

CO4.2: Participation rates of first-time voters

Definitions and methodology

Voter participation or turnout is defined as the number of votes cast 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 (IDEA)*. Information on voter turnout by age group is taken from the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES 2011-2016)*, an international research programme on comparable data on elections. For countries not covered by this programme, estimates are based on the 2014 *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.

Data on interest in politics are from the European Social Surveys (ESS) and the World Value Survey Wave 6: 2010-14 (WVS). Questions in both surveys ask about interest in politics and the respondent can choose from four responses: very interested, quite interested, hardly interested and not at all interested. Data refer to the rate of people answering that they are ‘not at all interested’ in politics.

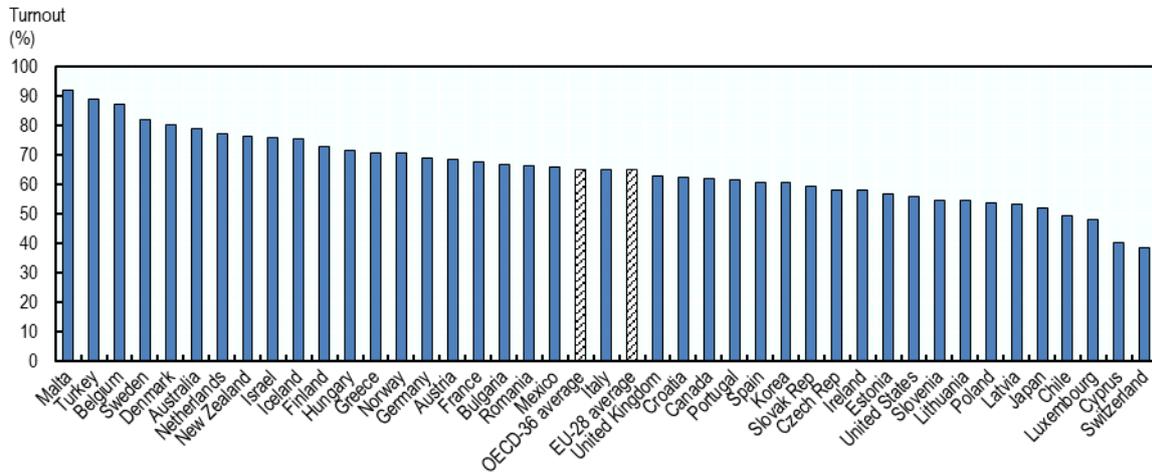
Key findings

Chart CO4.2.A shows voter turnout in the most recent parliamentary (or presidential) election as based on administrative data. Turnout rates are above 80% in Belgium, Denmark, Turkey and Sweden, but around 50% or below in Chile, Japan 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 turnout rates vary considerably across these countries.

Table CO4.2.A 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. Differences in voter participation by age, however, are much larger. In general, younger voters are less likely to cast their vote than the electorate in general: voter turnout among 18-to-24-year-olds is, on average, 17 percent lower than for adults aged 25 to 50 inclusive, with relative turnout among young people particularly low in France, the Slovak Republic, Estonia, and the United Kingdom. Only in Belgium and Korea are younger voters more likely to cast their vote than individuals aged 25-50.

Other relevant indicators: CO3.5 Young people not in education or employment; and, C04.1 Participation in voluntary work and membership of NGOs for young adults.

Chart CO4.2.A Voter turnout in latest parliamentary election, 2018 or latest year available ^a
 % of the voting age population



Note: Voting age population (VAP) turnout statistics are calculated by dividing the total vote by an estimated voting age population. The VAP is an estimate; for instance, in Korea the Voter turnout for presidential election defined as the total number of votes cast (valid or invalid) divided by the number of individuals on the voters' register was 75.84% in 2012. Data refer to parliamentary elections, with the exceptions of Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Mexico, Poland and Romania, where presidential elections are considered due to higher participation rates.

a) Year: 2017: Austria, Chile, Czech Rep., France, Germany, Malta, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, United Kingdom; 2016: Australia, Bulgaria, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Korea, Slovak Rep., Spain, United States; 2015: Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Israel, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland; 2014: Belgium, Japan, Romania.

b) The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

c) 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";

d) 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: [IDEA voter turnout database as in September 2019.](#)

Table CO4.2.A Gender and age differences in voter turnout
 Voter turnout ratios for different population groups

	Year	Source	Women relative to men	People aged 18-24 relative to people aged 25-50
Australia	2013	CSES	1.00	0.99
Austria	2013	CSES	1.03	0.88
Belgium	2014	ESS	1.02	1.05
Canada	2004	CSES	0.96	0.86
Czech Republic	2014	ESS	0.88	0.80
Denmark	2014	ESS	1.04	0.86
Estonia	2014	ESS	1.09	0.48
Finland	2014	ESS	0.97	0.70
France	2014	ESS	0.95	0.65
Germany	2013	CSES	0.91	0.83
Greece	2012	CSES	0.99	0.85
Hungary	2014	ESS	0.92	0.76
Iceland	2013	CSES	1.00	0.90
Ireland	2011	CSES	1.00	0.82
Israel (a)	2014	ESS	1.03	0.95
Italy	2012/13	ESS	0.98	0.91
Japan	2003	CSES	0.98	0.78
Korea	2004	CSES	0.95	1.02
Mexico	2012	CSES	0.99	0.91
Netherlands	2014	ESS	1.02	0.68
New Zealand	2011	CSES	0.99	0.86
Norway	2014	ESS	1.03	0.88
Poland	2011	CSES	0.94	0.97
Portugal	2014	ESS	1.01	0.77
Slovak Republic	2012/13	ESS	1.00	0.59
Slovenia	2014	ESS	1.06	0.91
Spain	2014	ESS	0.95	0.98
Sweden	2014	ESS	1.03	0.92
Switzerland	2011	CSES	0.95	0.87
United Kingdom	2014	ESS	0.97	0.47
United States	2012	CSES	1.04	0.82
OECD average			0.99	0.83
Bulgaria	2012/13	ESS	1.02	0.87
Cyprus (b,c)	2012/13	ESS	0.96	0.68
Lithuania	2014	ESS	0.96	0.61
EU average			0.99	0.80
Eurozone average			0.99	0.78

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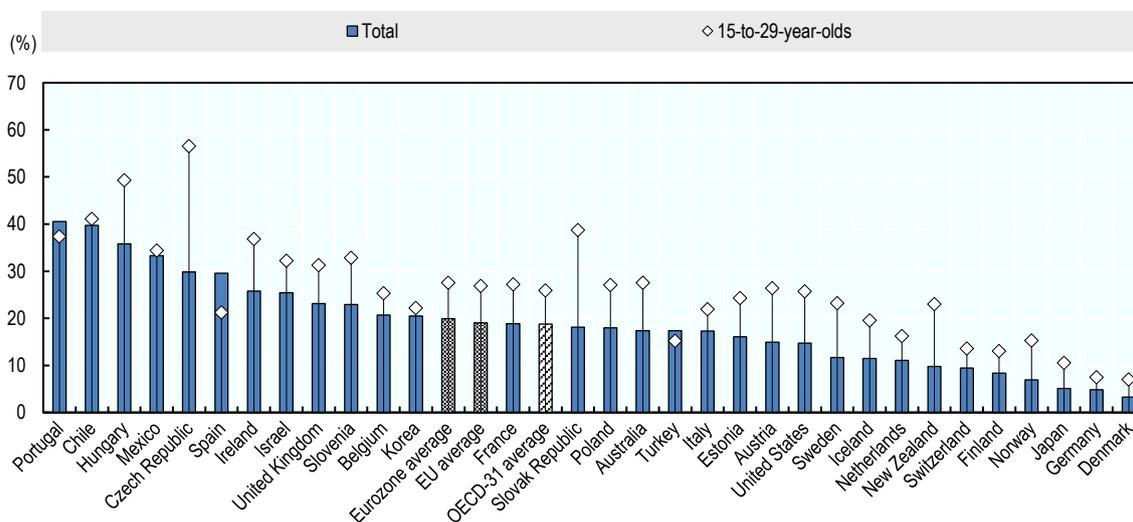
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Source: [Module 4 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems \(CSES 2011-2016\)](#); [European Social Survey 2014 for other countries](#).

Chart CO4.2.B shows those expressing a lack of interest in politics. On average across OECD countries, one in four young people (15-to-29-year-olds) report that they are ‘not at all interested’ in politics, compared to one in five for the total population. Chile and Portugal report the highest level of disinterest in politics among the total population whereas Denmark, Germany, Japan and Norway report the lowest levels. Among young people aged 15 to 29, disinterest in politics is high in Chile, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Chart CO4.2.B. Lack of interest in politics, around 2012-2014

Proportion (%) of people reporting that they are 'not at all interested' in politics, by age group



Sources: [for Chile, Japan, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, Turkey and the United States, World Values Survey Wave 6: 2010-2016](#); [for Austria, European Social Survey ESS7-2014](#), and for all other countries, [European Social Survey ESS6-2012](#)

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 may 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.

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 (IDEA)* 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 module 4 2011-2016), and the 2014 *European Social Surveys* (ESS). The ESS has data on participation in the last national election (parliamentary or presidential). 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/>; 2014 European Social Survey: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>; OECD (2019), *Society at a Glance 2019*; Pintor R. and Gratschew M. (2002), *Voter turnout since 1945: a global report*, http://www.idea.int/publications/vt/upload/VT_screenopt_2002.pdf.