



ÖGfE Policy Brief 05 2024

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Attitudes Towards the EU and the EP Election in 2024 in Austria

Policy Recommendations

- 1. Target communication:** Increasing interest in the EU and EP elections requires targeted communication and a focus on policy issues relevant for the public. These can vary depending on the age group and life circumstances.
- 2. Highlight benefits and costs of leaving the EU:** To counterbalance preferences for Austria leaving the EU, policymakers and stakeholders need to communicate the advantages of EU membership and the potential disadvantages of leaving.
- 3. Promote research and education:** Measures to promote fact-based discussions on the functioning of democracy, such as investments in research and education, can improve public understanding of and trust in the EU.

Abstract

This Policy Brief presents an overview of Austrian citizens' attitudes towards the European Parliament (EP) election and their views on the future of the European Union (EU) in light of the upcoming EP election on 9 June 2024. Using data from the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), responses from 3,054 participants were analysed, focusing on their interest in the EP election, their likelihood to vote next Sunday, their stance on European unification, and policy measures they

consider important for the future of the EU. Findings reveal a mixed interest in the upcoming election. 42.1% of the respondents state a definite intention to vote, but potential turnout varies across age groups. Although a large share of respondents support Austria's EU membership and the common currency euro, results also suggest that Austrians are rather Eurosceptic. The findings thus provide valuable insights for political and societal stakeholders ahead of the 2024 EP election.

Attitudes Towards the EU and the EP Election in 2024 in Austria

With the upcoming European Parliament (EP) election in Austria on 9 June 2024, citizens' attitudes towards both the EP election and the European integration are back in the focus of political and societal stakeholders. Do Austrians support European unification? If so, to which extent? If not, what do they want for the future of the European Union (EU)? Eventually, what do they think about EP elections? Are they actually interested in the election *per se*, and will they turn out to vote on election day? These are the questions this Policy Brief focuses on, setting the scene for the upcoming EP election.

To find out how people in Austria currently feel about the EU and the upcoming EP election, we ran a citizen-level survey within the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES – www.autnes.at). As part of this data collection, 3,054 respondents answered, *inter alia*, a series of questions on their interest in the upcoming EP election, their attitude towards European unification, and several policy measures between 15 March and 7 April 2024. [1]

Interest and Turnout

Starting out with political interest, we can observe in Figure 1 that respondents show mixed interest in the upcoming election. 49.1% stated that they are quite or very interested in the election, whereas 50.9% are not at all or not very interested. This resembles the picture we obtained in the last EP election in 2019: also then, in the run-up to the 2019 EP election, the interest was rather modest, with only half of the Austrians showing some interest. [2]

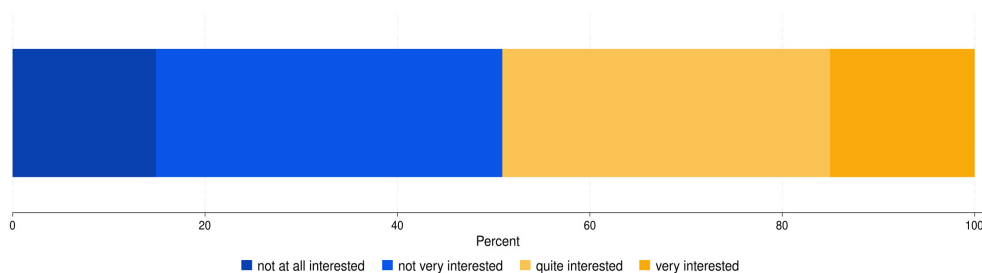


Figure 1: Interest in EP elections

Political interest is closely connected to political participation: in other words, voters are more likely to turn out on election day if they are interested in the election taking place. Given, amongst others, an intense mobilisation campaign in 2019 (“This time I’m voting”), we could observe an increase in voter turnout across most EU Member States. [3] In Austria, turnout was the second highest since joining the European Union in 1995, with 59.8% of the Austrian voters casting their ballots. [4] The question is whether, in 2024, this turnout rate will be reached or even increased.

To sum up, the actual turnout rate will most likely depend very much on how the “rather likely” citizens will in the end behave: taking an active role in the EP election or staying at home.

We make use of a fine-grained response scale to capture respondents' likelihood of turning out in a more nuanced way. Figure 2 illustrates the likelihood of voting in the upcoming EP election in Austria. Overall, we find that while a large share of respondents indicate they intend to vote, only **42.1%** state they **will definitely vote**, another **12.1%** consider it **highly likely**, and **21.9%** find it **rather likely** to turn out to vote in the upcoming election. Taking these three categories together, it seems that around three quarters of the Austrians plan to turn out to vote – thus, turnout would be as high as in national elections. As EP elections are usually considered by voters as second order elections with lower turnout rates [5], it seems more likely that the “actual” voters for the EP election 2024 are to be found in the first two response categories (“definitely vote” and “highly likely to vote”). This leads to about 55% of Austrians having a high probability of turning out to vote on 9 June, thus coming close to the turnout rate of 2019. Meanwhile, 9.9% of the respondents have expressed that they definitely do not intend to vote, 4.7% find it “highly unlikely” and 9.3% “rather unlikely”. To sum up, the actual turnout rate will most likely depend very much on how the “rather likely” citizens will in the end behave: taking an active role in the EP election or staying at home.

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We investigate a bit further the turnout probability of Austrians by dividing the turnout likelihood along age groups. This is all the more important as Austria belongs to one of the three EU Member States, in which 16- to 17-year-old citizens are allowed to cast a vote. This measure has been proven to be a successful tool to foster the political engagement of youth. [6] When we examine prospective participation by age groups, we find that the participation of respondents between the ages of 16 and 25 is similar to other age groups. The highest participation can be expected in the age group 66 years and older, with 61.2% of the respondents being certain to vote (and 7.0% being “highly likely”). This is not surprising, as in this oldest age group, turning

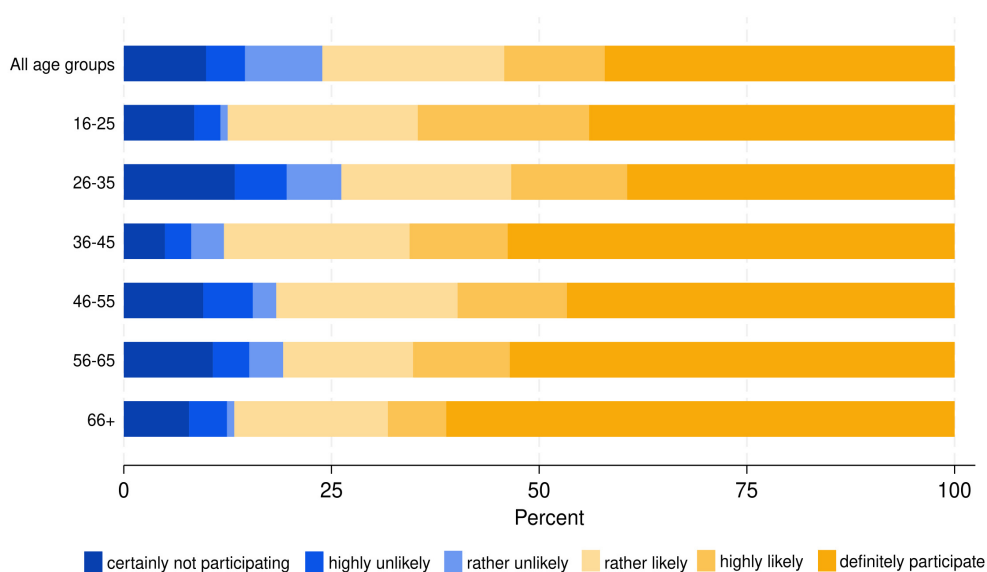


Figure 2: Likelihood to vote in the EP election 2024

out to vote is still regarded as a civic duty. Also, the age group of 36- to 45-year-olds is just as committed, albeit with a slightly lower expected voter turnout. Here, 53.8% are certain that they will definitely vote (11.8% think it is “highly likely”). In the age group of 26 to 35 years, the proportion of respondents who consider not turning out to vote is highest: 13.4% are certain that they will definitely abstain from the election (and another 6.2% consider their participation as “highly unlikely”). Only 39.4% state that they will “definitely” vote, while 14.0% consider it “highly likely”. This result is very much in line with previous findings on turnout in Austria: the youngest voters, including first-time voters, are rather engaged in (EP) elections while we see a slump in the age group of 26 to 35. This may be due to the life circumstances of this latter age group (e.g., getting married, having kids, first jobs, etc.).

Overall, we can thus conclude that citizens’ perceptions of EU democracy are rather negative and show the necessity of explaining the democratic processes at the EU level to a greater extent.

Research analysing the 2019 EP elections shows that citizens participating in EP elections tend to be more satisfied with the working of democracy. [7] This is not surprising given the fact that “voting” and “free and fair elections” are key elements of liberal democracies. [8]. Thus, in Figure 3 we consider citizens’ satisfaction with democracy at the national and European levels. As we can observe in the lower panel, 37.0% of respondents are “rather dissatisfied” with the functioning of democracy in the EU, while 19.9% even describe themselves being “very dissatisfied” with how democracy works in the European Union. Those who are “rather satisfied” or “very satisfied” amount to just 43.1%. In contrast, a majority, precisely 57.8%, express contentment with the way democracy works in Austria, considering themselves “rather satisfied” or even “very satisfied”. However, not all share this sentiment: 30.1% voice their discontent, feeling “rather dissatisfied” also with the national level, and for 12.1%, their dissatisfaction intensifies to being “very dissatisfied”. While these are pretty high numbers of dissatisfaction for both the national and the European levels, we have

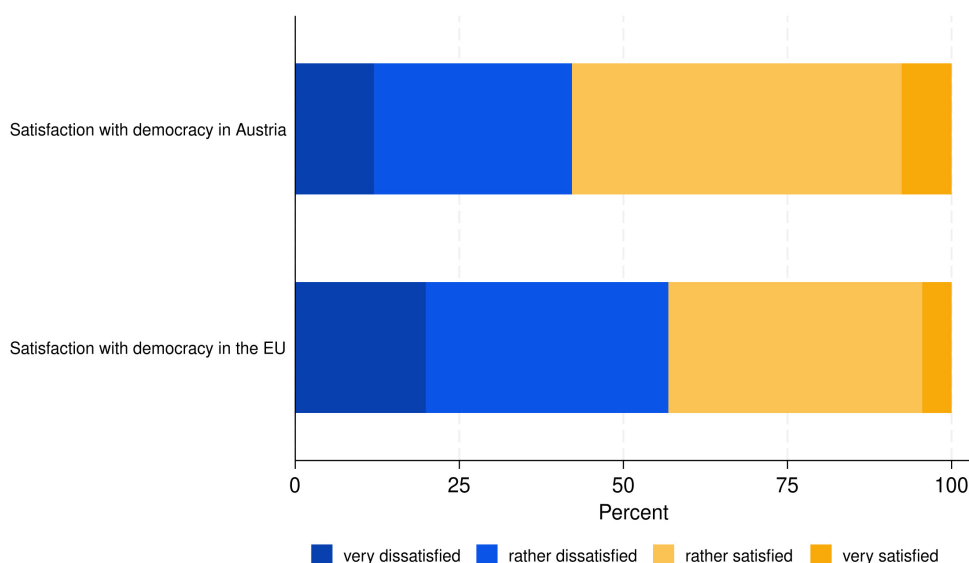


Figure 3: Satisfaction with democracy in Austria and in the EU

been observing this trend of expressing democratic dissatisfaction since the COVID-19 pandemic. [9] Overall, we can thus conclude that citizens' perceptions of EU democracy are rather negative and show the necessity of explaining the democratic processes at the EU level to a greater extent.

The Future of the EU

The fact that political campaigns could still win over undecided people means that this result cannot be interpreted as a clear majority in favour of remaining in the EU.

Since its foundation in 1951 as the European Coal and Steel Community, the EU's membership has changed over time and is likely to do so in the future. On the one hand, the European Council decided to open membership talks with Ukraine and Moldova and granted candidate status to Georgia in December 2023. On the other hand, with the withdrawal of the UK in 2020 – the so-called Brexit – debates about exiting the EU fell more silent but are still being held in some member states and especially by some political parties. In our survey, we therefore asked respondents whether Austria should stay a member of the EU. As Figure 4 shows, in this hypothetical vote, 48.9% would opt for Austria remaining an EU member. However, a notable 26.0% would favour leaving. Almost a quarter of the respondents (25.1%) find themselves undecided on this question. This result needs to be interpreted carefully. Although the majority of respondents are in favour of Austria remaining in the European Union, the group of those who would currently be undecided in such a hypothetical vote is just as large as the group of those who would prefer Austria to leave. The fact that political campaigns could still win over undecided people means that this result cannot be interpreted as a clear majority in favour of remaining in the EU. Given current insights into the costs of leaving the EU [10] this is an important finding that should be taken into account in the debate about Austria's role in the European Union.

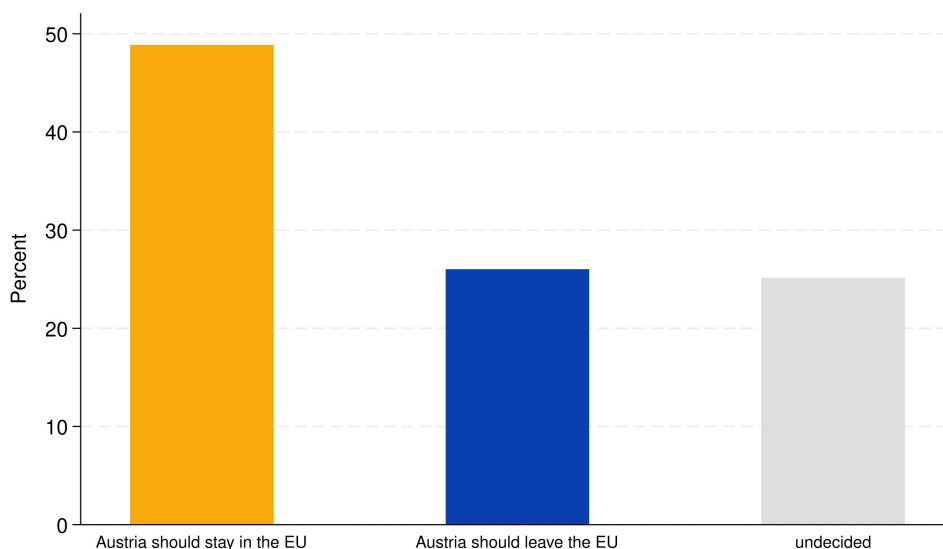


Figure 4: Opinion whether Austria should stay or leave the EU

Indeed, one of the major challenges of the soon-to-be-elected European Parliament will be reconciling the differences in public opinion on the future direction of European unification.

The ambivalence regarding the future of the European Union can also be seen in citizens' views on the integration and unification of the European Union. According to 26.8% of the respondents, European unification should be taken further, at least to some extent. By contrast, a larger proportion of the respondents stated that European integration "has already gone too far" (20.5%) or has "rather gone too far" (13.7%). 39.0% of the respondents do not express a clear opinion and place themselves in the middle of this scale or at most lean slightly to one of these options. Together with the question of Austria's role in the European Union, this shows that Austrians are rather Eurosceptic – a result that is regularly observed in the Eurobarometer surveys. Indeed, one of the major challenges of the soon-to-be-elected European Parliament will be reconciling the differences in public opinion on the future direction of European unification.

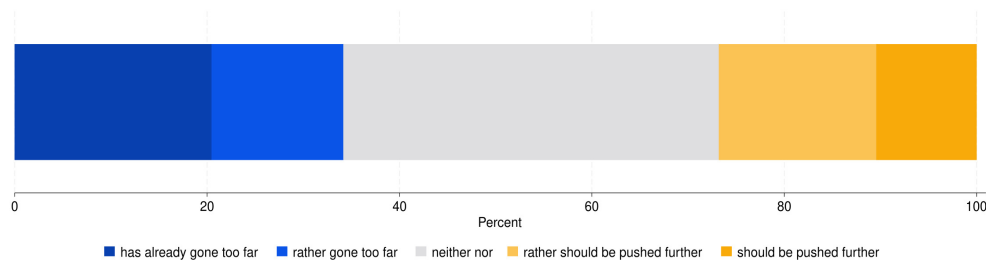


Figure 5: Opinion towards EU unification

A certain ambivalence in the economic policy preferences of Austrians is also evident here: they are generally in favour of the euro, but the majority refuses a common tax system.

However, the future of the EU is not just a choice between fostering unification or reversing the status quo. It also hinges on aligning citizens' policy prefer-

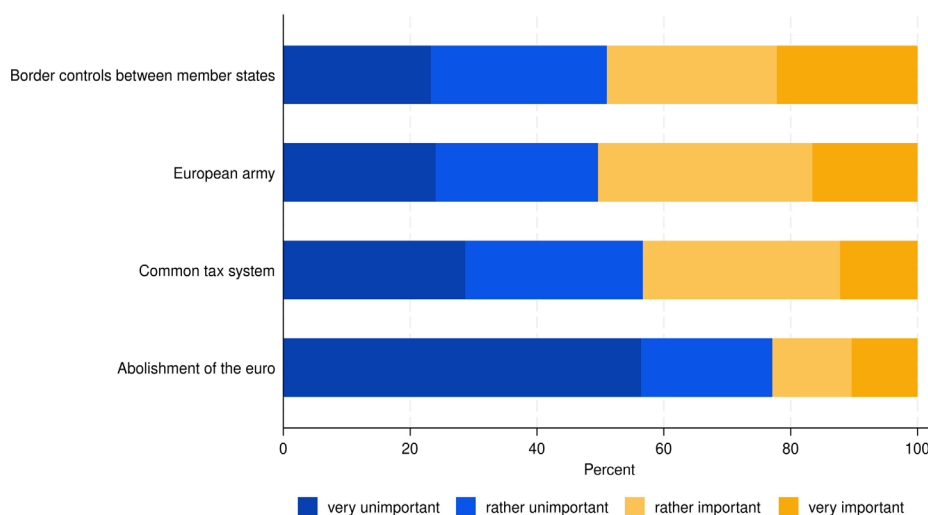


Figure 6: Perceived importance of policy measures for the future of the EU



ences for the future trajectory of the EU. Comparing the perceived importance of different policy measures, Figure 6 reveals few clear majorities. The only clear consensus is on the question of whether the common currency, the euro, should be abolished. Here, a majority considers this measure to be “very” (56.5%) or “rather” (20.7%) unimportant. Likewise, 56.7% of the respondents consider a common tax system to be unimportant. Slightly more than half of the respondents (50.4%) think of the establishment of a European army for common defence as important, whereas 48.9% state that the reintroduction of border controls between EU member states is “rather” or “very” important. A certain ambivalence in the economic policy preferences of Austrians is also evident here: they are generally in favour of the euro, but the majority refuses a common tax system. Regarding security aspects, they are in slight favour of a common European defence system on the one hand, while on the other hand, a slight majority supports checks at national borders.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, the ambivalence that respondents in Austria express shows the divide in public opinion about the future of the EU.

In sum, our data shows that the upcoming EP election are not a fixed priority in everyone’s calendar. While around half of the Austrian voters are interested in the election and plan to shape the EU’s direction through their votes, there is no clear majority in favour of further European unification, and there is even some potential to reverse Austria’s membership in the EU. Overall, the ambivalence that respondents in Austria express shows the divide in public opinion about the future of the EU. Given these mixed views among citizens, with some believing that unification should be taken further and others feeling that it has already gone too far, politicians may need to find a balance and invest more heavily in issues related to European integration – especially if they want to counterbalance the preferences of Austria leaving the EU.



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The Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE) is a non-governmental and non-partisan platform mainly constituted by the Austrian Social Partners. We inform about European integration and stand for open dialogue about topical issues of European politics and policies and their relevance for Austria. ÖGfE has a long-standing experience in promoting European debate and acts as a catalyst for disseminating information on European affairs.

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