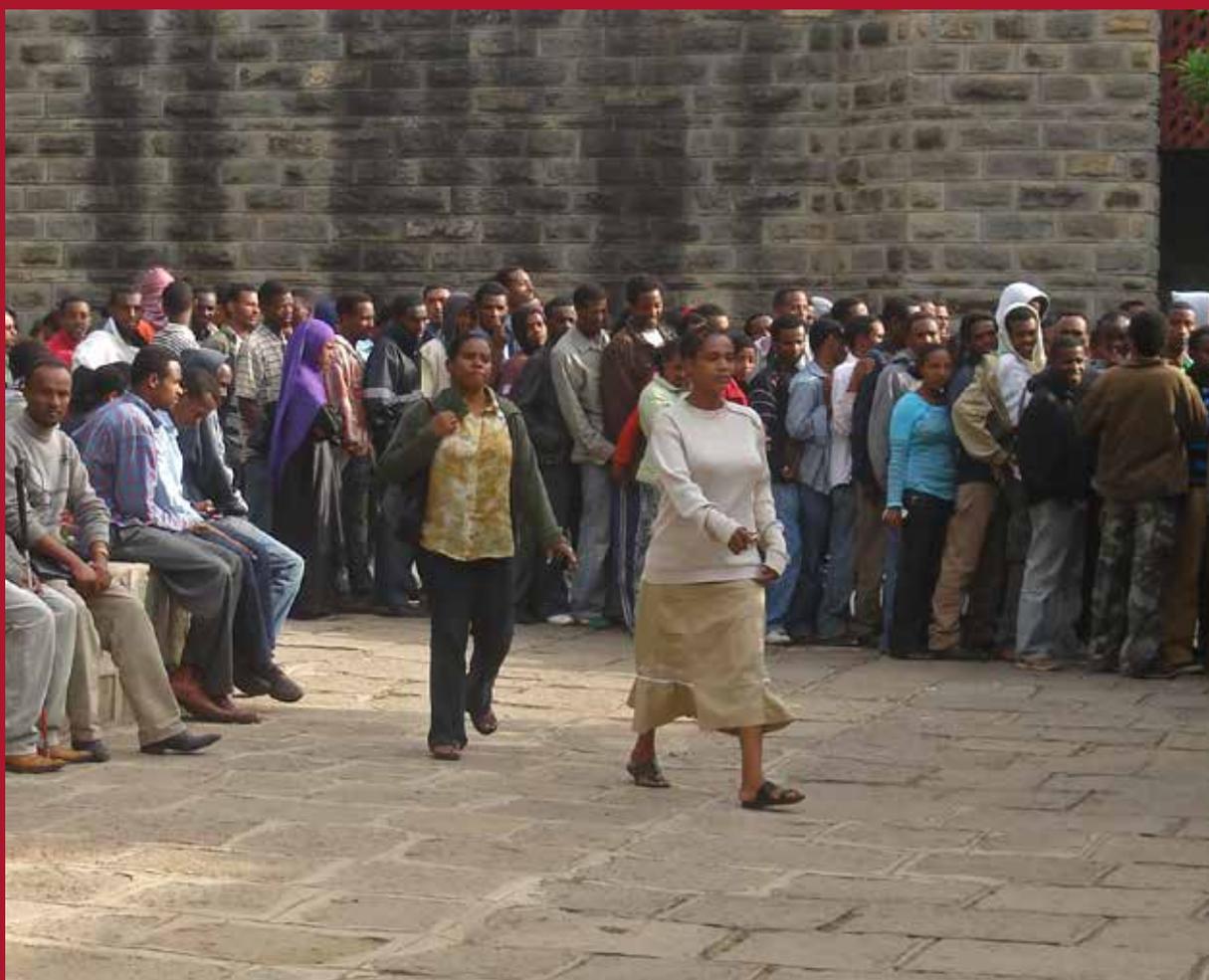




# Voter Turnout Trends around the World







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# Voter Turnout Trends around the World

**Abdurashid Solijonov**



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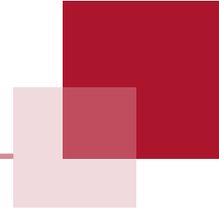
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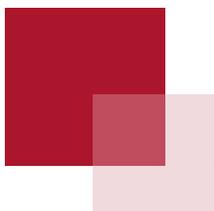
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# Contents

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<b>Acronyms and abbreviations</b> .....	7
<b>Preface</b> .....	8
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	10
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	13
<b>2. What is voter turnout?</b> .....	17
<b>3. Voter turnout across the globe</b> .....	23
<b>4. What factors affect voter turnout?</b> .....	35
<b>5. Conclusions</b> .....	43
<b>References</b> .....	45
<b>Annex 1. Voter turnout in the most recent parliamentary elections as of the end of 2015</b> .....	47
<b>About the author</b> .....	49
<b>About International IDEA</b> .....	50
<b>More International IDEA resources on electoral processes</b> .....	51



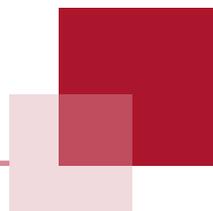
## List of figures

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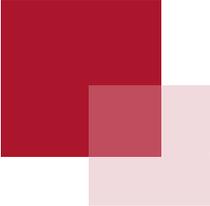
<b>Figure 1. Difference between voter registration and voting age population statistics .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Figure 2. Voter turnout trends in parliamentary elections in Egypt.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Figure 3. Voter population statistics for countries that hold direct national parliamentary elections (lower house).....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Figure 4. Global voter turnout by region, 1945–2015.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Figure 5. Voter turnout in Europe, 1945–2015 .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Figure 6. Differences in turnout between the first election after the end of the Cold War and the most recent election.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Figure 7. Freedom House indicators and Voter turnout .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Figure 8. Range of turnouts in the most recent parliamentary elections as of the end of 2015.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Figure 9. Difference in voter turnout between men and women.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Figure 10. Difference in voter turnout between men and women by country.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Figure 11. Impact of compulsory voting .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Figure 12. Voter turnout in Mexico.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Figure 13. Differences in voter turnout by age.....</b>	<b>41</b>

## Acronyms and abbreviations

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<b>EMB</b>	electoral management bodies
<b>VAP</b>	voting age population
<b>VTD</b>	Voter Turnout database



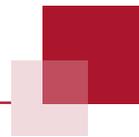
## Preface

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Voter turnout has been declining across the globe since the beginning of 1990s. Such a trend in democratic participation has raised many concerns among election stakeholders. Since its establishment in 1995, International IDEA has keenly engaged in research on voter participation. One outcome of this effort is the Voter Turnout database. The database is a widely acknowledged and well-respected resource for researchers, media, practitioners and other stakeholders. International IDEA has also published several publications on the topic of voter participation, which have inspired further research and debates in the elections field.

The Voter Turnout database was developed in 1999, and has been continually updated since then. It has served a growing number of users, from about 143,000 in 2006, the earliest year for which user statistics are available, to more than 410,000 in 2015. This shows that the democratic community is concerned about declining voter participation, and therefore uses the data to stay informed about voter turnout trends and inform others about this crucial issue. Several renowned media outlets, such as CNN, *The Economist*, *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*, have used the database as a resource in a variety of articles on the subject. We are pleased that through the Voter Turnout database, we continue to provide a resource that not only creates awareness about the extent of people's participation in elections, but also, and more importantly, helps electoral stakeholders to make informed policy decisions and programmatic choices to improve the legitimacy of the electoral process.

This brief report highlights key trends and developments on voter turnout across the globe. By reviewing the factors that affect voter turnout, the report also provides some insights into how to understand complex voter behaviour. In addition, the report addresses the critical need to improve collection of voter turnout statistics by electoral management bodies, mainly referring to the need for disaggregation of voter turnout data by gender, age and other key characteristics of voters. We hope this report will contribute to the field

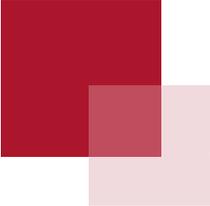


and also encourage election authorities, policymakers and other stakeholders to take serious action to increase voter participation, and at the same time to improve data collection methods in order to better understand voter behaviour.

Declining voter turnout signals the deep problems democracies are facing today. Lower turnout suggests that fewer citizens consider elections the main instrument for legitimizing political parties' control over political decision-making. It may even show that citizens are less interested in political parties as the main bodies of democratic representation as such. However, lower citizen participation in elections does not necessarily mean that citizens are becoming less active in politics. On the contrary, we have seen 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. This is therefore the right time for governments and political parties to adapt to recent developments and come up with sound responses. This can be done by embracing all the opportunities, such as repositioning themselves to meet the demands of active citizens, using technologies and social media platforms effectively, and using other innovative strategies to regain citizens' trust in representative governance. The availability of data on voter turnout, particularly disaggregated by various groups of the population, such as gender, age, geographic location, level of income and other important characteristics, greatly contributes to the effectiveness of such responses.

In addition to engaging directly with national and regional stakeholders, International IDEA will continue to develop cutting-edge knowledge resources for policymakers, practitioners, civil society actors, citizens, media and other stakeholders to help them advance democratic processes. As a crucial part of its broader role in supporting democracy, International IDEA's work on elections and particularly on voter participation will also continue beyond the work it has done so far.

*Yves Leterme*  
*Secretary-General*

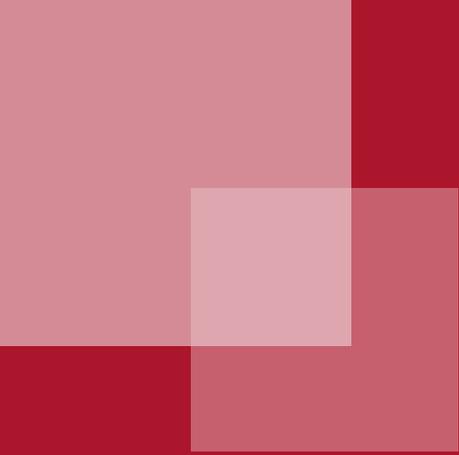


## Acknowledgements

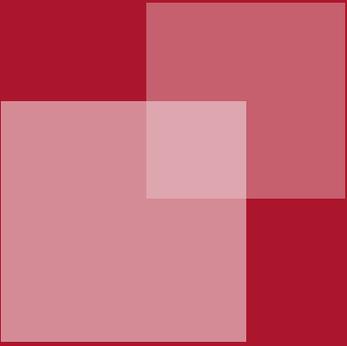
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This report has benefited greatly from the input, comments and recommendations of several International IDEA staff members. Heartfelt thanks go to Keboitse Machangana, Annette Fath-Lihic, Leena Rikkilä Tamang, Rumbidzai Kandawasvika-Nhundu, Sam Van der Staak, Nana Kalandadze, Dalia Zakhary and Lim Jia Liang for their dedicated feedback and recommendations. Heartfelt thanks also go to our colleagues in the Publications team, especially to Lisa Hagman, for their hard work and committed support in the preparation of this report.



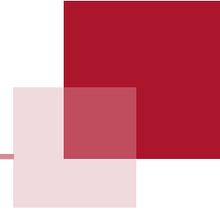


# 1. Introduction



# 1. Introduction

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Voter turnout is one of the crucial indicators of how citizens participate in the governance of their country. Higher voter turnout is in most cases a sign of the vitality of democracy, while lower turnout is usually associated with voter apathy and mistrust of the political process. Because of its importance, media and civil society actors, as well as the democracy support community and many other stakeholders are concerned when citizens do not turn out to vote. They are also keen to understand the reasons behind low turnouts. Collecting comprehensive data on voter turnout from across the globe and trying to understand what affects people's decisions to vote or not to vote is therefore important. In the late 1990s, International IDEA developed the online Voter Turnout database (VTD), which has become the most authoritative global dataset providing data on elections conducted since 1945. The VTD is regularly updated with the details of the presidential and (lower house) parliamentary elections that take place in every country of the world.<sup>1</sup> It also collects data on elections to the European Parliament.

In addition to maintaining the VTD, International IDEA has produced several publications on voter turnout, which present global voter turnout trends and relevant analyses.<sup>2</sup> The VTD has undergone a major update since publication of the last report in this series in 2006. In addition to the data that have been added on elections that have taken place since, some older data have been corrected and missing data added for some countries.

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1 The VTD covers all countries and most territories (e.g. partly recognized states, such as Palestine and Kosovo, self-governing islands, like the Faroe Islands, and overseas territories, like Gibraltar) for which voter turnout data are available.

2 *Voter Turnout since 1945: A Global Report* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2002); *Voter Turnout in Western Europe since 1945: A Regional Report* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2004); *Engaging the Electorate: Initiatives to Promote Voter Turnout from Around the World* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2006). These publications are freely accessible from International IDEA's website: <<http://www.idea.int/publications/>>.

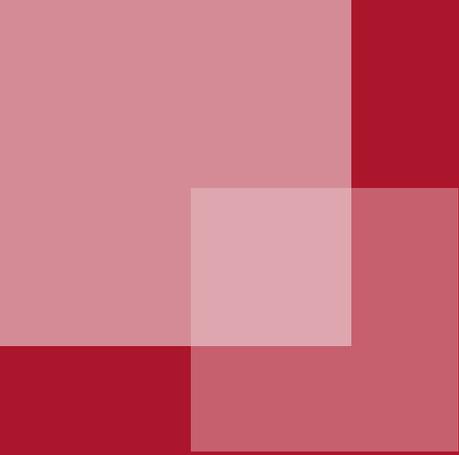
This report is a continuation of International IDEA's earlier publications on voter turnout, but in a much shorter form. It presents a brief summary of recent global trends in voter turnout and addresses some of the most frequent questions and concerns raised on the topic. The report begins by exploring methods used to measure voter turnout and the challenges associated with these. The report then presents voter turnout trends across the globe as a regional comparison for the period 1945–2015, and a detailed exploration of more recent data. Finally, the report discusses some of the major factors that affect voter turnout.

Presidential elections are not held in all countries. Therefore, in order to present and discuss global trends in voter participation, this report uses the data on lower house parliamentary elections. Those who are interested in the trends in presidential elections should explore the relevant data in the online platform of the VTD.<sup>3</sup>

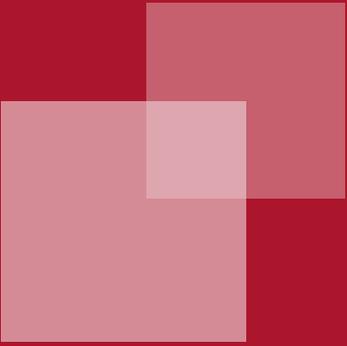
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3 VTD can be accessed at <<http://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout>>.



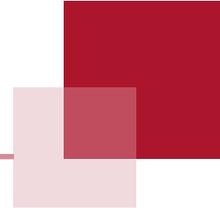


## **2. What is voter turnout?**



## 2. What is voter turnout?

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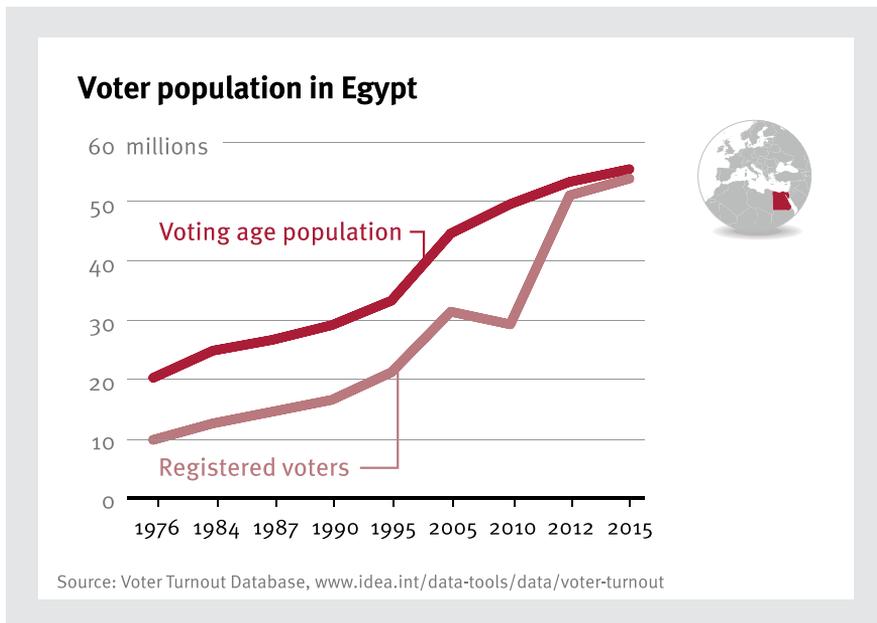
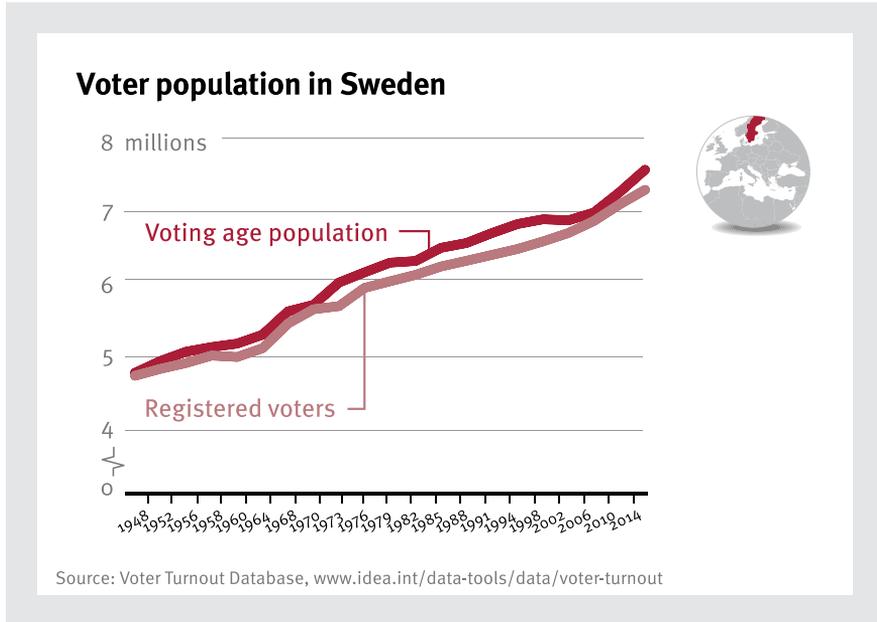
Voter turnout is the extent to which eligible voters use their vote on election day. It is measured as the percentage of votes cast at an election, including invalid votes.<sup>4</sup> The term ‘eligible voters’ can be defined in many ways. International IDEA has adopted two measures: first, the number of registered voters as officially reported by the national bodies responsible for compiling voters’ lists; and second, the voting age population (VAP), which is an estimate of the proportion of a country’s population that is of voting age.

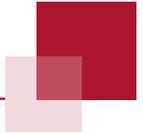
There are two main reasons for using both voter registration and VAP statistics to measure the number of eligible voters. First, in some countries registration data are either inaccurate or unavailable, and sometimes voter registers are not used. In such cases, VAP statistics can be used as an alternative to estimate voter turnout. Second, and most importantly, the VAP statistics can provide a clearer picture of participation in some countries as they signal a problem with the voters’ list or registration system. Figure 1 shows how voter registration numbers differ from the VAP in two countries.

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<sup>4</sup> The VTD provides separate statistics for invalid votes, which includes both rejected (or spoiled) votes and blank votes.

**Figure 1. Difference between voter registration and voting age population statistics**





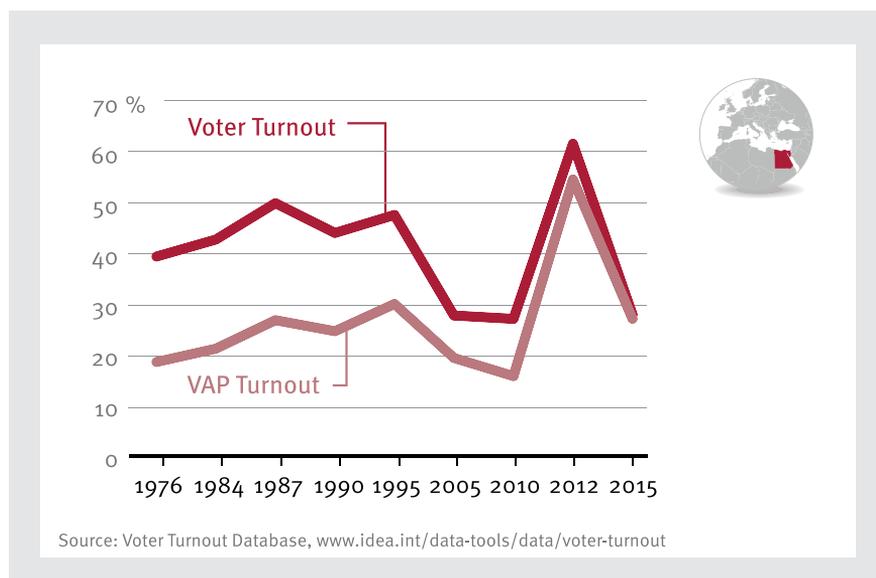
In Sweden, as in most established democracies, voter registration and the VAP statistics are very close to each other. This is the way it should be, because those who are eligible to vote should be registered on the voters' list. In Egypt, by contrast, there was a significant divergence between voter registration and the VAP statistics in the period 1976–2012. This can be explained by the fact that many voters were denied a political voice during this period, which resulted in much lower voter registration figures.<sup>5</sup> More than 10 million people were unable to register to vote between 1976 and 2005, and this number reached almost 20 million in 2010. After the Egyptian revolution in 2011, reforms were carried out based on the amended Constitution of 2011. The Egyptian electoral system adopted an automatic universal voter registration system, which is based on the National Identification Database. The impact of the new system can be clearly seen in Figure 1—the voter registration and VAP statistics were very close to each other in the 2012 and 2015 elections.

Interestingly, the voter registration reform, together with the overall political situation and the introduction of a proportional electoral system,<sup>6</sup> had a huge impact on voter turnout in Egypt's 2012 elections (see Figure 2), which were the first after the revolution. Voter turnout was more than double that of the previous elections held in 2010. However, voter enthusiasm had cooled by the time of the elections in 2015, when turnout declined to 28 per cent.

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5 See 'Learning a Lesson from Egypt's Universal Voter Registration', <<http://www.fairvote.org/learning-a-lesson-from-egypt-s-universal-voter-registration>>, accessed 2 March 2016.

6 A system of proportional representation, which gives political parties a number of seats in parliament in proportion to their overall share of the vote, is believed to increase voter participation.

**Figure 2. Voter turnout trends in parliamentary elections in Egypt**

The problems with voter registration in the period 1976–2010 make the use of VAP figures a more reliable method of assessing voter participation in Egypt. The use of VAP estimates in this case takes account of the fact that a huge portion of the population was unable to register to vote.

Data in the VTD show that similar problems with voter registration exist in South Africa, where almost 10 million people were not included on the voters' list for the 2014 elections; and in Pakistan, where more than 28 million people were not registered for the 2013 general elections. However, registration figures can sometimes be higher than estimates of the VAP, which means that the voter register can contain more people than the number of eligible voters. In Afghanistan's presidential elections in 2014, for example, the voters' list contained roughly four million more people than the country's VAP.

Even though the VAP figure can in most cases provide a good estimate of the number of eligible voters, it has some limitations. One such limitation is linked to the inaccuracy or sometimes non-availability of population statistics. This can be the case in developing countries. In such cases, the VAP figure may not give a true picture of voter participation. Some of these countries, however, may have reliable voter registration systems. In such cases, the registration figure becomes a better measure of voter turnout. For example, the Democratic Republic of the Congo had no population statistics before it held its first multiparty elections in 2006. The Electoral Commission

managed to register 25 million voters, and the national voter turnout was calculated based on this figure.

Another problem associated with the use of a VAP estimate is that it is not able to exclude those people in a population who may be ineligible to register or vote due to factors such as non-citizenship, mental illness or imprisonment. The factor of non-citizenship in particular can introduce significant error into the calculation of the VAP in some countries. For example, Singapore has a migrant, non-resident population of more than 1.5 million people, which makes up 29 per cent of the population.<sup>7</sup> The non-resident population of Singapore is not eligible to vote, and there is therefore a big difference between voter registration figures and the VAP.<sup>8</sup>

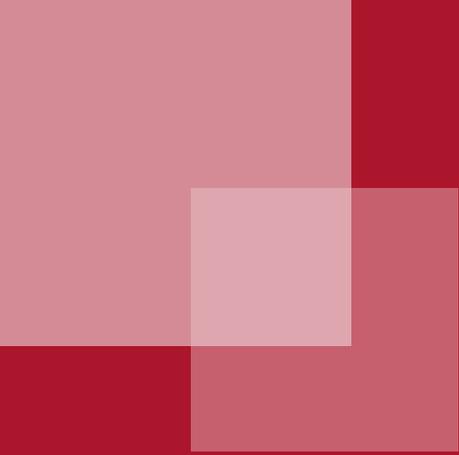
In order to apply a standard methodology for all countries, International IDEA does not treat cases such as Singapore differently and does not adapt VAP figures. Instead, the VAP figures are always calculated based on overall population statistics. Such an approach can sometimes help to initiate discussions and political debate on the issue of why non-residents or other groups within a population are ineligible to vote.

Taking into account the limitations of both methods of calculating the number of eligible voters, this report gives preference to voter registration statistics. Only voter registration statistics are used in the calculations of voter turnout below.

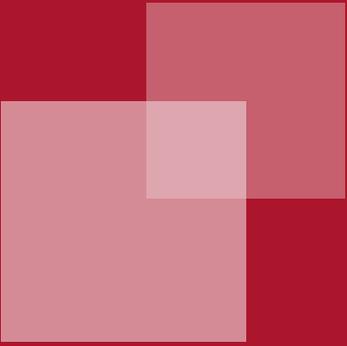
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7 The 2014 Population in Brief, <<http://www.nptd.gov.sg/portals/0/news/population-in-brief-2014.pdf>>, accessed 2 March 2016.

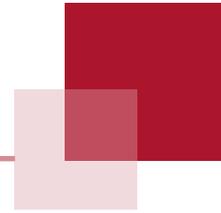
8 For data on Singapore see <<http://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/262/40>>.



### **3. Voter turnout across the globe**



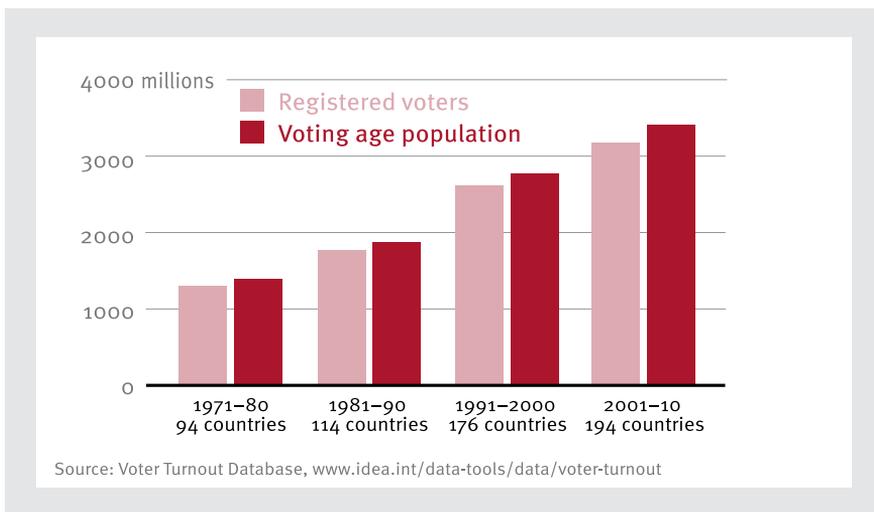
### 3. Voter turnout across the globe



#### Recent global trends

The number of countries that hold direct parliamentary elections has increased significantly since the 1990s (see Figure 3). The major reason for this growth is the end of the Cold War, which stimulated democratic processes in regions formerly under Soviet influence and the emergence of multiparty elections across the African continent. Accordingly, the global population of people entitled to vote has more than doubled in the four decades to 2010. Needless to say, the general growth of the global population has also contributed to the growth of the global voting population. There are only a few countries left in the world, such as Brunei Darussalam, China, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia and Vatican City, that do not hold direct national elections.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 3. Voter population statistics for countries that hold direct national parliamentary elections (lower house)**



Notes: The Voter Turnout Database lists only the countries/territories for which voter turnout statistics are available. Voting age population is the estimated number of people above voting age.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that China and Saudi Arabia hold direct subnational elections; elections in North Korea are not covered in the VTD.

The columns in Figure 3 show the difference between the number of registered voters and the VAP in each decade. They show that the total number of registered voters has always been lower than the total estimate of the VAP. Roughly 230 million people were not included on voters' lists across the globe in the decade 2001–10, which is nearly the equivalent of the population of Indonesia. It should be noted, however, that since the VAP of each country is an estimate, the figure of 230 million is also a very rough estimate.

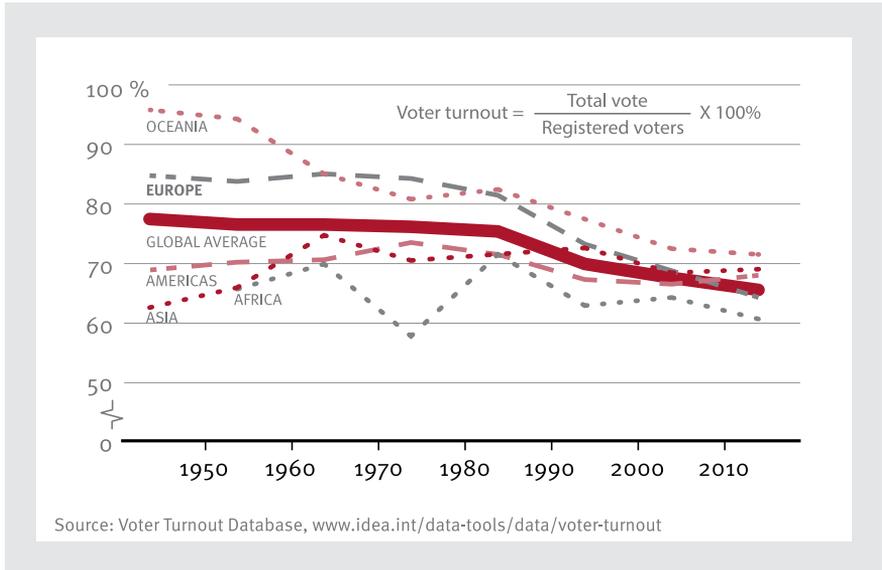
Despite the growth in the global voter population and the number of countries that hold elections, the global average voter turnout has decreased significantly since the early 1990s (see Figure 4). Global voter turnout was fairly stable between the 1940s and the 1980s, falling only slightly from 78 per cent to 76 per cent over the entire period. It then fell sharply in the 1990s to 70 per cent, and continued its decline to reach 66 per cent in the period of 2011–15.

In Europe, the region which experienced the highest level of voter turnout between the 1940s and the 1980s, voter turnout has decreased significantly since the 1990s. The decline in Europe is more significant than the decline in the other regions. In Asia and the Americas, the trends in voter turnout appear more stable over time. However, in both regions voter turnout has been much below the global average for most of the decades since the 1940s. Africa generally has the lowest turnout over the entire period since the 1950s. It should be noted, however, that for the decade of 1950s the VTD contains data only for the three African countries that held national legislative elections. In later decades the number of African countries holding legislative elections increased gradually to 10 in the 1960s, 11 in the 1970s and 16 in the 1980s. A dramatic increase can be observed in the 1990s, when 43 countries held national legislative elections. Thus, voter turnout trends from the 1990s reflect a more representative picture of participation on the continent.

Oceania's turnout trend should also be treated with some caution because elections took place only in Australia and New Zealand in the 1940s and the 1950s. In addition, voting is compulsory in Australia, which is another reason for the high turnout in the region during this period. Papua New Guinea held elections in 1964 and 1968, and its low turnout pulled down the high average in the region. In later decades, other islands in Oceania began to hold elections. The turnout statistics since the 1970s therefore provide a more representative regional picture.



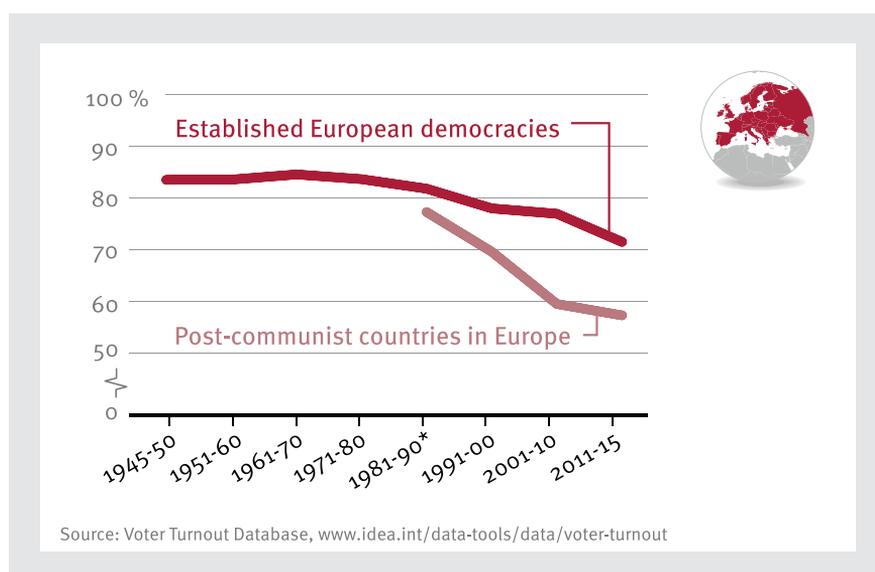
**Figure 4. Global voter turnout by region, 1945–2015**



Notes: Data is for Legislative (Lower House) Elections that took place across the globe since 1945 and covers 1,833 elections in total.

### Declining voter turnout in Europe

Plummeting voter turnout in Europe, which contains the largest number of established as well as new democracies, is a worrying phenomenon. A comparison of turnout trends between established democracies and the group of emerging democracies, which consists of the post-communist states, shows a big difference in the rate of decline in the past 25 years (Figure 5). The latter group of countries shows a much steeper decline compared to the established democracies. This means that the decline in Europe is disproportionately due to the sharp fall in voter turnout in the post-communist countries. Average turnout across these countries has declined by around 20 per cent since the first free elections held at the end of the 1980s. However, it is important to note a consistent decline in turnout of about 10 per cent in the established European democracies during the same period, albeit from a higher base.

**Figure 5. Voter turnout in Europe, 1945–2015**

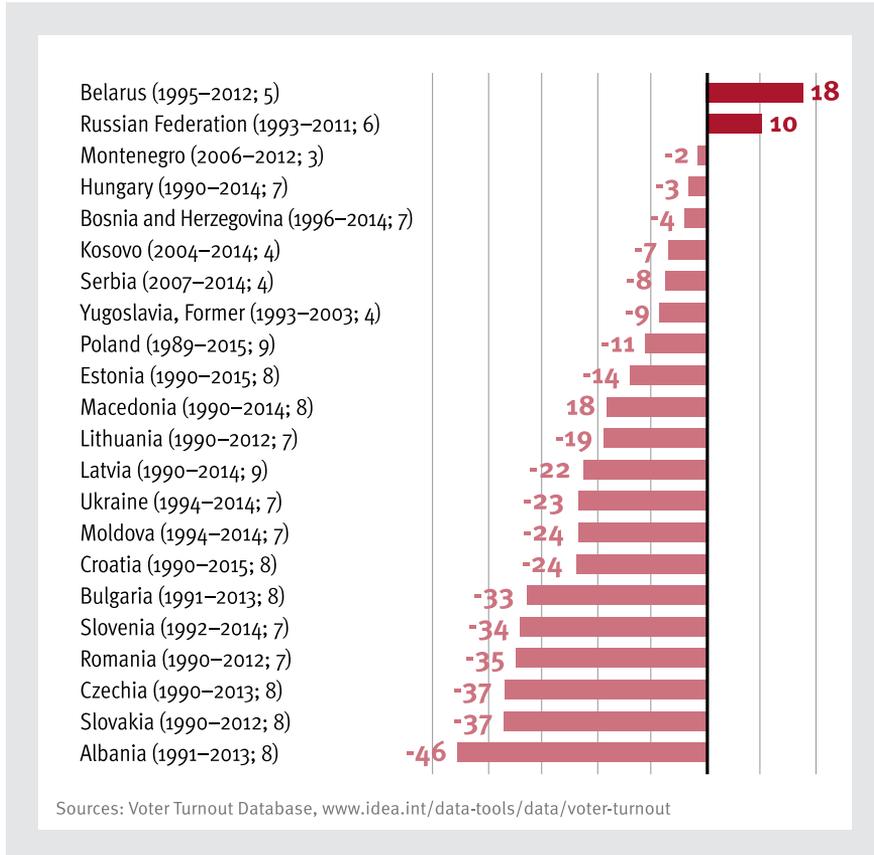
*Established European democracies (countries and territories):* Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Faroe Islands, Finland, France, Germany, Gibraltar, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

*Post-communist countries in Europe:* Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Yugoslavia (the Union of Serbia and Montenegro).

\* The first post-Cold War elections in post-communist countries were held during 1989–1990. Poland held its first post-Cold War election in 1989, and 10 other countries followed in 1990. Data for the elections held in Poland and Yugoslavia before the end of Cold War are included in the VTD. There are no data in the VTD for elections held in the countries of the former Eastern bloc, the former Soviet Union or the former Yugoslavia before 1990.

An in-depth examination of declining voter turnout in post-communist Europe is beyond the scope of this report, but country level data may shed some light on the problem. Figure 6 presents a snapshot of differences in turnout between the first elections after the end of the Cold War and the most recent parliamentary elections held in each country. The decline is greater than 18 per cent in more than half the countries. In Albania the decline was nearly 46 per cent, while Bulgaria, Czechia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia also experienced a significant downward trend in voter participation of more than 32 per cent. An increase in voter turnout can be observed in only two of the 22 countries.

**Figure 6. Differences in turnout between the first election after the end of the Cold War and the most recent election**



Notes: Figures in brackets show the years in which the elections were held and the number of parliamentary elections held between those years.

A number of empirical studies have been conducted to investigate the causes of such a consistent decline in voter turnout in the post-communist countries of Europe. One of the most frequently cited causes draws on the ‘founding elections’ hypothesis, which suggests that the first elections after the end of authoritarian rule attract greater voter engagement and that this enthusiasm declines in later elections. For example, Kostadinova (2003) and Kostadinova and Power (2007) provide evidence for this theory—they found that the second, third and fourth post-communist elections in Eastern Europe experienced significant declines. This is confirmed by the data in Figure 5, which show a significant fall in turnout in the post-communist countries throughout the 1990s.

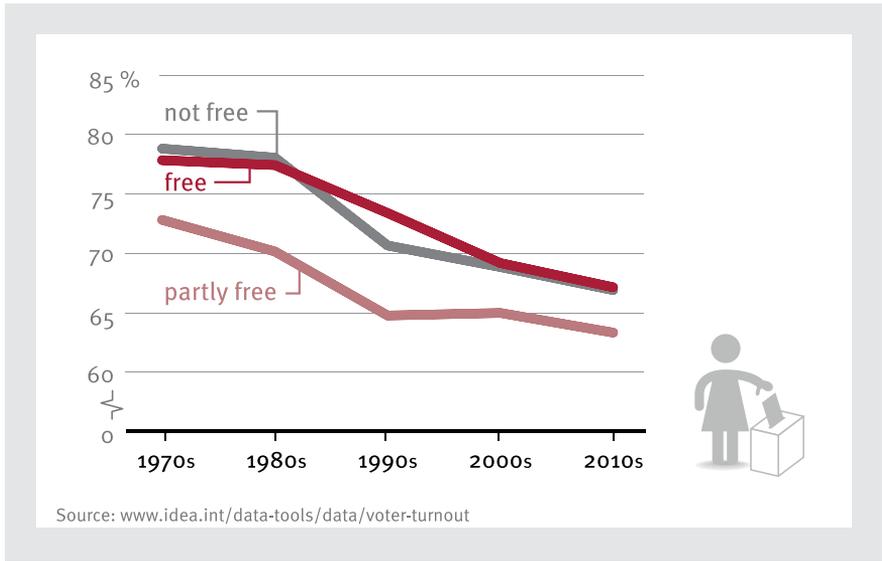
However, Figure 5 shows even more significant declines in subsequent decades, which casts doubt on the founding elections hypothesis. The further declines in the 2000s and 2010s indicate that other factors are probably also in play. This makes alternative explanations for the decline in the region more appealing: that the decline in voter turnout is due to disenchantment with democracy and disappointment over the transitional hardships (Mason 2003/04). This explanation has been widely discussed among scholars, and there are many who support it. Karp and Milazzo (2015), however, argue that while attitudes to democracy significantly affect voter behaviour across Europe, they cannot explain the differences in voter turnout between countries in the western and eastern parts of Europe. Investigating post-communist voter turnout, Pacek et al. (2009) also found weaker evidence for disenchantment-based approaches to explaining variations in voter turnout, arguing instead that what is at stake in elections has a greater impact on voter participation. Their analyses show, for example, that voter participation is higher in important elections, such as those that relate to the long-term political future of the country, and when the country faces fewer external constraints on policymaking.

The findings from the literature review generally show that declining voter turnout in post-communist Europe is yet to be properly understood. The continuing decline in recent years (2011–15) (see Figure 5), after most of the above-mentioned studies were conducted, calls for ever more serious engagement by researchers. Kostadinova and Power (2007: 373) argue that ‘somewhere ahead there is a natural “floor” for turnout—a point at which participation is unlikely to drop further’. However, the more recent data in Figure 5 show that there is no sign yet, of post-communist European countries reaching that floor.

Following the discussion of differences in turnout between consolidated and emerging democracies in Europe, it is useful to explore global differences in voter turnout between democratic and non-democratic countries. Figure 7 shows the trends in voter turnout in all the countries that hold parliamentary elections grouped by Freedom House indicators. It is interesting to note that with the exception of the 1990s, both the level of voter turnout and its rate of decline have been fairly similar in **free** and **not free** countries. These similarities between two distinct groups of countries require targeted study. Voter turnout in **partly free** countries, on the other hand, has consistently been much lower compared to the rates in the other two groups. This also requires more research to identify the common factors that might negatively affect voter turnout in this group of countries.



**Figure 7. Voter Turnout trends based on level of democracy**



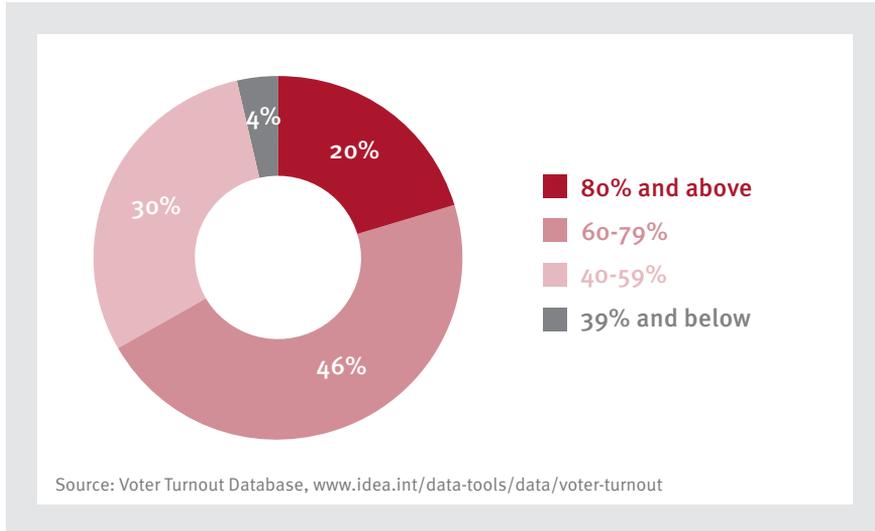
Notes: Freedom House indicators have been used to group countries as free, partly free and not free. Freedom House data are available from the 1970s until 2015.

### Turnout in the most recent parliamentary elections

Annex 1 lists countries in descending order based on voter turnout in the most recent national parliamentary (lower house) elections as of the end of 2015. Among the 26 countries that have compulsory voting, 12 (46 per cent) are located at the top of the list, with turnout rates above 81 per cent. This provides good evidence of the impact of compulsory voting on voter turnout. However, two countries with compulsory voting (Egypt and Gabon) appear at the bottom of the list. This is because there are no sanctions for not voting in Gabon, while in Egypt, even though the law states that non-voters will be fined, this is not the practice in reality.

Figure 8 summarizes the data in Annex 1. Almost half the countries in the world have voter turnouts of 60–79 per cent, while turnouts above 80 per cent can be found in only 20 per cent of countries. Only 4 per cent of countries have turnout rates below 39 per cent, which provides some consolation in the face of declining turnouts globally.

**Figure 8. Range of turnouts in the most recent parliamentary elections as of the end of 2015**



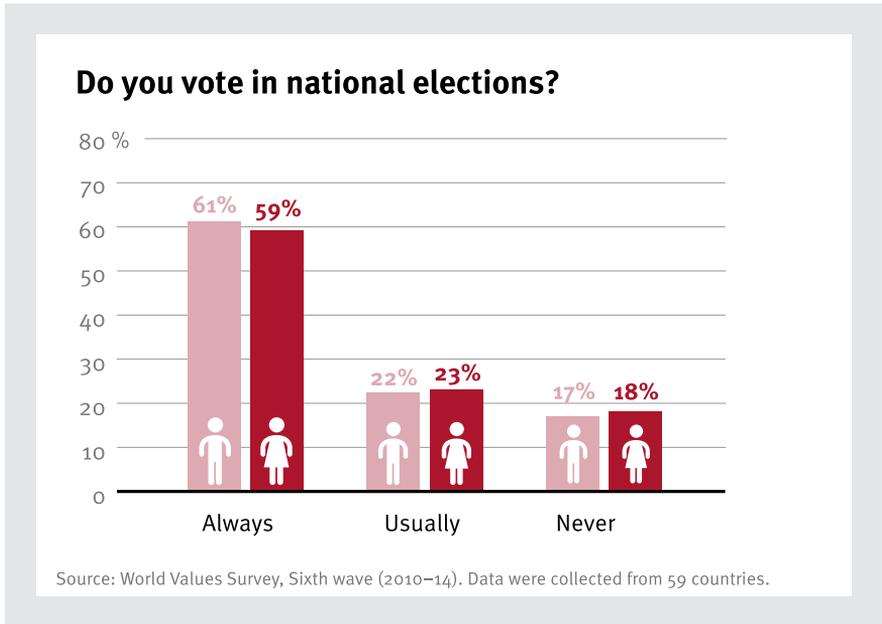
Notes: Data were collected from 196 countries.

## Gender and voter turnout

The gender gap in voter turnout is often the source of intense debate among practitioners, activists, electoral management bodies (EMBs), policymakers and researchers, who are keen to understand whether turnout differs between men and women, and identify the possible reasons for this. Studies conducted so far on gender differences in voter participation have found mixed results. In the United States, for example, women's turnout has been higher than men's in every presidential election since 1980 (CAWP 2015). The aggregate findings of the most recent World Values Survey, however, reveal only minor differences in voter turnout between men and women (Figure 9).

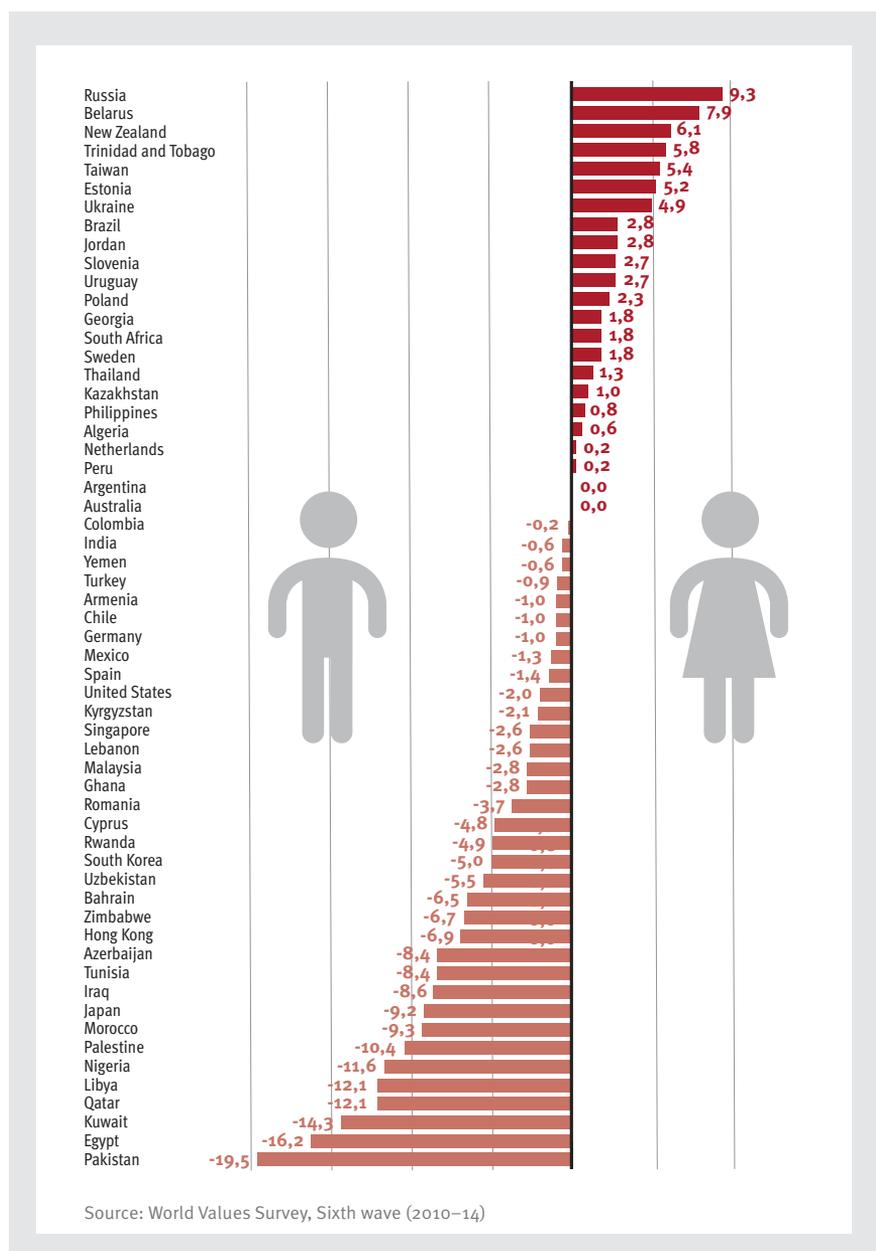


**Figure 9. Difference in voter turnout between women and men**



When the data are disaggregated by country, however, significant gender differences in voter turnout emerge in nearly a quarter of the countries in which the survey was conducted (Figure 10). The lowest rates of female participation in elections are found mainly in countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. Female participation is lowest in Pakistan. Countries from diverse regions can be found in the middle of the range. Equal rates of participation were found in Australia and Argentina. Some countries in the Middle East—Turkey and Yemen—have almost equal rates of participation between female and male voters. Women are more active in elections than men in 21 of the countries, most notably Belarus, New Zealand, Russia and Trinidad and Tobago.

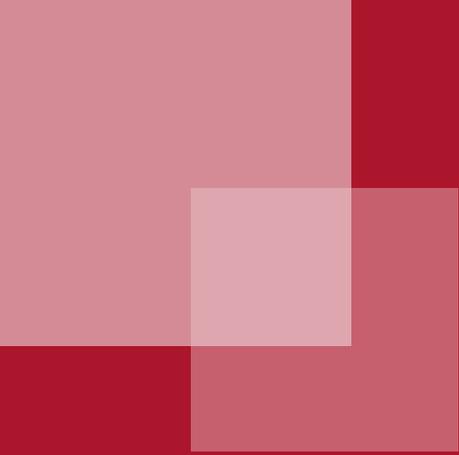
**Figure 10. Difference in voter turnout between women and men by country**



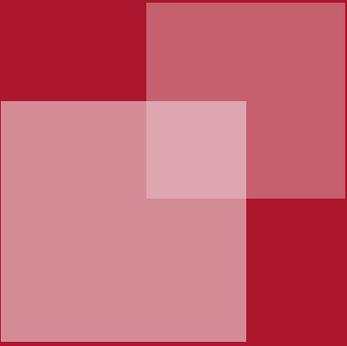
Notes: The figure shows the differences between the percentage of female and male respondents who answered ‘always’ to the question: “Do you vote in national elections?” Data were collected from 58 countries.

There is great interest among the users of the VTD in gender disaggregated voter turnout statistics as officially reported by election authorities. Unfortunately, such data are not available in most countries. Voting secrecy makes it difficult for election administrators to extract gender statistics from electoral results. While some countries, such as Australia, Costa Rica and India, do collect such data, most countries do not allocate the time and effort required to do so. Figures 9 and 10 therefore use data from the World Values Survey, which is based on the responses of a representative sample of people from each country covered by the survey. Since administrative data reported by election authorities provide a more accurate measure of voter turnout than survey-based studies (Elections Canada 2012), International IDEA encourages national EMBs to establish procedures to track gender differences in voter participation. Such data would provide a better understanding of differing rates of voter turnout between men and women; and help to resolve the problem if the difference is found to be significant.

Voter participation data should be disaggregated not only by gender, but also preferably by other characteristics such as age, ethnicity, religion, geographic location, level of education, level of income, and so on. Such data would help to identify whether any groups in the population are voting less than others, and the possible reasons for abstention in those groups. The findings could then be used to develop targeted strategies to encourage voter participation among members of specific groups of the population, such as voter education in minority languages, voter registration campaigns in remote areas or cultural events to attract youth.

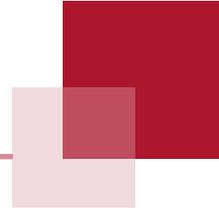


## **4. What factors affect voter turnout?**



## 4. What factors affect voter turnout?

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Many factors affect a voter's decision to cast his or her vote on election day and the interplay between these factors is different in every country. Journalists, civil society actors and other stakeholders concerned about low rates of voter participation are often eager for easy explanations for why people do not vote. Voter behaviour is highly complex, however, and social scientists have been studying it from different angles for many decades.

A great number of empirical studies have been conducted to try to understand how various factors affect voter turnout (see for example Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Geys 2006). International IDEA's publication on voter turnout discusses most of the factors that cause such variations in detail (International IDEA 2006). The factors most commonly cited in the literature are listed below.

### 1. *Socio-economic factors*

- **Population size.** In countries with smaller populations, the impact of each vote is greater and thus more people turn out to vote in an election.
- **Population stability.** People who reside in the same area for longer periods of time usually have better knowledge of local issues and candidates, and are also more concerned about the political decisions that affect their daily lives. Thus, they will be more likely to vote in an election. Frequent movement from one place to another, on the other hand, may decrease people's desire to engage in the political process.
- **Economic development.** There is a common understanding that people are more informed and engaged in political processes in developed countries, while economic adversity negatively affects political participation because economic hardship can result in voter apathy and lead people to withdraw from politics and focus on meeting their basic needs. In the least developed countries, people

affected by poverty do not have access to even a basic education that would enable them to understand how their vote is expected to affect the direction of government policies.

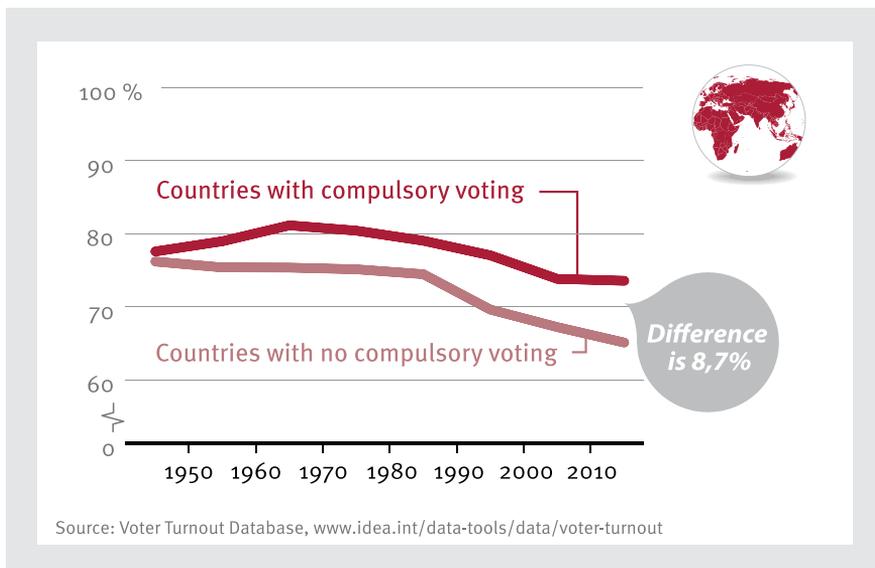
## 2. *Political factors*

- **Closeness of elections.** The decision to vote is influenced by the probability that an individual vote will have an impact on the election result. Therefore, the closer the election between parties or candidates is expected to be, the higher the likelihood that voters will cast their vote.
- **Perception of the political issues at stake.** The degree to which different election outcomes might lead to a different direction in the policies of the government on important issues will affect turnout. If, for example, the political parties contesting an election have different agendas on how to resolve a specific economic problem that affects the majority of the population (e.g. lack of housing), this will have a significant impact on citizens' desire to vote in order to elect the party that best represents their views on the issue.
- **Campaign expenditures.** More money spent on campaigning increases awareness of an election, which can affect the feeling of 'civic duty' among citizens. Greater resources can also enable wider distribution of political information, which helps citizens to obtain the necessary information about candidates and political party platforms. On the other hand, there is increasing concern globally about the role of money in politics (International IDEA 2015). The involvement of large amounts of money in election campaigns, mainly from private donors, is creating intense debate about the impact of the richest segments of the population on national policies.
- **Political fragmentation.** The number of parties that contest an election can affect voter turnout, but there is no agreement on whether fragmentation increases or decreases turnout. Some argue that the availability of more parties gives more options to voters, and thus increases their desire to vote. However, the opposite may also be true—too many options can confuse voters and make it difficult for them to judge whether their vote will have the desired impact on the election outcome.

### 3. Institutional factors

- **Electoral system.** Voter turnout is higher in elections that use systems of proportional representation than in those that use plurality/majority systems.
- **Compulsory voting.** Naturally, when voters are legally obliged to vote, turnout increases dramatically, as in the case of Australia discussed above. Based on global data since 1945, Figure 11 shows how voter turnout rates differ between countries that have compulsory voting requirements and those that do not. However, as noted above, in some countries with compulsory voting the sanctions for not voting can be weak or the regulation is not well observed, which results in lower turnouts.

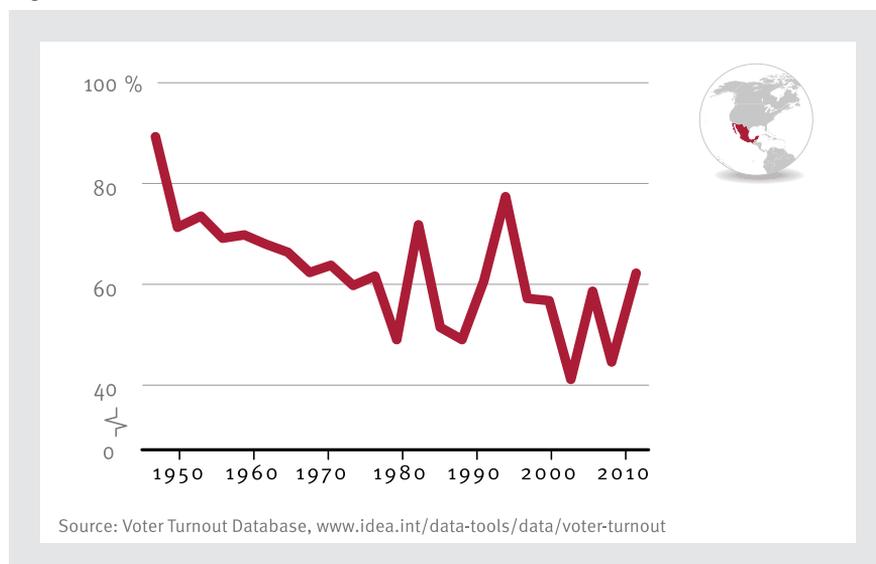
**Figure 11. Impact of compulsory voting**



- **Concurrent elections.** When several elections take place on the same day voter turnout is usually higher. This is because an individual voter may be motivated to cast his/her vote in at least one of the elections. For example, fluctuations in Mexican voter turnout since the late 1970s show the difference in the rates of participation between General Elections and legislative elections (Figure 12). In the General Elections, which took place in 1994, 2000, 2006 and 2012, Mexicans voted for the President, the lower house and the Senate and also in some local

elections. In the elections held in 1985, 2003 and 2009, however, Mexicans voted only for the lower house and in municipal elections.

**Figure 12. Voter turnout in Mexico**



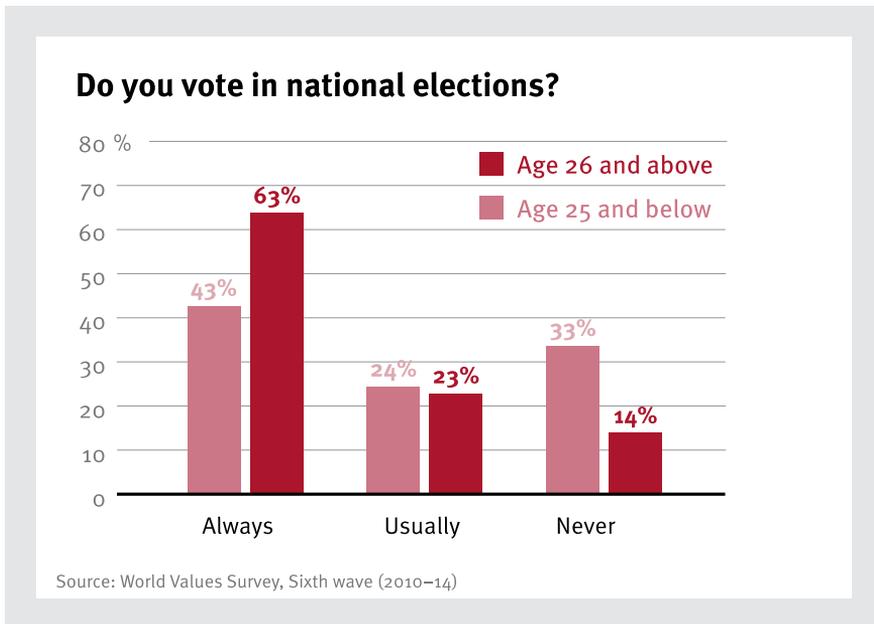
- **Registration requirements.** The existence of individual registration requirements that must be fulfilled by the voter creates an additional burden for voters, because registration requires time and energy. In some settings, registration may also entail direct financial costs such as for travel to registration centres. These burdens can affect registration rates and consequently voter turnout. Automatic registration (i.e. the use of civil registries to create voter lists) or election day registration are seen as efficient ways of removing registration-related barriers.
- **Voting arrangements.** The design of various types of voting arrangement can have an impact on voter 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. Although e-voting is attracting a lot of interest, its impact on voter turnout is unproven. Eight countries, six of which are in Europe, have recently abandoned the use of e-voting, mainly due to security concerns.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For more data, explore International IDEA's ICT in Elections database, <<http://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/icts-elections>>.

#### 4. Individual factors

- **Age.** Age is one of the most important factors to affect voter turnout. Youth voter apathy is a primary source of concern in many countries. The findings of the World Value Survey research conducted between 2010 and 2014 show significant differences in voter turnout between people aged 25 or under and those aged 26 or over (Figure 13). The research covered 59 countries representing all the regions of the world.

**Figure 13. Differences in voter turnout by age**



- **Education.** Higher levels of education can generally be associated with higher rates of voter turnout. However, research has led to contradictory findings about this relationship (see International IDEA 2006: 13–14).
- **Political interest.** The level of interest in politics can be a factor that drives turnout at elections. Societies that encourage citizens' interest in the political process through the introduction of citizenship education in schools, as well as a transparent environment that allows political discussion and debate, among other things, can boost voter participation.

- **Civic duty.** A perception of civic duty is one of the most crucial factors affecting attitudes to voting in elections. In many societies people perceive it to be their duty to contribute to political decision making.

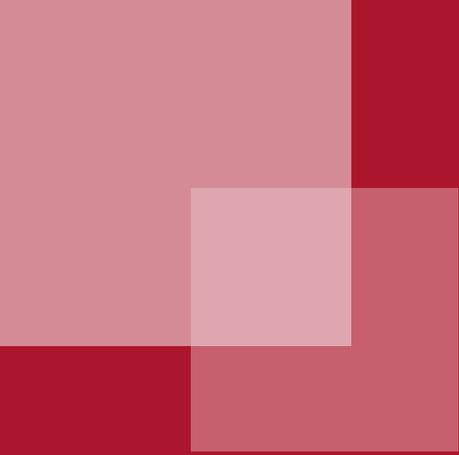
The factors discussed above appear in most of the literature on voter turnout. However, other studies have identified additional factors that do not belong in the above four groups but still play a major role in explaining voter behaviour. For example, using comparative data from 170 regions of 18 European countries, Sundström and Stockemer (2015) find that regional variations in the perceived level of corruption have a substantial impact on voter turnout. Perceptions of corruption in government services suppress citizens' desire to turn out on election day. Another example is the perception of electoral fairness. Using data from a large number of countries, Birch (2010) finds that perceptions of electoral integrity are positively associated with voter participation. The impact of decentralization on voter turnout has also been investigated. Drawing on data from Canada and Spain, Blais et al. (2011) find that decentralization increases turnout in regional elections and reduces the difference in voter participation between regional and national elections in both countries.

It is also important to note some of the factors that affect only certain groups of the population, such as women, minority groups, youth and so on. For example, the lack of freedom of movement for women or other traditional practices that limit women's agency and participation in public life may have a negative impact on women's turnout in elections. In some settings, the issue of personal security also becomes a serious factor that hinders women's ability to go out and vote. In some countries, certain minority groups may experience difficulties with voting due to conflict situations (e.g. Rohingya in Myanmar), or simply because they live in remote areas where access is limited. Young people may be motivated not to vote because their demands are not being addressed by the political parties or leaders competing in elections. In addition, political messages may not be properly communicated to youth, and they may therefore know less about the political process. Unfortunately, research that explores variations in voter turnout among different groups of the population is very limited, not least as mentioned above due to the lack of detailed, disaggregated data. National election authorities must therefore work to improve their data collection methods and procedures.

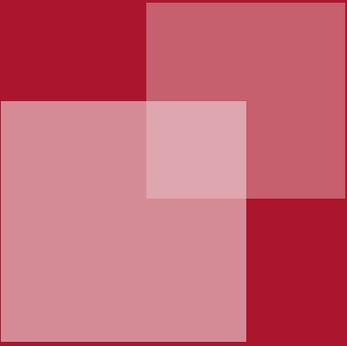
The above discussion shows that voter behaviour can be affected by a multitude of factors and depending on specific circumstances, these factors can appear in unique and complex combinations in each country. In order to understand voter behaviour in a particular country, a thorough contextual



analysis of a country's environment should be conducted that takes account of the factors discussed above, and perhaps some other factors that have not been considered so far. For example, in the case of Egypt discussed above, at least three factors were behind the sharp increase in voter turnout in the 2012 elections (see Figure 2): (a) improved voter registration procedures; (b) the introduction of a proportional electoral system; and (c) a more open and dynamic political environment following regime change.

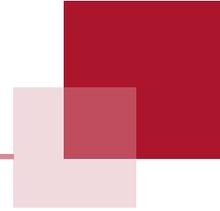


# 5. Conclusions



## 5. Conclusions

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The number of countries that hold direct national elections has increased substantially since the beginning of the 1990s. However, the global average voter turnout has decreased significantly over the same period. The decline in Europe is the most visible, and is a result mainly of the sharp decline in post-communist states. Since voter turnout is a crucial indicator of the level of citizens' interest and participation in political processes, the causes of such a decline must be investigated and better understood. The existing literature suggests several explanations for the decline in Europe. The debate among scholars is continuing, however, and evidence of a further decline in recent years (2011–15) should provide new impetus for the research community to explore the topic.

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. Diamond (2015: 152) argues that: 'low rates of voter participation are additional signs of democratic ill-health'. Given the importance of elections to democracy, the issue of voter participation should be taken more seriously by election stakeholders. The fact that this downward trend in voter turnout worldwide is not showing any signs of recovery demands not only enquiry into the causes of the decline, but also immediate action to improve voter participation. If voter turnout in Europe, for example, continues to decline at the current rate, there is a risk that elections might lose their appeal in the region as a fundamental tool of democratic governance.

Improving voter participation requires much broader action by election stakeholders, such as governments, EMBs, political parties, the international community and civil society actors. As this report briefly highlights, a multitude of factors affect voter turnout and these factors appear in complex combinations in each individual country. Understanding what affects voter turnout in a particular country demands: (a) a thorough analysis of a country's political, social and cultural environment; and (b) an examination of all the possible factors that might potentially be in play in that country. Only then

can specific policy decisions and effective action be taken to remove all the barriers identified as obstructing voter participation.

Finally, the collection of voter participation data by election authorities must be improved. The disaggregation of officially reported voter turnout data by gender, age, ethnicity, level of education and other key characteristics of voters would identify variations in turnout among various groups of the population. Strategies and the actions to be taken to encourage voter participation can then be better focused, and targeted at the specific problems identified by the analyses of such data.

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Producer: Asep/JDS (Madrid: World Values Survey Association, 2010–14)  
<<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>>, accessed 12 December 2016

## Annex 1. Voter turnout in the most recent national parliamentary election

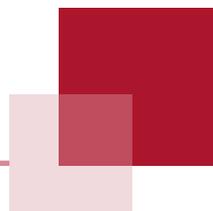
COUNTRY/TERRITORY	YEAR LATEST ELECTION WAS HELD	VOTER TURNOUT (%)	COMPULSORY VOTING	COUNTRY/TERRITORY	YEAR LATEST ELECTION WAS HELD	VOTER TURNOUT (%)	COMPULSORY VOTING
1 Lao People's Dem. Republic	2011	99.69		51 Philippines	2013	77.31	
2 Viet Nam	2011	99.51		52 New Zealand	2014	76.95	
3 Rwanda	2013	98.80		53 Papua New Guinea	2012	76.89	
4 Nauru	2013	96.91	yes	54 Tonga	2014	76.80	
5 Equatorial Guinea	2004	96.45		55 Cameroon	2013	76.79	
6 Singapore	2015	93.56	yes	56 Cabo Verde	2011	76.01	
7 Australia	2013	93.23	yes	57 Cook Islands	2014	75.82	
8 Ethiopia	2015	93.22		58 Kazakhstan	2012	75.44	
9 Malta	2013	92.95		59 Italy	2013	75.19	
10 Turkmenistan	2013	91.33		60 Panama	2014	75.19	yes
11 Luxembourg	2013	91.15	yes	61 Indonesia	2014	75.11	
12 Cuba	2013	90.88		62 Yemen	2003	74.98	
13 Bahamas	2012	90.78		63 Austria	2013	74.91	
14 Antigua and Barbuda	2014	90.27		64 Taiwan	2012	74.70	
15 Solomon Islands	2014	89.93		65 Netherlands	2012	74.56	
16 Uruguay	2014	89.62	yes	66 Monaco	2013	74.55	
17 Faroe Islands	2008	89.50		67 Mauritius	2014	74.41	
18 Belgium	2014	89.37	yes	68 Burundi	2015	74.32	
19 Guinea-Bissau	2014	88.57		69 Seychelles	2011	74.25	
20 Uzbekistan	2014	88.51		70 Belarus	2012	74.20	
21 Sao Tome and Principe	2010	88.45		71 Mauritania	2013	73.90	
22 Grenada	2013	87.73		72 Venezuela	2015	73.76	
23 Bolivia	2014	87.45	yes	73 South Africa	2014	73.48	
24 Kenya	2013	85.91		74 Saint Vincent and The Grenadines	2015	73.39	
25 Denmark	2015	85.89		75 Anguilla	2015	73.24	
26 Sweden	2014	85.81		76 Spain	2015	73.20	
29 Turkey	2015	85.18	yes	77 Suriname	2015	72.72	
28 Aruba	2013	84.86		78 Belize	2015	72.69	
29 Malaysia	2013	84.84		79 Israel	2015	72.34	
30 Botswana	2014	84.75		80 Guyana	2015	72.19	
31 Fiji	2014	84.60		81 Saint Kitts and Nevis	2015	72.19	
32 Peru	2011	83.72	yes	82 Namibia	2014	72.00	
33 Samoa	2001	82.54		83 Liberia	2011	71.64	
34 Tajikistan	2015	82.00		84 Germany	2013	71.53	
35 Iceland	2013	81.44		85 Comoros	2015	71.35	
36 Argentina	2015	81.07	yes	86 Guatemala	2015	71.13	
37 Ecuador	2013	80.84	yes	87 Montserrat	2014	71.06	
38 Brazil	2014	80.60	yes	88 Gibraltar	2015	70.77	
39 East Timor	2007	80.54		89 Bermuda	2012	70.70	
40 Ghana	2012	80.01		90 Montenegro	2012	70.56	
41 Tuvalu	2002	79.99		91 Malawi	2014	70.07	
42 Cayman Islands	2013	79.87		92 Ireland	2011	70.05	
43 Liechtenstein	2013	79.80	yes	93 Myanmar	2015	69.72	
44 Sierra Leone	2012	79.28		94 Republic of The Congo (Brazzaville)	2002	69.36	
45 Nicaragua	2011	79.09		95 Djibouti	2013	69.16	
46 Cyprus	2011	78.70	yes	96 Cambodia	2013	68.49	
47 Norway	2013	78.23		97 Canada	2015	68.49	
48 Maldives	2014	77.93		98 Costa Rica	2014	68.38	yes
49 Palestine	2006	77.70		99 Paraguay	2013	68.24	yes
50 Sri Lanka	2015	77.66		100 Kiribati	2007	67.54	

## Annex 1. Voter turnout in the most recent national parliamentary election

COUNTRY/TERRITORY	YEAR LATEST ELECTION WAS HELD	VOTER TURNOUT (%)	COMPULSORY VOTING	COUNTRY/TERRITORY	YEAR LATEST ELECTION WAS HELD	VOTER TURNOUT (%)	COMPULSORY VOTING
101 Tunisia	2014	67.43		149 Bosnia and Herzegovina	2014	54.54	
102 Finland	2015	66.85		150 Korea, Republic of	2012	54.26	
103 Trinidad and Tobago	2015	66.84		151 Lebanon	2009	53.98	yes
104 Virgin Islands, British	2015	66.58		152 Zambia	2011	53.65	
105 India	2014	66.40		153 Pakistan	2013	53.62	
106 Bhutan	2013	66.13		154 Albania	2013	53.31	
107 United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	2015	66.12		155 Jamaica	2011	53.17	
108 Togo	2013	66.06		156 Serbia	2014	53.09	
109 Benin	2015	65.91		157 Lithuania	2012	52.93	
110 Andorra	2015	65.62		158 Japan	2014	52.66	
111 Netherlands Antilles	2010	65.41		159 Bahrain	2014	52.60	
112 Mongolia	2012	65.24		160 Ukraine	2014	52.42	
113 Barbados	2013	65.05		161 Kuwait	2013	51.90	
114 Estonia	2015	64.23		162 Slovenia	2014	51.73	
115 Iran, Islamic Republic of	2012	64.20		163 Bangladesh	2014	51.37	
116 San Marino	2012	63.85		164 Syrian Arab Republic	2012	51.26	
117 Greece	2015	63.60	yes	165 Bulgaria	2014	51.05	
118 Guinea	2013	63.53		166 Poland	2015	50.92	
119 Nepal	2008	63.29		167 Madagascar	2013	50.72	
120 Vanuatu	2012	63.22		168 Chile	2013	49.25	
121 Macedonia	2014	62.98		169 Niger	2011	49.22	
122 Armenia	2012	62.87		170 Mozambique	2014	48.84	
123 Angola	2012	62.75		171 Switzerland	2015	48.40	
124 Tanzania, United Republic of	2015	62.68		172 Mexico	2015	47.72	yes
125 Hungary	2014	61.84		173 Thailand	2014	46.79	yes
126 Central African Republic	2011	61.16		174 Lesotho	2015	46.61	
127 Honduras	2013	61.16	yes	175 Sudan	2015	46.40	
128 Croatia	2015	60.82		176 El Salvador	2015	45.91	
129 Iraq	2014	60.53		177 Marshall Islands	2015	45.85	
130 Burkina Faso	2015	60.13		178 Afghanistan	2010	45.83	
131 Russian Federation	2011	60.10		179 Morocco	2011	45.40	
132 Georgia	2012	59.76		180 Micronesia, Federated States of	2013	44.68	
133 Czechia	2013	59.48		181 Nigeria	2015	43.65	
134 Uganda	2011	59.29		182 Colombia	2014	43.58	
135 Slovakia	2012	59.11		183 Algeria	2012	43.14	
136 Congo, Democratic Republic of	2011	59.05	yes	184 Kosovo	2014	42.63	
137 Latvia	2014	58.80		185 United States of America	2014	42.50	
138 Saint Lucia	2011	56.84		186 Romania	2012	41.76	
139 Oman	2015	56.66		187 Libya	2014	41.74	
140 Kyrgyzstan	2015	56.62		188 Zimbabwe	2008	40.81	
141 Chad	2011	56.60		189 Palau	2012	40.63	
142 Jordan	2013	56.45		190 Mali	2013	37.24	
143 Dominican Republic	2010	56.43	yes	191 Senegal	2012	36.67	
144 Dominica	2014	56.31		192 Côte d'Ivoire	2011	36.56	
145 Portugal	2015	55.84		193 Gabon	2011	34.28	yes
146 Moldova, Republic of	2014	55.80		194 Egypt	2015	28.27	yes
147 Azerbaijan	2015	55.54		195 Gambia	2012	19.44	
148 France	2012	55.40		196 Haiti	2015	17.82	

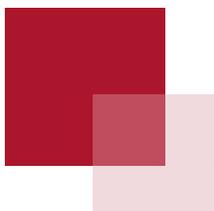
## About the author

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**Abdurashid Solijonov** is a Programme Officer in the Electoral Processes Programme. Solijonov is responsible for maintaining, updating, and developing International IDEA's election-related datasets. He regularly conducts global comparative research of legal reforms related to elections and updates datasets accordingly. He also responds to frequent media enquiries related to elections, and develops targeted infographics for social media using data from datasets.

Solijonov previously worked for State Testing Center of Uzbekistan as specialist on educational assessment and statistics. He also served as a research analyst at the Data Processing and Research Center (DPC) in Hamburg which is part of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).



## About International IDEA

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The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide. International IDEA's mission is to support sustainable democratic change by providing comparative knowledge, assisting in democratic reform, and influencing policies and politics.

### **What does International IDEA do?**

In the fields of elections, constitution-building, political parties, gender in democracy and women's political empowerment, democracy self-assessments, and democracy and development, the institute undertakes its work in three activity areas:

1. providing comparative knowledge derived from practical experience on democracy-building processes from diverse contexts around the world;
2. assisting political actors in reforming democratic institutions and processes, and engaging in political processes when invited to do so; and
3. influencing democracy-building policies through the provision of comparative knowledge resources and assistance to political actors.

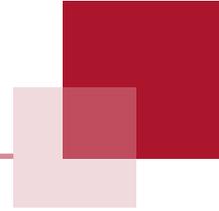
### **Where does International IDEA work?**

International IDEA works worldwide. Based in Stockholm, it has offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations.

<<http://www.idea.int>>

## More International IDEA resources on electoral processes

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2016, 68 pp

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2006, 139 pp

*Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook*

2005, 224 pp

*Voter Turnout in Western Europe since 1945: A Regional Report*

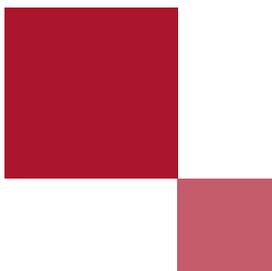
2004, 92 pp

*Voter Turnout Since 1945: A Global Report*

2002, 182 pp

These publications are available for download from our website:

<<http://www.idea.int/publications/>>



Voter turnout is an important indicator of how citizens participate in the governance of their country. Higher voter turnout is often a sign of the vitality of democracy, while lower turnout is usually associated with voter apathy and mistrust of the political process..

This report highlights key trends and recent developments on voter turnout. By reviewing the factors that affect voter turnout, the report also provides insights into how to understand complex voter behaviour. In addition, it addresses the critical need to improve how voter turnout statistics are collected, mainly referring to the need for disaggregation of voter turnout data by gender, age and other key characteristics of voters.