



Department of Political Science

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**Does (dis)trust in institutions explain electoral  
turnout decline?  
A study on six European countries**

SUPERVISORS:

Professor Lorenzo De Sio

Dr. Davide Angelucci

CANDIDATE:

Ruggero Bongiorno

Matr. 092892

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite differences in history, forms of governments and electoral laws, all advanced western democracies have seen a constant decline in electoral turnout. Due to the importance of political participation (especially voting) in democracies, this decline has been one of the most debated topics in the last decades. Researchers have extensively investigated the causes by analysing several variables but findings are debated and there is little agreement over the most prominent factors which affect electoral turnout decline. Among those variables, trust in institutions is of particular interest. Trust in institutions is also in decline in all western democracies but its real impact on turnout is controversial. Some believe that only a weak link is present between political trust and turnout<sup>1</sup> while others believe that there is a strong linear relationship between the two<sup>2</sup>.

This study aims at furthering exploring this relationship to find out if (dis)trust in institutions explains electoral turnout decline. The analysis will focus on six European countries: Italy, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Netherlands and Austria.

The first chapter provides a broad overview of the research question and explores the most important findings on turnout and political trust. The second chapter explains the choice of those six countries, why they are important and their main characteristics. It also explores the dataset and the method used to carry out the study.

Lastly, the third chapter analyses the results and confronts the hypotheses made.

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<sup>1</sup> Citrin, J. (1974). Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government. *The American Political Science Review*, 68(3), 973–988.

<sup>2</sup> Grönlund, K., Setälä, M. Political Trust, Satisfaction and Voter Turnout. *Comp Eur Polit* 5, 400–422 (2007).

## CHAPTER 1

### 1.1 Declining Turnout

Turnout is perceived as fundamental for the functioning and legitimacy of representative democracies all over the world. Historically, the right to vote has been the aim of many war and revolutions, becoming the symbol of citizenship. Electoral participation fulfils the two core democratic principles of universality and equality meaning that every individual, whatever its circumstances, should have an equal say<sup>3</sup>.

Elections are fundamental because they create a relationship of formal accountability between policy makers and citizens<sup>4</sup>. Elections provide incentives to incumbents that want to impress voters in order to be re-elected and therefore adapt their policies accordingly. Rational voters use elections to evaluate past policies of incumbents and future policies proposed by candidates thus holding accountable politicians of their actions. This is linked to the idea of responsiveness as elections ensure continuous responsiveness.

Elected officials should be responsive to the wishes and view of voters<sup>5</sup>.

It is important as it connects citizens to the decision-making process. Democratic responsiveness is understood as a process in which politicians anticipate citizens' opinions<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, citizens observe and evaluate those decisions taken, Elections constrain politicians to act in a responsible manner. Responsiveness translates in a continuous representation of citizens even after election day where voters delegate decisional power to elected officials<sup>7</sup>. A problem arises in case of low turnout because democratic responsiveness depends on citizen participation<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Crewe, Ivor. "Electoral participation." *Democracy at the polls: A comparative study of competitive national elections* (1981): 216-63.

<sup>4</sup> Ashworth, Scott. "Electoral accountability: Recent theoretical and empirical work." *Annual Review of Political Science* 15 (2012): 183-201.

<sup>5</sup> Dahl, Robert A. "Polyarchy: participation and opposition" (1971).

<sup>6</sup> Erikson, Robert S., Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson. *The macro polity*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Urbinati, Nadia, and Mark E. Warren. "The concept of representation in contemporary democratic theory." *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* 11 (2008): 387-412.

<sup>8</sup> Verba, Sidney. "The citizen as respondent: sample surveys and American democracy presidential address, American Political Science Association, 1995." *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 1 (1996): 1-7.

Voting, it goes without saying, is only one form of political participation. Nie and Verba<sup>9</sup> distinguish four major dimensions of participation: 1) the degree of initiative required of the participant 2) the degree of conflict incurred with others; (3) the type of influence exercised upon officials and politicians, that is, the amount of information imparted and pressure exerted; and (4) whether the outcome affects the community (or part of it) or the individual only. Let's analyse voting through these four dimensions.

Voting requires very little initiative, effort and time so it a very simple form of political participation. There is no degree of conflict with others since it is an individual act that does not require cooperation with others. Moreover ballot casting is secret meaning that no sanction or conflict can arise with other people. Therefore, considering those two dimensions, vote has a very small cost. The other two dimensions concern benefits rather than cost, in this aspect vote is discouraging. Casting an individual ballot has very little effect in the overall election and has no immediate benefit to the elector compared to other forms of political participation (ex. Working for an organised pressure group). The results of an election rarely depends on the vote of a singular individual therefore the benefits are very low. We can therefore conclude that voting has both little costs and benefits<sup>3</sup>.

In fact there is consensus among scholars and experts that electoral turnout is declining in all modern democracies. This is confirmed by data available which shows how the global average voting fell from 77% in the late 1960s to 67% after 2010<sup>10</sup> in western democracies. This trend is remarkably similar even among developed countries with extremely different electoral systems and forms of government. This can be seen in the six countries which will be furtherly investigated in this paper. Italy has seen a tremendous decline in electoral turnout. After reaching a peak of 93.87% in 1953, Italy had a stable turnout above 90% for more than 20 years. The decline started in 1979 and (except for 2006) never stopped, reaching a record-low of 72.93% in the last parliamentary election of 2018.

Out of the six countries selected, the United Kingdom has the lowest levels of turnout. In the last elections only 67.6% of citizens decided to cast a vote compared to more than 77% in 1964.

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<sup>9</sup> Verba, Sidney, Norman H. Nie, and Jae-on Kim. *Participation and political equality: A seven-nation comparison*. Cambridge university press, 1978.

<sup>10</sup> Kostelka, Filip, and André Blais. "The generational and institutional sources of the global decline in voter turnout." *World Politics* 73, no. 4 (2021): 629-667.

Germany also faced a decline, in 2021 the registered turnout was 76.58% compared to more than 86% in the late 1960's. Nevertheless, in the last 30 years, although some oscillations, turnout has been rather stable.

Similar trends can also be seen for France (presidential elections), Netherlands or Austria. Most of those advanced countries have very different electoral systems and forms of government but still face a similar declining trend.

Declining electoral turnout is problematic because it harms the health of our democracies. One of the problems of low turnout is that it reduces government responsiveness and favours clientelism and patronage<sup>11</sup>.

This is because citizens that vote and citizens that don't vote have important consequences on those who get elected and therefore, on the policies carried out. To put in in Dean Burnham's words<sup>12</sup> "the old saw remains profoundly true: if you don't vote, you don't count".

Lower turnout often means that lower social classes are disadvantaged since those citizens tend to abstain more than wealthy groups of people meaning that lower classes are less likely to be represented<sup>13 14</sup>. There is a clear link between socio-economic status and turnout. In other words, lower turnout means unequal and socioeconomically biased turnout.

For this reason, education was believed to have a positive impact on turnout. Many studies have strengthened this belief showing that education was the most impactful variable<sup>15</sup>.

However, advanced democracies have seen a decline in turnout despite the general rise in education in the last decades<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Martin, Paul S., and Michele P. Claibourn. "Citizen participation and congressional responsiveness: New evidence that participation matters." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2013): 59-81.

Avery, James M. "Does who votes matter? Income bias in voter turnout and economic inequality in the American states from 1980 to 2010." *Political Behavior* 37, no. 4 (2015): 955-976.

Nooruddin, Irfan, and Joel W. Simmons. "Do voters count? Institutions, voter turnout, and public goods provision in India." *Electoral Studies* 37 (2015): 1-14.

Aggeborn, Linuz. "Voter turnout and the size of government." *European Journal of Political Economy* 43 (2016): 29-40.

<sup>12</sup> Burnham, Walter Dean. "Elections as democratic institutions." *Society* 24, no. 4 (1987): 38-48.

<sup>13</sup> Lijphart, Arend. "Unequal participation: Democracy's unresolved dilemma presidential address, American Political Science Association, 1996." *American political science review* 91, no. 1 (1997): 1-14.

<sup>14</sup> Dassonneville, Ruth, and Marc Hooghe. "Voter turnout decline and stratification: Quasi-experimental and comparative evidence of a growing educational gap." *Politics* 37, no. 2 (2017): 184-200.

<sup>15</sup> Rosenstone, Steven J., and John Mark Hansen. *Mobilization, participation, and democracy in America*. Longman Publishing Group, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Teixeira Ruy Antonio. *The disappearing American voter*. Washington (D.C.) : Brookings Institution. 1992.

Education strongly predicts voter turnout, the overall education levels have risen dramatically therefore voter turnout had to increase, but it did not. This contradiction has puzzled political scientists for many years.

## 1.2 Determinants of Electoral Turnout

The relevance the problem and the difficulties in analysing its causes have led researchers to further explore the topic. Several different variables have been investigated with many different theoretical explanations but no consensus has been reached.

To sum up the findings on the topic of declining electoral turnout and its causes, Smets and Van Ham<sup>17</sup> have reviewed more than ninety important articles where 6 main models have been elaborated in order to explain voter turnout.

The resource model is based on the idea that political participation is driven by resources, in particular time, money and skills<sup>18 19</sup>. Therefore, those with a higher income and status are more likely to have a wider range of resources and to vote. This is also because higher resource citizens often have higher stakes in elections thus resulting in greater motivation to vote. In this model, education is considered among the strongest predictors of voter turnout. However, as previously stated, a general rise in education has not resulted in a general rise in turnover. Nevertheless, the analysis made by Smets and Van Ham finds education to be positively related with turnout. In this model, age was found to have a “curvilinear” relationship with turnout meaning that young adults were more likely to abstain but turnout rose as the individual transitioned into adulthood before starting to decline again at an older age. Race, Citizenship and gender were not found to have a statically significant impact on vote.

Another model is the mobilization model. This centres around the idea that parties and movements are fundamental in mobilizing citizens to vote. Therefore, associational

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<sup>17</sup> Smets, Kaat, and Carolien Van Ham. "The embarrassment of riches? A meta-analysis of individual-level research on voter turnout." *Electoral studies* 32, no. 2 (2013): 344-359.

<sup>18</sup> Verba, Sidney, and Norman H. Nie. 1972. *Participation in America: political democracy and social equality*. New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>19</sup> Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Harvard University Press, 1995.

membership is thought to have a very strong impact on turnout. However, the impact of union membership and attendance of religious services was found to be neglectable. What was found to have an effect was media exposure and campaign advertisements as well as partisan and non-partisan mobilization efforts<sup>20</sup>.

The socialization model is based on the idea that the formative years between childhood and adulthood are generally considered a key period where citizens learn political attitudes from peers, family and surrounding environments<sup>21</sup>. Here parental income and social class was found to have a strong impact on turnout. Another important factor is generational replacement and voting age. These two variables have been widely explored in recent research. Mark Franklin<sup>22</sup> suggested that lowering voting age below twenty-one (this occurred in most advanced democracies in the mid 1970's) had a negative impact of turnout. His studies found out that citizens between the age of eighteen and twenty are less likely to vote in the first elections that they face and this has a consequence on the subsequent elections. This is due to the socialisation process that is at an earlier stage in the case of eighteen-years-old citizens voting for the first time compared to twenty-one-years old. However, Kostelka and Blais<sup>23</sup> argue that Franklin does not consider the variety of situations in which young adults live. In many countries eighteen-years-old live with their parents and this is meant to protect them from the negative effects of the voting-age reform. Kostelka and Blais also studied the impact of new generations on electoral turnout. Their hypothesis was that more affluent generations are less likely to vote and they were partly responsible for the general decline in turnout. Previous findings had discovered that individuals born after 1960's voted at lower rates compared to older generations<sup>24</sup>. In fact, generational replacement was found to be the major factor determining the decline in voter turnout explaining up to 50% of the total decline. On why younger generations are less prone to vote, two main lines of arguments have developed. Some scholars believe that the

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<sup>20</sup> Smets, Kaat, and Carolien Van Ham. "The embarrassment of riches? A meta-analysis of individual-level research on voter turnout." *Electoral studies* 32, no. 2 (2013): 344-359.

<sup>21</sup> Plutzer, Eric. "Becoming a habitual voter: Inertia, resources, and growth in young adulthood." *American political science review* 96, no. 1 (2002): 41-56.

<sup>22</sup> Franklin, Mark N. *Voter turnout and the dynamics of electoral competition in established democracies since 1945*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Kostelka, Filip, and André Blais. "The generational and institutional sources of the global decline in voter turnout." *World Politics* 73, no. 4 (2021): 629-667.

<sup>24</sup> Blais, André, and Daniel Rubenson. "The source of turnout decline: New values or new contexts?." *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 1 (2013): 95-117.



generational gap in turnout reflects a larger cultural value change where those generations are less interested in politics and are less inclined to conceive voting as a civic duty. Other scholars believe that the decline in voting is due to the characteristics of elections that particularly affect younger generation such as less competitive elections, changes in electoral laws and the previously mentioned lowering of voting age<sup>28</sup>.

The fourth model was the rational choice model that emphasis the cost-benefit calculation of the individual that is likely to vote only if the benefits outweigh costs. Higher cost of voting was found to decrease likelihood of turnout while personal benefits to increase it<sup>25</sup>.

The psychological model focuses on the psychological determinants of turnout. This means analysing variables such as personal political interest, political knowledge, party identification, ideology and personal characteristics such as perceiving voting as a duty. Indeed, party identification and political interest do boost turnout while ideological placement was found not to have a significant impact<sup>28</sup>.

The sixth and last model is the political-institutional model. This model is linked to the idea that the decision to participate (or not) in political life depends on the political environment in which people live. Where the process of voting is made easier and more accessible, turnout increases.

However, the closeness and importance of elections was not found to have a significant impact. On the other side, compulsory voting does have a strong impact while voter facilitation rules (such as voting on weekends, postal voting or e-voting) was found to only mildly influence turnout.<sup>28</sup>

To sum up, the variables that were found to have a consistent effect on turnout in more than 10% of studies were: age and age squared, education, residential mobility, religion, media exposure, mobilization, vote in previous election, party identification, political interest and political knowledge. Education was among the strongest predictor of turnout being positively related (despite the decline in turnout and rise in education among citizens). Age was also very important. Studies suggest the presence of a curvilinear relationship with turnout

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<sup>25</sup> Smets, Kaat, and Carolien Van Ham. "The embarrassment of riches? A meta-analysis of individual-level research on voter turnout." *Electoral studies* 32, no. 2 (2013): 344-359.

meaning that young people are less likely to vote but turnout then rises with age and declines again when citizens reach an older age.

On the other hand, trust in institution was not found to have a significant effect on turnout. However, many studies disagree.

### **1.3 Political Trust**

Trust is a crucial element of our society. Trust towards other individuals and towards institutions is fundamental for the functioning of the democratic system which relies on the cooperation, support and participation of its citizens.

Despite the increasing attention and research on trust, it is very difficult to define it and its meaning is controversial in the academic debate. Nevertheless, there is some consensus around the fact that it “involves an individual making herself vulnerable to another individual, group or institution that has the capacity to do her harm or to betray her”<sup>26</sup>. Trusting therefore implies accepting vulnerability and the possibility of being betrayed: this is what makes trust difficult, especially towards entities we do not personally know and feel distant from.

Political trust refers to the citizen’s feeling about their political institutions. This kind of trust is strictly related to the idea of legitimacy as the former determines, or at least strongly influences, the latter. Legitimacy, in Max Weber’s definition, “endows authorities with the moral foundation for obedience”<sup>27</sup> and, consequently, political trust is what really binds and holds governments accountable to their choices and actions. Political trust can be interpreted as an evaluation of government based on how it is acting compared to people’s expectations<sup>28</sup>. Criteria may include ethical evaluations (honesty or dishonesty of elected officials), ability and efficiency of government officials and correctness of policy decisions<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Levi, Margaret, and Laura Stoker. "Political trust and trustworthiness." *Annual review of political science* 3, no. 1 (2000): 475-507.

<sup>27</sup> Citrin, Jack, and Laura Stoker. "Political trust in a cynical age." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 49-70.

<sup>28</sup> Miller, Arthur H. "Political issues and trust in government: 1964–1970." *American political science review* 68, no. 3 (1974): 951-972.

<sup>29</sup> Stokes, Donald E., and Warren E. Miller. "Party government and the saliency of Congress." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1962): 531-546.

When analysing political trust, it is important to differentiate between mistrust, distrust and disaffection but also between system and diffused support. Mistrust refers to scepticisms and doubts on the trustworthiness of the other while distrust is “a settled belief that the other is untrustworthy”<sup>28</sup>.

Finally Easton differentiates between “specific support” which refers to support for current authorities and “diffuse support” which refers to the support towards the regime’s principles and institutions<sup>30</sup>.

Some scholars believe that trust correlates only with specific support thus limiting the consequences of a decline of trust.

Other scholars believe in a connection between political trust and diffuse support where continuous low trust threatens regime legitimacy. Therefore, if support for institutions diminishes the legitimacy of the whole system is questioned. As a consequence, governments are pressured to stay effective and implement the correct policies<sup>31</sup>.

Whether it correlates with one or the other, “distrust breeds conditions for the creation of further distrust”<sup>32</sup>. This is because distrust causes disapproval and disapproval makes it harder for leaders to spend resources in order to implement policies aimed at resolving problems<sup>33</sup>.

This negative loop of distrust generating more distrust is dangerous as citizens may begin to question the regime itself.

Data shows a decline in trust towards governmental institutions in advanced democracies since the early 1980’s<sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup>. This decline poses a threat to our democracies. Advanced democracies have a very good record of policy performance and have seen an incredible rise in living standards since the end of the second world war<sup>36</sup>. This has led scholars to analyse the causes of the decline in institutional trust despite the improved living conditions that

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<sup>30</sup> Easton, David. "A re-assessment of the concept of political support." *British journal of political science* 5, no. 4 (1975): 435-457.

<sup>31</sup> Hetherington, Marc J. "The political relevance of political trust." *American political science review* 92, no. 4 (1998): 791-808.

<sup>32</sup> Gamson, William A. "Stable unrepresentation in American society." *American Behavioral Scientist* 12, no. 2 (1968): 15-21.

<sup>33</sup> Neustadt, Richard E. "Presidential power: The politics of leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan." (1990).

<sup>34</sup> Miller, Arthur, and Ola Listhaug. "Political performance and institutional trust." *Critical citizens: Global support for democratic government* (1999): 204-216.

<sup>35</sup> Dalton, Russell J. *Democratic challenges, democratic choices*. Oxford univ. press, 2004.

developed countries have seen and to question the impact of declining support on democracies. Arthur Miller<sup>36</sup> concluded that declining trust had fundamental implications for American politics as the data showed a strong hostility to political figures, government and regime as a whole.

Jack Citrin<sup>37</sup> highlighted how distrust was affecting orientations towards the incumbent and thus the system and hoped to see a political class able to transform those feelings of distrust. John Mueller<sup>38</sup> argued that a dissatisfied or cynical public is the normal pattern expected from democracies. Supporting Hetherington, he also attributed part of the decline to academics, political figures and intellectuals as those contribute to the cynicism of democracy that they complain about: “the cynicism about the [political] form so commonly found in democracies, and so often lamented by democratic idealists, is partly—may be even substantially—caused by them”.

A possible explanation is that people have become more realistic about politics. Citrin<sup>38</sup> points to the naïve idealism of the earlier period which might have led to disaffection towards politics. Strong reforms might mitigate these feelings but in order to implement them, trust is required in the first place. Citizens’ disaffection to political institutions has important consequences on democracies. If voters lose trust towards political parties, the whole electoral process changes<sup>39</sup>. This kind of electorate shows greater volatility in electoral choices which also facilitates the emergence of new parties. However, if new parties and greater volatility do not regenerate political trust, this may lead to a negative spiral<sup>40</sup>.

In fact, the decline of trust has also been linked to declining political participation. Defining political participation as those activities undertaken by the public to influence political decisions, either directly or by affecting the selection of persons who make policies, it has been identified as a key determinant of people’s trust in government and public institutions<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Miller, Arthur H. "Political issues and trust in government: 1964–1970." *American political science review* 68, no. 3 (1974): 951-972.

<sup>37</sup> Citrin, Jack. "Comment: The political relevance of trust in government." *American Political Science Review* 68, no. 3 (1974): 973-988.

<sup>38</sup> Mueller, John E. *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ralph’s Pretty Good Grocery*. Core Textbook. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Dalton, Russell J., and Martin P. Wattenberg. 2000. *Parties without partisans: political change in advanced industrial democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

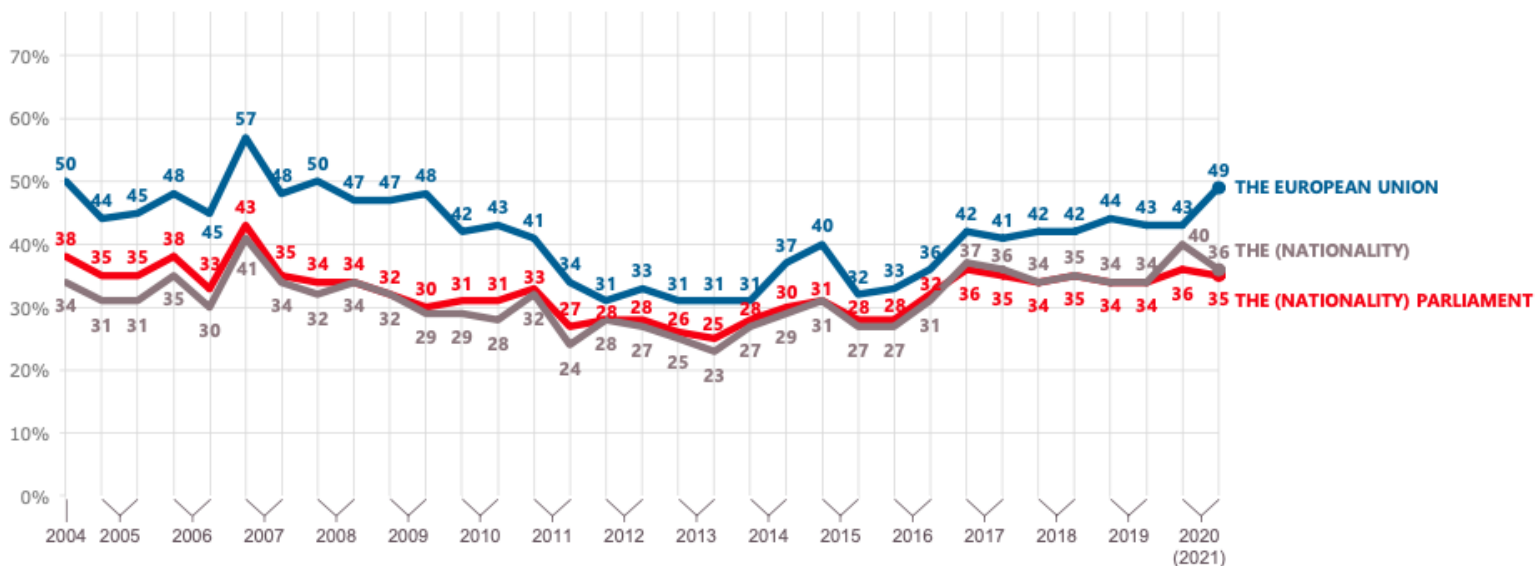
<sup>40</sup> Miller, Arthur H. "Political issues and trust in government: 1964–1970." *American political science review* 68, no. 3 (1974): 951-972.

<sup>41</sup> Prats, Mariana, and Axel Meunier. "Political efficacy and participation: An empirical analysis in European countries." (2021).

Trust can also be seen as a prerequisite of political action<sup>42</sup> such as voting and civic minded citizens are more likely to participate and have higher levels of trust than passive citizens<sup>43 44</sup>. Consequently, while participation has been found to increase trust, lack of participation is associated to low trust<sup>45</sup>.

In recent decades there has been a decline in trust towards institutions in developed countries<sup>46</sup>. Europe has seen such decline since the 1970's but there are important differences depending on the institution taken into consideration.

Figure 1: How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it? (% - EU - TEND TO TRUST) (Elaboration and Data: Eurobarometer)



<sup>42</sup> Hooghe, Marc, and Sofie Marien. "A comparative analysis of the relation between political trust and forms of political participation in Europe." *European Societies* 15, no. 1 (2013): 131-152.

<sup>43</sup> Verba, Sidney, and Gabriel Almond. "The civic culture." *Political attitudes and democracy in five nations* (1963).

<sup>44</sup> Brehm, John, and Wendy Rahn. "Individual-level evidence for the causes and consequences of social capital." *American journal of political science* (1997): 999-1023.

<sup>45</sup> Parvin, Phil. "Democracy without participation: A new politics for a disengaged era." *Res Publica* 24, no. 1 (2018): 31-52.

<sup>46</sup> UN DESA, 2021. Policy Brief No.108: Trust in public institutions: Trends and implications for economic security

Eurobarometer data conducts interview to citizens in different countries on their trust towards a certain institution. The different waves conducted over the years, allow us to identify the evolution of trends of trust.

Figure 1 shows trust towards European Union, National governments and national parliaments. We can see how the European Union has constantly outperformed national parliaments and governments in winning the trust of its citizens. The EU reached a peak in 2007 with 57% of its citizens tending to trust while, in the same year, trust towards national parliament was 14 points less (43%) and trust towards national government was only 41%.

Nevertheless, since the financial crisis of 2008, trust towards institutions has seen a strong decline. The EU has dropped dramatically to 31% in 2012 and has yet to reach its 2007 peak while national parliaments dropped to a record-low 25% of tendency to trust in 2013.

However, In the last wave of interviews trust towards EU and national parliaments stands at 49% and 35% respectively.

## **1.4 Electoral Turnout and Political Trust**

Many academics have previously studied this relationship. Citrin has found a weak relationship between political trust and electoral turnout (Citrin 1974). Analysing political trust and political involvement in the USA between 1964 and 1972, Citrin provided evidence for his conclusion: “the evidence that mistrust of government produces neither political apathy nor political activism reinforces the argument that many cynical responses merely record opposition to incumbent officeholders or largely ritualistic expression of fashionable clichés”<sup>47</sup>.

Similarly, Rosenston and Hansen<sup>48</sup> conclude that, controlling for other variables, trust has no effect on any form of electoral participation.

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<sup>47</sup> Citrin, Jack. "Comment: The political relevance of trust in government." *American Political Science Review* 68, no. 3 (1974): 973-988.

<sup>48</sup> Rosenstone, Steven J., and John Mark Hansen. *Mobilization, participation, and democracy in America*. Longman Publishing Group, 1993.

Hetherington<sup>49</sup> <sup>50</sup> argues that there is no link at all but focuses on the effect of political trust on voter choices. He concludes that citizens with low levels of trust, in elections with two candidates such as American presidential elections, tend to choose more the challenger over the incumbent. The distrustful tend to choose candidates who promise important changes.

On the other hand, Miller, Goldenberg and Erbring<sup>51</sup> provide evidence that trust affects participation, they find an indirect effect through external efficacy.

Grönlund and Setälä<sup>52</sup> also provide evidence of the impact of trust on turnout. They do so by first arguing that the results obtained by Citrin and Miller were because the operationalizations of political trust. This entailed too many variables such as attitudes towards incumbent governments and many more whilst their analysis is based on the distinction between the concepts of trust and satisfaction as measurement of political support.

In their work, they also distinguished between variables measuring support for representative democracy as a system from the variables measuring attitudes towards political actors. In other words, they separated support for political actors (current parliament or current government) from support towards political institutions. Thus, their research showed that “there is a clear and linear relationship between trust in parliament and turnout”.

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<sup>49</sup> Hetherington, Marc J. "The political relevance of political trust." *American political science review* 92, no. 4 (1998): 791-808.

<sup>50</sup> Hetherington, Marc J. "The effect of political trust on the presidential vote, 1968–96." *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 2 (1999): 311-326.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, Arthur H., Edie N. Goldenberg, and Lutz Erbring. "Type-set politics: Impact of newspapers on public confidence." *American Political Science Review* 73, no. 1 (1979): 67-84.

<sup>52</sup> Grönlund, Kimmo, and Maija Setälä. "Political trust, satisfaction and voter turnout." *Comparative European Politics* 5, no. 4 (2007): 400-422.

Figure 2: Trust in Parliament and Voter Turnout (Data: ESS; Elaboration: Grönlund and Setälä 2007)

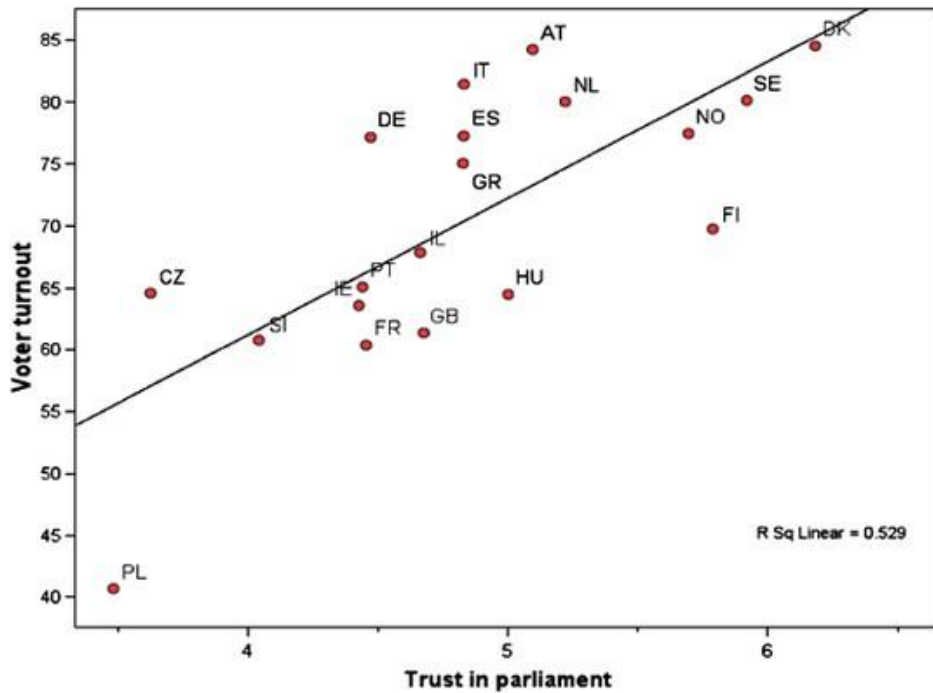


Figure 2 shows the clear positive relationship between trust in national parliament and voting turnout which resulted in the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) being 0.58. As hypothesised by Grönlund and Setälä, the countries with higher trust in national Parliaments are also the countries with the highest turnout. Those include Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

We can see that there is a group of low-trust countries with a higher than predicted turnout. Among those we can see Italy, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands that are all above the fitted line. The UK and France are both below the fitted line meaning that voter turnout is lower than predicted considering their level of trust in parliament. Overall, the relation between trust in national Parliaments appears to be strong and statistically significant<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Grönlund, Kimmo, and Maija Setälä. "Political trust, satisfaction and voter turnout." *Comparative European Politics* 5, no. 4 (2007): 400-422.



## 1.5 Hypotheses

So far, I have analysed turnout and the determinants of turnout through the findings of previous scholars. I have also provided a summary of the literature on political trust, its meaning, and its decline.

I have then seen the previous studies on the relationship between political trust and electoral turnout. Some scholars believe that there is little or no effect on the former on the latter while other conclude that there is a clear correlation. I will do a similar study analysing trust towards parliaments and turnout while focusing on Italy, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany and Austria.

First of all, satisfaction with the incumbent government must be kept separate from general support for institutions and democratic regime. Dissatisfaction with incumbent politicians might generate lower trust and encourage voting for new parties, maybe even boosting turnout.

However, when dissatisfaction with government is continuous and trust towards parliaments constantly declines, this might affect citizens' general attitude towards the regime.

Considering the constant decline of trust towards institutions, I believe that this affects turnout negatively.

Furthermore, I believe that the negative effect of trust on turnout has increased over time. In other words, declining political trust is affecting more and more electoral turnout.

To sum up, my hypotheses are:

H<sub>1</sub> : Low levels of trust towards national parliaments have a negative effect on declining electoral turnout

H<sub>2</sub> : This negative effect is increasing over time.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2.1 Case Selection

Italy, France, Austria, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Germany are the six countries that were chosen to be analysed in the present work. They are not only among the most important in Western Europe, but also representative of the different political cultures and institutional settings.

These countries have a history of both conflicting and coinciding interests which brought them to be allies and enemies. For example, whereas in the 20th century Germany and Italy were brought closer by their dictatorial experience, the United Kingdom has not known a different political regime than democracy for ages (although in different forms).

Moreover, an important *trait-d'union* of the forementioned countries is their predominant role in the creation of the European Economic Community first, and the European Union next. Following the Rome Treaty, excluding the United Kingdom and Austria, the integration process undertaken by these countries may be seen as reflecting particular characteristics of their political systems which are deemed of interest.

The role played within the European project also drastically differs from country to country. For example, the United Kingdom has been the most eager “veto-country” in the EU before it definitely left in 2016. On the other hand, what separates these countries is surely their different forms of State and government.

France and the Netherlands are unitary states, whereas Germany and Austria are federal states. Since 1970s Italy has followed the path of regionalism, and since the devolution era the United Kingdom adopted a similar territorial regime. However, most importantly, I would argue that the representativeness of the sample derives from its ability to encompass each of the three categories of political system as defined by Almond<sup>54</sup>.

Great Britain represents the Anglo-American political system characterised by greater stability and effectiveness. Italy, France, and Germany instead are representative of the continental European political system characterised by features of instability and political immobilism driven by centrifugal forces which lead political parties to the extremes rather than the centre<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> Almond, Gabriel A. "Comparative political systems." *The Journal of politics* 18, no. 3 (1956): 391-409.

<sup>55</sup> Lijphart, Arend. "Consociational Democracy." *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (1969): 207–25.

Lastly, the Netherlands embodies what has been defined as a sort of “third way” which brings together characteristics of the Anglo-American model and of the continental European model.

The next section aims at providing a brief description of each country taking into account their different political history and social developments in the attempt to attain better acquiescence with our sample countries.

### **2.1 a) Italy**

Italy has often been characterised by its unstable political environment and by the great importance assumed by political parties in the political life of the country. Having these been the major actors of the Italian political life since the beginning of the Republican era, scholars have also defined the Italian political system as “partitocracy”<sup>56</sup>.

Italian mass political parties have historically set the start and the end of different political era and the changes in parties’ configuration often initiated new political cycles. For example, it is the crisis of the mass party initiated by the legal inquiry of Manipulite (Bribesville) which ended the Italian first Republic and open the way for a Second Republic to emerge.

Throughout its history Italy has taken two distant approaches concerning the electoral law. During the monarchic experience which lasted from the unification of 1861 to 1945, except for the “ventennio” (the Fascist period), the electoral law had always been majoritarian. It is only with the foundation of the Republic in 1946 that Italy entered a proportional era which lasted until 1993.

In 1993, a new electoral law named “Mattarellum” was introduced. It was an indirect consequence of the political crisis which took place in those years (the forementioned Bribesville) and it had a clear majoritarian character.

Compulsory voting had also been present in Italy until 1993 but was rarely enforced and was therefore classified as “weak” compulsory voting by scholars<sup>57</sup>.

In 2005 the “Calderoli” electoral law, also known as “Porcellum” because its author (senator Calderoli) defined it a “porcata” (a rascality), was passed. This marked the return to the proportional system but with a majority prize and blocked lists to elect parliamentarians.

It was declared unconstitutional 8 years later, therefore a new proportional electoral law was adopted in 2015 known as the “Italicum”. Italicum was also declared unconstitutional and

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<sup>56</sup> Pasquino, Gianfranco. "The 2013 elections and the Italian political system." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 19, no. 4 (2014): 424-437.

<sup>57</sup> Grönlund, Kimmo, and Maija Setälä. "Political trust, satisfaction and voter turnout." *Comparative European Politics* 5, no. 4 (2007): 400-422.

was never used in any elections. It was then replaced by Rosatellum which is the current electoral law. It consists of a mixed system: 37% of the seats are to be assigned with a first past the post system while 61% with a proportional system (the remaining 2% for overseas constituencies).

According to Pasquino<sup>58</sup> the same number of parliamentary groups present in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies since the 1990s highlights both the difficulty to create multiparty coalitions governments and the rather fragile existence of those governments.

In line with Almond's political model of Continental European democracy<sup>59</sup>, the Italian political system of the First Republic was characterised by great political polarisation, defined by Sartori as "polarised pluralism". Strong anti-system parties like the Communist party were present spreading centrifugal political dynamics.

According to Bordignon<sup>60</sup> the fall of the last Berlusconi government in 2011 led the left-right division to lose salience and paved the way for the emergence of new cleavages. After the 2018 general elections the second republic, characterised by the polarising figure of Silvio Berlusconi and the strong bipolar drive, seems to have come to an end. Two new anti-system parties have emerged being the Lega (League) and Movimento 5 Stelle (5 stars movement). It was indeed the leader of the League, Matteo Salvini that played a pivotal role in the "reconfiguration of the political scenario in Italy<sup>63</sup>". After this short tripolar phase, according to Bordignon, the 2018 general elections marked the return of bipolarism with higher leader polarisation index and the emergence of divisive figures.

Regarding turnout, Italy has seen a tremendous decline. Italy's turnout had been stable above 90% for more than 20 years but the decline started in 1979. It never stopped and it reached a record-low of 72.93% in the last parliamentary election of 2018.

## **2.1 b) Austria**

The federal Republic of Austria, restored in April 1945 at the end of the Second World War, has known a rather stable political system for most of its life. However, like in other major European countries, the 2016 Presidential elections have been shocking for many reasons.

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<sup>58</sup> Pasquino, Gianfranco. "The 2013 elections and the Italian political system." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 19, no. 4 (2014): 424-437.

<sup>59</sup> Almond, Gabriel A. "Comparative political systems." *The Journal of politics* 18, no. 3 (1956): 391-409.

<sup>60</sup> Bordignon, Fabio. "Leader Polarisation: Conflict and Change in the Italian Political System." *South European society & politics* 25, no. 3-4 (2020): 285-315.

Firstly, they have seen the final decline of the traditional political parties which dominated the Austrian political scene in the aftermath of WWII namely, the SPÖ (social-democrats) and the ÖVP (Christian-democrats). Secondly, the elections saw two opponents belonging to complete opposite side of the political spectrum, on one hand Van der Bellen backed by the Greens and on the other Norbert Hofer running with FPÖ, a right-wing populist party.

Thirdly, the results of the elections were shocking in terms of numbers. At the second round, Van der Bellen won with 50,3% of the votes while Hofer lost with 49.7% of the votes. An important geographical divide was present too with southwestern Austrians strongly preferring Van der Bellen<sup>61</sup>.

Also Austria, like Italy, had compulsory voting. Here however, it was enforced strongly and it was abolished earlier than in Italy. Since 1982, it was left to the single provinces to uphold the compulsory voting system and, by 2004, only Tyrol had laws governing compulsory voting. At the presidential elections of 2010 compulsory voting ceased to exist in Austria. It is worth noticing that the electoral turnout at the 2010 presidential elections was at 53%, the lowest turnout ever recorded at presidential elections in the country.

### **2.1 c) France**

Counting the number of Republics is no Italian tradition. France was the forefather of this practice and being as such, it can be said to be the country which went through the highest amount of “republics”, namely five.

Today, the fifth French republic envisions a semi-presidential system that represent a unique system in continental Europe. Austria too is a semi-presidential system, however in Austria the president is rather a “figurehead president” while in France s/he enjoys an all-powerful presidency<sup>62</sup>. In fact, notwithstanding the constitutional qualifications of the 1958 Constitution as emended in 1962, the French President may in practice exercise indirectly the prerogatives of his/her prime ministers thus becoming “supreme head of the executive and real head of the government.”<sup>65</sup>

Following WWII, thanks to the figure of the President and the almighty powers vested in him or her, the French political scenario has been rather stable albeit broken lastly by the waves of rupture which have characterised the whole Europe from 2012 onwards. In doing so, French

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<sup>61</sup> Gavenda, Mario, and Resul Umit. “The 2016 Austrian Presidential Election: A Tale of Three Divides.” *Regional & federal studies* 26, no. 3 (2016): 419–432.

<sup>62</sup> Duverger, Maurice. “A new political system model: semi-presidential government.” *European journal of political research* 8, no. 2 (1980): 165–187.

politics has been aided by a well-designed electoral system. The two-ballots electoral system has had several consequences on the broader political system. Firstly, the electoral law and the semi-presidential standing of the country positively impacted the party system encouraging multiparty politics<sup>63</sup>. Secondly, most of the French parties have been newly formed. For example, the French socialist party (PS) was born in 1969 and the National Front (FN) in 1972. The continue decline and rebirth that the French political parties go through is nothing but the result of the “presidentialisation” of elections. In France, the party becomes the vehicle and the organizational machine for an individual presidential ambitions. This can be still seen today very clearly with parties like “La republique en marche!” of the current president Macron.

France electoral turnout is also difficult to interpret. The turnout at the 2022 presidential elections has been 73.7%, this comes as no surprise as the turnout at presidential elections has always been high. This seemingly encouraging number however is not reflected in the turnout for the parliamentary elections which is on a continuous decline. In the last elections the turnout reached a record-low of 48.7%. To visualize this, It suffices to say that in 2019, the elections for the EU parliament recorded a 50.3% turnout.

### **2.1 d) The United Kingdom**

While the United Kingdom’s political tradition undoubtedly inspired modern continental democracies, British politics is believed to be going through rough times. After having largely contributed to the EU project, the United Kingdom has decided to leave the European Union. The UK was never fully integrated within the European system, and it can be argued that their scepticism has hindered European integration more than it helped it as they came to be known “the vetoist”. More than it did in 2016, today the Brexit controversial choice reflects the divisions and cleavages underpinning the clash of the current political forces within the country. Brexit gave rise to new issues and reopened wounds that were thought to have been closed once and for all (e.g. the Northern Ireland question). Scotland too is now more eager to finally gain its full independence, while it is debated its possible adhesion to the EU. This territorial issues had been solved partially thanks to the action of the Blair government and the “devolution” reforms which assigned to the UK the strong regional character which it has today. Furtherly, the Crown which is a strong symbolic (and political)

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<sup>63</sup> Elgie, Robert. "France: Stacking the deck." *The politics of electoral systems* (2005): 119-136.

element of the British political tradition is in a poor state in terms of support. While 61% of the British people view the monarchy favourably, in the age group 18-24, 41% of respondents prefer an elected head of state as compared to the 31% who support the Monarchy<sup>64</sup>.

British governments were famous for their stability and longevity granted by the big parliamentary majorities ensured by the first past the post electoral system. However, today the lack of concentrated support has become an obstacle to the political process. Tackling the new societal issues that derive from contemporary times necessitates higher and more diversified representation<sup>65</sup>. In sum, the positive features of the political system are becoming its weaknesses especially today that the biggest political parties (Tories and Labour) are facing internal problems and morale crises.

Regarding turnout, the UK has the lowest level compared to the other democracies taken into account in this study. In the last elections only 67.6% of citizens decided to vote.

## **2.1 e) Germany**

The Federal Republic of Germany was created with the adoption of the Bonn Basic Law in 1949. The system envisioned by the Constitution would be later spread to Eastern Germany at the end of the reunification process when the capital city was moved once and for all from Bonn to Berlin. Learning from the shortcomings of the Weimar Republic's Constitution, which had led to the ascendance of National Socialism, the new constitution envisioned a particular system which conferred Germany the stable political set up that we know today. The president of the federal republic was entrusted with a low degree of powers while the chancellor is elected by the Bundestag, the lower legislative chamber. Representatives of the sixteen Lander that were left with a vast amount of governmental powers were instead in the upper legislative, the Bundesrat.

In 1949, the Christian democrats of Adenauer won the first elections of West Germany and initiated a staggering process of economic recovery which coincided with the start of the CDU (Christian democratic party) domination of German politics. Moreover, it is under Adenauer leadership that together with France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and

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<sup>64</sup> Data from Statista

<sup>65</sup> Curtis, K. Amber, and Julie Hassing Nielsen. "Predispositions matter... but how? Ideology as a mediator of personality's effects on EU support in five countries." *Political Psychology* 39, no. 6 (2018): 1251-1270.

Luxemburg, Germany took part to the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957 of which it has consistently been great supporter.

In the German voting system, each voter has two votes for the parliamentary elections (Bundestag). This is called personalised proportional representation.

The first vote allows the elector to vote for a candidate of their constituency and the “direct mandate” is awarded with a first past the post system. The second vote allows the elector to vote for a party and the seats are assigned with a proportional system to parties who have overcome the threshold of 5%. This second vote decides the total number of seats that the party will obtain. Although this seems a mixed system it is actually closer to a proportional one. This is because the seats gained in constituencies are compared to the overall seats won and any differences are compensated through overhang mandated and levelling seats.

Germany is the only case among the six cases where turnout has been stable in the last 30 years and the last elections have seen the participation of 76.6% of citizens.

### **2.1 f) Netherlands**

The Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy therefore the Dutch monarch’s powers are regulated by the constitution. The power of the head of state is very limited as ministers are accountable to the parliament, however, he/she does have political influence when governments are formed following general elections. This is because the monarch is officially part of the government.

The Netherlands are a parliamentary democracy. The Upper house of parliament is not directly elected by the citizens but by the member of the provincial councils whilst the lower chamber is directly elected by citizens. When women were given the right to vote in 1919, the electoral system also changed from first past the post to a proportional system. Seats are awarded by D’Hondt method or method of largest average. This leads to the formation of coalition governments as no party has ever won the majority of seats. Historically, the most important party have been the Christian Democrats and the Labour Party. The former has frequently been the most voted party although in the last ten years the party has seen a strong decline. The latter has followed a similar trajectory being really important historically but not doing so well recently. At the moment the biggest party is the Liberal Party (VVD) led by prime minister Mark Rutte.



The Netherlands is one of the founding member of the European Economic Community and the European Union.

Turnout in the Netherlands is the highest among the 6 countries chosen. In the last election around 78% of citizens voted. However, it has declined in the last decades.

## **2.2 Data**

The analysis in the current work is based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS is a multi-country survey that has been conducted for nine rounds (in 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018) in nearly forty countries. This survey monitors the changing public attitudes and values within Europe and allows to develop an historical trend of European social indicators, political behaviour and attitudes, inequalities and more. The survey involves strict random probability sampling with a minimum target response rate of 70% and is carried out through an hour-long face-to-face interview that includes questions on many different topics. In order to allow comparisons across different countries, survey conditions are implemented as similarly as possible across ESS participating countries. The strict protocols used to carry out the interviews and the consistency over the different rounds and across different countries, makes the data of high quality and extremely reliable.

All nine rounds are used in this study although not all rounds contain the six countries used. In particular, the United Kingdom, France, Netherlands and Germany are present in all rounds while Italy is present in rounds one (2002), six (2012), eight (2016) and nine (2018). Austria is present in rounds one (2002), two (2004), three (2006), seven (2014), eight (2016), and nine (2018).

The ESS investigates institutional trust by asking “On a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out” where 0 means not trust at all and 10 means complete trust.

In this study I use national parliament as the selected institution therefore trust in national parliament is the independent variable ranging from 0 to 10.

The dependent variable is turning out to vote. This data was acquired by asking “Some people don’t vote nowadays for one reason or another. Did you vote in the last national

election in month/year?”. Responders could answer yes or no and this was coded as “0” if they didn’t vote while it was coded as “1” if they did vote.

Although turnout seems straightforward, it is important to consider two aspects: the effect of electoral systems on turnout and the effect of compulsory voting.

Therefore, when analysing data, we have to consider the electoral systems of the six countries and whether or not is present compulsory voting. Indeed, turnout is believed to be higher with proportional representation (PR). PR produces more parties therefore voters have more choice and are more likely to find a party that represents them. Moreover, PR systems are believed to boost competition which leads to higher turnout since parties invest more in mobilization during electoral campaigns. Voters are all more likely to think that their vote matters since there is greater competition which make closer races more likely<sup>66</sup>. On the other hand, Jackman suggested that PR has consequences that might depress turnout. Since PR produces more parties, coalition governments are much more likely therefore elections are less decisive. In single-member plurality systems the party with most votes gets to form the government while in a PR system it is more complicated. Elections are perceived to be less decisive and this might depress turnout<sup>67</sup>. Despite this, most research dealing with western democracies and electoral systems show that turnout is higher under PR<sup>68</sup>.

Compulsory voting also has a strong effect on turnout. Strict enforced compulsory voting makes abstention non-optional and is believed to booster turnout by about 14% points compares to democracies where voting is optional <sup>69</sup>.

The UK, France and Germany do not have compulsory voting. Italy had it since 1993 when it was abolished. However, sanctions were rarely given. The Netherlands abolished compulsory voting in 1967 while Austria varies from region to region as we saw earlier.

To account for these contextual effects, all the models presented in this study use country-fixed effects.

The total database was composed of respondents from 6 countries in all nine rounds of interviews. The initial number of respondents was over 100,000.

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<sup>66</sup> Blais, André, and Kees Aarts. "Electoral systems and turnout." *Acta politica* 41, no. 2 (2006): 180-196.

<sup>67</sup> Jackman, Robert W. "Political institutions and voter turnout in the industrial democracies." *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 2 (1987): 405-423.

<sup>68</sup> Blais, André, and Kees Aarts. "Electoral systems and turnout." *Acta politica* 41, no. 2 (2006): 180-196.

<sup>69</sup> Norris, Pippa. *Electoral engineering: Voting rules and political behavior*. Cambridge university press, 2004.

Aside from our focal predictor and controls for country-fixed effects, we also included a set of control variables which the literature (see Chapter 1) considers to be related with individual turnout. These variables are:

1. Gender: 1 (male) or 2 (female)
2. Household income: total income of households with a scale from 1-10, each number corresponding to a certain range of income (ex. 10 for incomes over 77.500 euros)
3. Education: level of formal education of each individual explained through a scale 0-5, each number corresponding to a certain level of education (1 = individuals with primary education completed, 5 = individuals with tertiary education completed).
4. Age: age of respondent at the time of the interview
5. Political Interest: each individual was asked: “How interested would you say you are in politics - are you...” where 1 meant very interested and 4 not interested at all (range 1-4).
6. Political Orientation: each individual was asked: “ In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?”

In addition, we also included a variable to distinguish the different waves of the ESS used in this study. The variable ESS Edition (1 (2002), 2 (2004), 3(2006), 4 (2008), 5 (2010), 6 (2012), 7 (2014), 8 (2016), 9 (2018)), is plugged in the models as linear term to account for the effects of time (see also below).

## **2.3 Method**

The first hypothesis was that trust towards parliament had a negative impact on electoral turnout.

In order to test the first hypothesis three models were built, all of which are with country fixed effect. The data was filtered to exclude those who did not respond to questions on trust or turnout.

The first model is a linear probability model that describes the relationship between trust towards parliament and turnout.

The second one describes turnout and the control variables which are: year, education, household income, age, political interest, left and right scale. Also the controlling variables were filtered in order to ignore those that did not answer.

The third model is a composition of the first two, it describes turnout and trust towards parliament with all the controlling variables.

These models allowed me to compare the differences among them and to better evaluate the different impact of trust on turnout, on average, among the six countries.

The second hypothesis was that the negative effect of trust towards parliament on turnout would be increasing over the years (in this case over the different waves of interviews). In order to test this second hypotheses. I built a linear probability model with an interaction term between trust and the ESS round. This meant multiplying the variable trust by time (ess edition) in order to analyse if the negative effect was increasing or not over time. This model also has all the control variables.

## CHAPTER 3

### 3.1 Testing the first hypothesis

The first hypothesis of this study suggested that low levels of trust in national parliament have a negative effect on turnout. In order to test this first hypothesis three different models were built, all of them by using aggregated data from all six countries over the nine different waves of interviews. This allows us to have more accurate results due to the amount of data available and to make comparisons among the models.

<i>Dependent variable: voting (no = 0, yes = 2)</i>	<b>Model 1</b>		<b>Model 2</b>		<b>Model 3</b>	
	B	P	B	P	B	P
Trust in Parliament	0.16 (0.001)	***			0.1 (5.447e-4)	***
Education			0.11 (2.280e-4)	***	0.01 (2.269e-4)	**
L-R scale			-0.1 (5.893e-5)	***	-0.09 (5.872e-5)	***
Gender			0.03 (2.484e-3)	***	0.03 (2.471e-3)	***
Age			0.61 (8.072e-5)	***	0.62 (8.036e-5)	***
Age Squared			-0.02 (7.998e-8)	***	-0.02 (7.962e-8)	***
Political Interest			0.26 (1.480e-3)	***	0.24 (1.505e-3)	***
ESS Round			-0.03 ( 4.739e-4)	***	-0.03 (4.716e-4)	***
Country Fixed Effect	Yes		Yes		Yes	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.04		0.13		0.14	

Table 1: Determinants of turnout in 6 countries (ESS Data from 2002 to 2018)  
 Significant \* at the 0.05 level, \*\* at the 0.01 level and \*\*\* at the 0.001 level.  
 All coefficients are standardised.  
 Standard Errors in brackets.

The first model (Model 1) allows to investigate the relationship between trust in parliament and turnout. The relationship seems to be statistically significant since the p-value is at the 0.001 level which indicates that the null hypothesis (trust does not affect turnout) can be excluded with a reasonable level of certainty. Moreover the coefficient of trust is 0.16 indicating that turnout increases with higher trust. The standardised coefficients in the other models will allow us to better understand the relative importance of trust and to compare it with other determinants.

The second model (Model 2) includes the control variables only. Compared to Model 1, it has a higher R-squared compared to the first model (0.13 compared to 0.04) and all the

independent variables are statistically significant. The standardised coefficients show that age is the biggest predictor of turnout (0.61) and confirms the thesis that turnout rises with the transition into adulthood. The variable "Age squared" was introduced to further investigate the effect of age. In line with the existing literature we expect in fact a curvilinear effect of age on turnout, with turnout increasing as age goes up to then decline among older people. The negative coefficient of Age squared (-0.02) confirmed the curvilinear relationship between turnout and age meaning that citizens at older ages seem to withdraw from political life<sup>70</sup>.

Education is also a strong predictor (0.11) while gender is a weaker one (0.03). Together, those 3 variables are in line with the resource model mentioned in chapter one<sup>71</sup>. This was the model that attributed political participation to an act driven by resources, in particular time, money and skills. Therefore, those more educated, in adulthood, and of male sex are more likely to vote.

However, the overall second biggest predictor was political interest (0.26). Political interest is one of the key predictors in the psychological model. In this model psychological factors determine whether the person votes or not<sup>74</sup>. To further investigate if this study confirms this model, more variables such as party identification or ideology should be included.

The negative coefficient of ESS round confirms that, as years pass, turnout is decreasing. Lastly, the left and right scale indicates that people that identify themselves as left in the political spectrum, are slightly more likely to vote.

The third model (Model 3) includes the control variables and trust in parliament; therefore, it has the highest R-squared with 0.14. Compared to model 2, it's a 0.1 increase which shows that trust in national parliament alone, explains 1% of the variance in turnout.

This model also allows us to better understand the impact of trust on turnout thanks to the standardised coefficients. In fact age is still the most important factor followed by political interest. Trust is the third most impactful determinant in our study with a standardised coefficient of 0.1.

Contrary to Smets and Van Ham, education was not found to be a strong predictor but rather a weak factor in Model 3. It has to be pointed out that its statistical significance was lower

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<sup>70</sup> Cutler, Neal E., and Vern L. Bengtson. "Age and political alienation: maturation, generation and period effects." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 415, no. 1 (1974): 160-175.

<sup>71</sup> Smets, Kaat, and Carolien Van Ham. "The embarrassment of riches? A meta-analysis of individual-level research on voter turnout." *Electoral studies* 32, no. 2 (2013): 344-359.

than the other variables. The low impact of education on turnout would also explain why, despite the rise in education over the last decades, turnout has decreased. An enigma that has puzzled political scientists for years.

The first hypothesis suggested that declining trust in national parliament had a negative impact on turnout. Overall it can be said that the findings in this study indicate that the first hypothesis is verified. This is shown by model 3 which confirm the findings of model 1. The coefficient of 0.11 shows that trust is the third most important determinant of turnout and it explains a 1% variance in turnout.

Therefore higher trust in national parliament among citizens positively impacts turnout.

### 3.2 Testing the second hypothesis

The second hypothesis affirmed that the negative effect of trust over turnout increased over time. In order to test this, the fourth model was similar to Model 1 in Table 1, but it also included an interaction term between trust and the ESS round (“trust\*essround”). This new variables allows to investigate the effect of trust over time. The results of the analysis are depicted in Table 2:

Table 2: Effect of trust on turnout over time (ESS Data from 2002 to 2018)

<i>Dependent variable: voting (no = 0, yes = 2)</i>	<b>Model 4</b>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>P</i>
Trust in Parliament	0.16 (1.204e <sup>-3</sup> )	***
ESS Round	-0.01 (1.076e <sup>-3</sup> )	
Trst*Ess Round	-0.002 (2.042e <sup>-4</sup> )	
Country Fixed Effect	Yes	
Control Variables	Yes	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.04	

Significant \* at the 0.05 level, \*\* at the 0.01 level and \*\*\* at the 0.001 level.

All coefficients are standardised.

Standard Errors in brackets.

The coefficient of trust in parliament is the same as in Model 1 (0.16) and it indicated the effect of trust on turnout in 2002. The R-squared is also the same as in Model 1 (0.04). The interaction coefficient indicated how the trust effect on turnout varies as time passes. As table 2 shows, the coefficients of the interaction variable is very weak (-0.002). Moreover the variables is not statistically significant. This indicates strong evidence in favour of the null hypothesis, the fact that effect of trust on turnout is not increasing nor decreasing over time. This can also be better understood by looking at figures 3 and 4, which plot the average marginal effect of trust on turnout at different time points.

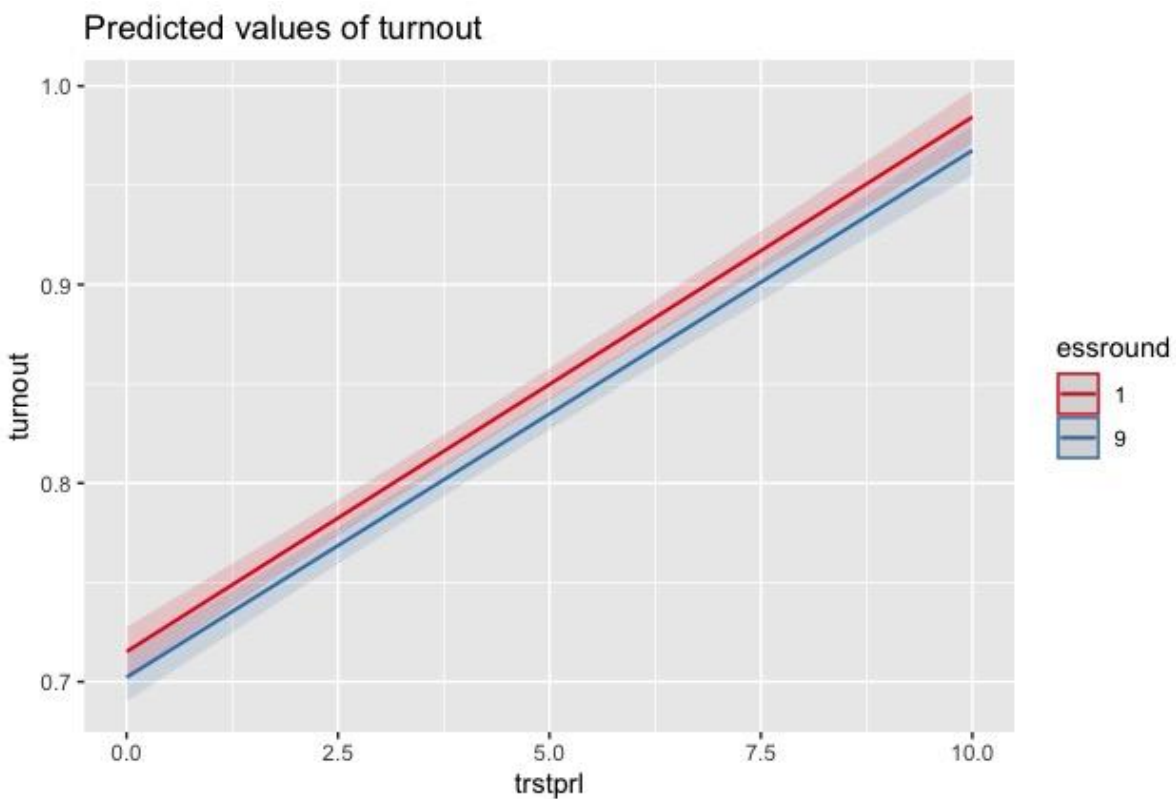


Figure 3: Predicted values of turnout over time (ESS round 1 (2002) and 9 (2018)) 95% C.I.

Figure 3 shows the effect of trust on turnout in the first round of interviews and in the last round of interviews. The two lines are parallel showing that the effect of trust on turnout has remained stable over time.

This is also confirmed by figure 4 which shows the mentioned effect on all the rounds of the ESS:



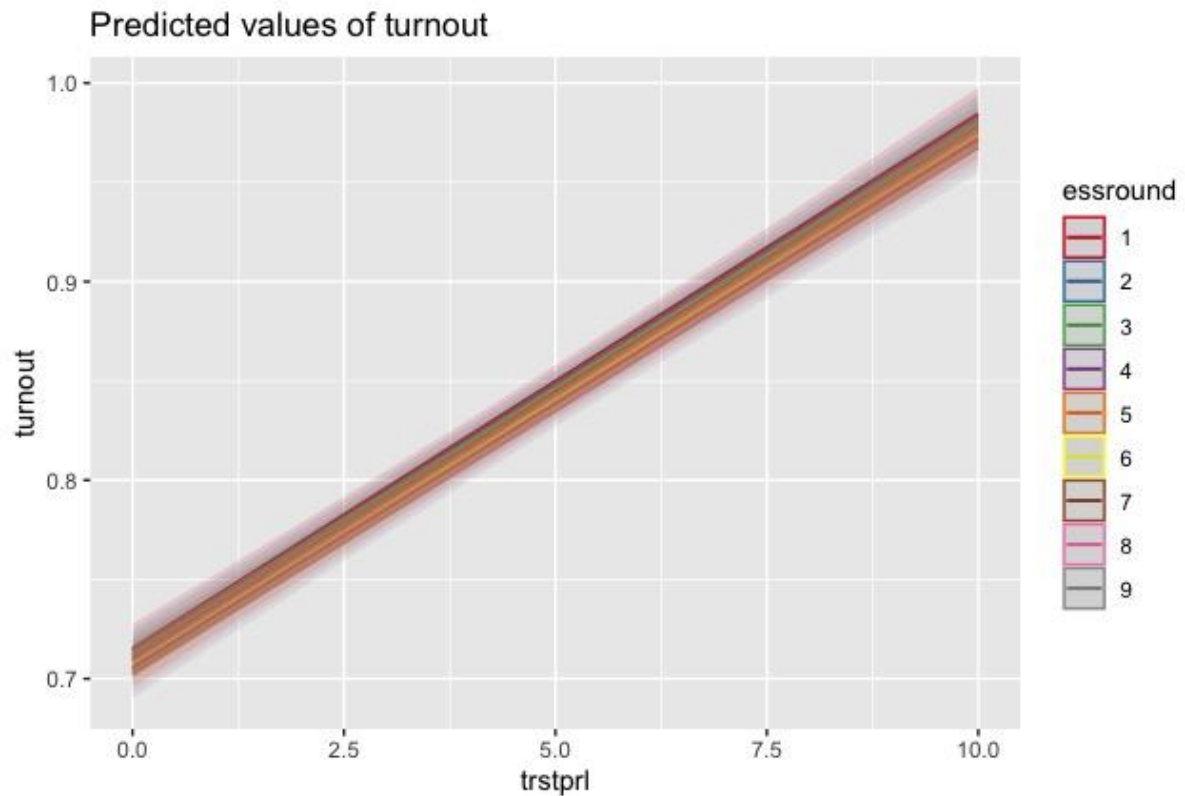


Figure 4: Predicted values of turnout over time (ESS round 1 (2002) and 9 (2018))  
95% C.I.

Figure 4 also depicts the same trend, all lines representing different round of interviews are parallel. These graphs, combined with the regression coefficients, suggest that the effect of trust on turnout has not increased over time.

Therefore, the second hypothesis is not verified.

## CHAPTER 4

### 4.1 Conclusions

All western democracies have seen a decline in turnout over the recent decades. This has happened despite the general increase in education and resources, which were believed to boost electoral turnout.

The importance of voting for modern democracies has led researchers to further investigate this topic and understand its determinants. Among those, trust is one of the most studied variables. Political trust has also been declining in recent decades and therefore, academics have often linked the decline in trust to the decline in turnout. However, this relationship is very debated as many have shown that no real causal effect was present while others have shown the opposite.

My study had the aim of contributing to this debate. This was done by selecting six European countries with similar characteristics in terms of declining trends in turnout, but with different institutional settings: Italy, Austria, UK, France, Germany and the Netherlands. Those are some of the richest countries in the world and are all modern democracies. This study used data from the European Social Survey over nine different rounds of interviews to verify two hypotheses:

H<sub>1</sub> : Low levels of trust towards national parliaments have a negative effect on declining electoral turnout

H<sub>2</sub> : This negative effect is increasing over time.

In order to test the first hypothesis three different regression models were built on aggregated data investigating trust in national parliament together with different control variables (gender, education, political interest, political orientation, time). This pooled analysis showed that the decline of trust in national parliament does have a negative impact on turnout and therefore verified the first hypothesis.

On the contrary, thanks to a fourth model, the second hypothesis was rejected as the negative effect of trust on turnout over time did not seem to be present.

Therefore, trust in parliament is confirmed to be an important predictor of turnout as results have shown. On the other hand, despite the decline in trust and in electoral turnout, the effect of trust on turnout has stayed the same over the years.

Further research could concentrate on distinguishing among the six countries. This could be done by analysing one country at the time and seeing if the results differ among modern democracies or if similar conclusions can be drawn everywhere. Moreover, trust in national government could be investigated to understand if the effect is similar to trust in parliament or if there are any differences.

It is also important to understand how countries could intervene to contrast the decline of institutional trust. What can be implemented to improve the perception on parliaments and governments in the eyes of citizens? A more responsive political system would help for sure but it probably wouldn't be enough. Governments may need to favour bottom-up participation which includes other methods of participation aside from voting. Younger generation, which include most abstainers from voting, tend to prefer other forms of participation such as online activism and petitions.

Advanced modern democracies need to interrogate themselves and understand how to increase political participation which is fundamental for a healthy democracy.

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## RIASSUNTO IN ITALIANO

Nonostante le differenze storiche, culturali e sociali, tutte le democrazie occidentali hanno registrato un calo dell'affluenza alle urne negli ultimi decenni. Da una media globale del 77% negli anni '60 si è passato a circa il 60% nell'ultimo decennio. Ciò è avvenuto nonostante l'aumento generale dell'istruzione e delle risorse economiche e non, che si riteneva precedentemente potessero incrementare l'affluenza alle urne.

Il diritto di voto è alla base della democrazia moderna ed è la forma di partecipazione politica più importante che esista.

L'importanza del voto per le democrazie ha spinto diversi ricercatori ad approfondire l'argomento e a comprendere le determinanti dell'affluenza. Tra queste, la fiducia è una delle variabili più studiate.

Anche la fiducia politica è diminuita negli ultimi decenni e quindi gli studiosi hanno spesso collegato il calo della fiducia al calo dell'affluenza alle urne. Tuttavia, questa relazione è molto discussa: molti hanno dimostrato che non esiste un vero e proprio effetto causale, mentre altri hanno dimostrato il contrario.

Il mio studio aveva l'obiettivo di contribuire a questo dibattito per capire se esistesse o meno un legame causale tra calo della fiducia e calo dell'affluenza. A tal fine, ho selezionato sei Paesi europei con caratteristiche simili in termini di tendenze al declino dell'affluenza alle urne, ma con contesti istituzionali diversi: Italia, Austria, Regno Unito, Francia, Germania e Paesi Bassi. Si tratta di alcuni dei Paesi più ricchi del mondo e di democrazie occidentali moderne.

Per analizzare il legame sfiducia-affluenza, ho utilizzato i dati del "European Social Survey". Un sondaggio che, in nove diversi cicli di interviste a cittadini di tutti i paesi europei, indaga sullo stato d'animo dei cittadini riguardo alle istituzioni. Ho usato questi dati per verificare due ipotesi:

- H1: bassi livelli di fiducia nei confronti dei parlamenti nazionali hanno un effetto negativo sul calo dell'affluenza alle urne.
- H2: L'effetto negativo dei bassi livelli di fiducia nei parlamenti nazionali sull'affluenza aumenta nel tempo.

Ho selezionato le seguenti variabili: fiducia nel parlamento nazionale, affluenza alle urne, sesso, istruzione, interesse nella politica, orientamento politico e tempo. Nel complesso, il database aveva circa 90.000 voci.

Per verificare la prima ipotesi ho costruito tre modelli di probabilità lineare. Il primo utilizzava solamente le variabili principali (fiducia verso il parlamento nazionale e affluenza), controllando per la variabile paese. Il secondo analizzava le altre variabili (sesso, istruzione, interesse nella politica, orientamento politico e tempo) mentre il terzo analizzava tutte le variabili insieme.

L'analisi aggregata ha prodotto i risultati visibili nella tabella 1 (pag. 28) che mostra i coefficienti standardizzati di ogni variabile, il valore  $R^2$  e il valore P.

Questi risultati hanno dimostrato che il calo della fiducia nel Parlamento nazionale ha un impatto negativo sull'affluenza alle urne e ha quindi confermato la prima ipotesi. In particolare, la (s)fiducia verso il parlamento è stata la terza variabile più impattante sul declino dell'affluenza.

Per quanto riguarda la seconda ipotesi, ho costruito un quarto modello di probabilità lineare dove ho introdotto una variabile di interazione che moltiplicava la fiducia verso le istituzioni con ESS Round (i diversi cicli di intervista).

Grazie ai risultati del quarto modello (visibili nella tabella 2 a pagina 30 e nei seguenti grafici), la seconda ipotesi è stata respinta in quanto l'effetto negativo della fiducia verso il parlamento sull'affluenza non è aumentato nel corso degli anni, è rimasto costante. Infatti il coefficiente della variabile di interazione non è statisticamente significativo e questo ci permette di respingere la seconda ipotesi.

Possiamo quindi concludere che, la fiducia nel Parlamento si conferma un importante predittore dell'affluenza alle urne. D'altra parte, nonostante il calo della fiducia e dell'affluenza elettorale, l'effetto della fiducia sull'affluenza è rimasto invariato nel corso degli anni.

Ulteriori ricerche potrebbero concentrarsi sul distinguere tra i sei Paesi. Questo permetterebbe di analizzare un Paese alla volta e vedere se i risultati differiscono tra le democrazie moderne o se si possono trarre conclusioni simili ovunque.

Inoltre, potrebbe essere analizzata la fiducia nel governo nazionale al posto della fiducia verso il parlamento per capire se l'effetto è simile o se ci sono differenze.

È anche importante capire come i Paesi possano intervenire per contrastare il declino della fiducia istituzionale. Cosa si può fare per migliorare la percezione del parlamento agli occhi

dei cittadini? Un sistema politico più reattivo aiuterebbe sicuramente, ma probabilmente non sarebbe sufficiente. I governi dovrebbero favorire la partecipazione dal basso, che comprende altri metodi di partecipazione oltre al voto. Le generazioni più giovani, che rappresentano la maggior parte degli astenuti dal voto, tendono a preferire altre forme di partecipazione come l'attivismo online o le petizioni.

Le democrazie moderne devono interrogarsi e capire come aumentare la partecipazione politica che è fondamentale per una democrazia sana.