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# Political Trust vs. Turnout in Modern Democracies

**Abstract:** The article analyzes the relations between political trust – one of the most important values in the life of political communities – and election-related behaviors in the narrow meaning of voting. Researchers investigate the phenomenon of decreasing turnout as one of the expressions of democratic crisis. When studying such a complex problem, it is essential to search for multi-theme causes which might be helpful in understanding the topic and possibly finding a solution for it. The author of this article, while assuming the correctness of analyzes conducted thus far, which indicate that the problem lies in weaker attachment to political parties, less interest in politics and inadequate tools, raises questions whether the decreasing turnout in individual states may be related to the level of trust that citizens put in political institutions and whether there is a relation between these both indicators. In order to answer these questions, the author employs a quantitative analysis of data which derive from reports containing percentage levels of political trust and turnout in the elections, a comparative analysis, as well as an overview of literature on the subject.

**Keywords:** *e-democracy, general election, general trust, political trust, voters' turnout*

## Introduction

Among many processes and changes characterizing the contemporary democracy, one of the most important problems formulating the democratic crisis is lower and lower turnout in the election, arguably treated as the most basic democratic process. There is a lot of analyzes of the elections from recent years concentrated mainly on turnout and the level of support for individual political parties. Those researchers investigate the subject of decreasing percentage of participation in the elections as, even though the number of states that organize democratic general elections is constantly increasing, this does not translate into higher citizens' participation in the process. There are also some attempts at explaining the phenomenon verifying the idea that political trust would have an effect on turnout. They

represent such research findings as: 1) trust in parliament has a positive impact on turnout, and also satisfaction with democracy increases it (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007, pp. 400-422); 2) while political trust is positively associated with institutionalized participation, it is negatively associated with non-institutionalized participation (Hooghe & Marien, 2013, pp. 131-152); 3) also basing on the case study – European Parliament elections in 1999 – Michaelene Cox (2003, pp. 757-770) found that voting turnout is strongly and significantly correlated with general confidence in political institutions and in particular with trust in the EP (the research offers no explanation for how much total variance in turnout can be explained by trust); 4) another case study – Canadian elections – also proves that political trust has a significant effect on voters' choice, but the research was limited to one country and a specific period (Bélanger & Nadeau, 2005, pp. 121-146).

Bearing in mind the results of the aforementioned research, the author decided to re-analyze the relations between political trust and voter turnout, being inspired by the case of Poland, where the turnout used to be the lowest in South East Europe. She is aware of the limited capabilities of finding conclusions regarding the influence of just one factor on the complex process of decreasing turnout. Moreover, she assumes the correctness of analyzes conducted thus far which indicate that the problem lies in weaker attachment to political parties, less interest in politics and inadequate tools. Thus, electronic democracy is often perceived as a chance to invert this negative trend, not only in the voting process, but in many other areas of citizens' activity. It seems, however, that when researching such a complex problem, it is essential to search for multi-theme causes which might help understand the topic and possibly find a solution for it.

Considering political trust as one of the more important values of life of political communities, the author investigates, in which of the European countries this correlates with election-related behaviors in the narrow meaning of voting. Acknowledging that comparing figures will not yield any information that could help in deciding if the level of political trust has an influence on turnout or vice versa. This article raises the following research questions: In which of the European countries the turnout is associated with the level of citizens' trust to political institutions? How can one characterize the countries that do not have this correlation? Therefore, the following hypothesis will be verified: the relation between political trust and turnout is higher in mature democracies. The basic research method employs a quantitative analysis of data (with the use of statistical tests) which derive from reports containing percentage levels of political trust and turnout in the elections, a comparative analysis, as well as an overview of literature on the subject.

## **Defining and Measuring Trust**

Trust is an important value of social life. However, as it is a form of learned behavior, activated on the basis of everyday experiences, it is not a natural or biological trait. Trust is associated with common interest and a lack of bad intentions (Warren, 1999, pp. 310-

345). Of course, such an abstract term is challenging to define; however, due to the present analysis, it is necessary to specify the term along with the methods of measuring it. According to Anthony Giddens (2002, p. 318) trust is „based on a belief which balances the lack of knowledge of information, relying on people and abstract systems”. Also, for Gambetta (1988, pp. 158-175) trust is built upon the conviction that other people will act to our benefit rather than to our harm. Both researchers limited trust to a certain conviction, albeit in the case of Giddens, based on a belief (which we will return to later on). However, a Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka (2007, p. 71) recognizes that trust is not only a conviction, but also actions based on that conviction. Due to this fact Sztompka treats trust as the most valuable kind of civil capital. Robert Putnam (1995, p. 264) complements the statement that trust is an element of civil capital, which „relates to the organizational traits of society, such as trust, norms and relations, which all may increase its efficiency, facilitating coordinated actions”.

On various levels of civil capital analyzes, we must clearly differentiate civil trust (to people), researched both on an individual and a general level, from political trust (understood as faith in institutions). These are sometimes defined as *horizontal (or interpersonal) trust* and *vertical trust* (Newton, 2010, p. 408). In order to measure the level of trust, researchers use various scales named after their creators and based on questions or statements presented to the respondents. A trustworthy and appropriate measure of social trust is Morris Rosenberg's scale (1957), which measures faith in people. By contrast, interpersonal trust is measured by Julian B. Rotter's scale (1967). The first of these two scales is based on questions like: „Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?” (*general social trust*); „Would you say that most people are more inclined to help others, or more inclined to look out for themselves?” (*willingness to help*); „Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they get the chance, or would they try to be fair?” (*fairness*). Rosenberg's scale is also applied when analyzing general trust in the European Social Survey (ESS). The second scale is based on statements like: „In dealing with strangers one is better off to be cautious until they have proved they are trustworthy”. „Fear of social disgrace or punishment rather than conscience prevent most people from breaking the law”. „Parents usually can be relied upon to keep their promises”. One of the first scientist to research the notion of political trust was Stokes (1962), who followed his interest in measuring basic evaluative orientations toward political actors and developed a corresponding set of questions (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Nowadays, among the tools used to measure political trust one must indicate the Edelman Trust Barometer (annual trust and credibility survey, produced by integrated research, analytics and measurement division in Edelman company) and many surveys based on questions about trust/faith in specific political institutions. They contain questions that have the following basic structure: “Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0–10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. Firstly, the legal system?” (European Social Survey). Questions are mostly

located in batteries and list a number of institutions that can be rated by the respondent (Bauer & Freitag, 2017, p. 4).

An analysis of available data shows that the level of social trust depends on people and circumstances (and also on experiences in specific cases) and one can trust their surroundings, but not political leaders. Even though both categories comprise the theory of civil capital, according to empirical data, they are independent of each other. Political trust is better explained by political rather than social variables, i.e. support for a party or coalition government, national pride, interest in politics or faith in open government. Moreover, civil and political trust are essentially embedded in a larger group of social, economic and political traits of a society. There are crucial dependencies between a generalized civil trust and a network of political means: a good government (lawful rule, political stability, the length of democracy), a state's wealth (and equality of incomes), ethnic uniformity and protestant religion, mainly due to strong relations with capitalism, and not the content of the religion itself (Newton, 2010, pp. 420-423).

## **Voter Turnout**

Participation in elections is the most common and at the same time the most basic form of democratic participation. Many studies have been carried out in order to explain voting-related behavior, including the decisions to vote or resign from voting. A plethora of theories have been formulated to determine the models of voting-related behaviors on an individual level: the consumer behavior model (Berelson, Gaudet), the sociological approach (Lazarsfeld, Berelson), the socio-psychological model (Campbell, Cooper), the rational model (Downs) and the notion of „civil duty” (Riker, Ordeshook). Another type of research that is becoming more frequent is the analysis of turnout in a collective sense, mainly because certain crucial changes are being observed. These pertain mainly to the general election, in which the average turnout is decreasing over time. In the 1970s and 80s it amounted to almost 80%, whereas currently it is around just over 70% (Blais, 2010, p. 239). It does not matter if a study analyzes a group of states with new democracies or if the research is limited only to those states with a strong democratic tradition, there is a noticeable 8-9 percentage point drop in turnout. Moreover, the decline in Europe is more significant than the decline in other regions (Solijonov, 2016, p. 24).

André Blais (2010) compiled a summary of causes for the differences in turnout in individual states, basing it on studies conducted by numerous researchers. The results show that turnout is higher in economically developed states. This is true for a large number of countries, as the financial factor does not matter in older democracies. The real difference in this group is de facto between poor countries and the remaining states (Blais & Dobrzyńska, 1998). Institutional conditions are also important: the responsibility to partake in the voting, the type of voting system, the importance of voters and the ease of registration and voting. There are the following institutional factors which foster higher turnout: introducing

compulsory voting; proportional electoral law; the importance of elections understood as power of an institution, the members of which are being chosen; laws that facilitate voting (days off, postal voting). Furthermore, studies prove that the turnout rate is inversely proportional to the number of parties and with fiercer competition, the turnout is higher (each vote matters more if the outcome is uncertain). However, it should be humbly accepted that each explanation is not clear enough.

Decreasing turnout worries researchers to such an extent that they are searching for its causes. These may be broken down into several categories. Socio-economics factors like population size, population stability, economic development; political factors: closeness of elections, perception of the political issues at stake, campaign expenditures, political fragmentation; institutional factors: electoral system, compulsory voting, concurrent elections, registration requirements, voting arrangements; individual factors: age, education, political interest, civic duty (Solijonov, 2016, pp. 35-40). Furthermore, Franklin (2004, p. 192) adds the influence of generational changes (the younger generation is less attached to parties, integrates with its own community and is not interested in politics as much); changes in the nature of elections, but not the voters (lowering the voting age from 21 to 18; the decreased level of „majority status”, i.e. the missing percentage that a party needs in order to get 50% of votes; the negative influence of party fragmentation on the nature of elections). Gray and Caul (2000) also point to the decreasing level of group mobilization (the biggest decrease of support for the left-wing parties and in states with weakening influence of trade unions). The answer to the most recently-studied factor in empirical research: inadequate tools (Kapsa & Musiał-Karg, 2019) would be an argument for introducing e-voting, especially for the younger generations in mind, who treat technology as an inseparable element of their professional and daily lives. Which is confirmed by another observation.

Lower turnout does not always indicate a decreased civic participation. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2019), there is a growing move toward engagement and action. In 2019, engagement with the news surged by 22 points (news engagement scale for general population, 26-market average); 40 percent not only consume news once a week or more, but they also routinely amplify it. This is confirmed in a report published by the International IDEA (Solijonov, 2016). It proves that lower turnout suggests that fewer citizens consider elections as the main instrument for legitimizing political parties' control over political decision-making. However, lower citizen participation in elections does not necessarily mean that citizens are becoming less active in politics. On the contrary, there is a rise in other forms of citizen activism, such as mass protests, occupy movements and increased use of social media as a new platform of political engagement. Such a shift in the channels of political participation, from voting for traditional bodies of representation to new forms of democratic participation and representation, puts serious pressure on governments and the way traditional political parties' function. Such a shift forms the basis for e-democracy. One of its most basic phenomena is the increase of civic participation through the use of electronic tools for aspects such as providing information, communication, mobilization and public activity.

## Political Trust and Voter Turnout: Results and Discussion of Findings

The aim of this part of the analysis is to seek answers to the following questions: Can turnout in individual states be associated with the level of citizens' trust to political institutions? Are these two factors related? How can one characterize the countries that do not have this correlation? Two variables have been researched for this purpose: turnout and political trust. The level of turnout expressed as a percentage value determines the extent to which eligible voters use their votes on election day. It is measured as the percentage of votes cast at an election, including invalid votes. For the purposes of the analysis, data from the last general elections was used, i.e. elections between 2014 and the start of 2019. The data has been taken from the Voter Data Database by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance IDEA ([idea.int](http://idea.int)), containing voter population statistics for countries that hold direct national parliamentary elections (lower house). The level of political trust is expressed by a percentage of citizens of a given state who answer a single question on whether or not people have confidence in their national government. Empirical data on trust comes from the Gallup World Poll (GWP) and has been shared in the OECD Government at a Glance 2017 Report.

The analysis does not include changes over time. It relates to data from around the same time. However, considering the fact that tendencies regarding trust in individual states remain constant and that turnout is decreasing gradually, not violently, it seems that such an approach helps in conducting an analysis of adequate data. Having in mind that the compared data is characterized by a certain weakness due to the fact that it is a compilation of data regarding declarative attitudes (subjective faith in institutions) and objective data connected to election-related behavior (participation), it should be noted that there is no easy way of translating attitudes to actions. The relation between these traits of the society should, however, indicate a certain interdependence between citizens; experience (which influences the level of political trust) and their behavior during the elections.

The results of the analyzes are shown below. The group of European countries contains states whose data regarding political trust is available in the Government at a Glance Report (information regarding turnout is available for all European countries) and states without compulsory voting. In countries where voting is obligatory, turnout is higher, which naturally obscures the full view of the studied phenomenon. A graphical summary of these two factors shows that for the majority of the countries, the level of turnout is higher than the level of political trust and also that states that have higher political trust also exhibit higher turnout.. This observation is confirmed by statistical tests. They show that both variables substantially correlate in statistical terms ( $p < 0.05$ ) in such a way that higher turnout correlates with higher political trust. However, the correlation coefficient (the correlation of the order of Spearman's ranks) is rather low and amounts to 0.24. This may also be deduced from the line chart. It is clear that in the group of the presented countries there are a couple of disturbances in the trajectory of the lines for both variables. In Germany, Norway and Ireland, political trust is

higher, but it does not exceed the level of turnout. Whereas in Russia and Switzerland trust is much higher than turnout. Understanding the political system of both countries forces us to deduce that there are no common traits for compromises in any of these cases. These lie in the current political situation, the historical background, the political culture and the diverse traits of the society which influence the analyzed phenomenon. The same pertains to the very low indexes of political trust in relation to turnout. We may observe them in Italy and Iceland. This is explained by the current political situation of these two countries.

Table 1. Percentage of turnout and trust in government by country

<b>Country</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Voter Turnout</b>	<b>Trust in government</b>
Austria	2017	80	43
Czech Republic	2017	60.84	42
Denmark	2015	85.89	47
Estonia	2019	63.67	34
Finland	2015	66.85	49
France	2017	42.64	28
Germany	2017	76.15	55
Hungary	2018	69.67	30
Iceland	2016	79.18	36
Ireland	2016	65.09	57
Italy	2018	72.93	24
Latvia	2018	54.58	32
Lithuania	2016	50.64	28
Luxembourg	2018	89.66	68
Netherlands	2017	81.93	57
Norway	2017	78.22	66
Poland	2015	50.92	38
Portugal	2015	55.84	35
Russian Federation	2016	47.88	58
Slovakia	2016	59.82	37
Slovenia	2018	52.64	25
Spain	2016	69.84	30
Sweden	2018	87.18	49
Switzerland	2015	48.51	80
United Kingdom	2017	68.93	41

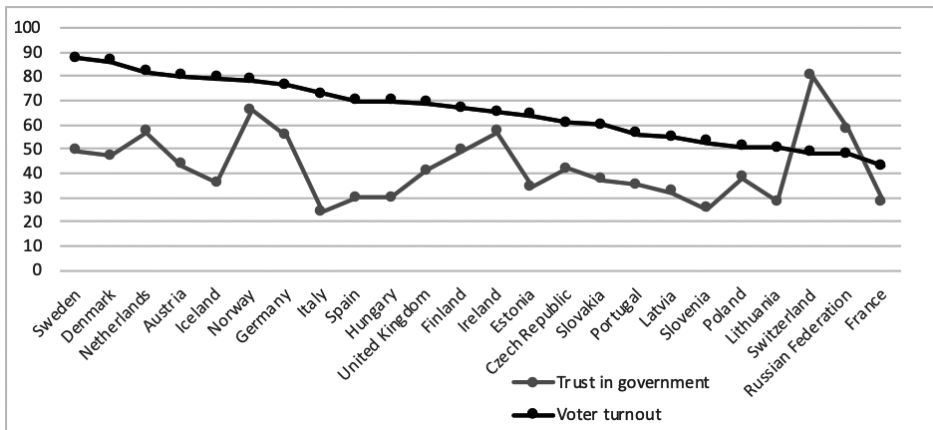


Chart 1. Turnout, from lowest to highest

## Conclusions

The aim of the analysis was to verify the correlation between turnout and political trust. It confirms the hypothesis that higher turnout correlates with higher political trust. Being aware that the causes for decreasing turnout are immensely complex and the existence of numerous theories which attempt at explaining the behaviors of voters (through the model of consumer behavior, the sociological approach, the socio-psychological model and the rational model), it is worth focusing on this relation. When organizing actions aimed at stopping the decreasing turnout, it is worth considering the recommendations used when taking action in order to increase political trust. We already know that electronic voting tools are not enough to stop the falling turnout, but at the same time they invigorate civil participation. As acknowledged in the OECD Report (Solijonov, 2016), voter turnout is a crucial indicator of the level of citizens' interest and participation in political processes, therefore the causes of such a decline must be investigated and better understood. The global decline in voter turnout has occurred in parallel with the emergence of many negative voices about the state of democracy around the world. Improving voter participation requires much broader action by election stakeholders, such as governments, EMBs, political parties, the international community and civil society actors. A multitude of factors affect voter turnout and these factors appear in complex combinations in each individual country.

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