



VOTER TURNOUT IN WESTERN EUROPE

since 1945

A Regional Report

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Voter Turnout in Western Europe

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Preface

Electoral participation is in general falling, at least as measured by voter turnout. Rising levels of public apathy or cynicism are of growing concern in both newer and older democracies, and are a particular focus of concern in Western Europe. At the same time, there are continuing obstacles and disincentives to participation that could be diminished by adapting electoral systems or encouraging easier electoral access for all. Not enough is yet known about which practical measures are effective in encouraging turnout, and which are not. Nor are the factors which breed apathy and discontent with democratic institutions themselves sufficiently understood.

There are currently very few tools available to assist the informed consideration of turnout questions. To follow the worldwide Voter Turnout Database, IDEA is pleased to present this Regional Report on Turnout in Western Europe, which is timed to coincide with the 2004 elections to the European Parliament. The Report brings together an unrivalled set of data on parliamentary, presidential and European elections in the region. It amasses the information necessary to analyse the gap between turnout in national elections and European elections, on which further work is planned by IDEA. It analyses the impact of factors affecting voter turnout trends in the region generally, ranging from choice of polling day through electoral system choice to longevity of democracy. It considers the effects of compulsory voting and of the successes and limitations of the use of new technology in encouraging turnout.

This Report is designed to provide all those engaged in the turnout debate with the basis for the development of new insights and policy recommendations. It is a step within IDEA's programme of work to develop practical knowledge on voter turnout. It puts forward ideas, poses questions, and tests some answers against the hard data which it provides. I hope that it will make a contribution to the continuing debate on participation and democracy.



Karen Fogg
Secretary-General

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A great number of organizations and individuals have made this unprecedented collection of voter turnout data possible—first and foremost the electoral management bodies that responded to our requests so quickly and willingly. Professor Rafael López Pintor of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and Maria Gratschew of International IDEA, who are the joint lead authors for this regional report, worked together previously on *Voter Turnout since 1945: A Global Report*. Their ambition to develop the Voter Turnout Project into a systematic methodology and a fundamental part of the programme work has resulted in this regional report as well as the two earlier global reports on electoral participation.

This regional report is based on work done on voter turnout over several years. Many colleagues and external writers have contributed with substantive comments and expertise. Under the supervision of my predecessors, Professor Reg Austin and Vijay Patidar, International IDEA's Elections Team developed into a highly valued programme with products and methodologies of a high standard. Kate Sullivan, Therese Laanela and Nina Seppälä all helped to lay the groundwork for this and the global reports on electoral participation. Nadia Handal Zander and Eve Johansson have also helped in the production of this report, and Richard Desjardins from Stockholm University is responsible for the statistical work presented here. In addition, International IDEA wishes to thank the following individuals and organizations for their help in providing data and information:

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Irish Ministry of Environment and Local Governance
Italian Ministry of Interior
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Maltese Electoral Office
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Andrew Ellis
Head of Electoral Processes
International IDEA

Methodology and Types of Electoral System

The aim of International IDEA's Voter Turnout Project is to provide up-to-date and reliable information about voter turnout around the world. Some trends are highlighted and conclusions are drawn in this report, but International IDEA does not aim to explain or to prove definitively why turnout differs between countries and across regions. The data should be seen as a basis for further research; additional correlations and comparisons can be drawn on the basis of the individual user's particular needs and interests.

This particular report has a regional focus. Western Europe has been chosen on the basis of the many debates going on in the region about a possible decline in voter turnout. Among the regions of the world it has traditionally had some of the highest average levels of turnout, and a discussion of a declining turnout in Western Europe is therefore very interesting and highly relevant.

Choosing the Elections

The Voter Turnout database includes elections held since 1945. The criteria for including elections in this report are:

- the elections were held after 1945 but before 30 June 2003;
- the elections were for national political office in independent nation states;
- there was a degree of competitiveness, that is, more than one party contested the election, or one party and independent candidates contested the election, or the election was only contested by independent candidates. Within this 'grey area' we have erred on the side of inclusion (for instance, in Iceland there has on occasion been only one candidate for a presidential election) and, at least where data is available, we have included the turnout figures and explanatory variables in the tables; and
- the franchise was universal. However, for purposes of comparison we have included in this regional report the following elections when women were excluded from voting: Liechtenstein before 1986, Switzerland before 1971, Greece before 1956 and Belgium in 1948. In these cases, the voting age population figure only includes men.

This particular report covers the following 19 West European countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Liechtenstein is also discussed in the relevant chapters but is not included in the statistical summaries.

Sources

Many researchers have difficulty obtaining information about registration figures and voter turnout rates. International IDEA's extensive network of electoral management bodies (EMBs) around the world has made it possible for us, in most cases, to use the official data compiled in different countries as our main source of information. When this source has not been available we have used information from government departments, universities or research institutes to find the necessary data on elections.

Types of Electoral System

First past the post (FPTP) The simplest form of plurality majority electoral system, using single-member districts. The winning candidate is the one who gains more votes than any other candidate, but not necessarily a majority of votes.

List proportional representation (List PR) involves each party presenting a list of candidates to the electorate. In its simplest form, closed list PR, voters vote for a party, and parties receive seats in proportion to their overall share of the national vote. Winning candidates are taken from the lists. Open list PR systems give voters the opportunity to vote for individual candidates as well as for a party. Parties receive seats in proportion to the overall share of the vote. The individual candidates that receive the most support are elected to those seats.

Mixed member proportional (MMP) Systems in which a proportion of the parliament (usually half) is elected from plurality majority districts, while the remaining members are chosen from PR lists. Under MMP the PR seats compensate for any disproportion produced by the district seat result.

Single transferable vote (STV) A preferential PR system used in multi-member districts. To gain election, candidates must exceed a specified quota of first-preference votes. Voters' preferences are reallocated to other continuing candidates if a candidate is excluded or if an elected candidate has a surplus.

Two-round system (TRS) A plurality majority system in which a second election is held if no candidate achieves an absolute majority of votes in the first election.

Acronyms

EU	European Union
EVM	Electronic voting machine
GDP	Gross domestic product
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PR	Proportional representation

Introduction

Andrew Ellis

This report on voter turnout in Western Europe is designed to bring together and make widely available the data collected by International IDEA and to promote discussion on issues relating to voter turnout and participation. The report covers the 15 member states of the European Union before 2004, plus Iceland, Malta, Norway and Switzerland. Since 1945, more than 300 elections have been held in these countries. This report includes statistics up to and including most of the elections held in 2003—a total of 299 general elections, 43 presidential elections and five European Parliament elections (in addition to those held on the occasion of successive enlargement of the EU). The statistics cover the period up to 2003, including most of the elections held during 2003.

Voter turnout is not a new issue, as Rafael López Pintor demonstrates in his chapter surveying the development of the franchise. However, it has come to be much more extensively debated in Western Europe during the 1990s. Examples of declining turnout are brought up at one national election after another, with particular concern being expressed after spectacular drops such as the 12 per cent drop in the UK between the general elections of 1997 and 2001. But, as Richard Rose asks in his chapter, do these elections provide evidence to support a general theory that turnout in Western Europe is falling? If so, is it then valid to infer that public interest in democratic participation has declined, or even that the general public's commitment to democracy is waning?

The report demonstrates that average turnout for elections to national parliaments in Western Europe has indeed declined since the early to mid-1990s. When looking at individual countries, only six of those included in this report experienced an increase in turnout at the most recent national parliamentary election compared with the previous one, while 13 countries showed a fall. There is still debate as to whether this fall reflects a significant long-term shift in the willingness of Western European electors to participate in democracy through the act of voting. There are, however, consistent findings that turnout is related to political systems, frameworks and institutions: for example, proportional representation systems tend to be associated with higher turnout, while the call for citizens to visit the polling station 'too frequently' to participate in elections and/or referenda may depress turnout.

This report is published to coincide with the 2004 elections to the European Parliament. Turnout is an issue at every European Parliament election, and 2004 is no

exception. There was a decline in turnout in 11 of the 15 member states between the 1994 and 1999 European elections, and many countries are now worried that turnout will fall further in 2004. If this fear is realized, it will have political implications, impacting perhaps on the perceived legitimacy of the European Parliament. Are lack of interest and the perception that its role is limited a cause of low turnout? Or will a low turnout lead in turn to declining interest in and a limited role for the European Parliament?

The accession of 10 new member states to the EU in May 2004 will demonstrate how willing the citizens of 25 countries are to vote simultaneously for members of one parliamentary body. Will this in itself affect turnout? It has been suggested, for example, that commitment to the institutions of democracy may be reflected in high turnout reflecting initial excitement when a transition from authoritarianism takes place, but fall after the euphoria has worn off and only increase again as the time over which democracy has been in place increases. Are harmonization issues important? For example, some of the new member states have included turnout thresholds in their electoral systems: if turnout does not pass a specified level, the election is invalid and has to be held again. Will these thresholds cause political problems if turnout does not reach the required level—perhaps not just once but several times in succession? Is there a case for a pan-European election law for European Parliamentary elections, and would this be a practical political suggestion?

Of the 19 countries covered in this report, six EU member states (Austria, France, Finland, Portugal and Ireland) plus Iceland (where presidential elections are often uncontested) have presidential elections as well as national and European parliamentary elections. In these six countries, presidential elections show a 5 per cent lower average turnout than parliamentary elections. However, this is not a global pattern. One explanation for this may be that many of Europe's presidents only have the role of head of state in a parliamentary system, and that the incentive to vote in a presidential election is very different in a presidential system where the elected president is also the head of executive government.

The perception that turnout is declining has led to a flurry of debate as politicians, election administrators and commentators express concern. One response that has been proposed to the 'turnout question' is a reversal of the slow decline both in the number of countries which practise compulsory voting and in the level of enforcement in those countries where voting remains compulsory. As Maria Gratschew indicates in her chapter, the political acceptability of this as an answer to the problem may be questionable, especially in contexts where previous non-democratic regimes made voting compulsory.

The decision to participate or not is, of course, ultimately a personal one; different people, and different groups in society, may take this decision in different ways. The differences in turnout between men and women are explored by Nina Seppälä in her chapter, tracking the history of the women's franchise and looking at some gender differences in voting patterns. This debate may encourage more electoral authorities to collect electoral data which disaggregates the turnout of men and of women.

Remote voting and electronic voting have become prominent on the agenda in Europe as politicians and electoral authorities attempt to attract young voters and busy voters by enabling them to vote at the supermarket, over the Internet or by using their mobile phone. The Council of Europe is in the final stage of drafting recommendations on e-voting. There have been several tests of wider facilities for remote voting, while the UK and some Swiss cantons have taken e-voting one step further and actually tried it. Pippa Norris writes in her chapter about the experience of the UK pilots, and Tim Bittiger about this kind of technology in general.

The assessment of remote voting and e-voting initiatives will address the security and cost implications of their introduction. They will also address their effectiveness. This is not just a question of plain numbers: is it necessarily positive if an increase in overall turnout is achieved because the turnout of some groups in the society increased disproportionately? In addition, as Richard Rose has pointed out, measures to encourage turnout may produce other effects which may not be considered so desirable. There seems little doubt, for example, that elections conducted entirely by post can increase turnout substantially, but do they also have a negative effect on electoral integrity, for instance, through the opportunities they may present for the 'head of the family' to vote for the whole family, or even for outright fraud? And, if there is a problem of trust in institutions, will innovations that demand the confidence of citizens in the integrity and accurate functioning of a 'black box' mechanism necessarily help?

Is there a connection between the role of the media and electoral turnout? There is debate as to whether the existence of more and more television channels, newspapers and radio stations gives people access to more in-depth coverage of elections and politics. Can the vast increase in the choice of media be leading instead to ignorance of politics, lack of interest and apathy as people 'choose other channels'?

Turnout may also be affected as societies become more mobile. Electoral registration may be a much easier exercise when most citizens live at the same address year after year. Election administrators are facing challenges to

devise effective ways of enabling both long-term migrants and short-term travellers to participate in elections. The effect of administrative changes may be important. Making polling day a public holiday may increase turnout; holding elections during periods when many electors take a major holiday may have the reverse effect. Efforts to ensure ease of voting for the disabled, pregnant women and the elderly may increase turnout in addition to promoting equality of electoral access.

There is of course a difference between low and declining turnout. A low turnout means a constant low turnout. Turnout in Switzerland is among the lowest in Western Europe: does this mean that the Swiss are dissatisfied with their model of citizens' democracy? Or does the low turnout in Swiss general elections reflect the limited governmental change that has usually resulted from these elections, while most citizens also participate in votes on those referenda and initiatives which they individually find of personal interest and importance?

On the other hand, a decline in turnout indicates change, and could indicate dissatisfaction or a change of perception of the impact of the political system—although this link cannot be assumed.

When any subject is fiercely debated, there is a particular need for reliable data and analysis. International IDEA has already published and maintains a worldwide database of voter turnout, available electronically at <http://www.idea.int> and in handbook form. This report follows on from the database to provide an easily accessible source of data for election administrators and designers as well as for the community of political analysts, and to promote analysis and the exchange of ideas in the field. IDEA has also established an Expert Group on Voter Turnout to encourage further identification of those factors which have a real effect on turnout, positive or negative, and those which do not. Pippa Norris has written that political institutions and legal rules are strongly and significantly associated with voter participation: some of the factors affecting turnout will thus be within the control of legislators, electoral system designers or election administrators. Others, such as social or cultural factors, will not. Analyses of these may better be used to inform the expectations of electoral administrators, participants and commentators in advance of elections.

IDEA is seeking to develop tools which can provide those participating in debate about change and improvement in democracy and electoral arrangements with solid information and knowledge on turnout issues. This report will serve its purpose if it helps to stimulate both work towards such tools and wider debate on participation and democracy itself.

