

## CO15: Participation rates of first-time voters

### Definitions and methodology

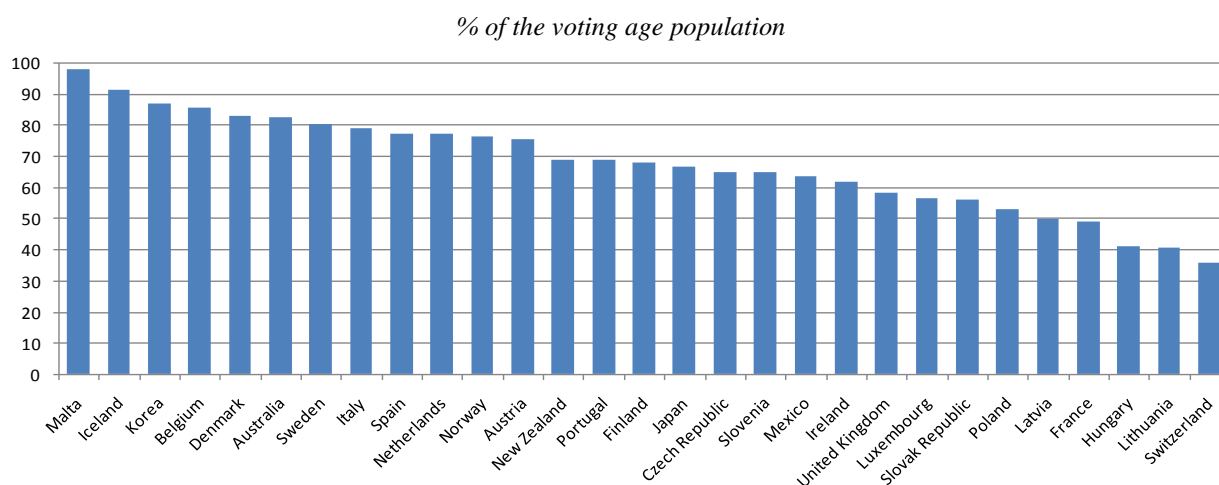
Voter participation or turnout is defined as the number of votes casts in a national parliamentary and/or presidential election as a proportion of the voting age population – generally the population aged 18 and over – and may serve as an indicator of societal participation. International comparisons of voter participation rates can be affected by differences in legal voting age, the voter registration process, and whether voting is compulsory or not (see comparability and data issues below).

Data presented here on voter turnout are based on administrative information collected by the *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*. Information on voter turnout by age group is taken from the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (CSES), an international research programme on comparable data on elections. For countries not covered by this programme, estimates are based on the 2006 *European Social Surveys* (ESS), even though the underlying samples are relatively small. The ESS has data on participation in the last national election (parliamentary or presidential), while information in the CSES concerns parliamentary elections only.

### Key findings

Chart CO15.1 shows voter turnout in the most recent parliamentary elections as based on administrative data. Turnout rates are above 80% in Iceland, Korea, Belgium, Denmark, Australia and Sweden, but below 50% in France, Hungary and Switzerland. Low turnout not only reflects limited participation by registered voters, but also that many potential voters do not register (Pintor and Gratshev, 2002). The compulsory character of voting does not seem to explain much of the observed cross-country variation. Voting is compulsory in Australia, Belgium, Greece, Luxembourg, Mexico, parts of Switzerland and Turkey, but many these countries also record low turnout rates.

**Chart CO15.1: Voter turnout in latest parliamentary election, around 2005<sup>1</sup>**



1) year: 2008 for Austria, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, New Zealand, Slovenia, Spain; 2007 for Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Poland, Russian Federation, Turkey; 2006 for Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Mexico, Netherlands, Slovak Republic, Sweden; 2005 for Japan, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom; 2004 for Luxembourg; 2003: Iceland and Switzerland; 2002: Ireland and Korea.  
 Source: IDEA Voter turnout database.

Other relevant indicators: CO13 Young people not in education or employment; and, C014 Participation in voluntary work and membership of NGOs for young adults.

Table CO15.1 shows differences in voting rates related to gender and age as based on survey data. Voter turnout does not differ much between men and women across countries. By comparison cross-national differences in voter participation by age are much larger. In general, younger voters are less likely to cast their vote than the electorate in general: voter turnout among 18 to 25 year olds is, on average, 13 percentage points lower than for adults aged 25 to 50 inclusive. Only in Korea and the US are younger voters more likely to cast their vote than prime-age individuals.

**Table CO15.1 Gender and age differences in voter turnout**

*Voter turnout ratios for different population groups*

	Year	Source	Gender	First time voters
			Women relative to men	Person aged 18-24 relative to the 25-50 years old
<b>Australia</b>	2004	CSES	1.03	0.97
<b>Austria</b>	2006	ESS	0.99	0.89
<b>Belgium</b>	2003	CSES	0.93	0.92
<b>Bulgaria</b>	2006	ESS	1.03	0.78
<b>Canada</b>	2004	CSES	0.96	0.86
<b>Cyprus</b> <sup>1, 2</sup>	2006	ESS	1.02	0.85
<b>Czech Rep.</b>	2002	CSES	0.98	0.77
<b>Denmark</b>	2006	ESS	1	0.79
<b>Estonia</b>	2006	ESS	1.13	0.57
<b>Finland</b>	2004	CSES	1.02	0.94
<b>Germany</b>	2002	CSES	0.99	0.83
<b>Finland</b>	2004	CSES	1.02	0.94
<b>France</b>	2003	CSES	1.09	0.84
<b>Hungary</b>	2005	CSES	0.84	0.82
<b>Ireland</b>	2002	ESS	0.93	0.92
<b>Iceland</b>	2002	CSES	1.02	0.78
<b>Japan</b>	2003	CSES	0.98	0.78
<b>Korea</b>	2004	CSES	0.95	1.02
<b>Mexico</b>	2004	CSES	0.95	0.75
<b>Netherlands</b>	2003	CSES	1.01	0.83
<b>Norway</b>	2002	CSES	1.02	0.99
<b>New Zealand</b>	2001	CSES	1.01	0.99
<b>Poland</b>	2002	CSES	0.96	0.91
<b>Portugal</b>	2001	CSES	0.94	0.91
<b>Romania</b>	2006	ESS	1.07	0.54
<b>Slovenia</b>	2006	ESS	1.05	0.66
<b>Slovak Republic</b>	2006	ESS	0.98	0.78
<b>Spain</b>	2001	CSES	1	0.88
<b>Sweden</b>	2005	CSES	0.98	0.84
<b>Switzerland</b>	2003	CSES	0.92	0.83
<b>United Kingdom</b>	2002	CSES	1.05	0.89
<b>United States</b>	2002	CSES	1.02	1.02
<b>OECD average</b>			0.97	0.87

1) Footnote by Turkey: The information in this document with reference to « Cyprus » relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Turkey recognizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of United Nations, Turkey shall preserve its position concerning the "Cyprus issue".

2) Footnote by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Commission: The Republic of Cyprus is recognized by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

Source: Module 2 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and 2006 European Social Survey for other countries.

### *Comparability and data issues*

Voter turnout rates are based on estimates of the Voting Age Population (VAP), i.e. the total number of potential voters of voting age (often the population over the age of 18) in a country. The VAP is an estimate as it is difficult to accurately account for people who are of voting age but who are not registered voters, whatever the reason. In countries where *registration* is compulsory and/or automatic (e.g. based on the civil register), as, for example in Scandinavian countries, the number of registered voters will be close to the VAP.

Cross-national comparisons for voter turnout data can be affected by a variety of factors including, the legal voting age, the voting registration system (automatic or requiring action by the potential voter) and whether voting is compulsory or not. In most OECD and European countries, the legal voting age in the national elections is 18 years old, but young people can vote from age 16 in Austria and from age 17 in Korea, and from age 20 only in Japan and Poland.

Most countries consider participating in national elections as a right of citizenship. In some countries, voting at elections has been made compulsory and has been regulated in the national constitutions and electoral laws. These countries include: Australia, Belgium, Greece, Luxembourg, Mexico, parts of Switzerland and Turkey.

Information in the database maintained by the *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* is based on administrative data, which is arguably the most reliable source of information. However, this data source does not involve a disaggregation of voters by age for elections since the turn of the Millennium. For information on younger voters surveys had to be relied upon. Data have been taken from both the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (CSES), and the 2006 *European Social Surveys* (ESS). The ESS has data on participation in the last national election (parliamentary or presidential), and has the more recent data. However, sample sizes are small, and for that reason CSES data has been used where available.

Sources and further reading: *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* <http://www.idea.int/index.cfm>; ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, <http://aceproject.org/>; CSES Comparative Study of Electoral System: <http://www.cses.org/>; 2006 European Social Survey: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>; OECD (2006), *Society at a Glance 2006*; Pintor R. and Gratschew M. (2002), *Voter turnout since 1945: a global report*, [http://www.idea.int/publications/vt/upload/VT\\_screenopt\\_2002.pdf](http://www.idea.int/publications/vt/upload/VT_screenopt_2002.pdf).