



Voter turnout and the first voters

1. Introduction

1.1. Importance of the voter turnout data

The voter turnout is a notion of primary importance of a modern multi-party democracy. The data of voter turnout are not only mechanic index numbers of the citizens' political activity but, going beyond this role, they provide important information on the totality of the social processes and the functioning or anomalies of the social institutions and norms as well. The level of participation is a sensitive index number of the social integration, which reflects to the social, economic and cultural courses and their effects, and which cannot be neglected by any careful social policy. Nevertheless, the voter turnout is the most obvious determinant of the legitimacy of the plural democracy.

The multiple-component characteristics of the voter turnout make its research more difficult: the considerable variety of the data by country, region and period can be concluded from the complicated and complex motive system hidden behind them.

1.2. Limits of the turnout data processing

It has been internationally acknowledged already that the voter turnout is an outstandingly important category of the political-social publicity. In accordance with this fact, continuously increasing databases and statistical evaluations can be seen in Western Europe. However, in our region researches have not reached the necessary level yet, the answers to the survey form given by our members give evidence of it as well (the answers to the survey form were given in small number and with great insufficiencies, which probably arose from the fact that there were not such kind of statistics). So data relating turnout are available in a quite limited scale, so apart the usual recorded files it would be necessary to prepare more detailed sociological information for a deeper analysis. That is also to take into consideration that countries where parliamentary democracy goes back only to the shorter past do not possess such data from which it would be possible to draw far-reaching conclusions or bigger trends.

In the case of the voter turnout, it is necessary to avoid overestimating the statistical data during the drawing of the tendencies and interpreting the special data which differ from them. The processing of the index numbers is not realized by simple or mechanic correlations. A prominent index number or that is lagging significantly behind the average cannot be correlated inevitably with any social event such as the decreasing or increasing of the participation may have different meanings in different countries or country-groups. So, during the analysis of the voter turnout data, it is necessary to reveal the complicated matrix of the motives, and take into consideration all of its units with the required importance and meaning.

It makes the evaluation, especially the comparison of data, more complicated that differences of the election systems of the countries may put the different data in different light, and so different conclusions may be drawn from them. Mainly those countries differ from the others, where the president of the state is elected directly. Although in most countries parliamentary elections are in the centre, the larger number of election events may influence the electoral activity by itself: on the one hand it may produce a bigger electoral socialization by the fact that citizens can use their suffrage more often, on the other hand it may also cause electoral apathy as well. The other fundamental difference between the election systems may arise from the number of the parliamentary electoral rounds: in general, in case of a multi-round election the first round participation rate is the crucial one. It can crucially influence the voter turnout if a law makes the vote compulsory for the citizens; I will revert to this factor in Chapter 3. of the study.

It makes the first voters related research particularly difficult that we have very few data about this group of voters. Chapter 4. of the study will deal with the first voters.

2. General tendencies

2.1. Decreasing of the voter turnout

Current problems also called attention to the importance of studying the voter turnout.. At the turn of the years 1980-1990 the generally decreasing tendency of the voter turnout began to take form, which has lasted since then. Of course, there are data, which differ from this trend, based on some special motives, which are different from the global social-economic processes. (The Hungarian parliamentary election in 2002 may be an example of it where the turnout was beyond 70% in the first round, then 73% in the second round. The reason for this high turnout rate – in comparison with the former ones – was surely the tense public climate, and the very close result, which was predicted by the public-opinion polls as well.)

There are several factors for the causes of the general decrease. First of all, the loosening, disintegration of the macro- and micro communities (e.g. families), which are the scenes of traditional interpersonal links. This fact leads to the weakening of traditional adoption of the norms, and also creates a generation spiral as the coming generation will be stayed away not only from the real activity but also from the socialization of the practice of the social norm and activity-sample, which are stimulant to vote.

The headway of individualism decreases the demand for the common decision-making, and the tendency towards participation. On the other hand, the globalization process with its transnationality decreases the importance of the national social participation; it makes weightless the importance of political participation. The participation relating traditions are being got worse by the high scale of migration as well, through which heterogeneity of the community becomes larger, which decreases the number of those who follow the traditional norms. The cause of the electoral absence of interest can be found in the transformation of the party systems and party ideologies as well. The formerly strong ideological borders became faded by the creation of the modern popular parties, “collecting parties”, the tense ideological contrasts disappeared by the process of the big parties drawing towards the centre, the political palette became less transparent. The electoral obligation of the voters also decreased by the decrease of the differences among the electoral possibilities. The rude, personalized campaign, which neglects the instruments of reasonable conviction, may retain the voters from polling, and they respond with demonstrative abstention.

But why is the low voter turnout harmful? The experts had not considered the electoral abstention as a problem for a long time because the necessary turnout for the validity of the

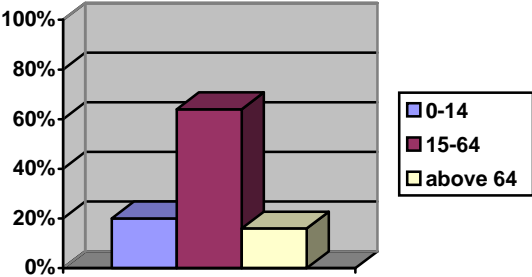
elections was completed, so there was not any doubt about the legality of the elections. However, in the 90s attention was drawn to the fact that because of the large rate of absence the sociological side of the electoral legitimacy, and the democratic representation can get into danger. Voters who don't take part in the election, are indifferent to the activity of the government, they don't support it, nor hinder its coming into power. However, later they may become rejective, and this may strongly threaten the stability of the governance.

The extremely low turnout may increase or decrease the realization of the will of some social classes. This phenomenon can lead to the fact that those groups, which are anyway at the periphery of the society, will get into a cumulated disadvantageous situation by the loss of their ability of their interest-realization.

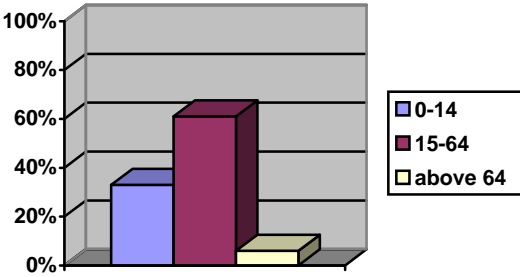
2.2. Age structure of the population

The countries of the region can be classified into two groups by the age structure of their population. Most countries (e.g. Latvia, Hungary, Russia, Slovakia), similarly to most western countries, have ageing structure of population. This means that 20% of their population is under 15, and more than 10% is over 60. There are fewer countries, which have younger population (e.g. Albania, Azerbaijan, Turkey). In these countries more than 30% of the population is under 15, and about 5% of it is over 60.

The diagrams below show the age structure of the population of an ageing and a young age structure country.



1. chart: Ageing population



2. chart: Young population

2.3. Correlations between the voter turnout and the age structure

Because of some causes, of which we will give details in the following chapters, the level of the voter turnout is connected with the age of the citizens. By drawing the age structure of the electoral participants, we would get the so called inverse of the population age structure, with the difference that in the case of the turnout, the age categories would begin not from zero but from 18 in general. So the voter turnout has its lowest rate among the young population, while in the older population it becomes more and more higher until we reach that age when the active work decreases naturally or stops functioning.

These experiences show how important the motivation of the young voters is for the participation as – especially in the young age-structured societies – compared to their proportion within the population, they are far underrepresented. The motivation of young people for voting becomes a more and more important question, by progressing of the time, as by reaching the inactive age of the middle-aged population, who still have strong traditions of motivations for voting, the voters turnout may decrease significantly if there is not any other age-group following them.

3. Determinant factors of the turnout

3.1. Participation obligation

The compulsory voting establishment is an effective instrument of the direct influence of the voter turnout. According to the experiences in those countries, where voting is compulsory – depending on the different level of sanctions, and the characteristics of the sanctions – the voter turnout rate is higher than in those countries, where the voting is based on free will. Among the sanctions, we can find verification obligation, deprivation of some citizenship rights, communal work, and most often fine. This latest one may be symbolic (e.g. in Switzerland) but it may also be a serious charge (e.g. Cyprus). We can also find such kind of solution when there is no formal sanction of the breach of the obligation.

Although, in general in the developed western democracies the turnout rate is high even when voting is not compulsory, nevertheless, we can find many examples for the compulsory voting among these countries who wish to insure the effectiveness of the democratic representation by this way. Opposite to the generally appearing negative tendency, it can usually stabilize the level of the voter turnout.

Among the countries of the region, voting is compulsory in Turkey. Negligence of the non-voters can be sanctioned by fine, however unfortunately statistics on sanctions are not available. Despite the obligation, the turnout is not very high, it is about 80%, of which the conclusion can be drawn that execution of the sanctions is not distinctly strict.

3.2 Social-economic determination of the voter turnout

By the observation of the voter turnout data, we can immediately see that the indicators are widespread, so their interpretation demands a wide-scale examination of the causes. In this chapter we will introduce the social motives of the voter turnout and absence.

The electoral motives can be divided into three groups by the examination of the social attitudes of the individuals: these are the status consciousness, the conventionalism, and the category of the social dependence.

The status consciousness means where an individual puts oneself among the members of the society, how values oneself as a worthy, creative member of the society. The higher status consciousness – which is mainly in connection with the level of education and the income situation – according to the meaning increases the electoral willingness, while the broken individuals at the bottom of the hierarchy of the society do not think themselves as creative members of the public life, so their turnout rate is also low.

The turnout-increasing effect of the conventionalism arises from the fact that by keeping alive the motivating norms for the traditional collective role-acceptance, it represents the act of voting as a social obligation. The low level of education, the rural domicile, the higher age, and the religiousness help the effectiveness of the conventionalism.

The third motive, the index of the social dependence-independence is based on the attitude of the voters against authority policy. For the older age-class, with traditional scale of value, which grew up in an authoritarian society, election means a social obligation (similarly to the motive of conventionalism). The young urban population with low income and showing negative attitude against the authority is situated in the other pole and this motive results a diminutive effect on the turnout of the population.

Another dimension of the examination of the turnout causes in the individual level gives the possibility to evaluate the motives, in a more complex, contracted form by settlements as well.

Examination based on the types of settlements shows a high turnout rate in the case of big cities, which decreases towards the direction of smaller settlements, however, in the case of the smallest settlements it turns, moreover, it produces the highest turnout indexes in the case of micro-villages. All this reinforces the facts, which were introduced in connection with the individual motives, but it just pays attention to the complex interference of the causes as well. In the case of the settlement types, the degree of supply by public utilities, infrastructure seems to be the determinant factor, which is obviously connected with the financial-income situation of the voters.

We can always find high turnout rates in the big cities, with good infrastructure supply, the population of such settlements have surely higher status consciousness and appropriate information supply. (The results of the survey form support it) On the other hand, in the smallest villages the principal driving force may be the conventionalism. The strong inner cohesion, the traditionally strong dominance of the group norms results the high turnout rates in this case. We can see the lowest turnout rates in the middle-sized towns, where the cultural-economic driving force of big cities does not dominate yet, but they have already lost the inner integration mechanisms of the small settlements. The high turnout rate of the small villages is also explained by that factor, that the rate of the old population is extremely high, and the level of passive young population is low.

The social relation system of the voters influences significantly the voter's activity. In this situation, we have to consider the above mentioned cohesion effects of the settlements, as

well as the family status, or the extensiveness of the individual relation systems. The deeper social inclusion results higher turnout, we may refer to the habit of common voting of the families. In this point, we can see that the motives of the turnout create an enormous complex, and they can only be interpreted by each other's functions.

The connections between the age and the willingness of voting have already been mentioned. Researches proved that by the progressing time of the age, the electoral activity increases until the age when the activity of old people begins to decrease in general. The causes of this can be found in the socialization of the older generations, thr respect of the traditions, which is in connection with the attitude of conventionalism. In the mirror of this, increasing the willingness of the younger population to vote is such a task, which must be privileged under any circumstances, in order to sustain the appropriate level of the turnout.

3.3. Characteristics of the transforming countries

The international experiences referring to the turnout in our region can be considered by different correlation. The regime transformation created conditions different from the western countries for the execution of the elections. The first elections after the collapse of the one-party regime attracted in general a larger mass of the voters, then later the general international tendency began to effectuate. But there were exceptions: for example in Poland and Hungary the process of pluralism following the "soft dictatorship" did not produce an exceptionally high turnout level, which was the case in the other countries. The other principal cause of the difference arises from the differences of the social distribution: in the Polish and Hungarian societies the financial-income differentiation of the society had already been more significant before the transformation of the regime, which influenced the mobilization of the voters negatively.

3.4. Social evaluation of the public life

In the information society of the XXI. century, the borders of the public and private life begin to weaken, and by the decrease of the distance of the two spheres, all election related cases will gain bigger publicity as well. Many motives of the electoral procedure can produce – in case of its functionally bad operation – electoral absence. Such as the corruption, the lack of transparent public life or the rude electoral campaign have all effect against public activity.

Some kind of active absence may happen as well, when the voters express their protestation against the political regime or the political practice.

4. The first voters

4.1. Significance of the first voters

During the analysis of the age structure of the population, I have already introduced the importance of the first voters. An aim of the study is that, within the research of the turnout, it must show the importance of the problematic of the first voters. The conclusions drawn by the developing demographic procedures in Central and Eastern Europe demand the elaboration of the necessary operational program in order to maintain the appropriate level of the turnout. An operational program must be elaborated for the hereditary transmission of the models of the conventionalism, the traditions and the social cohesion, which play important role among the motives of the participation, which will ensure the support of healthy distribution of the turnout, even when the young population becomes a middle-aged population.

The lack of information relating to the first voters shows that there is no required interest for them yet. However, their importance we introduced here would justify in any case beginning a widespread research for their electoral participation and the motives of that.

4.2. Orientation and education of the first voters

The importance of the first voters, we analysed above, justifies the operation of such institutions, which aim to develop the familiarity of the young population with the public life, especially in the field of elections. An important element of the socialization of the young people is the establishment of the appropriate level of the public life activity.

The youth organizations of the political parties have been diffused in order to develop the political participation of the young population, however there are very few independent organizations, which aim to encourage the electoral activity. As the youth plays a vital role in securing democracy in the long run we consider it very important to hold dialogues with the youth also in the electoral process. Using the experience and knowledge in this field our Association is willing to play an active role in the youth voters' information and education. For this reason the ACEEEO started the project called "WWW.FIRSTVOTER.EU" which aims to raise attention of the first time voters for elections through creating a homepage containing useful information in different languages. This web-based informative forum would widen the knowledge of the youth in Europe around the importance of electoral participation in the form of voting.

5. Recommendation

- The member states of ACEEEO should enlarge the statistical and sociological information collection for the turnout, in order to create increasing database and statistical evaluation of the election results.
- They should enlarge the exitpoll surveys, with the infiltration of the former participation related questions. (A powerful limit of this retrospective information collection is the subsequent “overvaluation”, which needs to be revised by the completion of the post-control.)
- It is extremely important to examine the age-specific research of the voter turnout and collect the information aiming to this.
- The member states aim to pursue effective party-neutral campaign in order to increase the general voter turnout, to elaborate electoral mobilization-programs. The non-profit organizations, foundations separated from the political parties and state-organs seems to be the most effective solution but the activity of the electoral organs of this direction is not negligible either.
- In order to increase the electoral activity of the young people, we recommend principally practicing the infiltrated programs in the education.
- It is necessary to create as many non-governmental organizations as possible, which – besides the youth organizations of the political parties – are able to develop the public life activity.
- The ACEEEO must continue to collect the voter turnout data of the member states, and inform related researchers about the turnout and results.
- The ACEEEO must continue its project about the first voters, and motivate the member states to create an internet site for their first voters, containing the necessary information for the elections and executing the electoral mobilization role as well.
- The ACEEEO must participate actively in the civic education programs of the Council of Europe and the European Union, and motivate the member states to participate in these programs.

6. Appendix: Voter turnout in the latest general parliamentary elections of the ACEEEO member states

Country	Year of Election	Total Votes	Registered voters	Total votes/ registered voters
Albania	1996	1 614 111	2 010 420	80,2 %
	1997	1 432 502	2 089 860	68,5 %
	2001	1 389 297	2 499 238	55,6 %
Azerbaijan	1995	3 556 277	4 132 442	86,1 %
	2000	3 024 414	4 387 266	68,9 %
Byelorussia	1995	4 199 431	7 445 800	56,4 %
	2000	4 430 878	7 254 752	61,1 %
Bosnia- Herzegovina	2000	1 596 805	2 508 349	63,7 %
	2002	1 299 021	2 342 414	55,5 %
Bulgaria	1994	5 264 614	6 997 954	75,2 %
	1997	4 291 258	7 289 956	58,9 %
	2001	4 608 289	6 916 151	66,6 %
Georgia	1992	2 592 117	3 466 677	74,8 %
	1995	2 127 946	3 121 075	68,2 %
	1999	2 133 878	3 143 851	67,9 %
Croatia	1992	2 690 873	3 558 913	75,6 %
	1995	2 500 000	3 634 233	68,8 %
	2000	2 941 306	4 244 558	69,3 %
Kazakhstan	1995	2 519 733	3 308 897	76,2 %
	1999	5 262 489	8 411 757	62,6 %

	1993	14 415 586	27 654 075	52,1 %
	1997	13 616 378	28 407 353	47,9 %
	2001	13 559 412	29 364 528	46,2 %
Country	Year of Election	Total votes	Registered voters	Total votes/ registered voters
Latvia	1995	955 392	1 312 638	72,8 %
	1998	964 667	1 318 317	73,2 %
	2002	997 754	1 391 734	71,7 %
Lithuania	1992	1 918 027	2 549 952	75,2 %
	1996	1 374 612	2 597 530	52,9 %
	2000	1 539 743	2 646 663	58,2 %
Macedonia	1994	707 210	1 222 899	57,8 %
	1998	793 674	1 572 976	50,5 %
	2002	1 218 014	1 664 296	73,2 %
Hungary	1994	5 486 385	7 960 293	68,9 %
	1998	4 536 254	8 062 708	56,3 %
	2002	5 685 655	8 061 101	70,5 %
Moldova	1994	1 868 493	2 509 368	74,5 %
	1998	1 680 470	2 431 218	69,1 %
	2001	1 606 703	2 379 491	67,5 %
Russia	1993	52 600 000	105 200 000	50,0 %
	1995	69 587 454	107 496 856	64,7 %
	1999	65 370 690	108 073 956	60,5 %
Armenia	1995	1 183 573	1 195 283	99,0 %
	1999	1 137 133	2 198 544	51,7 %
	2003	1 226 866	2 322 614	52,8 %
Romania	1992	12 496 430	16 380 663	76,3 %
	1996	13 088 388	17 218 654	76,0 %

	2000	11 559 458	17 699 727	65,3 %
Slovakia	1994	2 932 669	3 876 555	75,7 %
	1998	3 389 346	4 023 191	84,2 %
	2002	2 913 267	4 157 802	70,1 %
Country	Year of Election	Total votes	Registered voters	Total votes/ registered voters
Turkey	1995	29 010 000	34 038 000	85,2 %
	1999	32 590 000	37 440 000	87,0 %
	2002	32 650 000	41 276 000	79,1 %
Ukraine	1994	28 963 982	38 204 100	75,8 %
	1998	26 521 273	37 540 092	70,6 %
	2002	25 874 859	35 852 251	72,2 %