You Better Stay Home

By David Hearne, Researcher, Centre for Brexit Studies

Last week's EU elections in the UK had a runaway winner – and it wasn't Nigel Farage. No, the true runaway winner was Stay-At-Home. Non-voters outnumbered voters almost 2-to-1 in these elections. On one level, that tells us very little: why did people choose to stay at home? We have no idea of the political preferences of Stay-At-Home's voters (although it wouldn't be the only party not to release a manifesto or policies).

There have been many explanations put forward. One possibility is that people might actively choose not to vote in order to make a statement. Undoubtedly there are individuals who did make that choice. However, on balance it seems unlikely that they were a significant portion of the electorate for two major reasons.

Firstly, turnout in this election was almost identical to other European elections in recent years[1] and considerably higher than their nadir of 24% in 1999. Now, it is certainly possible that those who chose not to vote were replaced by an equal number who were unusually fired-up about the election. However, this is also unlikely given that the Brexit Party quite explicitly argued that it needed precisely this set of votes in order to deliver "a message" to the Government.

As a result, it seems safe to assert that low turnout was not due to some kind of mass boycott of EU elections. Another possibility (which might be related) was active voter dissatisfaction with the options available: the so-called "none of the above" option. Whilst this is certainly feasible, the spread of parties, variety of views and somewhat more proportional nature of representation in European elections generally make it unlikely.

After all, when one has the option to vote for anything from the Brexit Party through to the Greens with a realistic chance of electing one's preferred party this argument doesn't seem to hold much water (although its' fair to [argue](#) that this in the North East, Wales and East Midlands get a raw deal on this front). Indeed, turnout is generally considerably higher in General Elections, which use the antiquated

(and thoroughly undemocratic) First-Past-The-Post system where only marginal constituencies have any realistic choice at all.

More feasible is the notion that many felt that voting was largely purposeless given that the UK is expected to cease being an EU member shortly after the newly elected parliament begins sitting. After all, why bother voting in an election where one's vote is irrelevant? Of course, the same could be said of the many thousands of votes cast in safe seats in General Elections. Such a view also has to contend with the fact that turnout actually rose slightly from 2014 (although it remains pitiful).

It is not unlikely that two opposing forces were driving turnout in opposite directions. On the one hand, many voters felt a reduced need or desire to vote given the sentiments expressed in the above paragraph. On the other hand, we know that many felt 'fired up', either about leaving the EU as soon as possible (per the Brexit Party and UKIP), whilst others were equally passionate about remaining in the EU (supporters of the Liberal Democrats, Greens, SNP, Plaid, ChangeUK, Alliance etc.)

However, such was the crushing magnitude of Stay-At-Home's victory that I don't believe any of the above explanations to be sufficient. There are a variety of generalised explanations for low turnout, which has been an issue in UK elections for some time (albeit with notable exceptions, including recent referenda) but these also fail to fully explain the Stay-At-Home's overwhelming victory.

Thus, the explanation lies elsewhere. Voting is not automatic – it is something that you have to actively choose to do. In some senses, therefore, it is odd that most questions about turnout are asking why people *didn't* vote. Let's turn that on its head – what *would* make people choose to vote? I contend that people generally vote in order to have a say, to effect change and to make a statement.

I would venture to suggest that perhaps what these elections are actually telling us is that a majority of people feel far less strongly about the EU – one way or another – than the political acrimony over leaving (or not) has led us to believe. Most people "just don't care" that much. Sure, if you prod them hard enough, they will

express a preference over Britain's EU membership but oftentimes those preferences are not that strong.

Apathy was the real winner of these elections. How many of us can detail which grouping our chosen party sits with in the European Parliament? How many of us know the detailed policy platform we voted for? Perhaps it's not surprising that we believe we "need a strong leader who is willing to break the rules"[2]. Perhaps Pink Floyd had it right all those years ago: most of us are sheep.

[1] https://www.election-results.eu/turnout/

[2] https://assets.ctfassets.net/rdwvqctnt75b/7iQEHtrkIbLcrUkduGmo9b/cb429a657e97cad61e61853c05c8c4d1/Hansard-Society__Audit-of-Political-Engagement-16__2019-report.pdf