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LOW VOTER TURNOUT: A SYMPTOM OF DEMOCRATIC DISCONTENT OR A DEEPER SYSTEMIC FAILURE?

Abstract

The journey toward universal and equal suffrage, achieved primarily in the second half of the XX century, was a monumental step in shaping modern democratic societies. It marked the moment when voting became a right for all, not just a privilege for a few. Yet, as this right became universal in democratic societies, an unexpected trend began to unfold. Democracies worldwide have started to experience a troubling and persistent decline in voter turnout. Global electoral participation, which stood at 78.85% in 1946, has now diminished to 61.37%. The situation is even more alarming in Europe, where turnout has dropped from 88% in 1946 to an average of 61% in 2024. This trend is deeply concerning, taking into consideration that democracy cannot function properly without citizens' involvement. Without a doubt, low turnout poses a danger to democracy as it undermines legitimacy of the political institutions, diminishes the representativeness and accountability of political leaders and reflects growing civic apathy and dissatisfaction with the political process. Furthermore, since political systems often respond more to those who vote, low turnout allows certain groups to wield disproportionate influence over elections and policy, often at the expense of the broader public interest. Such a state is also a signal of inequality in political participation, further marginalizing already disadvantaged groups. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine the underlying causes of declining voter turnout, as well as propose strategies and measures to increase voter turnout in democratic societies.

Key words: *politics, political system, democracy, elections, voter turnout, political participation, voter apathy.*

I.   Introduction

"The ballot is stronger than a bullet" is a famous quote by American President Abraham Lincoln, emphasizing the importance of elections in a democratic society. It is through this powerful tool that citizens, by counting ballots


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rather than heads, determine who will govern and make decisions on their behalf. Elections not only grant legitimacy to rulers but also allow citizens to shape the direction of society. If citizens are dissatisfied with the way things are progressing, they have the opportunity to remove those in power. In democratic societies, this process occurs peacefully without violence through elections, something that cannot be said for other types of regimes.

However, it should be noted that even in democratic societies, the evolution of elections and suffrage has not been easy. The struggle for universal, equal, secret and direct suffrage has been one of the most challenging battles within democracies. For example, even in the United Kingdom, it took nearly a century, from the start of electoral reforms in 1832, to achieve universal, equal, secret and direct suffrage. In fact, this form of suffrage is a relatively modern category, becoming a reality in most democratic societies only in the second half of the XX century.

As voting rights became a true right rather than a privilege, an unexpected trend began to unfold. Democracies worldwide have started to experience a troubling and persistent decline in voter turnout.
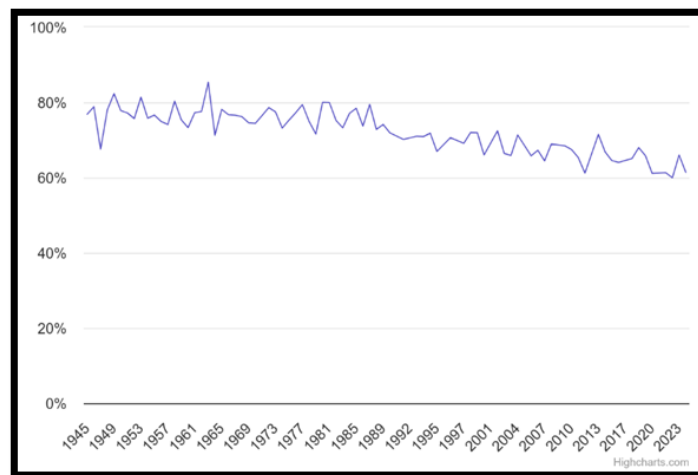

Picture No. 1: Global voter turnout (1946-2024)[1]

Data show that global electoral participation, which stood at 78.85% in 1946, has now diminished to 61.37%. Notably, the last time voter turnout exceeded 80% was in the 1960s. Even more striking is that this decline became particularly evident after the fall of the Berlin Wall, or to be more precise in a period widely regarded as a victory of democracy over undemocratic systems.

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[1] "Voter Turnout Database", International IDEA, accessed October 8, 2024, https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database

Picture No. 2: Voter turnout in Europe (1946-2024)[2]
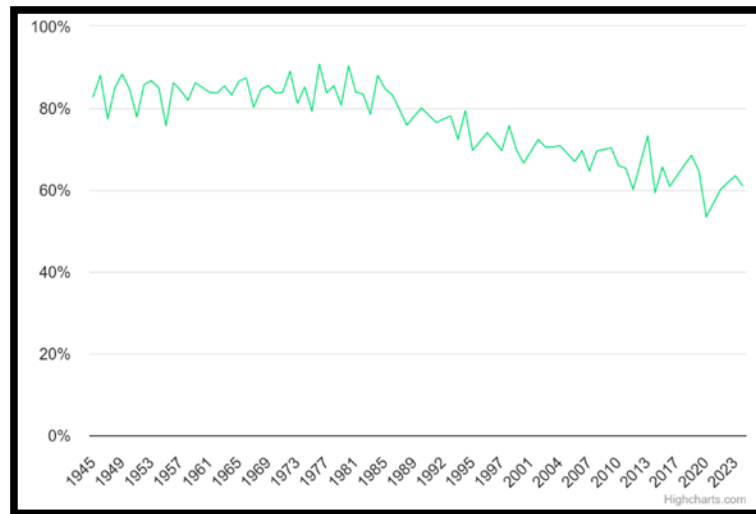
This trend is also evident when analyzing voter turnout data from Europe. In a period when democracy triumphed over communism in Europe, rather than seeing an increase in voter turnout, it began to decline. This decline becomes even more concerning when considering the magnitude of the drop in voter participation. Specifically, in Europe, voter turnout has decreased from 88% in 1946 to an average of 61% in 2024. This represents a decrease of 27% from 1946 to 2024.

Considering that elections are a key element of democracy's functioning, this trend is deeply concerning and poses a significant threat to democratic systems. It is a significant threat because it endangers and undermines the main pillars of one democratic society.

II.   The Danger of Low Voter Turnout to Democracy

Low voter turnout poses several threats to democracy. The most common concern is its impact on the legitimacy of elected officials and unequal representation. However, voter turnout also serves as a key indicator of the overall health of democracy in a society. Therefore, low turnout undermines democracy on several levels.

First and foremost, low voter turnout undermines legitimacy on multiple levels. Low or declining voter turnout is so often perceived as a signal of growing dissatisfaction with a regime and, as such, understood as a threat to democracy.[3] Actually, low turnout signals a systemic legitimacy crisis, indicating that citizens

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[2] "Voter Turnout Database", International IDEA, accessed October 8, 2024, https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database

[3] Mikolaj Czesnik, "Voter Turnout and Democratic Legitimacy in Central Eastern Europe," *Polish Sociological Review* 156, No. 4 (2006): 453.

have lost trust in the system. This distrust can escalate into widespread discontent, potentially leading to protests, riots and even the collapse of democracy. Historically, military coups that suspend democracy and human rights have frequently occurred in societies experiencing such crises. The military is likely to intervene in politics only when it senses that the legitimacy of the existing institutions and the ruling elite is challenged.[4] It is also worth noting that in non-democratic systems abstaining is one of the most common and well-known ways of delegitimizing a regime.[5] The rise in abstention within democratic societies in recent decades raises concerns that similar tactics are now being employed in these contexts as well. Furthermore, low voter turnout taints the legitimacy of elected officials. Voting turnout rates (the number of people who exercise their right to vote in a given election) serve to legitimize elected officials and public policies.[6] A high voter turnout and a decisive victory signal strong public support, granting the winner greater legitimacy and freedom to implement promised policies. Conversely, low turnout undermines the perceived legitimacy of elected politicians, as decisions affecting an entire population are made by a small fraction of voters. This reality aligns more with aristocracy or oligarchy than with democracy, which, by definition, means 'rule of the people' (demos – people, kratein – rule). Democracy is the only form of government that depends on the active participation and consent of its citizens. Without their engagement, it cannot function. That is why a participatory electorate is crucial for the functioning of democracy.[7]

Second, democratic societies are built on the principle that elected representatives should reflect and represent the will and interests of the citizens. However, low tournout makes the operation of electoral democracy unequal: some voices are heard and others are silent.[8] When low voter turnout rates are unequally distributed among members of the electorate, election results are not representative of society.[9] This indicates that political institutions are becoming unrepresentative and failing to reflect the true composition of society, meaning that not all citizens are being represented. This concern grows when we consider which groups of citizen's vote and which do not, often not as exceptions, but as the rule. Numerous studies show that gender, along with age, education and social class, are one of the standard demographic and social characteristics used to predict levels of civic

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[4] Heywood, *Politics: Fifth Edition*, 128.

[5] Czesnik, "Voter Turnout and Democratic Legitimacy," 449.

[6] Nienke Derksen et. Al, "Increasing Youth Voter Turnout," 3, Accessed January 10, 2025, https://www.lse.ac.uk/PBS/assets/documents/Increasing-Youth-Voter-Turnout.pdf

[7] Lawrence Ezrow and Werner Krause, "Voter Turnout Decline and Party Responsiveness," *British Journal of Political Science* 53, No. 1 (2023): 85.

[8] Georg Lutz and Michael Marsh, "Introduction: Consequences of low turnout," *Electoral Studies* 26, (2007): 539.

[9] Derksen et. Al, "Increasing Youth Voter Turnout," 12.

engagement, political activism and electoral turnout.[10] According to these studies, men, older individuals, wealthier citizens and those with higher education are more likely to vote, while younger, lower-income, or marginalized groups are less likely to participate. Therefore, low voter turnout also means unequal and socio-economically biased turnout.[11] It is systematically biased in favor of privileged citizens (those with better education, higher incomes, and greater wealth) and it is biased against less privileged citizens.[12]

This leads to the conclusion that low voter turnout contributes to unfair outcomes. Unequal participation means unequal influence. Groups that choose not to vote lose their power to influence election results. Politicians are naturally more likely to focus on the promises, issues and interests of those who vote, rather than those who abstain. This creates a vicious cycle in which the interests of privileged groups are prioritized, while marginalized groups face further neglect because their concerns are ignored by the political elite. Such an unfair outcome is compounded by the fact that low turnout should lead to a bias against left wing parties and left wing policies in consequence.[13] Studies show a direct link between turnout and support for left parties with the left share of vote went up by almost one-third of a percentage point for every percentage point increase in turnout.[14]

Third, in addition to ensuring representativeness and allowing that governmental policy reflects the demands of the public, elections also serve public to hold elected representatives accountable.[15] The only really effective weapon of popular control in a democratic regime is the capacity of the electorate to throw a party from power.[16] In this sense, citizens are the ones who hold the government accountable because politicians know that if they fail to remain accountable and committed to the public, they will lose the next election and end up in opposition. However, low turnout diminishes this control, as the pressure on elected official's decreases. When voter turnout is low, it allows irresponsible politicians to remain in power because citizens who are dissatisfied with the government choose to stay home instead of expressing their discontent at the polls. As the saying goes, bad officials are elected by good citizens who do not vote.

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[10] Pintor et. Al, *Voter Turnout Since 1945*, 96.

[11] Arend Lijphart, "The Problem of Low and Unequal Voter Turnout – and What We Can Do About It," *Reihe Politikwissenschaft / Institut für Höhere Studien, Abt. Politikwissenschaft* 54 (1998): 3.

[12] Lijphart, "The Problem of Low and Unequal Voter Turnout," 1-2.

[13] Lutz and Marsh, "Introduction: Consequences of low turnout," 540.

[14] Lijphart, "The Problem of Low and Unequal Voter Turnout," 1-2.

[15] Derksen et. Al, "Increasing Youth Voter Turnout," 3.

[16] Martin Rosema, "Low turnout: Threat to democracy or blessing in disguise? Consequences of citizens' varying tendencies to vote," *Electoral Studies* 26, (2007): 617.

This brings us to the final point. Authoritarians thrive on voter apathy.[17] Classic authoritarian regimes always seek to demobilize and passivize the masses.[18] Additionally, data suggests that authoritarian and populist leaders in hybrid regimes are more likely to stay in power when voter turnout is lower.[19] We must also consider that when citizens do not trust the electoral process, they often lose faith in democracy itself.[20] When people lose faith in the democratic system, they may become more open to leaders who promise radical or authoritarian solutions, viewing them as a "fix" for a broken system. In modern times people are often attracted to authoritarian ideas because they are bothered by complexity.[21]As a result they seek solutions in new political language that makes them feel safer and more secure.[22] Political language often associated with populist and authoritarian leaders, leaders who offer easy answers to difficult questions.

All of this indicates that low voter turnout poses a significant danger to democracy, and that this issue must be addressed seriously. However, in order to address the issue seriously, the main reasons for low voter turnout must first be identified.

III.   Main Reasons for the Decline in Voter Turnout in Democratic Societies

The decline in voter turnout in recent decades has been widely analyzed in theory. Several reasons are commonly cited for this trend, with the following being the most prominent.

Firstly, the low turnout can be attributed to political disillusionment and apathy. Many voters feel alienated from traditional political processes and are not convinced their participation can make a difference.[23] There is a feeling that citizens are too far from the places where decisions are taken and that political actors lack capacity to 'deliver the goods' by affecting people's lives and to bring about meaningful economic and social change.[24] The prevailing attitude is that elections

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[17] Giorgi Meladze and Srdja Popovic, "How to Defend the Vote from Authoritarians" accessed January 15, 2025,   https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-to-defend-the-vote-from-authoritarians/

[18] Рената Дескоска, Јелена Трајковска – Христовска и Марко Кртолица, *Политички систем* (Скопје: Фондација Фридрих Еберт, 2023), 150.

[19] Giorgi Meladze and Srdja Popovic, "How to Defend the Vote from Authoritarians".

[20] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 196.

[21] Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020), 106.

[22] Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 106.

[23] Rafael López Pintor et. Al, *Voter Turnout Since 1945 A Global Report* (Halmstad: Bulls Tryckeri, 2002), 113.

[24] Andrew Heywood, *Politics: Fifth Edition* (London: Macmillan Education Limited, 2019), 465.

won't lead to dramatic changes and that anyone who comes to power will be unable and unwilling to make real changes.

Change seems impossible because the prevailing view is that politicians live in a 'bubble', divorced from the cares and concerns of 'ordinary' people.[25] This gap between those who govern and those being governed seems to be getting wider and appears to be a fundamental reason for low participation.[26] The gap stems from the dissapoitnment and perception that political elites are 'out of touch,' 'privileged,' 'corrupt,' or 'self-serving.'[27] Additionally, the belief that politics is a dirty field filled with manipulation, lies, crime, and abuse contributes to the rise of anti-politics. As a result, instead of being a noble pursuit that should contribute to a better society, politics is viewed as a distant, undesirable and corrupt profession. It should be also noted that the decline in voter turnout in Europe is also linked to widespread disappointment with the democratization processes in post-communist countries. After the fall of communism, there was initially great euphoria about building democracy in post-coomunist countries in Euope. Still, this euphoria, quickly turned to disillusionment as political and economic reforms brought unexpected hardship.[28] Therefore, the process of transition has eroded the democratic euphoria.

Second, the decline in voter turnout coincides with the rise of so-called catch-all parties. These parties downplay their ideological backgrounds in order to appeal to a broad range of voters. Whereas elections once offered voters a choice between parties and policy programmes that had a distinctively left-wing or right-wing character, they came to be dominated by competition between centre-left and centre-right parties, with areas of disagreement being reduced, very much, to matters of detail or emphasis.[29] In this context, the slogan 'they are all the same' emerged, suggesting that voting has little meaning because, in the end, no matter who wins, the same policies will be implemented.

Third, despite the enormous progress in technology in recent decades, there has been little change in the way we vote. Paper-based voting in a controlled environment with in-person verification remains the primary, and often the only, method of voting. The fear that alternative voting methods might threaten the integrity and credibility of the electoral process has led societies to remain rigid on this issue. However, this rigidity can contribute to certain groups opting out of voting, as they feel compelled to devote part of their day to the process. Those who

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[25] Heywood, *Politics: Fifth Edition*, 465.

[26] Pintor et. Al, *Voter Turnout Since 1945*, 113.

[27] Heywood, *Politics: Fifth Edition*, 461-462.

[28] Kiran Auerbach and Bilyana Petrova, "Dissatisfaction drives democratic scepticism in Eastern Europe," accessed December 8, 2024, https://theloop.ecpr.eu/dissatisfaction-drives-democratic-scepticism-in-eastern-europe/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[29] Heywood, *Politics: Fifth Edition*, 463.

choose to not vote often cite the inconvenience of voting as the main motivation behind their abstention.[30]

This brings us to the next point - Is sacrificing 30 minutes on election day, which typically occurs once every few years, too great a price for citizens? The answer lies in the fact that we live in an era of the erosion of levels of social capital that has led to a rise in individualism and a faltering sense of civic and political duty.[31] As a result, the past few decades have not only seen a decline in voter turnout but also a decrease in political party membership, as well as participation in civil society and community activities. This trend is particularly evident among younger generations. A survey conducted in the USA found that only 30% of those aged 18 to 29 view voting as a duty, compared to 58% of those aged 65 and over.[32] This suggests that a generation who is relatively unlikely to see voting as an important civic responsibility is one who may well have many of its members lost as voters for the rest of its duration.[33]

All this indicates that low voter turnout is a systematic problem, not an incidental occurrence. Therefore, systematic and thorough solutions are needed to address the issue of low turnout in democratic societies.

IV.   Solutions and Measures to Increase Voter Turnout in Democratic Societies

There are many solutions and measures that can be implemented to increase voter turnout in democratic societies. One thing is clear: unless swift action is taken, the problems of low and unequal turnout can be expected to get worse, rather than better, in future.[34] In this context, we will explore in detail the solutions and measures that can help increase voter turnout.

Initially, the quickest and simplest solution to low voter turnout is the introduction of compulsory voting. In theory very often we can notice the argument that compulsory voting is by far the most effective means for raising voter turnout.[35] This is the case because it transforms voting from a mere right into a duty. Under such conditions, citizens who choose not to vote would face appropriate sanctions, effectively compelling participation. As a result, the issue of low turnout would likely be resolved in the very first election after compulsory voting is implemented.

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[30] Joshua Townsley et al., "Who Votes by Post? Understanding the Drivers of Postal Voting in the 2019 British General Election," *Parliamentary Affairs* 76, (2023): 46.

[31] Heywood, *Politics: Fifth Edition*, 467.

[32] Martin P. Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People? Completely Updated Through the 2018 Election: Fifth Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 126.

[33] Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?*, 134.

[34] Annabelle Lever,"Compulsory Voting: a Critical Perspective," *British Journal of Political Science* 40, No. 4 (2010): 900.

[35] Lisa Hill,"On the justifiability of Compulsory Voting: Reply to Lever," *British Journal of Political Science* 3 (2010): 918.

The link between turnout and compulsory voting becomes evident when comparing voter participation in countries where voting is purely a right versus those where it is both a right and a duty. According to IDEA data,[36] the average voter turnout in countries without compulsory voting is 68%, whereas in countries with strict enforcement of compulsory voting, the average turnout rises to 86%, which makes a striking 18% difference. Interestingly, even in countries where voting is compulsory but sanctions are either nonexistent or not enforced, turnout remains higher than in countries without compulsory voting. In such cases, the average turnout stands at 74%, indicating that the mere obligation to vote encourages greater participation, even without the threat of sanctions. The effectiveness of compulsory voting is particularly clear in Belgium, where the lowest voter turnout in the past 70 years was 87%, and in Australia, where it has never fallen below 89%. Some theorists suggest that if Belgium abolished compulsory voting, turnout would drop to between 60% and 70%.[37] This fact further reinforce the connection between compulsary voting and higher electoral participation.

Second, introducing alternative voting methods that simplify the voting process can help increase election turnout. These include single or multiple voting days, elections taking place on rest or working days, the availability of voting technologies, the proximity of polling stations and alternative voting procedures, such as advance voting, postal voting or proxy voting.[38] In particular, the expansion of postal voting on demand has been driven largely by a desire to increase turnout in elections.[39] The liberalisation of postal voting has made it possible for a much larger portion of the electorate to reduce the costs involved in participating.[40] This increased flexibility has had a clear impact on voter turnout. For example, data from Switzerland suggest that the introduction of the postal vote in Switzerland has visibly (and statistically signifi cantly) contributed to the increase in the turnout at general elections and referenda (an average increase of 10%).[41] Theoretical evidence also indicates that even the mere existence of mail and absentee voting, early voting, or proxy voting in a given country can boost turnout compared to countries without those same mechanisms.[42] These findings also support arguments

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[36] Pintor et. Al, *Voter Turnout Since 1945*, 110.

[37] Marc Hooghe and Koen Pelleriaux,"Compulsory Voting in Belgium: an Application of the Lijphart Thesis," *Electoral Studies* 4 (1998): 420.

[38] Abdurashid Solijonov, *Voter Turnout Trends around the World* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2016), 38.

[39] Townsley et al., "Who Votes by Post?," 45.

[40] Townsley et al., "Who Votes by Post?," 45.

[41] Magdalena Musiał-Karg,"Alternative Voting Methods Th rough the Example of Postal Voting and E-Voting in Switzerland," *Białostockie Studia Prawnicze* 20 (2016): 18.

[42] Robert Fenton, "Convenience Voting Methods and Effects on Voter Turnout: 2004-2018", 8, accessed January 8, 2025,

in favor of implementing online voting, which has the potential to further increase participation.[43] Online voting could be particularly beneficial for young voters who are accustomed to technology, individuals with busy work schedules, as well as citizens living abroad, all of whom may otherwise face obstacles to voting.

It has already been noted that countries are generally hesitant to introduce alternative voting methods due to concerns about electoral manipulation that could undermine the credibility of the entire process. However, the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated that countries it may also rely on alternative voting methods to complement or even replace in-person voting.[44] The pandemic forced countries to take bolder steps and explore the possibility of implementing such methods. Perhaps the ongoing voter turnout crisis should prompt a similar response in democratic societies. Experience from the field suggests that when alternative voting methods are implemented carefully and with dedication, they do not pose a threat to electoral integrity.

Third, the type of electoral model also plays a significant role in voter turnout. Turnout is usually higher at elections in counties with proportional electoral model than in countries without.[45] In addition, higher turnout has been noticed in proportional electoral systems where preferential voting is allowed and where open electoral lists are being used rather than in proportional electoral models in which the electoral lists are closed.[46] This trend is entirely expected. In proportional electoral models the electors have the feeling that their vote at the end of the electoral process will not be lost and that it will be represented in the parliament. Moreover, where there is a possibility for preferential voting, the elector has the feeling that they directly influence and decide who will be the elected through the possibility for ranking the nominated candidates. All this makes the ordinary elector feel that their vote has weight and that it truly has a meaning and makes changes in the system. Taking that into consideration, the voters will be more interested to give their vote on the day of the elections. Therefore, in the fight against low turnout, countries should consider adopting electoral models that enhance voter confidence by ensuring that every vote truly counts and is valued.

Fourth, lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 could help combat low voter turnout. Current data suggests that while the decline in voter turn out is evident this

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https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/mpampp_etds/article/1402/&path_info=Convenience_Voting_Methods_and_Effects_on_Voter_Turnout___2004_2018.pdf

[43] Peter Wolf, Rushdi Nackerdien and Domenico Tuccinardi, Introducing Electronic Voting: Essential Considerations (Stockholm: International IDEA and Bulls Graphics, 2011), 8.

[44] Christina Binder and Adam Drnovsky, "Elections in times of the Covid-19 pandemic: an international human rights perspective with a specific focus on vulnerable groups," *Cross-cultural Human Rights Review* 2, No. 2 (2020): 79.

[45] Simon Hix , Ron Johnson and Iain McLean, *Choosing an Electoral System*, (London: British Academy (Policy Centre), 2010), 16.

[46] Hix , Johnson and McLean, *Choosing an Electoral System*, 16.

decline in turnout has been especially pronounced among the young.[47] This is concerning for several reasons. First, it highlights that the issue of low voter turnout disproportionately affects young people and their interests. Second, increasing number of scholars have argued that the very act of voting is self-reinforcing and that voting should therefore be seen as a habit.[48] This mean that a young person's decision not to vote now will likely shape their political behavior well into adulthood. Therefore, this habit must be changed to prevent the voter turnout problem from worsening, as the number of habitual non-voters will continue to grow over time. Lowering the voting age to 16 is one way to change this pattern. Why? Because those voting for the first time after coming of age could form a habit of either voting or abstaining[49] and once such a habit is formed, data shows that it is hardly ever subject to change.[50] This is why the first vote is crucial in shaping long-term voting behavior, and studies indicate that 16-year-olds are in a more favorable environment for voting than 18-year-olds. At 18, many young people leave home to study in different cities, increasing the likelihood that they will be away from their polling station on election day and therefore less likely to vote in their first election. This is how a cycle of non-voting begins, creating a habit that often persists throughout their lives.

On the other hand, young people under 18 are more likely to live at home with their families and to still attend school, leading to potentially different socialisation effects at the time of their first election.[51] It may be easier to instil a habit of voting among those who are still in school and live at home,[52] as they are more likely to be present at their polling station on election day. Additionally, being surrounded by an environment filled with election related discussions, through family, school and their social circles, will encourage them to participate in their first election. This will help establish a habit of voting rather than abstaining. Thus, beyond ensuring better representation of youth interests, lowering the voting age could also increase the number of citizens who see participation in elections as a fundamental part of democratic society. Additionally, once a person has voted, they have gained knowledge about how to vote and obtained at least some political information, and they have probably received some positive reinforcement from friends, family, or co-workers.[53] This means that young people will not only have a direct opportunity to learn how to vote but will also become more engaged

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[47] Richard Öhrvall," Growing into Voting Election Turnout among Young People and Habit Formation (PhD diss., Linköping University, 2018), 2.
[48] Öhrvall," Growing into Voting Election," 2.
[49] Öhrvall," Growing into Voting Election," 2.
[50] Czesnik, "Voter Turnout and Democratic Legitimacy," 458.
[51] Markus Wagner, David Johann and Sylvia Kritzinger,"Voting at 16: Turnout and the quality of vote choice," *Electoral Studies* 31, (2012): 374.
[52] Wagner, Johann and Kritzinger,"Voting at 16," 381.
[53] Öhrvall," Growing into Voting Election," 14.

with political parties, candidates, policies and important issues as they prepare to make voting decisions. In fact, allowing voting at 16 will contribute to the political education of young people.

This brings us to another important measure - strengthening civic education. Enhancing civic education in schools is crucial for fostering a sense of civic duty and ensuring that future generations understand the importance of voting and political participation. Research has documented the direct link between higher levels of civic education and increased voter turnout rates.[54] The sense of empowerment that comes from being informed about one's civic rights and responsibilities can inspire individuals to take action, thereby enhancing voter turnout.[55] Such political education is especially important for marginalized groups. For example, an increase in the length and amount of social science education in Swedish vocational training programmes led to a more equal turnout, by increasing the likelihood to vote among individuals from families with low socio-economic status.[56]

The final factor to consider is the need to reintroduce ideology into the political arena. Politics without ideology becomes nothing more than a ruthless struggle for power. The decline in voter turnout has coincided with the rise of so-called catch-all parties, which have sacrificed their ideological basis in pursuit of votes. As parties of both the left and the right became detached from their ideological roots, they lost their sense of purpose and direction, and failed to provide members and supporters alike with a basis for emotional attachment.[57] Additionally, by abandoning both major issues and 'big' choices, electoral battles became less gripping and less meaningful. [58]This is why it is crucial to restore ideological values in politics. Voters must feel that elections matter and that they are making a real choice between distinct policies. Citizens are more likely to go to the polls if they think the election is important, and the perception of importance is clearly related to how much people believe a country would change depending on who is elected.[59] In this regard, the rise of radical-right parties over the past decade has contributed to an increase in voter turnout in democratic societies. These parties have fueled political polarization, which, while having several negative effects on

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[54] Diana Owen, "The Influence of Civic Education on Electoral Engagement and Voting," 5, accessed January 12, 2025,
https://www.civiced.org/images/stories/Resources/PapersandSpeeches/Owen_2011.pdf
[55] Thelma Chansa Chanda et, Al. "The Influence of Civic Education on Electoral Engagement and Voting," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 9, No. 8 (2024): 4484
[56] Öhrvall," Growing into Voting Election," 17.
[57] Heywood, *Politics: Fifth Edition*, 463.
[58] Heywood, Politics: Fifth Edition, 463.
[59] Eelco Harteveld and Markus Wagner,"Does affective polarisation increase turnout? Evidence from Germany, The Netherlands and Spain," West European Politics 46, No. 4 (2023): 735.

democracy, has also led to higher overall voter participation. A higher polarization leads to higher overall voter turnout, implying that when political parties and their policies are more polarized, voters are more motivated to participate in the election.[60] Studies show that ideological polarization polarisation (alsoknown as programmatic polarisation) tends to lead to higher levels of turnout.[61] Recent studies also have found that affective polarisation has a large effect on turnout.[62] Affective polarization, which stems from heightened emotions and animosity between political groups, has been fueled by the rise of the radical right, which mobilizes large numbers of voters as an alternative to moderate parties. At the same time, it also drives voter mobilization for moderate parties, as many citizens fear that power could fall into the hands of populist radical-right politicians.

V.   Conclusion

Over the last few decades, voter turnout in democratic societies has been declining. Since elections are crucial to the functioning of democracy, this trend has understandably raised concerns among academics. Low voter turnout can undermine legitimacy, weaken representation, lead to unfair outcomes, reduce accountability and increase the risk of authoritarian and populist politicians.

As a result, political theory in recent decades has focused heavily on identifying the causes of declining voter participation. Some of the most commonly cited reasons include political disillusionment, citizen apathy, disappointment with politics and politicians, the rise of catch-all parties, overly bureaucratic voting procedures, a decline in civic education and engagement and generational turnover.

To address this issue, democratic societies must take serious measures to boost voter turnout. Possible solutions include introducing compulsory voting, improving voting accessibility, implementing electoral reforms, lowering the voting age to 16, strengthening civic education and reintroducing ideology into the political arena. All of these measures are well known and have been long debated. However, very little has been implemented so far. Some countries have already adopted certain measures to increase voter participation, while others remain hesitant, continuing to analyze the issue without taking action. One thing is certain: the problem of low voter turnout is urgent and the time to increase political participation is now. The strength of democracy lies in the voices of its people and when those voices fall silent, the very foundation of democracy is threatened. Without urgent action, the long-term decline in voter turnout could be fatal for

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[60] Mariam Arzumanyan," Exploring voter turnout dynamics in polarized elections: A group-rule utilitarian framework," *Rationality and Society* (2024): 3.

[61] Harteveld and Wagner,"Does affective polarisation increase turnout?," 735.

[62] Harteveld and Wagner,"Does affective polarisation increase turnout?," 737.

democracy. And let's not forget that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

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