

ARE YOUNG VOTERS MORE LIKELY TO REGRET THEIR CHOICE?

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Abstract. According to classical theories of political representation, electoral outcomes are expected to reflect the genuine political preferences of the population. This, in turn, presupposes that citizens cast meaningful votes that they do not come to regret in the days following the election. In this paper, we assess the extent to which voters and abstainers experienced regret in the week following the 2024 European Parliament elections, based on samples from Germany, France, and Italy. We find that levels of regret are substantial, particularly among abstainers and young voters, who are specifically oversampled in our data. In all three countries, young respondents are more likely to regret having voted, or having abstained, than older ones. These findings suggest that, beyond higher levels of abstention, the youth vote conceals another form of democratic deficit, as young citizens exhibit higher levels of voting regret.

Keywords: abstention, electoral behavior, European Parliament elections, regret, youth vote.

Résumé. Selon les théories classiques de la représentation politique, les résultats électoraux sont censés refléter les préférences politiques authentiques de la population. Cela suppose, en retour, que les citoyens expriment des votes significatifs qu'ils ne regrettent pas dans les jours suivant l'élection. Dans cet article, nous évaluons dans quelle mesure les électeurs et les abstentionnistes ont ressenti du regret la semaine suivant les élections européennes de 2024, à partir d'échantillons provenant d'Allemagne, de France et d'Italie. Nous constatons que les niveaux de regret sont substantiels, en particulier chez les abstentionnistes et les jeunes électeurs, qui sont spécifiquement suréchantillonnés dans nos données. Dans les trois pays, les jeunes répondants sont plus susceptibles de regretter d'être allé voter ou de s'être abstenus que les plus âgés. Ces résultats suggèrent qu'au-delà des niveaux plus élevés d'abstention, le vote des jeunes dissimule une autre forme de déficit démocratique, car ils sont plus nombreux à regretter leur choix de vote ou d'abstention.

Mots-clés: abstention, comportement électoral, élections européennes, regret, vote des jeunes.

INTRODUCTION

Foundational models of representative democracy assume that electoral outcomes reflect the will of the voters, that is, the aggregation of their political preferences (Arrow, 1963 [1951]; Downs, 1957). In these models, parties adjust their policy platforms in response to electoral results, or in anticipation of them, because they seek to win office and avoid electoral punishment while in power. These theories implicitly assume that voters cast meaningful ballots genuinely representing their political preferences or meaningfully abstain when they are indifferent to the alternatives proposed. Meaningful voting and abstention are thus a necessary good functioning of representative democracy.

Yet many empirical studies show that voting decisions are not always good reflections of political preferences. Voters, for example, are often biased by their partisan identities (Achen and Bartels, 2016) and tend to find excuses not to punish their preferred party when it engages in misconduct, such as corruption (Anduiza et al., 2014). They are also relatively uninformed about political matters and are not always able to identify the ideological position defended by parties and candidates (Adams et al., 2011). Additionally, their decisions are influenced by factors unrelated to politics, such as sporting events (Healy et al., 2010), candidates' physical attractiveness (Berggren et al., 2010), or even the weather on election day (Persson et al., 2014). These factors can lead voters to deviate from what might be considered their "correct" choice, that is, a choice that best reflects their political preferences (Lau and Redlawsk, 1997).

In this paper, we study one of the consequences of such incorrect choices: voting regret, defined as the negative judgement that individuals express about their vote choice or abstention in the immediate aftermath of the election. A feeling of regret in this context indeed implies that the voting decision is perceived to be incorrect by the person who made it (Blais and Kilibarda, 2016; Connolly and Zeelenberg, 2002). If they could vote again, this person would make a different decision, either by voting for another party, abstaining instead of voting, or voting instead of abstaining. A high level of voting regret in the days that follow the election, in any of these scenarios, would therefore be

problematic for democracy, as it suggests that the electoral outcome does not carry the meaning attributed to it by classical models of representative democracy, that is a reflection of the voters' will.¹

Meanwhile, democracy advocates are increasingly concerned about young generations who show growing signs of disengagement from elections worldwide (United Nations Development Programme, 2015). Although new generations remain interested in politics and exhibit some strong commitment to democracy (Dalton, 2006; Wutke et al., 2022), they are not showing up at the ballot station as much as older cohorts (Blais and Kostelka, 2021). They also show less sense of partisan identity and loyalty and are therefore more volatile and indecisive (Dinas, 2014; Dassonneville, 2023). All these indicators point toward a global youth democratic deficit in terms of political representation.

Amid this challenge, we study in this paper whether young voters are more likely to regret their voting decision compared to older voters and therefore whether there is also a youth democratic deficit at this level. We do so in the context of the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections in France, Germany, and Italy. Arguably, voting regret is likely to be high in this context due to the second-order nature of EP elections in general and the relatively low level of voter engagement that typically accompanies them (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). However, it may also be lower, as second-order elections are seen as less important by voters (Golder et al., 2017). In any case, we believe that it remains a normatively important question to examine, given the leading role of the EP in the decision-making process of the European Union (EU) and the importance of European policies in the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of citizens on the continent (De Vries et al., 2025 [2021]).

1 Note that voting regret is not the same as a long-term change in partisan preferences. For example, a person who voted for one of the governing parties months or years ago may indicate that they would vote for a different party in the next election. Such a pattern may simply reflect an updating of their evaluation of the parties based on their performance in government or legislature and/or the policies implemented by this government during the current legislative period. Following the related literature on political science (e.g., Blais and Kilibarda, 2016) and the more general literature about regret in psychology (e.g., Kahneman and Tversky, 1982), we focus in this paper on immediate voting regret.

The results of our study show that abstainers express greater levels of regret than voters in all three countries covered. This finding echoes the literature in psychology that shows that negative evaluations of one's decisions are more common when the decision was one of inaction rather than action (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982). Regarding age differences, we find robust evidence that age decreases likelihood of regretting one's voting decision. This finding suggests that voting regret, particularly pervasive among young voters, is creating an additional deficit in political representation beyond abstention.

I. REGRETTING VOTING DECISIONS

Whereas political science has a long tradition of identifying the determinants of voting behavior, there are only a handful of studies examining voting regret.² This literature usually relies on a theoretical framework from psychology that considers regret as an aversive cognitive emotion, associated with counterfactual thinking, where individuals imagine alternative scenarios of what could have been if they had made other decisions (Gleicher et al., 1990; Pieters and Zeelenberg, 2005). Applied to voting, this corresponds to the negative emotional response individuals experience after an electoral process, particularly when they reassess their vote or abstaining decision as suboptimal (Blais and Kilibarda, 2016). In other words, voting regret arises when citizens consider that they made an incorrect decision and imagine that they would vote differently (or abstain) if they were given the chance to do it again (Drinkwater and Jennings, 2022; Tunç et al., 2023). Defined like this, it appears that voting regret, particularly when it comes right in the days that follow election day when none of the candidates and parties elected had the opportunity to make any political decision, is problematic for political representation. It entails that voting behavior is undetermined and therefore not a genuine expression of voters' political preferences.

- 2 Despite the lack of empirical studies on the topic, it is interesting to note that voting regret was a central mechanism in one of the first theories explaining voter turnout, according to which voters should vote because, in the exceptional event that their vote proved pivotal, they would deeply regret having abstained (Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974). However, this theory was later shown not to be supported by empirical evidence (Blais et al., 1995).

Voting regret is a common theme in the mediatic coverage of “surprise elections,” i.e. elections for which polls fail to predict the outcome. This is for example the case of the 2016 Presidential election in the United States³ and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom.⁴ Yet, voting regret is common, even in more normal elections. Its exact empirical prevalence depends on the survey question used to capture the concept. Respondents may be hesitant to admit a regret or may unconsciously rationalize their decisions to mitigate cognitive dissonance (Beasley and Joslyn, 2001). In their comparative study, André Blais and Anja Kilibarda (2016) estimate that, on average, only 2-3% of voters are willing to admit that their voting choice was a bad one. Meanwhile, a substantial number admit that they are not fully happy with their decision. Although there is variation between country and the election, this number is never lower than 30% of the electorate.

According to this literature, a key variable used to explain voting regret is political information. Voters who are interested in politics are more likely to consume political news and to be better informed about politics and elections. As a result, they are more likely to cast a vote that aligns with their genuine political preferences and, in turn, are less likely to regret such a “correct” vote (Blais and Kilibarda, 2016). Relatedly, another source of regret is the mis-anticipation of the final outcome. Incorrect polls’ prediction can indeed lead some citizens to abstain because they believe that the election is already decided and that their vote has no chance to be pivotal. This is, for example, what happened to a substantial portion of Remain supporters in the 2016 Brexit referendum (Drinkwater and Jennings, 2022). Similar dynamics can be observed in parliamentary elections held under majoritarian electoral systems, where results are difficult to anticipate at the local level due to the small size of the districts. In such contexts, a substantial portion of citizens end up voting for a non-viable party because they mis-anticipate its chances of winning in their district (Bol et al., 2018).

3 See S. Underwood, 2017, “I voted for Donald Trump, and I already regret it”, Vox: <<https://www.vox.com/first-person/2017/11/18/14300952/donald-trump-vote-regret>>.

4 See J. Staufenberg, 2016, “Brexit: More than one million people want to change their vote from Leave to Remain” *Independent*: <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-eu-referendum-bregret-leave-petition-second-remain-latest-will-we-leave-a7105116.html>>.

Note however that voting regret is not necessarily related to the closeness of the electoral outcome, and whether one's alternative vote would have tipped this outcome in one direction or the other, for example by giving one more seat to a given party. Many studies show that voting is in fact partially, or even mainly, driven by expressive motives, so that it is at least as much about one's willingness to affect the electoral results (instrumental motivation) than about one's willingness to feel good about themselves by casting a certain vote (expressive motivation) (Bol et al., 2018; Feddersen et al., 2009).

In this paper, we do not focus on political information. The reason is twofold. Firstly, in the 2024 EP elections, at least in the three countries covered in our data (France, Germany, and Italy), polls remained relatively stable in the weeks preceding election day. Hence, the election cannot be considered a surprise as the score of all major parties was correctly predicted. Secondly, these three countries use proportional electoral systems with large districts for this election, meaning that all but the very minor parties are viable. This limits the impact of strategic voting and the associated risk of regret (Bol et al., 2024). As evidence of this, our survey embedded an experimental vignette that reminded some random groups of respondents about the result of the election in their country before asking them whether they regret their choice. An analysis on the full sample reveals that the treatment effect of such vignette is far from being statistically significant, which suggests that this result was not a surprise for the average respondent.

Instead, we focus on two key hypotheses. First, the psychology literature considers that there is an asymmetry between action and inaction in the experience of regret (Gleicher et al., 1990; Kahneman and Tversky, 1982). Inactions tend to produce higher levels of regrets because they are associated with missed opportunities and unfulfilled intentions, which people revisit and mentally elaborate on *a posteriori*. This pattern tends to reinforce itself over time as missed opportunities accumulate (Gilovich and Medvec, 1995). By contrast, actions are more easily justified or reinterpreted due to their active nature and the fact that they at least reflect agency. If we apply this framework to the electoral context, and consider abstention as a form of political inaction, this asymmetry implies

that citizens are more likely to regret not voting than voting, even when their vote did not lead to a desired outcome. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: *Abstainers show greater levels of voting regret than voters*

Second, we also posit that age should be a determinant of voting regret. Young citizens have a different relationship to politics than older cohorts. Although they are equally committed to democracy (Wuttke et al., 2022) and equally, or even more, interested in politics (Dalton, 2006), they exhibit lower levels of partisan attachment to parties and candidates, which is partly due to their relatively limited experience with electoral participation (Dinas 2014). As a result, they tend to be more indecisive in their vote choice (Dassonneville, 2023; Muxel, 2010), more electorally volatile (Rekker, 2022), and ultimately more responsible for changes in party systems (Van der Brug and Kritzinger, 2025). For these reasons, we expect that young voters are more likely to regret their vote than older cohorts, as their higher levels of indecision increase the risk of hesitation and in turn post-electoral dissatisfaction. This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: *Young voters and abstainers are more likely to regret their choice than older cohorts*

2. DATA AND DESIGN

To test our hypotheses, we use data from the CEVIPOF-Bocconi European Election Study (CBEEs), which conducted a two-wave panel survey during the 2024 EP elections with samples made representative of the national populations of the three largest countries of the EU: France, Germany, and Italy. The first wave was conducted before election day (May 31-June 7), and the second after (June 12-July 2). A total of 8,953 respondents were interviewed in the first wave (France: 2,971; Germany: 3,050; Italy: 2,932), and 6,501 in the second wave (France: 2,234; Germany: 3,026; Italy: 2,241). For our analysis, we reduce the sample to the respondents who participated in both waves, given that our dependent variable is measured after the election. Importantly, about half of our samples consist of a specific subsample of young citizens aged 18 to 34, made

representative of this demographic stratum (France: 1,113; Germany: 1,109; Italy: 1,072). This subsample is particularly useful to test our second hypothesis.

To measure voting regret, we asked respondents in the second wave to first report whether they had voted in the 2024 EP elections, and if so, for which party they voted. We then asked whether they regretted their choice on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means they do not regret it at all and 10 means they regret it a lot.⁵ This scale constitutes our dependent variable. For those who gave an answer above the mid-point of the response scale (that is, 5), we asked a follow-up question about what they would do if they could vote again. Note that we remove “Don’t know” and “Refusal” responses from this question, as well from other questions used in our analysis.

To test our first hypothesis, we construct a variable taking the value of 1 for those who reported having voted in the 2024 EP elections and 0 for those who reported having abstained. To test our second hypothesis, we construct a variable capturing the respondent’s age group: between 18 and 30, between 31 and 45, and over 46. This grouping has the advantage of dividing the sample into three groups of approximately 33.3% each. However, in a robustness test below (see Table 1), we also use a continuous version of the age variable.

The descriptive statistics of these independent and dependent variables can be found in Appendix A. Interestingly, although the most common answer to the regret variable was the minimum value (about 56%), the variable has a mean of 3.2 and a standard deviation of 3.0, which indicates that a substantial portion of respondents do express a voting regret and there is sufficient variation to be explained by our independent variables. Indeed, 29% of respondents in our dataset express some form of regret about their voting decision by choosing a value above the mid-point of the response scale. Voting regret is thus a pervasive attitude in the electorate of the three countries covered in our data, at least for the 2024 EP elections. Yet, it is at the lower bound of the estimates of Blais and Kilibarda (2016), though not very different. They find that between

5 The survey question was: “Do you regret your vote choice/abstention on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means not at all and 10 means a lot?”

30% and 50% of respondents are not perfectly happy with their choice in national and regional elections across a range of Western countries.

Appendix B reports regret levels by voting choice in each country. It also reports the vote share obtained by each party in the election. It shows that the differences between parties are relatively small, the average regret level ranges from two to three points for most parties included in the data. Meanwhile, the average is neither lower than one or bigger than four for any of those parties. There is a slight tendency for supporters of large parties to regret less, but this is not systematic. In France, for example, the lowest level of regret is among those who voted for the Rassemblement National (RN), which won the election with 31% of the votes (average regret = 2.0), while the highest level is among those who voted for Europe Écologie-Les Verts, which received 5.5% of the votes (average regret = 3.3). However, in Germany, it is the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) supporters, i.e. a party that received just over 6% of the votes, who show the lowest level of regret (average regret = 2.1), and in Italy it is Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, which received only 6.8% of the votes (average regret = 1.8). We however control for the vote share of the chosen party in the multivariate below (see Table 1). In the context of a EP elections, the party's vote share is indeed a good measure of victory given the absence of government at the European level.

Appendix C then shows the answers to the follow-up question asked to regretting voters and abstainers about what they would choose if they could vote again.⁶ We do not find that the largest parties are necessarily those that would be favored by regretting respondents. In France, for example, whereas 22% of them would vote for the election's winner (RN), over 16% would opt for La France Insoumise, which received less than 10% of the votes in the 2024 EP elections, making it only the fourth-largest party. In Italy, it is the Partito Democratica that is the most popular among regretting respondents (22%), far above the elections' winner, Fratelli d'Italia (9%). Another interesting finding from this figure is that few regretting respondents chose abstention as an alternative voting decision, less than 5% compared to the 30% who declared having abstained in our survey.

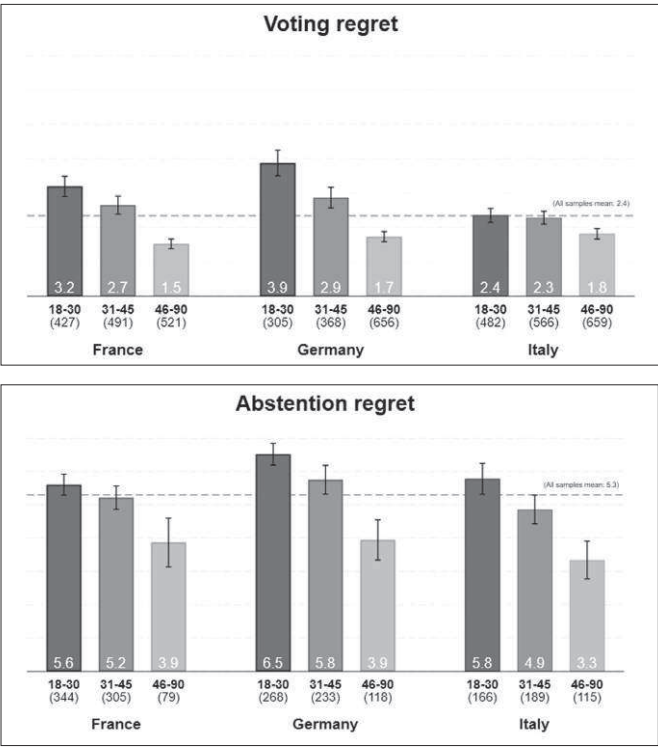
6 Note that the table crossing the party vote choice and the alternative vote of the regretting respondents is not informative given that the N becomes too small. There are generally less than 10 respondents in each cell.

3. RESULTS

Figure 1 reports the results of the bivariate analysis. It shows the average level of regret for voters and abstainers by age group. First, the figure clearly shows that abstainers are (much) more likely to regret their choice than voters. The difference is substantial: average regret is 2.5 for voters and 5.5 for abstainers. This is a three-points difference, which is equivalent to a third of the full range of the 1-10 response scale. This difference is similar across all three countries and within each age group. A series of t-tests reveals that all differences are statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (two-tailed). We thus find strong evidence confirming H1, according to which abstainers are more likely to regret their choice than voters.

Second, Figure 1 reveals that respondents aged 18-30 systematically report higher levels of regret than older groups. The magnitude of this difference varies by country, from 0.4 (France) to 0.9 (Italy) for abstainers, and from 0.1 (Italy) to 1.0 (Germany) for voters. Interestingly, respondents aged 31-45 are also more likely to regret their choice than those over 46, which indicates that the relationship between age is not only driven by the youngest respondents. Here again, a series of t-tests reveals that these differences are all statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level, except for the comparison between the 18-30 and 31-45 age groups in Italy (voting regret), and the one between the 18-30 and 31-45 age groups in France (abstention regret). We thus also find strong evidence in support of H2, with the caveat that voting regret is not only higher among the youngest group of voters but is linearly negatively correlated with age.

Figure 1. Level of regret by age and voting decision



Note: Bars are the average level of regret by age group. The upper panel is for voters, and the lower panel is for abstainers. Vertical lines are 95%-confidence intervals around the mean. The numbers in white are the means, and the values in parentheses indicate the N.

To further confirm these patterns, we conduct a multivariate analysis by estimating an OLS regression predicting the level of regret using our two main independent variables: abstention (vs. voting) and age. For age, we first use the age groups defined above, and then a continuous version of the variable. We also include a squared term for age to test for potential non-linear effects. Finally, we add a series of control variables to evaluate the robustness of the patterns presented above. These variables include socio-demographic characteristics (gender, urban status, marital status, occupation status, religion, and subjective social class) and political variables (political news consumption, self-reported left-right

ideology, likelihood to vote at the election as reported in the pre-election survey wave, perceived importance of this election, stability of voting intention, and vote share obtained by chosen party in the election). The full list is available in Appendix D. We also include country fixed effects.

Table 1 confirms the findings discussed above. Abstainers are 2.5 points more likely to regret their choice than voters, even after controlling for a range of covariates. The same applies to age: those between 18 and 30 years old are 0.5 points more likely to regret than those between 31 and 45, and 1 point more likely than those over 45. The second column shows that this effect is mostly linear, as regret decreases by 0.1 points with each additional year of age. All these patterns are statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. Finally, the squared term for age is also positive and statistically significant at the same level, indicating that regret tends to increase slightly among the very old. This last pattern is however very small in terms of magnitude.

Table 1. Results of multivariate analysis

	AGE GROUP	AGE CONTINUOUS
Voting	Ref.	Ref.
Abstention	2.132***	2.126***
	(18.92)	(18.83)
AGE		
18-30yo	Ref.	
31-45yo	-0.476***	
	(-5.19)	
46-90yo	-1.023***	
	(-9.45)	
Age		-0.084***
		(-5.80)
Age ²		0.001***
		(4.09)

GENDER		
Male	Ref.	Ref.
Female	0.016	0.015
	(0.25)	(0.23)
Other	-0.575	-0.638
	(-1.71)	(-1.85)
RELIGION		
Catholic	Ref.	Ref.
Protestant	0.078	0.069
	(0.54)	(0.48)
Other Christian	0.415*	0.409*
	(2.34)	(2.31)
Jewish	0.743*	0.738*
	(2.04)	(2.03)
Muslim	0.471*	0.451*
	(2.40)	(2.29)
Non-believer	-0.357***	-0.362***
	(-4.77)	(-4.83)
Other	-0.232	-0.246
	(-1.53)	(-1.63)
Don't know	0.373*	0.381*
	(2.16)	(2.22)
URBAN DENSITY		
Big city	Ref.	Ref.
Suburbs or outskirts of big city	-0.052	-0.058
	(-0.51)	(-0.56)
Town or small city	-0.275***	-0.278***
	(-3.48)	(-3.51)
Country village	-0.271**	-0.280**
	(-2.74)	(-2.83)

Farm or home in countryside	-0.183	-0.177
	(-0.64)	(-0.62)
Don't know	-0.385	-0.367
	(-0.69)	(-0.67)
MARITAL STATUS		
Married	Ref.	Ref.
Single living with partner	-0.110	-0.126
	(-1.20)	(-1.37)
Single	-0.288***	-0.309***
	(-3.35)	(-3.56)
Divorced or separated	-0.448***	-0.440***
	(-3.56)	(-3.51)
Widow/er	-0.533**	-0.550**
	(-2.79)	(-2.84)
OCCUPATION STATUS		
Self-employed	Ref.	Ref.
Employed	-0.301*	-0.295*
	(-2.48)	(-2.42)
In school	-0.393*	-0.502**
	(-2.45)	(-3.05)
Working in household	-0.570**	-0.568**
	(-2.85)	(-2.84)
Retired	-0.373**	-0.343*
	(-2.69)	(-2.13)
Unemployed	-0.581**	-0.590**
	(-3.22)	(-3.27)
Other	-0.410	-0.432
	(-1.51)	(-1.59)
SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL CLASS		
Working class	Ref.	Ref.

Lower middle class	-0.199	-0.196
	(-1.76)	(-1.73)
Middle class	-0.105	-0.103
	(-1.01)	(-0.99)
Upper middle class	-0.166	-0.174
	(-1.30)	(-1.36)
Upper class	-0.012	-0.007
	(-0.06)	(-0.03)
Other	0.273	0.281
	(0.81)	(0.83)
Don't know	-0.292	-0.299
	(-1.28)	(-1.31)
POLITICAL NEWS CONSUMPTION		
Very low	Ref.	Ref.
Low	-0.0381	-0.0445
	(-0.44)	(-0.51)
High	0.185*	0.182*
	(2.05)	(2.02)
Very high	1.205***	1.191***
	(11.02)	(10.86)
SELF-REPORTED LEFT-RIGHT POSITION		
Far-left	-0.352**	-0.354**
	(-2.76)	(-2.78)
Left	-0.126	-0.128
	(-1.31)	(-1.33)
Center	Ref.	Ref.
Right	0.0939	0.0905
	(0.94)	(0.91)
Far-right	0.525***	0.514***
	(3.94)	(3.84)
Don't know	-0.729***	-0.722***
	(-5.18)	(-5.13)

LIKELIHOOD OF VOTING (PRE-ELECTORAL WAVE)		
Low	Ref.	Ref.
Medium	0.551***	0.551***
	(4.53)	(4.54)
High	-0.0911	-0.0994
	(-0.70)	(-0.76)
Don't know	-0.104	-0.107
	(-0.33)	(-0.35)
PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF ELECTION		
Low	Ref.	Ref.
Medium	0.477***	0.489***
	(5.04)	(5.18)
High	0.494***	0.516***
	(4.48)	(4.67)
Don't know	0.281	0.288
	(1.03)	(1.06)
VOTE SHARE OF CHOSEN PARTY	-0.028***	-0.028***
	(-8.03)	(-7.99)
Country fixed effects	YES	YES
Intercept	3.355***	5.081***
	(13.66)	(12.54)
Observations	6,292	6,292
Adjusted R ²	0.339	0.339

Note: Entries are coefficient estimates from OLS regressions. Robust standard errors are in parenthesis.
* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

Table 1 also reveals several noteworthy patterns in the coefficients associated with the control variables. Regarding socio-demographics, we find that non-believers are less likely to experience voting regret than religious respondents, regardless of their specific religion. Similarly, individuals living in rural areas are less likely to regret their vote compared to urban residents.

By contrast, self-employed individuals are more likely to regret their vote than those in other occupational categories. Strikingly, however, there is a relative absence of strong socio-demographic patterns (aside from age). For example, gender and social class show no significant association with voting regret. Even the few observed patterns are modest in size, with coefficients never exceeding 0.5 in absolute terms.

The political control variables also reveal several interesting patterns. First, individuals who consume more political news are more prone to regret their vote. The same is true for those who perceive the election as particularly important. These findings suggest that respondents need to be at least minimally engaged in politics to experience voting regret. Second, individuals who expressed ambivalence about their likelihood of voting in the pre-election wave, as well as those whose vote intentions shifted between the pre- and post-election waves, are also more likely to regret their vote. This indicates that voting regret is partly linked to hesitation and indecisiveness. Third, there is a negative association between the vote share of the respondent's chosen party and voting regret: respondents are more satisfied with their vote when their party performs well and less so when it performs poorly. Finally, we observe that far-left voters are less likely to regret their vote, whereas far-right voters are more likely. This finding is somewhat surprising, as one might expect both groups to be more radical and thus confident in their political preferences. It is also worth noting that, as with the socio-demographic variables, most of these political patterns are small in magnitude compared to age (and even more so compared to abstention vs. voting), with the exceptions of political news consumption and the vote share of the chosen party.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we investigate the phenomenon of voting regret, that is, the tendency of some voters and abstainers to regret their decision in the immediate aftermath of an election. We do so in the context of the 2024 EP elections in France, Germany, and Italy, drawing on an original panel survey conducted before and after the elections in these three countries. Our analysis focuses on

the role of age, to assess whether young citizens, already known to be less likely to vote, are also more likely to experience regret about their voting behavior.

Our results reveal two main findings. First, abstention is more often followed by regret than voting. This pattern is consistent across the three countries studied and holds even after controlling for a range of individual-level characteristics. Second, we find that voting regret is higher among younger respondents. The relationship between age and regret appears largely linear, with younger age groups more likely to evaluate their voting decisions negatively than older cohorts. These findings have important implications for representative democracy. Classical models assume that electoral outcomes reflect the political will of the population. Yet if large segments of the electorate regret their decision in the days following elections day, before elected officials have had the opportunity to implement any policy, it suggests that electoral outcomes do not always represent a genuine aggregation of political preferences. In other words, the normative weight that politicians and analysts sometimes attribute to electoral results, in the sense that they provide authoritative direction to governments, may be more fragile than often assumed. The findings also indicate that young voters are more indecisive about their electoral choice than older cohorts. This suggests that beyond turnout, the experience of regret constitutes another facet of the youth democratic deficit, raising concerns about the capacity of elections to equally reflect the will of all citizens. On a more positive note, our findings also make a strong case in favor of campaigns advocating turnout, especially among the youth, as we show that abstention is rarely a definitive act of disengagement or indifference, and that many non-voters are in fact actively considering voting.

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APPENDIX

A. Descriptive statistics

	MEAN	SD	MIN	MAX
Regret	3.2	3.0	1	10
Abstention	0.3	0.5	0	1
Age group 18-34	0.4	0.5	0	1
Age group 35-44	0.3	0.4	0	1
Age group 46+	0.3	0.5	0	1
Age (continuous)	41.5	17.1	18	90

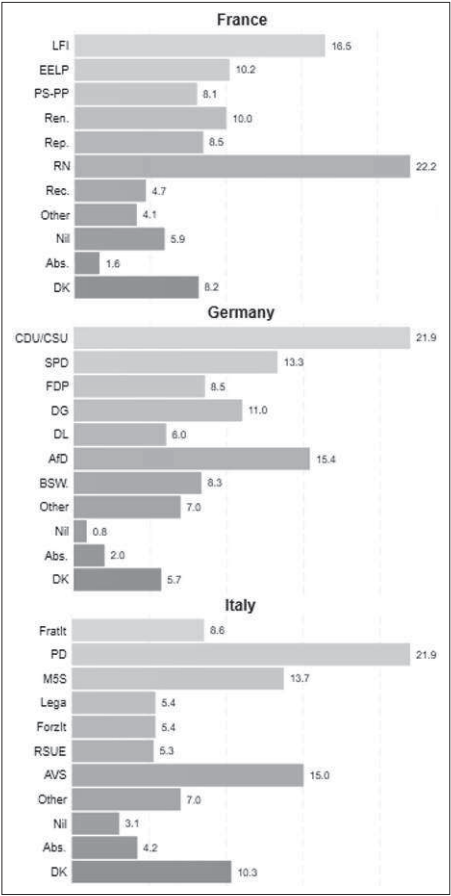
B. Regret by voting choice

	FRANCE	GERMANY	ITALY
La France Insoumise (9.9%)	2.8		
Europe Écologie-Les Verts (5.5%)	3.3		
Parti Socialiste (13.8%)	2.2		
Renaissance, ex La République en Marche ! (14.6%)	2.3		
Les Républicains (7.2%)	3.3		
Rassemblement National (31.4%)	2.0		
Reconquête (5.5%)	2.4		
CDU/CSU (30.0%)		2.7	
SPD (13.9%)		2.6	
FDP (5.2%)		3.5	
Die Grünen (11.9%)		2.9	
Die Linke (2.7%)		3.1	
AfD (15.9%)		2.4	
BSW (6.2%)		2.1	
Fratelli d'Italia (28.7%)			1.8
Partito Democratico (24.1%)			1.7
Movimento 5 Stelle (9.0%)			2.0
Lega (9.0%)			2.7
Forza Italia (9.6%)			3.0
Stati Uniti d'Europa (3.8%)			3.7
Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra (6.8%)			1.5

Other	2.2	1.8	3.4
Blank/null	2.5	4.0	2.1
Don't know	2.8	1.8	2.3
Abstain	5.3	5.7	4.8

Note: Entries are average levels of regret by voting choice (1-10). The % in parentheses is the vote share received by the party at the 2024 European election.

C. Alternative vote



Note: Entries are proportions of regretting respondents who would have chosen this alternative voting choice if there was another election.

D. List of control variables

Socio-demographics

- **Gender:** Male, female, other.
- **Religion:** Catholic, Protestant, other Christians, Jewish, Muslim, non-believer; other.
- **Urban status:** Big city, suburbs or outskirts of big city, town or small city, country village, farm or home in countryside, don't know.
- **Marital status:** Married or remarried, single living with partner, single, divorced or separated, widow/er.
- **Occupation status:** Self-employed, employed, in school, working in household, retired, unemployed, other; don't know.
- **Subjective social class:** Working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, upper class, others, don't know.

Political variables

- **Political news consumption:** 0-1 scale constructed by aggregating answers to a question where respondents indicated the frequency with which they learn about politics via the following channels: TV, radio or podcast, discussions with friends and family, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, LinkedIn, WhatsApp. We then split this variable into four categories corresponding to the four empirical quartiles.
- **Self-reported left-right scale:** 0-10 scale where 0 means very left and 10 very right. We re-coded this variable as: 0-1 far-left, 2-4 left, 5 center, 6-8 right, 9-10 far-right, and don't know.
- **Likelihood to vote for the upcoming European election (pre-election survey wave):** From a 0 to 10 scale where 0 means very likely to abstain and 10 very likely to vote. We then re-coded this variable as: low likelihood of voting (0-4), medium (5-9), high (10), and don't know.
- **Perceived importance of upcoming European election (pre-election survey wave):** From a 0 to 10 scale where 0 means not important at all and 10 very important. We then re-coded this variable as: low perceived importance (0-4), medium (5-9), high (10), and don't know.
- **Stability of vote intentions:** Whether the respondent's vote intention (or abstention) in the pre-election wave is the same as their vote choice (or abstention) in the post-election wave (=1). We use the mid-point 5 to separate those with an intention to abstain from an intention to vote in the pre-election survey wave.
- **Vote share of chosen party:** Vote share obtained by the party for which the respondent voted at the European election (in %). The variable is set to 0% for abstainers and to 1% for those who reported for another party (1% being the mean of the other parties not included in the survey).