



TRUEDEM

Trust in European Democracies

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VOTER TURNOUT: OVERTIME AND REGIONAL TRENDS IN EUROPE

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Purpose and scope of the deliverable:

The objective of *D2.3 – Voter turnout: Overall and regional trends in Europe* is to assess the cross-country patterns, regional trends and over time dynamics of electoral turnout in Europe, as regards both European Parliament and national parliamentary elections, examining structural and cultural predictors of the observed differences, with particular reference to the role of trust as a cause of voter turnout.

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Introduction

Project summary

TRUEDEM is a 3-year multinational research project funded by the Horizon program of the European Commission with several core objectives. TRUEDEM aims to design and implement a complex research effort to collect comprehensive evidence on the perceptions of trust and judgments of trustworthiness in a range of European states. The project will create a robust and comprehensive knowledge base on long-term dynamics and predictors of trust in political institutions of representative democracy (parties, executives, parliaments, judiciary etc.) in the EU. TRUEDEM will examine the role of new patterns of electoral behaviour, impact of socioeconomic transformations, the erosion of old and emergence of new political cleavages for the inclusiveness, representativity and legitimacy in European democracies, and political trust. TRUEDEM will identify strategies to address the demands and needs of citizens expressed via both electoral and non-electoral forms of political participation as means to enhance active engagement and inclusion and thus booster inclusive and responsive decision-making and governance in Europe. TRUEDEM will distinguish clusters of values that can hinder or foster pro-democratic values and attitudes and thus contribute to the barriers and opportunities to re-invigorating and enhancing representative democratic systems. Finally, TRUEDEM will develop a comprehensive and transparent toolbox of policy interventions including recommendations, toolkits and methodologies for enhancing trust in political institutions, boosting transparency inclusiveness of representative systems. TRUEDEM is coordinated in Austria with partners in Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, and Ukraine. The three-year program runs from January 2023 to December 2025.

Summary of the Report (D2.3)

The report investigates electoral turnout trends over the past three decades across the European Union member states. With a specific focus on European Parliament and national parliamentary elections, it seeks to unravel the intricate relationship between trust—both political and social—and voter participation. Grounded in political science theory, the report acknowledges the centrality of voter turnout as a fundamental indicator of democratic legitimacy. It builds upon established literature, to develop a nuanced understanding of the myriad factors influencing electoral participation. Highlighting the evolving nature of democratic practices, the report delineates trends in electoral turnout across different periods and country groupings based on EU accession and geographical location. This contextual analysis lays the foundation for examining the interplay between geopolitical dynamics, democratic consolidation, and voter behaviour.

Central to the report's inquiry is the theoretical framework articulated by scholars like P.Norris, which underscores the importance of political trust and social trust in shaping electoral outcomes. Through rigorous multivariate analysis, the report evaluates the relative impact of these trust dimensions alongside other institutional, political, social, and economic factors on voter turnout. The findings reveal intriguing patterns, indicating a significant role for social trust in influencing national election turnout, while institutional trust emerges as a critical factor in European Parliament elections. Moreover, the analysis underscores the pervasive influence of economic inequality on electoral participation, emphasizing the complex interplay between socio-political dynamics and democratic engagement. In examining specific national cases—such as Italy, Germany, and Poland—the report offers valuable insights into the contextual factors driving variations in electoral behaviour. It underscores the need for further scholarly inquiry into the nuanced relationship between trust and voter turnout within European democracies, pointing towards avenues for future research and policy consideration in bolstering democratic participation.



Introduction

This report is a part of *Work Package 2 – Voting and electoral behaviour: new challenges for inclusiveness and representativity in democratic systems*, led by UNISA-IT (Team leader: Domenico Maddaloni). The paper is aimed at understanding electoral turnout trends in European Union member countries in the last thirty years, with special reference to both European Parliament and national parliamentary elections. It follows the work on the construction of a cross-national voter turnout database (D2.1¹) and is parallel to the publication of a set of infographics presenting key data on electoral turnout in Europe to scholarly communities and the general public (D2.2²).

Voter turnout has been, and still is, one of the most important topics in research on representative democracies, since it is considered as an indicator of legitimacy of the political institutions. Over the years, an increasing amount of literature has been devoted to the topic. This report is aimed at a first outline of the factors at stake when voter turnout is addressed in social and political research, with a special reference to social and political trust. Following TRUEDEM overall project scope, this report's focus is on the relationship between political trust and electoral turnout. More specifically, the report investigates the role played by political and institutional trust, on one side, and social or generalized trust, on the other, in affecting voter turnout trends and differences among the EU countries. Therefore, the research questions addressed in this report are as follows: (1) *Is there an association between social trust and/or political trust, and voter turnout?* (2) *Does this association hold for both European Parliamentary (EP) and national parliamentary (NP) elections?* (3) *Is the effect of trust moderated by contextual and institutional factors?*

Before to the analysis, it is useful to briefly outline the main trends and differences in turnout across European countries. Following this, Chapter 1 assesses the turnout trends in both European Parliament elections and national elections. In this part, the report first describes the overall trends in electoral turnout, and then proceeds to discuss the differences in turnout trends over decades (1991-2001; 2002-2012; 2013-2023), Third, these trends are examined in different groups of countries, identified based on two criteria: the time of their accession to the EU and their geographical location. These aggregations make it possible to assess whether the influence of geopolitical background and the consolidation of democratic practices can be mirrored in different levels of voter turnout.

Subsequent chapters are devoted to the analysis of differences in turnout at country level. In this part, we focus on finding the most effective predictors of these national differences. For this purpose, chapter 2 builds on the previous work (Fruncillo et al., 2023), presenting a short review of the existing literature on the factors affecting voter turnout. One of Max Weber's main teachings on the epistemology of the social sciences is that much of the phenomena studied in this area are eminently multifactorial in nature. Therefore, any explanation of a phenomenon such as voter turnout can only consider the complexity of the interactions among the many factors that influence it. However, despite the increasing methodological sophistication of the studies on the topic, there is still no established core model of electoral turnout. Previous literature reviews on the issue (Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006; Cancela & Geys 2016; Smets & van Ham, 2013; Stockemer, 2017; Frank & Martinez i Coma, 2023) have shown that the predictors explaining voter turnout are various and relate to different dimensions of the social world. In this context, trust is only one of the many factors considered by scholars in explaining electoral turnout.

Chapter 2 examines previous research on the factors affecting voter turnout, including trust (Norris, 2023). There is a growing consensus that a direct role in causing differences in electoral turnout is

¹ See: <https://www.truedem.eu/resources-and-deliverables/online-data-analysis/voting-and-elections-database>

² See: [https://www.truedemdata.eu/truedem/Infographics on European and National elections Dec 31 2023.pdf](https://www.truedemdata.eu/truedem/Infographics%20on%20European%20and%20National%20elections%20Dec%2031%202023.pdf)



played by institutional and political trust and associated factors (such as perceptions of corruption and the integrity of the electoral process) (Uslaner, ed., 2018). However, there does not yet seem to be a general consensus on the role of social or generalised trust in influencing electoral behaviour. In this perspective, we draw on the previous research developed by Norris aimed at better understanding of political participation (Norris, 2002), and the most recent one, on trustworthiness and trust (Norris, 2022). Based on this, the report develops a theoretical model to highlight the role of both political trust and social trust on voter turnout in European Parliamentary and national elections, using institutional, political, social and economic factors as control variables. Since analysis is performed at the aggregate-level variables, Norris' scheme (2022) was adapted to the data available at this stage of the research pathway. Following this, chapter 3 defines the research strategy based on a model aimed at assessing the relationships between average electoral turnout rate (dependent variable), on the one hand, and a complex set of dimensions (at the macro level: culture, inequalities, development, demography; at the meso level: electoral convenience, democratic profiles, corruption, media pluralism and political fragmentation; at the micro level: political trust).

In this chapter, we also define the sample, the election levels, and the operational definition of the variables to be used in our exercise. In this perspective, we believe that an added value of our research path is the focus on European countries, and more specifically on the member states of the European Union since they share an important political participation event – the European elections. However, it should not be forgotten that national general elections have retained their relevance throughout the post-Cold War era. Due to this, the chosen timeline includes electoral outcomes since the establishment or restoration of openly competitive electoral procedures in Eastern European countries. As for the data availability, we rely on our longitudinal cross-country database on voter turnout (D2.1), integrated by data on trust drawn from cross-national surveys (EVS/WVS and Eurobarometer) and other sources.

Chapter 4 presents the results of an exercise of multivariate analysis aimed at testing the explanatory model of voter turnout in European Union member-states. This exercise allows to measure the weight some variables, including political trust (as an intervening variable) and social trust (as an element of societal culture) have in producing the differences in voter turnout between the countries studied. Obtained findings show that the role of social or generalised trust in influencing electoral turnout is confirmed for national elections. On the contrary, the relationship between institutional trust and turnout in national elections is reversed. Quite interestingly, the opposite is true when European elections are considered. Besides confirming the different dynamics in the two types of electoral competition, these results also seem to reinforce the idea that the two types of trust, although related, are by no means completely overlapping. In contrast, internal economic inequality, as measured by the Gini index, is an important predictor of voter turnout in both types of election.

Finally, in chapter 5 analyses discusses some national cases, where voter turnout levels and trends can be considered as “average” or “outliers”. This allows to understand better what affects electoral turnout at a national level. More specifically, our focus is on the cases of Italy, Germany, and Poland. The first one may be seen as an outlier since Italy shows a trend of growing decline in voter turnout during the whole period 1990s-2020s (unlike many other European countries). The other two cases, on the other hand, can be considered as representative of the average trend found in the EU, with little or no decline in turnout, albeit at different levels. Our results show that social, political, and institutional changes at national level greatly influence electoral behaviour. However, research on the role of trust in influencing citizens' political participation in European countries still seems rather underdeveloped. Other country cases also confirm that the relationship between trust and voter turnout is not yet the focus of scholarly attention. In these cases, research is still focused on the role of institutional and political factors, as well as on socio-economic ones, whose relative importance in turnout studies has grown recently.

1 Voter turnout trends across European countries

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

- the legitimacy of political institutions (see for instance³ Blais, 2006; Kirkland & Wood, 2016; Bekoe & Burchard, 2017; Facchini & Jaeck, 2019);
- the expression of the popular will in a democratic political framework (Rolfe, 2012; Kirkland & Wood, 2016);
- the legitimacy of public policies, including the size of the public sector (Agerborn, 2016; Ezrow & Krause, 2022);
- the political accountability of elected officials (Stokes, 2005; Birch, 2010; Bekoe & Burchard, 2017);
- overall levels of political participation (Mangum, 2003; Fornos et al., 2004; Wattenberg, 2015)
- major social changes, including technological innovations (Schelker & Schneider, 2017; Ohme, 2019).

In summary, high turnout is often seen as a positive sign for a healthy democracy, while low turnout may cause a widespread concern about representativeness and citizen participation in the political process. This raises some tempting research questions (Blais, 2006): Why is turnout higher in some countries and/or in some elections than in others? Why does it increase or decrease over time? To these questions we must add a central question for TRUEDEM research project: What role does trust play in influencing turnout levels?

The first task to be accomplished in this report is therefore to examine trends in voter turnout in elections for national parliaments and the European Parliament between the 1990s and the 2020s. Our analysis will cover all countries that are currently members of the European Union, including the United Kingdom which left the EU after the 2019 EP elections, as well as some other non-EU countries (Switzerland, Norway, and Ukraine)⁴.

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

³ Given the huge extent now reached by the literature on voter turnout, the bibliographical references in this introduction to chapter 1 must be considered as merely illustrative of a widespread knowledge.

⁴ We would like to thank our colleagues at TRUEDEM who contributed to our analysis by producing insights regarding the evolution of turnout in partner countries: Jakub Charvát (with the contribution of Petr Just and Ladislav Cabada), on the Czech Republic; Frédéric Gonthier and Prunelle Aymé, on France; Nikolas Demertzis and Sokratis Koniordos, on Greece; Bogdan Radu, Luciana Ghica, and Claudiu Tufis, on Romania; Branislav Dolný, on Slovakia; the UoL-SI team at TRUEDEM, on Slovenia; Igor Danylenko, Oleksandr Kizilov, Iryna Kuzina and Oleksandra Pedchenko, on Ukraine. Papers by Lennart Bruckert and Christian Welzel, on Germany, and Dawid Tatarczyk, on Poland, are published as case studies in chapter 5.

1.1 Measuring turnout

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

Each of these measures has drawbacks and can be misleading, as several studies on the subject have shown (see e.g. McDonald & Popkin, 2001; Wattenberg, 2002). In particular, the official turnout rate is based on the ratio of the number of actual voters to the number of registered voters. The reliability of this measure depends on the quality of voter list compilation methods, which can vary considerably from one country to another. There is no absolute certainty that all eligible voters are on the lists or that the lists are devoid of persons who are not entitled to vote or who are no longer eligible to vote. In other words, the calculation based on the number of registered voters may overestimate turnout (when the lists do not include all eligible voters) or underestimate it (when the lists are overstated or inflated by double or fictitious registrations). This measure of turnout, however, is the one most frequently used in official documents on citizens' electoral participation. In the following sections, we will refer to this measure of turnout rate as “turnout”, without further specifications.

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

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

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, we make use of the two most common measures of voter turnout, despite the methodological problems they raise. These are also the turnout measurements used in the construction of the database (D2.1). Before proceeding with the analysis, however, a few remarks about the calculation procedures of these indicators with reference to European countries are appropriate.

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

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

1.2 Voter turnout trends in national parliamentary elections

1.2.1 Overall trends, 1991-2023

Between 1991 and 2023, the average level of electoral participation in European Union member states (including the United Kingdom) was 69.2% when considering turnout (Table 1.1) and 66.6% when adopting VAP turnout (Table 1.2). Overall, in many cases, the participation rate is higher when calculated using the number of registered voters as a denominator. Considering the average values calculated for all elections held during the examined period, countries with the highest turnout are Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, Malta, Cyprus, Sweden; countries with the lowest levels of turnout are Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Bulgaria. The country rankings that emerge when considering turnout or VAP turnout are very similar. However, there are some exceptions, e.g. Luxembourg, Cyprus, and Latvia. These countries have a high share of foreign residents not entitled to vote on the total population. Consequently, the VAP turnout value tends to underestimate voter participation.

France is positioned at the bottom of the ranking when the focus is on parliamentary elections, which may be considered second-order by many voters as compared to presidential elections. Indeed, since 2002, legislative elections have consistently followed the presidential election, leading the less politically engaged segments of the electorate to believe that the National Assembly is not playing a crucial role in the functioning of French institutions.

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



Table 1.1. National Parliamentary Elections from 1991 to 2023: Turnout (a) by Country (%).

Country (b) / year	AT	BE	BG	HR	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK	EU countries (c)	Other countries (d)	
1991		92,7	84,0		94,3				72,1												43,0	67,8					86,7		77,2	46,1	
1992				75,0		85,0		67,8						68,5	87,4		75,2		96,0				76,3	84,2	85,8			77,0		79,8	
1993										69,0		79,2				89,9					52,1					76,4				73,3	75,9
1994	81,9		75,2				84,3				79,0		68,9		86,3			88,3						75,7			86,8			80,5	75,8
1995	86,0	91,2		63,3				69,1	67,8						71,0							66,3								73,5	42,2
1996					92,9	76,4						76,4			82,9		52,9						76,0		73,7	77,4				78,4	
1997			58,9							67,9				65,9								47,9						71,0		62,3	78,3
1998						73,9	86,0				82,2		59,0			71,0								84,3			81,1			78,5	70,8
1999	80,4	90,6						57,4	65,3									85,8					61,8							73,6	43,3
2000				70,5								75,0					58,6						65,3		70,2	68,7				68,0	
2001			66,6		91,8		87,2								81,4							46,2					59,4			72,1	75,5
2002	84,3					58,0				64,4	79,1		71,8	62,6		71,4						79,1		62,3		70,1			80,1	71,2	69,3
2003		91,6		59,6				58,2	66,3										95,7	80,0										75,2	45,2
2004												76,5					46,1	91,9					58,5		60,7	75,7				68,2	
2005			55,8				84,5				77,7											40,6	65,0				61,6			64,2	77,4
2006	78,5				89,0	64,5							67,8		81,2	62,7					80,4			54,7			82,0			73,4	67,6
2007		91,1		57,2			86,6	61,9	68,0	60,4		74,2		67,0								53,8								68,9	55,1
2008	78,8														78,1		48,6		93,3				39,2		63,1	73,9				67,9	
2009			60,6								70,8	71,0						90,9					59,7							70,6	76
2010		89,2				62,6							64,4			64,7					75,4			58,8			84,6	65,5		70,7	
2011				54,2	78,7		87,7	63,5	67,4					69,9		59,5						48,9	58,1		65,6	68,9				65,7	48,5
2012										57,2		63,8					52,9				74,6		41,8	59,1						58,2	57,4
2013	74,9		52,5			59,4					71,5				72,2			91,2	93,0											73,5	78,2
2014		89,4	51,1										61,8			58,9									51,7		85,8			66,4	51,9
2015				60,8			85,9	64,2	66,9			60,1									50,9	55,9					69,7		68,9	64,8	48,5
2016				52,6	66,7									65,1			50,6						39,8	59,8		66,5				57,3	
2017	80,0		53,9			60,8				48,7	76,2								92,1	81,6							70,0			70,4	78,2
2018													69,7		69,4	54,6		89,7							52,6		87,2			70,5	
2019	75,6	88,4					84,6	63,7	68,7			57,8									61,7	48,6				69,0		68,3	68,6	47,1	
2020				46,9										62,8			47,8						32,0	65,8						51,0	
2021			43,2		65,7	65,4					76,6										78,7									65,9	77,2
2022			39,4				84,2			47,5			69,6		60,4	59,4				85,6			51,4			71,0	84,2			65,3	
2023			40,5					63,7	68,5			57,6														70,4				60,1	
Entire period	6,5	90,5	56,8	60,0	82,7	67,3	85,7	63,3	67,9	59,3	76,6	69,2	66,6	66,0	77,7	66,3	54,1	89,6	93,5	78,0	49,5	59,7	53,6	68,1	66,0	71,7	84,3	67,7	69,2	63,0	
I DEC (1991-2001)	82,8	91,5	71,2	69,6	93,0	78,4	85,8	64,8	68,4	68,5	80,6	76,9	64,0	67,2	84,5	77,3	62,2	87,1	96,2	76,1	47,3	65,3	72,5	81,4	76,6	74,2	84,9	69,1	74,3	63,5	
II DEC (2002-2012)	80,5	90,6	58,2	57,0	83,9	61,7	86,3	61,2	67,2	60,7	75,9	71,4	68,0	66,5	79,7	64,6	49,2	91,4	94,5	77,9	47,8	61,3	46,5	60,7	63,1	72,8	82,2	63,6	68,6	62,1	
III DEC (2013-2023)	76,8	88,9	46,8	53,4	66,2	61,9	84,9	63,9	68,0	48,1	74,8	58,5	67,0	64,0	67,3	57,6	49,2	90,5	90,2	80,2	56,3	52,0	35,9	62,8	58,4	68,9	85,7	69,1	64,9	63,5	
Balance III-I dec	-5,9	-2,6	-24,4	-16,2	-26,8	-16,6	-0,9	-0,9	-0,4	-20,4	-5,8	-18,4	3,1	-3,3	-17,2	-19,7	-13,0	3,4	-6,0	4,1	9,0	-13,3	-36,6	-18,6	-18,1	-5,3	0,9	-0,1	-9,4	0,0	
Balance III-II dec	-3,7	-1,7	-11,4	-3,6	-17,7	0,2	-1,4	2,7	0,8	-12,6	-1,1	-12,9	-1,0	-2,6	-12,3	-6,9	0,0	-1,0	-4,3	2,3	8,5	-9,3	-10,6	2,1	-4,7	-3,9	3,5	5,5	-3,7	1,5	

Source: Data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

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



Table 1.2. National Parliamentary Elections from 1991 to 2023: VAP Turnout (a) by Country (%).

Country (b) / year	AT	BE	BG	HR	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK	EU countries (c)	Other countries (d)	
1991		85.1	84.6		78.6				71.6												44.4	78.6					82.8		75.1	39.7	
1992				75.4		56.5		40.9						73.7	92.3		70.2		95.3				76.2	83.8	85.5			75.4	75.0		
1993										61.0		85.6				57.7					52.0					76.8			66.6	74.5	
1994	75.5		81.0				81.7				72.4		69.4		91.0			60.5		75.2				76.2			82.4		76.5	74.7	
1995	78.6	83.2		77.6				48.8	71.1						50.6							79.1							69.9	35.7	
1996					78.3	77.7						84.2			87.1		50.0		98.0				78.2		75.8	81.2			78.9		
1997			66.9							59.8				67.4							48.8							69.6	62.5	76.8	
1998						76.6	83.1				75.3		57.0			52.9			95.9	70.2				78.9			77.7	74.2	69.7		
1999	72.6	83.1						46.0	65.2								56.9					68.7							65.4	34.9	
2000				85.8								89.0					50.4						62.2		72.1	73.8			72.2		
2001			72.1		67.7		84.3								84.7						47.6						57.8	69.0	73.5		
2002	77.5					59.0				56.2	73.5		70.5	67.0		55.2					76.8		66.8		71.6		78.0	68.4	68.3		
2003		86.0		74.4				48.1	69.5										95.4	77.5								75.1	37.3		
2004												87.6					43.4	56.6					62.3		61.1	76.5			64.6		
2005			62.4				81.3				72.0										40.9	68.8					58.5	64.0	76.5		
2006	73.2				60.4	65.1							67.6		84.5	50.1					77.5			56.4			80.6	68.4	53.3		
2007		86.0		72.0			83.2	53.4	68.2	54.5		79.6		68.9								54.2						68.9	61.5		
2008	75.6														81.5		46.2		94.6				40.5		65.0	70.3			67.7		
2009			72.4								64.6	79.2						53.2					66.2					67.1	74.7		
2010		84.7				62.2							63.7			52.5					71.1			58.5			82.6	60.6	67.0		
2011				66.1	47.2		81.8	55.5	72.8					63.8		53.0						48.5	64.5		67.0	63.3		62.1	39.6		
2012										50.7		70.8					55.9				71.0			42.8	57.9			58.2	55.5		
2013	65.9		59.7			60.0					66.1				70.6			55.1	91.7								67.0	77.9			
2014		87.2	60.9										63.4			51.7										54.1	82.6	66.6	43.1		
2015				63.9			80.3	56.8	73.1			66.4									49.4	61.8				64.6	60.7	64.1	38.6		
2016				55.5	39.1									58.0			54.5						41.1	59.4		61.2		52.7			
2017	68.8		62.8			58.0				44.4	69.9								92.3	77.3						62.9	67.1	70.6			
2018													71.7		67.8	53.6		48.2							54.6	82.1	63.0				
2019	64.4	77.9					76.4	56.5	69.4			63.5									59.1	61.3				62.7	62.0	65.3	38.3		
2020				49.5										56.7			52.5						34.3	65.4				51.7			
2021			50.7		35.2	61.7					69.5										74.9					62.9		58.4	69.3		
2022			45.8				75.7			43.6			71.5		58.6	60.8			77.4				64.8			69.4	80.3	64.8			
2023			47.5					63.1	68.9			64.4															62.9		61.3		
Entire period	72.5	84.2	63.9	68.9	58.1	64.1	80.9	52.1	70.0	52.9	70.4	77.0	66.9	65.1	79.8	53.8	52.9	55.1	92.6	74.6	49.4	68.1	54.7	67.6	67.2	69.3	81.0	63.4	66.6	58.4	
I DEC (1991-2001)	75.6	83.8	76.2	79.6	74.9	70.3	83.0	45.2	69.3	60.4	73.9	86.3	63.2	70.6	88.8	53.7	56.9	58.7	96.4	72.7	48.2	75.5	72.2	79.6	77.8	77.3	81.0	67.6	71.4	59.9	
II DEC (2002-2012)	75.4	85.6	67.4	70.8	53.8	62.1	82.1	52.3	70.2	53.8	70.0	79.3	67.3	66.6	83.0	52.7	48.5	54.9	95.0	74.8	47.9	66.6	48.5	61.1	64.4	70.0	80.4	59.6	66.5	58.3	
III DEC (2013-2023)	66.4	82.6	54.6	56.3	37.2	59.9	77.5	58.8	70.5	44.0	68.5	64.8	68.9	57.4	65.7	55.4	53.5	51.7	87.1	76.1	54.3	62.6	37.7	62.4	59.4	62.9	81.7	61.9	62.0	56.3	
Balance III-I dec	-9.2	-1.2	-21.6	-23.3	-37.7	-10.4	-5.6	13.6	1.2	-16.4	-5.3	-21.5	5.7	-13.2	-23.1	1.6	-3.4	-7.1	-9.3	3.4	6.1	-12.8	-34.5	-17.2	-18.4	-14.4	0.7	-5.7	-9.4	-3.6	
Balance III-II dec	-9.1	-3.0	-12.8	-14.5	-16.7	-2.2	-4.6	6.5	0.3	-9.8	-1.5	-14.5	1.6	-9.2	-17.3	2.7	5.0	-3.3	-7.9	1.3	6.4	-3.9	-10.8	1.3	-5.0	-7.2	1.3	2.3	-4.5	-2.0	

Source: Data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

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

To better observe the evolution of electoral participation at the country level, election results were grouped into three periods of approximately 10 years: 1991–2001, 2002–2012 and 2013–2023. For each country, a 10-year average of turnout rates was calculated. With this method, we avoid focusing on exceptional events and thus neglect broader, long-term trends that are more significant.

Overall, between the first and the last decade, there is a 9.4% drop in participation with regard to both turnout and VAP turnout. Between the second and the last decade, the drop in percentage points is slightly less than half, i.e. 4.5% when considering VAP turnout and 3.7% when considering voter turnout. The ranking of countries for each period differs slightly from the overall ranking.

Countries with the largest decline in participation between the first and third decade are Romania, Cyprus, Bulgaria, France, Latvia, Slovakia, Greece, Slovenia, and Italy. Using the VAP turnout, countries with the largest declines in participation are Cyprus, Romania, Croatia, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, and Slovenia. The two lists are different, and here the stability of the data on registered voters and voting age population and the reliability of the estimates made for quantifying the voting age population should be further investigated. This consideration also proves to be appropriate if we turn to the list of countries where participation seems to increase between the first and third decade. These are Poland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Hungary, and Sweden, based on turnout; these are Poland, the Netherlands, Estonia, Hungary, and Finland, based on VAP turnout.

1.2.2 Regional trends in national elections

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

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

The data presented in Tables 1.3 and 1.4 confirm the usefulness of verifying the robustness, stability and reliability of the data and related measures of electoral participation. Indeed, if electoral participation is measured on the basis of registered voters, the highest rates are registered in the founding countries (79.7%), while if electoral participation is calculated on the population of voting age, the average turnout rates are highest for the countries that joined the European Union before 2000 (71.9%). The countries that joined the Union after 2000 have the lowest participation rates when both voter turnout and VAP turnout are considered. The same conclusions emerge when looking at these data from one decade to the next. Founding countries show higher participation rates for all three periods when calculated based on the number of registered voters; countries that joined in the second phase show higher average participation rates when turnout is based on the voting age population.

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



Table 1.3. National Parliamentary elections in Europe from 1991 to 2023: Average turnout by decades and EU Accession (%)

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

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

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

Table 1.4. National Parliamentary elections, 1991-2023: Average VAP turnout by decades and EU accession (%)

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

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

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

As previously mentioned, countries were aggregated also according to their geopolitical location into four groups – Northern, Western, Eastern, and Southern Europe. Again, some differences emerge when considering the turnout or the VAP turnout. If we consider turnout (Table 1.5), for the entire reference period (1991-2013), countries with the highest turnout are those in Western Europe (79.0%). Countries in Eastern Europe (58.2%) are those where citizens vote the least. The same ranking is found if the observation is restricted to each of the three decades. It is always Western Europe that has the highest turnout, and it is always Eastern Europe that has the highest turnout.



Table 1.5. National Parliamentary Elections, 1991-2023: Average turnout by decades and geopolitical regions (%)

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

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

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

If we move to consider the trend in VAP turnout (Table 1.6), the results are again slightly different since, with reference to the period from 1991 to 2023, the highest participation rates are found in Southern European countries (72.0%), rather than in Western European countries. Eastern European countries have the lowest VAP turnout on average. Moreover, if we deepen our analysis by articulating it over the three decades, we can find non-negligible differences. Indeed, in the first and second decades, the area with the highest participation rates is Southern Europe rather than Western Europe, but in the third decade Northern Europe shows higher participation rates. Eastern countries show the lowest participation rates for the whole period and for the second and third decade. Only in the first decade is the average VAP participation lower in the Northern countries.

Table 1.6. National Parliamentary Elections in Europe from 1991 to 2023 – Average VAP turnout by decades and geopolitical regions

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

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

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

Finally, looking at the turnout rates over the three decades, we can consider the trends in electoral participation in the four different geographical areas. Between the first decade and the third, the biggest drop in participation occurs in Southern European countries (14.6% for turnout and 20.0% for VAP turnout). In Northern European countries, there is a smaller decrease (-3.9%) or even a slight increase (+0.4%) when considering VAP turnout. A similar divergence can be seen in relation to Western European countries, as turnout remains stable over the decades, while it decreases when considering the voting age population. In Eastern countries, the decline seems to be slowing down, as participation rates have decreased by 0.5% for turnout and 0.4% for VAP turnout over the last 10 years.

1.3 Voter turnout trends in European Parliament elections

1.3.1 Overall trends, 1994-2019

In this section, we examine voting participation in European Parliament (EP) elections. The analysis will consider the European elections held in each country between 1994 and 2019⁵. Our analysis follows the same pattern as in the previous section. Therefore, we begin by analysing the overall results for the entire period considered. Secondly, we analyse turnout trends with reference to three periods, each of which includes two European Parliament elections (1994-1999; 2004-2009; 2014-2019). Finally, we examine electoral participation in groups of countries distinguished based on the time of EU accession or geopolitical location. Differences arising from the two measures of electoral participation are highlighted below.

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

The countries with the highest turnout are Belgium, Luxembourg, Malta, Italy, Greece, Austria, Cyprus. Those with the highest VAP turnout are Belgium, Malta, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Ireland, and Austria. The ranking that emerges based on the two measures is similar. There is a wider difference between the values for Luxembourg and Cyprus, as might be expected (see section 3.2 above). The countries with the lowest levels of participation, both in terms of turnout and VAP, are Croatia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, and the United Kingdom.

Overall, a substantial decline in voter turnout in EP elections occurred from 1994 to 2019. The drop is 9% based on turnout and 10.3% based on VAP turnout. However, the turnout rate in the 2019 European elections (tables 3.7 and 3.8) was higher than in the previous round - a result confirmed whether using turnout (+5.5%) or VAP turnout (+4.3%). Interestingly, in the UK, turnout remained stable (when using turnout) or even increased by 1.6% (when using VAP turnout), in the most recent time period, just before the Brexit process was completed.

Regarding the trend in turnout over the three periods, there is a decrease of 11% for VAP turnout and 9.2% for turnout between the 1990s and the 2000s. In contrast, there is a slight increase in participation rates (0.5% for turnout, 0.2% for VAP turnout) between the second and third periods. These results must be interpreted with caution, due to the different number of countries involved in EP elections in each period. However, even with these cautions, it can be observed that the countries with the largest declines in participation are Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, France, and Luxembourg. This emerges with both measures of turnout. In particular, Italy shows a consistent decline in participation rates in both periods. In France, Greece, and Spain, on the other hand, turnout declines sharply between the 1990s and 2010, with a recovery between the second and third decade.

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

⁵ In this regard, it should be noted that we have chosen to include the elections held in Sweden (1995), Austria, and Finland (1996) in the 1994 round. Similarly, the elections held in Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 were included in the 2004 round. As regards Croatia, a country that celebrated two electoral rounds in 2013 and 2014, the average value is considered.



Table 1.7. European Parliamentary Elections from 1994 to 2019: Turnout (a) by Country (%)

Country (b) / Year	AT	BE	BG	HR	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK	EU countries
1994	67.7	90.7					52.9		57.6	52.8	60	73.2		44	73.6			88.6		35.7		35.5				59.1	41.6	36.5	58.0
1999	49.4	91					50.5		30.1	46.8	45.2	70.2		50.2	69.7			86.6		30		40.3				63.1	38.8	24.1	52.4
2004	42.4	90.8	29.2		72.5	28.3	47.9	26.8	39.3	42.8	43	63.2	38.5	59	71.7	41.3	48.4	91.2	82.4	39.3	20.9	38.8	29.5	17	28.4	45.1	37.9	39.2	46.5
2009	46	90.4	38.9		59.4	28.2	59.5	43.9	40.5	40.6	43.3	52.5	36.3	57.6	65.1	53.7	21	90.8	78.8	36.8	24.5	36.8	27.7	19.6	28.3	44.9	45.5	34.7	45.2
2014	45.4	89.6	36.1	23	44	18.2	56.3	36.5	39.1	42.4	48.1	59.3	29	52.4	57.2	30.2	47.4	84.6	74.8	37.3	23.8	33.8	32.4	13.1	24.6	43.8	51.1	35.6	43.3
2019	59.8	88.5	32.6	29.9	45	28.7	66.1	37.6	43.1	50.1	61.4	58.7	43.6	49.7	54.5	33.5	53.5	84.2	72.7	41.9	45.7	30.7	51.2	22.7	28.9	60.7	55.3	37.2	48.8
Entire period (e)	51.8	90.2	34.2	25.3	55.2	25.9	55.5	36.2	41.6	45.9	50.2	62.9	36.8	52.2	65.3	39.7	42.5	87.7	77.2	36.8	28.7	36	35.2	18.1	27.5	52.8	45	34.5	49.0
I (1994-1999)	58.6	90.9					51.7		43.9	49.8	52.6	71.7		47.1	71.7			87.6		32.9		37.9				61.1	40.2	30.3	55.2
II (2004-2009)	44.2	90.6	34.1		66.0	28.3	53.7	35.4	39.9	41.7	43.2	57.9	37.4	58.3	68.4	47.5	34.7	91.0	80.6	38.1	22.7	37.8	28.6	18.3	28.4	45.0	41.7	37.0	45.9
III (2014-2019)	52.6	89.1	34.4	26.5	44.5	23.5	61.2	37.1	41.1	46.3	54.8	59.0	36.3	51.1	55.9	31.9	50.5	84.4	73.8	39.6	34.8	32.3	41.8	17.9	26.8	52.3	53.2	36.4	46.1
Balance III-I	-6.0	-1.8					9.5		-2.8	-3.6	2.2	-12.7		4.0	-15.8			-3.2		6.7		-5.7				-8.9	13.0	6.1	-9.2
Balance III-II	8.4	-1.6	0.3		-21.5	-4.8	7.5	1.7	1.2	4.6	11.6	1.2	-1.1	-7.3	-12.6	-15.7	15.8	-6.6	-6.8	1.6	12.1	-5.6	13.2	-0.4	-1.6	7.3	11.5	-0.5	0.2

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

Table 1.8. European Parliamentary Elections from 1994 to 2019: VAP Turnout (a) by Country (%)

Country (b) / Year	AT	BE	BG	HR	CY	CZ	DK	EE	FI	FR	DE	EL	HU	IE	IT	LV	LT	LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SK	SI	ES	SE	UK	EU countries
1994	63.6	84					53.3		60.9	46.6	56.1	85		47.9	78.8			63.9		35.2		39.8				67.7	40.4	36.5	57.3
1999	46.5	83.9					49.2		31.6	41.4	42	78.7		54.7	74.3			61.7		29.4		44.2				67.6	38.1	24.1	51.2
2004	40	84.6	31.3		47.2	30.9	46.4	22.3	41.1	37.5	39.8	70.3	38.4	62.5	75.4	31.3	45.3	60	82.4	38.3	21.5	40.5	26.9	17.5	31.9	45.7	37.3	37.9	43.8
2009	41.3	83.9	43.6		39	29.7	56.3	37.8	39.9	26.4	39.5	59.2	36	54.2	65.1	43.2	19.5	57.1	78.8	34.7	24	41.5	28.1	19.5	28.8	41.9	46.8	32.3	41.8
2014	39.8	85.9	41.1	24.6	31.5	17.6	54.2	32.6	41.9	38.8	44.6	67.5	29	47.5	57.3	25.2	43.2	55.8	77.8	36.4	23.6	37.6	33.5	13.2	25.6	41.2	49.4	33.4	41.1
2019	51.1	77.6	36.2	31.3	28.3	27.2	59.9	33.3	41.1	45	55.8	65.2	43.2	45.6	53.3	30.4	58.8	48.7	71.8	39.9	43.5	38.7	52.8	22.6	28.4	55.7	52.3	33.4	45.4
Entire period	47.1	83.3	38	26.8	36.5	26.3	53.2	31.5	42.8	39.3	46.3	71	36.6	52.1	67.4	32.5	41.7	57.9	77.7	35.6	28.2	40.4	35.3	18.2	28.7	53.3	44	32.9	46.8
I (1994-1999)	55.1	84.0					51.3		46.3	44.0	49.1	81.9		51.3	76.6			62.8		32.3		42.0				67.7	39.3	30.3	54.3
II (2004-2009)	40.7	84.3	37.5		43.1	30.3	51.4	30.1	40.5	32.0	39.7	64.8	37.2	58.4	70.3	37.3	32.4	58.6	80.6	36.5	22.8	41.0	27.5	18.5	30.4	43.8	42.1	35.1	42.8
III (2014-2019)	45.5	81.8	38.7	28.0	29.9	22.4	57.1	33.0	41.5	41.9	50.2	66.4	36.1	46.6	55.3	27.8	51.0	52.3	74.8	38.2	33.6	38.2	43.2	17.9	27.0	48.5	50.9	33.4	43.3
Balance III-I	-9.6	-2.2					5.8		-4.8	-2.1	1.2	-15.5		-4.8	-21.3	27.8		-10.6		5.9		-3.8				-19.2	11.6	3.1	-11.0
Balance III-II	4.8	-2.5	1.2		-13.2	-7.9	5.7	2.9	1.0	10.0	10.6	1.6	-1.1	-11.8	-15.0	-9.5	18.6	-6.3	-5.8	1.7	10.8	-2.8	15.7	-0.6	-3.4	4.7	8.8	-1.7	0.5

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

1.3.2 Regional trends in EP Election

The average turnout and VAP turnout for groups of countries based on when they joined the European Union was then calculated. The groups include the EU founding countries, those that joined before 2000 and those that joined after 2000 (Tables 1.9 and 1.10). Turnout is highest in the founding member-states (62.7% for turnout and 55.0% for VAP turnout) and lowest among those that joined the EU after 2000 (37.7% for turnout and 35.6% for VAP turnout). Countries that joined before 2000 are in an intermediate position. The gap between the founding countries and those that joined the EU after 2000 is larger when looking at voter turnout and less when looking at VAP turnout.

Table 1.9. European Parliamentary elections, 1994-2019 – Average turnout by decades and EU accession (%)

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

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

Table 1.10. European Parliamentary elections, 1994-2019 – Average VAP turnout by decades and EU accession (%)

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

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

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

The distance between these groups of countries is the same when observed with reference to the periods defined above. In the 1990s, the difference between the average participation rates of the founding countries and those of the countries that joined later was 6.4% for VAP turnout, but rises to 15.0% when considering turnout. Moreover, among the founding countries there is a drop in participation from one period to the next, although in the third period the drop is smaller than in



the second (-0.5% for turnout and -0.2% for VAP turnout). The countries that joined the EU before 2000 even show an increase in electoral participation rates between 2000 and 2010.

Finally, looking at the turnout for the European Parliament elections in the EU countries according to the geopolitical region they belong to (Tables 1.11 and 1.12), constant differences can be noted between Western, Southern, Northern and Eastern Europe. Western European countries have the highest VAP participation rates in the 2010s. When looking at VAP turnout, Southern countries show a higher participation rate both over the entire period and in the first two decades. In contrast, Eastern European countries always show the lowest VAP participation rates, regardless of the calculation method. Overall, turnout and VAP turnout decrease between the first and second period, between the second and third decade. However, the average turnout rates increase in all groups, except for Southern Europe, between the 2000s and the 2010s.

Table 1.11. European Parliamentary elections, 1994-2019 – Average turnout by decades and geopolitical region (%)

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

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

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

Table 1.12. European Parliamentary elections, 1994-2019 – Average VAP turnout by decades and geopolitical region (%)

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

Source: data elaboration from TRUEDEM voter turnout database

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

1.4 Some concluding remarks

Our analysis of turnout trends in European countries allows to present some conclusions that may be useful for the further development of the TRUEDEM research.

First, from a methodological point of view, it was shown that the two methods of calculating turnout produce sometimes quite different results. In general, the electoral participation rate is lower when measured using the voting age population. This seems to be due to the increasing share of foreign citizens in the population of European countries, as a result of growing migration. Further differences emerge if the results are examined for different groups of countries and different time period. It would be useful to explore, based on these results, whether the two calculation methods measure different phenomena or the same phenomenon in different ways. This raises the question of the validity and reliability of the turnout measurement. In any case, the results of the above analysis show a higher reliability and stability of the 'official' turnout rate. We should also note that the automatic registration of voters on the electoral roll is generally provided for in almost all European countries. Indeed, the problem of updating the electoral registers remains. However, the error caused by failure to maintain registers could be lower than that resulting from incorrect estimates of the voting age population.

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

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

2 Voter turnout differences across European countries: Conceptual framework

In the previous chapter we have outlined the operational definitions of the concept of turnout. Moreover, we have described turnout trends in European countries between 1991 and 2023. In this chapter we look for answers to the next questions: What affects voter turnout? What role does trust play in influencing turnout levels? Therefore, we proceed with a short review of the literature to analyse the main findings already gained on the subject and to show the relevance of trust as a predictor of voter turnout. Based on this analysis, in the next chapter we then present a theoretical model aimed at integrating trust among the factors leading to the explanation of electoral behaviour.

2.1 What affects voter turnout? A review of reviews

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

The search for the causes and predictors of voter turnout has produced a substantial amount of literature, ranging from case studies to quantitative cross-national comparative analysis. This has resulted in a growing body of knowledge about the factors fostering or hindering the voter turnout. Unfortunately, there is no agreement among scholars as to which variables should be included in an explanatory model of electoral behaviour. Nor is there an agreement as to what structure this model should have. Moreover, the literature on electoral behaviour has grown enormously over time.

To better define this subject, our first step has been to compare the literature reviews on electoral turnout we found in a search via Google Scholar (Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006; Smets & van Ham, 2013; Cancela & Geys, 2016; Stockemer, 2017; Frank & Martinez i Coma, 2023). We considered (1) the type of work done; (2) the level of the variables; (3) the number of articles or essays examined in each study; (4) the number of variables taken into account in the survey; (5-7) the factors which were found to be associated with voter turnout (divided into three categories: institutional, political, socio-economic); and finally whether (8) trust was considered in each study. The main findings of this exercise are summarized in Table 2.1.

This exercise, however, meets some limitations, the most important of which is the risk of oversimplifying a very complex issue. In addition, “even the most exhaustive meta-analyses like those above are circumscribed by their samples. This implies that we are unsure about the robustness of such results, given that most researchers’ robustness checks are ad hoc” (Frank & Martinez i Coma, 2023: 612). Moreover, “many variables explaining turnout are interconnected, be it because of path-dependency or because they measure closely related concepts” (Smets & van Ham, 2013: 357). Another limitation stems from the wide range of variable operationalisations available. For instance, Geys (2006) refers to 12 variables under scrutiny, but differences in operationalisation increase the number of variables under analysis to 33, rising to 40 in a later study



(Cancela & Geys, 2016). In addition, the explanatory power of each variable is not the same if we consider elections of different relevance. Cancela & Geys, for instance, find that “campaign expenditures, election closeness and registration requirements have more explanatory power in national elections, whereas population size and composition, concurrent elections, and the electoral system play a more important role for explaining turnout in subnational elections” (2016: 264). Finally, while the number of political and institutional variables considered in research on voter turnout is relatively limited, the number of variables referring to demographic, economic, social or cultural aspects is much higher. This reduces even more the comparability of the findings that relate to the set of potential causes of electoral behaviour.

Table 2.1. A review of reviews: factors affecting voter turnout*

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

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

With these limitations in mind, we can observe that political researchers generally agree that compulsory voting, voting facilities, the presence of concurrent elections, previous turnout, the closeness or competitiveness of elections, the size of the population and ethnic fractionalisation are safe predictors of voter turnout. However, this does not imply that other variables are unimportant, for the reasons mentioned above and also because the effect of some variables may be relevant for

some groups of countries but less relevant for others (Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006; Cancela & Geys, 2016; Stockemer, 2017; Frank & Martinez i Coma, 2023). Moreover, overall social change may affect the closeness of the relationship between a variable and voter turnout, which may therefore change over time. In addition, major structural and cultural changes produce new factors that may intervene in the causal pathway leading to electoral behaviour. For instance, a variable that is receiving increasing attention in turnout research is political polarisation (Dodson, 2010; Wilford, 2017; Bélanger, 2017; see also Cabada & Charvat, 2023). On this issue, recent research shows that the presence of the so-called populist parties, seen as an indicator of political polarisation, can boost voter turnout (Hobolt & Horner, 2019; Leininger & Meijers, 2020). Other developments in turnout literature may reflect a growing interest in a particular issue, as in the case of income inequality. There is evidence that higher levels of income inequality may lead to a decrease in voter turnout especially among poorer groups (Anderson & Beramendi, 2012; Schafer et al., 2021). These recent findings corroborate the main results of a larger study by Horn (2011), stating that inequality is negatively associated with turnout at national elections.

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

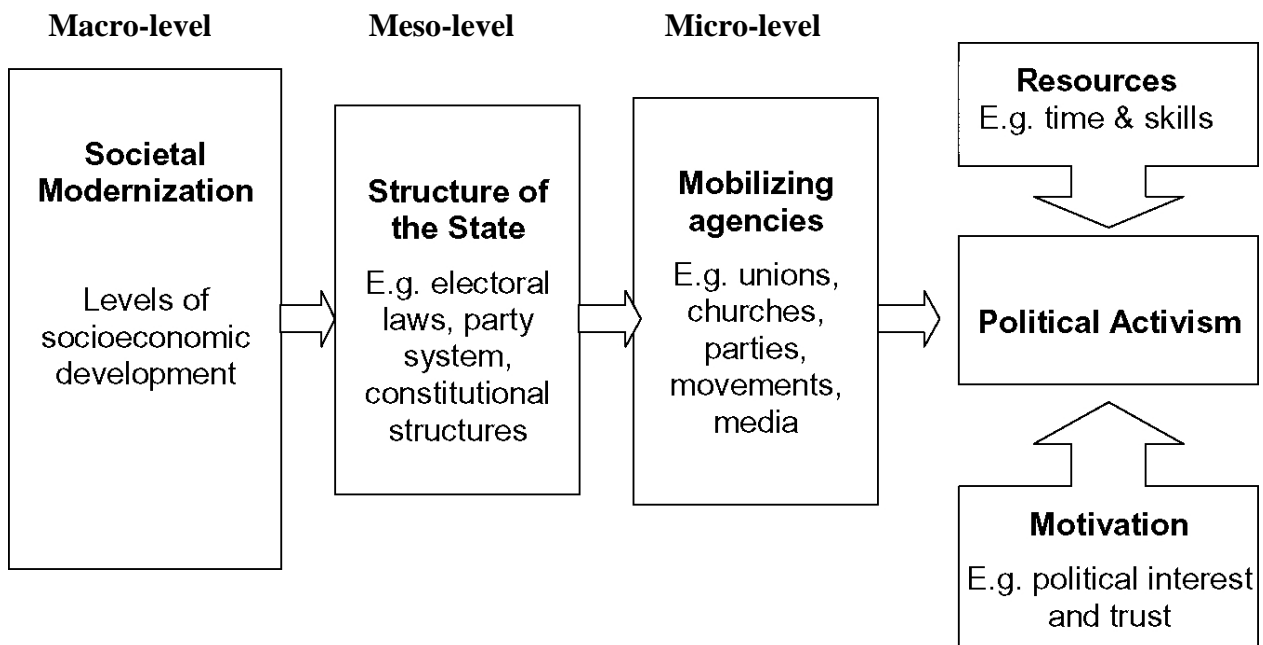
1. The resource model (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995), according to which electoral behaviour is driven by resources such as income, education, or socio-economic status.
2. The mobilization model (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993), according to which citizens are motivated to vote by their involvement in parties, candidates, interest groups and other social networks.
3. The rational choice model (Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968), according to which the choice of going or not going to vote is affected by direct costs-benefits calculations.
4. The psychological (or attitudinal) model, according to which electoral behaviour is affected by a range of psychological determinants, including cognitive characteristics such as party identification or political knowledge (Verba et al, 1978).
5. The socialization model (Plutzer, 2002), according to which the exposure to different socialization processes makes a difference in affecting electoral behaviour.
6. The political-institutional model (Lijphart, 1997; Franklin, 2004; Farrell, 2011), according to which individual choices are a by-product of the political system in which people live.

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

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

Starting from this debate, Norris develops a single theoretical model that explains differences in political participation (and thus also voter turnout) as a function of a combination of the factors considered by the previous approaches (see Figure 2.1). According to this theoretical model, the political behaviour of citizens is the result of a combination of factors operating at macro (social modernisation), meso (state structure and mobilising agencies) and micro (resources and motivations) levels.

Figure 2.1. A theoretical model of political activism



Source: Norris (2002), p. 20

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

2.2 The role of trust in voter turnout

Trust and perceptions of trustworthiness, the concepts at the core of TRUEDEM research, do not play a major role in the literature reviews examined above. Table 2.1. shows that these variables are not even mentioned in four out of six studies, while in one of them (Smets and van Ham, 2013) trust “in institutions” and trust “towards others” are included among the potentially relevant variables for the psychological model. Unfortunately, the meta-analysis conducted by these authors disproves that there is a strong correlation between these dimensions of trust and electoral turnout. Stockemer (2017) mentions research on trust “in elected officials” (Stockemer et al, 2013) but only to state that there are still too few studies to draw a definitive conclusion on the relevance of this variable for electoral behaviour.

In the last few years, however, a growing amount of research has been accumulated on the effect that various types of trust may have on political behaviour, including turnout. In this perspective, a first distinction can be made between political trust (towards the government and its policies, elected political bodies, coalitions and parties, or individual candidates and political entrepreneurs) and social trust (especially generalised trust, or trust toward “the others”) (Uslaner, 2018).

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

On the other hand, low levels of political trust can lead to political disenchantment (Eder et al., 2015), even if this does not automatically imply a decline in each form of political participation. According to this perspective, there is a link between political trust (via perceptions of political efficacy, on one side, and trustworthiness of political actors, on the other) and corruption perceptions in representative democracies (Norris, 2022: 169-197). Some studies (for instance, Malmberg & Christensen, 2021) have delved into the relationship between corruption perceptions and political participation, shedding light on the influence of corruption on citizens' engagement in the political process and their trust in democratic institutions. A growing body of research shows that perceptions of the parliament and/or the government being as corrupt decrease trust, and therefore aggregate turnout (Stockemer et al., 2013; Sundström and Stockemer, 2015). Another study refines these findings, showing that perceptions of a growing corruption among political leaders drives to a decline in electoral turnout in countries with previously low or medium levels of perceived corruption (Dahlberg & Solevid, 2016). However, when a new player enters the electoral competition and it is perceived as of greater integrity, voter turnout may grow (Kostadinova, 2009). According to this perspective, research on political trust also meets the issue of political polarisation, as in a recent work on polarisation of political trust among US citizens (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015).

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

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

Moreover, while political trust is more sensitive to short-term contingencies, such as economic downturns, social trust is more stable over time (Uslaner, 2018).

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

Once the relevance of the concepts of political trust and social trust (or generalised trust) for voter turnout research has been established, a further step is to incorporate them into the theoretical model aimed at an overall explanation of electoral behaviour. Research on voter turnout has developed at least two broad families of theories relating trust and electoral behaviour.

According to rational choice theories (Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968), individuals choose whether or not to vote based on a cost-benefit analysis. Hence, individuals who trust political institutions and believe that their vote will make a difference are more likely to vote because they perceive the benefits of voting to outweigh the costs. Conversely, individuals who distrust political institutions and believe that their vote will have no effect are less likely to vote because they perceive the costs of voting to outweigh the benefits. According to this perspective, rational choice theories relate more particularly to political trust.

Social capital theories (Putnam, 1993, 2000), instead, argue that trust (indeed, social or generalised trust) may boost the development of social networks and formal or informal associations (social capital), a resource useful to achieve both individual and collective goals. Individuals with high levels of social capital are more likely to engage in civic activities, such as voting, because they feel a sense of belonging to their community and believe that their actions can make a difference. Societies with high levels of social capital are therefore more prone to civic engagement and political participation, including voting. In this approach, social capital theories relate more particularly to social trust.

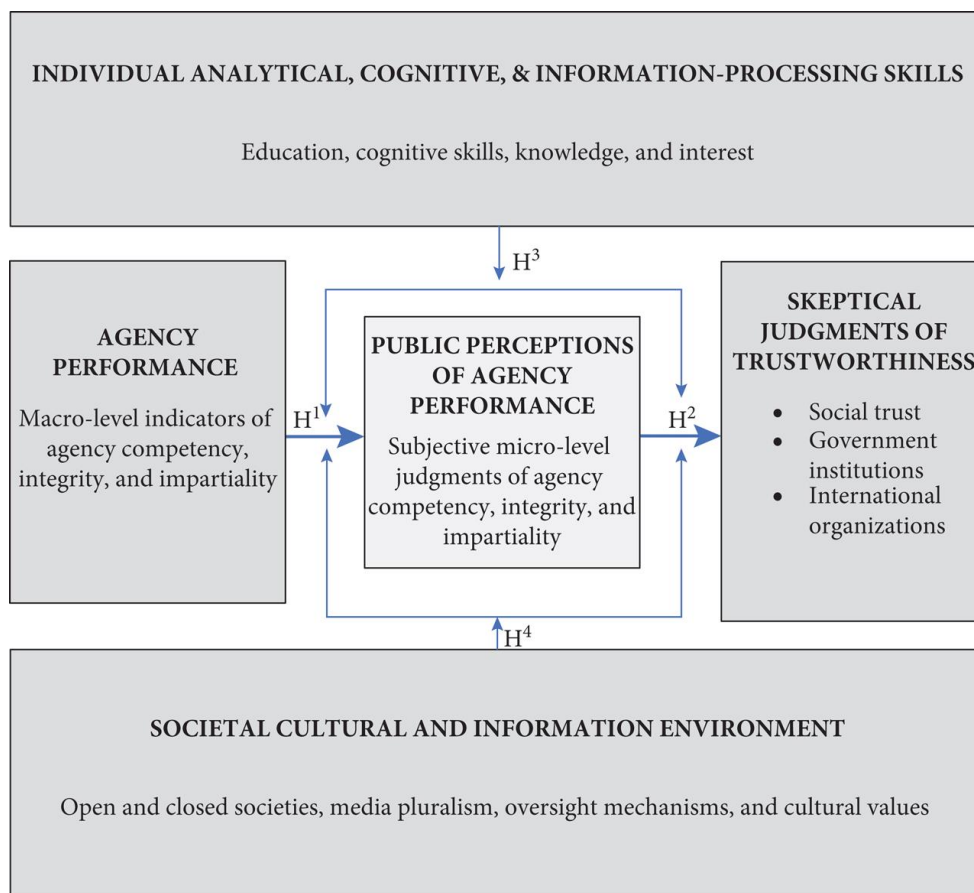
Another perspective, recently developed by Rolfe (2012), emphasizes the impact of social context and the interdependence of individual decisions. In Rolfe's view, social capital affects individual political choices insofar it produces a dynamic of social influence and communication that may increase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

With regard to trust, an important reference for this report work is the recent research on trust and participation by Norris (2022) – a book that also serves as the theoretical premise of the TRUEDEM project. From an actor-centred perspective, Norris views trust as an attitude based on a judgement of the trustworthiness of the actor's counterparts in the framework of a dyadic relationship. This judgement, in turn, may be affected by various factors. In the political arena these factors may be: (1) the societal environment (cultural values, media pluralism, systemic control, social hierarchies); (2) individual skills (such as the individual educational level or cognitive skills); (3) the agency performance (through indicators of competency, integrity, and impartiality) (see Figure 2.2).

Drawing on the argument developed by Norris, we posit that citizens living in an environment challenged by a set of relevant issues for them, use their aforementioned skills to develop perceptions on the extent to which political institutions and elected authorities rise up to these issues

and deal with the challenge. At the same time, the citizens assess the credibility of the programmes and proposals of other actors in the political arena (e.g. opposition parties). As a result, they may sceptically judge the trustworthiness of these institutions and actors and behave accordingly (see Sotiropoulos et al., 2023, for an application of this type of reasoning to the relationship between migration and political participation in Europe). The model thus states that political trust, in association with the individual judgment of trustworthiness on political institutions and actors, is an important intermediary between the basic structural and cultural variables and the choice to vote or not to vote. Under this perspective, perceptions of corruption and electoral integrity are linked to political trust, as they are indicators of trustworthiness of political institutions and the actors that support them (the government, ruling parties, political leaders, the bureaucracy), and thus enter into individual voting choice (Norris, 2022: 169-197).

Figure 2.2. A theoretical model of skeptical trust



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

In the examined model, social trust or generalised trust is seen rather as a dependent variable, since it may be affected by possible changes in perceived trustworthiness (see figure 2.1). But it may also act as an independent variable in the overall causal pathway. For instance, political corruption can undermine generalised trust. But higher levels of social trust are associated with lower levels of corruption (and vice versa). Trusting individuals are less likely to engage in corrupt behaviour, and societies with higher levels of trust tend to have stronger mechanisms in place to control corruption – and vice versa (Yu, 2018).

Therefore, social or generalised trust may be included not just in the outcomes, but also in the societal environment, based on this model. More specifically, since according to a long-standing sociological tradition generalised trust is one of the building blocks of social cooperation and collective self-rule, it has been seen as the foundation of both individual social networks and many kinds of social groups, including social and civic engagement associations. Therefore, social trust plays a significant role in fostering civic engagement, which encompasses cooperative activities such as volunteering, participation in community events, and political involvement (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Paxton & Kessler, 2018; Norris, 2022: 97-135). It should be noted, however, that some trust-based social networks and associations may be negative for democracy, as in the case of clientelism and rackets (Warren, 2018). Indeed, the latter may cause a decline in political trust and a withdrawal of citizens from political participation, including turnout in elections. Furthermore, social capital and civic engagement can lead to forms of political participation other than voting, such as involvement in social movements (Norris, 2022: 97-135), with mixed effects for electoral behaviour. In this theoretical model, therefore, social trust is only *prima facie* positively associated with voter turnout. Other factors – especially those we identified in section w.1 and listed also in the model – may intervene in the causal relationship, which can therefore only be understood when considering the theoretical model as a whole.

2.3 Some concluding remarks

The issue of trust has gained importance in the field of turnout studies, but it is still not considered a fundamental factor in research on the causes of electoral behaviour. Other variables continue to receive more attention, especially institutional and political ones, which are also more familiar to political scholars. However, some progress has certainly been made – particularly about the role of political trust (and related variables) in influencing turnout. By contrast, the role of social trust in this debate is less clear. From this perspective, contributions by Norris to the analysis of political participation (2002) and trust (2022) seem relevant to us in that they can lead to a broader and deeper understanding of the determinants of turnout. In the following chapters of this report, we proceed to merge the two approaches proposed into a single heuristic model linking social and political trust to voter turnout.

3 Voter turnout difference across European countries: Research design

The analysis of turnout trends outlined in chapter 1 and the conceptual framework defined in chapter 2 laid out the foundation for a research design aimed at understanding the relationship between trust and turnout in national parliamentary elections and European elections over the past thirty years. In this chapter (3) we first define the theoretical model explaining the influence exerted by social trust and political trust on turnout in the context of the network of causal relations that, as we have seen, also includes other factors. Secondly, we outline a research strategy in which all relevant variables are clearly defined both in their operational definition and in their presumed relationship to turnout. In the next chapter (4), we assess the validity and reliability of the theoretical model through a multivariate analysis.

3.1 Theoretical model

There are two ways to analyse turnout: using system (country) level explanations or individual level factors. Obviously, this choice is reflected in the empirical data. We opted for a system-level analysis of turnout. As we have seen in the previous chapter, and as confirmed by the meta-analysis of aggregate-level research on turnout (Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006; Smets & van Ham, 2013; Cancela & Geys 2016; Stockemer, 2017; Frank & Martinez i Coma, 2023), despite the increasing methodological sophistication of turnout studies, there is still no established central model of turnout and several factors have been alternately considered predictors of turnout at the macro level. Rarely have these factors been examined all together; rather, policy researchers have tested the influence of one or a few factors. Our aim is therefore to provide a comprehensive model to assess turnout in Europe. The model includes both explanatory factors that the literature has shown to be robust and other potentially important factors that have attracted increasing attention in more recent work. The model is based on four dimensions that are assumed to have an effect on turnout.

Following Norris (2002; see also chapter 2), we distinguish between macro-factors, which include all systemic causes of turnout, meso-factors related to the electoral and institutional context, and micro-factors related to individual attitudes and behaviour in aggregate. The distinction between macro, meso and micro factors is also related to data collection. Macro data preserves the country as a unit of analysis, meso data is election-related information and micro data is survey-based individual data.

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

The central claim of modernisation is that wealth, education, and urbanisation are the social foundations of democracy and mass political participation (Verba, Nie, Kim 1971). Modernisation refers to a multitude of social, economic and demographic changes that transform the structure of society (Norris 2002). These changes are so diverse and encompass so many dimensions that their

impact on democratisation and civic engagement may vary: some of them may encourage democratic engagement and others depress it. In particular, economic and human development (GDP growth, rising levels of literacy and education, increased public social spending) encourage democracy and thus push voter turnout upwards by improving cognitive skills and financial resources (Sassen 1999). Conversely, inequality and poverty should depress democratisation and civic engagement. At the same time, social trends associated with modernisation and industrialisation, such as urbanisation, can weaken traditional community ties and associations. Due to the revolution in cultural values that has caused changes in the forms of civic participation among the younger generations, who seem to be more interested in a post-materialist political agenda through new social movements and alternative forms of participation (Topf 1998; Inglehart 1997), a higher percentage of young people may also depress political participation.

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

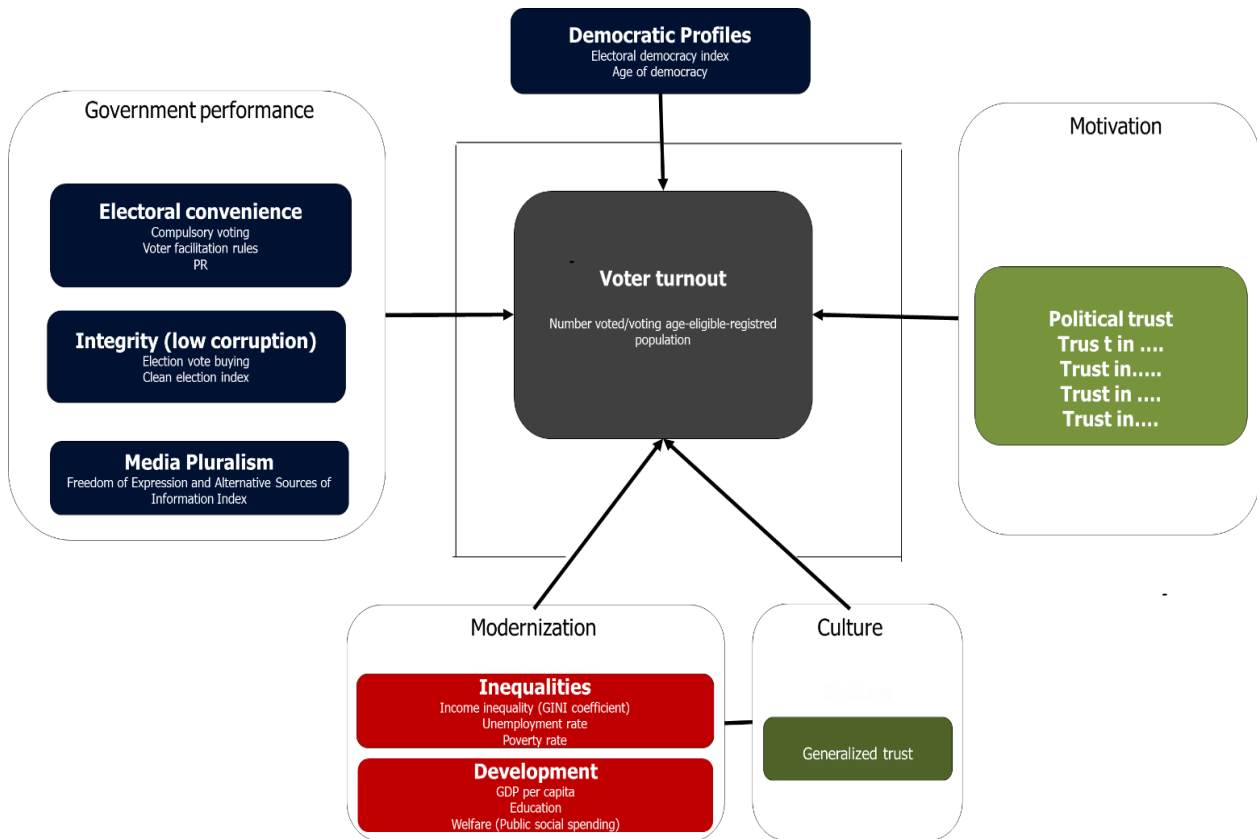
The cultural and socio-economic context defines opportunities for civic engagement that are further shaped by the state, institutions, and the rules of the political game. At the meso level, therefore, institutional arrangements and electoral systems influence the convenience of voting. This means that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

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

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

Thus, the relationship between the above listed variables is as follows: culture (generalised trust) and modernisation (level of social, economic and demographic development) promote cooperative social relations on which effective political institutions are based. In turn, effective political organisations help create legitimate government, which fosters political trust and thus voter turnout (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. A theoretical model of voter turnout



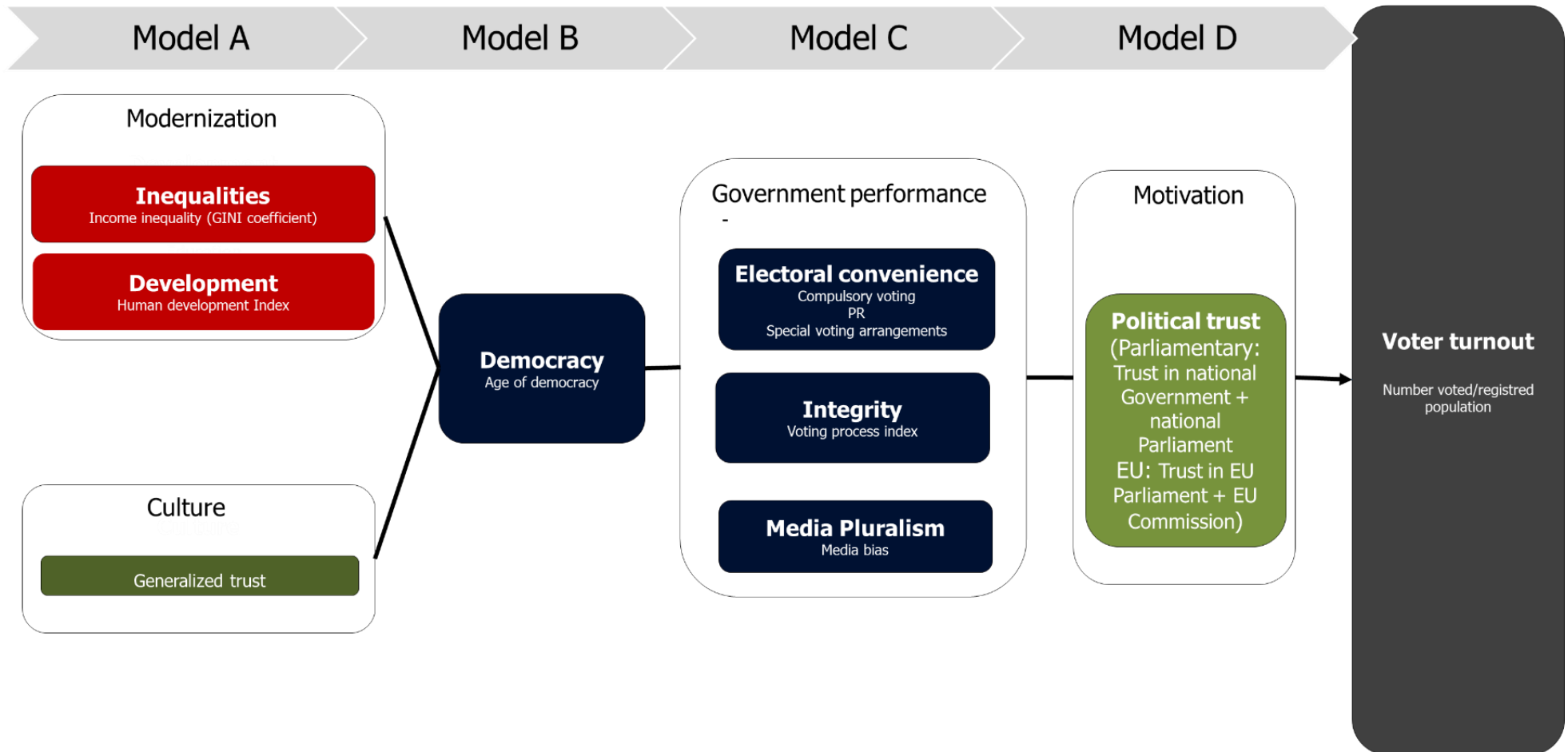
Source: elaborated by the authors

3.2 Research strategy

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

Our study is based on two separate multivariate analyses based on OLS regression analysis. Specifically, we construct two different sets of empirical models according to the type of election and distinguishing between national and European elections (see Figure 3.2). The dependent variable is turnout, measured as the percentage of registered voters in 273 national and 142 European elections held from 1991 to 2023 in 31 European countries. For each regression, Model A first inserts only the variables generalised trust and modernisation. Model B adds democratisation. Model C adds governmental performance indicators related to institutional factors that are assumed to influence turnout (electoral convenience, integrity and media pluralism). Finally, model D also tests the effect of political trust.

Figure 3.2. Empirical models of voter turnout



Source: elaborated by the authors

3.3 Operationalization/Measures

3.3.1 Dependent variable: Turnout

As we have seen in chapter 1, turnout can be operationally defined in two basic ways: 1) as the percentage of registered voters; 2) as the percentage of the voting age population. The first measure is calculated as the number of votes divided by the number of citizens legally registered to vote. The second measure is calculated as the number of votes divided by the size of the population that has reached the minimum voting age (voting age population, VAP). Semantically, these measures refer to different aspects of participation, depending on individual choices and electoral regulations. As discussed in chapter 1, neither of these measures is without limitations. Both can influence the magnitude of turnout rates by underestimating or overestimating electoral participation depending on contextual factors (see Figure 3.3). In particular, the first measure overestimates turnout by not including those who are entitled to vote but choose not to register. Registering may be an individual choice in some countries (e.g. the United States), not a choice in countries where citizens are legally obliged to register (e.g. Australia), or a duty of the government in countries where it takes responsibility for the registration process (e.g. Belgium). Furthermore, this operational definition of voter turnout can be misleading in countries where voting rights are restricted and only certain groups are eligible to vote (e.g. only men or whites, as in apartheid South Africa). Populations deemed ineligible to vote may also be excluded, such as illegal immigrants, the homeless, refugees, prisoners, people in psychiatric institutions and so on (Norris 2002). In these cases, turnout may appear high even though many voices are excluded. Conversely, it may underestimate turnout in the case of double or fictitious entries.

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

Figure 3.3. Types of voter turnout measures and their biases

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

Based on the results of the analysis carried out in chapter 1, which found a higher reliability of the measure based on registered voters, due to the fact that almost all European countries provide automatic registration of voters, the multivariate analysis was limited to it. All data for the construction of the turnout measures were collected from our Horizon TRUEDEM database (D2.1). The database covers 272 elections at the national level (lower house) and 141 elections at the European level from 1991 to 2023 in 31 European countries. Limiting the analysis to the period after 1990 also has the advantage of not confusing the phenomenon under observation with the long-term decline in voter turnout found in most democracies (Lijphart, 1997; IDEA, 2016).

3.3.2 Independent variables

Turnout and culture

Generalised trust

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

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

Turnout and modernisation

Inequalities

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

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

Development

Following modernisation theories (Inglehart 1997), the existing literature suggests that economic development can have important effects on the political involvement of citizens (Blais & Dobrzynska, 1998, Norris, 2004, Fornos et al., 2004): the more developed a country is, the higher the voter turnout. However, this influence on voter turnout seems to be rather moderate (Stockemer, 2017). Norris (2004) found that voter turnout is slightly higher in more developed societies. Somewhat more successful are attempts to find a positive correlation between voter turnout and a country's level of education (Stockemer, 2017). Development encompasses both economic as well as educational and social dimensions. Therefore, we measure development through the UNDP's Human Development Index, a composite index that combines longevity (life expectancy at birth), education (years of schooling for adults aged 25 and older and expected years of schooling for school-age children) and standard of living (gross national income per capita).

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

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

Turnout and democratization

Democratic profile

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

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

Turnout and government performance

Electoral convenience

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

H5: the presence of compulsory voting laws increases turnout.

The type of electoral system - with reference to the majoritarian or proportional nature of electoral systems - is also widely used, although the theoretical argument that proportional representation should favour turnout is not always empirically supported (Fornos et al., 2004; Collier & Vicente, 2012; Stokes et al., 2013). The electoral system is expected to influence turnout according to incentive-based explanations: while in majoritarian systems supporters of smaller and marginal parties may be disincentivised to vote believing that their vote will not make any difference (wasted vote argument), in proportional representation (PR) systems - particularly those with low thresholds and large electoral district sizes - smaller parties may enter parliament with a modest share of votes and this increases their incentives to participate (Norris 2004: 162). Empirical results vary widely between established and non-established democracies, between European and non-European countries, and there does not seem to be a generalised correlation between electoral system and turnout. However, Norris (2004) found that turnout is higher in countries with PR (party lists and STV electoral systems). Therefore, we hypothesise that PR systems increase the opportunity for smaller parties to enter parliament even with a modest share of votes and that this may be an incentive for citizens who support them to participate in elections.

H6: PR systems increase turnout

Another variable often considered is the presence of certain rules facilitating voting. However, on this point, the evidence is ambiguous (Norris, 2004). For example, postal voting may have some positive effect on electoral participation (Gerber et al., 2013), but only among middle and upper-class individuals, who are already more likely to vote. Furthermore, some studies have found that early voting may actually reduce the overall turnout (Burden et al., 2014) and that early voting may also diminish citizens' trust in the entire electoral process (Burden and Gaines, 2015). We

hypothesise that special voting arrangements may have a positive impact on political participation. Our argument is that they affect the costs of electoral activism: if voting is easier, more voters should participate in elections.

In particular, we consider five facilitation rules:

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

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

H7: the more special voting arrangements, the higher the turnout.

Corruption

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

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

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

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

Media Pluralism

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

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

Turnout and motivation

Political trust

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

H101: Political trust increases turnout.

The variables used in our theoretical model and the assumed relationships between them and the voter turnout are depicted in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4. Summary of the variables

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

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

4 Voter turnout differences across European countries: Multiple regression analysis

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

Other variables that have been sequentially entered in the analysis:

- **step 1 – model A:** Multiple Regression analysis starts with three independent variables pertaining “modernization” (GINI index and Human Development Index) and “culture” (Generalized Trust).
- **step 2 – model B:** The impact of democratization has been tested by means of the “age of democracy”.
- **step 3 – model C:** As regards the government performance dimension, the institutional factors related to “electoral convenience” (“compulsory voting”, “proportional system” and the “special voting arrangements”); “electoral integrity” (“political corruption index” and “vote buying”) and “media pluralism” (“media bias”) are included as variables in the statistical model.
- **step 4 – model D:** The “motivation” conceptual dimension refers to the political trust, and it comprise some variables measuring the trust in institutions related to the EU and to the Country (Government and Parliament).
- **step 5:** The geographical dimension (Eastern / Western countries) is included in the analysis as a dummy variable to control the model (the variable is named “Eastern” as this is the reference modality).

The operational definition of all the variables used in this multiple regression analysis have been fully detailed in chapter 2. All data analyses were conducted using SPSS 23.0 IBM software.

4.1 National elections dataset

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

Next tables, 4.1 and 4.2, summarizes respectively the univariate statistics and the five multiple regression models by providing information about the model summary and the statistical coefficients (standardized beta and significance).

Table 4.1 – Univariate statistics of the variables used in the Multiple Regression Analysis (National elections dataset).

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

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

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

At step 2, the introduction of the age of democracy variable has no statistically significant effect on the model even if the Beta standardized score hints at a negative effect. However, after introducing the democratization variables at step 3, the generalized trust shows a positive and statistically significant impact ($\beta = 0,474$) on the voter turnout. Other variables that could be considered predictors are Compulsory Voting ($\beta = 0,293$) and Special voting arrangements Index ($\beta = -0,371$). An interesting result at this stage of the model is that the age of democracy shows a negative effect on voter turnout yet not being statistically significant, while the proportional system, the political corruption index, and the media bias seems not related to the phenomenon.

The introduction of the political trust measure (derived from combining the trust in national government and national parliament) show no statistical relationship with the voter turnout has the standardized β score is near to zero (step 4).

Table 4.2 – Results of Multiple Regression Analysis on the National Elections with “enter” method: model summary and final model (Step 1-5).

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

Last run of the multiple regression analysis (step 5) points out the relevance of the geographical dimensions, as the Eastern variable has a statistically significant and negative effect ($\beta = -0,399$) on the voter turnout. Moreover, this final model highlights as significant predictors of the voter turnout the following variables: Gini coefficient (OECD), generalized trust and the special voting arrangements index with slight variations in the standardize beta score from their first introduction in the analysis. Human Development index and Compulsory voting maintain their positive effect,

though losing in statistical significance while the other variables show no appreciable variations. Table 4.3 sums up the hypotheses testing for the national elections multiple regression analysis.

Table 4.3 – Hypothesis testing on the national elections dataset

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

4.2 European elections dataset

The model discussed in chapter 3 has been also applied to the section of our dataset focused on the European elections. Therefore, all the variables have been built taking into account the values of each Country in the years the European elections have been held.

This procedure has the most significant effect on the voter turnout variable, as its values are different from those analysed in the previous model, while the other variables share the same value, or just some slight variations, from those used before (see table 4.4.).

Table 4.4 – Univariate statistics of the variables used in the Multiple Regression Analysis (European elections dataset).

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

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

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

As the previous analysis on the National elections' dataset, the 5 tested models are statistically significant with a relevant adjusted R square value: from 0,350 (step 1) to 0,602 (step 5), therefore, 60,2% of the voter turnout variance is explained by the final model. However, the results of the present multiple regression analysis show some relevant differences with those obtained with the previous analysis (see table 4.5).

Table 4.5 – Results of Multiple Regression Analysis on the European Elections Dataset with “enter” method: model summary and final model (Step 1-5).

Model	Variable	Standardized Beta	Sig.
1 Adjusted R Square = 0,350	(Constant)		0,866
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,541	0,022
	Human Development Index	0,227	0,452
	Generalized Trust	-0,205	0,384
2 Adjusted R Square = 0,399	(Constant)		0,572
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,552	0,016
	Human Development Index	-0,024	0,942
	Generalized Trust	-0,328	0,174
	Age of democracy (years)	0,427	0,099
3 Adjusted R Square = 0,506	(Constant)		0,195
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,909	0,001
	Human Development Index	-0,138	0,686
	Generalized Trust	-0,326	0,205
	Age of democracy (years)	0,020	0,943
	Compulsory	-0,316	0,136
	Special voting arrangements Index	0,503	0,045
	Political corruption index	-0,023	0,937
	Vote Buying	-0,616	0,007
	Media bias	0,124	0,605
4 Adjusted R Square = 0,614	(Constant)		0,362
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,807	0,001
	Human Development Index	-0,044	0,886
	Generalized Trust	-0,441	0,066
	Age of democracy (years)	0,116	0,646
	Compulsory	-0,389	0,047
	Special voting arrangements Index	0,444	0,047
	Political corruption index	-0,188	0,488
	Vote Buying	-0,648	0,002
	Media bias	0,099	0,641
	EU Trust	0,345	0,025
5 Adjusted R Square = 0,602	(Constant)		0,483
	Gini coefficient [OECD]	-0,742	0,006
	Human Development Index	-0,005	0,988
	Generalized Trust	-0,406	0,100
	Age of democracy (years)	0,109	0,673
	Compulsory	-0,331	0,121
	Special voting arrangements Index	0,337	0,211
	Political corruption index	-0,123	0,673
	Vote Buying	-0,593	0,008
	Media bias	0,087	0,689
	EU Trust	0,364	0,023
	Eastern	-0,146	0,488

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

When testing the model at step 4, another important difference with the national elections emerges. Trust in the European Union has an impact on the voter turnout, with a positive and statistically significant standardized beta equal to 0,345 (step 4).

The final model (step 5) introduces the geographical variable with a negative on the voter turnout effect ($\beta = -0,146$), however, its effect is weaker than the previous model and it is also non-significant. This model identifies as significant predictors of the voter turnout in European elections the following variables: Gini coefficient (OECD), vote buying and EU trust, with slight variations in the standardized beta score from their first introduction in the analysis.

The special arrangement index keeps its positive effect, though losing the statistical significance, while the generalized trust sees its negative beta standardized value intensifying and approaching the threshold of statistical significance. Table 4.6 shows the hypotheses testing for the European elections multiple regression analysis.

Table 4.6 – Hypothesis testing on the European elections dataset

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

4.3 Discussion

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

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

In both cases, the age of democracy (model B of the theoretical framework) does not have a statistically significant impact. Interestingly, the sign of the standardized beta is opposite in the two models analysed: positive for national elections, negative in the case of European elections.

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

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

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

4.4 Some concluding remarks

The results of this exercise in multivariate analysis are still not conclusive, for a number of reasons. To name but a few, the use of average values over the entire period from the 1990s to the 2020s for each country may have reduced the effect of short-term changes on voter turnout rates, which can be of great value when related to dimensions such as institutional performance and the motivation represented by political trust (Newton et al., 2018; Uslaner, 2018). In addition, the prior selection of variables allowed us to discard some factors that were strongly correlated with each other but did not allow us to consider other variables that may be of great importance in the analysis of voter turnout. One example is political polarisation, which will be therefore one of the topics of our next report.

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

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

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

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

5 Voter turnout trends and differences: national case studies

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

We chose to present the national cases of three countries - Germany, Poland, and Italy – which belong to different geopolitical areas of Europe – Western, Eastern and Southern Europe. Moreover, while Germany and Italy are among the founding members of the European Union, Poland only joined the EU in 2004. In addition, Germany (around 83 million inhabitants), Poland (around 37 million) and Italy (around 59 million) are among the countries with the largest demographic size in the European Union. Together, these three countries have more than 40% of the total population of the EU. Therefore, the evolution of the political life in these countries can profoundly influence the future of Europe.

The analysis in chapter 1 showed differences in both the level and dynamics of voter turnout between Germany, Poland and Italy. In the following sections of Chapter 5, we discuss – in relation to each of the countries considered – trends in voter turnout, differences in turnout between different types of elections, and the factors identified as relevant in explaining these variations in citizens' electoral behaviour.

5.1 The case of Germany*

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

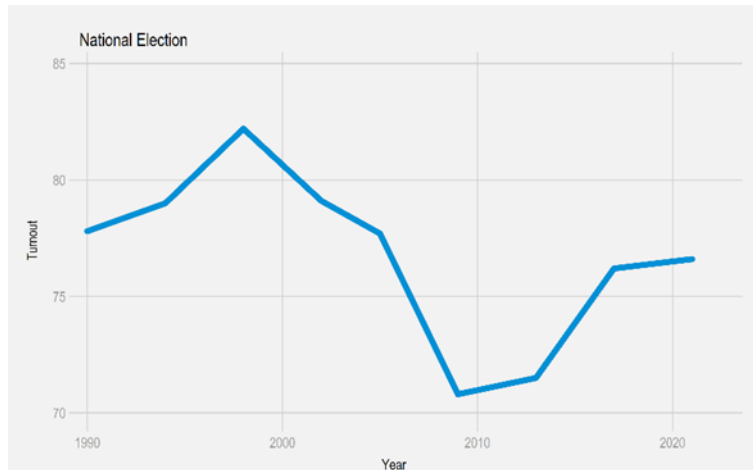
With regard to national elections, voter turnout in Germany reached its all-time high in the 1972 federal election with more than 90% participation in the national elections. In the following decades turnout successively decreased to around 80% in the 1990's, reaching its lowest point in the 2009 election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

For the subnational elections in the *Länder* (regions) turnout remains at a lower baseline level, trending between 60% and 80% in the 1990's, with a decreasing tendency. Recent sub-national elections in Nordrhein-Westfalen, the federal state with the highest population, reached a low turnout of 55%. Since WWII only two elections attracted fewer eligible voters. Figure 5.2 summarizes the development in the 16 German "Länder". Explanations for the different

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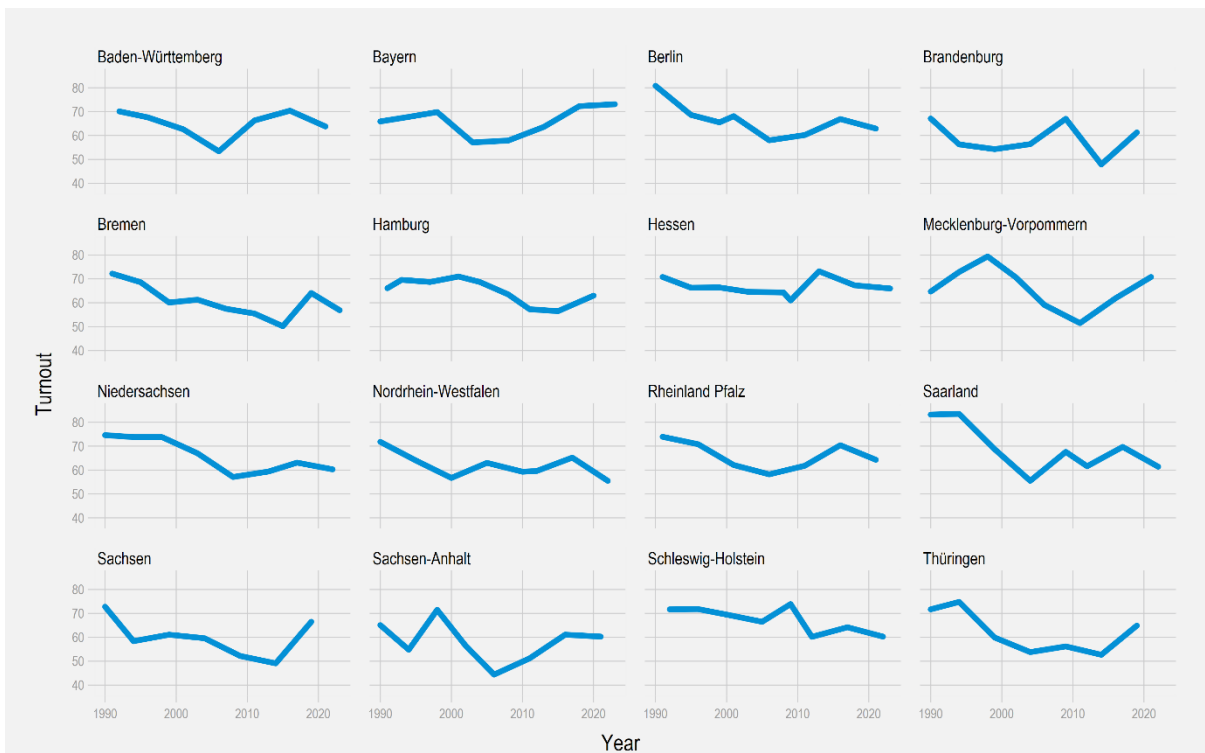
development on the subnational level rarely find their way into peer-reviewed articles and are usually shortly discussed in news articles following the regional elections.

Figure 5.1. Turnout in German National Elections (%)



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

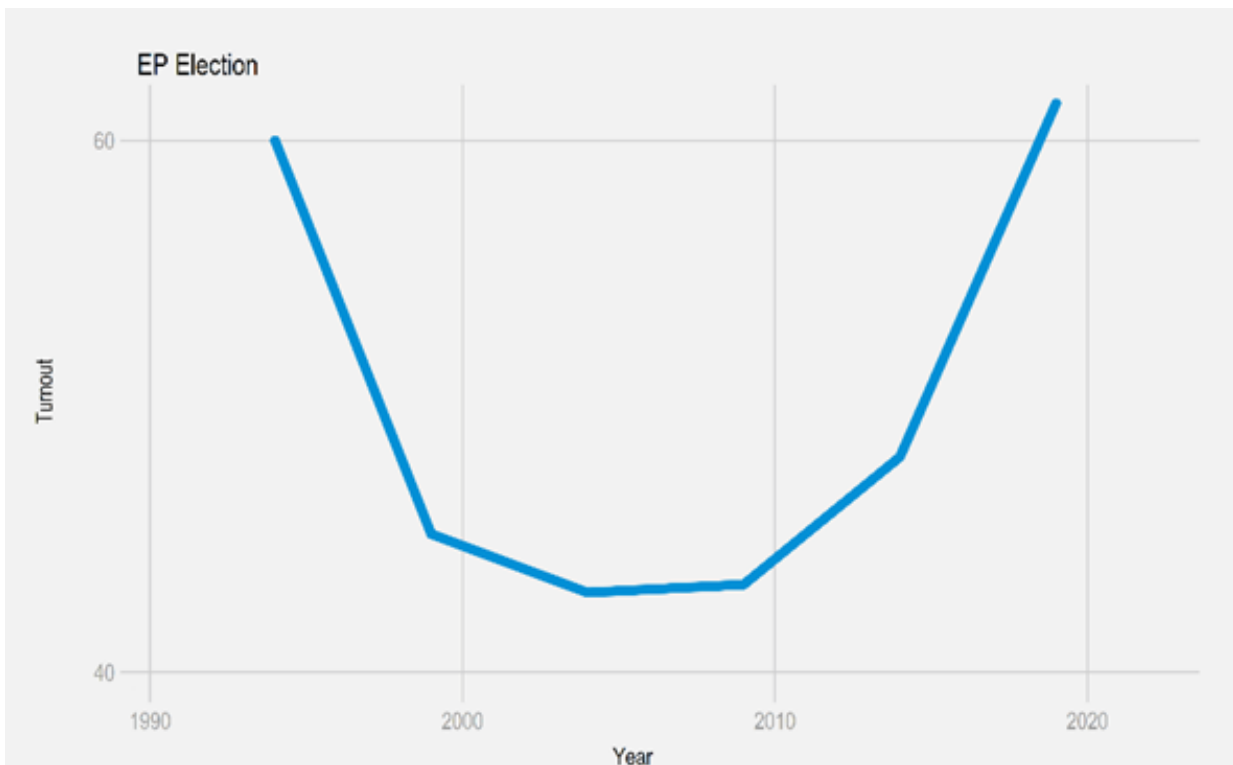
Figure 5.2: Turnout in Regional Elections (Landtagswahlen) 1990-2023 (%)



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

Finally, the turnout for the European Parliament elections in Germany has followed a fluctuating trend over the past decades. Elections for the EP mostly stay below 50% turnout with a recent upward trend (see figure 5.3). It remains to be seen whether this reversal of the declining turnout will also be confirmed at the next EP elections in June 2024.

Figure 5.3: Turnout in EP Elections



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

Let us now consider the causes of these trends in turnout according to the literature. From a global perspective, institutional variables stand out in the historical explanation of voter turnout. However, their effect may be overstated as Blais (2006) suggests. Blais' literature review also suggests that “[w]e can confidently say that turnout is lower in poor countries and higher in small ones, that compulsory voting fosters turnout, and that turnout increases in closely contested elections (Blais, 2006, p. 122)”. Similarly, Kostelka and Blais (2021) connect decreases in global turnout rates with individuals' egalitarian standing in society and their relative economic and social well-being, arguing that better off individuals enjoy greater degrees of influence on policy outcomes and tend to vote more regularly. In their analysis, however, citizens' political discontent, does not function as a core explanation for declining turnout. The authors favour generational change and replacement, as well as an increasing number of elections as explanations for decreasing voter turnout. Generations born into favourable economic conditions show a lower turnout rate. Hadjar and Beck (2010) observe this generational trend also in Europe.

Similar to these international studies (Blais, 2006; Hadjar & Beck, 2010; Kostelka & Blais, 2021), scholars link the decreasing turnout to age, education and overall socio-economic inequality (Abendschön & Roßteutscher, 2016; Schäfer, 2015; Schäfer et al., 2013). Konzelmann et al. (2012)

show that period effects and to a lesser extent also generational replacement influence turnout in the German electorate. Their analysis suggests that a shifting age structure may in the short run lead to an increase of turnout, since the older population has a higher likelihood to attend elections, while a longer perspective points towards decreasing turnout rates from 2030 onwards.

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

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

Using the German Longitudinal Election Study (2017), Stövsand und Roßteutscher (2019) summarize general political attitudes, satisfaction with democracy, interest in politics, seeing voting as a civic duty and the overall sympathy for political actors as the key explanatory factors for decreasing turnout in national elections. In their analysis it is concluded that, compared to voters, non-voters lack party-identification, are dissatisfied with democracy in Germany, are generally not interested in politics and do not see voting as a civic duty. Additionally, Schoen and Steinbrecher (2013) find that these just mentioned attitudes serve as mediating factors and that, through them, certain character traits impact turnout (i.e. emotional stability and conscientiousness). Social networks also play an interesting role in the explanation of vote abstention. Individuals who regularly discuss politics are much more likely to vote than those that do not discuss political issues with peers. Lack of political interest, thus, may become a norm in some societal milieus and leads to the creation of voting- and non-voting hotspots (Schäfer & Roßteutscher, 2015).

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

5.2 The case of Poland*

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

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

Another trend characterizing elections in Poland is the partial stability of the electorate. On one hand, a stable part of the electorate regularly shows up at the polling stations. On the other hand, however, many voters are unstable in the sense that they tend to “lie and present themselves as stable” making Poland the outlier in the region (Cześniak 2009, 110). This, in turn, connects to the overall constancy of the electoral scene in Poland. For instance, political party labels were switched much more often than the personality of political elites, and thus the actual change was less significant than it appeared to an outside observer of politics in the country (Sadowski 2017). As a result, the lack of political evolution can be connected to the overall dissatisfaction with Polish politics, which then further compresses the voter turnout rates. Gendźwiłł (2013) finds, for

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

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

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

Scholars analysing the predictors of voter turnout in Poland have identified a variety of relevant factors. For example, looking at the 2015 parliamentary elections, Grabowski (2019) finds that socio-demographic factors and location variables strongly determined the Poles’ electoral preferences, but historical and cultural factors turned out to be the more important determinants. In fact, the legacy of communism has been seen by some as one of the key historical antecedents to the way Poles interact with democracy (Ash 2002; 2019), given the myriad of socio-economic challenges which had to be tackled when democracy was still in its incipient stages (Elster 1998). Looking at the cohort of post-communist countries, Linek and Petrúšek (2016) find that socialization and political habit formation under communism had no discernible effect on voter turnout, but such generational effects were evident in Poland, indicating a qualitative difference in political history compared to neighbouring countries.

As already previously mentioned, the rate of the voter turnout is likely positively affected by the perceived importance of the upcoming elections in the context of democratic durability. As such, re-engineering of the socio-political structures in Poland by the Law and Justice party resulted in raised political emotions and led to higher electoral activity (Rachwał 2020). A similar mechanism might help explain the record-breaking turnout rate in the 2023 parliamentary election.

Furthermore, after Poland's successful accession to the European Union, many Poles moved abroad. This, in turn, has resulted in the increase of votes casted abroad, given the growing diaspora and political campaigns targeting this part of the Polish population diaspora (Lesińska 2014).

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

The element of trust has been an important feature of Polish democracy. In the incipient stages of Polish democracy, especially during the semi-free election of 1989, trust in the potential of a democratic order – and conversely a deep distrust towards the communist party – helped the country transition away from non-communism and resulted in a high degree of electoral turnout (Ash 2002; 2019). However, when the challenges of forming a new democratic order became evident almost immediately (Elster 1998), the rate of electoral turnout went down, all while the former communists (also referred to as post-communists) re-captured political power via democratic means. In the 1990s, the Roman Catholic Church emerged as a key political institution with a very high degree of public trust (Morawska 1995). Consequently, the Church used these assets to legitimize the democratic order in exchange for policy concessions, while also attempting to bolster voter turnout for its preferred political parties (Grzymała-Busse 2015).

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

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

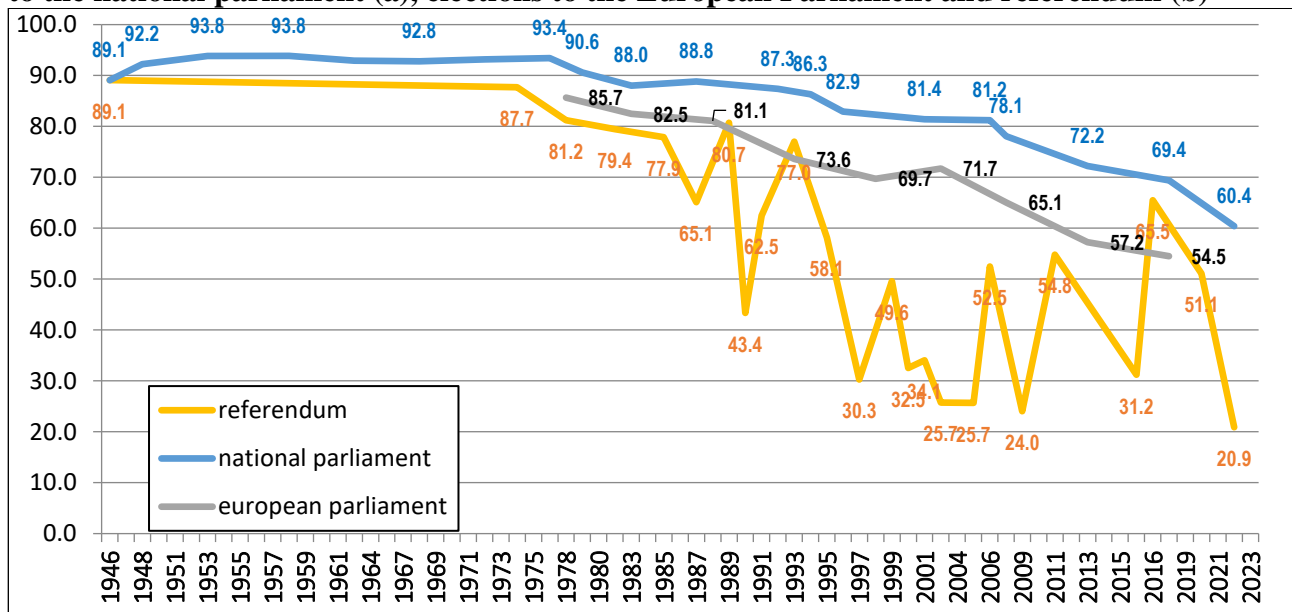
5.3 The case of Italy*

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

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

The specificity of the turnout trend in Italy can also be highlighted by a comparison with the rest of Europe. For the period 1991-2023, Italy had an overall average turnout rate of 77.7%, i.e. 8.5% higher than that estimated for the EU countries as a whole. The average calculated for the first two decades is even wider: 10.2% in the first decade and 11.1% in the second. However, this gap narrows to only 2.4% in the last period.

Figure 5.4. Voting participation in Italy from 1946 to 2022 by type of consultation: elections to the national parliament (a), elections to the European Parliament and referendum (b)



Source: Own elaboration based on the Ministry of Interior's data.

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

* By Domenico Fruncillo, University of Salerno, Italy.

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

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

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

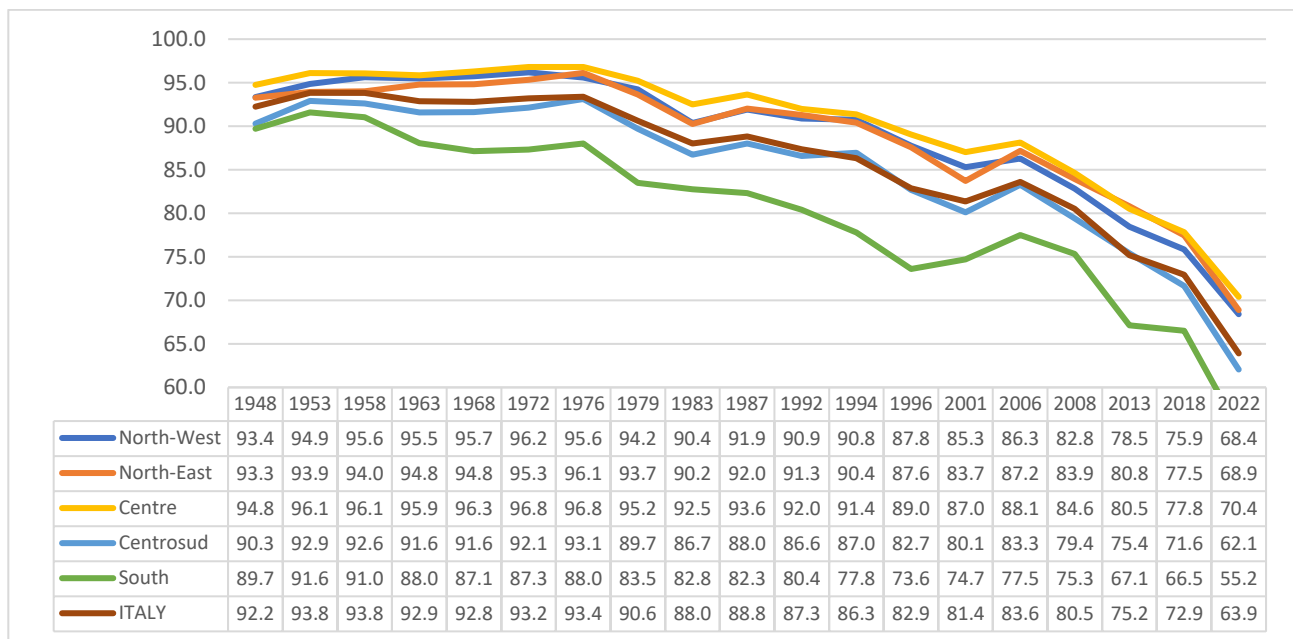
The debate on voter turnout in Italy has developed since the 1980s. Some scholars pointed out that the decline in participation was due to the reduced ability of parties to mobilise citizens, who were more distant from politics. Disaffection has been considered the cause of the decline in voting participation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

All these factors still have influence on voting participation levels, although perhaps to a lesser extent than in the past. Indeed, the distribution of turnout rates by territorial areas continues to indicate a different level of participation in each area (Figure 5.5). Voter turnout is falling everywhere, but significant differences remain in favour of the regions where the parties are more deeply rooted, the culture of participation is more widespread (Cartocci, 2007) and the levels of socio-economic development are higher.

Differences in turnout may be caused not only by the relevance of elections, but also by the specific characteristics of each election. Recent research has highlighted the growth of intermittent participation (Legnante & Segatti, 2001, 2016), whereby an increasing number of citizens decide whether or not to participate in a particular election, considering not only its relevance, but also the competitiveness of each election. In this perspective, changes in electoral rules, the characteristics of the electoral offer and different mobilisation levers have been analysed (Tuorto 2008; 2010). This type of analysis has proved particularly promising, since national, European and local elections take place according to different electoral rules that propose different constraints and

advantages for parties and candidates. In particular, depending on the type of political institution and the rules for converting votes into seats, it has been found that a more or less significant role of the mobilisation potential to vote stems from the engagement of both incumbents and other candidates for political office (Fruncillo, 2016; De Luca & Fruncillo, 2019; Fruncillo & Addeo, 2019).

Figure 5.5. Chamber of Deputies elections in Italy from 1948 to 2022. Voting participation by geopolitical area (a)



Source: Own elaboration based on the Ministry of Interior's data.

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

Research on the Italian case has hitherto focused on political factors (such as the role of parties and individual personalities), institutional characteristics (electoral rules and the incentives and constraints arising from them) and territorial subcultures. In recent years, however, there has been a renewed focus on socio-economic factors. Some studies based on both ecological analyses and sample surveys have found a relationship between conditions of socio-economic deprivation and a lower propensity to participate in elections (Schafer et al., 2022). Other studies refer to the impact of economic conditions in shaping electoral turnout (Passarelli & Tuorto, 2014).

Trust and other more related variables have not received much attention in research on the Italian case so far. Among the exceptions is research on the 2014 European elections in which turnout rate was related to trust in both national political actors and European institutions (Fruncillo, 2015). Other strands of research have used the concept of trust as part of an investigation into the role of social capital in influencing turnout (Fiorino et al., 2021). Some scholars have highlighted the relationship between the decline in political trust and the rise of populist parties, such as the 5 Star movement (Angelucci & Vittori, 2021). Finally, trust in political or institutional actors has been

used in research on the role of political culture in influencing various degrees of citizen participation, from total involvement to conformity, from alienation to hostility. From this perspective, trust seems to be directly or indirectly correlated with greater or lesser propensity to vote (Fruncillo 2020).

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

5.4 Some concluding remarks

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

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

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

Conclusions

This report investigates the trends in voter turnout in Europe and the differences in electoral participation among European countries between the 1990s and the 2020s. There is a general trend of declining voter turnout in European countries, which develops from different starting points and can be considered much more relevant for elections to national parliaments than for European elections (see chapters 1 and 5). In general, Eastern European countries, which joined the European Union most recently, show the lowest levels of turnout. In contrast, the sharpest decline in voter participation can be found in some Southern European countries. Moreover, the trend of declining turnout has been partially reversed recently. Pending further research on this issue, we advance the hypothesis that this may be due to the rise of populist movements and polarised politics (Belanger, 2017; Wilford, 2017). These emerging parties manage to mobilise those sectors of the electorate that feel most alienated from politics, in particular because they distrust the ability of European institutions, national governments and traditional parties to meet their needs. To this it should be added that the decline in electoral turnout may not be linked to a crisis in the legitimacy of democratic regimes, but to a change in the structure of participation opportunities (Norris, 2022: 134). In other words, these trends could also be linked to the emergence of new forms of civic engagement and political activism, including participation in protest movements (see also Norris, 2002: 215-223). In this perspective, political trust, or rather the lack of trust towards well-identified political actors, would become a major factor in explaining the recent evolution of electoral turnout in European countries, including the recent growth in electoral volatility.

The report examined the factors and processes behind national differences in voter turnout. The carried out literature review allowed to identify some variables of great importance in the analysis of electoral behaviour, as well as a theoretical model that defines the connections between these variables and turnout (see chapters 2 and 3). Although still not widely recognised in the literature, trust can play a role in turnout analysis – both social or generalised trust, which may be regarded as an element of societal culture at the origin of the causal chain leading to political participation (Putnam, 1993, 2000), and political or institutional trust, which is instead regarded as an intervening variable at the final stage of this process (Uslaner, 2018; Norris, 2022). However, the influence of trust on political participation can be mediated by many other factors, such as the level of economic and social development, the extent of inequalities, the duration of democracy, or the system of formal and informal rules governing electoral competition between parties.

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

The results of the multivariate analysis performed using the theoretical model provided an answer to these questions (see chapter 4). There is indeed a positive relationship between social or generalised trust and political participation, considering turnout in national elections. In contrast, the relationship between the two variables is reversed when considering European parliamentary elections. Perhaps the capacity for civic engagement and political mobilisation associated with social trust is of little or no relevance for elections that are mainly considered second-order and related to institutions that may still be perceived as of little or no relevance to citizens' lives. Indeed, this divergence may require further investigation.

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

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

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