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# Trust and voter turnout in Europe

Results from the Horizon TRUEDEM  
research project



**Sociologia  
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# Sociologia Politica

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La globalizzazione determina, tra i suoi effetti maggiormente problematici, una crisi profonda della politica e della cultura politica democratica. La sociologia politica italiana e le nuove generazioni di ricercatori che la animano hanno una missione cruciale, vale a dire attualizzare il percorso dei classici da Karl Marx e Max Weber agli elitisti, adeguandone le categorie analitiche alla complessità della postmodernità. La nuova centralità delle relazioni transnazionali e la questione dell'Europa suggeriscono l'uso del metodo comparativo come cornice di una riflessione sociologica innovativa. La collana intende tematizzare l'intreccio tra mutamento sociale e mutamento politico nella consapevolezza che il cambiamento investe sia le questioni di *polity*, relative agli assetti istituzionali e alla crisi della tradizionale forma-Stato, sia le dinamiche di *politics*, con la personalizzazione e la mediatizzazione del potere, sia infine le *policies*, condizionate dalle ricorrenti ondate neo-liberiste. La collana promuove studi e ricerche che interpretano gli elementi più significativi di queste trasformazioni spingendosi a esplorare nuove categorie, nuovi movimenti e nuove tematiche.

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This book has been prepared with the support of the TRUEDEM “Trust in European Democracies” research project funded under the European Union’s Horizon research and innovation program (grant agreement No 101095237). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Horizon research and innovation program. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

This book has been published with the support of the Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e della Comunicazione, Università di Salerno.

Isbn: 9788835171386

Isbn e-book Open Access: 9788835179467

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# Preface

by *Domenico Maddaloni*\*

The relationship between trust toward institutions and political actors and citizen participation in democratic life is undoubtedly a topic of great relevance to contemporary social and political research. This book stems from the experience accumulated on this issue as part of the Horizon TRUEDEM – *Trust in European Democracies* research, whose principal investigator is Professor Christian Haerpfer (University of Vienna), President of the World Values Survey Association. More specifically, it allows us to present the results we have obtained regarding electoral participation, one of the fundamental aspects of democratic life. The line of research we dedicated to this topic<sup>1</sup> first allowed us to create a database on electoral rules and data in European countries.<sup>2</sup> Next, we used our database to examine the relationship between trust in the social and political field and electoral turnout, drawing on the indications from the extensive comparative political research work Pippa Norris has been doing for many years at Harvard University.

Voter turnout has been, and still is, one of the most critical topics in research on representative democracies since it is considered an indicator of the legitimacy of political institutions. Over the years, an increasing amount of literature has been devoted to the issue. Therefore, our book aims to outline the factors at stake when voter turnout is addressed in social and political research, with a particular reference to social and political trust. More specifically, we focus on the role played by political and institutional trust on

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<sup>1</sup> More specifically, our research has been carried out in the framework of *Work Package 2 – Voting and electoral behaviour: new challenges for inclusiveness and representativity in democratic systems*, led by the UNISA-IT team.

<sup>2</sup> Available in various formats at: <https://www.truedem.eu/resources-and-deliverables/online-data-analysis/voting-and-elections-database>.

one side, and social or generalized trust on the other, in affecting voter turnout trends and differences among the EU countries. Therefore, the research questions addressed in this book are: (1) *Is there an association between social and/or political trust, and voter turnout?* (2) *Does this association hold for both European Parliamentary (EP) and national Parliamentary (NP) elections?* (3) *Is the effect of trust moderated by contextual and institutional factors?*

Before getting into the heart of the analysis, Chapter 1 (by Christian Haerpfer) will present the reader with more details about the TRUEDEM project: the research network, the research structure, and the scientific and policy objectives it proposes. This is because the issue of voter turnout in European countries cannot be separated from the broader context of the social and cultural changes that Europe is experiencing today. In fact, fluctuations in electoral turnout in Europe are the effect of a series of deep and more general transformations and must be explained with reference to these. At the same time, these transformations may generate innovative behaviour and unexpected solutions to the problem of citizen involvement in political decision-making.

A brief outline of the main trends and differences in turnout across European countries follows this overall presentation of TRUEDEM research. Chapter 2 (by Domenico Fruncillo and Marialaura Ammirato) assesses the turnout trends in both the European Parliament and national elections. In the latter case, we considered 31 European countries, that is, the European Union member States, plus the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Norway, and Ukraine. The authors first describe the overall trends in electoral turnout and then discuss the differences in turnout trends over decades (1991-2001; 2002-2012; 2013-2023). In addition, the authors examine these trends for different groups of countries, identified based on two criteria: the time of their accession to the EU and their geographical location. These aggregations make it possible to assess whether the influence of geopolitical background and the consolidation of democratic practices can be mirrored in different levels of voter turnout.

Subsequent chapters are devoted to the analysis of differences in turnout at the country level. We focus on finding the most effective predictors of these national differences. For this purpose, Chapter 3 (by Domenico Maddaloni) builds on a previous work (Frucillo et al., 2023), presenting a short review of the existing literature on the factors affecting voter turnout. One of Max Weber's main teachings on the epistemology of the social sciences is that much of the phenomena studied in this area are eminently multifactorial. Therefore, any explanation of a phenomenon such as voter turnout can only consider the complexity of the interactions among the many factors that influence it. However, despite the increasing methodological sophistication of the studies on this topic, there is still no established core model of electoral turnout. Previous literature

reviews on the issue (Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006; Cancela and Geys, 2016; Smets and van Ham, 2013; Stockemer, 2017; Frank and Martinez i Coma, 2023) have shown that the predictors explaining voter turnout are various and relate to different dimensions of the social world. In this context, trust is only one of the many factors considered by scholars in explaining electoral turnout.

Chapter 3 examines previous research on the factors affecting voter turnout, including trust (Norris, 2023). There is a growing consensus that a direct role in causing differences in electoral turnout is played by institutional and political trust and associated factors (such as perceptions of corruption and the integrity of the electoral process) (Uslaner, ed., 2018). However, there does not yet seem to be a consensus on the role of social or generalised trust in influencing electoral behaviour. In this perspective, we draw on the previous research developed by Norris aimed at a better understanding of political participation (Norris, 2002) and the most recent one on trustworthiness and trust (Norris, 2022). Based on this, we develop a theoretical model to highlight political and social trust's role in voter turnout in European Parliamentary and national elections, using institutional, political, social, and economic factors as control variables. Since analysis is performed at the aggregate-level variables, Norris' scheme (2022) was adapted to the data available at this stage of the research pathway.

Following this, Chapter 4 (by Angela Delli Paoli) defines the research strategy based on a model aimed at assessing the relationships between the average electoral turnout rate (dependent variable), on the one hand, and a complex set of dimensions (at the macro level: culture, inequalities, development, demography; at the meso level: electoral convenience, democratic profiles, corruption, media pluralism, and political fragmentation; at the micro level: political trust).

In this chapter, we also define the sample, the election levels, and the operational definition of the variables used in our exercise. In this perspective, we believe that an added value of our research path is the focus on European countries, especially the European Union member states since they share an important political participation event – the European elections. However, it should not be forgotten that national general elections have retained their relevance throughout the post-Cold War era. Due to this, the chosen timeline (1991-2023) includes electoral outcomes since establishing or restoring openly competitive electoral procedures in Eastern European countries. As for the data availability, we rely on TRUEDEM's longitudinal cross-country database on voter turnout<sup>3</sup>, integrated by data on trust drawn from cross-national surveys (EVS/WVS and Eurobarometer) and other sources.

<sup>3</sup> See the previous footnote.

Chapter 5 (by Felice Addeo) presents the results of an exercise of multivariate analysis to test our explanatory model of voter turnout in European Union member-states. This exercise allows to measure the weight of some variables, including political trust (as an intervening variable) and social trust (as an element of societal culture), in producing the differences in voter turnout between the countries studied. Obtained findings show that the role of social or generalised trust in influencing electoral turnout is confirmed for national elections. On the contrary, the relationship between institutional trust and turnout in national elections is reversed. Quite interestingly, the opposite is true when European elections are considered. Besides confirming the different dynamics in the two types of electoral competition, these results also reinforce the idea that the two types of trust, although related, are not entirely overlapping. In contrast, internal economic inequality, as measured by the Gini index, is an essential predictor of voter turnout in both types of election.

In Chapter 6, we work with the other TRUEDEM partners to assess voter turnout evolution in partner countries. This allows us to understand better what affects electoral turnout at a national level. Our results show that social, political, and institutional changes at the national level greatly influence electoral behaviour. However, research on the role of trust in influencing citizens' political participation in European countries still seems somewhat underdeveloped. Our country cases confirm that the relationship between trust and voter turnout is not yet the focus of scholarly attention. On this issue, research is still focused on the role of institutional and political factors, as well as on socio-economic ones, whose relative importance in turnout studies has grown recently.

Finally, the results obtained from the research will enable us to draw some conclusions both on the scientific level and on the level of policies geared toward improving the democratic life of European countries. While, as we have seen, it may be helpful to emphasize the relevance of trust among the causes of voter turnout and electoral behavior in general, it seems to us also useful to point out that, based on this, we can design policies for reforming political processes in European democratic regimes.

# *1. Introduction. Trust in European Democracies: An International EU Research Programme in Austria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, and Ukraine (2023-2025)*

by *Christian Haerpfer\**

Political trust has long been regarded as an important element of regime support and factor of the regime stability (Easton 1975); it is widely associated with a number of positive outcomes in representative democracies (van der Meer 2017; van der Meer and Zmerli 2017). Political trust drives citizens' interest and engagement in politics, increases voting turnout and makes law-abiding behaviour more common (Putnam 1993). Political trust is frequently equated to diffuse regime support and thus linked to the effective functioning and stability of the political system (Haerpfer et al. 2019; Kizilova and Haerpfer 2023). Political trust is sometimes regarded as the “glue” of the political system that holds its elements together and ensures their smooth operation. Political trust plays a central role in times of crisis and change, such as the recent pandemic when, as numerous evidence suggests, societies with the higher levels of political trust have been more successful in making their citizens to follow lockdown, quarantine, and further restrictive anti-corona measures (Schraff 2021; Devine et al. 2021; Farzanegan and Hofmann 2021). Political trust is thus a valuable resource for governments (and not only) in their ambition to implement (or reform) the public policies as the success rate is likely to increase the more reliable and trustworthy the political actor is perceived by the public.

It follows logically that diminishing trust levels are of concern, as they threaten the cooperative fabric essential for societal resilience. Lack of political trust (or mistrust) has proven to bring negative consequences for the development of political systems: it can disrupt democratic processes, stalling efforts to address pressing issues like climate change, public health, and economic inequality (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki 1975; Klingemann and

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Fuchs 1995; Kaase and Newton 1995; Linz and Stepan 1996; Mishler and Rose 1997; Norris 2011; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Dalton 2004; Thomassen 2015). On a more general level, high mistrust to the institutions that comprise the system of government undermines its legitimacy, resulting in the norms, laws and policies being sceptically met or rejected by the public (Mishler and Rose, 2005; Newton & Norris, 2000). Furthermore, with trust facilitating the public's acceptance of democratic values and ideals (Norris, 1999) and rejection of undemocratic alternatives (Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer, 1998), lack of trust not only undermines the very foundations of the democratic regime, but also threatens to increase support for autocratic forms of governance (Rothstein and Holmberg, 2014). Internationally, a lack of trust heightens tensions, weakening alliances and raising the potential for conflict.

However, it is essential to re-examine the conventional assumptions that form the basis of these widely accepted claims. Recognizing the importance of political trust and its growth as a desired outcome and means to strengthen the European democracies, one should not discard its "dark sides". Cross-country social survey research projects such as the World Values Survey or the Global Barometer Study allow to identify countries in various parties of the world, but especially in Central and Eastern Asia with abundantly high levels of political trust, yet none of these states belong to the group of liberal democracies. Welzel and Dalton (2017), who interpreted public trust as part of a broader syndrome of allegiance norms, find that democracy and public trust are negatively correlated across a large pool of countries representing more than ninety percent of the world population. In a similar vein, Shin and Chu (2012) have concluded that public support for democracy leads to high levels of democracy, but only if this support is combined with low levels of political trust. Very high levels of political trust, frequently widespread in authoritarian regimes, can be used to support the political ideology, they contribute to the consolidation of the existing regime, but do not stimulate government's accountability and the improvement of the performance of public institutions (Haerpfer and Kizilova 2019; Norris 2022). Thus, as another body of literature suggests, while democracies essentially rely on the consent and support of those governed, a critically engaged citizenship that is able to hold the government accountable on key issues is the prerequisite to the efficiency and durability of the democratic regime (Arizti et al. 2010; Cook and Gronke 2005; Norris 1999, 2011; Welzel, Deutsch and Inglehart 2005).

Therefore, political trust as a public good can be not only a source of support for the political system that revitalizes its functioning, but also an important regulating tool serving as a "warning sign" and pointing to the situation, when a political system makes a wrong turn or is heading in a wrong direction, in the view of the public. This suggests that political trust

is, in fact, a multi-facet concept: depending on if driven by rationality, blind compliance or unjustified, cynical criticism, political trust can have both positive and negative implications for the development of the political system. Based on this, in the context of any policy action, it is relevant to distinguish between various types of political trust to distinguish those congruent with the development of democracies.

To address the multi-facet nature of trust, TRUEDEM distinguishes between trust as a quality of the individual and trustworthiness as a feature of dyadic relationships. In the context of a political system, trustworthiness can be described as a function of the institutions' ability to provide citizens with a political and economic environment that guarantees political rights, ensures economic prosperity, equality, and wellbeing for substantial parts of the society and is guided by ethical, just, fair, and transparent standards. This approach emphasizes that trustworthiness is not about an individual or an agency alone – but about an interaction between them. Trust delegates actions both to agents (individuals) as well as to agencies (institutions).

From this perspective, for agencies – governmental institutions or other political bodies – greater credit of public trust is always beneficial. Higher levels of political trust increase voting turnout as well as citizens voluntary adherence to laws and policies (Putnam 1993; van der Meer 2017; van der Meer and Zmerli 2017; Norris 2022). High public trust therefore serves as a major source of legitimacy and regime support, both in democracies and autocracies (Zmerli 2014). However, for ordinary citizens, when public assessments of trustworthiness fail to match the actual competence, integrity, and impartiality of authorities, trust can be risky or even harmful. Compliant trust to authoritarian leaders reinforces dictatorships and political corruption, preventing the mechanism of checks and balances from stimulating democratization. Blind belief in conspiracy theories prevents many in Europe and around the world from taking vaccinations, putting lives at risk. Such reflections highlight that trust, frequently assumed to be universally positive, can also have a dark side. When citizens' assessment of trustworthiness is misplaced and fails to reflect the actual levels of competency of the authorities, then it can lead to negative consequences. TRUEDEM's theoretical stance posits that the type of political trust beneficial for both the citizens and the institutions should be based on the critical assessment of the institutional trustworthiness; the positive (or negative) decision about should be both informed and accurate.

However, what sounds as a simple formula, in fact, has many mediators. Key questions in this context are, which information citizens use to evaluate the performance of governments and other political institutions, on the one hand, and which individual- and country-level factors intervene, fostering

more or less accurate assessments and decisions about trust. Perceptual bias in judgments of trustworthiness includes both overestimating the performance of institutions, resulting in credulous or compliant trust widespread in authoritarian environments, as well as underscoring governmental efficacy, leading to cynical mistrust, common for many European societies. To address these research questions, TRUEDEM aims to create a robust and comprehensive knowledge base on long-term dynamics and predictors for trust in political institutions of representative democracy (parties, executives, parliaments, judiciary etc.) in the EU. The project's ultimate goal is to develop a comprehensive policy toolbox of short- and long-term interventions for enhancing both informed public trust and the trustworthiness of political institutions.

## **1.1. Project Methodology, Thematic Areas, and Methods**

To address the multi-facet nature of trust, TRUEDEM distinguishes between trust as a quality of the individual and trustworthiness as a feature of dyadic relationships. Operationalized through a repeating cycle of trustworthiness assessment, trust-building can be described as a complex process of matching new evidence on agency performance (such as new laws adopted by the parliament, new policies introduced by the government, changes in the rates of inflation or unemployment) against a set of good governance criteria, mediated by a system of individual-level characteristics (individual values, education, cognitive skills) and factors of a broader societal, political, and cultural environment. In this framework, judgement of trustworthiness of agencies involves assessing the risks and benefits of delegating authority to them (Norris 2022).

TRUEDEM aims to unpack mediating conditions, which can help to understand the intervening steps and the causal chain within the trustworthiness assessment sequence. To achieve this objective, the TRUEDEM research design utilizes a mixed-method approach and complements the existing cross-national surveys with the new quantitative and qualitative data, which will provide innovative scientific and policy-relevant insights about the complex cognitive processes, which underlie public judgments of trustworthiness of different government agencies and actors, especially the role of cognitive skills and civic education, the importance of information and misinformation, the role of institutional arrangements and constitutional designs, and the legacy impact of cultural values on contemporary judgments of trustworthiness.

TRUEDEM analyses the multi-level system of factors and their interplay

to generate new knowledge on the underlying societal, cultural, state, and individual conditions strengthening reliable and accurate public evaluations of government performance. Rooted in the theoretical and methodological premise, that trust is a multifaceted concept with the potential to yield both positive and negative effects on the political system and society, TRUEDEM addresses the complexity and multi-factor nature of trust-building. The research framework encompasses a series of thematic studies, each dedicated to examining a specific domain that influences assessments of trustworthiness and the transition towards a positive or negative decision about trust. The overarching aim is to uncover new insights into the societal, cultural, state, and individual factors that foster reliable and accurate public evaluations of government performance. One thematic area deals with socioeconomic transformations, which pose a significant challenge to political trust. Economic crises often erode confidence in the government's ability to manage the economy and address inequality, leading to a decline in political trust. Most recently, the socioeconomic and security challenges arising from the COVID-19 crisis, war in Europe, migration pressures, low economic growth, and rising inflation have further destabilized political institutions across Europe. These emerging issues carry implications for political trust that have yet to be fully addressed. To address this, TRUEDEM focuses on the short-term and mid-term impacts of socioeconomic transformations, examining how they may reshape European democracies.

Cultural values and norms, represent an important cluster of factors that both define the political values, ideals and expectation of citizens and influence the perceptions of the competency, impartiality, and integrity of the institutions. A major disconnect between the prevailing cultural attitudes and the actual performance of institutions can generate misperceptions with cynical and credulous citizens. Particular importance in this context is attributed to emancipative values, which transform allegiant into assertive citizens with an elite-challenging mindset and which rise with the expanding education, information, and communication that enhance people's cognitive capacity (Welzel 2013; Dalton and Welzel 2014). TRUEDEM examines the mechanisms and patterns of interplay between political values, support for democracy and political trust on one side, and social, cultural, religious, and other values that constitute an important component of the national cultures in the EU on the other. The aim is to identify those social and cultural values, attitudes and beliefs, which are congruent with the support for democracy and reinforce political trust, and those which hinder it.

Another thematic area examines the role of social cleavages and political polarisation for political trust and trustworthiness. Recent polarisation within European societies is interpreted as the set of new and reshaped cleavages.

TRUEDEM addresses fundamental changes regarding the socio-political and socio-economic cleavages in European societies, including erosion of old and emergence of new political cleavages, a shift towards the axiological cleavages, radicalisation of political attitudes and increased polarisation, emergence of new social movements and political parties, and individualisation and atomisation of citizens. Based on the set of crises (fiscal and financial, migration, coronavirus, energy insecurity, but also institutional crisis of the European integration project), one can observe the creation of two “ideal typical” societal groups, labelled as “cosmopolitan liberals” and “counter-cosmopolitan traditionalist” (Rensmann 2012). Such development is accompanied with the polarisation of European and more generally Western societies. Specifically, at least some of the mentioned crises even deepened such polarisation between the “winners” and “losers” of transformation from the (post)modern industrial society towards the knowledge and information society (Sass, 2020). Results of this analysis are employed by TRUEDEM in a set of policy recommendations aiming at reducing the political polarisation and promoting the centripetal solutions.

The media and information environment plays also a crucial role in shaping political trust by influencing public perceptions, framing political narratives, and providing the context through which people interpret political events. Openness, media pluralism, and the free press are commonly regarded as an essential condition for an enlightened public (Norris, 2022). Thus, more informed decisions about trustworthy political leaders, political parties, civil service officials, and state authorities are likely to be maximised in open societies with freedom of expression, media pluralism, and accountability mechanisms, all closely associated with the type of democratic or autocratic regime governing each state, combined with levels of human development, expanding literacy, schooling, and media access in each society. On the other hand, social media’s influence on political trust is dual edged: it enhances transparency and citizen engagement, but also fosters echo chambers, spreads misinformation, and may inadvertently deepen polarisation. TRUEDEM engages into a comprehensive analysis of the information environment in the societies across the EU to assess the openness of information flows (monitored by proxy measures of freedom of expression), which serves as an important mediator of trustworthiness assessment and hence trust-building.

Another thematic area examines the role of democratic innovations for strengthening public confidence in the political system. Democratic innovations are a family of institutional reforms that could help substantiate the objective of reenchanting democracy. Democratic innovations empower individuals and communities by providing opportunities for citizens to directly engage in decision-making processes, and thus can affect perceptions of

trustworthiness. Democratic innovations like citizen assemblies and deliberative polling ensure that a diverse range of voices and perspectives are being taken into account in decision-making processes. This helps to address inequalities in political representation and fosters trust by ensuring that all citizens have a stake in the democratic system. As a result, TRUEDEM aims to create a comprehensive catalogue of democratic innovations, that can enhance political trust and support for democracy.

A separate thematic area is dedicated to the analysis of an important issue of elections and citizen participation, that is at the heart of this monograph. Voting behaviour shapes trust by indicating faith in the system through participation, ensuring representation aligns with voter interests, holding officials accountable, fostering civic engagement, and reflecting disillusionment, when perceived corruption or disconnect occurs. The aim of this thematic area of the project is to explore the changes in the electoral behaviour of citizens witnessed in the last decades, including the steadily declining turnout, the growing electoral volatility as shown by the European research and statistical data, an increase in radicalisation of voter attitudes and greater polarisation. TRUEDEM particularly examines the implications of voting and electoral behaviour in terms of new challenges for inclusiveness and representativity in democratic systems.

Elections can be analysed as an indicator of transformations in the relationship between citizens-voters and political institutions and specifically those of the European Union. The opposite to the numerous studies of electoral systems, the characteristics of election campaigns, the results which they deliver and their implications for political trust, have received less attention in the literature. Yet, negative campaigns, polarising campaigning techniques and highlight of contested election results are among factors that contribute to the erosion of political trust (Lau et al. 2007). Other findings suggest that citizens tend to express greater political trust to institutions if they supported the winner in the last elections (Banducci & Karp, 2003). This highlights the need to address implications of voting and electoral behaviour for political trust through examining, which new challenges for inclusiveness and representativity in democratic systems are posed by the declining voter turnout on the one hand and growing electoral volatility on the other. Attention is also given to cross-pressured voters - those citizens who hold conservative and progressive views on different issues (Lefkofridi et al 2014). Previous research suggests that in Western Europe, cross-pressured voters tend to prefer the right over the left since they attach more salience to cultural issues (Gidron 2022). Yet, whether and how cross-pressured voters decide to participate or believe in the efficacy of voting remains an overlooked issue that could and should be further investigated (Hillen and Steiner 2019).

## 1.2. Project Geography and Consortium Members

The immediate geographical coverage of the TRUEDEM project analysis includes 11 EU member-states where the project partners are based: Austria, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden. One more project team comes from a non-EU country – Ukraine. This group comprises an excellent survey of cases studies including both societies with high and low levels of political trust, societies with the patterns of both sceptical and credulous trust as well as sceptical and cynical mistrust. Selected countries also exemplify a substantial variation of the state of liberal democracy and quality of democratic governance and belong to different cultural zones, thus allowing to expand the scope of the analysis and verify all necessary hypotheses.

The TRUEDEM project is hosted at the Institute for Comparative Survey Research (Vienna, Austria) and coordinated by Christian W. Haerpfer (Project Coordinator and Principal Investigator), who is Director of the Institute and Professor at the University of Vienna (Austria) and Pippa Norris (co-Principal Investigator), who is Senior Research Fellow at the ICSR and Professor at Harvard University, USA. The Project Coordinator and Project Manager at ICSR is Dr Kseniya Kizilova. The project team in Czech Republic is based at the Metropolitan University Prague and is led by Professor Ladislav Cabada. The team brings in expertise on comparative politics of East-Central Europe, party politics and electoral studies, theory of consensual democracy, Europeanisation and Euroscepticism, qualitative social research. Project team in France is represented by the Sciences Po Institute of Political Science at Grenoble Alpes University and is led by Professor Frederic Gonthier. The team brings in expertise on political and cultural values, support for democracy and authoritarianism, party polarisation, political sophistication, populism, quantitative survey methodology and policy analysis. Project team in Germany is based at Center for the Study of Democracy at Leuphana University Luneburg and is led by Professor Christian Welzel. The team brings in expertise on the study of values and political culture. Project team in Greece is based at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of University of the Peloponnese and is led by Professor Sokratis Koniordos. The team brings in expertise on values, culture wars, social and political trust, social capital, challenges to democracy. Project team in Italy is based at the University of Salerno, at the Department of Political and Communication and is led by Professor Domenico Maddaloni. The team brings in expertise on voting and electoral behaviour, electoral volatility, policy and programme evaluation research, qualitative and quantita-

tive social research methods, online research methods, globalization and international migration.

Project team in Poland is based at the Institute of Political Science of the University of Silesia in Katowice and is led by Professor Agnieszka Turska-Kawa. The team brings in experience on psychological perspective on social and political trust, youth policy and educational policy, voting and political participation, crisis of trust and populism. Project team in Romania is based at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Bucharest and is led by Professor Claudiu Tufis. The team has strong connections with civil society organizations and brings in expertise on political culture, political behaviour, electoral studies, civil society, social movements, higher education public policies, methodology of social research, as well as strong background and skills in quantitative social data analysis. Project team in Slovak Republic is based at the Department of Political Science of Comenius University and is led by Professor Aneta Világi. The team brings in expertise on voting behaviour, quality of democracy, democratic representation, performance of democratic institutions. Project team in Slovenia is based at the University of Ljubljana and is led by Professor Alenka Krasovec. The team brings in expertise on public policy analysis, evaluation of public policies, comparative interest group politics, decision-making in the EU, processes and actors in public policies. Project team in Sweden is based at the Bikupan Research Institute and is led by Professor Bi Puranen. The team brings in expertise on economic theory and methods of economic analysis which will enrich the interdisciplinarity of the project. The project team in Ukraine is based at the School of Sociology of V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University and is led by Professor Irina Kuzina. The team brings in extensive expertise on empirical social research, quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods.



## 2. Voter turnout trends across European countries

by *Domenico Fruncillo* and *Marialaura Ammirato*\*

In research on representative democracies, a growing number of studies focus on turnout. Indeed, since the pioneering studies of Powell (1982) and Jackman (1987), this dimension of political behaviour has been seen as a crucial topic in political research due to its significant implications for democratic processes. Indeed, voter turnout has been variously linked to:

- the legitimacy of political institutions (see for instance<sup>1</sup> Blais, 2006; Kirkland and Wood, 2016; Bekoe and Burchard, 2017; Facchini and Jaeck, 2019);
- the expression of the popular will in a democratic political framework (Rolfe, 2012; Kirkland and Wood, 2016);
- the legitimacy of public policies, including the size of the public sector (Agerborn, 2016; Ezrow and Krause, 2022);
- the political accountability of elected officials (Stokes, 2005; Birch, 2010; Bekoe and Burchard, 2017);
- overall levels of political participation (Mangum, 2003; Fornos et al., 2004; Wattenberg, 2015)
- major social changes, including technological innovations (Schelker and Schneider, 2017; Ohme, 2019).

In summary, high turnout is often seen as a positive sign of a healthy democracy. In contrast, low turnout may cause a widespread concern about representativeness and citizen participation in the political process. This raises some tempting research questions (Blais, 2006): Why is turnout higher in some countries and/or in some elections than in others? Why does it increase or decrease over time? Finally, what role does trust play in influencing turnout levels?

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<sup>1</sup> Given the huge extent now reached by the literature on voter turnout, the bibliographical references in this introduction to Chapter 2 must be considered as merely illustrative of widespread knowledge.

The first task to be accomplished in this research is therefore to examine trends in voter turnout in elections for national parliaments and the European Parliament between the 1990s and the 2020s. Our analysis will cover all countries that are currently members of the European Union, including the United Kingdom, which left the EU after the 2019 EP elections, as well as some other non-EU countries (Switzerland, Norway, and Ukraine).

In particular, we will examine the participation rates calculated considering the registered and voting age population by country and election round for the entire period (1991-2023) and over decades (1991-2001, 2002-2012, and 2013-2023). Next, we will analyse these trends with reference to groups of countries distinguished by the time of their accession to the European Union and by their geopolitical location to highlight the evolution of turnout rates both in general and across the decades. Our analysis follows some hypotheses widely debated in the scientific community and have received some empirical confirmation in the past. In particular, we will see that (1) electoral participation rates based on registered voters produce higher values than those based on the voting age population; (2) voter turnout tends to decrease over time; (3) electoral participation is higher in the founding members and Western European countries, while it is lower in countries that have recently joined the European Union and in those located in Eastern Europe.

## **2.1. Measuring turnout**

There is a substantial consensus on turnout and its general definition as the level of citizen participation in the election of public office holders. However, there is a debate on its measurement, and different solutions have been adopted depending on the purposes of the studies and the territorial context. In general, turnout is calculated as the percentage ratio between different categories of voters. However, several measures have been identified that differ in the value placed at the denominator of the ratio: the number of (1) registered voters, (2) persons of voting age (VAP), and (3) eligible voters (VEP) (Geys, 2006; International IDEA, 2016).

Several studies have shown that each of these measures has drawbacks and can be misleading (see, e.g., McDonald and Popkin, 2001; Wattenberg, 2002). In particular, the official turnout rate is based on the ratio of the number of actual voters to the number of registered voters. The reliability of this measure depends on the quality of voter list compilation methods, which can vary considerably from one country to another. There is no absolute certainty that all eligible voters are on the lists or that the lists are devoid of persons who are not entitled to vote or no longer eligible to vote. In other words, the

calculation based on the number of registered voters may overestimate turnout (when the lists do not include all eligible voters) or underestimate it (when the lists are overstated or inflated by double or fictitious registrations). However, this turnout measure is the one most frequently used in official documents on citizens' electoral participation. In the following sections, we will refer to this measure of turnout rate as "turnout", without further specifications.

Voter turnout can also be calculated as the ratio of actual voters to the total voting-age population. It is often used to describe voting participation in countries where there is significant under-registration on the electoral roll, such as in the United States or other countries where registration on the electoral roll does not occur automatically but at the request of citizens. This calculation includes people who have yet to register on the electoral register. The number of these persons may also be relatively high when obtaining registration on the electoral roll is rather cumbersome and onerous. However, this calculation may be too inclusive. The usual procedure is to estimate the voting-age population, but this estimate includes people who do not have the right to vote because they are not citizens. Some countries grant citizenship quite easily to newcomers, others are much more reluctant. Consequently, the voting-age population includes non-citizens who would not have the right to vote. Conversely, citizens living abroad (who would have the right to vote) are not included in this calculation. It should also be noted that population surveys are carried out at different intervals in different countries and at times that may not coincide with election years. This leads to calculations that tend to underestimate the turnout rate more often than to overestimate it.

The third measure of turnout is the ratio of voters to eligible voters (VEP) (Holbrook and Heildbreder, 2010). In this case, the electoral body is deprived of those who do not have citizenship or have committed a crime that results in suspending the right to vote. Voter turnout calculated in this way seems more accurate because it considers all those who could legally vote. However, it must be considered that each country has different disenfranchisement rules for convicted felons, which vary somewhat quickly. Moreover, in many countries, the number of citizens who can legally exercise their right to vote is not available.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, we make use of the two most common measures of voter turnout, despite the methodological problems they raise. Before proceeding with the analysis, however, a few remarks about the calculation procedures of these indicators with reference to European countries are appropriate.

Regarding the measure based on registered voters, it should be noted that

in some countries (such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Cyprus), registration on the electoral roll takes place on the citizens' initiative. In France and Slovakia, the voter's application is required, although there is automatic registration in some cases. In France, registration is necessary for prisoners who still enjoy civil rights, those who became French citizens after 2018, or those who turned 18 but were not registered through the census after turning 16. In Slovakia, registration is required for citizens of another Member State who have permanent residence in Slovakia and wish to vote in the European elections. In general, in almost all countries, there are difficulties in keeping electoral rolls up-to-date due to deaths, transfers, or reaching the minimum age.

In turn, the population of voting age is an estimate that is not always up to date concerning different election rounds, as it is generally based on the results of the most recent census and also includes persons who are not entitled to vote, such as stateless persons, persons with civil incapacity and those who have lost their right to vote as a result of a conviction. Across Europe, the voting age population (VAP) includes all citizens over the age of 18, except for Greece, where the voting age is 17, and Austria (since 2007) and Malta (since 2018), where the voting age is 16.

## **2.2. Voter turnout trends in national parliamentary elections**

### ***2.2.1. Overall trends, 1991-2023***

Between 1991 and 2023, the average level of electoral participation in European Union member states (including the United Kingdom) was 69.2% when considering turnout (Table 2.1) and 66.6% when adopting VAP turnout (Table 2.2). In many cases, the participation rate is higher when calculated using the number of registered voters as a denominator. Considering the average values calculated for all elections held during the examined period, countries with the highest turnout are Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, Malta, Cyprus, Sweden; countries with the lowest turnout levels are Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Bulgaria. The country rankings that emerge when considering turnout or VAP turnout are very similar. However, there are some exceptions, e.g. Luxembourg, Cyprus, and Latvia. These countries have a high share of foreign residents not entitled to vote on the total population. Consequently, the VAP turnout value tends to underestimate voter participation.

France is positioned at the bottom of the ranking when the focus is on parliamentary elections, which may be considered second-order by many voters compared to presidential elections. Indeed, since 2002, legislative elections

have consistently followed the presidential election, leading the less politically engaged segments of the electorate to believe that the National Assembly is not playing a crucial role in the functioning of French institutions.

Some further considerations can be derived by examining the turnout in a diachronic perspective, i.e. by describing its evolution between 1991 and 2023. A significant decline in voter turnout is a cause for concern, albeit often with some fluctuations from one election to the next. This trend is common to almost all European countries and from different levels of electoral participation at the beginning of the period considered. Only in a few countries electoral participation remained high and stable. These include Belgium, where on average 90.5% of registered voters and 84.2% of the VAP have voted since 1991, Luxembourg, where turnout rates are 89.6% (registered voters) and 55.1% (VAP), and Malta, where these rates are 93.5% (registered voters) and 92.6% (VAP). However, the decline in voter turnout is stark in some countries, including Bulgaria, which drops from 84% (84.6 VAP) in 1991 to 40.5% (47.5% VAP) in 2023; Latvia, where there is a decrease of 30,5 percentage points from 89.9 % in 1993 to 59.4 % in 2022; Croatia and Cyprus where turnout drops by about 30 points; and Italy, where turnout declines by 27 percentage points from 87.4 % in 1992 to 60.4 % in 2022.

In order to better understand how electoral participation has evolved at the country level, election results were grouped into three periods of approximately 10 years: 1991-2001, 2002-2012, and 2013-2023. A 10-year average of turnout rates was calculated for each country to avoid focusing on exceptional events and instead to capture broader, long-term trends. Participation dropped 9.4% between the first and last decade, considering both turnout and VAP turnout. For the second and last decade, the drop in percentage points was slightly less than half, at 4.5% for VAP turnout and 3.7% for voter turnout. The countries' ranking for each period differs slightly from the overall ranking.

Countries with the most significant decline in participation between the first and third decade are Romania, Cyprus, Bulgaria, France, Latvia, Slovakia, Greece, Slovenia, and Italy. When looking at VAP turnout, countries with the most significant declines in participation are Cyprus, Romania, Croatia, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, and Slovenia. The two lists are different, and it's crucial to investigate the stability of the data on registered voters and voting age population, as well as the reliability of the estimates made for quantifying the voting-age population.

This consideration also proves appropriate when examining the list of countries where participation seems to have increased between the first and third decade. Those countries are Poland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Hungary, and Sweden based on turnout and Poland, the Netherlands, Estonia, Hungary, and Finland based on VAP turnout.

Table 2.1. - National Parliamentary Elections from 1991 to 2023: Turnout (a) by Country (%)

Country (b)/ year	AT	BE	BG	HR	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK	EU countries (c)	Other countries (d)	
1991	92.7	84.0		94.3				67.8	72.1					68.5	87.4		75.2		96.0			43.0	67.8	76.3	84.2	85.8		86.7	77.2	46.1	
1992				75.0	85.0			67.8									89.9				52.1			76.3	84.2	85.8		77.0	79.8	77.2	
1993									69.0			79.2		68.9		89.9								75.7			76.4		73.3	75.9	
1994	81.9		75.2				84.3				79.0		68.9		86.3		88.3			78.8								86.8	80.5	75.8	
1995	86.0	91.2		63.3				69.1	67.8			76.4				71.0	52.9					66.3		76.0					73.5	42.2	
1996					92.9	76.4								82.9															78.4		
1997			58.9						67.9					65.9							47.9								71.0	62.3	78.3
1998							73.9	86.0			82.2	59.0				71.0			95.4	73.4				84.3			81.1		78.5	70.8	
1999	80.4	90.6															85.8				61.8								73.6	40.3	
2000				70.5				57.4	65.3			75.0				58.6							65.3			70.2	68.7			68.0	
2001			66.6	91.8			87.2							81.4							46.2			70.1				59.4	72.1	75.5	
2002	84.3				58.0				64.4	79.1	71.8	62.6				71.4				79.1		62.3					80.1		71.2	69.3	
2003		91.6		59.6				58.2	66.3			76.5								95.7	80.0			58.5					75.2	45.2	
2004																46.1	91.9												68.2		
2005			55.8				84.5				77.7																		61.6	64.2	77.4
2006	78.5				89.0	64.5						74.2	67.8		81.2	62.7								54.7				82.0	73.4	67.6	
2007		91.1		57.2			86.6	61.9	68.0	60.4				67.0							53.8								68.9	55.1	
2008	78.8														78.1		48.6			93.3						63.1	73.9		67.9		
2009			60.6								70.8	71.0	64.4				90.9					59.7							70.6	76	
2010		89.2				62.6									64.7														70.7		
2011				54.2	78.7		87.7	63.5	67.4					69.9							48.9	58.1							65.7	48.5	
2012									57.2			63.8				52.9														58.2	57.4
2013	74.9		52.5			59.4					71.5				72.2		91.2	93.0												73.5	78.2
2014		89.4	51.1										61.8			58.9														66.4	51.9
2015				60.8								60.1																		64.8	48.5
2016				52.6	66.7									65.1			50.6													57.3	
2017	80.0		53.9			60.8				48.7	76.2																			70.4	78.2
2018													69.7		69.4	54.6	89.7												70.5		
2019	75.6	88.4					84.6	63.7	68.7			57.8									61.7	48.6							68.3	68.6	47.1
2020				46.9										62.8			47.8													51.0	
2021			43.2		65.7	65.4					76.6																			65.9	77.2
2022			39.4							47.5																				65.3	
2023			40.5									57.6																		60.1	
Entire period	6.5	90.5	56.8	60.0	82.7	67.3	85.7	63.3	67.9	59.3	76.6	69.2	66.6	66.0	77.7	66.3	54.1	89.6	93.5	78.0	49.5	59.7	53.6	68.1	66.0	71.7	84.3	67.7	69.2	63.0	
I DEC (1991- 2001)	82.8	91.5	71.2	69.6	93.0	78.4	85.8	64.8	68.5	68.5	80.6	76.9	64.0	67.2	84.5	77.3	62.2	87.1	96.2	76.1	47.3	65.3	72.5	81.4	76.6	74.2	84.9	69.1	74.3	63.5	
II DEC (2002- 2012)	80.5	90.6	58.2	57.0	83.9	61.7	86.3	61.2	67.2	60.7	75.9	71.4	68.0	66.5	79.7	64.6	49.2	91.4	94.5	77.9	47.8	61.3	46.5	60.7	63.1	72.8	82.2	63.6	68.6	62.1	
III DEC (2013- 2023)	76.8	88.9	46.8	53.4	66.2	61.9	84.9	63.9	68.0	48.1	74.8	58.5	67.0	64.0	67.3	57.6	49.2	90.5	90.2	80.2	56.3	52.0	35.9	62.8	58.4	68.9	85.7	69.1	64.9	63.5	

Balance III-I dec	-5,9	-2,6	-	24,4	-	16,2	-	26,8	-	16,6	-	-0,9	-0,9	-0,4	-	-5,8	-	18,4	-	3,1	-	-3,3	-	17,2	-	19,7	-	13,0	-	3,4	-	-6,0	-	4,1	-	9,0	-	13,3	-	36,6	-	18,6	-	18,1	-	-5,3	-	0,9	-	-0,1	-	-9,4	-	0,0
Balance III-II dec	-3,7	-1,7	-	11,4	-	-3,6	-	17,7	-	0,2	-	-1,4	2,7	0,8	-	12,6	-	-1,1	-	-1,0	-	-2,6	-	12,3	-	-6,9	0,0	-1,0	-	-4,3	-	2,3	-	8,5	-	-9,3	-	10,6	-	2,1	-	-4,7	-	-3,9	-	3,5	-	5,5	-	-3,7	-	1,5		

**Source:** Data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

**Notes:** a) Turnout = (voters/registered)\*100; In case of multiple elections in the same year, an average turnout was calculated; b) Each country is indicated by international abbreviation; c) In case of multiple elections in the same year, an average VAP turnout was calculated; d) Other countries include Switzerland, Norway, and Ukraine.

Table 2.2. - National Parliamentary Elections from 1991 to 2023: VAP Turnout (a) by Country (%)

Country (b) / year	AT	BE	BG	HR	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK	EU countries (c)	Other countries (d)
1991		85.1	84.6		78.6				71.6												44.4	78.6							75.1	39.7
1992				75.4		56.5		40.9						73.7	92.3		70.2		95.3				76.2	83.8	85.5			82.8		75.0
1993										61.0		85.6			57.7						52.0								76.8	74.5
1994	75.5		81.0				89.3			72.4		72.4	69.4		91.0	57.7		60.5		75.2				76.2				82.4	76.5	74.7
1995	78.6	83.2		77.6				48.8	71.1							50.6						79.1							69.9	35.7
1996					78.3	77.7						84.2			87.1		50.0		98.0				78.2		75.8	81.2			78.9	
1997			66.9						59.8					67.4							48.8									76.8
1998											75.3		57.0						95.9	70.2				78.9				69.6	62.5	76.8
1999	72.6	83.1						46.0	65.2									56.9										77.7	74.2	69.7
2000				85.8								89.0					50.4						68.7						65.4	34.9
2001			72.1		67.7										84.7						47.6				72.1	73.8			72.2	
2002													70.5	67.0		55.2														
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I DEC (1991-2001)	72.5	84.2	63.9	68.9	58.1	64.1	80.9	52.1	70.0	52.9	70.4	77.0	66.9	65.1	79.8	53.8	52.9	55.1	92.6	74.6	49.4	68.1	54.7	67.6	67.2	69.3	81.0	63.4	66.6	58.4
II DEC (2002-2012)	75.6	83.8	76.2	79.6	74.9	70.3	83.0	45.2	69.3	60.4	73.9	86.3	63.2	70.6	88.8	53.7	56.9	58.7	96.4	72.7	48.2	75.5	72.2	79.6	77.8	77.3	81.0	67.6	71.4	59.9
III DEC (2013-2023)	75.4	85.6	67.4	70.8	53.8	62.1	82.1	52.3	70.2	53.8	70.0	79.3	67.3	66.6	83.0	52.7	48.5	54.9	95.0	74.8	47.9	66.6	48.5	61.1	64.4	70.0	80.4	59.6	66.5	58.3
	66.4	82.6	54.6	56.3	37.2	59.9	77.5	58.8	70.5	44.0	68.5	64.8	68.9	57.4	65.7	55.4	53.5	51.7	87.1	76.1	54.3	62.6	37.7	62.4	59.4	62.9	81.7	61.9	62.0	56.3



Balance	-9,2	-1,2	21,6	23,3	37,7	10,4	-5,6	13,6	1,2	16,4	-5,3	21,5	5,7	-	13,2	23,1	1,6	-3,4	-7,1	-9,3	3,4	6,1	12,8	34,5	17,2	18,4	-	14,4	0,7	-5,7	-9,4	-3,6
III-I dec																																
Balance	-9,1	-3,0	12,8	14,5	16,7	-2,2	-4,6	6,5	0,3	-9,8	-1,5	14,5	1,6	-9,2	17,3	2,7	5,0	-3,3	-7,9	1,3	6,4	-3,9	10,8	1,3	-5,0	-7,2	1,3	2,3	-4,5	-2,0		
III-II dec																																

Source: Data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

Notes: a) VAP Turnout = (voters/VAP)\*100; The voting age population (VAP) includes all citizens above the legal voting age; b) Each country is indicated by international abbreviation; c) In case of multiple elections in the same year, an average VAP turnout was calculated; d) Other countries include Switzerland, Norway, and Ukraine.

2.2.2. Regional trends in national elections

In the further analysis stage, countries were aggregated according to two basic criteria: (1) the time of their accession to the European Union and (2) their geopolitical position. Our hypothesis is that sharing these two characteristics has consequences for the levels of voting participation and their evolution. On this basis, we calculated the average turnout rates for each group of countries.

With reference to EU membership, countries were aggregated into three groups: founding members (France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, Netherlands); countries that joined the EU before 2000 (Austria, Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Finland, Sweden); and countries that joined the EU after 2000 (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania).

The data presented in Tables 2.3 and 2.4 confirm the usefulness of verifying the data’s robustness, stability, reliability, and related measures of electoral participation. Indeed, suppose electoral participation is measured on the basis of registered voters. In that case, the highest rates are registered in the founding countries (79.7%). In contrast, if electoral participation is calculated based on the voting age population, the average turnout rate is highest for the countries that joined the European Union before 2000 (71.9%). The countries that joined the Union after 2000 have the lowest participation rates when both voter turnout and VAP turnout are considered. The same conclusions emerge when looking at these data from one decade to the next. Founding countries show higher participation rates for all three periods when calculated based on the number of registered voters; countries that joined in the second phase show higher average participation rates when turnout is based on the voting age population.

Table 2.3. - National Parliamentary elections in Europe from 1991 to 2023: Average turnout by decades and EU Accession (%)

Groups Time span	Founding members	Joined before 2000	Joined after 2000	EU countries (a)	Other countries (b)
1991-2001	82,2	75,2	69,7	74,3	63,5
2002-2012	79,3	71,8	60,4	68,6	62,1
2013-2023	76,6	72,6	59,1	64,9	63,5
1991-2013	79,7	73,2	63,1	69,2	63,0

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database  
Notes: a) Founding Members: France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, Netherlands; Joined Before 2000: Austria, Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Finland, Sweden; Joined After 2000: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania; b) Other countries: Switzerland, Norway and Ukraine; c) Turnout = (actual voters/registered voters)\*100; the value in each cell is the average turnout for a given group of countries with reference to the time period.

*Table 2.4. - National Parliamentary elections, 1991-2023: Average VAP turnout by decades and EU accession (%)*

<b>Groups Time span</b>	<b>Founding members</b>	<b>Joined before 2000</b>	<b>Joined after 2000</b>	<b>EU countries (a)</b>	<b>Other countries (b)</b>
1991-2001	73,0	76,2	68,8	71,4	59,9
2002-2012	70,3	72,2	60,9	66,5	58,3
2013-2023	64,7	67,3	57,3	62,0	56,3
1991-2013	69,5	71,9	62,5	66,6	58,4

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

Notes: a) Founding Members: France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, Netherlands; Joined Before 2000: Austria, Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Finland, Sweden; Joined After 2000: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania; b) Other countries: Switzerland, Norway and Ukraine; c) VAP turnout = (actual voters/voting age population)\*100; the value in each cell is the average turnout for a given group of countries with reference to the time period.

Overall, turnout rates calculated on registered voters are higher than those based on VAP. However, the group of countries that joined the EU before 2000 showed a higher turnout rate when it was based on VAP in the first two decades. These results could depend on the different demographic dynamics of each group of countries. In general, differences between the two turnout calculation techniques can also be observed in this respect.

As previously mentioned, countries were aggregated according to their geopolitical location into Northern, Western, Eastern, and Southern Europe. Again, some differences emerge when considering the turnout or the VAP turnout. If we consider turnout (Table 2.5) for the entire reference period (1991-2013), the countries with the highest turnout are those in Western Europe (79.0%). Eastern European countries (58.2%) are those where citizens vote the least. The same ranking is found if the observation is restricted to each of the three decades. It is always Western Europe that has the highest turnout, and it is always Eastern Europe that has the lowest turnout.

*Table 2.5. - National Parliamentary Elections, 1991-2023: Average turnout by decades and geopolitical regions (%)*

<b>Groups Time span</b>	<b>Western Europe</b>	<b>Eastern Europe</b>	<b>Southern Europe</b>	<b>Northern Europe</b>	<b>EU Countries (a)</b>	<b>Other countries (b)</b>
1991-2001	80,5	66,0	79,4	71,8	74,3	63,5
2002-2012	79,5	55,1	69,8	63,9	68,6	62,1
2013-2023	76,7	54,6	64,8	67,9	64,9	63,5
1991-2023	79,0	58,2	71,1	68,0	69,2	63,0

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

Notes: a) Western countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands; Eastern countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia; Southern countries: Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain; Northern countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, United Kingdom. b) Other countries: Switzerland, Norway, and Ukraine; c) Turnout = (actual voters/registered voters)\*100; the value in each cell is the average turnout for a given group of countries with reference to the time period.

Now let's consider the VAP turnout trend (Table 2.6). The results are again slightly different since, concerning the period from 1991 to 2023, the highest participation rates are found in Southern European countries (72.0%) rather than Western European countries. Eastern European countries have the lowest VAP turnout on average. Moreover, we can find non-negligible differences if we deepen our analysis by articulating it over the three decades. Indeed, in the first and second decades, the area with the highest participation rates is Southern Europe rather than Western Europe. Still, in the third decade, Northern Europe shows higher participation rates. Eastern countries show the lowest participation rates for the whole period and the second and third decades. Only in the first decade is the average VAP participation lower in the Northern countries.

*Table 2.6. - National Parliamentary Elections in Europe from 1991 to 2023 – Average VAP turnout by decades and geopolitical regions*

<b>Groups Time span</b>	<b>Western Europe</b>	<b>Eastern Europe</b>	<b>Southern Europe</b>	<b>Northern Europe</b>	<b>EU Countries (a)</b>	<b>Other countries (b)</b>
1991-2001	71,6	65,9	82,1	64,1	71,4	59,9
2002-2012	70,0	57,1	72,7	60,5	66,5	58,3
2013-2023	64,3	56,8	62,1	64,5	62,0	56,3
1991-2023	68,8	59,6	72,0	63,1	66,6	58,4

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

Notes: a) Western countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands; Eastern countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia; Southern countries: Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain; Northern countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, United Kingdom. b) Other countries: Switzerland, Norway, and Ukraine; c) VAP turnout = (actual voters/voting age population)\*100; the value in each cell is the average turnout for a given group of countries with reference to the time period.

Finally, looking at the turnout rates over the three decades, we can consider the trends in electoral participation in the four different geographical areas. Between the first decade and the third, the most significant drop in participation occurs in Southern European countries (14.6% for turnout and 20.0% for VAP turnout). In Northern European countries, there is a smaller decrease (-3.9%) or even a slight increase (+0.4%) when considering VAP turnout. A similar divergence can be seen about Western European countries, as turnout remains stable over the decades, while it decreases when considering the voting age population. In Eastern countries, the decline seems to be slowing down, as participation rates have decreased by 0.5% for turnout and 0.4% for VAP turnout over the last ten years.

## 2.3. Voter turnout trends in European Parliament elections

### 2.3.1. Overall trends, 1994-2019

In this section, we examine voting participation in European Parliament (EP) elections. The analysis will consider the European elections held in each country between 1994 and 2019<sup>2</sup>. Our analysis follows the same pattern as in the previous section. Therefore, we begin by analysing the overall results for the entire period considered. Secondly, we analyse turnout trends with reference to three periods, each including two European Parliament elections (1994-1999; 2004-2009; 2014-2019). Finally, we examine electoral participation in groups of countries distinguished based on the time of EU accession or geopolitical location. Differences arising from the two measures of electoral participation are highlighted below.

Turnout rates for the entire period are 49.0% if calculated using the total number of registered voters as the denominator and 46.8% if using the voting age population. Again, therefore, turnout and VAP turnout produce different results, overall lower for VAP turnout. Moreover, turnout rates for EP elections are considerably lower than those calculated for national elections.

The countries with the highest turnout are Belgium, Luxembourg, Malta, Italy, Greece, Austria, and Cyprus. Belgium, Malta, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Ireland, and Austria have the highest VAP turnout. The ranking that emerges based on the two measures is similar. There is a wider difference between the values for Luxembourg and Cyprus, as might be expected. The countries with the lowest levels of participation, both in terms of turnout and VAP, are Croatia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, and the United Kingdom.

Overall, a substantial decline in voter turnout in EP elections occurred from 1994 to 2019. The drop is 9% based on turnout and 10.3% based on VAP turnout. However, the turnout rate in the 2019 European elections (tables 2.7 and 2.8) was higher than in the previous round - a result confirmed whether using turnout (+5.5%) or VAP turnout (+4.3%). Notably, in the UK, turnout remained stable (when using turnout) or even increased by 1.6% (when using VAP turnout) in the most recent time period, just before the Brexit process was completed.

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, it should be noted that we have chosen to include the elections held in Sweden (1995), Austria, and Finland (1996) in the 1994 round. Similarly, we included in the 2004 round the elections held in Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. As regards Croatia, a country that celebrated two electoral rounds in 2013 and 2014, the average value is considered.

Table 2.7. - European Parliamentary Elections from 1994 to 2019: Turnout (a) by Country (%)

Country (b)/ Year	AT	BE	BG	HR	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK	EU countries			
1994	67.7	90.7					52.9		57.6	52.8	60	73.2		44	73.6			88.6		35.7		35.5								58.0		
1999	49.4	91					50.5		30.1	46.8	45.2	70.2		50.2	69.7			86.6		30		40.3								52.4		
2004	42.4	90.8	29.2				72.5	28.3	47.9	26.8	39.3	42.8	43	63.2	38.5	59	71.7	41.3	48.4	91	82.4	39	20.9	38.8	29.5	17	28.4	45.1	37.9	39.2	46.5	
2009	46	90.4	38.9				59.4	28.2	59.5	43.9	40.5	42.6	43.3	52.5	36.3	57.6	65.1	53.7	21	90.8	78.8	36.8	24.5	36.8	27.7	19.6	28.3	44.9	45.5	34.7	45.2	
2014	45.4	89.6	36.1	23	44		18.2	56.3	36.5	39.1	42.4	48.1	59.3	29	52.4	57.2	30.2	47.4	84.6	74.8	37.3	23.8	33.8	32.4	13.1	24.6	43.8	51.1	35.6	45.3		
2019	59.8	88.5	32.6	29.9	45		28.7	66.1	37.6	43.1	50.1	61.4	58.2	43.6	54.5	33.5	53.5	84.2	72.7	41.9	45.7	30.7	51.2	22.7	26.9	60.7	55.3	37.2	48.8			
Entire period (a)	51.8	90.2	34.2	25.3	55.2	25.9	55.5	36.2	41.6	45.9	50.2	62.9	36.8	52.2	65.3	39.7	42.5	87.7	77.2	36.8	28.7	36	35.2	18.1	27.5	52.8	45	34.5	49.0			
I (1994-1999)	58.6	90.9					51.7		43.9	49.8	52.6	71.7		47.1	71.7			87.6		32.9		37.9				61.1	40.2	30.3	55.2			
II (2004-2009)	44.2	90.6	34.1				66.0	28.3	53.7	35.4	39.9	41.7	43.2	57.9	37.4	58.3	68.4	47.5	34.7	91.0	80.6	38.1	22.7	37.8	28.6	18.3	28.4	45.0	41.7	37.0	45.9	
III (2014-2019)	52.6	89.1	34.4	26.5	44.5	23.5	61.2	37.1	41.1	46.3	54.8	59.0	36.3	51.1	55.9	31.9	50.5	84.4	73.8	39.6	34.8	32.3	41.8	17.9	26.8	52.3	53.2	36.4	46.1			
Balance III-I	-6.0	-1.8					9.5	-2.8	-3.6	2.2	-12.7			4.0	-15.8			-3.2		6.7		-5.7				-8.9	13.0	6.1	-9.2			
Balance III-II	8.4	-1.6	0.3				-21.5	-4.8	7.5	1.7	1.2	-4.6	11.6	1.2	-1.1	-27.3	-12.6	-15.7	13.8	-6.6	-6.8	1.6	12.1	-5.6	13.2	-0.4	-1.6	7.3	11.5	-0.5		

Source: Data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database. Notes: a) Turnout = (voters/registered)\*100; b) Each country is indicated by international abbreviation.

Table 2.8. - European Parliamentary Elections from 1994 to 2019: VAP Turnout (a) by Country (%)

Country (b)/ Year	AT	BE	BG	HR	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK	EU countries		
1994	63.6	84					53.3		60.9	46.6	56.1	85		47.9	78.8			63.9		35.2		39.8				67.7	40.4	36.5	57.3		
1999	46.5	83.9					49.2		31.6	41.4	42	78.7		54.7	74.3			61.7		29.4		44.2				67.6	38.1	24.1	51.2		
2004	40	84.6	31.3				47.2	30.9	46.4	22.3	41.1	37.5	39.8	70.3	38.4	62.5	75.4	45.3	60	82.4	38.3	21.5	40.5	26.9	17.5	31.9	45.7	37.3	37.9	43.8	
2009	41.3	83.9	43.6				39	29.7	56.3	37.8	39.9	26.4	39.5	59.2	36	54.2	65.1	43.2	19.5	57.1	78.8	34.7	24	41.5	28.1	19.5	28.8	41.9	46.8	32.3	41.8
2014	39.8	85.9	41.1	24.6	31.5	17.6	54.2	32.6	41.9	38.8	44.6	67.5	29	47.5	57.3	25.2	43.2	55.8	77.8	36.4	23.6	37.6	33.5	13.2	25.6	41.2	49.4	43.2	41.1	41.1	
2019	51.1	77.6	36.2	31.3	28.3	27.2	59.9	33.3	41.1	45	55.8	65.2	43.2	45.6	53.3	30.4	58.8	48.7	71.8	39.9	43.5	38.7	52.8	22.6	28.4	55.7	52.3	33.4	45.4		
Entire period	47.1	83.3	38	26.8	36.5	26.3	53.2	31.5	42.8	39.3	46.3	71	36.6	52.1	67.4	32.5	41.7	57.9	77.7	35.6	28.2	40.4	35.3	18.2	28.7	53.3	44	32.9	46.8		
I (1994-1999)	55.1	84.0					51.3		46.3	44.0	49.1	81.9		51.3	76.6			62.8		32.3		42.0				67.7	39.3	30.3	54.3		
II (2004-2009)	40.7	84.3	37.5				43.1	30.3	51.4	30.1	40.5	32.0	39.7	64.8	37.2	58.4	70.3	32.4	58.6	80.6	36.5	22.8	41.0	27.5	18.5	30.4	43.8	42.1	35.1	42.8	
III (2014-2019)	45.5	81.8	38.7	28.0	29.9	22.4	57.1	33.0	41.5	41.9	50.2	66.4	36.1	46.6	55.3	27.8	51.0	52.3	74.8	38.2	33.6	38.2	43.2	17.9	27.0	48.5	50.9	33.4	43.3		
Balance III-I	-9.6	-2.2					-5.8		-4.8	-2.1	1.2	-15.5		-4.8	-21.3	27.8		-10.6		5.9		-3.8				-19.2	11.6	3.1	-11.0		
Balance III-II	4.8	-2.5	1.2				-13.2	-7.9	5.7	2.9	1.0	10.6	1.6	-1.1	-11.8	-15.0	-9.5	18.6	-6.3	-5.8	1.7	10.8	-2.8	15.7	-0.6	-3.4	4.7	8.8	-1.7	0.5	

Source: Data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database. Notes: a) VAP Turnout = (voters/VAP)\*100; The voting age population (VAP) includes all citizens above the legal voting age; b) Each country is indicated by international abbreviation.

When examining the trend in voter turnout over the three periods, it's important to approach the results with caution. There's a decrease of 11% for VAP turnout and 9.2% for turnout between the 1990s and the 2000s. However, there's a slight increase in participation rates (0.5% for turnout, 0.2% for VAP turnout) between the second and third periods. These results, while informative, should be interpreted with caution due to the varying number of countries involved in EP elections in each period. Even with these cautions, it's clear that the countries with the largest declines in participation are Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, France, and Luxembourg. This is consistent with both measures of turnout. Notably, Italy shows a consistent decline in participation rates in both periods. In contrast, France, Greece, and Spain experience a sharp decline in turnout between the 1990s and 2010, with a recovery between the second and third decades.

In some countries, an increase in voting participation may be observed. These include Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Latvia if the comparison is made between the first and third periods. Poland, Romania, Sweden, France, Germany, Denmark, and Lithuania are the countries with the highest increase in participation levels between the second and third periods. These results should be further analysed because they could be influenced by the size of the initial participation rates.

### ***2.3.2. Regional trends in EP Election***

The average turnout and VAP turnout for groups of countries based on when they joined the European Union were then calculated. The groups include the EU founding countries, those that joined before 2000, and those that joined after 2000 (Tables 2.9 and 2.10). Turnout is highest in the founding member-states (62.7% for turnout and 55.0% for VAP turnout) and lowest among those that joined the EU after 2000 (37.7% for turnout and 35.6% for VAP turnout). Countries that joined before 2000 are in an intermediate position. The gap between the founding countries and those that joined the EU after 2000 is larger when looking at voter turnout and less when looking at VAP turnout.

*Table 2.9. - European Parliamentary elections, 1994-2019 – Average turnout by decades and EU accession (%)*

<b>Groups (a) Time span</b>	<b>Founding members</b>	<b>Joined before 2000</b>	<b>Joined after 2000</b>	<b>EU countries</b>
1990s	64,2	49,2	n. a.	55,2
2000s	62,2	46,2	38,5	45,9
2010s	61,7	48,8	36,9	46,1
1994-2019	62,7	48,0	37,7	49,0

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

Notes: a) Founding Members: France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, Netherlands; Joined Before 2000: Austria, Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Finland, Sweden; Joined After 2000: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania; b) Other countries: Switzerland, Norway and Ukraine; c) Turnout = (actual voters/registered voters)\*100; the value in each cell is the average turnout for a given group of countries with reference to the time period

*Table 2.10. - European Parliamentary elections, 1994-2019 – Average VAP turnout by decades and EU accession (%)*

<b>Groups (a) Time span</b>	<b>Founding members</b>	<b>Joined before 2000</b>	<b>Joined after 2000</b>	<b>EU countries</b>
1990s	58,1	51,7	n. a.	54,3
2000s	53,5	46,4	35,6	42,8
2010s	53,3	47,5	35,6	43,3
1994-2019	55,0	48,5	35,6	46,8

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

Notes: a) Founding Members: France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, Netherlands; Joined Before 2000: Austria, Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Finland, Sweden; Joined After 2000: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania; b) Other countries: Switzerland, Norway and Ukraine; c) VAP turnout = (actual voters/voting age population)\*100; the value in each cell is the average turnout for a given group of countries with reference to the time period

The distance between these groups of countries is the same when observed with reference to the periods defined above. In the 1990s, the difference between the average participation rates of the founding countries and those of the countries that joined later was 6.4% for VAP turnout but rose to 15.0% when considering turnout. Moreover, among the founding countries there is a drop in participation from one period to the next, although in the third period the drop is smaller than in the second (-0.5% for turnout and -0.2% for VAP turnout). The countries that joined the EU before 2000 even showed an increase in electoral participation rates between 2000 and 2010.

Finally, looking at the turnout for the European Parliament elections in the EU countries according to their geopolitical region (Tables 2.11 and 2.12), constant differences can be noted between Western, Southern, Northern, and Eastern Europe. Western European countries have the highest VAP participation rates in the 2010s. When looking at VAP turnout, Southern countries show a higher participation rate both over the entire period and in the first two decades. In contrast, Eastern European countries always show



the lowest VAP participation rates, regardless of the calculation method. Overall, turnout and VAP turnout decreased between the first and second periods and the second and third decades. However, the average turnout rates increase in all groups, except for Southern Europe, between the 2000s and the 2010s.

*Table 2.11. - European Parliamentary elections, 1994-2019 – Average turnout by decades and geopolitical region (%)*

Groups Time span	Western Europe	Eastern Europe	Southern Europe	Northern Europe	EU Countries (a)
1990s	62,0	n. a.	60,6	42,6	55,2
2000s	58,1	28,2	54,9	43,5	45,9
2010s	61,1	31,4	46,4	45,3	46,1
1994-2019	60,4	29,8	53,9	43,8	49,0

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

Notes: (a) Western countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands; Eastern countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia; Southern countries: Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain; Northern countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, United Kingdom; b) Turnout = (actual voters/registered voters)\*100; the value in each cell is the average turnout for a given group of countries with reference to the time period,

*Table 2.12. - European Parliamentary elections, 1994-2019 – Average VAP turnout by decades and geopolitical region (%)*

Groups Time span	Western Europe	Eastern Europe	Southern Europe	Northern Europe	EU Countries (a)
1990s	54,5	n. a.	67,0	43,7	54,3
2000s	48,6	29,0	53,4	40,9	42,8
2010s	51,6	32,0	46,0	42,6	43,3
1994-2019	51,6	30,5	55,5	42,4	46,8

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

Notes: (a) Western countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands; Eastern countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia; Southern countries: Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain; Northern countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, United Kingdom; (b) VAP Turnout = (voters/VAP)\*100; the value in each cell is the average turnout for a given group of countries with reference to the time period.

## 2.4. Some concluding remarks

Our analysis of turnout trends in European countries yields conclusions valuable for political research and may significantly influence policy decisions in the electoral field.

First, from a methodological point of view, the two methods of calculating turnout sometimes produce quite different results. The electoral participation rate is generally lower when measured using the voting age population. This is due to the increasing share of foreign citizens in European countries' population as a result of growing migration. Further differences emerge

if the results are examined for different groups of countries and other periods. Based on these results, it would be useful to explore whether the two calculation methods measure different phenomena or the same phenomenon in different ways. This raises the question of the validity and reliability of the turnout measurement. In any case, the above analysis results show a higher reliability and stability of the ‘official’ turnout rate. We should also note that the automatic registration of voters on the electoral roll is generally provided for in almost all European countries. Indeed, the problem of updating the electoral registers remains. However, the error caused by failure to maintain registers could be lower than that resulting from incorrect estimates of the voting age population.

Secondly, the analysis confirmed both considerable disparities between different groups of European countries in terms of voter turnout and a general trend of declining turnout over the years (at least as regards national parliamentary elections). For example, countries such as Poland show low participation rates, while Germany has higher levels of turnout. Some countries, such as Italy or Greece, show a more pronounced decline in turnout. However, especially in the last decade, a recovery of citizens’ attention towards elections seems to be emerging, at least in some countries or groups of countries. Further research could investigate the factors that have produced this recent partial reversal, for instance with reference to the rise of populism and the growth of political polarisation (Wilford, 2017; see also Cabada and Charvat, 2023). However, national trends in turnout are not synchronised with each other, creating differences and variations. These discrepancies underline the complex nature of voter behaviour and the differences between the socio-political contexts of European countries.

Thirdly, our analysis shows that, despite the decline in turnout, national parliamentary elections remain “first order” compared to European parliamentary elections, which are considered “second-order,” especially in Eastern Europe (Hloušek and Kaniok, 2020). As we have seen in the case of France, in some countries, presidential elections attract an even higher turnout than parliamentary elections. Moreover, as in the case of the Czech Republic, there are considerable differences between elections in one branch of parliament and those in the other. Nevertheless, turnout is higher in national parliamentary elections in all the above-mentioned groups of countries. This result is valid for the entire period and each of the decades. The difference between the two electoral participation rates is higher for Northern and Eastern European countries and smaller for Western and Southern European countries. This result might also be worthy of further investigation.

### *3. Voter turnout differences across European countries: Conceptual framework*

by *Domenico Maddaloni*\*

In the previous chapter, we defined electoral turnout and discussed turnout trends in European countries from 1991 to 2023. In this chapter, we aim to answer the following questions: What factors influence voter turnout? What role does trust play in affecting turnout levels? To achieve this, we will review the existing literature to analyse the key findings on the subject and demonstrate the significance of trust as a predictor of voter turnout. Building on this analysis, in the next chapter we will present a theoretical model that seeks to incorporate trust as one of the factors contributing to the understanding of electoral behaviour.

#### **3.1. What affects voter turnout? A review of reviews**

Any attempt to explain the evolution of voter turnout and the differences in voting participation between countries is first faced with the task of identifying the independent variables, that is, the factors considered as causes of voter turnout. Furthermore, the relationships between these dimensions and variables need to be defined using a theoretical model since a linear mono-causal pattern of social explanation cannot be easily applied in complex systems such as human societies. The concept of the causal web may instead be much more useful in describing scientific work in this field – not to mention the recursive nature of many social processes (Morin, 2008), whereby, for example, a social trust may, in turn, influence or modify processes or conditions generally listed among its leading causes.

The search for the causes and predictors of voter turnout has produced a substantial amount of literature, ranging from case studies to quantitative cross-national comparative analysis. This has resulted in a growing body of

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knowledge about the factors fostering or hindering the voter turnout. However, the lack of consensus among scholars as to which variables should be included in an explanatory model of electoral behaviour and the structure this model should have, underscores the need for further research and the potential for contributing to the field. Moreover, the literature on electoral behaviour has grown enormously over time.

To better define this subject, our first step has been to compare the literature reviews on electoral turnout we found in a search via Google Scholar (Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006; Smets and van Ham, 2013; Cancela and Geys, 2016; Stockemer, 2017; Frank and Martinez i Coma, 2023). We considered (1) the type of work done; (2) the level of the variables; (3) the number of articles or essays examined in each study; (4) the number of variables taken into account in the survey; (5-7) the factors which were found to be associated with voter turnout (divided into three categories: institutional, political, socio-economic); and finally whether (8) trust was considered in each study. The main findings of this exercise are summarized in Table 3.1.

This exercise, however, meets some limitations, the most important of which is the risk of oversimplifying a very complex issue. In addition, “even the most exhaustive meta-analyses like those above are circumscribed by their samples. This implies that we are unsure about the robustness of such results, given that most researchers’ robustness checks are ad hoc” (Frank and Martinez i Coma, 2023: 612). Moreover, “many variables explaining turnout are interconnected, be it because of path-dependency or because they measure closely related concepts” (Smets and van Ham, 2013: 357). Another limitation stems from the wide range of variable operationalisations available. For instance, Geys (2006) refers to 12 variables under scrutiny, but differences in operationalisation increase the number of variables under analysis to 33, rising to 40 in a later study (Cancela and Geys, 2016). In addition, the explanatory power of each variable is not the same if we consider elections of different relevance. Cancela and Geys, for instance, find that “campaign expenditures, election closeness, and registration requirements have more explanatory power in national elections, whereas population size and composition, concurrent elections, and the electoral system play a more important role for explaining turnout in subnational elections” (2016: 264). Finally, while the number of political and institutional variables considered in research on voter turnout is relatively limited, the number of variables referring to demographic, economic, social, or cultural aspects is much higher. This reduces even more the comparability of the findings that relate to the set of potential causes of electoral behaviour.

Table 3.1. - A review of reviews: factors affecting voter turnout\*

Cases / Variables	Blais (2006)	Geys (2006)	Snets and van Ham (2013)	Cancela and Geys (2016)	Stockemer (2017)	Frank and Martinez i Coma (2023)
Type of inquiry	Review	Meta-analysis	Meta-analysis	Meta-analysis	Meta-analysis	Meta-analysis
Variables level	Aggregate	Aggregate	Individual	Aggregate	Aggregate	Aggregate
Number of works	n. a.	83	90	185	130	44
Number of variables	n. a.	12 (33)	67	12 (40)	"More than 100"	127
Institutional factors	Compulsory voting; Voting age; <u>Voting facilities</u>	Compulsory voting; Voting facilities; Concurrent elections; Electoral system	<u>Compulsory voting</u> ; <u>Voting facilities</u>	<u>Compulsory voting</u> ; <u>Voting facilities</u> ; Concurrent elections	Compulsory voting; <u>Voting facilities</u> ; Importance of elections	Compulsory voting; Concurrent elections; Electoral system; Age of democracy
Political factors	<u>Election closeness / competitiveness</u>	Previous turnout; Election closeness / competitiveness; Campaign spending	<u>Previous vote</u> ; Political mobilisation; Party identification; Political interest; political knowledge	Previous turnout; Election closeness / competitiveness; Campaign spending	<u>Previous turnout</u>	
Socio-economic factors	Development level; <u>Popul. size</u>	Popul. size; Popul. stability; Ethnic fractionalisation	Age; Education; Residential mobility; Region; Media exposure	Popul. size; Popul. stability; Ethnic fractionalisation	<u>Popul. size</u>	Development level; Ethnic fractionalisation; Income inequality; Economic globalisation; Inflation; Spending decentralisation
Mentioned: Trust	n. m.	n. m.	In institutions (no correlation); In others (no correlation)	n. m.	Toward elected officials ("Too few studies")	n. m.

\* Factors appearing in at least 3 out of 6 studies are underlined

With these limitations in mind, we can observe that political researchers generally agree that compulsory voting, voting facilities, the presence of concurrent elections, previous turnout, the closeness or competitiveness of elections, the size of the population, and ethnic fractionalisation are safe predictors of voter turnout. However, this does not imply that other variables are unimportant, for the reasons mentioned above and also because the effect of some variables may be relevant for some groups of countries but less relevant for others (Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006; Cancela and Geys, 2016; Stockemer, 2017; Frank and Martinez i Coma, 2023). Moreover, overall social change may affect the closeness of the relationship between a variable and voter turnout, which may, therefore, change over time. In addition, major structural and cultural changes produce new factors that may intervene in the causal pathway leading to electoral behaviour. For instance, a variable that is receiving increasing attention in turnout research is political polarisation (Dodson, 2010; Wilford, 2017; Bélanger, 2017; see also Cabada and Charvat, 2023). Recent research shows that the so-called populist parties, seen as an indicator of political polarisation, can boost voter turnout (Hobolt and Horner, 2019; Leininger and Meijers, 2020). Other developments in turnout literature may reflect a growing interest in a particular issue, such as income inequality. Evidence shows that higher levels of income inequality may lead to a decrease in voter turnout especially among poorer groups (Anderson and Beramendi, 2012; Schafer et al., 2021). These recent findings corroborate the main results of a more extensive study by Horn (2011), stating that inequality is negatively associated with turnout at national elections.

Turning now to consider the theoretical models by which these results are incorporated to explain electoral turnout, Smets and van Ham provide a relatively systematic review of the latter (Smets and van Ham, 2013). However, this is done in the context of an inquiry into the role of individual-level variables in explaining voter turnout differences. According to these authors, several approaches to the study of voter turnout can be distinguished:

1. The resource model (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995), according to which electoral behaviour is driven by resources such as income, education, or socio-economic status.
2. The mobilization model (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993), according to which citizens are motivated to vote by their involvement in parties, candidates, interest groups, and other social networks.
3. The rational choice model (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968), according to which the choice of going or not going to vote is affected by direct costs-benefits calculations.
4. The psychological (or attitudinal) model, according to which electoral behaviour is affected by a range of psychological determinants, including

cognitive characteristics such as party identification or political knowledge (Verba et al, 1978).

5. The socialization model (Plutzer, 2002), according to which the exposure to different socialization processes makes a difference in affecting electoral behaviour.
6. The political-institutional model (Lijphart, 1997; Franklin, 2004; Farrell, 2011), according to which individual choices are a by-product of the political system in which people live.

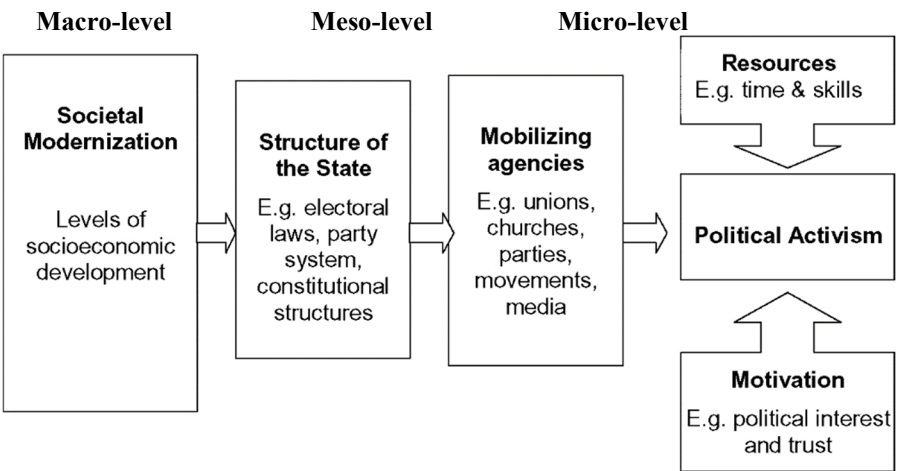
In broader terms, the first four models refer to an individualist perspective in social analysis; the last two approaches, on the other hand, appear congruent with a systemic perspective. Since the review was geared towards evaluating research conducted from an individualist perspective, it is not surprising that the authors found more robust correlations on this side. However, Smets and van Ham avoid making final judgements from this exercise: “The current state of turnout research seems to be one where models are often underspecified theoretically and empirically. While the theoretical argumentation for the variable of interest is mostly well developed, often too little attention is paid to other factors that evidently influence turnout, and that may confound the impact of the variable of interest on turnout” (2013: 356).

An alternative model of voter turnout may be found in Norris’s analysis of the old and new forms of political activism (2002). According to it, to explain the recent trends and national differences in political participation, one can rely on many approaches, each stressing different variables. Modernization theories suggest that some common social trends “have increased demands for more active public participation in the policy-making process through direct action, new social movements, and protest groups, while weakening deferential loyalties and support for traditional hierarchical organizations and authorities [...]. By contrast, institutional accounts emphasize the way in which the structure of the state sets opportunities for participation [...]. Agency theories [...] focus on the role of traditional mobilizing organizations in civic society, notably the ways in which political parties, trade unions, and religious groups recruit, organize, and engage activists. [...]. Lastly, the civic voluntarism model [...] emphasizes the role of social inequalities in resources such as educational skills and socioeconomic status, and motivational factors such as political interest, information, and confidence, in explaining who participates” (Norris, 2002: 19).

Starting from this debate, Norris develops a single theoretical model that explains differences in political participation (and thus also voter turnout) as a function of a combination of the factors considered by the previous approaches (see Figure 3.1). According to this theoretical model, the political behaviour of citizens is the result of a combination of factors operating at the

macro (social modernisation), meso (state structure and mobilising agencies), and micro (resources and motivations) levels.

Figure 3.1. - A theoretical model of political activism



Source: Norris (2002), p. 20

The results of Norris’ research confirm that “all other things being equal, political institutions matter” in affecting citizens’ electoral behaviour at an aggregate level (Norris, 2002: 217). More specifically, her findings confirm the important role of variables such as compulsory voting, voting facilities, the presence of concurrent elections, and the closeness or competitiveness of elections (to quote only those mentioned in our previous analysis) in affecting voter turnout. Moreover, Norris’ research also confirms that “after controlling for levels of modernization and the institutional context, social structure, mobilizing agencies, and cultural attitudes still played important roles in predicting micro-level turnout” (Norris, 2002: 218). However, when broken down by country, the role of factors, such as education and income levels, in affecting electoral turnout is not clear because the evidence is mixed. One reason for this may be that “there is a ceiling effect in the impact of human development. In particular, once primary and secondary education become ubiquitous throughout the population, producing the basic cognitive skills that facilitate civic awareness and access to mass communications, then further gains in the proportion of the population attending college and ever-rising levels of personal wealth, income, and leisure time do not, in themselves, produce further improvements in voting participation” (Norris, 2022: 216).



### 3.2. The role of trust in voter turnout

Trust and perceptions of trustworthiness, the concepts at the core of TRUEDEM research, do not play a significant role in the literature reviews examined above. Table 3.1. shows that these variables are not even mentioned in four out of six studies, while in one of them (Smets and van Ham, 2013) trust “in institutions” and trust “towards others” are included among the potentially relevant variables for the psychological model. Unfortunately, the meta-analysis conducted by these authors disproves that there is a strong correlation between these dimensions of trust and electoral turnout. Stockemer (2017) mentions research on trust “in elected officials” (Stockemer et al, 2013) but only to state that there are still too few studies to draw a definitive conclusion on the relevance of this variable for electoral behaviour.

However, in recent years, there has been a significant surge in research on the influence of various forms of trust on political behaviour, including voter turnout. This growing body of work is particularly focused on two main types of trust: political trust, which encompasses trust in the government and its policies, elected political bodies, coalitions and parties, or individual candidates and political entrepreneurs; and social trust, which primarily refers to generalised trust or trust in “the others” (Uslaner, 2018).

As for political trust, there is a growing consensus in the literature on its role in shaping electoral behaviour, and, more generally, the whole set of relationships between the rulers and the ruled in various types of political systems (Norris, 2022; 2023). First, trust does have a direct impact on political participation. Research has consistently shown that higher levels of trust in political institutions and actors (political trust) are associated with greater political engagement and participation of individuals (Grönlund and Setälä, 2007; Hooghe and Marien, 2012). Hence, trust plays an essential role in the functioning of democratic societies as it provides the foundation for citizens to engage in political activities and contribute to the democratic process. Trust in political institutions and actors is linked to beliefs about the legitimacy and fairness of the political system and the confidence that one’s participation can make a difference (internal and external efficacy). For instance, Carreras and İrepoğlu (2013) found that the effect of trust in elections on turnout is larger in countries where voting is not mandatory, suggesting a significant relationship between political trust and voter turnout. Therefore, it may be argued that political trust has a direct impact on electoral turnout (Cox, 2008; Hooghe, 2018).

On the other hand, low levels of political trust can lead to political disenchantment (Eder et al., 2015), even if this does not automatically imply a decline in each form of political participation. According to this perspective,

there is a link between political trust (via perceptions of political efficacy, on one side, and trustworthiness of political actors, on the other) and corruption perceptions in representative democracies (Norris, 2022: 169-197). Some studies (for instance, Malmberg and Christensen, 2021) have delved into the relationship between corruption perceptions and political participation, shedding light on the influence of corruption on citizens' engagement in the political process and their trust in democratic institutions. A growing body of research shows that perceptions of the parliament and/or the government being as corrupt decrease trust and, therefore, aggregate turnout (Stockemer et al., 2013; Sundström and Stockemer, 2015). Another study refines these findings, showing that perceptions of growing corruption among political leaders drive a decline in electoral turnout in countries with previously low or medium levels of perceived corruption (Dahlberg and Solevid, 2016). However, voter turnout may grow when a new player enters the electoral competition and is perceived as having greater integrity (Kostadinova, 2009). According to this perspective, research on political trust also meets the issue of political polarisation, as in recent work on the polarisation of political trust among US citizens (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015).

Another variable that may affect electoral turnout is citizens' perception of electoral integrity (Norris, 2014; Norris, 2022: 169-197). "There is no question that electoral malpractices are widely regarded as intrinsically important where they violate obligations, commitments, and principles of democratic elections in universal and regional human rights instruments" (Norris, 2014: 5). Higher turnout is often found in elections showing higher electoral integrity (Birch, 2010; Martinez i Coma and Trinh, 2017). This is because perceptions of electoral integrity are a relevant factor for citizens' evaluations of the quality and legitimacy of elections (Norris and Grömping, 2019). Furthermore, it has been observed that the integrity of the electoral process has a significant impact on the citizens' attitudes and behaviours (Fortin-Rittberger et al., 2017). In turn, perceptions of electoral integrity may be affected by both long-term factors, such as the local civic culture (Putnam, 1993, 2000), and contextual and short-term factors, such as the quality of the media environment and campaign finance. At the individual level, perceptions of electoral integrity are shaped by the voters' personal experiences and media consumption (Norris and Grömping, 2019). However, there are methodological issues in much research on corruption and election integrity perceptions. Indeed, many studies on these topics look at expert assessments and do not draw directly on citizens' opinions, which may have some effect on the results.

Political trust, however, is not the only dimension of trust involved in research on political participation and voting. Social trust (or generalised

trust) may also be relevant in this context. Moreover, the combination of social trust and political trust may shape individual preferences as regards political participation (Williams, 2020), thus affecting electoral turnout at an aggregate level. This indicates that contextual factors may influence the relationship between social trust and voter turnout and may not hold across all settings (Zmerli and Hooghe, 2011; Hooghe and Marien, 2012). In order to explain these differences, it is important to note that, according to many scholars, social trust and political trust differ in their foundations, consequences, and associations. While social trust may reflect cultural values rooted in basic societal structures and long-term attitudes, political trust is mainly based on short-term outcomes and evaluations of leaders (Newton et al., 2018). This suggests that these two dimensions of trust may affect different types of citizens' political participation. While political trust has a direct role in electoral turnout, social trust is more linked to other forms of social networking (social capital) and civic engagement (Uslaner, 2004). Moreover, while political trust is more sensitive to short-term contingencies, such as economic downturns, social trust is more stable over time (Uslaner, 2018).

To sum up, research has shown that political trust and the variables linked to it, such as perceptions of corruption and electoral integrity, may directly affect turnout. On the contrary, the impact of social trust on electoral behaviour can be mediated by other factors (for instance, social capital: Fiorino et al., 2021).

Having established the importance of political trust and social trust (or generalised trust) in voter turnout research, the next step is to integrate these concepts into a comprehensive theoretical model that explains citizens' electoral behaviour. The study of voter turnout has evolved to encompass two broad families of theories aimed at explaining this relationship.

According to rational choice theories (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968), individuals choose to vote based on a cost-benefit analysis. Hence, individuals who trust political institutions and believe that their vote will make a difference are more likely to vote because they perceive the benefits of voting to outweigh the costs. Conversely, individuals who distrust political institutions and believe their vote will have no effect are less likely to vote because they perceive the costs of voting outweigh the benefits. According to this perspective, rational choice theories relate more particularly to political trust.

Social capital theories (Putnam, 1993, 2000), instead, argue that trust (indeed, social or generalised trust) may boost the development of social networks and formal or informal associations (social capital), a helpful resource to achieve both individual and collective goals. Individuals with high levels of social capital are more likely to engage in civic activities, such as voting,

because they feel a sense of belonging to their community and believe that their actions can make a difference. Societies with high levels of social capital are, therefore, more prone to civic engagement and political participation, including voting. In this approach, social capital theories relate more particularly to social trust.

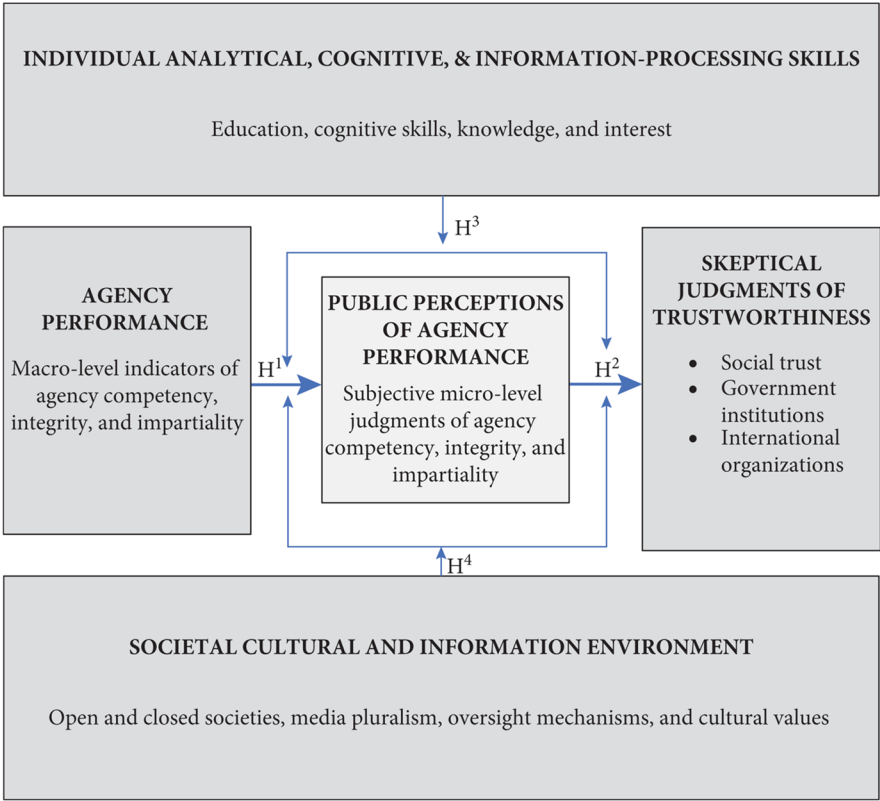
Another perspective, recently developed by Rolfe (2012), emphasizes the impact of social context and the interdependence of individual decisions. In Rolfe's view, social capital affects individual political choices insofar as it produces a dynamic of social influence and communication that may increase or decrease the propensity to vote. Social interactions and networks impact voter participation in local and national elections by shaping the communication, perceptions, and social norms within communities, ultimately influencing individual voter decisions and turnout rates. Thus, the approach proposed by Rolfe also seems to identify social trust as the basis of the causal process leading to electoral choice.

With regard to trust, an important reference for our research work is the recent research on trust and participation by Norris (2022). From an actor-centred perspective, Norris views trust as an attitude based on a judgement of the trustworthiness of the actor's counterparts in the framework of a dyadic relationship. This judgement, in turn, may be affected by various factors. In the political arena, these factors may be: (1) the societal environment (cultural values, media pluralism, systemic control, social hierarchies); (2) individual skills (such as the individual educational level or cognitive skills); (3) the agency performance (through indicators of competency, integrity, and impartiality) (see Figure 3.2).

Based on Norris's argument, we posit that citizens living in an environment challenged by a set of relevant issues use their skills mentioned above to develop perceptions of how political institutions and elected authorities rise up to these issues and deal with the challenge. At the same time, the citizens assess the credibility of the programmes and proposals of other actors in the political arena (e.g., opposition parties). As a result, they may sceptically judge the trustworthiness of these institutions and actors and behave accordingly (see Sotiropoulos et al., 2023, for an application of this reasoning to the relationship between migration and political participation in Europe). The model thus states that political trust, in association with the individual judgment of the trustworthiness of political institutions and actors, is an important intermediary between the basic structural and cultural variables and the choice to vote or not to vote. Under this perspective, perceptions of corruption and electoral integrity are linked to political trust, as they are indicators of the trustworthiness of political institutions and the actors that

support them (the government, ruling parties, political leaders, the bureaucracy), and thus enter into individual voting choice (Norris, 2022: 169-197).

Figure 3.2. - A theoretical model of skeptical trust



Source: Norris (2022: 42, fig. 2.1)

In the examined model, social trust or generalised trust is seen instead as a dependent variable since it may be affected by possible changes in perceived trustworthiness (see Figure 3.1). However, it may also act as an independent variable in the overall causal pathway. For instance, political corruption can undermine generalised trust. However, higher levels of social trust are associated with lower levels of corruption (and vice versa). Trusting individuals are less likely to engage in corrupt behaviour, and societies with higher levels of trust tend to have more robust mechanisms in place to control corruption – and vice versa (Yu, 2018).

Therefore, the social or generalised trust may be included not just in the

outcomes but also in the societal environment based on this model. More specifically, since according to a long-standing sociological tradition, generalised trust is one of the building blocks of social cooperation and collective self-rule, it has been seen as the foundation of both individual social networks and many kinds of social groups, including social and civic engagement associations. Therefore, social trust plays a significant role in fostering civic engagement and cooperative activities such as volunteering, participation in community events, and political involvement (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Paxton and Kessler, 2018; Norris, 2022: 97-135). It should be noted, however, that some trust-based social networks and associations may be harmful to democracy, as in the case of clientelism and rackets (Warren, 2018). Indeed, the latter may cause a decline in political trust and a withdrawal of citizens from political participation, including turnout in elections. Furthermore, social capital and civic engagement can lead to forms of political participation other than voting, such as involvement in social movements (Norris, 2022: 97-135), with mixed effects on electoral behaviour. In this theoretical model, therefore, social trust is only *prima facie* positively associated with voter turnout. Other factors – especially those we identified in section 3.1 and listed also in the model – may intervene in the causal relationship, which can, therefore, only be understood when considering the theoretical model as a whole.

### **3.3. Some concluding remarks**

The issue of trust has become increasingly important in studies on voter turnout, but it still needs to be recognized as a fundamental factor in research on the causes of electoral behaviour. Other variables receive more attention, particularly those of institutional and political nature, which are more familiar to political scholars. Nonetheless, there has been some progress, especially in understanding the role of political trust and related variables in influencing turnout. However, the role of social trust in this debate is less clear. Norris's contributions to the analysis of political participation (2002) and trust (2022) are relevant as they can lead to a broader and deeper understanding of the factors that influence voter turnout. In the following chapters, we aim to integrate the two proposed approaches into a single model that links social and political trust to voter turnout.

## 4. Voter turnout difference across European countries: Research design

by *Angela Delli Paoli* and *Felice Addeo*\*

The analysis of turnout trends outlined in Chapter 2 and the conceptual framework defined in Chapter 3 laid the foundation for a research design to understand the relationship between trust and turnout in national parliamentary elections and European elections over the past thirty years. In this chapter, we first define the theoretical model explaining the influence exerted by social trust and political trust on turnout in the context of the network of causal relations that, as we have seen, also include other factors. Secondly, we outline a research strategy in which all relevant variables are clearly defined in their operational definition and presumed relationship to turnout. In the next chapter, we assess the validity and reliability of the theoretical model through a multivariate analysis.

### 4.1. Theoretical model

There are two ways to analyse turnout: aggregate-level (in this case, country-level) or individual-level explanations. This choice is reflected in the empirical data. We opted for a system-level analysis of turnout. As we have seen in the previous chapter and as confirmed by the meta-analysis of aggregate-level research on turnout (Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006; Smets and van Ham, 2013; Cancela and Geys 2016; Stockemer, 2017; Frank and Martinez i Coma, 2023), despite the increasing methodological sophistication of turnout studies, there is still no established central model of turnout and several factors have been alternately considered predictors of turnout at the macro level. Rarely have these factors been examined all together; instead, policy researchers have tested the influence of one or a few factors. Therefore, we aim to provide a comprehensive model to assess turnout in Europe. The model

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includes both explanatory factors that the literature has shown to be robust and other potentially influential factors that have attracted increasing attention in more recent work. The model is based on four dimensions that are assumed to affect turnout.

Following Norris (2002; see also Chapter 3), we distinguish between macro-factors, which include all systemic causes of turnout, meso-factors related to the electoral and institutional context, and micro-factors related to individual attitudes and behaviour in aggregate. The distinction between macro, meso, and micro factors is also related to data collection. Macro data preserves the country as a unit of analysis, meso data is election-related information, and microdata is survey-based individual data.

At the macro level, voter turnout can be influenced by both culture and modernisation. Culture refers to the set of norms and values of society and is represented by generalised social trust, which is seen as a public good. The concept of social trust encompasses both generalised interpersonal trust and particularised interpersonal trust. The latter is limited to people we already know, who belong to our social, demographic or ethnic group. Instead of benefiting society as a whole, particularised trust can divide society into in-group and outgroup dynamics. Therefore, our aim is to isolate the effects of generalised interpersonal trust from particularised interpersonal trust. In this way, we see generalised trust as a moral value that promotes trust in the generalised other and the feeling that “most people can be trusted”.

The central claim of modernisation theories is that wealth, education, and urbanisation are the social foundations of democracy and mass political participation (Verba, Nie, Kim 1971). Modernisation refers to a multitude of social, economic, and demographic changes that transform the structure of society (Norris 2002). These changes are so diverse and encompass so many dimensions that their impact on democratisation and civic engagement may vary: some may encourage democratic engagement and others depress it. In particular, economic and human development (GDP growth, rising levels of literacy and education, increased public social spending) encourage democracy and thus push voter turnout upwards by improving cognitive skills and financial resources (Sassen 1999). Conversely, inequality and poverty should depress democratisation and civic engagement. At the same time, social trends associated with modernisation and industrialisation, such as urbanisation, can weaken traditional community ties and associations. According to these theories, the revolution in cultural values caused changes in civic participation among the younger generations, who apparently have a growing interest in a post-materialist political agenda. This creates the basis not only for new social movements and alternative forms of participation (Topf 1998;



Inglehart 1997) but also for a decrease in traditional forms of political participation, including turnout.

Socio-economic development can be closely correlated with the spread of democratisation: the higher the level of development, the more established the democracy. The democratic profile of the country itself - as part and product of the modernisation process - can influence the electoral participation of citizens.

The cultural and socio-economic context defines opportunities for civic engagement that the state, institutions, and political game rules further shape. At the meso level, therefore, institutional arrangements and electoral systems influence the convenience of voting. This means that in a situation of a similar level of cultural, social, and economic development, the structure of the institutional system plays a major role in shaping political participation. This includes electoral laws, legal regulations and administrative arrangements within each country, the efficiency of registration, and compulsory voting. Other important factors in this context are those related to the fairness of electoral competition and media pluralism. We call this dimension 'electoral convenience' since it is supposed to encourage or discourage turnout by directly influencing the individual cost-benefit balance in voting choice. At the aggregate level, these choices can affect turnout. For these reasons, countries with the same level of modernisation may show different turnout trends depending on institutional differences.

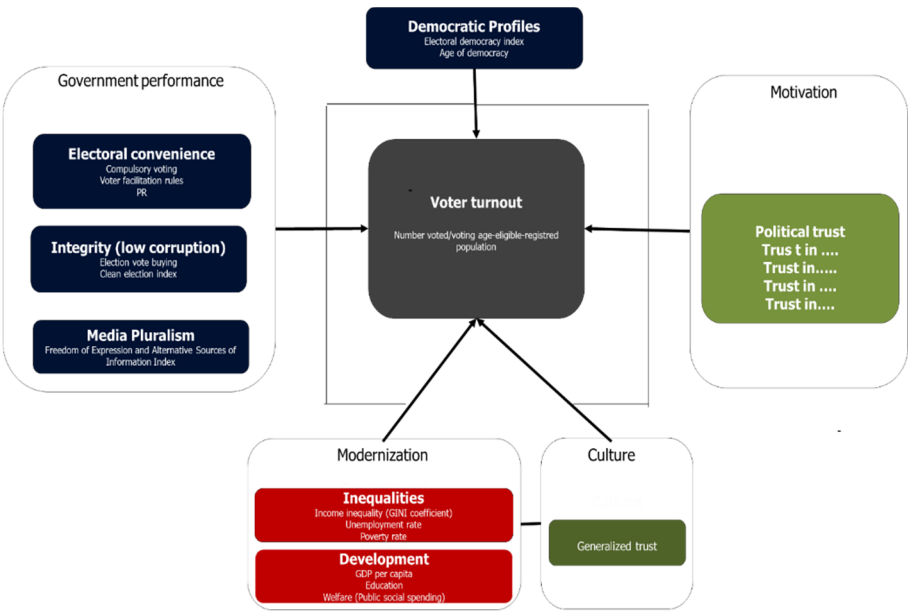
While interpersonal trust is not necessarily a direct antecedent of political trust, as it can stimulate unconventional or non-institutionalised political participation used against the state (Rose et al., 1997; Kaase, 1999), we follow Putnam's argument linking social trust to political trust (Putnam, 1993) via effective government.

The theoretical assumption of the connections between generalised trust, effective government and political participation comes from the literature on social capital. While recognising that generalised trust can also be an individual good, we consider it a public good following Putnam's (2000) argument on the better functioning of democracy in an environment of high social capital: "Stocks of social capital, such as trust, norms, and networks, tend to be self-reinforcing and cumulative. Virtuous circles lead to a social equilibrium with high levels of cooperation, trust, reciprocity, civic engagement, and well-being, as well as honesty and respect for the law" (Putnam, 1993: 111, 177).

Thus, the relationship between the above listed variables is as follows: culture (generalised trust) and modernisation (level of social, economic and demographic development) play a significant role in promoting cooperative social relations on which effective political institutions are based. In turn,

effective political organisations help create a legitimate government, which fosters political trust and, thus, voter turnout (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. - A theoretical model of voter turnout



Source: Our own elaboration.

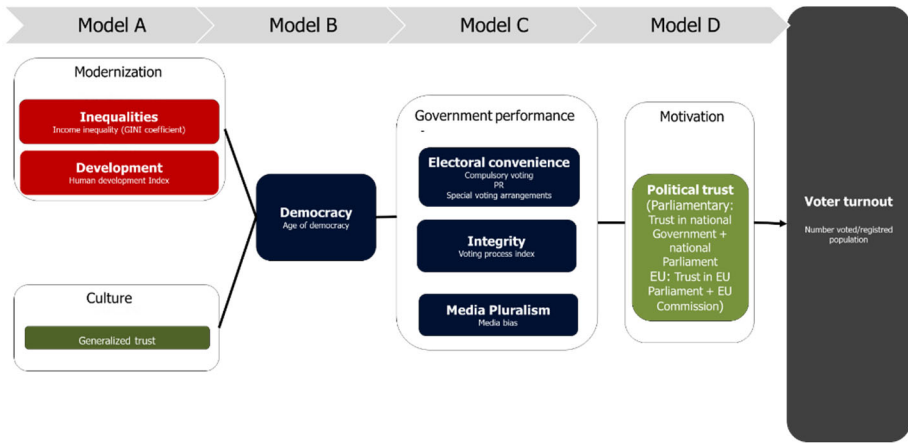
## 4.2. Research strategy

Following Norris’ (2002) approach, individual European countries are used as the unit of analysis. This means that the model considers the relationships between variables as national average values for the period considered (or shorter time frames in the case of missing data).

Our study is based on two separate multivariate analyses based on OLS regression analysis. Specifically, we construct two different sets of empirical models according to the type of election and distinguish between national and European elections (see Figure 4.2). The dependent variable is turnout, measured as the percentage of registered voters in 273 national and 142 European elections held from 1991 to 2023 in 31 European countries. For each regression, Model A first inserts only the variables of generalised trust and modernisation. Model B adds democratisation. Model C adds governmental

performance indicators related to institutional factors that are assumed to influence turnout (electoral convenience, integrity, and media pluralism). Finally, model D also tests the effect of political trust.

Figure 4.2. - Empirical models of voter turnout



Source: Our own elaboration.

### 4.3. Operationalization/Measures

#### 4.3.1. Dependent variable: Turnout

As we have seen in Chapter 3, turnout can be operationally defined in two primary ways: 1) as the percentage of registered voters; 2) as the percentage of the voting age population. The first measure is the number of votes divided by the number of citizens legally registered to vote. The second measure is the number of votes divided by the population size that has reached the minimum voting age (voting age population, VAP). Semantically, these measures refer to different aspects of participation, depending on individual choices and electoral regulations. As discussed in Chapter 3, neither of these measures is without limitations. Both can influence the magnitude of turnout rates by underestimating or overestimating electoral participation depending on contextual factors (see Figure 4.3). In particular, the first measure overestimates turnout by not including those entitled to vote but choosing not to register. Registering may be an individual choice in some countries (e.g. the United States), not a choice in countries where citizens are legally obliged to register (e.g. Australia), or a duty of the government in countries where it

takes responsibility for the registration process (e.g. Belgium). Furthermore, this operational definition of voter turnout can be misleading in countries where voting rights are restricted and only certain groups are eligible to vote (e.g. only men or whites, as in apartheid South Africa). Populations deemed ineligible to vote may also be excluded, such as illegal immigrants, the homeless, refugees, prisoners, people in psychiatric institutions and so on (Norris 2002). In these cases, turnout may appear high even though many voices are excluded. Conversely, it may underestimate turnout in the case of double or fictitious entries.

The second measure of turnout is more inclusive since it includes people who, for different reasons, are not registered to vote but, in this way, it may distort voter turnout. The voting-age population may also include people not entitled to vote (immigrants without full citizenship rights), underestimating turnout. Conversely, it may overestimate turnout in the case of a large number of citizens living abroad who are excluded from the voting-age population.

Figure 4.3. - Types of voter turnout measures and their biases

	overestimate	underestimate
Number voted/ Registered voters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High number of eligible to vote decide not to register</li> <li>▪ Restricted franchise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High number of duplicates or fictitious registrations</li> </ul>
Number voted/ Voting age population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High number of nationals living abroad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High number of non-citizens</li> </ul>

Based on the analysis carried out in Chapter 2, which found a higher reliability of the measure based on registered voters, because almost all European countries provide automatic registration of voters, the multivariate analysis was limited to it. All data for the construction of the turnout measures were collected from the Horizon TRUEDEM database. The database covers 272 elections at the national level (lower house) and 141 elections at the European level from 1991 to 2023 in 31 European countries. Limiting the analysis to the period after 1990 also has the advantage of not confusing the phenomenon under observation with the long-term decline in voter turnout found in most democracies (Lijphart, 1997; International IDEA, 2016).

### 4.3.2. *Independent variables*

#### **Turnout and culture**

##### *Generalised trust*

We start with Newton and Norris' (2000) hypothesis on the social nature of generalised trust: the aggregate level of generalised trust is believed to influence turnout. Generalised trust is measured with the standard variable: 'most people can be trusted' as the percentage of people who agree with the statement in each country; data are taken from two different sources: SSE and Statistics Netherlands and the Integrated Values Surveys (IVS). While recognising this is a reductive measure for such a complex concept, this represents a shared and common opportunity to operationalise the concept. Thus, the aggregate generalised trust measuring the degree of trust in civil society is the individual-level score aggregated to the country level, as is customary in the literature (Benson and Rochon, 2004; Uslaner and Brown, 2005).

**H1:** High aggregated levels of generalised trust in society are associated with high levels of political participation.

#### **Turnout and modernisation**

##### *Inequalities*

Evidence shows that higher levels of income inequality can lead to lower voter turnout (Anderson and Beramendi, 2012; Schafer et al., 2021; Horn, 2011; Wilford, 2020). Inequality is considered in terms of income inequality and, although it can be operationalised in several ways, the most comprehensive is the Gini index. The latter varies between 0 and 1, where 0 stands for an egalitarian society where all members have the same income, and 1 stands for a highly unequal society where all income is concentrated on a single individual while all others have none. The OECD collected data for this variable.

**H2:** The more unequal the distribution of income in society, the lower the turnout.

##### *Development*

Following modernisation theories (Inglehart 1997), the existing literature suggests that economic development can have significant effects on the political involvement of citizens (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998, Norris, 2004, Fornos et al., 2004): the more developed a country is, the higher the voter turnout. However, this influence on voter turnout seems rather moderate (Stockemer, 2017). Norris (2004) found that voter turnout is slightly higher in more developed societies. Somewhat more successful are attempts to find a positive correlation between voter turnout and a country's level of education (Stockemer, 2017). Development encompasses both economic as well

as educational, and social dimensions. Therefore, we measure development through the UNDP's Human Development Index, a composite index that combines longevity (life expectancy at birth), education (years of schooling for adults aged 25 and older and expected years of schooling for school-age children), and standard of living (gross national income per capita).

It is assumed that people in more developed countries are better informed, have a higher level of education, and have more resources to devote to society (including politics).

**H3:** The higher the level of human development, the higher the turnout.

## **Turnout and democratization**

### *Democratic profile*

The longevity of electoral democracy can also influence political participation. In order to measure the level of democratisation, we used the age of democracy (number of consecutive years of democracy) based on the assessment by Boix et al. (2013) of democracies understood as political systems in which political leaders are elected with broad suffrage in free, fair and multiparty elections.

**H4:** the higher the level of democratization, the higher the turnout.

## **Turnout and government performance**

### *Electoral convenience*

Electoral convenience refers to the institutional dimensions that influence political participation. First, it encompasses the legal characteristics of elections (in particular compulsory voting) and the type of electoral system (see, e.g., Norris, 2004; Stockemer, 2017). Among the legal characteristics of elections, compulsory voting is the one that has the most characterised turnout patterns. We expect higher turnout where compulsory voting laws are in place and when sanctions are applied because voters are punished to varying degrees if they do not vote in these systems. However, due to the low number of European countries with compulsory voting laws, we do not distinguish between how compulsory voting is enforced. This variable is taken from V-Dem.

**H5:** the presence of compulsory voting laws increases turnout.

### *Electoral system*

The type of electoral system - concerning the majoritarian or proportional nature of electoral systems - is also widely used, although the theoretical argument that proportional representation should favour turnout is not always empirically supported (Fornos et al., 2004; Collier and Vicente, 2012; Stokes et al., 2013). The electoral system is expected to influence turnout according to incentive-based explanations: while in majoritarian systems, supporters of

smaller and marginal parties may be disincentivised to vote, believing that their vote will not make any difference (wasted vote argument), in proportional representation (PR) systems (particularly those with low thresholds and large electoral districts) smaller parties may enter parliament with a modest share of votes and this increases their incentives to participate (Norris 2004: 162). Empirical results vary widely between established and non-established democracies and between European and non-European countries, and there does not seem to be a generalised correlation between the electoral system and turnout. However, Norris (2004) found that turnout is higher in countries with PR (party lists and STV electoral systems). Therefore, we hypothesise that PR systems increase the opportunity for smaller parties to enter parliament even with a modest share of votes and that this may be an incentive for citizens who support them to participate in elections.

**H6:** PR systems increase turnout

#### *Voting arrangements*

Another variable often considered is the presence of specific rules facilitating voting. However, the evidence is ambiguous (Norris, 2004). For example, postal voting may positively affect electoral participation (Gerber et al., 2013), but only among middle and upper-class individuals, who are already more likely to vote. Furthermore, some studies have found that early voting may actually reduce the overall turnout (Burden et al., 2014). In addition, early voting may also diminish citizens' trust in the entire electoral process (Burden and Gaines, 2015). We hypothesise that special voting arrangements may positively impact political participation. We argue that they affect the costs of electoral activism: if voting is easier, more voters should participate in elections.

In particular, we consider five facilitation rules:

- Absentee voting, which allows voters to send their ballot by mail to the election administration;
- Early voting, which allows voters to submit their ballot at a polling station before election day;
- Mobile ballot box, which allows voters to submit their ballot away from their assigned polling station (at home or at an institution equipped with a mobile ballot box);
- Proxy voting, which allows an authorised person to cast a vote on behalf of the voter;
- Electronic voting, which allows voters to cast their votes through electronic solutions.

The composite index, which ranges from 0 to 5, is an aggregate measure based on the presence or absence of each of the voting modes.

**H7:** the more special voting arrangements there are, the higher the turnout.

### *Corruption*

We also consider the conditional effects of corruption, malpractice, and irregularities on voting decisions. We find that corruption hurts political participation, as it negatively affects citizens' confidence in elections. The freedom and fairness of the electoral process is measured through the voting process index of the Perception of electoral integrity database. The unfairness of elections can reduce the willingness to participate.

**H8:** the higher the unfairness of election, the lower the turnout.

### *Vote buying*

If the perceived unfairness of elections can reduce the willingness to participate, receiving material incentives during the campaign (vote buying) can have the opposite effect. Vote buying can be defined as “the offering of money or (more commonly) minor consumer goods to voters by political parties, whether incumbent or opposition, in exchange for the recipient's vote” (Brusco et al., 2004: 67). Although vote buying is a clear violation of electoral fairness, distorting the link between parties and voters and skewing results, it can have a positive effect on voter turnout by providing material incentives to vote and thus functioning as an instrument of electoral mobilisation (Schaffer, 2007: 4-8), especially of those who would otherwise have stayed at home (Nichter, 2008). The variable vote buying considers the systematic and familiar presence of vote buying by certain parties and candidates, measured in V-Dem.

**H9:** the higher the frequency of vote buying, the higher the turnout.

### *Media Pluralism*

Media pluralism is measured through V-Dem's Media Bias Index, which assesses how governments respect press and media freedom or are biased against opposition parties and candidates. The media bias index is highest when the print and broadcast media cover only the official party or candidates and highest when they show coverage of all notable parties and candidates.

**H10:** the higher the media bias, the lower the turnout.

## **Turnout and motivation**

### *Political trust*

Political trust is expressed in terms of trust in many political institutions (national parliament, political parties, European Commission, EU Parliament, etc.) We have created two indices for national and European political trust. The data come from the harmonised Eurobarometer 2004-2021 provided by GESIS. We expect political trust to be positively correlated with voter turnout, but the magnitude of this association may differ depending on the type of trust and the type of election.



**H101:** Political trust increases turnout.

The variables used in our theoretical model and the assumed relationships between them and the voter turnout are depicted in Figure 4.4.

*Figure 4.4. - Summary of the variables*

Variable	Hyp. relation
Generalised trust	+
Gini index	-
Human Development Index	+
Compulsory voting	+
PR	+
Special voting arrangements	+
Age of democracy	+
Voting process index	-
Vote buying	+
Media bias	+
Political trust	+

In the next chapter, we examine whether multivariate analysis can corroborate the model we have proposed.

## *5. Voter turnout differences across European countries: Multiple regression analysis*

by *Felice Addeo and Angela Delli Paoli\**

This chapter discusses the results of the multivariate statistical analysis implemented to address the hypotheses stated in Chapter 3 (from H1 to H11). We performed a multiple regression analysis with the enter method to identify the potential factors influencing voter turnout (von Eye and Schuster, 1998; Frost, 2020). Multiple Regression analysis was applied to two different sub-datasets extracted from the TRUEDEM longitudinal cross-country database on voter turnout: one focuses on National elections, the other on European elections. There are some relevant differences between the two datasets: The European elections dataset contains data about the 28 EU Countries that held this type of election (the United Kingdom is retained in the analysis), while the national election dataset includes three more countries: Norway, Switzerland, and Ukraine. According to the theoretical model discussed in Chapter 3 (see Figure 3.1), the multiple regression analysis procedure involves five sequences to explain the variance of the same variable. In fact, in both the statistical models, the dependent variable is the voter turnout, defined as the proportion of voters on eligible voters calculated in the elections collected in our dataset: 273 national elections and 142 European elections conducted in 31 European nations between 1991 and 2023.

Other variables that have been sequentially entered in the analysis:

- **step 1 – Model A:** Multiple Regression analysis starts with three independent variables about “modernisation” (GINI index and Human Development Index) and “culture” (Generalized Trust).
- **step 2 – Model B:** The impact of democratization has been tested using the variable “age of democracy”.
- **step 3 – Model C:** As regards the government performance dimension, the institutional factors related to “electoral convenience” (“compulsory

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voting”, “proportional system”, and the “special voting arrangements”); “electoral integrity” (“political corruption index” and “vote buying”) and “media pluralism” (“media bias”) are included as variables in the statistical model.

- **step 4 – Model D:** The “motivation” conceptual dimension refers to the political trust, and it comprises some variables measuring trust in institutions related to the EU and to the individual Country (Government and Parliament).
- **step 5:** We included the geographical dimension (Eastern / Western countries) in the analysis as a dummy variable to control the model (the variable is named “Eastern” as this is the reference modality).

The operational definition of all the variables used in this multiple regression analysis has been fully detailed in Chapter 4. All data analyses were conducted using SPSS 23.0 IBM software.

## 5.1. National elections dataset

We performed the first multiple regression analysis on the national elections dataset in the following way: The Gini coefficient (OECD), Human Development Index, and generalised trust were introduced in step 1; The age of democracy (years) entered the regression analysis in step 2; Compulsory voting, proportional system, special voting arrangements index, political corruption index, vote buying, and media bias were introduced in step 3; Political trust was added in step 4. We introduced the geographical dummy variable (Eastern country = 1, Western country = 0) as a control variable in the last step of the regression analysis.

The following tables, 5.1 and 5.2, summarise the univariate statistics and the five multiple regression models respectively by providing information about the model summary and the statistical coefficients (standardized beta and significance).

All the tested models are statistically significant, and the several values of the adjusted R square indicate relevant goodness of fit of the models: from 0,444 (step 1) to 0,673 (step 5), the last value means that approximately 67,3% of the voter turnout variance is explained by the variables used in this analysis.

Table 5.1. - Univariate statistics of the variables used in the Multiple Regression Analysis (National elections dataset)

Descriptive Statistics	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Voter Turnout [IDEA]	45,9	93,5	69,8	12,2
Gini coefficient [OECD]	0	0,3	0,1	0,1
Human Development Index	0,8	1,0	0,9	0,0
Generalized Trust	13,3	72,9	35,8	17,0
Age of democracy (years)	9	157	45,5	33,2
Compulsory Voting	0	1	0,2	0,4
Proportional System	0	1	0,7	0,5
Special voting arrangements Index	0	5	1,7	1,0
Political corruption index	0,0	0,8	0,2	0,2
Vote Buying	1,36	4	3,5	0,7
Media bias	0,6	3,0	2,0	0,5
Political Trust	-1,2	2,1	0	1
Eastern	0	1	0,2	0,4

More specifically, in step 1, the Gini coefficient has a negative and significant effect ( $\beta = -0,540$ ) on voter turnout, while the human development index has a positive though not statistically significant effect ( $\beta = 0,327$ ); the generalized trust appears to have no impact on voter turnout.

In step 2, introducing the age of democracy variable has no statistically significant effect on the model, even if the beta standardised score hints at a negative effect. However, after introducing the democratisation variables at step 3, the generalised trust shows a positive and statistically significant impact ( $\beta = 0,474$ ) on voter turnout. Compulsory Voting ( $\beta = 0,293$ ) and Special voting arrangements Index ( $\beta = -0,371$ ) are other variables that could be considered predictors. An interesting result at this stage of the model is that the age of democracy negatively affects voter turnout yet is not statistically significant. At the same time, the proportional system, the political corruption index, and the media bias seem unrelated to the phenomenon.

The introduction of the political trust measure (derived from combining trust in the national government and national parliament) shows no statistical relationship with voter turnout, even though the standardised  $\beta$  score is near zero (step 4).

*Table 5.2. - Results of Multiple Regression Analysis on the National Elections with “enter” method: model summary and final model (Step 1-5).*

<i>Model</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Std. Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
1 Adjusted R Square = 0,444	(Constant)		0,938
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,540	0,001
	Human Development Index	0,327	0,137
	Generalized Trust	0,064	0,763
2 Adjusted R Square = 0,474	(Constant)		0,347
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-,0492	0,002
	Human Development Index	0,552	0,037
	Generalized Trust	0,113	0,587
3 Adjusted R Square = 0,592	Age of democracy (years)	-0,336	0,126
	(Constant)		0,535
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,423	0,006
	Human Development Index	0,483	0,127
	Generalized Trust	0,474	0,042
	Age of democracy (years)	-0,225	0,312
	Compulsory Voting	0,293	0,069
	Proportional System	-0,077	0,566
	Special voting arrangements Index	-0,371	0,046
	Political corruption index	0,113	0,697
4 Adjusted R Square = 0,570	Vote Buying	0,082	0,720
	Media bias	-0,076	0,723
	(Constant)		0,535
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,437	0,019
	Human Development Index	0,497	0,142
	Generalized Trust	0,487	0,059
	Age of democracy (years)	-0,210	0,401
	Compulsory Voting	0,296	0,076
	Proportional System	-0,069	0,642
	Special voting arrangements Index	-0,366	0,057
5 Adjusted R Square = 0,673	Political corruption index	0,111	0,711
	Vote Buying	0,081	0,732
	Media bias	-0,088	0,708
	Political Trust	-0,042	0,883
	(Constant)		0,581
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,444	0,007
	Human Development Index	0,490	0,094
	Generalized Trust	0,533	0,020
	Age of democracy (years)	-0,269	0,217
	Compulsory Voting	0,249	0,082
	Proportional System	-0,065	0,610
	Special voting arrangements Index	-0,411	0,016
	Political corruption index	0,225	0,389
	Vote Buying	-0,090	0,669
	Media bias	-0,044	0,827
	Political Trust	-0,045	0,852
	Eastern	-0,399	0,013

The last run of the multiple regression analysis (step 5) points out the relevance of the geographical dimensions, as the Eastern variable has a statistically significant and negative effect ( $\beta = -0,399$ ) on voter turnout. Moreover, this final model highlights the following variables as important predictors of voter turnout: the Gini coefficient (OECD), generalised trust, and the special voting arrangements index, with slight variations in the standardised beta score from their first introduction in the analysis. The Human Development Index and Compulsory voting maintain their positive effect, though losing statistical significance, while the other variables show no appreciable variations. Table 5.3 sums up the hypotheses testing for the national elections multiple regression analysis.

Table 5.3. - Hypothesis testing on the national elections dataset

Hypothesis	Accepted + Rejected -
<b>H1:</b> High aggregated levels of generalized trust in society are associated with high levels of political participation.	+
<b>H2:</b> The more unequal the distribution of income in society, the lower the turnout	+
<b>H3:</b> The higher the level of human development, the higher the turnout	-
<b>H4:</b> the higher the level of democratization, the higher the turnout	-
<b>H5:</b> the presence of compulsory voting laws increases turnout.	-
<b>H6:</b> PR-systems increase turnout	-
<b>H7:</b> the more special voting arrangements, the higher the turnout	-
<b>H8:</b> the higher the unfairness of election, the lower the turnout.	-
<b>H9:</b> the higher the frequency of vote buying, the higher the turnout	-
<b>H10:</b> the higher the media bias, the lower the turnout	-
<b>H11:</b> Political trust increases turnout	-

## 5.2. European elections dataset

The model discussed in Chapter 3 has also been applied to the section of our dataset focused on the European elections. Therefore, we calculated all the variables considering each Country’s values in the years the European elections were held.

This procedure has the most significant effect on the voter turnout variable, as its values are different from those analysed in the previous model, while the other variables share the same value, or just some slight variations, from those used before (see table 5.4.).

*Table 5.4. - Univariate statistics of the variables used in the Multiple Regression Analysis (European elections dataset)*

Descriptive Statistics	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Voter Turnout [IDEA]	18,1	90,5	46,2	18,1
Gini coefficient [OECD]	0	0,4	0,2	0,1
Human Development Index	0,8	1,0	0,9	0,0
Generalized Trust	13,3	72,9	34,2	16,1
Age of democracy (years)	12	91	44,2	24,9
Compulsory Voting	0	1	0,2	0,4
Special voting arrangements Index	0	1	0,1	0,3
Political corruption index	0	0,5	0,2	0,2
Vote Buying	1,4	4	3,5	0,7
Media bias	0,7	3,0	2,1	0,5
EU Trust	30,2	68,2	52,2	9,0
Eastern	18,1	90,5	46,2	18,1

We performed the second multiple regression analysis in a similar way as the previous one with two notable exceptions: 1) the electoral system variable was not included because all EU member countries adopt some proportional representation in EP elections; 2) trust in political institutions at national level has been replaced by the trust in European Union institutions.

Therefore, the steps were the following: Step 1 introduced the Gini coefficient (OECD), human development index and generalized trust; Step 2 entered the age of democracy (years), while compulsory voting, special voting arrangements index, vote buying and media bias were introduced in Step 3. EU trust appeared in Step 4 and the geographical dummy variable (Eastern country = 1, Western country = 0) was used as a control variable in the last step.

Like the previous analysis on the National Elections dataset, the five tested models are statistically significant with a relevant adjusted R square value from 0,350 (step 1) to 0,602 (step 5). Therefore, the final model explains 60,2% of the voter turnout variance. However, the results of the present multiple regression analysis show some relevant differences from those obtained with the previous analysis (see Table 5.5).

*Table 5.5. - Results of Multiple Regression Analysis on the European Elections Dataset with “enter” method: model summary and final model (Step 1-5)*

Model	Variable	Standardized Beta	Sig.
1	(Constant)		0,866
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,541	0,022
	Human Development Index	0,227	0,452
	Generalized Trust	-0,205	0,384
Adjusted R Square = 0,350			
2	(Constant)		0,572
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,552	0,016
	Human Development Index	-0,024	0,942
	Generalized Trust	-0,328	0,174
	Age of democracy (years)	0,427	0,099
Adjusted R Square = 0,399			
3	(Constant)		0,195
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,909	0,001
	Human Development Index	-0,138	0,686
	Generalized Trust	-0,326	0,205
	Age of democracy (years)	0,020	0,943
	Compulsory	-0,316	0,136
	Special voting arrangements Index	0,503	0,045
	Political corruption index	-0,023	0,937
	Vote Buying	-0,616	0,007
	Media bias	0,124	0,605
Adjusted R Square = 0,506			
4	(Constant)		0,362
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,807	0,001
	Human Development Index	-0,044	0,886
	Generalized Trust	-0,441	0,066
	Age of democracy (years)	0,116	0,646
	Compulsory	-0,389	0,047
Adjusted R Square = 0,614			



	Special voting arrangements Index	0,444	0,047
	Political corruption index	-0,188	0,488
	Vote Buying	-0,648	0,002
	Media bias	0,099	0,641
	EU Trust	0,345	0,025
5	(Constant)		0,483
Adjusted R Square = 0,602	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,742	0,006
	Human Development Index	-0,005	0,988
	Generalized Trust	-0,406	0,100
	Age of democracy (years)	0,109	0,673
	Compulsory	-0,331	0,121
	Special voting arrangements Index	0,337	0,211
	Political corruption index	-0,123	0,673
	Vote Buying	-0,593	0,008
	Media bias	0,087	0,689
	EU Trust	0,364	0,023
	Eastern	-0,146	0,488

Like in the previous analysis, in Step 1, the Gini coefficient (OECD) negatively and significantly affects voter turnout ( $\beta = -0,541$ ). In contrast, the human development index has a positive, though not statistically significant effect ( $\beta = 0,227$ ). Moreover, generalised trust appears to have a negative relationship with voter turnout, yet not statistically significant. Another difference with the preceding model is in Step 2: even if the effect of the age of democracy has no full statistical significance, its direction is the opposite ( $\beta = 0,427$ ). However, after introducing the democratization variables in Step 3, this effect almost disappears, while the significant predictors are the special voting arrangements Index ( $\beta = 0,503$ ) and Vote buying ( $\beta = -0,616$ ).

When testing the model in Step 4, another significant difference emerges with the national elections. Trust in the European Union impacts voter turnout, with a positive and statistically significant standardized beta equal to 0,345.

The final model (Step 5) introduces the geographical variable negatively impacting the voter turnout ( $\beta = -0,146$ ). However, its effect is weaker than in the previous model and is also non-significant. This model identifies as significant predictors of voter turnout in European elections the following variables: Gini coefficient (OECD), Vote buying, and Trust towards EU institutions, with slight variations in the standardised beta score from their first introduction in the analysis.

The Special arrangement index keeps its positive effect, though losing the statistical significance, while the generalized trust sees its negative beta standardized value intensifying and approaching the statistical significance threshold. Table 5.6 shows the hypotheses testing for the European elections’ multiple regression analysis.

*Table 5.6. - Hypothesis testing on the European elections’ dataset*

Hypothesis	Accepted + Rejected -
<b>H1:</b> High aggregated levels of generalized trust in society are associated with high levels of political participation.	-
<b>H2:</b> The more unequal the distribution of income in society, the lower the turnout	+
<b>H3:</b> The higher the level of human development, the higher the turnout	-
<b>H4:</b> the higher the level of democratization, the higher the turnout	-
<b>H5:</b> the presence of compulsory voting laws increases turnout.	-
<b>H6:</b> PR-systems increase turnout	Not tested
<b>H7:</b> the more special voting arrangements, the higher the turnout	-
<b>H8:</b> the higher the unfairness of election, the lower the turnout.	-
<b>H9:</b> the higher the frequency of vote buying, the higher the turnout	+
<b>H10:</b> the higher the media bias, the lower the turnout	-
<b>H11:</b> Political trust increases turnout	+

### 5.3. Discussion

The findings above show that in both multiple regression analyses, the final models have good predictive power, explaining more than 60% of the voter turnout variance. However, there are relevant differences between the two models, which can largely be ascribed to the different types of elections to which they were applied.

As model A of the theoretical framework suggests, the influence of inequality and culture may impact voter turnout. This appears to be confirmed in the national election analysis. Economic disparities do have an impact on voter turnout in national elections, as evidenced by the Gini coefficient and the Human Development Index (although the latter’s significance coefficient is above 0.05): the higher the disparities, the lower the turnout. The generalized trust coefficient supports this outcome, indicating that the higher the

trust, the higher the voting participation rate. Analysing the European elections yields a different conclusion: turnout is significantly influenced only by the Gini coefficient.

In both cases, the age of democracy (model B of the theoretical framework) has no statistically significant impact. Interestingly, the sign of the standardised beta is opposite in the two models analysed: positive for national elections and negative for European elections.

Model C of the theoretical framework recalls institutional performance through three sub-dimensions: electoral convenience, integrity, and media pluralism. Overall, this dimension does not have a strong statistical impact on voter turnout, and again, the two multiple regression analyses show different results. As far as national elections are concerned, compulsory voting and special voting arrangements index have an impact on voter turnout: positive the former (the presence of obligations and sanctions induces people to vote), negative the latter (having many voting options does not seem to have the effect of pushing people to vote). The other variables have almost no impact, except the political corruption index, whose positive beta (the higher the corruption, the higher the turnout) is not supported by a statistical significance test. The multiple regression analysis shows a different result for the European elections, where only vote buying has a significant negative effect on the turnout (the more vote buying, the lower the turnout will be).

Model D, motivation, was operationally defined as trust in national (government and parliament) and European political institutions. In the first scenario, voter turnout is unaffected by political trust, while in European elections, voter turnout is significantly influenced by trust in the EU.

Lastly, the geographical location (operationalized as Western vs Eastern Countries) has a negative impact on voter turnout in both types of elections, even if it is not statistically significant for the European elections. Considering that the geographical variable is dichotomous and has “Eastern” as the reference category, negative impact means that Eastern countries have a lower turnout than Western ones.

## 5.4. Some concluding remarks

The results of this exercise in multivariate analysis are still not conclusive for several reasons. To name but a few, the use of average values over the entire period from the 1990s to the 2020s for each country may have reduced the effect of short-term changes on voter turnout rates, which can be of great value when related to dimensions such as institutional performance and the motivation represented by political trust (Newton et al., 2018; Uslander,

2018). In addition, the prior selection of variables allowed us to discard some factors strongly correlated with each other but did not allow us to consider different variables that may be of great importance in the analysis of voter turnout - political polarisation, for example.

Despite these important limitations, we believe that the multivariate analysis has advanced our knowledge of the determinants of electoral behaviour – especially as regards the differences in electoral behaviour between European countries and types of elections.

From this perspective, economic inequality has emerged as a relevant factor in explaining the electoral behaviour of citizens in European countries over the last thirty years. It is worth mentioning that this result confirms some findings of the most recent meta-analysis on voter turnout (Frank and Martínez i Coma, 2023). The growing interest in socio-economic variables, notably inequality, in explaining political phenomena is therefore confirmed in our analysis (see also Horn, 2011; Anderson and Beramendi, 2012; Schafer et al., 2021).

Conversely, the role of social or generalised trust in influencing electoral turnout, if confirmed for national elections, is not so for European elections, for which, however, it is trust in the supranational institutions of the European Union that counts. Perhaps, as we suggested in Chapter 2, the relationship between trust and electoral behaviour may be influenced by other factors (not considered in the theoretical model) and thus change from one socio-political context to another (Zmerli and Hooge, 2011; Hooghe and Marien, 2012). Moreover, as we suggested earlier, the different natures of generalised or social trust and institutional and political trust may also play a role in producing this result.

Other results – e.g., those relating to governmental performance, which was assessed with reference mainly to institutional aspects – deserve further investigation, possibly with the addition of other variables in our theoretical framework.

## 6. Voter turnout trends and differences: national case studies

by *Domenico Fruncillo* and *Domenico Maddaloni*\*

We collected national case studies on the issue of electoral turnout in TRUEDEM partner countries. Case studies may produce a better understanding of the factors and dynamics at work in individual national contexts. Moreover, they can help to identify recurring patterns, but also the differences and specificities of each case (Swanborn 2010). Therefore, case studies methodology may be useful to facilitate understanding of various forms of political participation.

More specifically, each partner team produced a short research paper on the following research questions: 1) *What have been the main trends in voter turnout from about 1990 to the present?* 2) *Were there differences in voter turnout between European, national parliamentary, and regional or local elections?* 3) *What factors have been identified as major causes of voter turnout in your country?* In this chapter, we present the papers produced by TRUEDEM partner country teams in response to these questions.

The main common feature of these case studies is a trend of declining voter turnout since the early 1990s, with occasional small reversals. Another common feature among these countries are the differences in turnout between different types of elections: a higher turnout occurs in national parliamentary elections, a lower one in European elections and regional or local elections. The distinction between first- and second-order elections is apparently confirmed by these results. Among the factors most commonly mentioned as causes of voter turnout are demographic characteristics (especially with reference to the electoral behaviour of the young), political and institutional trust, and contextual factors like economic and financial crises. More specifically, trust (or mistrust) towards politics and institutions play a role in influencing voter turnout in all countries.

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With regard to the main differences among these country cases, we can say that national trends in turnout are not synchronised with each other, creating differences and variations. Other differences between the countries under consideration relate to institutional characteristics – for example, the presence of compulsory voting and rules facilitating turnout – and national political specificities – such as party fragmentation. The literature on individual national case studies also considers the age of established democracy very relevant. These discrepancies underline the complex nature of voter behaviour and the differences between the socio-political contexts of the case studies.

Some further considerations deserve the analysis of outliers. In comparative studies, the analysis of outliers can be considered a valuable tool to highlight the main similarities and differences between national cases. From this perspective, three of the following cases – those of Germany, Poland and Italy – may be worth of attention. These countries belong to different areas of Europe – Western, Eastern and Southern Europe. Moreover, while Germany and Italy are among the founding countries of the European Union, Poland only became a member state in 2004. In addition, it should not be forgotten that Germany (around 83 million inhabitants), Poland (around 37 million) and Italy (around 59 million) are among the countries with the largest demographic size in the European Union. Together, these three countries have more than 40% of the total population of the European Union. Therefore, the evolution of the political life of these countries can profoundly influence the future of Europe. In the concluding remarks, we will elaborate on the similarities and differences between these three countries about the evolution of voter turnout.

## 6.1. Austria\*

The Austrian state has a multi-level system of governance, where elections are conducted at the national, regional, and local levels. At the national level, Austrians elect both the Federal President and the National Parliament (*Nationalrat*). Direct elections of the President take place every six years since 1951, and elections to the National Parliament – every 5 years since

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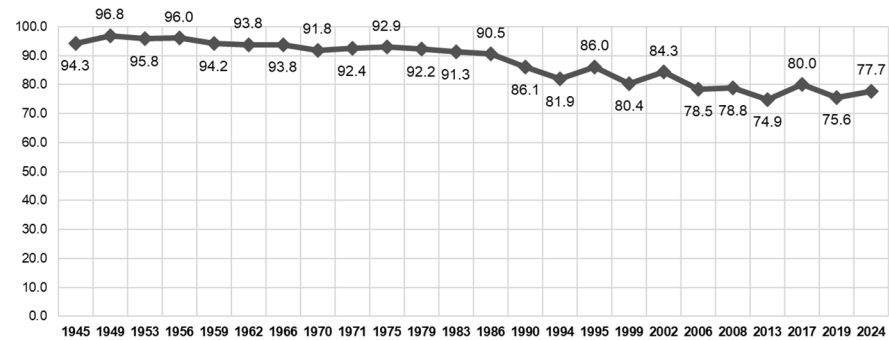
1945 (after World War II, marking the establishment of the Second Republic). Another type of elections conducted in Austria at the national level are elections to the European Parliament (EP); same as in other European Union (EU) member-states, these elections are held every five years and took place in Austria for the first time in 1996, after the EU accession of Austria. Additionally, every Federal State (*Bundesland*) holds elections for their regional parliament (*Landtag*) in 9 Provinces across Austria. Regional elections take place every five years in all Federal States, with the exception for Carinthia, Upper Austria, and Tyrol, where the terms of the regional government last six years. Finally, at the lowest level, elections are also conducted in municipalities; Austria is divided into 2,093 municipalities, with two thirds of them comprising just 2,500 or less residents (Umek et al., 2022). The regional and municipal elections are merged in the capital, the city of Vienna, which is one of the 9 Federal States and at the same time a municipality and the Capital City of Austria (Praprotnik et al., 2023; Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2024a; 2024b).

Austria uses a proportional representation system for local, regional, national and EP elections with open list system, where seats are allocated based on the proportion of votes each party receives through the ‘D’Hondt method’ (Praprotnik et al. 2023). Parties are required to reach the 4% threshold to be elected at both regional, national and the EP level. A major electoral reform was conducted in Austria in 2007, when the minimum voting age was lowered from 18 to 16 years, with the aim to increase political engagement, inclusion, and participation of young people (Zeglovits and Aichholzer 2014; Bronner and Ifkovits 2019). In order to participate in elections, citizens must turn 16 no later than on the election day. It was the third electoral age reduction in the Austrian history: in 1968 voting age was lowered from 21 to 19 years, and in 1992 – from 19 to 18 (Kritzinger 2013). In addition, the 2007 electoral reform expanded the use of voting by post (absentee ballot), which existed since 1989, but was limited primarily to Austrian citizens residing abroad, the so-called ‘10<sup>th</sup> Bundesland’. The recent reforms to Austrian election laws, effective January 2024, focus on enhancing electoral accessibility for disabled individuals, expediting the counting of postal votes, refining the roles of election authorities, and alleviating administrative burdens on municipalities, therefore enhancing the efficiency, transparency and inclusivity of the electoral process (Bundesministerium für Inneres 2024).

Austria exhibits high turnout rates as compared to many other European countries and the EU on average. Similar to many other countries, the highest is the turnout in the national elections in Austria. Until 1990, the share of citizens participating in the parliamentary elections reached an unprecedented level and varied between 90.5% and 96.8%, meaning over nine out

of ten citizens went to vote. While such a high turnout was never repeated in the Austrian history, the rate remained high through early 1990s decreasing slightly to 81.9%, and then recovering to 86.0% in 1995. The next phase of turnout decline occurred in 2002-2013. The historical minimum – lowest ever turnout in national parliamentary elections of 74.9% – was recorded in Austria in 2013. In the subsequent years, the turnout has recovered and varied within 75.6-80.0% (Figure 6.1). Thus, on average, over the past seventy years, the turnout in parliamentary elections in Austria experienced only a moderate decline by about 10 percent points, which is a much smaller decrease of political engagement and participation as compared to other European democracies (Addeo et al. 2024).

Figure 6.1. - Turnout (%) in National Parliamentary Elections in Austria



Data source: Federal Ministry of the Interior, *Nationalratswahlen* (<https://www.bmi.gv.at/412/Nationalratswahlen/start.aspx>).

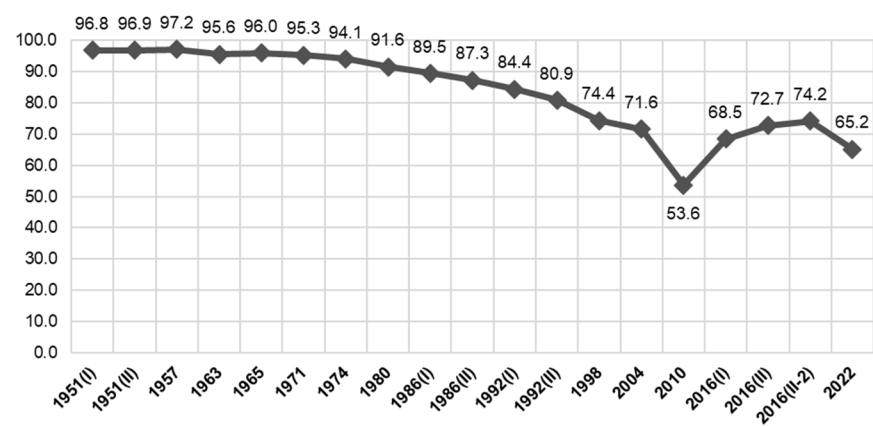
The second highest turnout rates have been recorded in Austria for the national direct elections of the Federal President. While the President in Austria is a ceremonial head of state, through most part of Austria’s modern history, a vast majority of citizens turned up at the polling stations to vote for the President. Direct elections of the President by the public were first introduced in 1951. Presidential elections in Austria are conducted using a two-round system: unless a candidate could secure more than 50% of valid votes in the first round, a runoff election is held between the two candidates with the highest vote shares. Nomination as a candidate requires 6,000 signatures from voters; candidates must be Austrian citizens and at least 35 years old (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2024b).

Similar to the parliamentary elections, turnout for the presidential elections in Austria exceeded 90.0% in 1951-1980, varying between 91.6% and 97.2%. The turnout has declined to 80.9% by 1992. A steep decline has then



occurred in the period between 1998 and 2010, with 2010 marking a historical minimum, when the turnout for the Presidential election dropped to 53.6%. Beyond the consequences of the economic crisis of 2008-2009, which shift the public focus towards material concerns, the 2010 elections featured little political competition with the winning candidate being favoured by an overwhelming majority of the electorate. The situation changed dramatically in 2016, when presidential election occurred on the background of a migration and asylum crisis in Europe. The candidates representing, on the one hand, the progressive, pro-European values and on the other right-wing, nationalist, Eurosceptic views, have deeply divided the electorate. The 2016 election therefore not only actualized the importance of presidential elections in the eyes of the voters, but also marked a shift from a traditional centrist parties' domination towards polarized politics (Gavenda and Umit 2016). The turnout rates have recovered since 2010 reaching 65.2-74.2% in 2016-2022 (Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2. - Turnout (%) in Presidential Elections in Austria



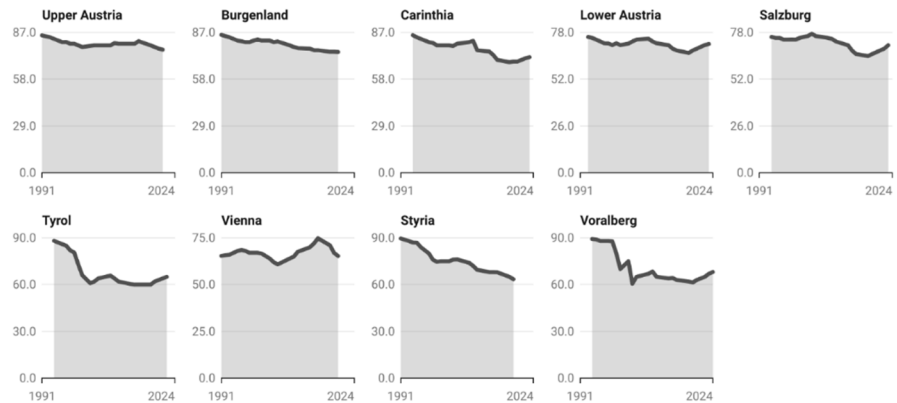
Source: Federal Ministry of the Interior. *Bundespräsidentenwahlen* (<https://www.bmi.gv.at/412/Bundespraesidentenwahlen/>).

The next in terms of the turnout rates in the hierarchy of elections in Austria are the elections to the regional councils and parliaments of the 9 Austrian Federal States. This data (Figure 6.3) is also indicative for the local (municipal) elections in Austria, where the turnout rates are quite similar to those of regional elections with the difference often within just 5-8%. Depending on the historical development of each Federal State, the turnout in regional elections can be both higher and lower than in local elections (Umek et al. 2022). In the Federal States there are only single-chamber parliaments;

the members of the regional councils are elected according to the principle of equal, direct, secret and personal proportional representation. Federal State elections are held at different points in time across the nine Federal States; national elections and regional elections do not coincide (Praprotnik et al. 2023; Federal Ministry of the Interior 2024a; 2024b).

Not surprisingly, given the federal government system, Austria exhibits also higher electoral turnout in regional elections, where in the early 1990s, 87%-90% voters went to vote (Figure 6.3). Since then, turnout in regional elections in all 9 Federal States, except for Vienna, is characterized by a decline. Since 1991, turnout in all regional elections decreased, not continuously, often with upward fluctuations, but the general trend shows a clear decrease in voter turnout. Vorarlberg saw the highest decline in voter turnout of almost 28%, from 89.3% in 1991 to 61.4% in 2019. A similarly large decline in voter turnout can be found in Styria: from 89.6% in 1991 to 63.5% in 2019. Lower Austria has recorded the smallest decrease, from 75,5% in 1993 to 71.6% in 2023. Only Vienna (the Federal Capital) has a similarly high voter turnout in 2020 as in 1991 of just over 65%. Voter turnout in regional elections is highest in Upper Austria (76.3% in 2021) and in Burgenland (74.9% in 2020).

Figure 6.3. - Turnout (%) in Regional Elections in Austria



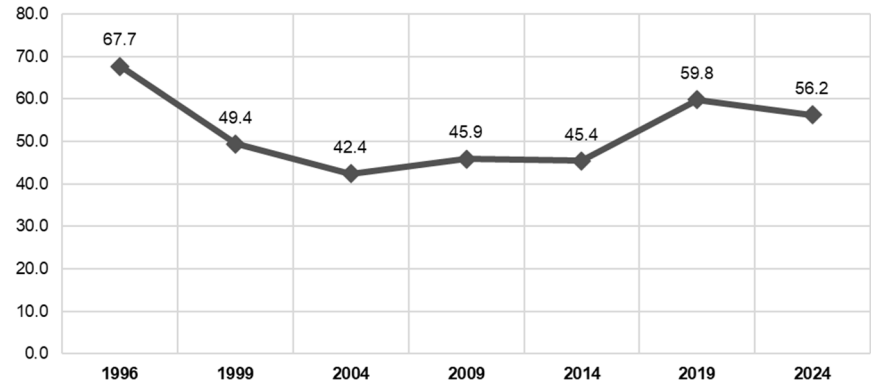
Source: Election Database Austria (<https://www.wahldatenbank.at/>).

While the steady decline of the turnout in the elections in Austria can be partly attributed to the weakening of the party affiliation and emergence of new parties, as discussed later in this chapter, one factor that should not be overlooked is the experience of compulsory voting, which in Austria was introduced at different levels in the second half of the 20th century. First, in

the presidential and regional elections voting was compulsory in all states until 1982, when the decision was devolved to the state level. Four out of nine states continued to practice compulsory voting until 2004, when the law was eventually abolished in all Federal States. The decision concerning the compulsory voting in national parliamentary elections was left at the discretion of the Federal States. Three out of nine states (Styria, Tyrol, and Vorarlberg) introduced compulsory voting in 1949, with Carinthia joining them in 1986. Compulsory voting in national parliamentary elections was cancelled by the constitutional court in 1994 (Ferwerda 2014). As compulsory voting was over, and financial penalties as a part of this mechanism, the turnout went down abruptly in late 1990s across several Federal States.

Finally, the least attended elections in Austria are the elections to the European Parliament. Austria first voted in European elections in 1996 after joining the EU in 1995 (Figure 6.4). The enthusiasm of the “honeymoon period” caused a higher turnout of 67,7%. After that, turnout went down (42.4%-49.4%) and first again exceeded the threshold of 50% in 2019 (59,8%). The 2019 EP election saw an increase of turnout across many EU states (European Parliament, 2024). The specifics of this EP election in Austria were that it coincided with the national political scandal involving the Freedom Party FPÖe (the so called “Ibiza-gate”), that caused the collapse of the government coalition and snap parliamentary elections taking place in autumn 2019. Therefore, while EP elections are traditionally seen as second-order contest, the domestic framing of this election mobilized a broad spectrum of voters and reduced the gap between national and European salience, significantly increasing turnout (Kritzing et al. 2020).

Figure 6.4. - Turnout (%) in European Parliament Elections in Austria



Data source: European Parliament, *European Parliament elections 2024 turnout* (<https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/turnout/>).

In 2024, the turnout remained similar with 56.2% voters participating in elections (which is slightly above the EU average of 51.1%) (European Parliament, 2024). Turnout in the EP elections in Austria is therefore at least 20 percent points lower than the turnout for national parliamentary elections, which confirms the status of the EP elections as “second order” elections – or, taking into account the federal structure of government in Austria, as “third order” elections, as voting in regional elections in the majority of Federal States exceed the turnout in EP elections (Bischof and Plasser 2017; Umek et al. 2022).

Among the factors identified as major predictors of voter turnout in Austria are socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the citizens, foremost age, education, and income level, as well as increasing electoral volatility, associated with the erosion of traditional party affiliations in Austria (Kritzinger 2013; Boomgaarden et al. 2016; Kritzinger et al. 2020). Turnout in national elections tends to be positively correlated with age. For instance, in the 2013 parliamentary election with the general turnout of 74.9%, the turnout among the older generation was 85%, while among the youngest voters it fell below 60% (Bischof and Plasser 2017). This generational divide highlights the persisting traditional party loyalty among the older voters and, on the other hand, the growing political detachment of younger generations, who in turn, lean towards new parties, such as the Greens and the far-right populist parties such as the Freedom Party FPÖ (Kritzinger 2013). Below average turnout level can also be found among voters with lower educational attainment and low income, which aligns with the resource mode of political participation (Haerpfer 1997; Kritzinger 2013; Habersack et al. 2023).

In the light of this data, it becomes relevant to look deeper into the electoral reform that targeted the youngest generation and aimed to increase their participation. The 2007 electoral reform that lowered the voting age from 18 to 16 years across all types of elections in Austria was accompanied by an extensive awareness-raising campaign (Zeglovits and Aichholzer 2014). Enhancement of the status of civic and citizenship education in schools turned the school into an important agent of political socialisation, a role traditionally played by family. Studies conducted before and after the electoral reform have revealed that political knowledge and political interest of adolescents have increased, which motivated higher turnout rates in the first national and regional elections carried out across Austria in 2008–2011 (Zeglovits and Zandonella 2013). In a local election in Vienna (2010), turnout for 16- and 17-year-olds was 64.2%, compared to 56.3% for 18–20-year-olds, and in local elections in Krems (2012), turnout for 16- and 17-year-olds was 56.3%, compared to 46.3% for 18–20-year-olds (Zeglovits and Aichholzer 2014).

Overtime, as a part of the electoral habituation mechanism, this effect establishes stronger voting habits among young voters and contributes to the long-term turnout increases. Beyond the turnout rates, the reform affected the political landscape in Austria – as younger generations tend to support far-right and extremist parties, such as the Freedom Party FPÖ, who became the winner of the 2024 national parliamentary election in Austria (Bronner and Ifkovits 2019).

Religious belonging, social class, trade union membership and party identification have traditionally been strong predictors of voter turnout in Austria (Haerpfär 1997; Kritzinger 2013). However, while the first three factors influence specific electoral choice rather than the turnout per se, self-identification or belonging to a political party remain a key driver motivating individuals to cast their vote in elections. In local (municipal) elections in Austria, in addition to social and demographic factors, an important role is attributed to the size of the municipality and the competition of running parties and candidates. Voter turnout has proven to be inversely related to municipality size. In addition, Federal States, which traditionally feature uncontested elections (one party is prevailing and is very likely to win, frequently observed in Western States – Tyrol and Vorarlberg) also experience lower turnout, as compared to other regions where the perceived political competition is more vibrant (Umek et al. 2022).

Since the outbreak of the migration crisis in 2015 and in the aftermath of the Corona pandemic of 2020, a general dissatisfaction with the performance of Austria's major political parties, the Socialist SPÖ and the Conservative ÖVP, led to weakening political affiliations. This in turn has contributed to a growing share of non-voters and swing voters, increasing electoral volatility (Boomgaarden et al. 2016). Additionally, the multiple crises of the past decade caused a shift in Austria's political landscape, when the traditional Rokkanian socio-economic cleavages between voters became mixed with and overshadowed by new conflicts, which are focused on the issues of identity, security, and European integration (Gavenda & Umit 2016; Jansesberger et al. 2021). Public preferences on the traditional issues of economy, welfare, and social policy started to decline and influence primarily the supporters of the major parties such as the Socialist SPÖ and the Conservative ÖVP. Support for the new parties is more frequently associated with issues such as immigration, European integration, and the environment (Kritzinger 2013).

## 6.2. The Czech Republic\*

In general, voter turnout in the Czech Republic is low by European standards. However, it is above average when compared to the region of Central and Eastern Europe. It also shares a number of similarities with the Central European region in terms of development trends (see e.g., Nový 2013, 2015). At the same time, the level of voter turnout is converging across the various electoral arenas in the Czech Republic.

Most post-communist countries faced a significant decline in voter turnout after the “revolutionary euphoria” faded. This is also the case in the Czech Republic, with the trend of declining voter turnout manifesting itself not only in elections to the Chamber of Deputies, but also in local elections. In this context, the turn of the millennium appears to be a turning point. After the initial enthusiasm for the regained freedom and the possibility to vote freely in elections, which was manifested by a very high voter turnout in the first two Czechoslovak parliamentary elections (almost 97% in 1990 and over 85% in 1992) and whose reverberations could still be observed in the second half of the 1990s (around 75% in parliamentary elections 1996 and 1998), a certain sobering came after the first political crisis of 1997–1998 and after the two main political parties, right-wing Civic Democrats and left-wing Social Democrats, subsequently negotiated the so-called Opposition Agreement in 1998, on the basis of which politics was to be cartelized by these two parties. The subsequent elections thus reflected to some extent the disillusionment of citizens with politics – Linek (2010) speaks of the betrayal of the dream of democracy – and voter turnout fell to an all-time minimum of 58% in the 2002 elections to the Chamber of Deputies. However, participation in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies declined significantly only during the first decade after the establishment of the Czech Republic. Since then, voter turnout in elections to the Chamber of Deputies has stabilised over 60% (see e.g., Lebeda et al. 2006; Linek 2011, 2013a, 2015; Charvát 2012; Linek 2012; Havlík and Lysek 2022). In the case of a heated and polarised campaigning, as was the case in the 2006 and 2021 elections, voter turnout even rose to around 65% (see Figure 6.5).

If we examine the spatial distribution of electoral participation, we can observe notable variations in voter turnout across the Czech regions. For instance, the differences between the regions with the highest and lowest levels of turnout in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies reach 12 (in 2006) to

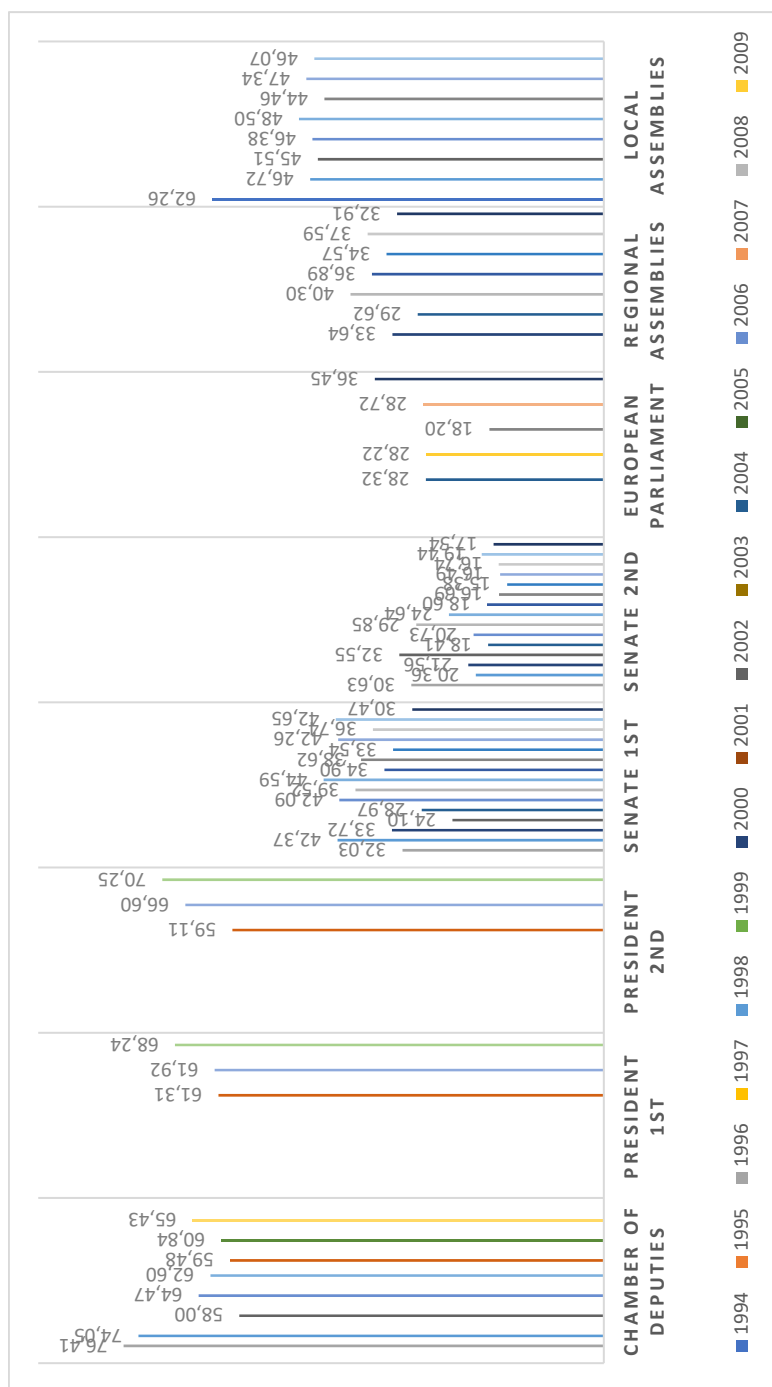
\* By Jakub Charvát (with the contribution of Ladislav Cabada). Both authors are from the Metropolitan University of Praha, The Czech Republic.

15 percentage points (in 2017). Voter turnout is traditionally highest in Prague, the capital city of the Czech Republic (between 4 and 6.29 percentage points above the national average), and voter participation in the Vysočina region is being also significantly higher than average (around 5 percentage points above the national average; furthermore, in 2002 the Vysočina region even had the highest turnout across the country). Conversely, relatively low voter turnout is concentrated in the three structurally affected regions in north-western Bohemia, especially in the Karlovy Vary Region and the Ústí nad Labem Region, and also the Moravian-Silesian Region in north-eastern part of the country, traditionally lag far behind in the number of voters participating in elections (while voter turnout in the Karlovy Vary Region is about 8 percentage points below the national average and in Ústí nad Labem Region is between 7 and 8 percentage points below the national average, in Moravian-Silesian region is between 3.5 and 5 percentage points below the national average). These patterns of voting behaviour can be described as more or less stable over time.

If we focus only on voter turnout, it is possible to conclude that the Czech elections – with the only exception of the elections of the President – meet the assumptions of the second-order elections argument (for the Czech context see, e.g. Šaradín 2008; Cabada 2010; Charvát 2012; Ryšavý 2013; Pink and Eibl 2018; Charvát and Maškarinec 2020; Lysek and Kouba 2022). Turnout in other types of elections is significantly lower than in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies (see Figure 6.5).

Among the second-order elections, presidential (see below) and local elections are the most popular. As in the case of the elections to the Chamber of Deputies, voter turnout dropped by about a quarter after the Opposition Agreement came into force in the latter case (see turnout in the municipal elections in autumn 1998). Since then, turnout in local elections has remained above 45% (for more details, see e.g. Haman and Školník 2020; Kouba, Novák and Strnad 2021; Maškarinec 2022; Kouba and Lysek 2023). The regional level of governance was only established in 2000 (for more details, see e.g. Just 2012), which may be one of the reasons why regional elections are less popular with voters. Voter turnout in regional elections oscillates between 30 % and 40 %, with the highest turnout occurring in 2008, when regional elections largely took the form of a protest vote against the unpopular Topolánek's government (for more details, see e.g. Šaradín 2008; Ryšavý 2013; Pink and Eibl 2018; Maškarinec 2023; Maškarinec, Bláha and Charvát 2023).

Figure 6.5. - Voter turnout in the Czech Republic by election type



Source: Czech Statistical Office.



Czech citizens show the lowest interest in the Senate and the European Parliament elections. In the latter case, voter turnout is one of the lowest among EU Member States, namely around 28% in 2004, 2009 and 2019, albeit with an increase to over 36% in the last election in 2024, but also a drop in turnout to just 18% in 2014 (for more details, see e.g. Linek 2004; Šaradín 2008; Cabada 2010; Havlík 2014; Charvát 2017; Charvát and Maškarinec 2020; Cabada 2024; Charvát, Cabada and Charvátová 2024). In the case of the Senate elections, turnout is even lower. At first glance, voters' indifference to the Senate elections is not reflected in the turnout in the first round of voting, but this is mainly due to the fact that the first round of Senate elections is held concurrently with local elections (in even-numbered non-leap years) or regional elections (in even-numbered leap years) – the only exception was the 2002 Senate elections, when the first round was held separately and the concurrence with local elections was, on the contrary, in the second round. On the other hand, in the second round of Senate elections, which is already held separately, turnout has been declining significantly, even below 20% since 2012. Like the regions, the Senate was established later (in 1996), at a time when it was doubtful whether Czechia, as a relatively small, unitary and homogeneous country, needed a bicameral parliament, which affected the image of the Senate in the eyes of the voters. Another reason arises from the runoff nature of the second round of the Senate elections, which may reduce the motivation of the voters of unsuccessful candidates to come to the polls (for more details, see e.g. Kopecký and Mudde 2009; Just 2012; Lebeda, Malcová and Lacina 2009; Lebeda, Vlachová and Řeháková 2009; Lebeda 2011, 2016; Hruška 2023; Hruška and Balík 2024).

As mentioned above, only the presidential elections deviate from the assumption of lower voter turnout in the second-order contest. The President has been elected in the Czech Republic by popular vote since 2013. Traditionally, the presidency enjoys a high level of authority in the Czech society, which is reflected, for example, in the fact that the President is one of the most trusted political institutions and, since the introduction of the popular election of the President, in the high turnout, which is comparable to or even higher than the turnout in elections to the Chamber of Deputies. In the last presidential election in 2023, voter turnout even reached more than 70% in the second round (for more details, see e.g. Šedo 2013; Charvát and Just et al. 2014; Just, Brunnerová and Charvát et al. 2018; Šedo et al. 2018; Gregor et al. 2023; Pospíšilová 2023).

Regarding the causes of voter turnout in Czechia, we can see that, along with the gradual decline in voter turnout, it is possible to observe increasing social stratification over time in the case of participation in Czech elections,

with social status (especially education, income, and social class) and age being significant predictors of voter turnout. More specifically, the degree of social stratification of voter turnout seems to be related to the level of both income inequality and education inequality. Indeed, the higher the inequality, the less low-status groups participate in elections, and conversely, better socio-economic resources increase the likelihood of electoral participation. Another important factor influencing voter turnout seems to be the generation gap, as older (but not the oldest) citizens with higher levels of education are more likely to vote. This social and age conditionality is reinforced over time. Furthermore, this trend is reinforced as citizens' sense of the importance of (second-order) elections declines. Last but not least, it is possible to consider a significant family conditioning of voting behaviour in Czech elections. In this context, it has been observed that the social integration and (active) voting behaviour of family members (especially partners and/or parents) has a significant impact on voter turnout (for more details, see e.g. Linek 2012; Linek 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Nový 2015; Linek and Petrušek 2016).

### **6.3. France\***

This summary builds on two recent reports from the French national institute for statistical and economic studies (INSEE) (Algava and Bloch, 2022; Bloch, 2022). Since 2002, French citizens have been called to vote every five years in two national elections held in the same year – the presidential election and legislative elections. In 2002, 48% of registered voters in metropolitan France participated in all rounds of national elections (both rounds of the presidential election and both rounds of the legislative elections). However, in 2022, this proportion of consistent voters dropped to 37%, marking an 11-point decrease over two decades. This decline is due to an increase in systematic abstention and, more significantly, intermittent voting (turnout in at least one round of national elections in a given year, but not in all).

The diminished turnout in the 2022 legislative elections, compared to the presidential election, results from a trend that has been unfolding since the beginning of the century. While turnout in the presidential election has remained steady over the past three decades, decreasing only slightly between

\* By Frédéric Gonthier and Prunelle Aymé, Sciences Po Grenoble, University of Grenoble Alpes, France.

1995 and 2022 (from 78.38 and 73.69 percent, and from 79.66 to 71.99 percent for the first and second rounds, respectively), turnout in legislative elections has sharply declined, dropping by about twenty-one points between 1993 and 2022.

In the most recent electoral cycle in 2022, 84% of voters participated in at least one of the four rounds of the presidential and legislative elections. Of these, 36% voted in all four rounds, 48% in one, two, or three rounds, and only 16% did not vote in any round. Notably, turnout was significantly higher in the presidential election, with 69.3% voting in both rounds, 13.3% in one round, and 17.4% abstaining in both rounds, compared to the legislative elections where these figures were 40.2%, 17.7%, and 42%, respectively. This is primarily due to the fact that since 2002, legislative elections have consistently followed the presidential election, leading the less politically engaged segments of the electorate to believe that the National Assembly is not playing a crucial role in the functioning of French institutions.

Since 1990, political participation in European elections in France has experienced notable fluctuations. Overall, there has been a trend of declining turnout, with peaks in engagement during the 1994 (52.8%) and 2019 (50.1%) elections. However, voter turnout reached historically low levels during the 2009 elections (41%). Despite variations, overall participation in European elections remains lower than that in national elections. These trends underscore a persistent challenge in mobilizing the French electorate toward European issues.

The same goes with voter turnout in regional and local elections. Peaks in engagement were observed during certain periods (e.g., 2004 in regional elections), while intermediate elections sometimes recorded more modest participation rates. This mirrors the sensitivity of regional engagement to local and national political dynamics, with variations that may reflect the significance attributed to specific issues in regional elections. Overall, turnout in municipal elections has often been higher than in cantonal and regional elections. Abstention in municipal elections is however rising: abstention in the second round was 30% in 1995, and 37.9% in 2014; the exceptionally high abstention rate in 2020 elections – 58.4% – might be attributed to the context of pandemic (Bréchon, 2022). Despite some peaks in engagement, voter interest in local elections has sometimes ebbed and flowed with local issues and national debates.

Turnout in national elections is shaped by three factors: age, generation, and social status (Braconnier et al., 2017; Tiberi, 2017). In 2022, the participation gap across the four rounds of presidential and legislative elections consistently decreased with age. While there was a nearly thirty-point difference among the youngest (18-24 years), it reduced to about ten points in the

70-74 age group. The overall decline in turnout in legislative elections is also attributed to each new generation participating less than the previous one. In 2000, over 30% of 18-24-year-olds were consistent voters, but by 2022, this dropped to less than 20%.

Examining the life cycle reveals a regular increase in systematic turnout with age, peaking at 70 years, a phenomenon recurring across generations. Additionally, systematic abstention and intermittent voting decrease with age, being higher among today's youth compared to those twenty years ago. While the rise in intermittent voting from one generation to the next appears to reflect a structural evolution related to a period effect, systematic abstention is more indicative of a generational effect, particularly pronounced among those under 45, and more so in recent generations. Yet, although voter turnout is higher for presidential elections than for legislative elections at all ages, the preference for presidential elections is more pronounced among young people.

Most notably, national statistics show that systematic abstention is lowest among those with higher education (10%), executives and higher intellectual professions (7%), and individuals with the highest income levels (8%). Conversely, it is highest among those without a diploma (30%), unskilled workers (24%), and those with the lowest income levels (25%). Disparities have widened, with a 20-point gap between executives and workers in the proportion of registered voters who consistently vote in 2022 (compared to 17 points in 2002 and 13 points in 2012). These social differentials are more marked in legislative elections (Braconnier et al., 2017). As a result of the social characteristics of their residents, systematic abstention is also particularly high in disadvantaged suburbs and in French overseas departments. Moreover, in both 2002 and 2022, systematic voting is less common in urban areas compared to non-suburban rural areas. However, these differences are modest (6 points in 2002 and 3 points in 2022) and are primarily explained by age differences based on residential zones. Immigrant background does not appear as an essential determinant of voter turnout.

It is noteworthy that in 2002, women aged 18 to 29 participated more than their male counterparts, with a 3-point higher rate of systematic voting and a 3-point lower rate of systematic abstention. This gender gap in systematic abstention widened over time, reaching 7 points in 2022 (20% for young women and 27% for young men). Between 2012 and 2017, the increase in intermittent voting was more pronounced among young women, while systematic abstention significantly rose among young men. This gender gap persists in 2022.

If intermittent voting refers to a weakening of the duty to vote and illuminates changes in the very concept of citizenship, the refusal to participate in

all elections is more indicative of a distrust toward electoral democracy (Muxel, 2010). Among those aged 18-24, systematic abstention increased by nearly ten points from 2002 to 2022. Using the 2007 election as a reference (which did not have the heightened mobilization seen in 2002 due to Jean-Marie Le Pen's presence in the second round), systematic abstention grew by over twelve points among those aged 18-29.

Two accounts of systematic abstention have been proposed. The first is based on the hypothesis of a generational effect that is a “delayed effect.” Young people systematically abstain from both rounds of presidential and legislative elections simply because their political socialization occurs later, as they age and take on adult roles (professional and familial). The second interpretation is based on the hypothesis of a more enduring generational effect. While there is an aging effect in the evolution of systematic abstention – decreasing until 40-45 years, stabilizing, and then rapidly rising after 75 – there is no assurance that this effect will replicate in recent generations, which started their political lives with a significant increase in systematic abstention. This could leave lasting imprints.

Several surveys indicate that the detachment of some young people from politics stems from a profound scepticism toward the mechanisms of representative democracy. The 2018 European Values survey found that younger generations (born after 1980) in France express less attachment to the democratic system and tend to view a military takeover more positively when the government is incompetent. Yet the generations are also the most demanding, considering that democracy should not be limited to holding free elections, but should also guarantee equal rights between individuals and ensure a genuine redistribution of income between individuals. These ambivalent positions of the younger generations reveal their criticism of the way representative institutions currently operate (Bedock, 2021; Wuttke et al., 2020).

In sum, a significant portion of younger generations seems to harbor a deep distrust toward the political system. This distrust is particularly pronounced and has intensified among those with lower levels of education. National statistics provide evidence that systematic abstention has become the majority among the latter, affecting only 17% of those with higher education. Turnout divides within the youth. The hypotheses of the delayed effect and the enduring generational effect likely play a concomitant role. The democratic health of the country will depend on which of the above-mentioned factors prevails.

## 6.4. Germany\*

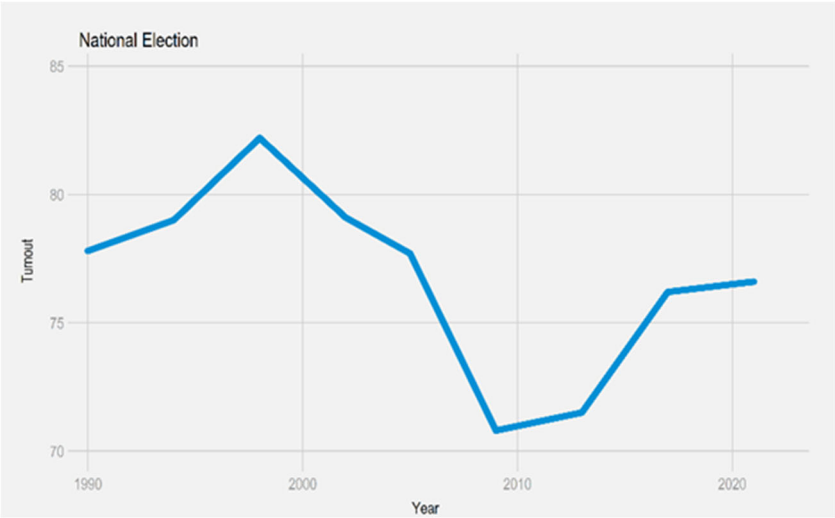
Germany exhibits a relatively high voter turnout compared to other European Union countries. However, this indicator of political participation shows considerable variability over time and across different types of elections within Germany.

With regard to national elections (Figure 6.6), voter turnout in Germany reached its all-time high in the 1972 federal election with more than 90% participation in the national elections. In the following decades turnout successively decreased to around 80% in the 1990's, reaching its lowest point in the 2009 election with only 70,8% participation rates. In the two elections that followed after that the turnout slightly increased again. Following reunification, overarching trends in East- and West-Germany are comparable, albeit with a lower baseline participation observed in the former GDR. The gap between old and new federal states reached its highest point in the 2009 election and since then decreased to only 3,6% points difference in the latest elections. The latest upward movement in turnout can partially be attributed to the far-right AfD's ability to mobilize former non-voters using populist, anti-immigration rhetoric in the 2017 elections following the so-called migration crisis. Even though turnout decreased from the highly politicized 70's to today, Germany still ranks on a relatively high level of political participation in elections internationally (Stövsand and Roßteutscher 2019).

For the subnational elections in the *Länder* (regions) turnout remains at a lower baseline level, trending between 60% and 80% in the 1990's, with a decreasing tendency. Recent sub-national elections in Nordrhein-Westfalen, the federal state with the highest population, reached a low turnout of 55%. Since WWII only two elections attracted fewer eligible voters. Figure 6.7 summarizes the development in the 16 German "Länder". Explanations for the different development on the subnational level rarely find their way into peer-reviewed articles and are usually shortly discussed in news articles following the regional elections.

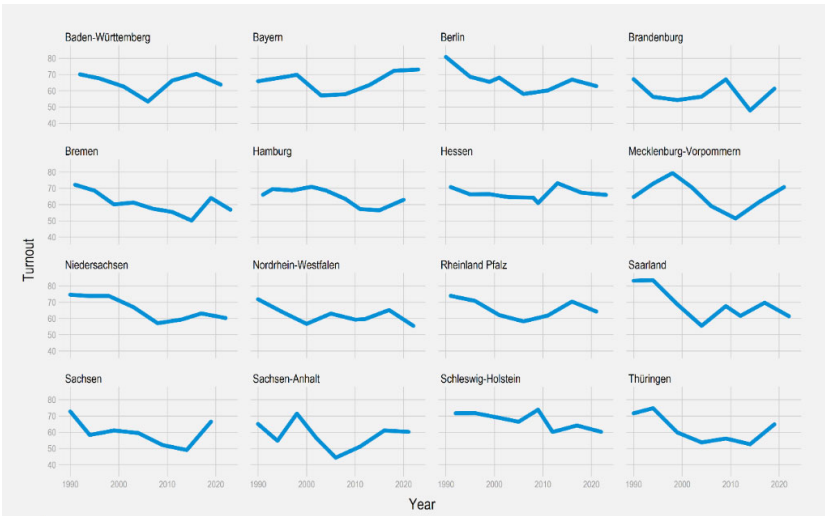
\* By Lennart Bruckert and Christian Welzel, Leuphana University. Lüneburg, Germany.

Figure 6.6. - Turnout in German National Elections (%)



Source: Fruncillo D., Addeo F., Ammirato M., Delli Paoli A., Maddaloni D. (2023). *Longitudinal cross-country database on voter turn-out in European countries*. Working paper no 2.1. TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies Project ([www.truedem.eu](http://www.truedem.eu)).

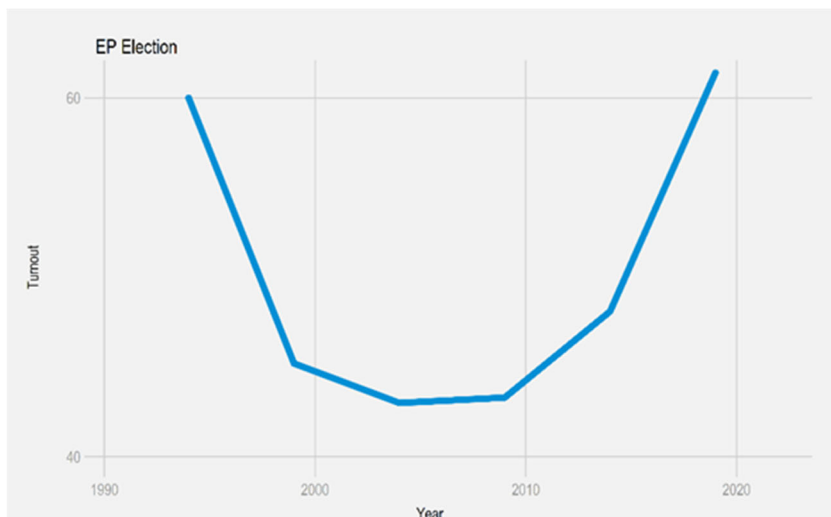
Figure 6.7. - Turnout in Regional Elections (Landtagswahlen) 1990-2023 (%)



Source: Fruncillo D., Addeo F., Ammirato M., Delli Paoli A., Maddaloni D. (2023). *Longitudinal cross-country database on voter turn-out in European countries*. Working paper no 2.1. TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies Project ([www.truedem.eu](http://www.truedem.eu)).

Finally, the turnout for the European Parliament elections in Germany has followed a fluctuating trend over the past decades. Elections for the EP mostly stay below 50% turnout with a recent upward trend (see Figure 6.8). It remains to be seen whether this reversal of the declining turnout will also be confirmed at the next EP elections in June 2024.

*Figure 6.8. - Turnout in EP Elections*



Source: Fruncillo D., Addeo F., Ammirato M., Delli Paoli A., Maddaloni D. (2023). *Longitudinal cross-country database on voter turn-out in European countries*. Working paper no 2.1. TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies Project ([www.truedem.eu](http://www.truedem.eu)).

Let us now consider the causes of these trends in turnout according to the literature. From a global perspective, institutional variables stand out in the historical explanation of voter turnout. However, their effect may be overstated as Blais (2006) suggests. Blais' literature review also suggests that “[w]e can confidently say that turnout is lower in poor countries and higher in small ones, that compulsory voting fosters turnout, and that turnout increases in closely contested elections” (Blais 2006: 122). Similarly, Kostelka and Blais (2021) connect decreases in global turnout rates with individuals' egalitarian standing in society and their relative economic and social well-being, arguing that better off individuals enjoy greater degrees of influence on policy outcomes and tend to vote more regularly. In their analysis, however, citizens' political discontent, does not function as a core explanation for declining turnout. The authors favour generational change and replace-



ment, as well as an increasing number of elections as explanations for decreasing voter turnout. Generations born into favourable economic conditions show a lower turnout rate. Hadjar and Beck (2010) observe this generational trend also in Europe.

Similar to these international studies (Blais 2006; Hadjar and Beck 2010; Kostelka and Blais 2021), scholars link the decreasing turnout to age, education and overall socio-economic inequality (Abendschön and Roßteutscher, 2016; Schäfer, 2015; Schäfer et al., 2013). Konzelmann et al. (2012) show that period effects and to a lesser extent also generational replacement influence turnout in the German electorate. Their analysis suggests that a shifting age structure may in the short run lead to an increase of turnout, since the older population has a higher likelihood to attend elections, while a longer perspective points towards decreasing turnout rates from 2030 onwards.

Educational differences do not seem to matter too much in older cohorts. However, the youngest and low-educated individuals deviate as much as 30 percentage points from the youngest and highly educated individuals' turnout. Almost two thirds of the non-voters fall into the lowest educational category and did not graduate or hold a *Hauptschulabschluss* — the basic nine years of compulsory education in Germany (see also Gallego, 2009). An extensive study of youth expectations and political attitudes identified that young (16-30 years) non-voters did not see any party that would represent their interests sufficiently (55%), they did not feel properly informed about the latest (2021) election, are not politically interested (34%) or generally do not go to vote (36%). Young non-voters in the former GDR show significantly less interest in politics than their West German counterparts. (Döbele et al., 2023)

From an income perspective, the working class, which was historically aligned with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) make up half of the non-voters and no longer show high levels of party identification (Elff and Roßteutscher 2017). This is also reflected by around ten percent unemployed in the non-voter camp and a dominance of people with monthly household incomes below 3000€.

Using the German Longitudinal Election Study (2017), Stövsand und Roßteutscher (2019) summarize general political attitudes, satisfaction with democracy, interest in politics, seeing voting as a civic duty and the overall sympathy for political actors as the key explanatory factors for decreasing turnout in national elections. In their analysis it is concluded that, compared to voters, non-voters lack party-identification, are dissatisfied with democracy in Germany, are generally not interested in politics and do not see voting as a civic duty. Additionally, Schoen and Steinbrecher (2013) find that these just mentioned attitudes serve as mediating factors and that, through them,

certain character traits impact turnout (i.e. emotional stability and conscientiousness). Social networks also play an interesting role in the explanation of vote abstention. Individuals who regularly discuss politics are much more likely to vote than those that do not discuss political issues with peers. Lack of political interest, thus, may become a norm in some societal milieus and leads to the creation of voting- and non-voting hotspots (Schäfer and Roßteutscher 2015).

The literature, thus, suggests that a plethora of factors matter for the turnout in elections (in Germany). While trust in political institutions does not feature prominently in the list of explanations for turnout in Germany, Wang (2016) shows that it impacts turnout as well via its effect on seeing voting as a civic duty. Thus, high trusting individuals may perceive voting as a civic duty and thus attend elections more regularly. Grönlund and Setälä (2007) also identify a direct effect of trust in institutions on turnout. In their analysis of 22 countries, surveyed in the ESS 2002-2003, trusting the parliament and satisfaction with democracy have a direct effect on turnout at an aggregated level.

## 6.5. Greece\*

Alongside party and trade union membership, media news consumption, grass roots initiatives and social movement activity, and civil society networking, voting is a most crucial dimension of political participation associated with social trust, interest in politics, and confidence in political institutions and political personnel. Low voting turnout is an indication not only of reduced political participation but also of loose social cohesion when correlated with other dimensions of political participation. This is particularly significant given the growing frustrations sparked by the ongoing crises and the emergence of anti-political sentiments in Greece and around the world.

The aim of this short paper is to address voting turnout and absenteeism by providing responses to three questions. These concern the main trends in voter turnout, the differences in voter turnout between different types of elections, and the factors identified as major causes of voter turnout and nonappearance in elections.

As in other countries, voting turnout is calculated in Greece as the percentage of actual voters of all registered voters, not as a percent of the voting-

\* By Nicolas Demertzis, University of Athens, Greece and Sokratis Koniordos, University of Peloponnesos, Greece.

age population. This incurs several pertinent problems in identifying the actual turnout since electoral registries are quite often inaccurate (Vassilopoulos and Vernardakis, 2015; Mavris, 2009)<sup>1</sup>.

In Greece, elections for the national parliament are regarded as “first order elections” and stand alone in terms of their timing with other elections, namely local/regional elections, or elections for the European parliament (considered as “second order elections”) (Teperoglou and Skrines, 2006; Tsirbas, 2014). Normally, the dates national elections are held are quite separate from the dates other elections are held.

Voting in Greece has been and remains legally obligatory since the end of the 2nd World War. Exempt from voting are citizens over 70, those in ill health, and when physically absent from the designated voting constituency. Ever since 1974, after the restoration of parliamentary democracy in the country, controls over voting have been eased, and in actual practice, no penalties are imposed for non-participating in any kind of election. Thus, the compulsory dimension in voting is imposed quite loosely (IDEA 2004: 26-30). Due to its political profile, Greece has shown a fairly high electoral turnout, with the mean turnout between 1974 and 2004 approximating 80% (Blais 2007: 623). However, since the 1990s, it has declined by several percentage points (International IDEA 2004: 62).

From 1989 until today (in 2024), i.e., over the last 35 years, participation in the national elections has steadily been declining (see Table 6.1). There has been a small upward swing in voter participation during the last eight years, but the last election of June 2023 confirmed the noted trend. Indeed, the difference between the elections that took place in April 1990 compared with the latest one of June 2023 shows a reduction in voter turnout of 25.7%.

The European Parliament elections are held every five years on pre-set dates, and during the period 1989-2024, eight have taken place in Greece. In two instances, European elections coincided with local/regional elections. This was the case in May 2014 and again in May 2019, when elections for the European Parliament and the first round of local/regional elections were held on the same day. The implication is that there may have been a measure of influence or/and election fatigue, although if there was any, this should have affected the participation in the second round of local/regional elections. Indeed, participation was less than that of the first round, and this is a general trend.

<sup>1</sup> See also D. Michailidis, *Electoral Participation and Abstention*. In, Greece in Figures, 25 May 2023 (in Greek). <https://greeceinfigures.com/eklogiki-symmetoxi>.

Table 6.1. - Greece - National (Parliamentary) Elections, 1990-2023

Date	Turnout (in percent)
June 2023	53.74
May 2023	61.76
July 2019	57.78
September 2015	56.16
January 2015	63.94
June 2012	62.49
October 2009	70.95
September 2007	74.15
March 2004	76.50
April 2000	74.97
September 1996	76.35
October 1993	79.22
April 1990	79.51

Source: Greek Ministry of Interior (<https://ekloges.ypes.gr/en>).

Overall, the noted trend is that of a reduction in electoral participation in the elections for the European Parliament (see Table 6.2), a tendency that has been observed with reference to national elections too (see Table 6.1). However, this has not been as sharp as has been the decline in turnout of national elections, although it has shown some resurgence in the mid-2010s. The reduction of turnout between the two extreme election years for the European Parliament elections is 31.94%, which is more than the noted reduction in the turnout of national elections that reached 25,77%, again between the two extreme election years.

Table 6.2. - Greece - European Parliament Elections, 1989-2023

Date	Turnout (in per cent)
June 2024	41.39
May 2019	58.69
May 2014	59.97*
June 2009	52.54
June 2004	63.22
June 1999	70.25
June 1994	73.18*
June 1989	80.03

Source: Greek Ministry of Interior (<https://ekloges.ypes.gr/en>); European Parliament: (<https://www.euro-parl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/national-results/greece/1999-2004/constitutive-session/>).

With regard to elections at the regional and municipal levels, these are held concurrently, although at different dates than the national or European elections. Besides, there are two rounds of each of these elections to allow the election of officials with a 50% plus one majority, as prescribed by law. Turnout in the second election has always been less than in the first election.

Table 6.3. - Greece - Regional Elections, 1990-2023

<i>Date</i>	<i>Turnout (in percent)</i>
Regional elections – October 2023 2nd round	35.16
Regional elections – October 2023 1st round	52.53
Regional elections – May 2019 2nd round	41.88
Regional elections – May 2019 1st round	58.28
Regional elections – May 2014 - 2nd round	58.88
Regional elections – May 2014 - 1st round	61.16
Regional elections – Nov. 2010 - 2nd round	46.68
Regional elections – Nov. 2010 - 1st round	60.88
Regional elections – Oct. 2006 - 2nd round	N/A
Regional elections – Oct. 2006 - 1st round	N/A
Regional elections – Oct. 2002 - 2nd round	N/A
Regional elections – Oct. 2002 - 1st round	N/A
Regional elections (Prefectures) – Oct. 1998 - 2nd round	N/A
Regional elections (Prefectures) – Oct. 1998 - 1st round	72.09
Regional elections (Prefectures) – Oct. 1994 - 2nd round	N/A
Regional elections (Prefectures) – Oct. 1994 - 1st round	74.21

Source: Greek Ministry of Interior (<https://ekloges.ypes.gr/en>).

Table 6.4. Greece - Municipal (Local) Elections. 1990-2023

<i>Date</i>	<i>Turnout (in percent)</i>
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 2023 2nd round	40.71
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 2023 1st round	52.50
<i>Municipal</i> elections – May 2019 2nd round	44.83
<i>Municipal</i> elections – May 2019 1st round	58.96
<i>Municipal</i> elections – May 2014 2nd round	60.71
<i>Municipal</i> elections – May 2014 1st round	61.61
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Nov. 2010 2nd round	61.03
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Nov. 2010 1st round	49.25
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 2006 2nd round	N/A
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 2006 1st round	N/A
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 2002 2nd round	N/A
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 2002 1st round	N/A
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 1998 2nd round	N/A
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 1998 1st round	N/A
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 1994 2nd round	N/A
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 1994 1st round	74.26
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 1990 2nd round	N/A
<i>Municipal</i> elections – Oct. 1990 1st round	75.82

Source: Greek Ministry of Interior (2023) <https://ekloges.ypes.gr/en>

The overall trend over the last 43 years for both elections is compatible with the already noted reduction in voter participation in national elections and elections for the European Parliament. Thus, regional elections demonstrate the more than halving of turnout when 1990 figures are compared for those for the year 2023. Accordingly, turnout waned: from 74.21% in 1990, it was more than halved in 2023; it was reduced by 39.05% (see Table 6.3).

As far as the municipal election turnout is concerned, it was also significantly reduced (Kafe, Nezi, and Pierides, 2015; Hlepas and Chadjipadelis, 2022). So, from a high 75.83% in 1990 to a low 40.71% in 2023. The turnout reduction between the two extreme years for municipal elections stands at 35.11%, which means that voter turnout was nearly halved (see Table 6.4).

Voter turnout has been declining across the globe since the beginning of the 1990s. There are several factors affecting voter turnout, ranging from the electoral system to political cultural traits (Blais, 2007; Solijonov, 2016: 35–41).

With regards to Greece, there are demand- and supply-side drivers of the declining voter turnout. The demand-side cause is political disenchantment as expressed in diminished political interest, political distrust, and the gradually increasing percentage of the population who refrain from placing themselves onto the right-left political axis (Ervasti, Kouvo, and Venetoklis 2019). The supply-side drivers include the inability of democracy to deliver much of its promises well before, during, and after the severe economic crisis the country faced between 2009 and 2019 by failing to address rising income inequalities, public administration inefficiency, and effectiveness issues in very many jurisdictions, as well as by preventing political corruption (Demertzis, 2015; Gerodimos and Karyotis, 2015). Besides, media cynicism fuels much of the mass public distrust against the political system and political personnel.

On the aggregate level of analysis, electoral absenteeism in Greece is a persisting trend compared to other EU countries (OECD 2024). Regarding the individual level of analysis, it is variably correlated with the “voice” and “exit” kind of reaction (Hirschman 1970) against perceived social injustices documented in the public’s distrust and suspicion of the electoral procedure itself. In fact, suspicion and distrust are widespread in Greece, impinging on at least 1/3 of the electorate. This is signalled from the Greek version of WVS-7 of 2017. Thus, 33% of respondents thought that “rich people buy elections”, 37.4% declared that election officials are not fair, and 39.5% said that voters are bribed.

Furthermore, distrust of the electoral nexus is continuous, as the outcomes of a recent survey on the underlying causes of absenteeism indicate. Thus, among those that abstained from the national elections of 2023 because they chose to do so and not because of adversities, which comprise a 25% of the electorate, the three main reasons such citizens gave for non-participating were the following: to “express their disapproval of the political personnel of the country in general (58%), because “elections don’t change anything about the country’s situation” (32%), while the third main reason given was that “no party expresses their ideas/beliefs” (26%). In addition, those that consciously abstained expressed an enhanced distrust towards the mass media (74%), trade

unions (72%), political parties (69%), and the Parliament (56%). This is much higher than the distrust expressed by those who participated in the elections; there is a 20 to 30 percent difference (Kapa Research 2024).

As far as the European elections of 2024, those that chose to abstain gave three main reasons for their non-participation: to “express... disapproval of the political personnel of the country (43%)”, “because no party expresses their ideas/beliefs” (40%), and to “express disapproval of the government” (31%) (ibid.).

It may be surmised that absenteeism has clearly established itself as a prominent electoral trend in Greece. The spatial distribution of absenteeism was noticeable in rural and semi-urban areas until 2015. However, the said trend also became evident in urban and metropolitan areas after 2016.

These trends exert pressure on democratic settings since they prompt delegitimation and depoliticization. At the same time, they point to two opposite but no less concurrent possible directions: either toward further trump of meta-democracy and authoritarian predilections or gradual re-politization of areas of public life beyond the business-as-usual model of politics.

## 6.6. Italy\*

The first elections with universal male and female suffrage were held in Italy on 2 June 1946. At that time, 89.1% of voters participated in the two founding moments for the Italian Republic, the referendum to choose between monarchy and republic and the election of the Constituent Assembly. Thereafter, turnout in national political elections was consistently high, exceeding 90% of registered voters between 1948 and 1979. Similarly, the turnout was 85.7% in the first elections to the European Parliament in 1979.

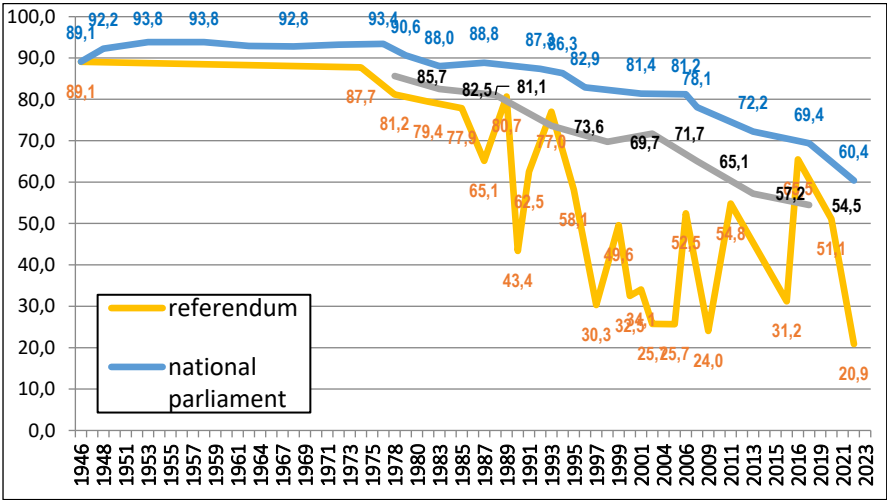
From 1979 onwards, a decline in voter participation began (see Figure 6.9). The downward trend was evident at each election round (Fruncillo, 2004; 2020; Tuorto, 2006; 2022). Moreover, the data in Figure 5.4 shows a significant acceleration of this trend over the last three decades. The decline in voting participation is 32.9% between 1976 and 2022 and 30.1% between 1979 and 2022. Over the period 1992-2022, the decline is 26.9%. The decline in turnout, its magnitude and its acceleration in recent years show that Italy is a country to which particular attention should be paid in research on political participation.

The specificity of the turnout trend in Italy can also be highlighted by a comparison with the rest of Europe. Over the period 1991-2023, Italy had an overall average turnout rate of 77.7%, i.e. 8.5% higher than that estimated

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for the EU countries as a whole. The average calculated for the first two decades is even wider: 10.2% in the first decade and 11.1% in the second. However, this gap narrows to only 2.4% in the last period.

Figure 6.9. - Voting participation in Italy from 1946 to 2022 by type of consultation: elections to the national parliament (a), elections to the European Parliament and referendum (b)



Source: Our own elaboration from Ministry of Interior’s data.  
Notes: a) The 1946 data refer to the election of the Constituent Assembly. b) The turnout rates for the referendums refer to the abrogative referendums, with the exception of those held in 2001, 2006, 2016 and 2020, which were constitutional referendums; since 2003 turnout rates have been calculated considering the electorate resident in both Italy and abroad; in the case of referendum in which there were several questions, the value shown in the figure is calculated with reference to the question with the highest turnout rate. The 1946 data refer to the monarchy vs. republic referendum.

As we have already seen, there are differences in turnout rates depending on the type of election. The turnout in European elections has always been lower than in national parliamentary elections. In particular, between 1979 and 2019, the turnout rate for European elections drops by a total of 31 percentage points. The magnitude of the decline is similar to that observed for national elections. With reference to the period 1994-2019, the drop is 23.9%. On average, 65.3% voted in European elections for the entire period from 1994 to 2019, compared to 49% for all EU countries. However, the higher propensity to vote in Italy compared to that calculated for all other countries tends to decrease over time. Moreover, the last European elections saw a further decline (-2.8%) in turnout in Italy, while a slight increase (+0.2%) was observed at European level.



European elections are considered second order in Italy (Angelucci et al., 2020; Fruncillo, 2023). However, some more recent European elections have registered higher turnout rates than those calculated for regional elections (Frucillo, 2016). Overall, in a ranking based on participation levels, municipal elections in Italy would rank second. In mayoral and municipal council elections, turnout is close to that recorded in general elections. On some occasions and in some territorial contexts, such as southern Italy, the turnout in municipal elections is even higher than that recorded in general elections (De Luca, 1997, 2010; Cuturi et al., 2000; Fruncillo, 2016).

The Italian debate on the main causes of turnout has shown that turnout is an increasingly complex and articulated phenomenon, exposed to the influence of both long-term dynamics and short-term factors related to political contingency.

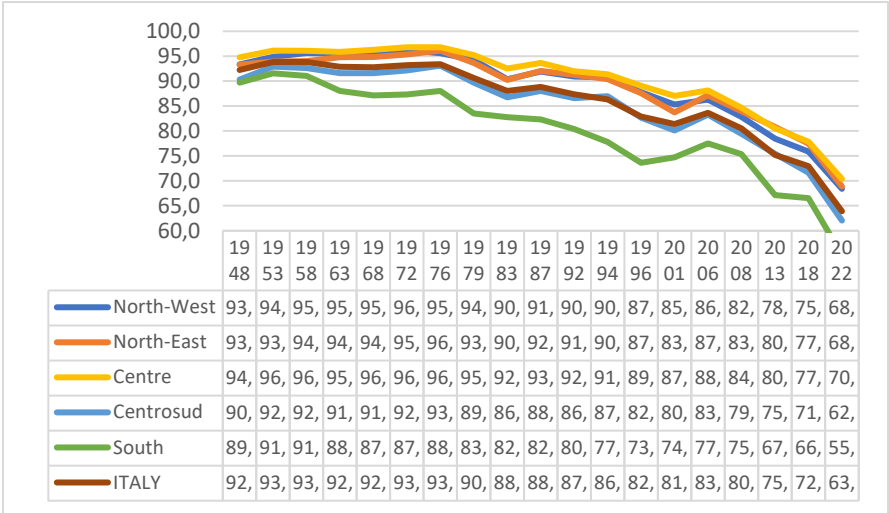
The debate on voter turnout in Italy has developed since the 1980s. Some scholars pointed out that the decline in participation was due to the reduced ability of parties to mobilise citizens, who were more distant from politics. Disaffection has been considered the cause of the decline in voting participation (Tuorto 2006; Corbetta and Parisi 1987; 1994). Other scholars have argued that some citizens withdrew support for their parties as a manifestation of their disappointment (Ferrarotti 1989; Tuorto 2006; Harka and Rocco 2022). These two perspectives of analysis have focused on the processes of change in political parties, perceived as increasingly distant from citizens and their needs. Another strand of research has focused on so-called cognitive mobilisation, the development of a post-materialist culture and the relevance of social capital (Mannheimer and Sani 1984;2001; Legante and Segatti 2001; Legnante 2007; Tuorto 2010; Putnam, 1993; Cartocci 1990; 2007). Finally, other scholars have focused on the relationship between turnout rates and socio-economic status (Pisati, 2010; Fruncillo 2020; Tuorto 2023).

All these factors still have influence on voting participation levels, although perhaps to a lesser extent than in the past. Indeed, the distribution of turnout rates by territorial areas continues to indicate a different level of participation in each area (Figure 6.10). Voter turnout is falling everywhere, but significant differences remain in favour of the regions where the parties are more deeply rooted, the culture of participation is more widespread (Cartocci, 2007) and the levels of socio-economic development are higher.

Differences in turnout may be caused not only by the relevance of elections, but also by the specific characteristics of each election. Recent research has highlighted the growth of intermittent participation (Legnante and Segatti, 2001, 2016), whereby an increasing number of citizens decide whether or not to participate in a particular election, considering not only its

relevance, but also the competitiveness of each election. In this perspective, changes in electoral rules, the characteristics of the electoral offer and different mobilisation levers have been analysed (Tuorto 2008; 2010). This type of analysis has proved particularly promising, since national, European and local elections take place according to different electoral rules that propose different constraints and advantages for parties and candidates. In particular, depending on the type of political institution and the rules for converting votes into seats, it has been found that a more or less significant role of the mobilisation potential to vote stems from the engagement of both incumbents and other candidates for political office (Fruncillo, 2016; De Luca and Fruncillo, 2019; Fruncillo and Addeo, 2019).

Figure 6.10. - Chamber of Deputies elections in Italy from 1948 to 2022. Voting participation by geopolitical area



Source: Our own elaboration from Ministry of Interior’s data.  
Notes: North West includes Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria and Valle d’Aosta; North East includes Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Trentino Alto Adige; Centre includes Emili Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and Marche; Centre South includes Lazio, Abruzzo and Sardinia; South includes Campania, Molise, Calabria, Basilicata, Apulia, Sicily; Voter percentages are calculated excluding the foreign constituencies established from the 2006 elections onwards.

Research on the Italian case has hitherto focused on political factors (such as the role of parties and individual personalities), institutional characteristics (electoral rules and the incentives and constraints arising from them) and territorial subcultures. In recent years, however, there has been a renewed focus on socio-economic factors. Some studies based on both ecological analyses and sample surveys have found a relationship between conditions

of socio-economic deprivation and a lower propensity to participate in elections (Schafer et al., 2022). Other studies refer to the impact of economic conditions in shaping electoral turnout (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2014).

Trust and other more related variables have not received much attention in research on the Italian case so far. Among the exceptions is research on the 2014 European elections in which turnout rate was related to trust in both national political actors and European institutions (Fruncillo, 2015). Other strands of research have used the concept of trust as part of an investigation into the role of social capital in influencing turnout (Fiorino et al., 2021). Some scholars have highlighted the relationship between the decline in political trust and the rise of populist parties, such as the 5 Star movement (Angelucci and Vittori, 2021). Finally, trust in political or institutional actors has been used in research on the role of political culture in influencing various degrees of citizen participation, from total involvement to conformity, from alienation to hostility. From this perspective, trust seems to be directly or indirectly correlated with greater or lesser propensity to vote (Fruncillo 2020).

The suggestions that emerged from this brief review should be further developed. This will require a better operationalisation of the concept of trust and its inclusion in a coherent theoretical framework. It should also take into account the characteristics acquired by the relationship between society and politics in Italy.

## **6.7. Poland\***

One of the overarching themes of the voter turnout in Poland, underscored by both domestic and international scholars, can be broadly described as limited participation. Limited participation is problematic from the point of view of democratic theory since low turnout rates can undermine the legitimacy of democratic governance. As a result, the concern for an appropriate level of democratic participation is both procedural and normative in its substance (Dahl 1989; Schumpeter 1942). However, scholars analysing the Polish democracy after the transition away from communism suggest that low turnout rates in the post-communist country might not be as important as originally thought, because “what matters is not the size of turnout but the character and quality of abstention” (McManus-Czubińska et al. 2004, 418).

Descriptive data suggests that indeed the size of turnout in Poland has

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been limited for most of the democratic period (i.e., 1989 – present). According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, for instance, the average turnout rate in the country across 25 elections amounts to 52.4% (IFES 2023). Such truncated participation has the potential to undermine the long-term spirit of democratic participation. However, it is important to point out two critical exceptions, which deviate from the above-mentioned generalization. The first exception occurred during the semi-democratic election of 1989, which saw the voter turnout rate exceed 60%. The net result of that election was an unequivocal victory for the Solidarity candidates, and an obvious blow to the communist regime. After the election of 1989, democracy became the only game in town. It is likely that soon afterwards, democracy was seen as a panacea for all ills, as Poland was steadily moving away from communism. But the introduction of democracy necessitates reforms, which tend to be costly both socially and politically. In a short amount of time, citizens became increasingly dissatisfied with the negative consequences of these reforms (i.e., galloping inflation, high unemployment rates, increased poverty) and with the democratic system as a whole (Ash 2019), which likely also explains suppressed turnout rates in later elections. In short, since democracy underperformed in the eyes of many voters, they abstained from further participation. The second exception to low democratic participation rates occurred during the recent parliamentary election of 2023, which saw an unprecedented voter turnout rate of 74.3% (PKW 2023). Because the election took place on October 15, 2023, the academic community is still working on explaining which factors were mainly responsible for the record-levels rates of voter turnout. Nonetheless, it appears plausible that the Polish society mobilized in order to prevent further democratic backsliding in the country, which has been a major concern since 2015 when the Law and Justice party consolidated its grip on power (Grzymala-Busse 2018; Stanley 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Even though the Law and Justice party won the most mandates in 2023, PiS - in all likelihood - will not be able to form a governing coalition.

Another trend characterizing elections in Poland is the partial stability of the electorate. On one hand, a stable part of the electorate regularly shows up at the polling stations. On the other hand, however, many voters are unstable in the sense that they tend to “lie and present themselves as stable” making Poland the outlier in the region (Cześnik 2009, 110). This, in turn, connects to the overall constancy of the electoral scene in Poland. For instance, political party labels were switched much more often than the personality of political elites, and thus the actual change was less significant than it appeared to an outside observer of politics in the country (Sadowski 2017). As a result, the lack of political evolution can be connected to the overall dissatisfaction

with Polish politics, which then further compresses the voter turnout rates. Gendźwiłł (2013) finds, for example, that anti-partyism in Poland is relatively durable and embraces both cultural and reactive components, affecting voters socialized during the communist era as well as the younger generation. So, while the turnout rates observed during the parliamentary election of 2023 are certainly encouraging from the perspective of the overall legitimacy of the democratic system, prior research also suggests that the general trend of the voter turnout rates in democratic Poland are rather low and potentially pernicious.

With reference to the different types of elections, while there are differences in voter turnout between different election types in Poland, one common denominator between them is an overall low level of participation. In other words, the voter turnout in Poland is consistently low, regardless of the election type. Nonetheless, some elections exhibit an even more limited participation rate. Such is the case, for example, with elections to the European Parliament, which are sometimes conceptualized as “second-order elections,” which helps explain low citizen engagement levels (Cześniak, Chedawczuk-Szulc, and Zaremba 2014). On the other hand, however, focusing especially on the 2019 parliamentary election, Rachwał (2020) finds increased turnout rates which the author attributes to drastic socio-political overhaul initiated by the ruling Law and Justice party after winning the 2015 election. This increased concern for prevention of further democratic erosion arguably culminated in the October 2023 national election, resulting in the highest turnout in the history of democratic Poland, while also thwarting PiS from retaining its parliamentary majority.

The different type of elections can sometimes mutually impact each other. Such was the case, for instance, in 2019 when the coincidence of European and national parliamentary elections in Poland played a significant role in mobilizing voters to attend the latter election (Nadolska 2020). Voter mobilization and turnout are important determinants of a political success. As such, the increased turnout in the 2019 European Parliament was initially interpreted by the media as an asset for the victorious PiS, which presumably benefitted from new votes. However, analysis of the electoral data at the lowest level of political administration in Poland suggests a negative correlation between higher frequency of voting and increased support for PiS, implying that PiS did not win solely as a result of new voters being mobilized, but rather because many voters switched their allegiance to the Law and Justice party (Skorupska 2022).

Scholars analysing the predictors of voter turnout in Poland have identified a variety of relevant factors. For example, looking at the 2015 parliamentary elections, Grabowski (2019) finds that socio-demographic factors

and location variables strongly determined the Poles' electoral preferences, but historical and cultural factors turned out to be the more important determinants. In fact, the legacy of communism has been seen by some as one of the key historical antecedents to the way Poles interact with democracy (Ash 2002; 2019), given the myriad of socio-economic challenges which had to be tackled when democracy was still in its incipient stages (Elster 1998). Looking at the cohort of post-communist countries, Linek and Petrůšek (2016) find that socialization and political habit formation under communism had no discernible effect on voter turnout, but such generational effects were evident in Poland, indicating a qualitative difference in political history compared to neighbouring countries.

As already previously mentioned, the rate of the voter turnout is likely positively affected by the perceived importance of the upcoming elections in the context of democratic durability. As such, re-engineering of the socio-political structures in Poland by the Law and Justice party resulted in raised political emotions and led to higher electoral activity (Rachwał 2020). A similar mechanism might help explain the record-breaking turnout rate in the 2023 parliamentary election. Furthermore, after Poland's successful accession to the European Union, many Poles moved abroad. This, in turn, has resulted in the increase of votes casted abroad, given the growing diaspora and political campaigns targeting this part of the Polish population diaspora (Lesińska 2014).

Economic factors, too, have been underscored as important for the voter turnout in Poland, ever since democracy was introduced. As a result, Bell (1997) examines the relationship between unemployment rates and voting patterns during the early democratic period in Poland and finds a strong correlation between rising joblessness and increased support for post-communist parties, such as the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD). In a similar vein, but reaching results that point in a different direction, Marcinkiewicz (2018) finds that economic variables are not as significant as the urban-rural divide in Poland when it comes to explaining voting behaviour.

Trust has been an important feature of Polish democracy. In the incipient stages of Polish democracy, especially during the semi-free election of 1989, trust in the potential of a democratic order – and conversely a deep distrust towards the communist party – helped the country transition away from non-communism and resulted in a high degree of electoral turnout (Ash 2002; 2019). However, when the challenges of forming a new democratic order became evident almost immediately (Elster 1998), the rate of electoral turnout went down, all while the former communists (also referred to as post-communists) re-captured political power via democratic means. In the 1990s, the Roman Catholic Church emerged as a key political institution with a very

high degree of public trust (Morawska 1995). Consequently, the Church used these assets to legitimize the democratic order in exchange for policy concessions, while also attempting to bolster voter turnout for its preferred political parties (Grzymała-Busse 2015).

Polish democracy matured over time, but the electoral party system nonetheless experienced several episodes of endogenous institutional evolution. These changes were driven primarily by partisan self-interest in maximizing seat share (Benoit and Hayden 2004), and such changes affected the level of trust citizens exhibit towards political institutions as well as their willingness to vote. Research from the mid to late 1990s suggests that older people and women were more likely to trust political institutions, but education had a negative impact on political trust (Johnson 2005). Other research finds that in Poland, low levels of political trust and low levels of political participation go together (Grönlund and Setälä 2007).

The general pattern, therefore, is that after an initial optimism about the possibilities of democracy also had a positive effect on the rate of electoral turnout. However, as the problems associated with democratic transition and consolidation become more evident to the society at large, the level of trust towards institutions and consequently political participation became suppressed. The recent parliamentary election from October 2023 was an exception from this generalization since record-breaking turnout levels were observed. Initial assessment seems to suggest that such high levels of participation were driven by a duality of factors. On the one hand, citizens voting in record numbers is an expression of trust in the political process. On the other hand, however, this crucial election can also be seen as an expression of distrust towards the Law and Justice party (PiS) and as a manifestation against further democratic erosion in the country.

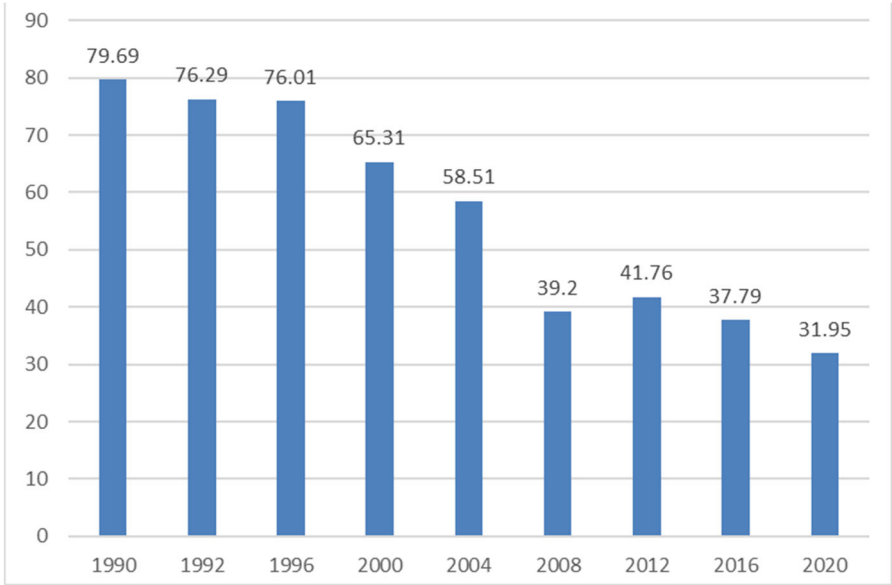
## **6.8. Romania\***

During the last three decades and a half, which coincide with the so-called democratic transition/transformation/consolidation phase caused by the collapse of communism, turnout in Romania followed dynamics that were similar with other post-communist countries. Initial enthusiasm (Northmore-Ball 2016) regarding regaining electoral rights was followed by increased apathy, and, consequently, by dropping turnout rates (see Figures 6.11, 6.12,

\* By Claudiu Tufis, Luciana Alexandra Ghica and Bogdan Radu, University of Bucharest, Romania.

6.13 and 6.14<sup>\*\*</sup>). However, measuring election turnout is not as much a straightforward process as could be commonly believed. Comşa (2015) shows that, in fact, having a precise reading of turnout in Romanian elections is made difficult by three influencing factors: the accuracy of electoral registers, the number of ineligible voters and rates of outgoing migration. When these factors are taken into account, turnout may, in fact, be higher.

Figure 6.11. - Turnout in parliamentary elections (%)



<sup>\*\*</sup> Data has been computed from two sources: the Voter Turnout database <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database>, and (for local elections only), and the Code for Romania database <https://rezultatevot.ro/elections/112/results>



Figure 6.12. - Turnout in presidential elections

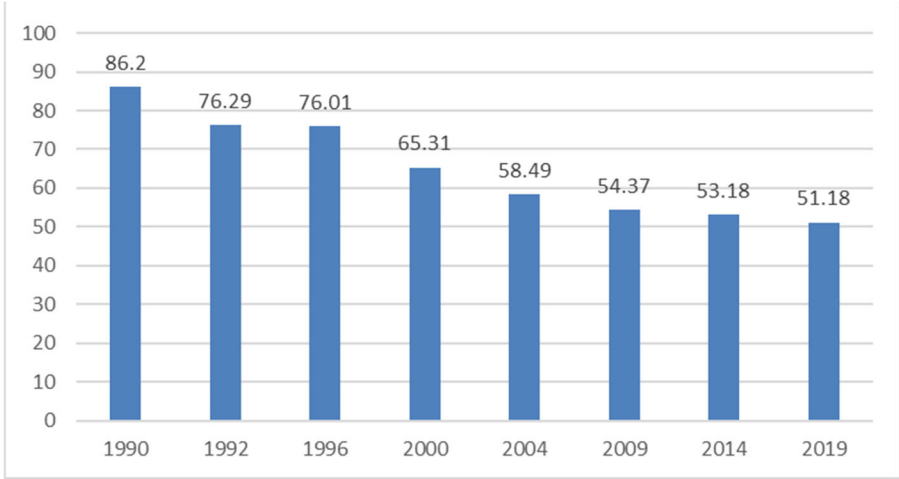


Figure 6.13. Turnout in EP elections (%)

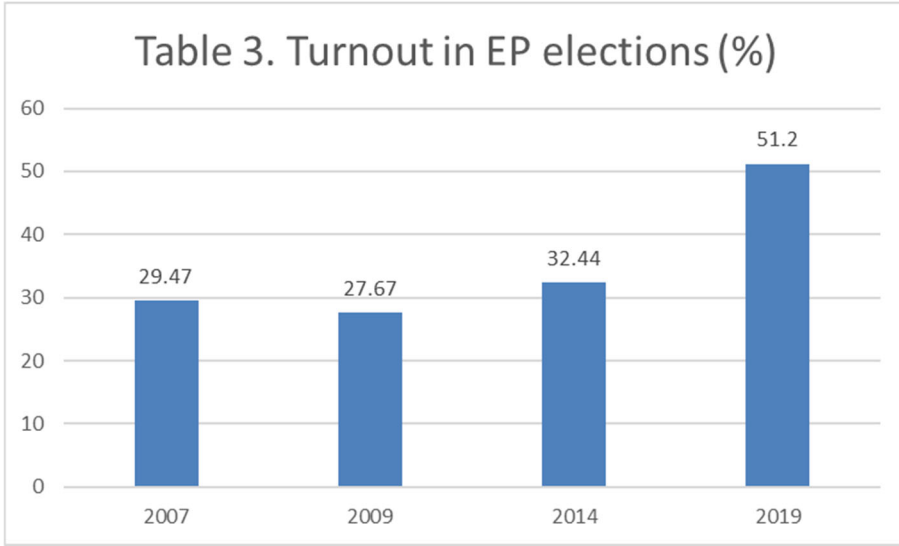
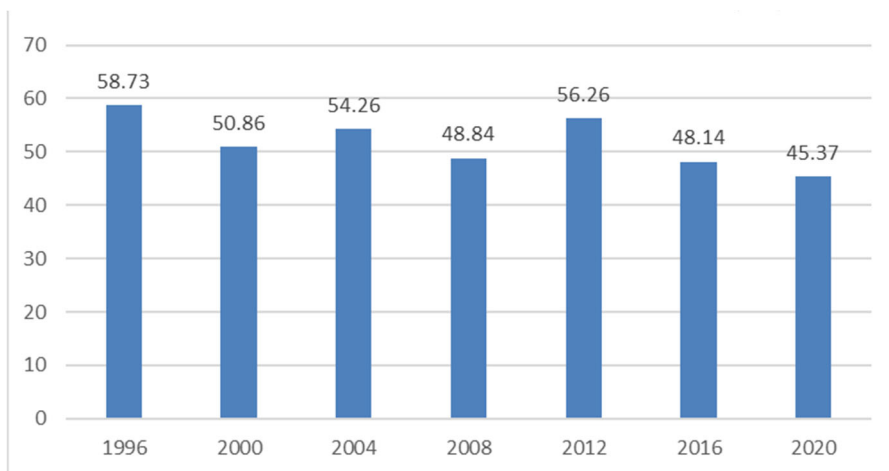


Figure 6.14. - Turnout in local elections (%)



When considering all types of elections (legislative, presidential, local and European), different trends become apparent. For legislative and presidential elections, there is a clear descending pattern, for local elections the turnout rate is somewhat constant for the last 35 years, while for European elections, the trend is ascending. Legislative elections are marred by the steepest and constant decline in terms of turnout, from an initial almost 80% turnout in the first decade of democratic transition, to a little above 30% in the 2020 elections. In other words, the people that participated in the most recent legislative elections represent less than 40% of those that were regularly participating in the 1990s. A similar trend is seen in the case of presidential elections, although the drop is not that dramatic: from close to 80% turnout in the first decade of transition, turnout decreased to slightly above 50% in the elections taking place in the last decade and a half. Turnout for local elections has been somewhat constant (around 50%), although a slight decline can also be seen in this case, from values close to 60% down to 45% in the most recent elections. Finally, in the case of European elections, an ascending trend can be identified, from values below 30% in the elections following Romania's EU integration in 2007, to more than 50% in the 2019 EP elections.

The differences between these trends can be associated with various changes that affected both the electoral system and the society, in a broader sense. For example, a 2003 referendum increased the presidential mandate from 4 to 5 years. The ensuing decoupling of legislative and presidential elections could have decreased turnout rates in the former (see Comşa 2017).

Moreover, the decline in turnout in the case of presidential elections may not be as marked as in the case of legislative elections because Romania has some features of a presidential system, and perceived utility of voting may be higher when the competition is between several individuals which are easily identifiable (and, decreasing down to two contenders in the second round of presidential elections). Briefly, presidential elections may seem to have higher stakes, which, in turn, may motivate people to cast their ballots. Finally, increasing turnout in EP elections is not surprising given the relatively short history of such elections in the country. After the 2007 EU integration, the first EP elections were not popular perhaps because there was neither sufficient understanding about their importance and role within the society, nor clear knowledge about EU politics (and lack of knowledge has been shown to decrease turnout, see Høgh and Larsen 2016, Petričević and Stockemer 2020). Nevertheless, this significant increase in turnout for EP elections is not a general pattern, since out of post-communist countries which are EU member states, it is only in Poland and Lithuania that this trend is so stark (Hosli et al. 2022). According to the authors, trust in EP may influence turnout in European elections, especially when in post-communist countries trust in national political institutions is lower than trust in EU institutions; consequently, a compensatory mechanism may explain these trends. This finding is confirmed by Grönlund and Setälä's 2007 research which argues that trust in parliament and satisfaction with democracy have positive effects on turnout.

The literature on the determinants of voting considers a plethora of factors influencing the decision to cast a ballot. Mircea Comșa's 2018 study on voting trends in post-communist countries is one of the most comprehensive through its design which allows comparisons across countries while also testing many of the widely recognized hypotheses in the literature. Analyzing 30 post-communist countries over approximately two decades (1989-2012), Comșa finds that worsening economic status (potentially related to globalization) and party fragmentation negatively impacts turnout. He also finds support for the so-called electoral stakes hypothesis, according to which people decide which elections are worth voting for, and only cast ballots in those (roughly following a Downsian model of economic voting, i.e. deciding to vote based on a calculation of costs and benefits, especially related to the probability that one's vote may actually make a difference in terms of overall outcome). While the electoral stakes hypothesis finds most support on the data, integration in supranational structures is also relevant, with EU countries scoring the lowest turnout rates. The author also finds that migration (outgoing) is positively associated with decreasing turnout.

Carreras and İrepoğlu (2013) found that in Latin America, trust in the elections themselves is correlated with turnout. While elections in Romania have not been marred by presumptions of fraud, low political trust in general can be associated with declining participation. Another factor influencing turnout may be related to perceptions of corruption. Since corruption has unfortunately been present in public debates for the last three and a half decades, it is conceivable that political apathy spreads throughout society also because of the system's incapacity or unwillingness to deal with it. This observation would be supported by Dahlberg and Solevid's 2016 article, according to which perceptions of corruption are directly correlated with turnout.

Moreover, turnout may also be influenced by processes of generational replacement that change both public perceptions of political participation and the youth's political engagements. On the one hand, older generation that have been socialized in communism may carry over automatisms of mandatory voting into the post-communist realities (Northmore-Ball 2016). On the other hand, the youth's increased propensity to engage in different acts of participation (Sloam 2014) may lead to a higher reluctance to vote.

Finally, turnout is significantly influenced by both resources and mobilization. Northmore-Ball (2016) shows that voting is affected by inequality in Eastern European countries, while mobilization of particular socio-economic categories is a staple of both mainstream and more extremist parties in Romania.

## 6.9. Slovakia\*

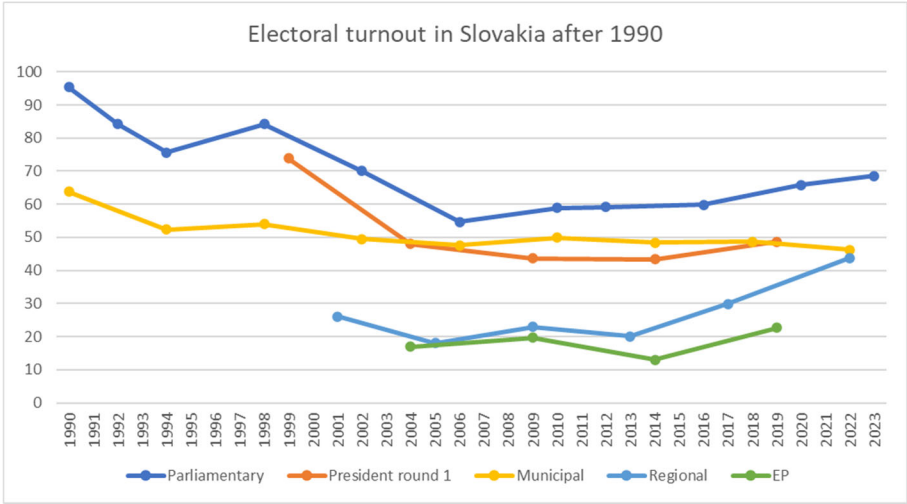
From a time perspective, after 1990 in Slovakia we can observe a clear trend of a decrease in voter turnout in all types of elections, its subsequent stabilization after joining the EU and a slight increase in recent years (see Figure 6.15).

The first free parliamentary elections in 1990 recorded a record turnout of 95.4% of voters, a result of "participatory euphoria" (Gyarfášová 2018: 177) and their perception as referenda confirming the new free democratic regime. In the subsequent elections in 1992, the participation rate decreased to 84%, and in 1994 (the first time in the independent Slovak Republic), it dropped by nearly another 10%. An exception to this declining trend was the 1998 elections, which once again had the character of referenda on the future democratic direction of Slovakia after the rule of Prime Minister Mečiar's authoritarian regime. The experience of weakly checked majority power and

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authoritarian rule, characterized by conflicts over basic democratic principles, delegitimization of opposition and critical opinions, open enrichment, and clientelism, prompted significant public resistance and mobilization (Fischer 2006). This was reflected in the high voter turnout of these elections, which meant the defeat of Prime Minister Mečiar and the re-establishment of the democracy consolidation process.

Figure 6.15. - Electoral turnout in Slovakia after 1990



After joining the EU in 2004, parliamentary elections lost the themes crucial to the fundamental direction of the state, which had managed to polarize and mobilize a large majority of society. This was reflected in the decline and gradual stabilization of voter turnout in parliamentary elections, which ranged from 55 to 60% until 2016. Similarly, voter turnout values stabilized in presidential elections. After the introduction of direct presidential elections in 1999, the turnout in the first round was over 70%, related to the candidacy of former Prime Minister Mečiar. However, in the subsequent presidential elections after EU accession, they failed to attract even half of eligible voters. We also observe a stabilization of turnout in local elections, which fluctuates around the 50% level, down from over 60% in the first elections in 1990. Participation in regional elections and European Parliament elections, introduced later, was significantly low and did not exceed 30%. The more pronounced increase in turnout in the recent regional elections in 2022 (reaching 43%) was the result of combining these elections with local elec-

tions, ensuring that participation in these two types of elections will practically be the same in the future.

Since 2020, we have observed a new trend of increasing voter turnout in the last two parliamentary elections (compared to 2016, the turnout in the recent elections this year was higher by 9%). The 2020 elections were significantly marked by the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, which triggered the largest protests since 1989 and revealed corrupt connections between top government officials and influential oligarchs. Although the demonstrations stopped after a few months and occurred only occasionally thereafter, the sentiment for a significant political change and an overall increased mobilization of society persisted until the 2020 election (Havlík et al. 2020). The 2020 elections did not bring about a calming of the situation; on the contrary, against the backdrop of the pandemic, an energy crisis, and the war in Ukraine, the new government, marked by internal disputes, gradually disintegrated. Former Prime Minister Fico managed to mobilize a significant portion of the population through an aggressive and offensive campaign featuring illiberal, conspiratorial, and pro-Russian appeals. This led to concerns and mobilization among a numerous group of his opponents who feared a renewed threat to the democratic character of the state. As a result, voter turnout in the early elections increased compared to the year 2020.

In addition to the differences in time, we also noticed shifts in the degree of mobilization in urban and rural areas in Slovakia. Since 1992, elections in Slovakia have been characterized by differing levels of participation in these environments, specifically, residents of smaller municipalities had higher voter turnout than residents of large cities until 2010 (Krivý 1999; 2007; 2011). This effect was more pronounced in municipal elections (Kostelecký and Krivý 2015). However, since 1998, this difference has been diminishing, and currently, we observe a higher level of participation in large cities (Gyarfášová 2018).

The participation of the Hungarian minority has developed interestingly. Data from municipalities with a majority Hungarian population show that until the 1994 elections, their participation was below average, subsequently, it was significantly above the nationwide average until 2010, and from the 2012 elections onwards, it has been below average again (Krivý 2007; Krivý and Majó 2018). The increase and the subsequent higher rate of electoral participation of the Hungarian minority after 1994 was related to the feeling of threat during the government of Prime Minister Mečiar with his nationalist agenda and later to the successful performance of the united Hungarian party in right-wing governments. Its desintegration in 2009 and the subsequent conflicting relationships among several Hungarian political parties led to the gradual demobilization of this group of voters.

Voter turnout in different types of elections varies significantly in Slovakia. The highest turnout is maintained by the parliamentary elections, which so far has not been lower than 54%. They are followed by presidential elections and municipal elections, where participation is most often around the 50% mark. Regional elections and EP elections follow with a significant distance, where participation does not exceed 30%.

Since the Slovak turnout in the EP elections has long been the lowest in the entire EU since the first elections in 2004, the reasons for the fundamental gap in turnout compared to the elections to the national parliament were sought. Franklin (2007) attributes this primarily to the status of new democracies. In contrast to established democracies, the public lacks long-established commitments to political parties and to the “rules of the game” of politics, which may bring them loyally to the polls even in an election which has no purpose that is apparent to them. However, he concedes that further clarification is necessary to fully understand the reasons behind such low turnout.

Most often, the low voter turnout in these elections is attributed to the low visibility of the pre-election campaign without the efforts of political parties for more significant mobilization (Gyarfášová 2007; Spáč 2014; Plešivčák 2015), the distance from European politics and the unclear meaning of elections for voters, when their results are not directly translated into policy (Gyarfášová and Henderson 2018); the timing of the elections, when they are always preceded by the much more watched presidential elections (Spáč 2014; 2019; Gyarfášová and Henderson 2018) or weak politicization of the EU in domestic politics (Gyarfášová 2017; Gyarfášová and Henderson 2018). It is interesting that the elections to the EP are second order elections, since there is significantly less at stake for the parties and they can only appeal to voters who consider the elections to be their duty, but in Slovakia they do not fulfill other features of this concept, such as lower support for large or government parties or strengthening smaller radical parties (Plenta 2010; Gyarfášová 2015). Although the stated reasons explain the lower rate of participation, they do not convincingly explain why participation in Slovakia is so significantly low even in comparison with other post-communist countries. Gyarfášová and Henderson (2018) suggested there are also country specific characteristics in Slovakia’s relationship to the EU that depress turnout, particularly difficult path to EU membership and (primarily instrumental) perception of membership.

Similar levels of participation were characteristic of regional elections, with a significant contrast to municipal elections. These elections do not attract much attention from analysts, and there are not many studies systematically examining the reasons for low turnout. A comprehensive overview of

the reasons associated with low participation is provided by the study of Rybár and Spáč (2017). Regional self-government in Slovakia, the number of regions, and their boundaries emerged as a product of a political deal in the central government with little engagement of citizens. Regions were created regardless of historical traditions, and citizens do not feel attached to their regions. Similarly, they still do not fully understand their powers, resources, and responsibility. Regional issues hardly receive attention in the media, and we cannot speak of a clear regional policy that would be decided in elections. The majority electoral system induces political parties to form electoral alliances (which are different for each region), and in many occasions, cooperation crosscuts the government-opposition divide at the national level, confusing and obscuring voters' choices (this is also emphasized by Marušiak 2018). The centralized organization of political parties with a low number of members causes the absence of regionally based party leaders. Moreover, parties are reluctant to invest significantly in regional campaigns, as their funding depends exclusively on the acquisition of votes and mandates in parliamentary elections. The sense of regional self-government is also repeatedly questioned by several party leaders.

The focal point of analyses and studies on voter turnout in Slovakia predominantly revolves around the characteristics of voters affiliated with individual parties, with comparatively less emphasis directed toward examining the factors influencing voter turnout.

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics that influence electoral participation (such as the type of elections, urban/rural differences, and the participation of the Hungarian minority), studies (Baboš 2014; Gyarfášová 2018) have identified significant sociodemographic characteristics at the individual level, such as age and education. The identification (closeness) with a political party has proven to be an important characteristic, while variables such as gender, satisfaction with democracy, and retrospective evaluation of economic conditions have been not significant.

Studies have also emerged that have identified certain effects of sudden catastrophic events, such as floods (Jusko and Spáč 2024), or the timing of holidays (Jusko and Spáč 2023). Attention is also devoted to the issue of civic education in Slovakia, which, in its current form, promotes a passive political culture (see for example Žilinčíková 2020).



## 6.10. Slovenia\*

In 1990, Slovenia had its first multi-party democratic elections while still part of Yugoslavia. The inaugural elections in independent Slovenia were held in April 1992. The 2022 national parliamentary elections marked the 10th multi-party elections in Slovenia, occurring 30 years after the establishment of a new institutional framework.

Voter turnout in Slovenia, based on longitudinal data from 1992 to 2022 (State Election Commission, 2023), shows instability, but in general we can speak about stable decline since the first elections in the beginning of 1990s with some smaller increases (see Table 6.5). At the beginning of the 1990s, the time of democratic transition, not surprisingly if we consider new democracies in CEE countries, voter turnout was very high and reached 85%, while in mid-2010 the lowest levels were recorded; close to 50% (national parliamentary elections) and 42% (presidential and local elections), and even 24% in EP elections (see Table 6.5). However, bigger increase of voter turnout was recorded in 2022 elections – national parliament and presidential elections. In the case of presidential elections, there is no clear pattern in voter turnout between the two rounds – when the second round was held.

There were differences in voter turnout between different types of elections in terms of levels, but not so much in terms of trends (see Table 6.5) – higher voter turnout at the beginning of 1990s, a relatively stable decline, and then a (slight) increase, which is basically similar in all elections.

State Election Commission data show that voter turnout in Slovenia varies depending on the type of election\*\*. In European Parliament elections, turnout is generally the lowest, followed by local elections (there are no regional elections in Slovenia). On national parliamentary and presidential elections turnout is higher, but it is possible to identify a rather stable pattern with turnout being anyway higher on the former (parliamentary) elections than on the latter (presidential).

Regarding the main causes of change in voter turnout in Slovenia, the State Election Commission prepared analysis of voter turnout based on the data collected during the election day, on the national parliamentary, presidential and EP elections\*\*\*. Participants of elections were analyzed based on age and gender. However, such data are available only since 2017. These

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\*\* Republic of Slovenia State Election Commission (Republika Slovenija Državna volilna komisija), *Volitve in referendum*. <https://www.dvk-rs.si/volitve-in-referendumi/predsednik-republike/>

\*\*\* See the note above.

data clearly show the importance of age as determinant of voters' participation. Young cohort records the lowest turnout, while those 60+ years the highest turnout. Young voters' participation increased in the last elections (held in 2022), also due to many mobilization activities of different CSOs and social movements (Haughton and Krašovec 2022; Novak and Lajh 2022). Nevertheless, the turnout of young voters remained the lowest. According to this data, women participated to slightly bigger extent on all above-mentioned elections held since 2017 (between 51% and 54% of all voters in all years were women).

*Table 6.5. - Voter turnout in Slovenia (1992-2022)*

YEAR	Voter turnout (%) national parliamentary elections	Voter turnout (%) presidential elections	Voter turnout (%) local elections	Voter turnout (%) EP elections
1992	85,8	85,8		
1994			61,1	
1996	73,7			
1997		68,3		
1998			1. round – 58,3 2. round – 51,6	
2000	70,1			
2002		1. round – 72,1 2. round – 65,4	72,1	
2004	60,6			28,35
2006			1. round – 58,2 2. round – 53,2	
2007		1. round – 57,7 2. round – 58,5		
2008	63,1			
2009				28,33
2010			1. round – 51,0 2. round – 48,8	
2011	65,6			
2012		1. round – 48,4 2. round – 42,1		
2014	51,7		1. round – 45,2 2. round – 43,6	24,5
2017		1. round – 44,2 2. round – 42,1		
2018	52,6		1. round – 51,2 2. round – 49,1	
2019				28,9
2022	71,0	1. round – 51,6 2. round – 53,6	1. round – 47,6 2. round – 42,1	

Source: Republic of Slovenia State Election Commission.

Analysis based on public opinion poll data show similar picture in terms of voting participation dependent on age during the last 30 years. The oldest cohort group exhibits the highest turnout while the youngest has the lowest turnout. An important factor is also party identification as those who already have party identification are much more likely to vote than those without this kind of identification and subjective competences. On the other hand, this kind of data show also some connection between gender and education – men and more educated exhibit a bit higher voter turnout (Fink-Hafner and Boh 2002a, 2002b; Krašovec 2005; Deželan et al. 2007; Krašovec 2010; Hafner-Fink et al. 2011).

In terms of some contextual factors, it seems that decline in trust in institutions, but also some crises, especially economic and financial (that hit Slovenia with some delay in 2011) and the austerity measures taken by the government and parliament to combat the crises, seems to have contributed to the rise of several anti-political attitudes of the citizens, fatigue and apathy (Fink-Hafner 2010; Krašovec and Deželan, 2020). However, contrary to the economic and financial crises, the crises connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, the handling of the pandemic-related restrictions alongside the democratic backsliding led to many civil protests against the government and contributed to a revival of political interest and increase in political participation and consequently also to a higher voter turnout (Novak and Lajh 2022; Lovec 2023). Some additional factors were identified that have also contributed to lower voter turnout in the 2010s – the characteristics of the new political parties and the crises of the transitional political generation; question of new political elite and its qualities in relation to the transitional political generation (Fink-Hafner 2020).

Also, some factors related to personalities in politics seem important. Janez Janša, a long-term leader of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) and three times PM, who has been in the political arena since the democratic transition, has been in the last two decades described as the ‘love-me-or-hate-me’ figure in Slovenian politics. As several research indicated, so-called anti-Janša voting is important not only in terms of electoral behavior but also as mobilization factor related to turnout\*.

In the case of the EP elections, Euroscepticism could be a driving force for higher voter turnout. However, even though Euroscepticism has been more visible in the 2014 and 2019 EP elections in Slovenia than in the previous ones, it is in general still possible to speak about rather low level of it in Slovenia, among the public as well as parties. In addition, some analyses

\* T. Haughton and A. Krašovec, *Slovenia voted against an illiberal leader and for an untested party: Why did a brand-new party win the parliamentary election?* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/26/slovenia-jansa-golob-backsliding-democracy/>

in the past revealed that EU is not important topic for party competition and therefore could not play an important role neither in terms of mobilization of voters (Krašovec and Lajh 2020).

The timing of elections; the scheduling of elections can also have some influence. For example, in 2014 national parliamentary elections were held in mid-July – a period when a significant portion of the electorate is likely to be on holiday – and among other also highlighting the importance of logistical considerations for voter participation. In 2007 there was rather high turnout on local elections. An obvious factor that contributed to important increase in these local elections was a fact that simultaneously first round of presidential elections was held – turnout was indeed the same on both elections (Krašovec and Deželan 2020).

At the local elections there is one characteristic that probably contributed to being rather stable despite low turnout during the last 30 years, even in terms of decline of trust in political institutions and anti-political attitudes of the citizens. This is a continuation of a trend first noticed at the local elections held in 1994 – increasing number of non-partisan or independent candidates and their very good electoral results. In the 2022 local elections across 212 municipalities incumbents and non-partisan candidates performed particularly well, with independents winning 141 mayoral seats and making up over a third of council members (Haček 2023).

## **6.11. Ukraine\***

Over more than 30 years of independence in Ukraine, there have been 23 nationwide electoral campaigns: 7 presidential (one of them was early, and one extraordinary), 8 parliamentary (including 4 early ones), and 8 local, not counting all the interim, early, and repeat elections. Over the years of independence, the legal state of Ukraine has experienced practically all the most popular electoral systems, sometimes changing the “rules of the game” literally on the eve of the start of the electoral process. Only on January 1, 2020, did the Electoral Code come into effect, which, hopefully, has finally legislatively fixed the electoral systems in Ukraine for a long time. The changes taking place in the electoral system have in one way or another influenced the electoral behaviour of voters.

Over more than 30 years of independent Ukraine, the main trends in electoral activity and the factors that define it have clearly emerged.

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The number of potential voters has significantly decreased. In 1994, the number of Ukrainians of voting age was 38,778,325 people, while in 2007, it decreased to 37,929,625 people. A sharp decline in the number of voters occurred in 2014. In 2014, the number of potential voters in Ukraine was 37,236,028, and by 2019, it had decreased to only 34,403,861<sup>2</sup>. At the moment the situation has become even worse, but we can only talk about rough estimates, which are determined by the following trends and facts:

- a decrease in the overall population due to low birth rates and a high level of mortality,
- Ukraine's loss of control over part of its territory in 2014-2024 due to Russian aggression, where a significant number of voters live,
- migration of voters to permanent places of residence, mainly to European countries.

The situation with the number of potential voters has become much more complicated due to the start of the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. Director of the Institute for Demography and Social Studies Ella Libanova said in her interview to the Forbs magazine in September 2023: "Before the war, we thought that about 3 million Ukrainians were working abroad. About 6 million people left because of the war. If you add the "pre-war" 3 million, you get an extremely dangerous and bad figure"<sup>3</sup>. According to the United Nations data, 1,227,555 Ukrainians were registered in Russia (as of December 2023) and 46,000 in Belarus (as of September 2024)<sup>4</sup>. According to Eurostat, as of October 2024, 4,163,655 Ukrainians were registered in the EU countries<sup>5</sup>. If the situation does not change, then most of them are unlikely to be able to exercise their voting rights.

A general trend in Ukrainian elections throughout its independence has been a decline in voter turnout. This is most noticeable in the turnout for local government elections. While Ukraine is a parliamentary-presidential republic, due to the political culture of one-man rule that has developed,

<sup>2</sup> *The Constitution of Ukraine*. Available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/254%D0%BA/96-%D0%B2%D1%80#Text>.

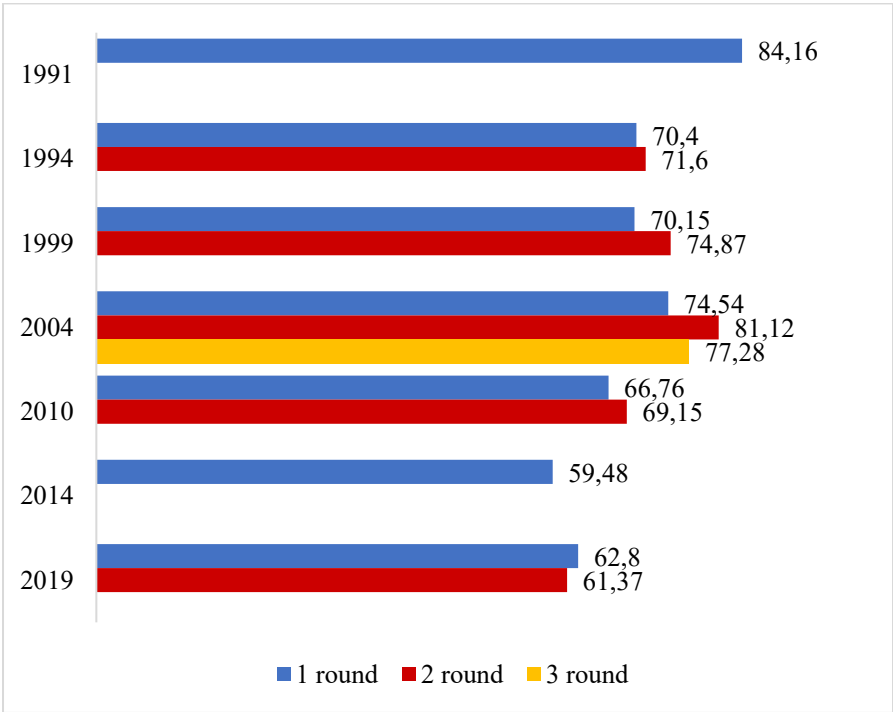
<sup>3</sup> Serhiy Shevchuk, *Ukraine will need to attract at least 300,000 migrants each year. Sociologist Ella Libanova on existential problems with demography and what can be done?* Published on September 25, 2023. Available at: <https://forbes.ua/war-in-ukraine/35-mln-ukraintsiv-u-2033-mu-nadzvichayno-optimistichniy-stsenariy-sotsiologinya-ella-libanova-pro-veliki-problemi-z-demografieyu-v-ukraini-yaki-zarodilisya-shche-do-viyni-shcho-z-tsim-robiti-250-92023-16201> (in Ukrainian).

<sup>4</sup> Data from the United Nations: Ukraine Refugee Situation (October 2024). Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

<sup>5</sup> Data from Eurostat (October 2024). Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary\\_protection\\_for\\_persons\\_fleeing\\_Ukraine\\_-\\_monthly\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics).

greater significance is placed on presidential elections, which is reflected in higher turnout when electing the President of Ukraine<sup>6</sup>.

Figure 6.16. - Ukraine: turnout in presidential elections



Source: Central Election Commission of Ukraine

As we have already noted, the type of elections significantly determines the level of voter turnout. Let’s examine this in more detail.

In Ukraine, according to the Constitution, the President of Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (parliament), regional, and local authorities are elected. Moreover, different institutions of power are formed in accordance with different electoral systems that have changed during the country’s political development.

All the elections of all six presidents of Ukraine were held according to the majority system of the absolute majority, where in the case of a second round, it was enough for the winner to get more votes than his opponent.

<sup>6</sup> Andriy Protsyuk, Andriy Horbal, *Historic turnout (2010-2019)*. Published on November 30, 2020. Available at: <https://socialdata.org.ua/istorichna-yavka-2010-2019/> (in Ukrainian).

Since the first presidential elections in 1991, voter turnout has consistently decreased, except for a surge in 2004 (see Figure 6.16). The highest voter turnout in presidential elections was in 1991 when 84.16% of eligible voters participated. Subsequently, voter participation gradually declined. In 2014, only 59.48% of eligible voters cast their votes. The trend in the 2019 elections did not change significantly, but overall, turnout in 2019 was slightly higher than in 2014. In 2019, a slightly larger percentage of Ukrainians voted in the first round - 62.8%. In the second round, this figure was slightly lower - 61.37%<sup>7</sup>.

In every case where a second round of elections was held, the turnout was higher than in the first round. Even in the third round, which took place in 2004, more voters participated than in the first round. The only exception was the year 2019 when the turnout in the second round decreased by one and a half percent (Maiboroda 2019).

The next presidential elections in Ukraine were scheduled for March 31, 2024, but were cancelled due to martial law in Ukraine because of Russia's invasion. Ukrainian law prohibits holding elections during wartime. It is impossible to ensure the safety of voting during ongoing hostilities. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers fighting against Russian aggression would not be able to take part in the elections, and voting is difficult for millions of Ukrainian refugees who have fled the country. According to a research conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology on September 30 - October 11, 2023<sup>8</sup> [7], 81% of Ukrainians support the rejection of elections during wartime. According to the Constitution of Ukraine (Article 83), if the term of powers of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine expires while martial law or a state of emergency is in effect, its powers shall be extended until the day of the first meeting of the first session of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine elected after the cancellation of martial law or of the state of emergency. The current version of the Constitution does not provide for an extension of the powers of the President. The question of the president's powers and new elections should be decided by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine. However, by the end of March 2024, no one who could do so according to the law had contacted this authority. In November 2023 all political parties represented in the Verkhovna Rada signed a memorandum agreeing to postpone the next elections until after martial law has ended<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Data from the Central Election Commission of Ukraine. Available at: <https://www.cvk.gov.ua/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Results of a study on the timing of elections, attitudes towards online voting and attitudes towards possible restrictions on citizens' rights*. Published on October 30, 2023. Available at: <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1309&page=1> (in Ukrainian)

<sup>9</sup> *Conclusions adopted during the ninth "Jean Monnet Dialogue" with the participation*

Ukraine has undergone a lengthy process in determining the electoral system for forming its parliament. The first step occurred on November 18, 1993, when under the pressure of miners' riots the Law of Ukraine "On Elections of People's Deputies" was adopted for the first parliamentary elections of independent Ukraine, not under Soviet legislation. It provided a majoritarian electoral system of the absolute majority. On September 24, 1997, a new Law of Ukraine "On Elections of People's Deputies" was adopted, introducing a parallel mixed electoral system with both majoritarian and proportional representation. On March 25, 2004, the Law of Ukraine "On Elections of People's Deputies of Ukraine" was adopted, which introduced a proportional representation electoral system with closed lists. On November 17, 2011, the Law of Ukraine "On the Elections of People's Deputies of Ukraine" was adopted, once again returning to a mixed majoritarian and proportional representation electoral system, which is currently in effect<sup>10</sup>. According to the Law, 1) 225 deputies are elected under a proportional system in a nationwide multi-mandate electoral district according to electoral lists of candidates for deputies from political parties; 2) 225 deputies are elected under a majority system of relative majority in single-mandate electoral districts<sup>11</sup>. In 2019, 225 deputies were elected in a nationwide multi-member district based on electoral lists from political parties, and the remaining 199 were elected under the majoritarian system in single-member districts (another 26 districts were located in the occupied territories). At polling stations, voters are given two ballots: one with a list of parties, the second with candidates from the district where the voter is registered. A total of 5,966 candidates were registered, including 2,746 from parties and 3,220 majoritarian candidates.

Assessing the main trends in elections of the national parliament - the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, it should be noted that a decline in electoral activity in parliamentary elections has been observed since the first parliamentary elections of independent Ukraine, not under Soviet legislation. In this context, there is a notable decrease in voter turnout in elections to the Verkhovna Rada in each election cycle, from 75.81% in 1994 to 51.91% in 2014 and 49.24% in 2019<sup>12</sup>.

One way or another, presidential elections are more important for the

*of the leadership of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.* Published on November 13, 2023. Available at: <https://www.rada.gov.ua/news/Top-novyna/243634.html?search=%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B5> (in Ukrainian).

<sup>10</sup> Kateryna Zhemchuzhnikova, *History of elections: electoral systems in Ukraine*. Published on February 22, 2021. Available at: [https://oporaua.org/news/vyborny/election\\_history/22821-istoriia-viboriv-viborchi-sistemi-v-ukrayini](https://oporaua.org/news/vyborny/election_history/22821-istoriia-viboriv-viborchi-sistemi-v-ukrayini) (in Ukrainian).

<sup>11</sup> Law "On the Elections of People's Deputies of Ukraine". Available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/4061-17#Text>.

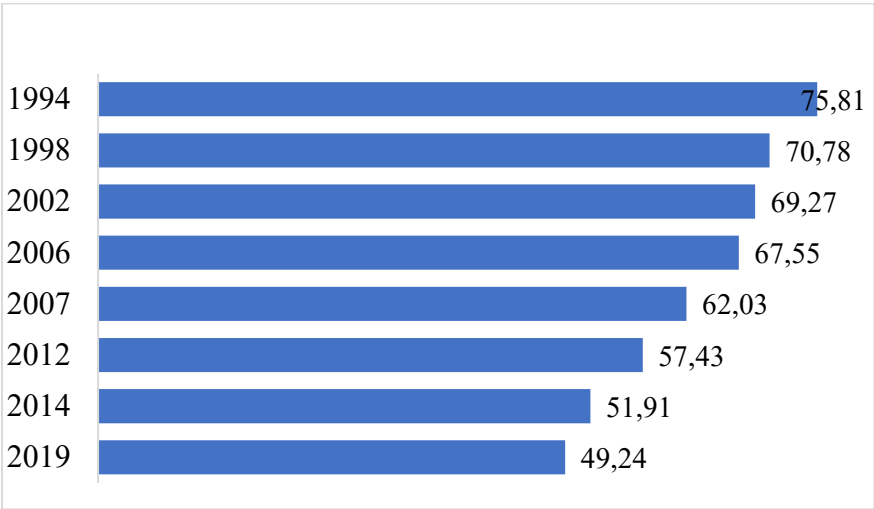
<sup>12</sup> Andriy Protsyuk, Andriy Horbal, *Historic turnout (2010-2019)*. See note above.



electorate than elections to the Verkhovna Rada and, especially, local elections. According to the Central Election Commission of Ukraine, from 1998 to 2019, the average voter turnout in presidential elections was 69.8%, while in elections to the Verkhovna Rada, it was only 58.9%.

Additionally, a relatively high positive correlation between voter turnout and trust in the Parliament has been identified. It is challenging to determine causation, but in the Ukrainian context, the legitimacy of the previous government and a high level of trust motivate citizens to participate in the electoral process (Krekhovets 2017).

Figure 6.17. - Ukraine: turnout in parliamentary elections



Source: Central Election Commission of Ukraine.

Regarding the elections of regional and local authorities, we can say that the system of formation of local and regional bodies has also come a long way. In 1998, the Law of Ukraine “On Elections of Local Council Deputies and Village, Township, and City Heads” was adopted. This law, among other things, provided for a mixed electoral system (both majoritarian and proportional representation) for the election of deputies to the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, regional, district, city, and district-in-city councils. In 2004, the Law of Ukraine provided elections for village and township councils, as well as village, township, and city heads through the majoritarian system; for city, district-in-city, district, regional councils, the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, and the councils of Kyiv and Sevastopol, proportional representation with closed lists was established.

As of today, according to the Electoral Code, elections for city mayors in communities with 75,000 or more voters are conducted under the majoritarian system. In village, township, and city councils, where the number of voters in the community is 10,000 or more, proportional representation with open lists is employed. Simultaneously, elections for the head of a village, township, or city council in communities with fewer than 75,000 voters are held using the majoritarian electoral system<sup>13</sup>.

The trend of a gradual decrease in voter turnout is also typical for local elections. In the local elections in Ukraine held in June 1994, 75.6% of voters participated. According to the Central Election Commission of Ukraine, since then turnout has been consistently declining. In the local elections of 1998, it was 70.8%, in 2002 – 69.3%, in 2006 – 67.6%, in 2010 – 48.7%, and in 2015 – 46.6%.

The sharp decline in voter turnout in 2010 is associated with the fact that previously local and regional elections were held simultaneously with the elections to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. In 2010, this combination did not occur, leading to a significant decrease in interest and a reduction in the level of electoral turnout. A similar situation was observed in the elections of 2015 and 2020. The recent local elections held on October 25, 2020, were marked by particularly low turnout, attracting the attention of sociologists and political analysts.

Sociological studies have identified some reasons for such low turnout. Specifically, 20% of respondents reported not voting due to health reasons. 19% did not participate in the elections because they do not reside at their registered address, and 15% were busy on the day of the elections. 14% of respondents did not know who to vote for, and elections were not interesting for 12%. Additionally, 10% of respondents did not go to the polls due to the coronavirus epidemic, 4% mentioned that there were no elections in their city or village, and another 4% were absent from the voter lists<sup>14</sup>.

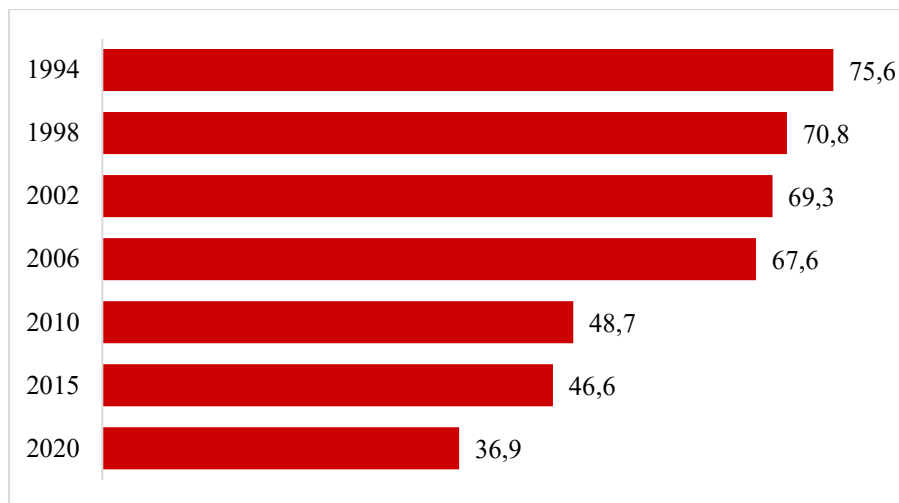
The trend of decreasing voter turnout may be associated with both a reduced interest in elections and an overestimated number of voters on electoral lists (the actual population size is unknown, as there has been no population census since 2001)<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Kateryna Zhemchuzhnikova, *History of elections: electoral systems in Ukraine*. See note above.

<sup>14</sup> *Results of electoral and behavioral research on election day*. Published on October 25, 2020. Available at: [https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/rezultaty\\_elektoralno-povedencheskogo\\_issledovaniya\\_v\\_den\\_vyborov.html?fbclid=IwAR1N5yZPO0cdC-smYPTpg2run7Zyy0EkG9I7eBZfhYbwnpaqxft-IPEID54](https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/rezultaty_elektoralno-povedencheskogo_issledovaniya_v_den_vyborov.html?fbclid=IwAR1N5yZPO0cdC-smYPTpg2run7Zyy0EkG9I7eBZfhYbwnpaqxft-IPEID54) (in Ukrainian)

<sup>15</sup> Andriy Protsyuk, Andriy Horbal, *Historic turnout (2010-2019)*. See note above.

Figure 6.18. - Ukraine: turnout in local elections



Source: Central Election Commission of Ukraine.

Among the factors influencing the voter turnout, some notable ones include:

- The type of election: this is the most significant factor determining the level of voter turnout. The highest turnout is observed in presidential elections, somewhat lower in parliamentary elections, and even lower in regional and local government elections. However, when elections to various government institutions are combined, the turnout is determined by the elections to the higher-level governing institution.
- Political situation in the country: The level of voter turnout is significantly higher in situations of acute political confrontation. Independent Ukraine has experienced at least three acute political crises, characterized by open street confrontations between political forces, known as “Maidan.” Typically, these intensifications lead to a substantial increase in electoral activity<sup>16</sup>.
- Type of electoral system: The majoritarian system tends to demonstrate a somewhat higher turnout compared to the proportional system. This is particularly noticeable during local government elections.
- Age of voters: The older population tends to participate in elections

<sup>16</sup> Svetlana Topalova, *Absenteeism as a problem: between activity and competence*. Published on February 17, 2020. Available at: [https://lb.ua/blog/svetlana\\_topalova/450092\\_absenteizm\\_yak\\_problema\\_mizh.html](https://lb.ua/blog/svetlana_topalova/450092_absenteizm_yak_problema_mizh.html) (in Ukrainian).

more frequently than the younger generation. This is a consistent trend rooted in post-Soviet traditions. The older generation typically approaches voting with greater responsibility. Traditionally, the youth is the least active electoral group during elections. In Ukraine, during the parliamentary elections in 2014, only one-third of the youth aged 18-24 cast their votes, while over 65% of Ukrainians aged 50-59 voted at the polling stations.

- Type of settlement: The rural population, on average, tends to be more politically active than the population in large cities. This factor is more evident within regions and is partially explained by the age of the population, which is higher in rural areas compared to cities.
- Ethnicity: Within regions, voter turnout among Ukrainians exceeds the turnout among ethnic minorities, especially those living compactly and weakly integrated into Ukrainian society (such as Romanians, Hungarians, Moldovans, Roma).
- Absence of electorate at the place of registration: Being abroad or lacking registration at the actual place of residence due to labour migration has become a significant factor affecting voter turnout. The absence of a population census after 2001, and possibly an overestimation of the electorate from election to election, is a potential factor that reinforces the trend of declining turnout over time.
- Administrative resource, which includes both supporting the activity of certain voter groups and direct falsification. In the early stages of forming Ukraine's electoral system, its importance was particularly significant, but in recent years, the significance of this factor has decreased.
- "Countryman" factor. The electoral system for the elections of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (parliament) combines a proportional and a majoritarian system. In majoritarian districts where a certain political leader was born, voters are generally more inclined to support him or her regardless of the results of his activities.
- Environmental conditions. Negative weather conditions can have a situational impact on the level of electoral turnout. A decrease in turnout in elections is also observed in mountainous areas and, to a lesser extent, in the Polissia region, where accessibility to polling stations may be an issue.
- Epidemiological situation. The COVID-19 situation has demonstrated how this factor can influence the level of electoral turnout. The local elections in Ukraine in 2020, amid epidemiological threats, showed a significant decrease in turnout.

## 6.12. Some concluding remarks

As we have seen, the national cases we have presented in this chapter appear diverse due to both voter turnout trends and the factors invoked by scholars to explain national dynamics. In our opinion, however, this does not contradict the results of the previous multivariate analysis. The gaze that embraces a whole forest is never the same as the one that looks at a single tree. For this reason, we will devote some final considerations to the analysis of three specific cases, those of Germany, Italy and Poland, which belong to different regions of Europe and show different trends in voter turnout.

From this perspective, we can see, first, that the original differences in voter turnout between Germany, Poland and Italy seem to be rooted in structural factors that have shaped the history of these countries. In Poland, the historical legacy of the communist regime influenced citizens' interaction with democracy. On the other hand, Germany and Italy share the legacy of fascist regimes. Perhaps even more important are the socio-economic factors, especially when considered from a territorial perspective. In Poland, the urban-rural divide has been influential in shaping voting behaviour, while regional disparities in economic development are extremely important in generating differences in turnout in both Germany (the East-West divide) and Italy (the North-South divide).

Recently, voter turnout in Germany, Poland and Italy has decreased due to several factors. These include, firstly, a generational trend: younger generations, born under favourable economic conditions, show lower participation rates. Differences in education also have a significant impact on turnout, with younger and less educated people showing lower participation. This also means that growing inequality, economic crises and unemployment may produce lower voter turnout, especially in poor households.

Other factors concern the political arena and its changes over time. In Germany as well as in Poland and Italy, there has been a decline in party identification and a growing feeling of distrust towards politics. The 'traditional' parties are increasingly seen as distant from citizens and their needs. This political discontent plays a role in the decline in voter turnout, as many non-voters express dissatisfaction with representative democracy, disinterest in politics and no longer see participation in voting as a civic duty. In turn, declining turnout has led to reforms to encourage voting participation, but so far without much success. On the other hand, new political actors have appeared that have led to some recovery in turnout, at the cost of increasing polarisation.

# Conclusions

by *Domenico Maddaloni*\*

This book investigates the trends in voter turnout in Europe and the differences in electoral participation among European countries between the 1990s and the 2020s. There is a general trend of declining voter turnout in European countries, which develops from different starting points and can be considered much more relevant for elections to national parliaments than for European elections (see chapters 2 and 6). In general, Eastern European countries, which joined the European Union most recently, show the lowest levels of turnout. In contrast, the sharpest decline in voter participation can be found in some Southern European countries. Moreover, the trend of declining turnout has been partially reversed recently. Pending further research on this issue, we advance the hypothesis that this may be due to the rise of populist movements and polarised politics (Belanger 2017; Wilford 2017). These emerging parties manage to mobilise those sectors of the electorate that feel most alienated from politics, in particular because they distrust the ability of European institutions, national governments and traditional parties to meet their needs. To this it should be added that the decline in electoral turnout may not be linked to a crisis in the legitimacy of democratic regimes, but to a change in the structure of participation opportunities (Norris 2022: 134). In other words, these trends could also be linked to the emergence of new forms of civic engagement and political activism, including participation in protest movements (see also Norris 2002: 215-223). In this perspective, political trust, or rather the lack of trust towards well-identified political actors, would become a major factor in explaining the recent evolution of electoral turnout in European countries, including the recent growth in electoral volatility.

The book examined the factors and processes behind national differences in voter turnout. The literature review allowed us to identify some variables

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of great importance in the analysis of electoral behaviour, as well as a theoretical model that defines the connections between these variables and turnout (see chapters 3 and 4). Although still not widely recognised in the literature, trust can play a role in turnout analysis – both social or generalised trust, which may be regarded as an element of societal culture at the origin of the causal chain leading to political participation (Putnam 1993, 2000), and political or institutional trust, which is instead regarded as an intervening variable at the final stage of this process (Uslaner 2018; Norris 2022). However, the influence of trust on political participation can be mediated by many other factors, such as the level of economic and social development, the extent of inequalities, the duration of democracy, or the system of formal and informal rules governing electoral competition between parties.

We can conclude these final considerations by recalling the questions we asked in the outline of the book: (1) *Is there an association between social trust and/or political trust and voter turnout?* (2) *Does this association hold for both EP and NP elections?* (3) *Is the effect of trust moderated by contextual and institutional factors?*

The results of the multivariate analysis performed using the theoretical model provided an answer to these questions (see chapter 5). There is indeed a positive relationship between social or generalised trust and political participation, considering turnout in national elections. In contrast, the relationship between the two variables is reversed when considering European parliamentary elections. Perhaps the capacity for civic engagement and political mobilisation associated with social trust is of little or no relevance for elections that are mainly considered second-order and related to institutions that may still be perceived as of little or no relevance to citizens' lives. Indeed, this divergence may require further investigation.

Quite the opposite results are found regarding political trust. The influence of political trust on turnout in national elections is rather limited, but it is higher and positive when considering European elections. Our hypothesis here is that citizens of European countries may be motivated to vote in national elections because they may be driven mainly by considerations other than loyalty to the institutional system, the government, or political parties. Therefore, they could be mainly motivated by material interests or the defence of a collective identity, as in the case of immigration policy (Sotiropoulos et al. 2023). On the contrary, voting in European elections would be perceived more as a behaviour based on trust in the European Union, not or less motivated by other material or moral considerations. Here too, further research is required.

The third question mentioned above requires some final considerations.

The conducted multivariate analysis showed that the strength of the relationship between the two types of trust and voter turnout can change when controlling for certain variables. They therefore certainly play a role in the causal chain that produces distinct levels of voter turnout. Furthermore, the analysis highlighted the prominent role of differences in levels of internal inequality in explaining differences in voting behaviour across European countries. The resulting policy indication is that policies aimed at reducing income inequality may have the side effect of increasing electoral participation. “People usually expressed greater political trust in more open societies with higher economic growth and development, economic equality, education, and longevity, as well as lower rates of unemployment, inflation, and insecurity” (Norris 2022: 152). The same can be said as regards turnout in European democracies.





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The relationship between trust toward institutions and political actors and citizen participation in democratic life is undoubtedly a topic of great relevance in contemporary social and political research. This book stems from the experience accumulated on this issue as part of the Horizon *TRUEDEM – Trust in European Democracies* research. More specifically, it allows us to present the results we have obtained regarding voter turnout, one of the most critical topics in research on representative democracies since it is considered an indicator of the legitimacy of political institutions. More specifically, our book aims to outline the factors at stake when voter turnout is addressed in social and political research, with a particular reference to social and political trust. We focus on the role played by political and institutional trust on one side, and social or generalized trust on the other, in affecting voter turnout trends and differences among the EU countries. The results obtained from the research will enable us to draw some conclusions both on the scientific level and on the level of policies geared toward improving the democratic life of European countries. While it may be helpful to emphasize the relevance of trust among the causes of voter turnout and electoral behavior in general, it seems to us also useful to point out that, based on this, we can design policies for reforming political processes in European democratic regimes.

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