

## European Parliament aims to reverse voter apathy with new election awareness campaign

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News

The European Parliament is stepping up efforts to combat voter apathy and raise public awareness of next year's European elections.



*Photo credit: Press Association*

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The European Parliament has launched a new campaign designed to boost voter turnout in the elections next May.

Traditionally, voter participation is poor - falling to below 25 percent in some parts of the EU - and there are also fears that this time there could be a huge upsurge in support for populist and eurosceptic parties.

The fear is that this could result in a massive influx of MEPs from anti-EU parties into the next five-year legislature, something the EU is desperate to avoid, particularly in light of the UK leaving the EU next year.

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Parliament has already invested millions of euros in a promotional campaign for the poll and the key message of the latest campaign, launched in Brussels on Thursday, is to distribute what parliament calls “proper facts” to voters ahead of poll in the spring.

The overall aim, says the institution, is to “annihilate fake news and make sure the positive and true stories are not overshadowed by negative, opportunistic propaganda.”

Parliament has joined forces with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the Brussels-based body that represents civil society and industry representatives at the EU level, to undertake a number of activities in order to raise awareness about the elections and to encourage participation.

Youth involvement in the elections is seen as particularly vital and first-time voters will be particularly targeted.

As part of the campaign, EESC members will be asked to act as “ambassadors” and will receive specific training for “Going Local” pre-election events.

"The European Parliament is committed to responding to the needs and priorities of citizens - especially on jobs, growth, security, migration and climate change. We all have a stake in these elections and we have a duty to inform" European Parliament President Antonio Tajani

Particular attention will be paid on how to communicate on social media, with specific guidelines on the use of hashtags and target groups and internal training for EESC members and staff.

The initiative was kicked off by parliament president Antonio Tajani and EESC president Luca Jahier, who signed a “joint declaration” which outlines the campaign goals.

Speaking at the launch, Jahier said, "Understanding and embracing change will allow Europe to move forward and shape the global order for the 21st century. There is no other alternative than being together. There is no way back. I am very happy to work together with Antonio Tajani to reassert the moral foundations of our model of democracy."

Tajani, an Italian centre-right MEP, added, "The European Parliament is committed to responding to the needs and priorities of citizens - especially on jobs, growth, security, migration and climate change. We all have a stake in these elections and we have a duty to inform."

All major activities organised by the EESC or taking place in its premises will include awareness raising on the elections and the EESC "Citizens' Convention" that will be organised in Brussels in early 2019.

Both the EESC and parliament will cooperate on national and local coverage and a number of articles and op-eds on the elections will be sent out to "selected" media outlets.

### **ELECTION TAMPERING CRACKDOWN**

Meanwhile, parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee has backed a proposal introducing penalties on European political parties deliberately breaching data protection to tamper with the European elections.

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The new provisions are aimed at protecting the electoral process from online disinformation campaigns based on misuse of voters' personal data. Some recent cases, like the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal, show how the vulnerabilities of data protection systems may undermine democratic debate and free elections.

In a vote on Thursday, the committee backed a draft law that would introduce financial sanctions on European political parties or foundations that infringe data protection rules deliberately to influence or attempt to influence the outcome of European elections.

Once a national supervisory authority decides that such an infringement has occurred, the authority for European political parties would decide upon the financial penalty.

The report by German Socialist Rainer Wieland and his Italian colleague Mercedes Bresso was adopted unanimously.

The plenary will now have to approve the mandate for inter-institutional negotiations, the outcome of which will have to be adopted by parliament as a whole and the European Council before it can enter into force.

### **About the author**

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