

European elections in crisis:

What affected the voter turnout and the electoral choice in Bulgaria and Romania during European elections 2009 and 2014?

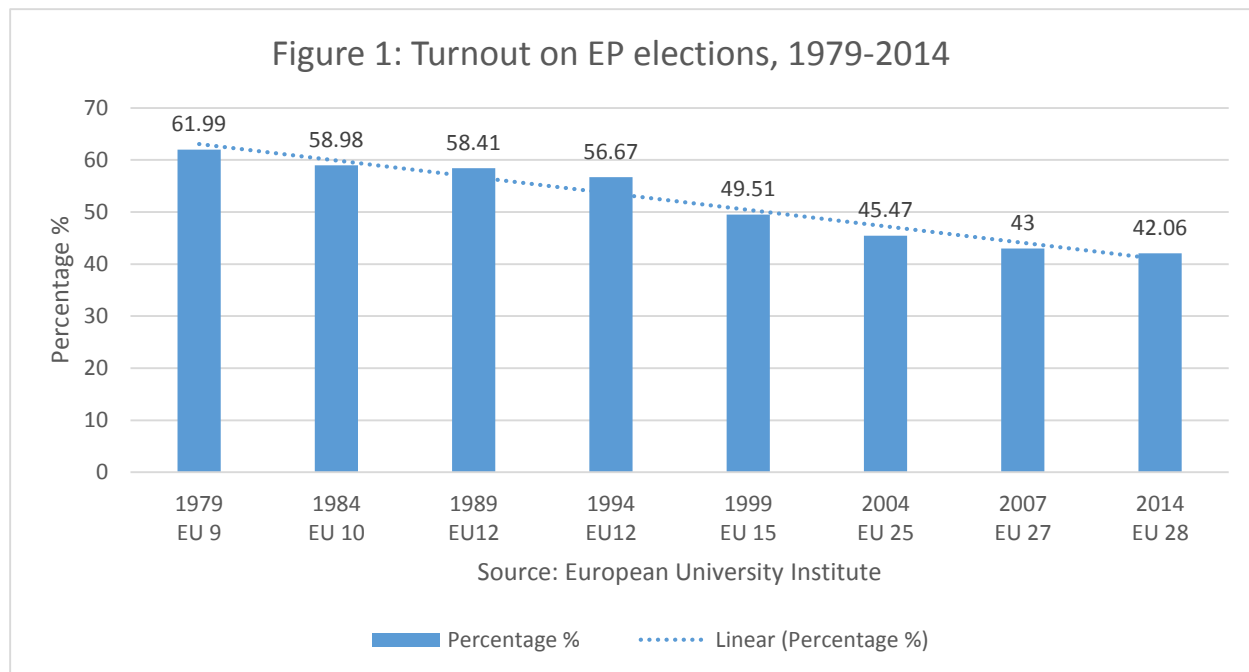
Atanas Stoyanov

Central European University

March 2015

1. Introduction

The crisis of the European elections and party politics has never been as deeper as after the last elections for members of the European Parliament. The results of the elections held on May 22-25, 2014, showed the lowest turnout in the history of the European Parliament since its establishment in 1979 (Figure 1). Merely 42.6 % of the eligible European electorate went to the election sections to exercise their right to vote (Euroactive 2014).



This progressive clear-cut decline in the only European-dimension elections can have various explanations. For many these results can be seen as a consequence of numerous ongoing processes at a national level, including economic and financial policy (Hernandez and Kriesi, 2015; Bosco and Verney, 2012; Mair, 2007). For others, the European elections show to what extent citizens of a particular country recognize themselves as European citizens, i.e., the turnout of European elections is being equaled to the European integration coefficient of these nationalities (Blondel, Sinnott, and Svensson, 1997; Kriesi, 2007). These two main hypotheses are not self-exclusive but complementary. Moreover, they are very much dependent on the national contexts.

The current study research aims at the analysis of “What affected the electoral activity and political choices of voters in Bulgaria and Romania during the European elections in 2009 and 2014?” Because of their relatively recent accession to EU in 2007 and the very limited and undeveloped the research on the European elections, the scope of the study is focused particularly on Bulgaria and Romania.

2. Methods

As a method for answering the main question was used the “Second-order national model” and the “Europe matters model” developed by Simon Hix and Michael Marsh as explanatory models for the turnout and the political choices in times of European elections.

The “second order national model” was coined in 1980 by Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt after the first European elections held in 1979. Reif and Schmitt classified the European elections as a “second-order elections”, i.e. less important than the national parliamentary or presidential elections. They argued that these are all “by-elections, municipal elections, various sorts of regional elections, those to a ‘second chamber’ and the like”. Due to their “secondary” nature these are doomed to always receive lower public attention” (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Later on, in 2007, Hix and Marshal took this concept and developed a new research on the 25 members of the European Unions for all the European elections held between 1979 and 2004. The “Europe matters”, on the other hand, was explained by Hix and Marshal as an alternative model in which voters trust in their personal values, and national processes and policies do not influence their choice. Having the empirical data, they came up with the following “laws” or regularities valid for the European elections (Table 1):

Classical Second-Order Election Model	<i>Table 1: Simon Hix & Michael Marsh, 2007</i>	"Europe Matters" Alternative Model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The turnout is lower compared to national elections; • Voters tend to support small or new parties; • Parties in government loose; parties in opposition win; • if the EU-elections are closely before or after national elections the political support for a certain party is likely to be the same; if EU-elections are in between two national elections the rulling party can loose the most. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The more Anti-European a party is, the more votes it will gain between the last national and the consequent EU-elections; • The more extreme a party is on the "left-right" scale, the more votes it will gain between the last national and the consequent EU-elections; • Green parties receive greater vote-share compared to other parties; • Anti-EU parties receive greater vote-share compared to other parties.

The object of the current study was to apply the developed by Hix and Marsh hypotheses to the national contexts of Bulgaria and Romania and to test whether their arguments proved to be valid for these two particular EU-newcomers. Additionally, using empirical data from the national electoral statistics, I found out what is the interconnection between the elections for EU-parliament and other national elections in the two Balkan countries. Analysis of the most recent polls on the public opinion of European Union (2014) also contributed for finding out whether the perception of EU as an important institution might influence the turnout of the European elections.

3. Results

In order to see whether Romania and Bulgaria are fitting into the model of Marshal of Hix, we collected all the available data for all the held elections in Bulgaria and Romania, and more precisely, the voter turnouts and the political choices made in the different national and European elections. As sources of information were used the official statistical electoral bodies in the two countries: The Central Electoral Bureau of the Republic of Romania (Biroul Electoral Central¹⁾ and the Central Electoral Committee of the Republic of Bulgaria (Централен Избирателен Комитет²⁾. As time boundaries of the investigation was chosen the period between the date of the official accession to the European Union – 1 January 2007

¹ <http://www.bec2014.ro>

² <https://www.cik.bg>

and the end of 2014 as a year in which were held not only elections for European Parliament but also important national elections in the both countries, only few months after the European Parliament elections. The results of the empirical study on Romania and Bulgaria can be found in Annex 1 and 2 and their graphic expression, respectively, in Figure 2 and

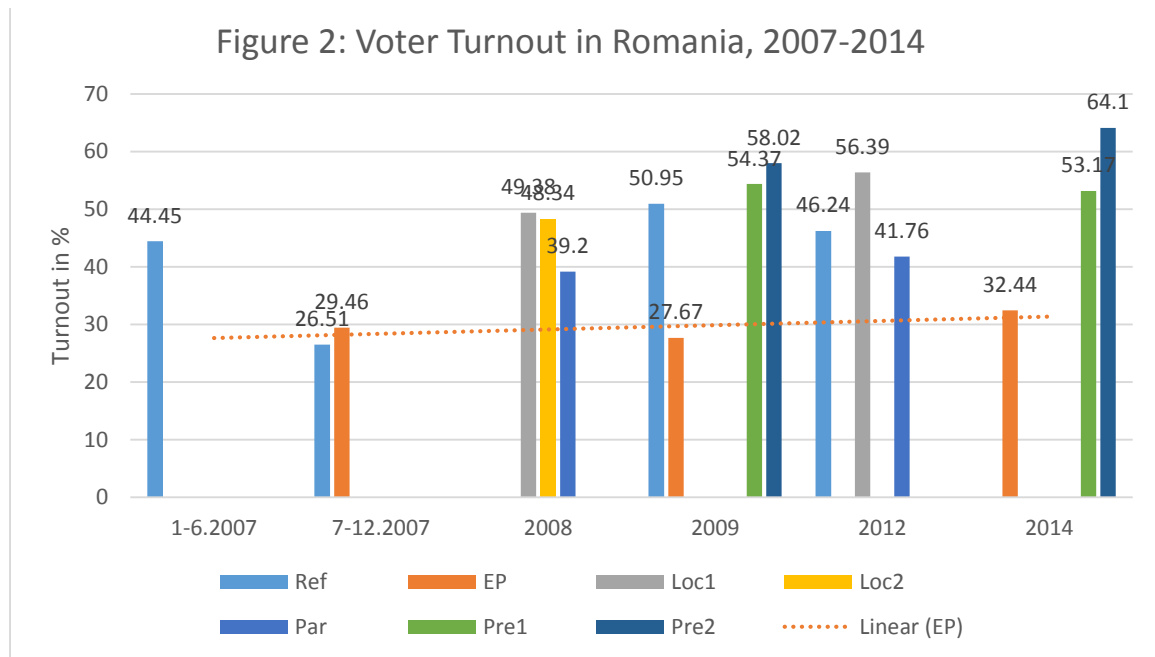
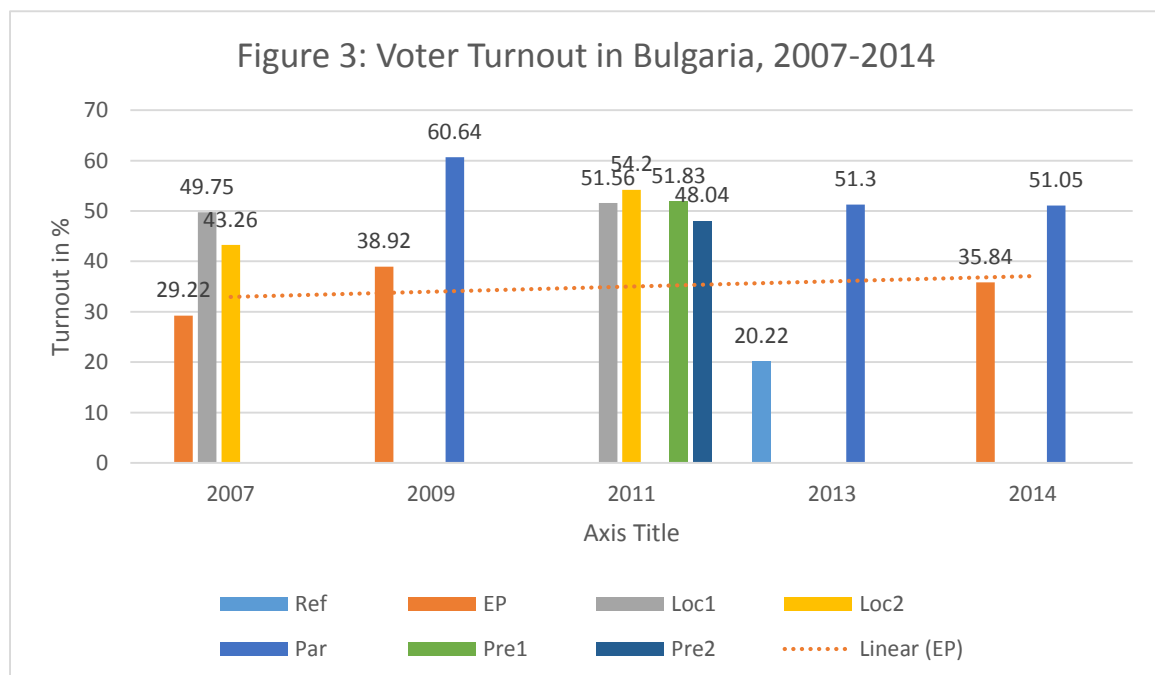


Figure 3:



The initial data indicates that the turnouts in the European elections, both in Romania and Bulgaria are significantly much lower in comparison to any other national elections. This proves the hypothesis of Reif and Herrmann from 1979 that the highest turnouts in presidential countries are being observed on the presidential elections (Romania is a semi-

presidential republic) and for parliamentary systems of government – on parliamentary elections (Bulgaria). Thus the highest turnout in Romania for the period 2007-2014 is 64.1 % on the second tour of the presidential elections held on 16 November 2014. This turnout is twice bigger than any of the three European Parliament elections held in Romania in 2007, 2009 and 2014. Similarly, in Bulgaria the highest turnout for this seven-year period is being observed on the parliamentary elections in 2009 when 60.64 % percent of the electorate exercised their right to vote.

In order to answer the question whether voters support more small or new parties on European elections, whether parties in power loose vote shares and parties in opposition win shares and all the other aspects of the “Second-order national model” and the “Europe matters” model, there was made a more comprehensive research in the national contexts on the interconnection between European elections and national elections.

3.1 Romania

In 2007 the Romanian representatives in the European Parliament are coming from five parties, ordered by the numbers of MEP's elected³: Democratic Party⁴ (13), Social Democratic Party⁵ (11), National Liberal Party⁶ (6), Liberal Democratic Party⁷ (3) and Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania⁸ (2). At this time the Liberal Democratic Party - PLD is relatively new in comparison to all the other parties which have decades of history and at the same it can be argued that it is not: PLD was formed in 2006 as a breakdown of the well-established and positioned National Liberal Party - PNL. One can also argue if the ethnic Hungarian Party-UDMR is small, because it has voters who vote along ethnic lines since the early 90s and reserved seats in a number of institutions. After the elections for European Parliament in 2009 there are no new parties among the winners, except the Greater Romania Party - PRM⁹, a nationalistic parliamentary represented and small party which won 3 seats. The picture after the elections in 2014 shows the same winners. The difference this

³ Source: Biroul Electoral Central

⁴ Partidul Democrat (PD) – central-right party, founded in 1993.

⁵ Partidul Social Democrat, (PSD), social democratic political party, formed in 1992

⁶ Partidul Național Liberal, (PNL), liberal party, founded in 1875

⁷ Partidul Liberal Democrat, (PLD), liberal party established in December 2006

⁸ Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România, (UDMR), Ethnic Hungarian Party, established in 1989.

⁹ Partidul România Mare, (PRM), founded in 1991

time is that PRM was replaced by a new party formed in the very beginning of 2014: the People's Movement Party¹⁰ with 2 seats.

Thus it is true for Romania that voters support comparatively new and small parties on European elections, but proportionally, the share of the small and new parties, compared to the share of the big parties in government or in opposition is very small: around 10 percent and less. However, in Romania remains invalid the argument that parties in opposition increase vote shares during European elections. The comparison between the parliamentary represented parties in Romania and their shares after the European elections in 2014 shows no difference: parties in power have not lost on the EP-elections and parties in opposition have not won more votes.

Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of the Romanian electoral results shows that the political support for a certain party does not remain the same, if EP-elections are closely before or after national elections. For instance, the legislative elections in November 2008 have PDL as a winner, on the European elections in June 2009 the opposition party PSD gained more votes and in December 2009 PDL is again leading on the presidential elections, although the results are almost equal¹¹.

Thus it can be concluded that except the very low turnouts, the second-order national model fails to explain the results of the EP-elections in Romania. The "Europe matters" models with its hypotheses is inapplicable as well in the Romanian case because there are no green or nationalist parties in power which to be investigated, i.e. the political parties are built upon different, in comparison to the western model, ideologies and reflect different cultural values. The only exception is the nationalist Greater Romania Party-PRM, which received 3 seats in the European Parliament. However, analysis shows that it does not win, but contrary loses votes on consequent national elections: 8.6 % of the votes in 2009 in comparison to 19.5 % vote-share in 2000 and 1.5 % on the parliamentary elections in 2012.

¹⁰ Partidul Mișcarea Populară, PMP, Christian-democratic and liberal party, founded in 2014

¹¹ Traian Băsescu, PDL: 50.33 % support vs Mircea Geoană, PSD, 49.66 % support

3.2 Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, however, the results appear to be slightly different¹². After the elections for European Parliament in June 2009 some nationalist extreme right parties, such as Ataka¹³, gained many votes and this contributed in their favor very much on the consequent parliamentary elections that were held just a month later, in July 2009. Moreover, those very small and new parties that did not succeed on the European elections in June, managed to get seats, although very few, into the national Parliament in July 2009. RZS¹⁴ for first time got 10 seats. Lider¹⁵ had a huge success with more than 100 000 votes, but the party could not pass the minimal electoral threshold which led to dispersion of its votes among the other winners. The Bulgarian Green Party¹⁶ proved to be very weak with 0.5 % of the electoral vote on the parliamentary elections in 2009, with no representation afterwards. The year of the third European elections in Bulgaria – 2014 – happened to be the year of parliamentary elections as well. Proving the allegations of Marshall and Hix some new-born parties and coalitions such as Bulgaria without Censorship¹⁷ and the Reformist Block¹⁸ had an initial success. On the European elections in May 2014 each of them managed to get 1 seat out of the total 17 seats allotted to Bulgaria in the European Parliament. Few months later, in October 2014, these new political entities managed to win seats in the national parliament as well, making the Reformist Block even part of the governing wide coalition. Similarly to the case of PLD in Romania, the Reformist Block was born as a coalition of many parties that used to be strongly represented in the past but which had weaker results in the consequent elections. Thus, this party is not a new one, per se, but it is a new coalition.

After this brief overview of the results of European and national elections in Bulgaria it can be concluded that the Hix-Marshall hypotheses that attempt to explain what affects the voters turnout and the political choices of voters in times of European Parliament elections are more applicable to the Bulgarian case, especially because of the proximity in time of important national and European elections. However, the new coalitions are consisted of “old” parties and the nationalist and very new parties which have a success on

¹² Source: Central Elective Committee of Bulgaria, www.cik.bg

¹³ Ataka (in English “Attack”): a nationalist party founded in 2005

¹⁴ RZS – Red, Zakonnost i Spravedlivost (Eng: “Order, Law and Justice”), conservative political party founded in 2005

¹⁵ Lider (Eng: “Leader”), conservative political party, founded in 2007

¹⁶ Bulgarska zelena partiya – a center-left party founded in 1989

¹⁷ Bulgaria bez Tsenzura – conservative and reformist party, founded in January 2014

¹⁸ Reformatorski blok – a center-right political coalition founded in December 2013. The coalition includes the leading democratic parties of Bulgaria, some of which led governments in the 90’s

the European elections are proving ineffective in showing stability and political endurance, i.e. in the next EP-elections it is most likely that these will not exist or will not have their own candidates. Moreover, the weak results of the Bulgarian Green Party can be only explained by the cultural differences between western and eastern European countries (Trechsel, 2010).

4. Does Europe really matter? Concussions

After the examination of the interconnection between national and European elections, one common and important for our main question line that can be observed are the relatively high electoral turnouts of Bulgaria in Romania on European elections in comparison to the CEE-10 countries¹⁹(Directorate-General for Communication 2014). The European elections-2014 turnout of Bulgaria (35.84 %) is bigger than those of UK and Portugal, although there is a decrease in comparison with the results of the EP-elections in Bulgaria in 2009 (38.92 %). The EP-elections turnout in Romania is not that high but it is certainly progressing: from 26.51 % in 2007 to 27.67 % in 2009 and 32.44 % in 2014.

These results can only be explained with the positive image of the European Union among Bulgarians and Romanians: 51 % of the Bulgarians and 59 % of the Romanians consider EU as something very positive which puts them in the top 5 in this list (Eurobarometer 2014a, 82, p.7). Contrary to this, just before the EP-elections in 2014, Bulgarians felt themselves the least European citizens than any other in EU-28: only 46 % against 61 % percent for the Romanians (Eurobarometer 2014b, p.29).

The higher turnouts of EP-elections in Bulgaria can be explained with a higher appreciation of the EU-values and the momentum towards these European standards, despite the low self-identification as Europeans. At the same time, the results of the European elections in Bulgaria are much more connected to other elections that have taken place in the country. Political parties actually put more effort into their preparation, as they were considered as preliminary national elections. In Romania the turbulent presidential battle led to several referenda with significantly high turnouts, very close to the turnouts of local or parliamentary elections.

The current analysis cannot fully reject the models of Simon and Hix. It must be admitted that the observations here are based only on the last two electoral cycles in 2009 and

¹⁹ Except of Lithuania

2014 against the six electoral cycles analyzed by the authors. However this analysis showed that in their choice for MEPs, Romanians and Bulgarians are very much affected by:

- the believe that Europe is a symbol of high life standards;
- the domestic politics and processes which are based on different compared to western Europe cultural values and political ideologies: green, nationalist, and extreme parties prove to be weak, small and unsustainable.

To add to what was found by Simon and Hix, the regularities that can be observed in Bulgaria and Romania in times of EP-elections are as follows:

- If a new small party wins the European elections, the probability to survive for a second mandate in EP is very low;
- New political coalitions consisted of “old” political parties are more likely to be successful on EU-elections than other new parties and coalitions.

Bibliography:

Blondel, Jean, Richard Sinnott, and Palle Svensson. 1997. “Representation and Voter Participation.” *European Journal of Political Research* 32 (2): 243–72.

Bosco, A., and S. Verney. 2012. “Electoral Epidemic: The Political Cost of Economic Crisis in Southern Europe, 2010–11.” *South European Society and Politics*, 129–54.

Biroul Electoral Central, Romania, <http://www.bec2014.ro>

Central Electoral Committee of Bulgaria, <https://www.cik.bg>

Directorate-General for Communication, EU. 2014. *2014 Post-Election Survey EUROPEAN ELECTIONS 2014 ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW*.

Eurobarometer. 2014a. *Standard European Barometer 82. Autumn 2014. Public Opinion in the European Union. First Results*.

———. 2014b. *Standard Eurobarometer 81. Spring 2014. Public Opinion in the European Union. First Results*.

Hernandez, Enrique, and Hanspeter Kriesi. 2015. "The Electoral Consequences of the Financial and Economic Crisis in Europe." *European University Institute*.

Hix, Simon, and Michael Marsh. 2007. "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections." *The Journal of Politics* 69 (2): 495–510.

Kriesi, Hanspeter. 2007. "The Role of European Integration in National Election Campaigns." *European Union Politics* 8 (1): 83–108.

Mair, Peter. 2007. "The Limited Impact of Europe on the National Party Systems." *West European Politics* 23 (4): 27–51.

"Power Struggle in Romania." 2013. *Eurotopics.net*.

[http://www.eurotopics.net/en/home/debatten/links-2012-](http://www.eurotopics.net/en/home/debatten/links-2012-07_romania/)

[07_romania/http://www.eurotopics.net/en/home/debatten/links-2012-07_romania/](http://www.eurotopics.net/en/home/debatten/links-2012-07_romania/).

Reif, K., and H. Schmitt. 1980. "Nine Second Order National Elections. A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Elections Results." *European Journal of Political Research* 8 (1): 3.

Trechsel, Alexander. 2010. "How Much 'Second Order' Were the European Parliament Elections 2009?." *European University Institute*, 3–13.

Annexes:

Annex 1: Elections in Romania , 1.1.2007-31.12.2014, Source: BIROUL ELECTORAL CENTRAL, Republic of Romania

No cases	Type of elections	Date	Turnout First tour %	Turnout Second Tour %
1.	Referendum: Impeachment of the President	19 May 2007	44.45	
2.	Referendum about the voting system	23 October 2007	26.51	
3.	European Parliament	25 November 2007	29.46	
4.	Local	1 June 2008 15 June 2008	49.38	48.34
5.	Parliamentary	30 November 2008	39.20	
6.	European Parliament	7 June 2009	27.67	
7.	Presidential	22 November 2009 6 December 2009	54.37	58.02
8.	Referendum: Bicameral or unicameral Parliament?	22 November 2009	50.95	
9.	Local	10 June 2012	56.39	
10.	Referendum: Impeachment of the President	29 July 2012	46.24	
11.	Parliamentary	9 December 2012	41.76	
12.	European Parliament	25 May 2014	32.44	
13.	Presidential	2 November 2014 16 November 2014	53.17	64.10

Annex 2: Elections in Bulgaria(1.01.2007-31.12.2014)Source: Централен Избирателен Комитет, Republic of Bulgaria

No cases	Type of elections	Date	Turnout First tour %	Turnout Second Tour %
1.	European Parliament	20 May 2007	29.22	
2.	Local	28 October 2007 4 November 2007	49.75	43.26
3.	European Parliament	7 June 2009	38.92	
4.	Parliamentary	5 July 2009	60.64	
5.	Local	23 October 2011 30 November 2011	51.56	54.2
6.	Presidential	23 October 2011 30 November 2011	51.83	48.04
7.	Referendum: Nuclear Power	27 January 2013	20.22	
8.	Parliamentary	12 May 2013	51.3	
9.	European Parliament	25 May 2014	35.84	
10.	Parliamentary	5 October 2014	51.05	

