

UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

WHO DOES (NOT) VOTE?

Voter turnout trends in 30 European
and North American democracies

A translation of the German
original »Wer geht (nicht)
wählen?« by **Jonas Wenker**

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This study analyses the results of the updated dataset "Unequal Democracies", which now encompasses 212 elections in 30 democracies in Europe and North America. General trends are analysed with a focus on three countries – the United Kingdom, Portugal and Poland.



Falling turnout remains unequally distributed across society. People with occupations that only require a lower level of formal education are disproportionately less likely to cast a vote. This effect of socially unequal voting is particularly pronounced among young voters.



Populism turns out not to be a remedy for low electoral turnout: it is far from clear, in contrast to a common view, that (right-wing) populist parties provide a voice for non-voters in particular. Rather it appears that higher general turnout can be expected at elections characterised by more intense political polarisation. Overall, however, voter turnout has been falling constantly for the past few decades.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Who does not turn out to vote?

In the 30 European and North American countries examined in this study people with occupations that only require a lower level of education are disproportionately less likely to vote. This effect of socially unequal voting is particularly pronounced among young voters.



Does unequal participation in elections pose a problem for democracies?

Inequality is evident at the ballot box. When turnout is low it is primarily people from the working class and those with low formal education who stay away. Democracy embodies the promise of political equality for all citizens within the framework of free and fair elections. If more and more people don't even bother to vote, this can scarcely be a sign of satisfaction, especially if the socially and economically disadvantaged stay at home on election day. This finding is bad news for democracy in a number of respects.



Can populism remedy low turnouts?

Populism has not proved itself to be a remedy for low electoral turnout: it is far from clear, in contrast to a common view, that (right-wing) populist parties encourage non-voters to cast their vote. Rather it appears that higher turnout can generally be expected at elections characterised by more intense political polarisation, among both parties and citizens, in all socioeconomic classes. This effect however should not be overestimated. In spite of the (alleged) polarisation, voter turnout has continued to decline in general.





United Kingdom

The general trend is clearly discernible in the United Kingdom. On average, electoral turnout has fallen and workers have been much less likely to cast their votes than people on higher incomes, in all elections. The 2017 parliamentary election in the wake of the Brexit vote was exceptional, in that more middle income people than people on higher incomes turned out to vote. This anomaly was resolved at the last election in 2019 and social stratification re-emerged to the detriment on working class people.



Portugal

The general trend is also clearly discernible in Portugal. The Southern European country has seen a longstanding decrease in turnout, despite a first-in-a long time increase in the most recent 2022 election. The elections to be held in spring 2024 in a context of political uncertainty could see a further increase in turnout, greater success for the political extremes or voter abstention because of a possible loss of trust in response to corruption allegations.



Poland

Poland is an exception. It shows that the trend of falling turnout is reversible. Comparatively high rates of voter mobilisation are still feasible, especially when there's a lot at stake. Although also in Poland workers are less likely to cast their votes than people on higher incomes, it appears that such differences have diminished along with the general increase in turnout. To that extent Poland can be held up as a positive example, illustrating that falling turnout can be reversed. It remains to be seen, however, how far this finding can be transposed to more stable democracies, so that people from all social classes participate in politics equally and have a voice.

For more information, see

<https://democracy.fes.de/topics/inequality-democracy>

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1

IS UNEQUAL ELECTION PARTICIPATION A PROBLEM FOR DEMOCRACY?

Inequality is all too evident at the ballot box. When voter turnout is low, it is mainly the working class and those with little formal education who abstain. Large-scale abstention should not be perceived as an expression of satisfaction with the existing democratic system when it is precisely the socially disadvantaged who stay home on election day. This finding is problematic for democracy in several ways.

First, the (systematic) abstention of particular social groups constitutes a distortion of political communication (Verba 2003: 666). If workers in particular stay at home, their views on political developments and their voice in the democratic process remain unheard. And this effect is not compensated by other forms of political participation, such as joining demonstrations or public petitions, because the latter forms of political participation are even more socially unequal than elections (Schäfer 2015; Bödeker 2012).

Second, there is a danger of negative political interactions and feedback. For example, although it still cannot be demonstrated unequivocally that falling turnout is accompanied by changing election outcomes (Radcliff 1994; Fisher 2007; Schäfer 2012), it is theoretically perfectly possible that there is a connection between which citizens turn out to vote and which parties are elected. But even if we don't assume any link between voter turnout and result, it is possible that socially selective voter turnout influences political outcomes. We can assume, for example, that the decision-making of elected politicians pays attention to the people who actually vote rather than those who don't. Internationally, a whole raft of studies have shown that political decision-making tends to be more in line with richer voters' policy preferences than those of poorer voters (Gilens 2005; Elsässer 2018). Poorer voters' increasing electoral apathy is one possible reason for this development.

Third, low turnout can be regarded not only as a possible cause of problems with the political system, but as itself a symptom of an existing problem. A broad strand of the political science literature stresses the importance of voter support for maintaining a democratic system (Easton 1975; Norris 1999). After all, a democratic system can remain stable over the long term only if citizens are committed to it and positively embrace its underlying democratic principles. There is a wealth of studies that show that non-voters are less satisfied with the political system than people who

turn out to vote (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Karp and Banducci 2008; Grönlund and Setälä 2007), although the causal effect and its direction are controversial (Kostelka and Blais 2018; Ezrow and Xezonakis 2016). The existence of a large number of non-voters may thus indicate that citizens are not satisfied with their democratic system and they would be less committed to it in the event of a crisis. Similarly there is a danger that dissatisfaction with the actual workings of the system may itself lead to a rejection of basic democratic principles.

In this analysis we discuss the results of the updated dataset "Unequal Democracies". The dataset now encompasses 212 elections in 30 European and North American countries. General trends are analysed on the basis of the United Kingdom, Portugal and Poland, focusing on the most recent parliamentary elections. The results of this report are largely consistent with the preceding study *Unequal Democracies* (Elsässer et al. 2022).

2

THE DATASET

The analysis is based on survey data from prestigious social science studies on electoral behaviour at national elections, taking socioeconomic status into account. Only adequately democratic countries in Europe and North America were investigated. We took 0.5 points on the Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem) as the relevant degree of democratisation, for the period 1990 to 2020.

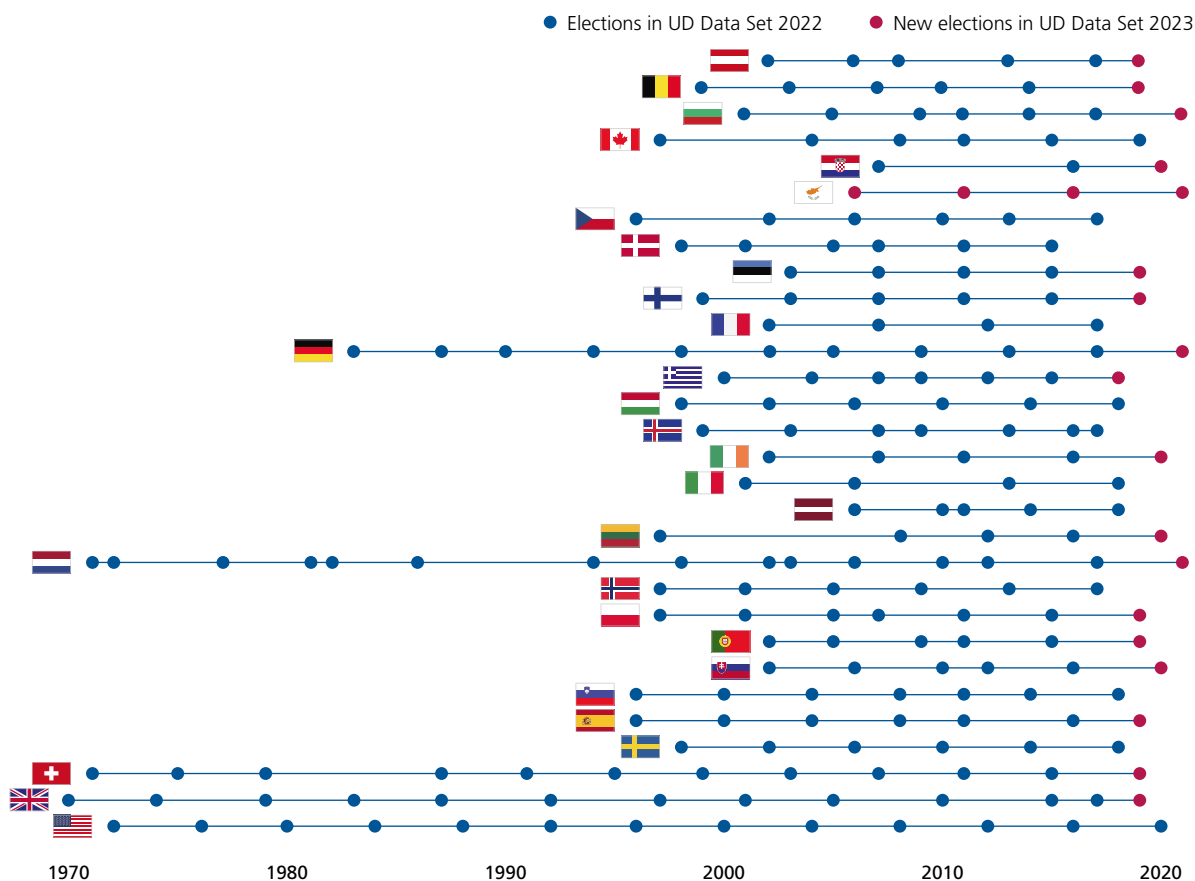
Individual national election studies were used for the period from the 1970s to the 1980s, such as AIBUS (Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften – German General Social Survey) for Germany. For the period from the 1990s cross-country surveys were used, such as the

Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) or the European Social Survey (ESS). These make possible a comparative analysis of a large number of countries.

All in all, the current UD dataset 2023 encompasses 212 elections in 30 democracies in Europe and North America. Figure 1 presents the elections used in the analysis and shows the expansion of the 2022 UD dataset by 21 elections.

- 1 The main reason for this expansion is the publication of the tenth wave of the European Social Survey in June 2023.

Figure 1
212 elections in 30 democracies are analysed



3

NEW DATA, SAME PICTURE

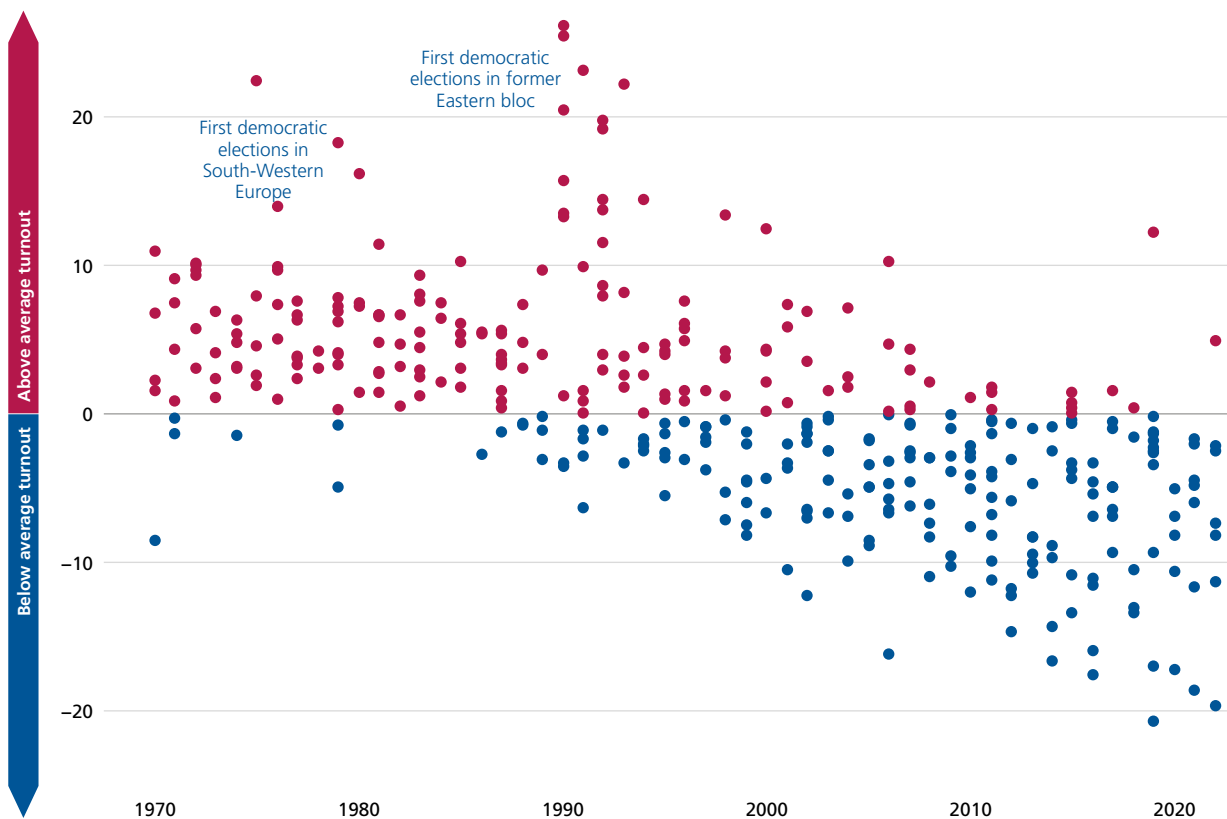
3.1 VOTER TURNOUT IS FALLING – DESPITE A RISE IN POPULISM

The point of departure for the analysis and the project motivation are that average voter turnout in many democracies has been falling over time and that this decline is unequally distributed across society. Studies show that turnout in a given country depends on, among other things, the level of social inequality, and that in the case of higher social inequality particularly resource-poor citizens do not turn out

at election time (Solt 2008, 2010; Elsässer et al. 2022). A corollary of this is that as inequality diminishes voter turnout should start to rise again.

Another line of argument emphasises the role of the party system. Populist – especially right-wing populist – parties have become increasingly established in recent years and decades and could – it is argued – appeal in particular to social groups that otherwise are less likely to participate in elections, thereby raising voter turnout. Right-wing populist

Figure 2
Constantly declining voter turnout since 1970

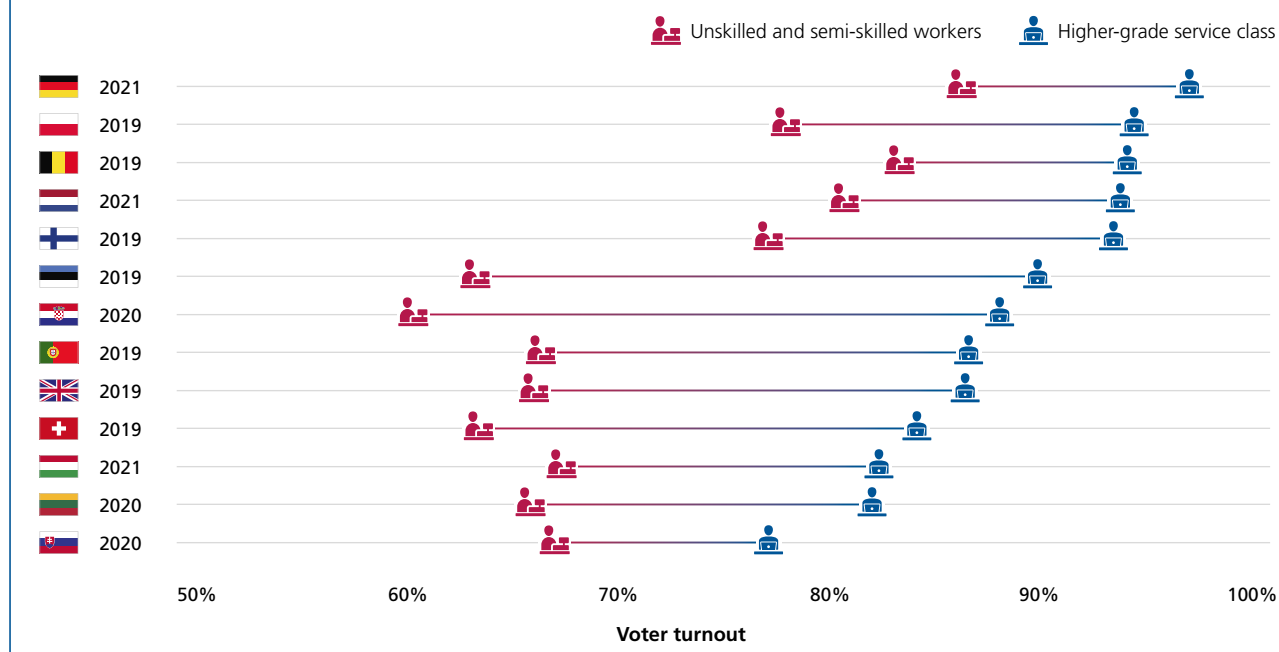


The points represent individual elections – in each case deviations are shown in comparison with average turnout in the respective country across the whole period. Red points thus correspond to elections with higher turnout than average, blue lower than average. Overall, it clearly shows a constant decline in voter turnout since 1970.

Figure 3

Workers are much less likely to vote than the upper service class

Analysis of the most recent elections in the data set



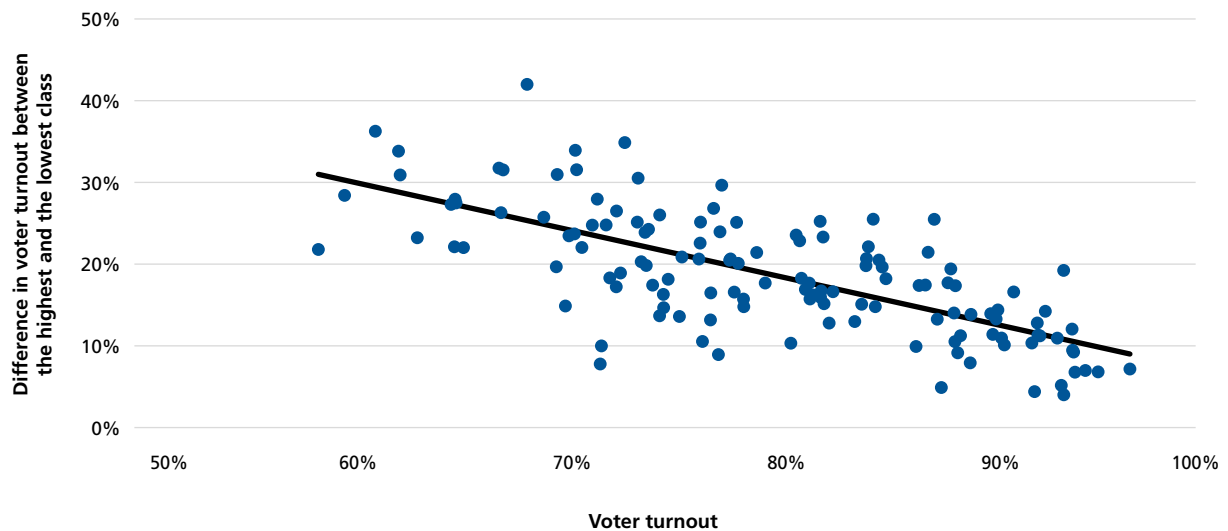
parties especially have indeed been on the rise, at least in Western party systems. For example, since 2017 Alternative für Deutschland have entered the Bundestag for the first time, while in 2021 in Spain Vox was first elected to parliament and in Portugal Chega! almost quintupled its share of the vote at the 2022 election in comparison with 2019. In Poland (until this year) and Hungary likeminded parties have even formed the government and have been striving to dismantle the democratic rule of law. However, an empirical link between the presence of populist parties and voter turnout is less clear than the abovementioned argument would suggest. For example, Schwander et al. (2020) found no connection between the presence of populist parties and voter turnout, while Leininger and Meijers (2021) find such a link only for eastern Europe, but not the west. In particular, however, the idea that these parties are more likely to give non-voters a voice and that this alone is sufficient to boost voter turnout is not borne out. Rather it appears that voter turnout is generally higher where political polarisation is more intense, whether among parties or the population (Ellger 2023; Dassonneville and Çakır 2021; Harteveld and Wagner 2023; Polacko et al. 2021). This effect basically applies to voters of all social classes, however, not only to the socially disadvantaged.

Furthermore, the strength of this effect should not be overestimated. For example, Figure 2 shows that voter turnout has been generally falling everywhere, regardless of the rise of populist parties and a much touted increase in political polarisation in some countries.

3.2 WORKERS ARE PARTICULARLY PROMINENT AMONG NON-VOTERS

As voter turnout declines across the board the question of who the non-voters are becomes all the more urgent. If satisfied, better educated and better off citizens don't bother to vote because they are generally fine with what is happening in politics falling turnout is less of a problem. However, if the decline in turnout is mainly due to lower class citizens abstaining from voting, this could be seen as more problematic. The obvious assumption in that case would be that they are motivated by dissatisfaction and apathy. In order to test this assumption an analysis was carried out on the basis of Daniel Oesch's social class model (2006). Its five-point schema categorises citizens in five social classes based on occupation. The highest and lowest social classes can be juxtaposed for this purpose. The first ("higher-grade service class") encompasses occupations requiring academic qualifications, such as lawyer or doctor. Contrasted with that are "un- and semiskilled workers", such as call centre workers or service staff in hotels and restaurants. As Figure 3 shows, in the most recent elections in the dataset workers turned out to vote much less often than people in the higher-grade service class.

Figure 4
The lower the voter turnout, the bigger the class difference



In the case of 60% general voter turnout the turnout of the higher-grade service class is 30 percentage points higher than that of workers. Conversely, in the case of over 90% turnout the turnout of the higher-grade service class is only 10 percentage points higher than that of workers.

3.3 LOW VOTER TURNOUT MEANS SOCIALLY UNEQUAL VOTER TURNOUT

Herbert Tingsten's (1975) "law of dispersion" predicts a correlation between the social inequality of voter turnout and the general level of voter turnout. Accordingly, the differences in voter turnout are heightened when general turnout falls.

The UD dataset shows this correlation clearly. Figure 4 portrays how differences in voter turnout depend on general turnout. The horizontal axis indicates the level of general turnout, while the vertical axis presents the level of differences in turnout between the higher-grade service class and the unskilled/semiskilled workers. The individual points stand for individual elections. The average turnout in each election and the difference between the two classes can thus be read off from the positions of the points in the graph. The best fit line indicates the general trend and slopes from left to right. That means that as general voter turnout increases, inequality of turnout diminishes. These results are consistent with our earlier findings (Elsässer et al. 2022) and have a broad basis in the academic literature (Kohler 2006; Schäfer 2015; Roßteutscher and Abendschön 2014; Schäfer and Schwander 2019).

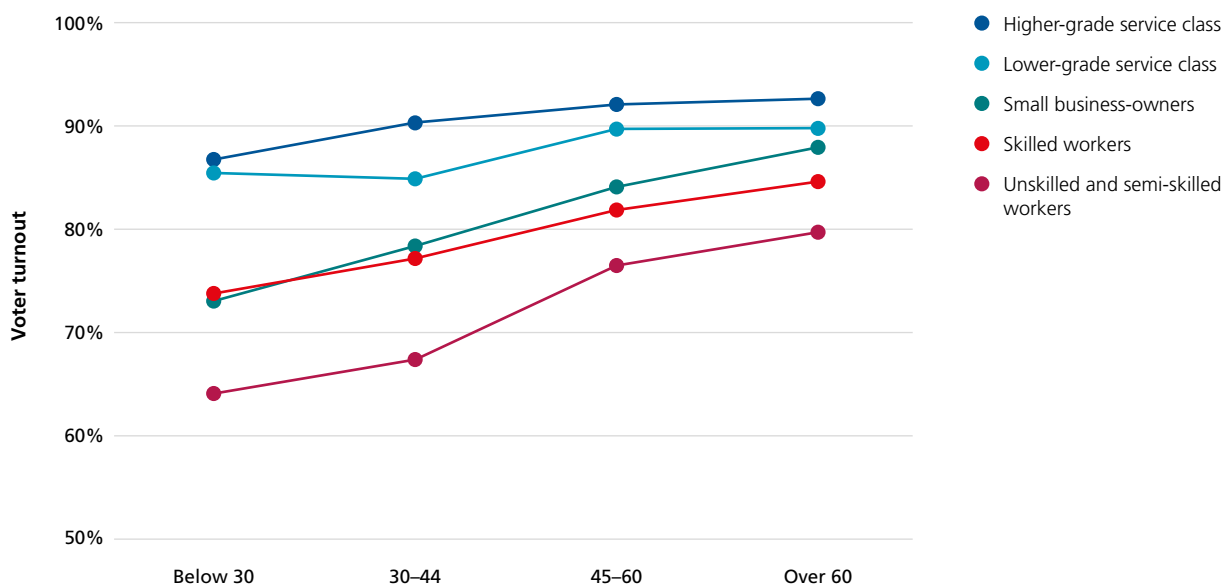
3.4 CLASS EFFECTS EVEN STRONGER AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE²

The results so far show a clear disparity in voter turnout. While those in the higher- and lower-grade service classes still vote fairly regularly it is particularly the workers who stay home on election day. This finding is further differentiated in the next step of the analysis. What interests us here are the different age groups within social classes. In order to come up with the most up-to-date picture possible we use data exclusively from the tenth wave of the ESS, which cover the most recent elections.

Figure 5 presents the voting probability of members of the different occupational classes in four age groups. Voter turnout is higher across all age groups among members of the higher and lower-grade service class than among skilled, semiskilled and unskilled workers. It also turns out that, on average, older people are much more likely to vote than young people. The interaction between the two factors of age and social class is of particular significance, however. Among older people the difference in voter turnout between the two higher and the two lower classes is much smaller than among young people. Accordingly, the group of un- and semiskilled workers has the lowest voter turnout of all the groups studied. Here lies the danger that this group becomes further estranged from political processes and also refrains from participating when they get older.

² No separate analysis by gender was carried out because already the predecing study (Elsässer et al. 2022) based on the same data has not found significant differences in this regard.

Figure 5
Voter turnout by age and social class
 Across all elections in the dataset



3.5 THREE COUNTRIES IN FOCUS

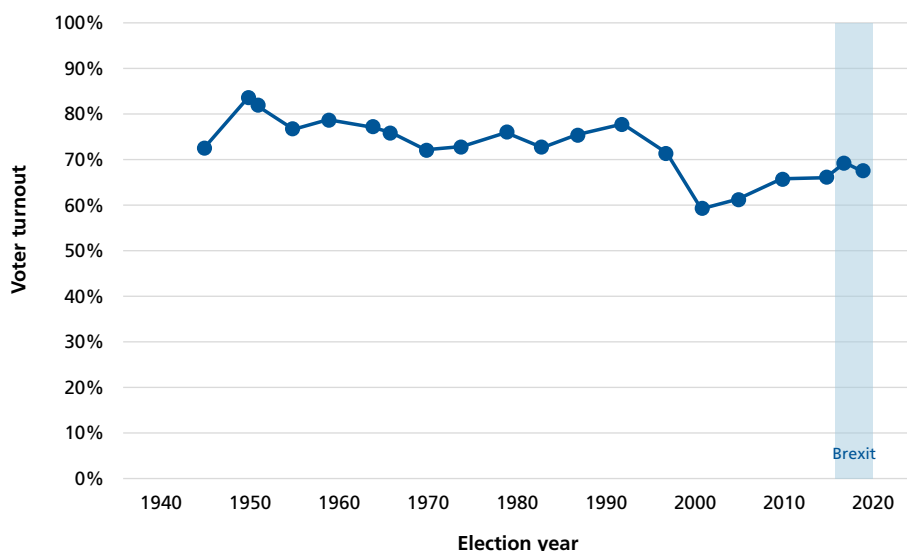
In what follows the development of voter turnout is analysed over time in relation to three selected countries. In each case the focus is on the most recent election in the dataset.

UNITED KINGDOM: BREXIT AS A DRIVER OF PARTICIPATION?

Figure 6 shows the evolution of voter turnout in the United Kingdom since 1945. Compared with other established western European democracies, such as Germany or the

Netherlands, UK turnout is relatively low, but it is generally much higher than in many eastern European democracies. At the last election, in 2019, 68 per cent of those eligible to vote did so. This is far below the turnout at all elections between 1945 and 1997, however. The 2001 election has seen a sharp decline below 60% in voter turnout. In the meantime, turnout has recovered slightly, and at the parliamentary elections in 2017, in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum, there was a comparatively substantial rise. Despite Brexit, however, the general level of turnout remains well below that of the period from the 1950s to the early 1980s.

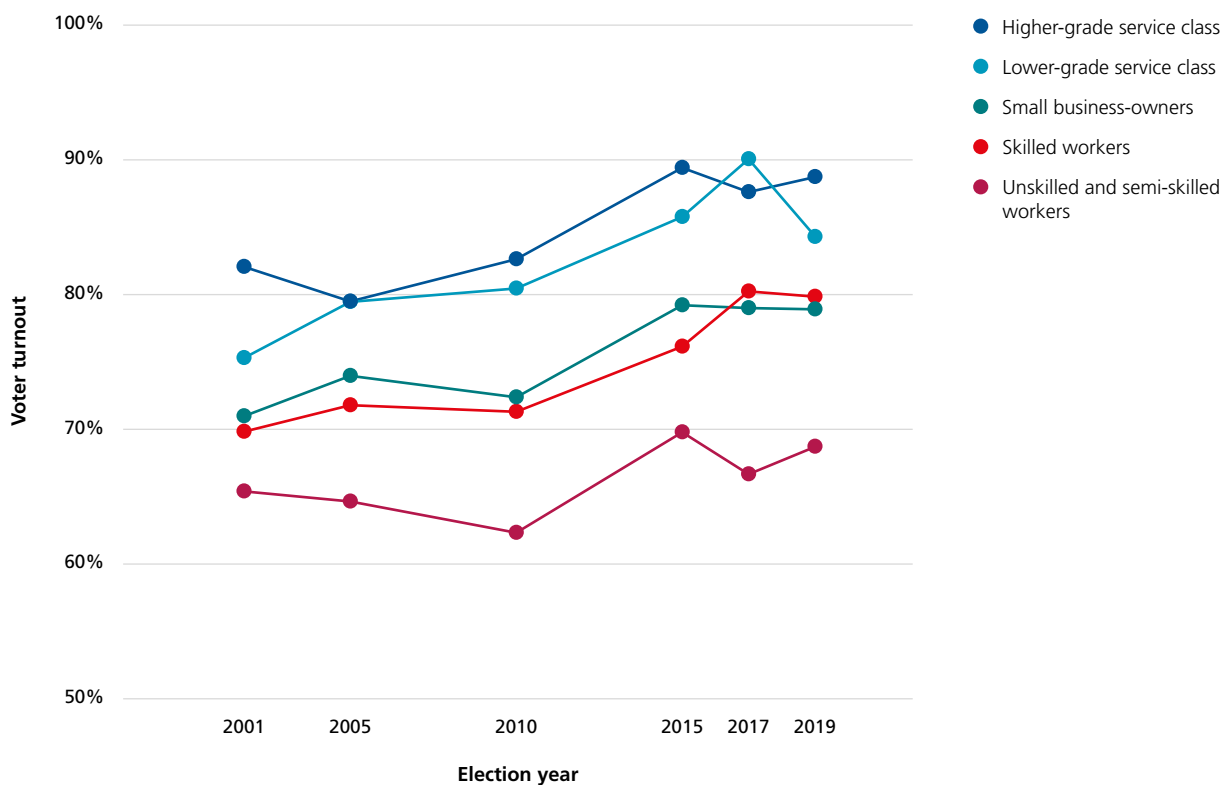
Figure 6
Voter turnout in the United Kingdom



Source: www.idea.int/vt.

Figure 7

Voter turnout in the United Kingdom by social class



How does the evolution of voter turnout look in terms of social classes (see Figure 7)?³ This dataset starts with the 2001 election, at which voter turnout in the United Kingdom was relatively low. For all elections it appears that un- and semiskilled workers are least likely to vote. By contrast, voters from the higher-grade service class, generally speaking, are most likely to vote. Although the 2017 election represents an exception in this regard, when the lower-grade service class came out slightly ahead, at the last election, in 2019, this anomaly was resolved and the familiar social differentiation was observable once again.

PORTUGAL: IS VOTER TURNOUT ABOUT TO BOTTOM OUT?

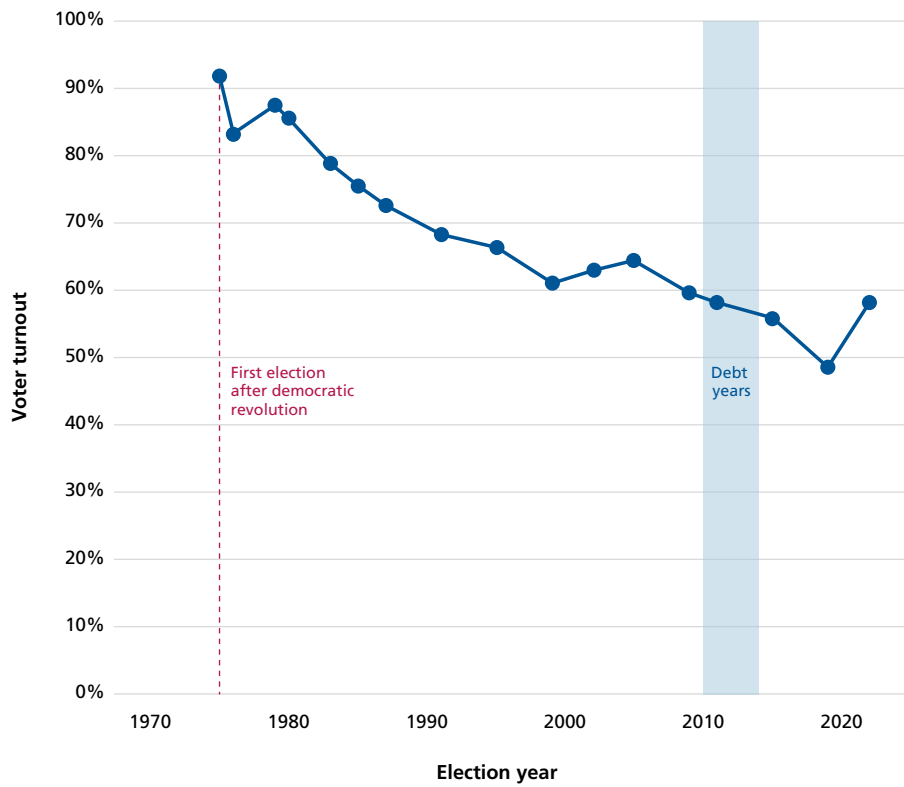
Portugal, as a southern European country, has experienced a significant downward trend in voter turnout over time, reaching its nadir at the last election in 2019 (Figure 8).

Looking at voter turnout by social class (Figure 9), however, a familiar pattern emerges albeit no class data for the most recent 2022 election was available. At virtually every election the higher-grade service class has the highest likelihood of voting, while un- and semiskilled workers are least likely. The biggest discernible difference applies to the behaviour of the lower-grade service class. While at the last election it rather fell in line with the higher-grade service class, at the 2019 election its voter turnout fell comparatively sharply, which may explain the fall in voter turnout at this election.

But things might change. Elections scheduled for spring 2024 in an environment fraught with political uncertainty could, on one hand, revive voter turnout and strengthen the political extremes. On the other hand, a possible loss of trust resulting from outstanding accusations of corruption against a government formerly perceived as stable and trustworthy could lead to even more political disenchantment and people staying away from the polls.

³ On closer inspection it turns out that for almost all elections, based on the UD dataset, the expected voter turnout exceeds the official voter turnout. This problem arises from overreporting, in other words people falsely stating that they voted even though they didn't actually do so, probably motivated by their perceptions of social expectations. But because we are here not really interested in the absolute level of voter turnout, but rather in class differences, this is less relevant. Further information on tackling this problem can be found in the first edition of "Unequal Democracies" (Elsässer et al. 2022)

Figure 8
Voter turnout in Portugal



Source: www.idea.int/vt.

Figure 9
Voter turnout in Portugal by social class

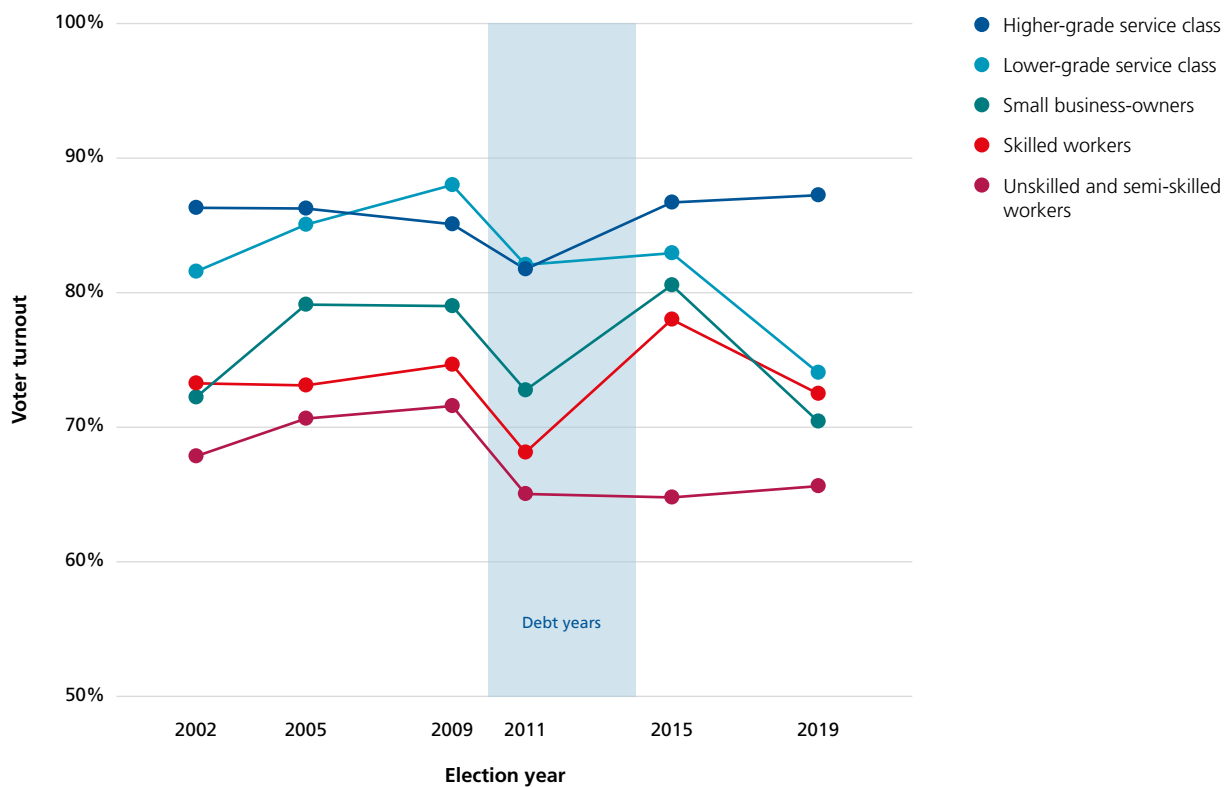


Figure 10
Voter turnout in Poland

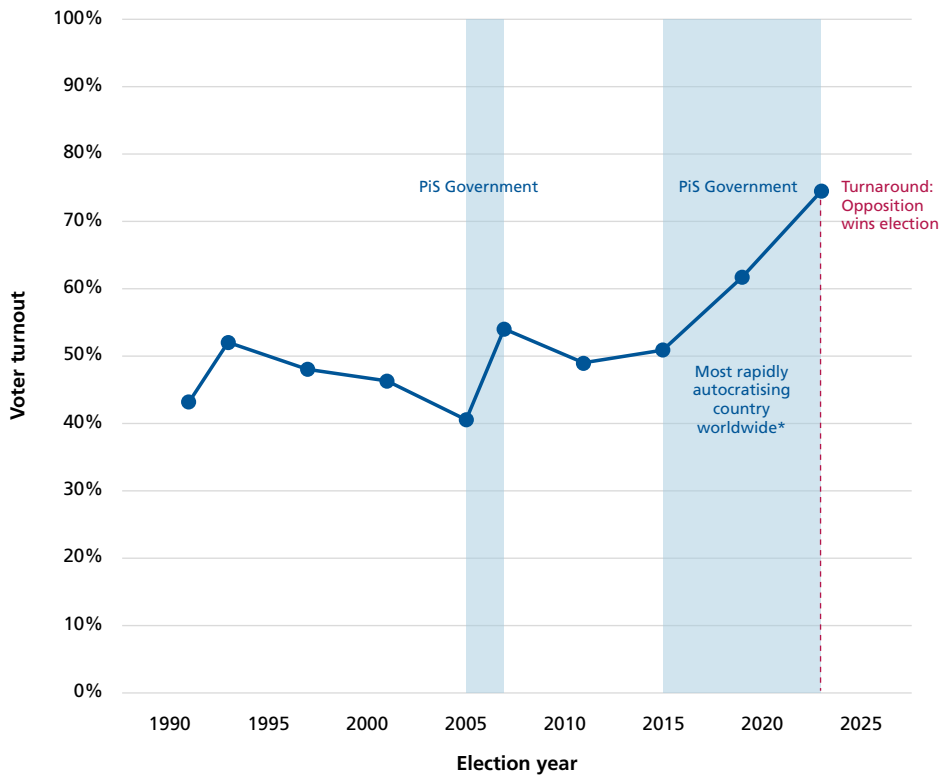
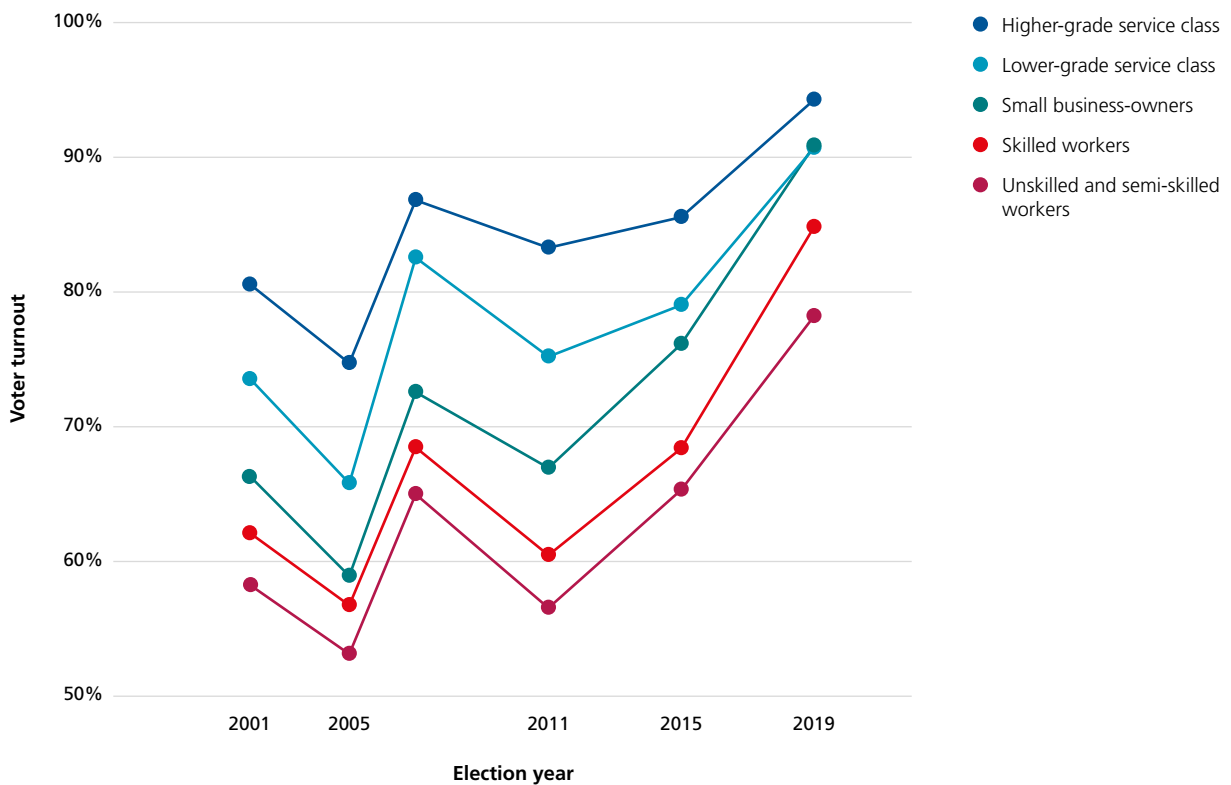


Figure 11
Voter turnout in Poland by social class



POLAND: WHEN VOTER TURNOUT RISES AGAIN IN THE CONTEXT OF POLARISATION

In comparison with many other countries voter turnout has recently been on the rise in Poland (see Figure 10). Voter turnout fell from 1993 to 2005. Starting from the 2007 election, however, things began to look up. The 2019 parliamentary election was characterised by the highest voter turnout until then, at around 62 per cent. But this has been exceeded by the recent parliamentary election in October 2023, in which 74 per cent of the population turned out to vote. The precise circumstances of this exceptional election need to be analysed and evaluated comprehensively elsewhere. This election's special significance for the Polish people appears to be a key factor in the high turnout, however. Since its election victory in 2015 Poland's PiS party has tried repeatedly to undermine Polish democracy and especially the constitutional courts (Sadurski 2019; Pirro and Stanley 2022), as a result of which Poland was the most rapidly autocratising country in the world between 2010 and 2020 (Alizada et al. 2021). Yet another election win for the PiS would have entrenched this further. Clearly this was a strong motivation for the opponents of autocratisation at the election. In this context, the rise in voter turnout can be traced back to a "polarisation from above" (Tworzecki 2019), particularly by the PiS party, which sought to use elite political rhetoric to create turmoil in a country otherwise lacking major societal divisions.

But it remains to be seen whether this will ameliorate the social stratification of voter turnout. After all, a considerable proportion of the electorate still did not cast a vote. This can be answered with the help of Figure 11 (although it doesn't take the 2023 election into account). It shows that also in Poland workers are less likely to vote than members of the higher-grade service class. In other words, voter turnout is also stratified in Poland. It should also be noted, however, that differences in voter turnout diminish as turnout rises. In that sense, Poland may serve as a positive example of the fact that the trend towards falling election turnouts can be reversed.

But a number of open questions remain. For example, although the 2023 election saw record turnout of 74 per cent this still means that one in four eligible voters stayed at home on election day. Furthermore, although this value is high compared with many eastern European democracies, it is rather average in comparison with recent elections in Western European democracies and is far below voter turnouts in Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. On top of that, the high turnout was also a consequence of the undemocratic conduct of the outgoing Polish government. Poland provides an example of how the dismantling of democracy can mobilise democracy's supporters. The increase in turnout is, on top, a result of the antidemocratic behaviour of the previous government. Poland thus can only partially serve as an example of how participation may be increased in other more consolidated democracies. Finally, there is the issue of whether the last two elections illustrate a persistent trend or whether voter turnout will continue to fall once the special circumstances of this election – in terms of its importance for

the survival of Polish liberal democracy – have receded. More specifically, it remains to be seen whether voter turnout in Poland will remain high or even continue to rise, even though the immediate threat to Polish democracy from right-wing populist parties has been averted, at least for the time being.

4

WHAT REMAINS?

The expanded 2023 UD dataset, covering 212 elections in 30 countries in Europe and North America, presents a picture of unequal voter turnout. On average, voter turnout has been falling across the democracies of these regions since the 1970s. Even though average voter turnout in individual countries has sometimes fluctuated sharply and there have been constant ups and downs in given countries between elections, a general negative trend is discernible. This development is worrying because lower voter turnout tends to go hand in hand with greater inequality. This “Law of Dispersion” (Tingsten 1975) has again been confirmed with this updated data set.

The three short country analyses provide examples of regional and temporal differences. The general trend is all too evident in the cases of the United Kingdom and Portugal: on average, voter turnout has fallen and workers were less likely to vote in almost all elections than members of the higher-grade service class. Poland, by contrast, is a positive example, showing that the trend towards falling voter turnout can be reversed. This shows that it’s still possible to really mobilise the electorate when there’s a lot at stake. But the issue still remains of how this can be transposed to other established liberal democracies so that members of all social classes can participate in politics equally and have their voices heard.

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

Unequal Democracies is a FES Democracy of the Future project producing comparative analyses of the consequences of inequalities for democracies. The goal is to contribute to the political discourse about this issue and advise decision-makers.

In the format **“Who does (not) vote?”** we analyse social inequalities in voter turnout in European and North American democracies. In 2022 we published a comparative study (Elsässer et al. 2022) on this topic. The present paper presents the results of a recent data update of the main study.

For more information, see
<https://democracy.fes.de/topics/inequality-democracy>

WHO DOES (NOT) VOTE?

Voter turnout trends in 30 European and North American democracies



Who doesn't turn out to vote?

This analysis of 30 European and North American democracies shows that voters with occupations that require lower levels of education systematically are less likely to vote than more affluent voters.



Does unequal participation in elections pose a problem for democracies?

Democracies require equal participation of all social groups. This is the only way that ensures that democracies deliver for all. The increasing voting abstention of socially and economically disadvantaged people endangers this democratic promise.



Can populism remedy low turnouts?

The common conception that (right-wing) populist parties mobilize non-voters is not corroborated in this analysis.

Country profiles



United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is a good example of the general trend: Voting turnout has decreased steadily over time and working class were much less likely to vote than people of higher social classes. Only the 2017 House of Commons after Brexit showed a comparatively high increase of turnout across all social groups.



Portugal

Portugal is another case of significant decline in voter turnout over time. 49% of turnout at the 2019 general elections marked the nadir of all Western European EU countries. The snap elections in early 2024 may bring a turnaround.



Poland

The Polish election in October 2023 marked a record turnout of 74% and showed how decreasing turnout trends may be reversed. Even though also Polish working class people are less likely to vote than their upper service class compatriots the higher turnout meant also fewer differences in voter turnout between social groups.

For more information, see:

<https://democracy.fes.de/topics/inequality-democracy>