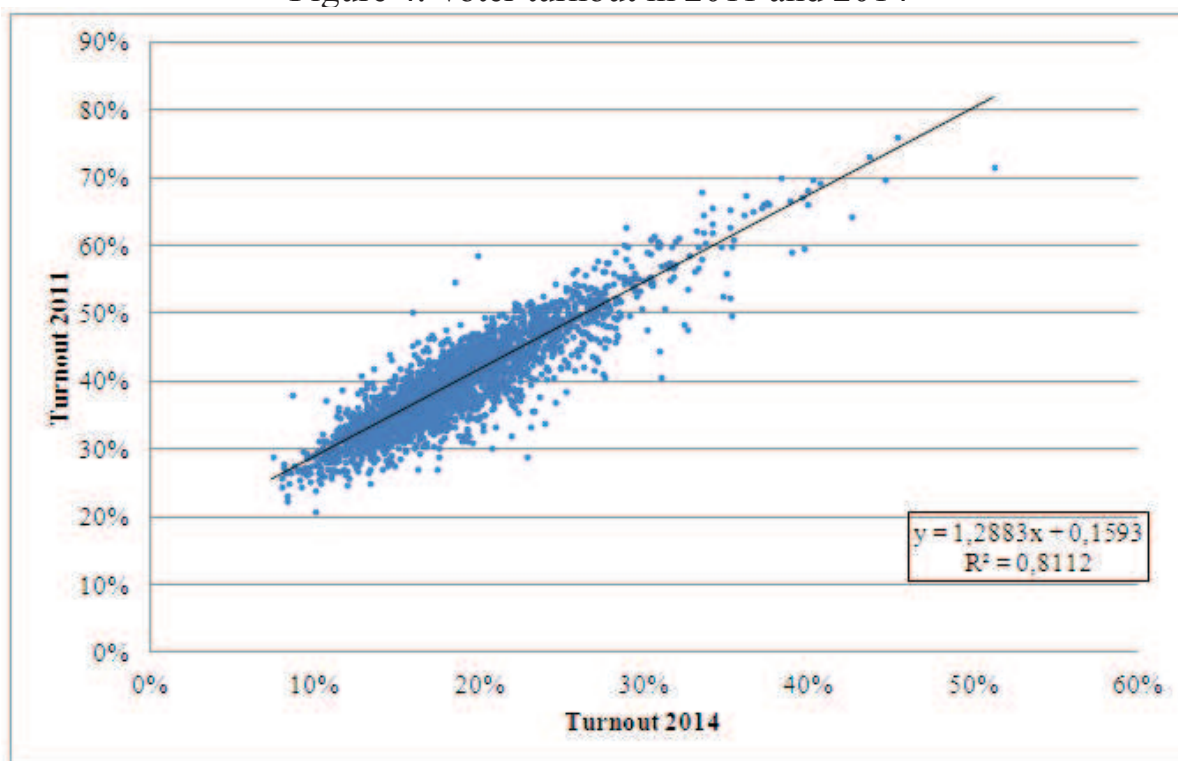
Figure 3. Voter turnout in 2009 and 2014



Source: own calculations based on PKW data.

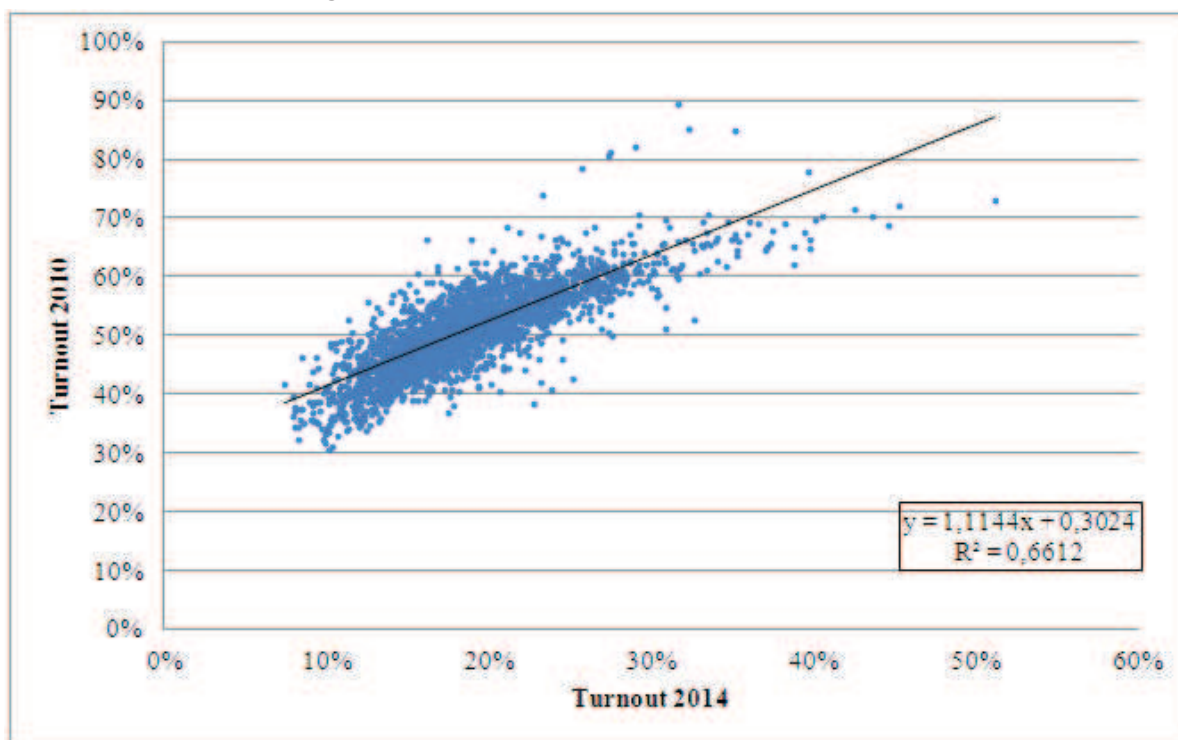
Then we proceed to analysis of voter turnout stability (on macro-level). Figure 3 shows a simple comparison of voter turnout in the EP elections of the 2009 and 2014. Given the instability of voting behaviour in Poland, often addressed in the literature [Cf.: Markowski 2006; 2008; Cześnik 2006], the stability of voter turnout observed at the local level is striking: Pearson’s correlation coefficient R between voter turnout in the 2009 and 2014 EP elections equals 0,89. In other words, the level of turnout in the 2009 EP election explains *circa* 80% of voter turnout variance in the 2014 EP election.

Figure 4. Voter turnout in 2011 and 2014



Source: own calculations based on PKW data.

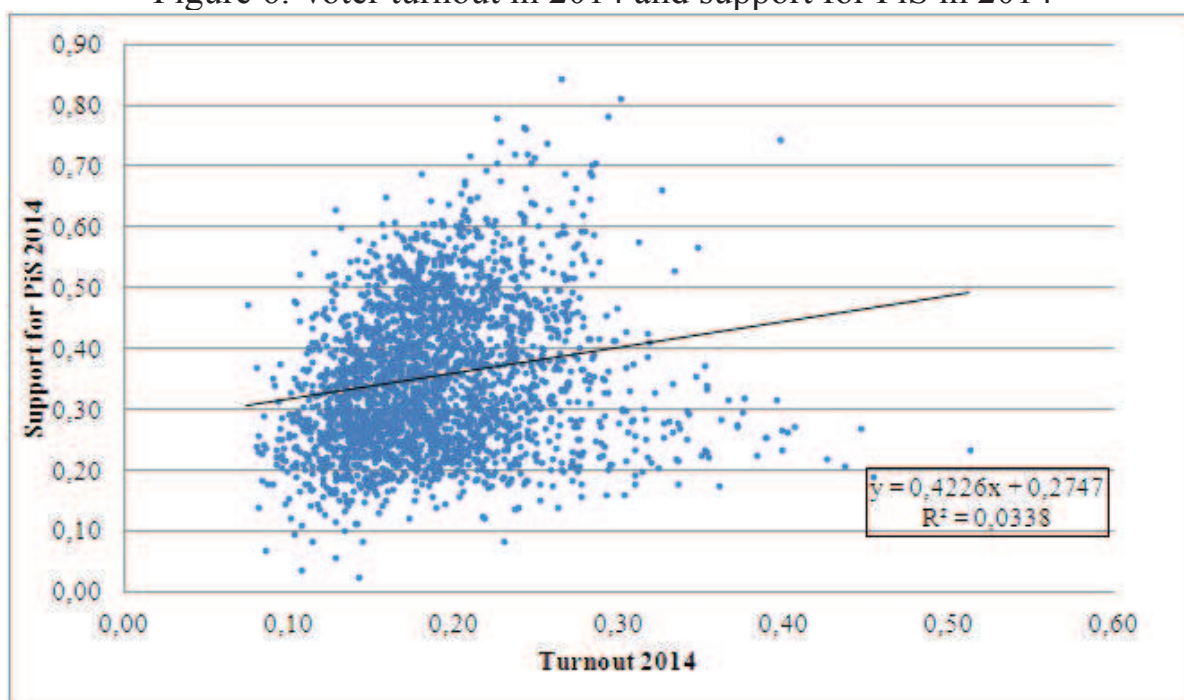
Figure 5. Voter turnout in 2010 and 2014



Source: own calculations based on PKW data.

Figures 4 and 5 show the relationship between voter turnout in the 2014 EP elections and voter turnout in the last parliamentary (2011) and presidential elections (second round, 2010). The comparison includes the level of voter turnout in 2014 and 2011 (Figure 4), and the level of voter turnout in 2014 and 2010 (Figure 5). Again, in both cases strong positive relationship (the Pearson's correlation coefficients R equal 0.90 and 0.81) can be identified.

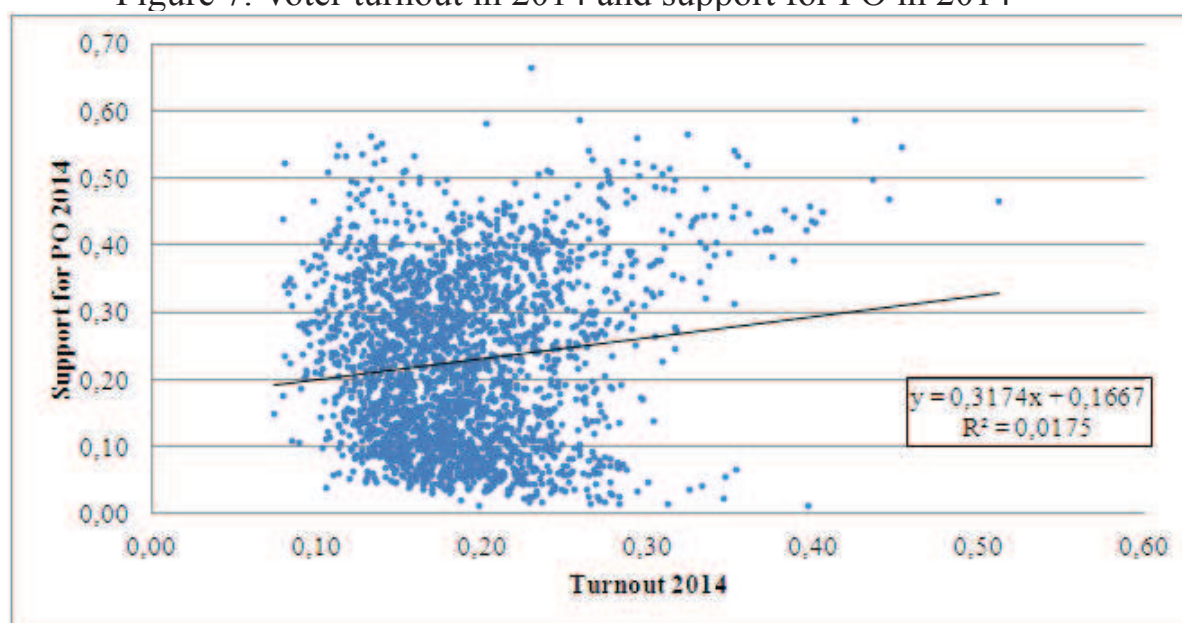
Figure 6. Voter turnout in 2014 and support for PiS in 2014



Source: own calculations based on PKW data.

Figures 6 and 7 report the relationship (at the commune level) between support for the dominant Polish political parties in 2014 (Civic Platform [*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO] and Law and Justice [*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS]) and voter turnout. These relationships are much weaker, in fact they suggest that electoral participation is rather weakly associated with support for these political parties and does not have a strong impact on their electoral performance. In both cases, higher voter turnout is associated with a higher support for parties (and this relationship is statistically significant, though quite small): in the case of PiS, the Pearson's correlation coefficient R between the two variables equals 0.184, and in the case of PO it equals 0.132.

Figure 7. Voter turnout in 2014 and support for PO in 2014



Source: own calculations based on PKW data.

The results presented above contradict previous findings about the stability of electoral behaviour in Poland [Czeński 2007]. Earlier studies of this phenomenon showed very high, one of the highest in the world in fact, instability of voter turnout in Poland [Czeński 2008]. Similarly, analyses of electoral volatility of Poles [V.: Markowski, Czeński 2002; Markowski 2008; Jasiewicz 2008; Millard 2009] pointed to the exceptional ‘shakiness’ of Polish citizens. In a nutshell, these studies suggest that Poles quite easily transit from voting to abstention (or vice versa), and/or change their voting preferences between elections. Such assertions are at odds with the results of the analyses presented above.

Thus this macro-level stability observed in the empirical material, can be a signal of a fundamental change taking place on the Polish political scene, a signal of its petrification, when support for parties does not change even with change in voter turnout. These results require cross-checking, especially given the fact that they are in conflict with other existing data. It is interesting to what extent they indicate a general, durable, long-lasting pattern of increasing macro-level stabilization of voting behaviour. It might be expected that the identified effect can appear to be entirely episodic and idiosyncratic. Therefore further analyses, exploring individual-level data are necessary, to shed more light on this issue.

Unquestionably, the above analysis suffers from certain shortcomings. Firstly, the threat of ecological fallacy. Changes that might have happened on the individual level are not controlled. Additionally, one cannot reject the thesis that the shift in patterns of electoral behaviour are visible at the individual level, but not at the aggregate level, because it took place within the units of aggregation (i.e. within communes, municipalities).

Empirical analysis: individual-level data

This section investigates individual-level correlates and determinants of voter turnout in the 2014 EP elections in Poland. Relevant literature [Czeńnik 2007] suggests that we should observe significant effects of gender, age, education, religiosity, place of residence, ideological preferences (e.g. Left-Right scale). Previous studies [Czeńnik 2011] conducted in Poland, addressing the question of differences in electoral participation among groups defined in terms of the key socio-demographic variables (determining the position of an individual in a social structure), reveal quite significant and rather stable impacts of these variables on voter turnout. They demonstrate convincingly that (at least in years 1997-2007) electoral participation in Poland has been significantly related to gender, age, educational level and church attendance. Data from particular years provide a surprisingly similar picture and the impact of particular variables is more or less the same over time.

In the following analyse we employ post-election survey data, gathered within the framework of European Election Study (the 2014 edition). The EES 2014, in addition to the ‘classical’ post-electoral cross-section survey, also includes (for the first time) a panel component based on a series of country-specific online studies, administered in several EU member countries. The research aim behind this initiative is to compare the voting behaviour of respondents in the EP election of May 2014 with the subsequent first order national election vote. The first wave has been carried out right after the 2014 EP elections (these data are used in the analyses reported beneath) and the second wave will be carried out after the subsequent national elections.

Table 2. Voter turnout and gender³

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
I did not vote in the European Parliament elections	N	435	372	807
	%	28,4%	26,8%	27,6%
I thought about voting this time, but didn't do it	N	279	269	548
	%	18,2%	19,4%	18,8%
Usually I vote, but not this time	N	362	292	654
	%	23,7%	21,0%	22,4%
I'm sure I voted in the European Parliament elections	N	453	457	910
	%	29,6%	32,9%	31,2%
Total	N	1529	1390	2919
	%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Pearson's Chi-squared test	Value	df	Asymptotic significance (two-sided)	
	6,005 ^a	3	,111	

Source: EES 2014.

According to our findings the differences in voter turnout between men and women in the 2014 EP elections in Poland are negligible. There is a slight over-representation of females in the group of non-voters (those who say "I did not vote in the European Parliament elections"), but this difference is minor and statistically insignificant. The same pertains to the over-representation of males in the group of voters (those who say "I'm sure I voted in the European Parliament elections"). The difference is rather small and lacks statistical significance. In the two intermediary groups (respondents who choose answers "I thought about voting this time, but didn't do it" and "Usually I vote, but not this time") the differences are even smaller.

³ The question was phrased: "On the 25th of May this year election to the European Parliament were held. Many people did not vote, because they were ill, didn't have time, or they are simply not interested. Which of the below statements best describes your?". In the table the "Don't know" answers are omitted.

Table 3. Voter turnout and age

		Age				Total
		18 - 24	25 - 39	40 - 59	60≤	
I did not vote in the European Parliament elections	N	107	268	256	176	807
	%	31,2%	30,7%	26,8%	23,6%	27,6%
I thought about voting this time, but didn't do it	N	78	173	155	142	548
	%	22,7%	19,8%	16,2%	19,1%	18,8%
Usually I vote, but not this time	N	65	178	237	174	654
	%	19,0%	20,4%	24,8%	23,4%	22,4%
I'm sure I voted in the European Parliament elections	N	93	255	309	253	910
	%	27,1%	29,2%	32,3%	34,0%	31,2%
Total	N	343	874	957	745	2919
	%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Pearson's Chi-squared test 27,153 ^a		Value	df	Asymptotic significance (two-sided)		
		9		,001		

Source: EES 2014.

Age is one of sociodemographic characteristics which indisputably influences voter turnout. In general, the relationship between age and voter turnout is curvilinear: turnout is the lowest among the youngest voters, then it gradually increases to pick among middle-aged and then slowly decreases among elderly voters. Our analyses (reported in table 3) confirm this notion at least partly. In the 2014 EP elections in Poland we observe a statistically significant relationship between age and voter turnout, but this relationship is not curvilinear. Coding of the age variable – it is not continuous, but it contains age categories – might have produced this result⁴. According to our findings young people are least likely to vote. Then levels of electoral participation increases monotonically with age; voter turnout is the highest in the categories of middle-aged and elderly citizens. Due to stronger community attachments, greater participation in organizations, greater church attendance and higher income, they are more interested in politics and more prone to vote. Young people on the other hand probably have other than political concerns. Once they pass through various transition points (including leaving home, finishing education, getting a job, settling down and getting married) their propensity to vote increases. We do not find any decrease of voter turnout among the oldest voters, obstacles such as health problems, increasing disability and decreasing income do not seem to influence the propensity to vote in the group of citizens who are above 60 years of age.

⁴ Curvilinearity of the relationship is 'hidden' in the group of 60+ citizens; probably the cutting point is 'higher', among 70-75 years of age. Due to this fact we cannot see it in the analysis.

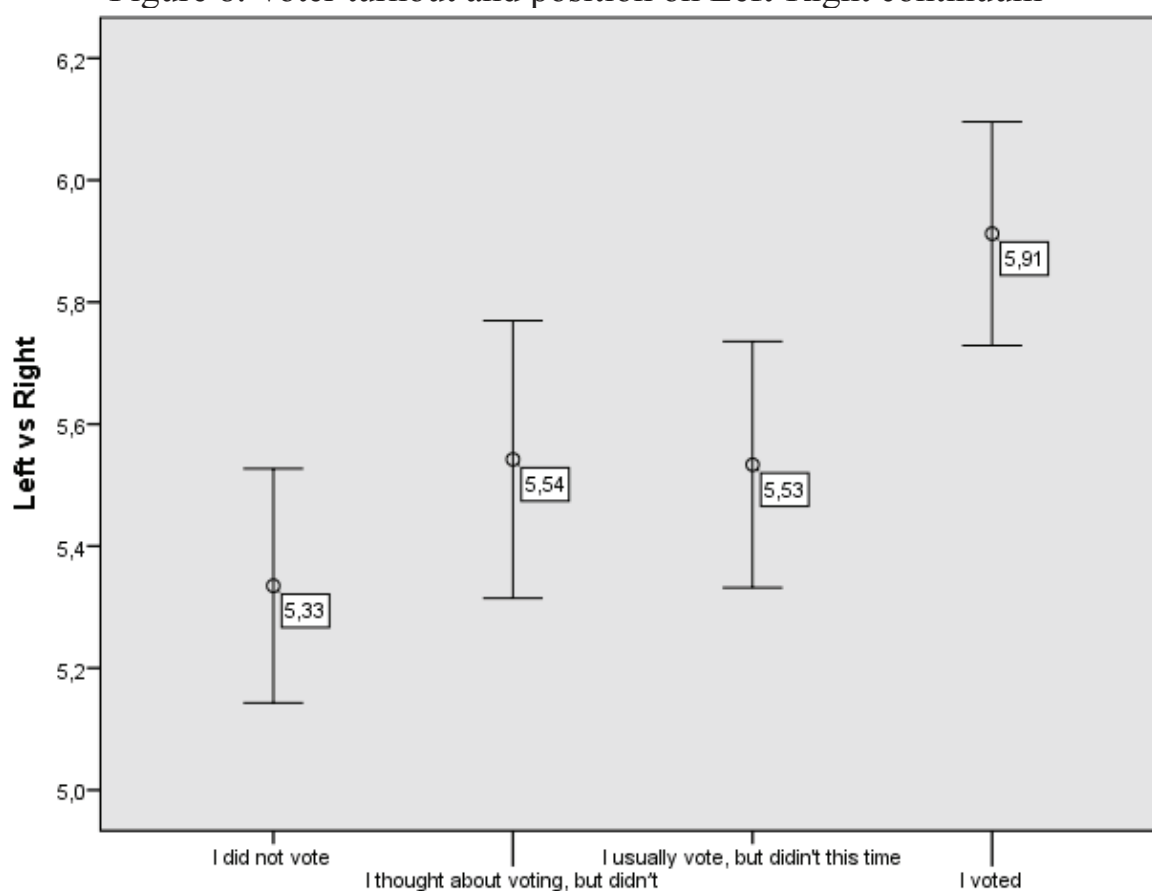
Table 4. Voter turnout and place of residence

		City over 200 thousand	City 50-200 thousand	City up to 50 thousand.	Village	Total
I did not vote in the European Parliament elections	N	148	147	181	331	807
	%	26,3%	25,1%	27,5%	29,7%	27,6%
I thought about voting this time, but didn't do it	N	110	107	111	220	548
	%	19,5%	18,3%	16,9%	19,7%	18,8%
Usually I vote, but not this time	N	116	134	158	246	654
	%	20,6%	22,9%	24,0%	22,1%	22,4%
I'm sure I voted in the European Parliament elections	N	189	197	207	317	910
	%	33,6%	33,7%	31,5%	28,5%	31,2%
Total	N	563	585	657	1114	2919
	%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Pearson's Chi-squared test 12,086 ^a		Value	Df	Asymptotic significance (two-sided)		
		9		,208		

Source: EES 2014.

The relationship between voter turnout and place of residence is less clear and may be puzzling (table 4). Typically, in previous elections in Poland, there was a clear trend: the bigger city of residence, the higher turnout. According to our findings there are some slight differences in voter turnout between the categories of this variable, but the relationship observed is not statistically significant. There is a slight over-representation of voters in the group of urban residents (those living in the cities over 200 thousand inhabitants) and slight over-representation of non-voters in the group of rural residents (those living in the villages), but these differences are quite small and – more importantly – lack statistical significance. Thus we can plausibly conclude that in the 2014 EP elections in Poland the relationship between voter turnout and place of residence is rather negligible.

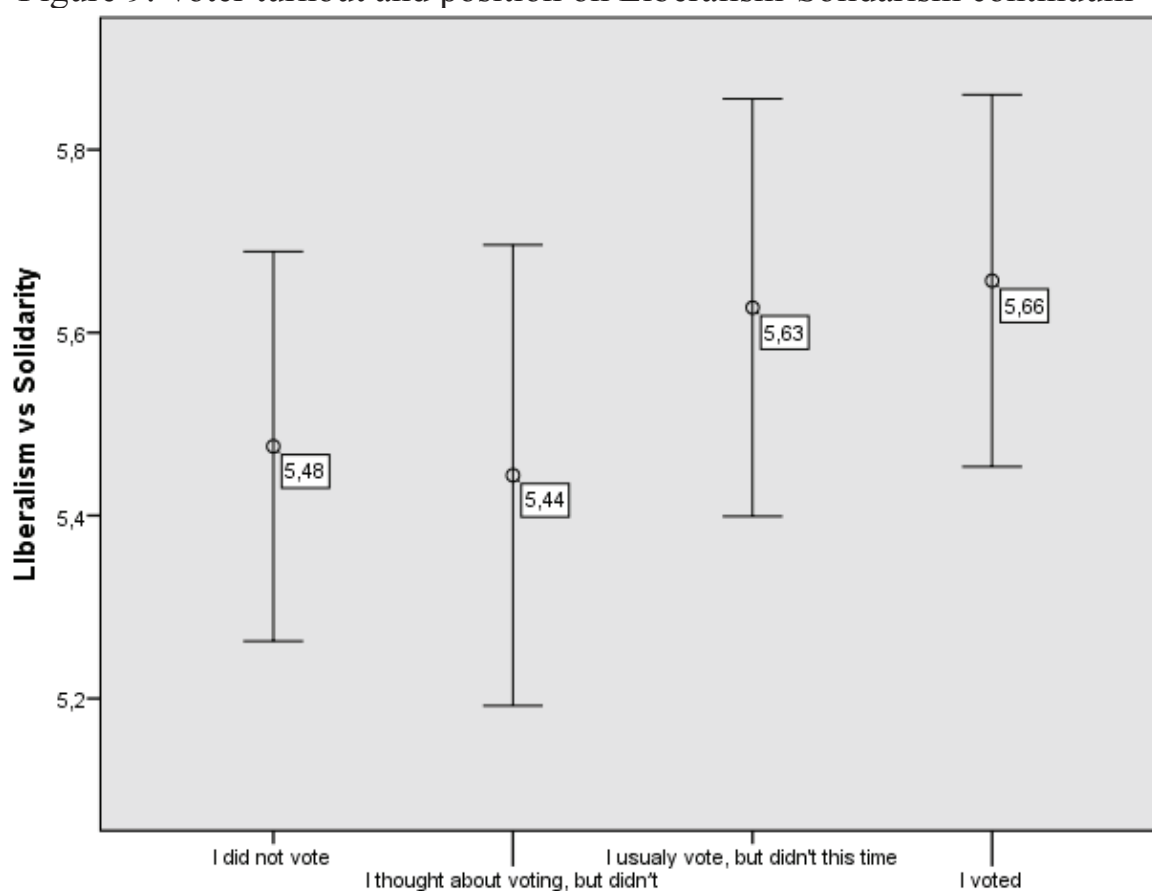
Due to lack of relevant data we are unable to analyse the relationships between voter turnout and other important sociodemographic variables, which often influence significantly electoral participation, i.e. education and religiosity (like church attendance). But it is plausible to expect, especially taking into account (typical) impacts of other sociodemographics (analysed in this article) on electoral participation in the 2014 EP elections, that their effects were “usual”, i.e. similar to the effects they exerted on voter turnout in previous elections. Therefore we can quite plausibly claim that voters in the 2014 EP election in Poland differ in terms of education and religiosity from non-voters: they are – on average – better educated and more religious.

Figure 8. Voter turnout and position on Left-Right continuum⁵

Source: EES 2014.

Our analysis is not limited to sociodemographics, as we take closer look at political differences between voters and non-voters. In figure 8 we present differences in Left-Right positioning, existing between voters and non-voters (and the two intermediary groups). The mean value of this variable is close to the centre of the scale, with a slight skew towards the right side of the continuum. The only significant difference observed exists between voters and non-voters (voters are more “rightist”, non-voters are more “leftist”); the two intermediary groups (respondents who choose answers “I thought about voting this time, but didn’t do it” and “Usually I vote, but not this time”) do not differ significantly from voters and non-voters (and from one another).

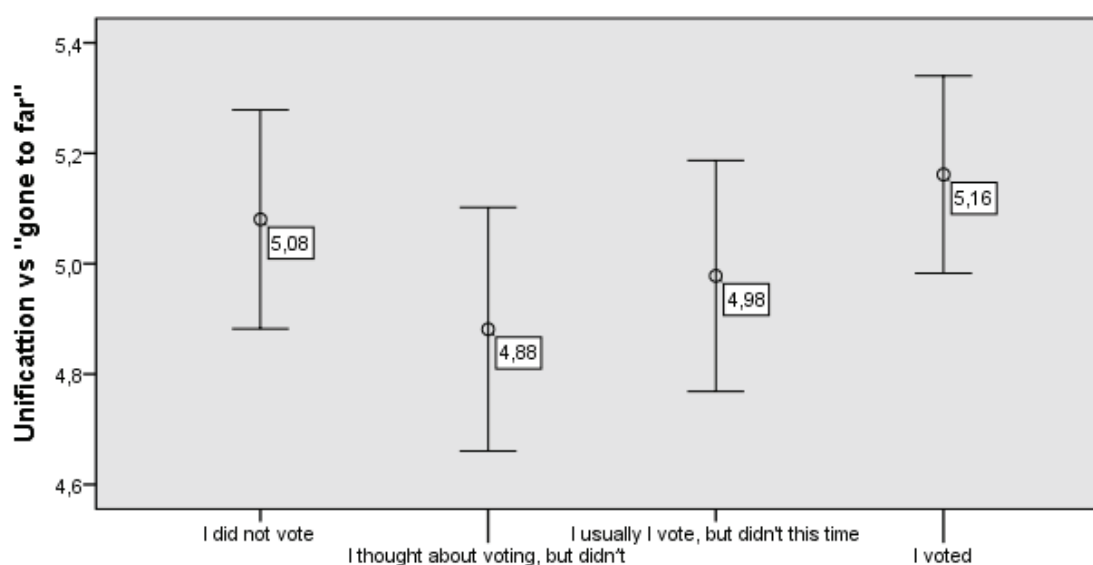
⁵ The question was phrased: “In politics we sometimes talk about the “left” and “right”. How would you define your political views? On a scale of 0 to 10, on which ‘0’ is “left” and ‘10’ is “right” please mark the number which best describes your political views”. In the analysis the “Don’t know” answers are omitted.

Figure 9. Voter turnout and position on Liberalism-Solidarism continuum⁶

Source: EES 2014.

Figure 9 provides further information about (potential) political differences between voters and non-voters. It presents the relationship between voter turnout and positions on “Solidary Poland vs Liberal Poland” scale. According to our analysis the differences between the groups are small and statistically insignificant. The mean value for both voters and non-voters falls close to the centre of the scale; it is slightly skewed towards the “Solidary Poland” end of the continuum. In a nutshell, “Solidary Poland vs Liberal Poland” an important aspect of Polish politics, does not relate significantly to voter turnout in the 2014 EP elections.

⁶ The question was phrased: “In politicians sometimes talk about the split into “Solidarity Poland” and “Liberal Poland”. Where would you place yourself on that scale?”. In the analysis the “Don’t know” answers are omitted.

Figure 10. Voter turnout and attitudes towards European integration⁷

Source: EES 2014.

The same pertains to the European integration issue (often regarded as an important determinant of voter turnout in the EP elections). In figure 10 we compare mean positions (of the four groups under scrutiny) on the 0-10 scale, related to this question. The differences observed are rather small and statistically insignificant; consequently, we can conclude that in the 2014 EP election in Poland the impact of attitudes towards European integration on voter turnout is limited or negligible.

Conclusions

The main objective of this study is to discuss the issue of voter turnout in the 2014 EP election in Poland. It provides the results of preliminary analyses, which address empirically this topic. More specifically, we investigate macro-level spatial dispersion of voter turnout in Poland (and analyse similarities/dissimilarities in voter turnout rates existing between geographically defined entities), and we also study micro-level determinants and correlates of voter turnout.

The paper concludes with three main assertions. Firstly, our findings support the thesis that Polish political scene has somewhat petrified in the last years. Macro-level stability of spatial dispersion of voter turnout, observed

⁷ The question was phrased: “Some believe that Europe should go further in the unification process. Others believe that the unification process has gone too far. What is your opinion? On a scale of 0 to 10, on which ‘0’ is “unification” and ‘10’ is “gone too far”. Where would you place yourself on that scale?”. In the analysis the “Don’t know” answers are omitted.

across geographically defined entities (communes) in Poland, can signalise important processes occurring in the political system. They might indicate an ongoing consolidation of the system, which materialises – *inter alia* – in increasing (macro-level) stabilization of voting behaviour.

Our second major conclusion pertains to the individual level. According to our findings voter turnout in the 2014 EP election in Poland is quite predictable and unsurprising. Patterns of voter turnout are similar to those observed in earlier Polish elections. Electoral participation in Poland is determined by factors which usually have impact on voter turnout in general⁸. This observation corresponds with our first conclusion, indicating an ongoing consolidation of the Polish political system – consolidating, maturing electoral democracy should be in fact characterised by stabilising patterns of voting behaviour, identifiable on both aggregate and individual level.

Our third conclusion is of a more general type. The main characteristic of the previous elections in Poland (including EP elections) was low voter turnout. After the 2014 EP elections nothing has changed in this regard. Again extensive electoral abstention was the main idiosyncrasy of this election. This fact shows that the EP elections became, ten years after the accession, a normal aspect of the Polish politics, which does not generate any extra tensions, does not produce much of political mobilisation and is not a source of political disorder and turbulences. Therefore – quite paradoxically and ironically – low voter turnout in the EP elections can be perceived as a sign of painless and unproblematic ‘Europeanisation’⁹ of Polish politics.

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⁸ Poland is quite ‘unexceptional’ in terms of voter turnout determinants, i.e. voter turnout in Poland is usually determined by factors which also influence turnout in other countries; gender, age and education have an impact on turnout in majority of modern democracies.

⁹ Understood here as an incorporation of the European-level procedures and mechanisms (such as the EP elections) into the Polish political life.

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