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Trust as the Foundation of Democracy:

4 **Political Trust, Voter Turnout, and Democratic Legitimacy in Comparative Analysis**

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ABSTRACT

Voter turnout is a critical and unstable part of democracy. It reflects the trust and relationship that citizens have with their government. Many factors can influence citizens' desire to vote. Overall, there has been a decline in political participation. This research looks into the reasons behind this, suggesting that the weakening of political and social trust drives this trend. While traditional models often focus on socio-economic resources or institutional rules, this paper argues that trust is the main factor that determines whether citizens feel their vote truly matters. The research fills a gap in existing literature, which generally examines these factors separately instead of comparatively. It also responds to the current global decline in trust and its effects on democratic stability. The essay uses case studies from various countries to illustrate the trend of declining voter turnout worldwide and analyzes the differences in each country's institutions and their effects on turnout. The investigation also considers modern structural challenges, such as globalization, corporate influence, and the breakdown of national identity. Instead of providing alternative reasons for low turnout, the paper finds that these forces make national governments seem outdated or unresponsive, further damaging public trust in institutions. The study concludes that the current turnout crisis is essentially a crisis of faith. It argues that trying to increase participation through mechanical means will not work. Instead, democratic health relies on restoring the belief that political institutions are both legitimate and capable of serving the public good.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a dramatic paradox has emerged within the world's democracies: despite the fact that the tools for political participation have proliferated and access to information has become universal, a fundamental act of citizenship, voting, has become less active. From the United States to European states, the trend of voter disengagement is a

41 global phenomenon. For instance, in the 2022 French legislative elections, turnout fell to a
42 record low (France: Voter Turnout in the Legislative Elections, 2024). There are also recent
43 democracies facing similar issues: the 11.2% turnout in Tunisia's 2022 election demonstrated
44 a deep-seated political disengagement (Tunisia Assembly of People's Representatives
45 December 2022 Election, 2022). Rather than representing a short-lived issue, the decline that
46 signifies a creeping crisis of democratic legitimacy is part of a growing crisis of democracy
47 worldwide.

48 In this paper, I will argue that although factors such as civil society, economic
49 conditions, and globalisation are substantial, the primary overarching phenomenon that
50 determines voter turnouts in democracies—and, accordingly, contributes to the recent
51 downturns—is political trust. This research is important, given the current global crisis of trust
52 and its potential consequences for democratic stability; it fills a void in the current research
53 that examines these factors in isolation rather than comparatively, under a broader category
54 such as political trust. To ground this research, the paper will focus on a broad comparative
55 analysis of cases from Europe, Oceania, and Asia. Austria serves as an example of declining
56 trust and turnout to demonstrate a great trend in Europe. Australia offers a contrasting model
57 of stable engagement through an institutional framework that promotes voter participation. In
58 comparison, Asian democracies, including Japan, South Korea, India, and Singapore, will
59 show the varying relationships between trust and voting across different political cultures.
60 Ultimately, the conclusion posits that trust is an essential precondition, as without it, other
61 factors fail to sustain consistent electoral participation. Therefore, restoring trust is important
62 to the vitality of democratic societies.

63 The erosion of voter turnout poses a significant statistical issue and a serious threat to
64 the democratic health and equity of our society. Low and declining voter turnout leads toward

a concentration of political power in mobilised and usually more affluent sections of the populace, which skews the outcomes of policy decisions and, therefore, weakens the principle of representation. This loss of legitimacy for governments elected through political processes also increases the likelihood of creating instability in the political system by widening the divide between a government and its electorate. Therefore, understanding the root causes of the erosion of voter turnout is critical to identifying the crisis currently faced by democratic systems.

This investigation centres on political and social trust as a multidimensional concept. Political trust refers to citizens' confidence in the impartiality, efficiency, and integrity of core institutions such as the government, parliament, the electoral commission, and the legal system (Vitale, 2018). Social trust is characterised as interpersonal trust that includes perceptions of honesty, the capacity to work together, and the existence of common social norms among other citizens (Kirby, 2025). The critical hypothesis is that these forms of trust will reduce perceived 'costs' of voting. If you believe your vote will be counted fairly and that you are part of a collective citizenry, you will be more likely to vote. Without this underlying basis, people will view their votes as irrelevant regardless of the particular circumstances.

The case studies selected for this paper are appropriate cases as they span a range of institutional settings and political cultures, which makes them well-suited for isolating the effect of trust from other potential confounding variables. Austria and Australia are both developed, stable democracies with established civil societies, yet they diverge sharply in turnout stability, which is due to differences in institutional design and the nature of the trust created through these institutions. The Asian cases add to the argument beyond the Western liberal democratic tradition, testing the universality of the trust-turnout hypothesis in contexts where participatory norms and state-society relationships are different. Crucially, while the

analysis is focused on these specific cases, the evidence from the example cases refers to a global trend: when people lose faith in the institutions that govern them, the will to participate in the democratic process diminishes.

The essay is structured in four sections. First, it reviews the established literature on voter turnout and develops a theoretical rationale for political trust as the primary mediating variable influencing turnout rates. Second, it uses comparative empirical analysis through evidence from Austria, Australia, and Asia to test the relative explanatory strength of trust. Third, it examines additional structural forces, globalisation, corporate power, and the erosion of national boundaries and shows that they contribute to the decline of trust in politics. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the findings, arguing that while economic deprivation or weak civic networks can depress turnout, their impact is conditional on a bedrock of trust, the erosion of which presents the most fundamental challenge to electoral democracy globally.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This literature review and theoretical framework will involve two related areas of scholarship: the extensive literature on the determinants of voter turnout and the evolving scholarship on political trust and social capital. The prior research has traditionally prioritised socio-economic models and institutional models of voting, while the latter treats trust as a background variable. This paper presents an argument for the importance of elector-focused political trust as the most significant proximate factor mediating the effects of more general, structural variables—civil society, economic conditions, and globalisation—on turnout in contemporary democracies. The existing studies on voter participation have generally followed two paths. The first path follows the rational choice and socioeconomic models, which views voting as a cost-benefit calculation that is influenced by the availability of resources (Blais et al., 2019). Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady's

113 'Civic Voluntarism Model' remains foundational, arguing that turnout is a function of
114 resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks (Verba et al., 1995). This
115 explains correlations between higher turnout and factors like education and income. The
116 second path, which is represented by the work of scholars including Arend Lijphart and Mark
117 Franklin, offers an institutionalist perspective of the voter turnout with specific reference to
118 the 'rules of the game', identifying how facilitative laws (Franklin, 2004), including
119 proportional representation, automatic voter registration, and weekend voting, result in lower
120 costs of voting and greater participation in elections (Lijphart, 1997). However, a growing
121 body of work identifies a puzzle: even in democracies with facilitative institutions and rising
122 education levels, turnout is often stagnant or declining. This leads to the conclusion that an
123 independent factor is contributing to low turnout rates, which cannot be accounted for by
124 resources or through the application of regulations. Scholars like Pippa Norris point to a shift
125 from 'mobilising' citizens to 'critical' citizens, who have become distrustful of the system,
126 resulting in their energy being diverted towards alternative forms of civic engagement (Norris,
127 2011).

128 This paper contends that while socio-economic models explain capacity and
129 institutional models explain opportunity, they do not adequately explain an individual's will
130 to participate in the electoral process. That will is fundamentally shaped by political trust. It
131 serves as the vehicle through which broader structural conditions impact an individual's
132 decision to vote.

133 Political trust is a complex, multi-dimensional concept. Different scholars use
134 different approaches to create a generalised understanding of this phenomenon. David
135 Easton's systems theory creates a distinction between diffuse support, a generalised
136 connection to the democratic regime as a whole, and specific support for leaders or policies

(Easton, 2010). Marc Hetherington makes an important distinction between confidence in institutions and confidence in current officeholders, claiming that a lack of relative confidence in institutions is a more corrosive factor to civic engagement than a lack of confidence in politicians (Hetherington, 1998). Robert Putnam's work on social capital links interpersonal trust to political trust, but the causal relationship is still a point of contention regarding whether civic engagement helps to develop trust, or if pre-existing trust is necessary for civic engagement (Boix & Posner, 1996). Furthermore, Ronald Inglehart provides a cultural perspective that associates high levels of trust with post-materialist and safe societies (Inglehart, 1988). Yet critical theorists such as Claus Offe question whether trust can be extended beyond the relationship between individuals to abstract forms of political authority where citizens have limited means to monitor the actions of those authorities (Offe, 1999). These nuances reveal that 'low political trust' can mean many things: tension with a ruling party, cynicism about any politicians, or a widespread view that the political system has been rigged or is not responsive. The most damaging variation to turnout is mistrust of the system itself. Therefore this paper focuses on developing a focused conceptualization of political trust as it relates specifically to the electoral process and its expected fairness. The concept builds upon the perspective articulated by Adrian Leftwich — that politics is the main mechanism by which society arrives at collective decisions regarding the distribution of resources and values (Leftwich, 1993). When citizens lose confidence in this primary function, the incentive to participate in elections diminishes.

Here, political trust is defined as the citizen's eroding or sustained belief in the fairness, integrity, and functional efficacy of the electoral process and the key institutions that animate it. It encompasses two critical dimensions. First, belief in procedural fairness: the conviction that elections are free from manipulation and that all major interests have a roughly equal opportunity to compete for power. Second, belief in output responsiveness: the

162 expectation that the government emerging from this process will function effectively and be
 163 responsive to public will. Erosion of this trust breeds a specific sense of electoral
 164 hopelessness; this hopelessness is the direct antagonist of voter turnout.

165 Electoral hopelessness does not automatically mean political apathy in all domains.
 166 Rather, Norris' 'critical citizens' thesis states that residents may withdraw entirely from
 167 participation as a classic abstainer or they will divert their energy and resources into
 168 alternative venues such as social movements or protests which they perceive as more genuine
 169 than the compromised electoral venue (Norris, 2011). This represents a flight from
 170 participation rather than a flight from politics in general. Using this framework to understand
 171 the factors associated with diminished voter turnout could be useful in determining whether
 172 or not weak civil societies, economic distress, or globalization directly impact voter turnout,
 173 because the relationships among these variables do not have a direct influence on voter
 174 turnout. However, in using political trust as a filter, the economy has a detrimental impact on
 175 trust through "output" responsiveness, while the perception of elite capture has a corrosive
 176 effect on trust with regard to "procedural" fairness. Therefore, the state of electoral
 177 hopelessness is the most deterrent to voting. Consequently, in order to understand the crisis in
 178 voter participation, it is necessary to identify the crisis in trust in the electoral system itself.

179 **3. ON WANING TRUST AND ERODING VOTES**

180 Trust in political institutions is the foundational public belief in the integrity,
 181 competence, and legitimacy of democratic institutions. Once that trust declines, citizens will
 182 disengage because they consider democracy to be unresponsive to their needs and too far
 183 removed from them. The clearest way to measure this disengagement from the democratic
 184 system is through declining electoral participation. The instability in turnout is an indication
 185 of an individual's belief that their vote does not matter and is a reflection of electoral

186 hopelessness. This section explores the link between political trust and voter turnout through
 187 a comparative lens. This will involve examining Austria as a European case study of unstable
 188 levels of political trust and electoral turnout, and then contrasting it with Australia's model of
 189 stability under compulsory voting, then finally analysing the different political trust and voter
 190 turnout trends across Asia, namely Singapore, India, Japan and South Korea. Ultimately, this
 191 section will conclude that effective and stronger institutional design can help sustain political
 192 trust in an age of democratic uncertainty.

193 **3.1 Austria**

194 Austria presents an interesting European model because it is not an extreme example
 195 of democratic failure, but rather a bellwether of broader continental trends. It is a stable,
 196 prosperous, democratic country; however, constant changes in the country give insight into
 197 some of the vulnerabilities within a stable democracy. Located in Central Europe, Austria
 198 faces both the integrationist pull of the EU and the disintegrationist impulses related to
 199 populism, immigration discussions, and complex coalition politics (Sus, 2016).

200 Voter turnout in Austrian national elections is declining and is very volatile. Austrian
 201 national election turnouts have been on a volatile, declining trajectory. Turnout was
 202 approximately 90% for much of the second half of the 20th century, but for the first time
 203 ever, has dropped below 80% at 77.5% in the 2008 elections, then rebounded to 84.3% in the
 204 2017 elections likely due to an extremely polarising campaign, but fell again at the snap
 205 elections to only 75.6% in 2019 (Gaebler et al., 2020). The pattern of spikes in turnout seems
 206 to occur when there is an apparent major crisis or when there is high-stakes polarisation. But
 207 it is difficult for spikes to sustain with an instrumentally motivated electorate who only votes
 208 when the stakes are sufficiently acute so as to break through their general disillusionment, but
 209 is unlikely due to deep-seated habitual voting or because of deep trust in their institutions.

210 The Austrian government's 2007 decision to lower the voting age to 16 has been
 211 referred to as an ambitious effort at advancing civic participation among young residents. The
 212 idea behind this was to create a stronger habit of voting and encourage civic engagement by
 213 allowing young people to vote as they develop their civic identities (Bronner & Ifkovits,
 214 2019). However, the results have been mixed. While young people have been highly engaged
 215 in specific issues like climate, their overall turnout rates remain the lowest of any age group,
 216 for example in the United States, only 40% of 18 year olds registered as voters, compared to
 217 80% of those aged 45 and above. This suggests that providing access does not automatically
 218 build confidence in participating in elections and that the underlying factors behind low
 219 turnout must be addressed, which in turn can be a symptom of low turnout. Thus, this
 220 intervention is addressing a symptom without addressing some of the larger issues underlying
 221 the cause

222 Austria's story is not unique. Rather, it plays out against the backdrop of a wider
 223 European tale of decline. Surveys, including the Eurobarometer and the European Social
 224 Survey, consistently show falling confidence in parliaments, political parties, and
 225 governments across the continent (European Commission, 2026). The EU technocracy's
 226 growing distance from citizens, the 2008 financial crisis and austerity measures, the 2015
 227 migration crisis, and longstanding fears of inequality and globalisation have caused this
 228 decline of support (Scicluna, 2019). The turnout crisis is directly caused by the erosion of
 229 trust. When citizens see institutions as unresponsive or beholden to elites, the cost of voting,
 230 in time, effort and emotional burden, begins to exceed the benefits. In this way, abstention
 231 becomes a rational choice, a semantic protest, or apathy. The European pattern communicates
 232 clearly that an emptying trust reservoir is connected with the electoral participation rate. This
 233 creates a vicious cycle where turnout further delegitimises governing mandates and
 234 undermines public trust in the system's legitimacy and effectiveness.

235 **3.2 Australia**

236 Australia offers a clear and insightful contrast. Voter turnout in federal elections is
 237 consistently high, remaining around 90 to 95% for decades (*Participation in the 2025*
 238 *Federal Election, 2025*). This impressive turnout reflects a strong trust in the democratic
 239 system. Australians generally believe in the system's fairness and legitimacy, which is known
 240 as procedural trust.

241 The foundation of this stability is compulsory voting, introduced in 1924. Its success
 242 however is not due to a modest fine (approximately \$20 AUD). For many citizens, the fine is
 243 financially insignificant. Instead, the law has a sociological and normative effect (Fowler,
 244 2013). First, it encourages a lifelong habit of voting, making it a regular civic duty like
 245 paying taxes. Second, over generations, the norm of participating has become deeply
 246 embedded, so not voting is seen as unusual and neglectful of civic duty. Third, and most
 247 importantly, it changes political incentives. With the entire electorate voting, political parties
 248 must develop broad, centrist policies that appeal to all groups, not just their base. This
 249 strengthens the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which is the second pillar
 250 of political trust.

251 Consider a thought experiment: if Austria adopted a similar system with a meaningful
 252 fine, the result would likely be an immediate, mechanical increase in turnout. However,
 253 whether it would restore trust is a more complex question. It would force Austrian parties to
 254 appeal to a broader electorate, potentially mitigating polarisation. Yet, if citizens perceived
 255 compulsory voting as an authoritarian imposition on a system they already distrusted, it could
 256 breed resentment rather than renewed civic commitment. Australia's lesson is thus nuanced:
 257 compulsory voting appears most effective as a prophylactic measure. It sustains civic habit
 258 and social norms, preventing the trust-turnout spiral from starting in the first place, rather

259 than serving as a simple cure for an already advanced condition of disengagement. The
 260 intervention works with trust, not despite its absence.

261 Australia's experience shows that compulsory voting works best as a preventive
 262 measure. It helps maintain civic habits and social norms, stopping the decline of trust and
 263 turnout before it starts rather than acting as a simple remedy for a serious problem of
 264 disengagement. This approach interacts with trust rather than ignoring its absence. Over
 265 generations, the norm of 'showing up' has become deeply rooted; not voting feels unusual and
 266 irresponsible. Most importantly, it changes political incentives. Knowing that everyone will
 267 vote, political parties must create broad, centrist policies and engage all groups, not just their
 268 core supporters. This enhances the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which
 269 is crucial for building political trust.

270 **3.3 Asia**

271 In Asia, the situation is more complex, with the diverse cultures and political
 272 structures across countries, this complicates the link between trust and turnout. It still
 273 emphasizes the importance of trust as a key factor, even when it looks different from the
 274 Western democratic framework.

275 In developed democracies like Japan and South Korea, there is a pattern of decreasing
 276 trust and lower voter turnout, especially among young people. This is driven by economic
 277 stagnation, political scandals, and a pervasive sense of unresponsive establishment politics. In
 278 Japan, turnout for lower house elections has fallen from over 70% in the 1990s to below 55%
 279 recently (Japan: Voting Rate at the Lower House Elections 1946-2024, 2024). South Korea
 280 shows similar trends. The mechanism resembles the Austrian case: as trust in fairness and
 281 responsiveness declines, voting starts to feel pointless.

India presents an intriguing paradox. Voter turnout is usually high and often rising, fueled by strong partisan mobilization, identity politics, and a lively democratic culture. Yet trust in specific institutions like parliament, the civil service, and the judiciary can fluctuate and is often low (Ajay Gudavarthy, 2024). Here, high turnout reflects political engagement driven by social divisions and polarization, rather than broad support for the system. It's crucial to note that turnout can be high while democratic quality declines if participation is based on fear, grievance, or group identity instead of confidence in fair systems. India shows the limitations of using turnout numbers as a clear indicator of democratic health, as although there could be participation in the democratic system, it could have no relationship to political trust.

On the other hand, Singapore stands apart. It features consistently high voter turnout, with an average of 83.10% voter turnout and 92.47% turnout in the 2025 election, being within a system characterised by dominant-party rule and restricted civil liberties (IFES Election Guide Singapore, 2022). Trust here is based not on liberal democratic institutions but on an agreement about performance. Citizens have high confidence in the government's ability to deliver economic growth and social order. Turnout is high due to social pressure, the symbolic value of voting, and genuine support for governance outcomes. This model shows that high turnout can occur alongside a type of political trust focused on performance rather than on participation. Even in this unique case, trust is still the key factor; its nature simply differs from the procedural trust seen in liberal democracies.

3.4 Summary

Examining Austria's changing turnout, Australia's steady results, and Asia's diverse trends, demonstrates that political trust and voter turnout have a mutually reinforcing relationship. However, this relationship is shaped by political culture and institutional design.

306 Austria illustrates that when trust diminishes, turnout becomes unpredictable which is a
 307 reflection of temporary crises rather than a solid foundation of democracy. Europe's broader
 308 challenges serve as a warning about this gradual decline. In contrast, Australia provides a
 309 powerful, practical lesson; simply the requirement to vote can cultivate a strong civic habit
 310 that protects the political system from the serious erosion of trust, making participation the
 311 norm rather than a calculated choice. Finally, the Asian experience reminds us that there is no
 312 universal equation: high turnout can indicate active democratic engagement, strong partisan
 313 mobilization, or a public agreement for competent governance. In all instances, some level of
 314 trust is essential. Democracies worried about declining trust should not just try to boost
 315 turnout with penalties; the deeper goal should be to create a responsive, legitimate, and
 316 effective political environment that encourages citizens to participate.

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4. BEYOND POLITICAL TRUST

319 The previous section showed how political trust connects citizens to the electoral
 320 process. When trust in government declines, the motivation to vote often drops as well. This
 321 is evident from the evidence in Austria, Europe, and beyond. However, looking solely at
 322 political trust does not tell the whole story. A direct loss of faith in political institutions is
 323 clearly significant, but broader structural changes in society might also play a role. These
 324 changes can lead citizens to feel less dependent on their national government, making them
 325 less willing to participate in national elections, even if they do not have overly negative views
 326 of politicians or institutions. The question is whether these structural forces provide separate
 327 reasons for declining voter turnout or if they function through the same trust mechanism
 328 already identified.

Three interconnected phenomena are especially important in this context: globalization, the weakening of national boundaries, and the increasing reliance on markets and corporations to provide goods and services that were once the responsibility of the state. These forces do not replace political trust as the main explanatory factor. Instead, they work alongside it as additional contributors that guide citizens toward the same outcome, lowering turnout through the feelings of detachment and disincentive discussed earlier. This section will explore how these additional phenomena collectively reduce political trust and lessen the perceived importance of national elections, which contributes to lower electoral participation.

4.1 Globalisation and the Fragmentation of National Identity

The first factor is globalization, which has changed how people view their identity and their connection to their nation. In the past, the average person in a democratic country was more likely to identify with one national identity. They were born, educated, employed, and expected to live within the borders of a single country. This sense of belonging to a national community created a duty; voting was not just a right but an obligation to fellow citizens and the nation's future. Globalization has made this picture much more complex (Mahoney, 2022).

Increased mobility means that more people now hold dual or multiple citizenships. They may be born in one country, educated in another, and work in a third, with family members spread across various continents. For these individuals, figuring out where they truly belong can be complicated. This mix of identities can weaken the sense of responsibility toward any single national political system. If one's future is not tied exclusively to a specific country, the outcome of that country's election may seem less personally important. Besides the issue of multiple citizenships, globalization has also encouraged the growth of transnational identities. (Marko Mrakovčić et al., 2020) An environmental activist may feel a

353 stronger connection with activists in other countries than with neighbors who do not share
354 their concerns. A tech professional might feel more aligned with a global industry network
355 than with political discussions in their home country. These transnational identities are real
356 and significant, but they do not easily lead to electoral participation.

357 Immigration and demographic change have also played a role. In many developed
358 democracies, the population is now more diverse than ever before. This diversity enriches
359 society in many ways, but it can complicate the relationship between citizenship and political
360 participation. First-generation immigrants may face barriers to voting, even after gaining
361 citizenship, such as not being familiar with the issues, candidates, or voting process, or
362 coming from countries where elections were not meaningful or where political participation
363 posed real dangers (Pratsinakis, 2017). More fundamentally, they may not yet feel a full sense
364 of belonging to their new country. The feeling of being an outsider, even a permanent one,
365 does not easily translate into the sense of civic duty that drives people to vote. The processes
366 of globalization have created a world where a singular, unquestioned national identity is no
367 longer the common experience it once was, weakening the sense of obligation to participate
368 in the political life of any one nation.

369 **4.2 Corporate Power and the Capture of Democratic Institutions**

370 The second factor is the growing concentration of economic power among large
371 corporations and the influence these companies have on politics. Increased market
372 concentration accounts for about one-quarter of the recent decline in democracy worldwide
373 (OECD, 2024). Large, profitable firms can turn their economic strength into political sway
374 through campaign contributions, lobbying, and other forms of political involvement that
375 ordinary citizens cannot access.

376 This situation creates a widespread belief that the political system favors wealthy
 377 interests, undermining the fairness of political trust identified in the theoretical framework. In
 378 the United States, for instance, a small group of wealthy donors makes up a significant
 379 portion of total election spending (Albert & Raja, 2020). Polls consistently show that many
 380 Americans feel donors have too much sway over Congress, while regular citizens have too
 381 little (Beshay, 2023). This view is not limited to the United States; citizens in many
 382 developed democracies are increasingly skeptical of the relationship between business and
 383 government. When people believe that the economy's rules benefit corporate interests over
 384 the public, faith in the political system's fairness naturally declines. Citizens who think that
 385 elections are mostly decided by the highest bidder have little motivation to take part. Their
 386 distrust often targets the system itself rather than individual politicians, as they see it as
 387 fundamentally compromised.

388 Besides directly influencing policy, corporations are also stepping into roles typically
 389 held by the government. They are taking positions on social issues, enhancing healthcare
 390 benefits, and providing social support to employees. While these actions may be
 391 well-intentioned, they can lower expectations for government responsibilities. This distances
 392 citizens from political life and strengthens the belief that voting is not the best way to create
 393 meaningful change. This represents a decline in output responsiveness: if the private sector
 394 provides social benefits instead of elected officials, people's motivation to vote to influence
 395 public services goes down.

396 **4.3 The Erosion of National Boundaries**

397 The third factor involves the decreasing importance of national borders as
 398 globalization deepens and corporate power rises (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). For much of the
 399 twentieth century, the nation-state was the main unit of political, economic, and cultural life

400 (Held, 1989). Elections mattered because governments controlled power within clearly
 401 defined areas. Today, the sense of a bounded community has weakened. Capital flows freely
 402 across borders. Multinational media companies increasingly shape culture instead of national
 403 institutions. Even the experience of place has changed, as cities and regions connect more to
 404 global networks than to their own surrounding areas.

405 When national identity weakens, and people no longer see the nation-state as the
 406 natural framework for economic and social life, participating in a national election can seem
 407 less meaningful (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). Citizens may feel a stronger connection to their
 408 region, profession, or transnational networks than to their fellow citizens. They might view
 409 global corporations as the main agents of change, not governments. In this situation, electoral
 410 politics can seem outdated, a remnant from a time when the nation-state truly mattered.

411 **4.4 Summary: Ancillary Factors and the Trust Mechanism**

412 In summary, the decline in voter turnout is not just about a loss of faith in
 413 government. It also stems from structural changes that have made the nation-state seem less
 414 relevant. Globalization has limited the policy choices available to national governments,
 415 forcing them to respond to external market pressures rather than the will of the people. The
 416 concentration of corporate power has created a perception that the political system serves
 417 wealthy interests. Corporations have taken on roles traditionally held by the state. Combined
 418 with the erosion of national boundaries, these factors have made national elections feel less
 419 significant to many citizens.

420 These elements do not function independently of political trust. Instead, they alter the
 421 environment in which political trust develops. Citizens do not simply think the government is
 422 performing poorly; they increasingly see it as unable to succeed because of global capital

constraints, corporate agendas, or the redundancy of its traditional roles. This form of distrust comes from a belief that the government is ineffective and outdated—a collapse in output responsiveness shaped by structural conditions. In this way, globalization and corporate power do not compete with political trust; they are key drivers of its decline. Their overall impact on voter turnout goes through the same trust mechanism that this paper emphasizes.

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5. CONCLUSION

This paper aims to address a seemingly simple question: among the numerous factors that scholars propose to explain declining voter turnout in modern democracies, which is the most significant? A comparative analysis of Austria, Australia, and various Asian democracies, along with a theoretical exploration of globalization, corporate power, and the decline of national identity, points to a clear answer: political trust. Trust in institutions is not just one factor among many. It is the foundational element through which all other factors work—the lens that shapes whether economic conditions, civic infrastructure, or structural changes result in participation or abstention.

The findings can be summarized as follows. The literature review and theoretical framework show that existing voter turnout models—socio-economic and institutional—explain capacity and opportunity but fail to capture the will to participate. This willingness, the paper argues, is mainly influenced by political trust, defined as citizens' belief in the fairness of the electoral process and the responsiveness of the resulting governments. The comparative case studies then tested this framework empirically. Austria showed that a loss of institutional trust leads to erratic turnout instead of stable civic participation. It also demonstrated that measures like lowering the voting age fail if the underlying trust issues remain unaddressed. Australia showed the opposite: that institutional

447 design can create conditions for trust—by normalizing participation across the electorate and
 448 encouraging parties to be responsive—thus preventing the trust-turnout spiral from starting.
 449 The Asian cases provided further insights, indicating that trust manifests differently across
 450 political cultures, from Singapore's focus on performance to India's turnout driven by
 451 mobilization. Still, every case highlighted trust as a crucial variable. Finally, Section 4
 452 illustrates that the structural forces of globalization, corporate power, and diminishing
 453 national boundaries are not competing explanations for the turnout crisis. Instead, they are
 454 significant contributors to the erosion of institutional trust, confirming that trust is the central
 455 factor through which structural conditions influence individual political behavior.

456 This paper has two notable limitations, which deserve acknowledgement, along with
 457 reasons why its main findings remain compelling. The first limitation is the lack of detailed
 458 longitudinal quantitative data. A more thorough study would systematically use panel
 459 datasets like the World Values Survey, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and
 460 European Social Survey to connect trust scores with turnout rates across a broad,
 461 representative sample of democracies over time. This paper mainly relies on qualitative and
 462 structural comparisons. However, this method suits an exploratory, theory-building endeavor
 463 rather than a hypothesis-testing approach. The consistency of the trust variable in diverse
 464 contexts like Austria, Australia, Singapore, and India strongly indicates it captures a real
 465 causal mechanism rather than just a contextual artifact—robustness that purely quantitative
 466 studies, which may struggle to reflect the qualitative nature of trust across different political
 467 systems, cannot easily match. The second limitation concerns the possibility of reverse
 468 causation. The assertion that declining trust leads to lower turnout faces a valid
 469 counter-argument: declining turnout may also damage trust by creating governments with
 470 weak mandates and questionable legitimacy, which in turn depresses future participation.
 471 This circularity exists, yet it does not weaken the argument; instead, it enhances it. The

negative cycle shown in the Austrian case supports trust's importance. Conversely, the Australian case serves as a near-natural experiment in the opposite direction—compulsory voting interrupts the downward trend by ensuring widespread participation regardless of temporary fluctuations in trust. This stabilizes the conditions under which trust is built. This imbalance supports the view that trust is the initial factor, even if the relationship is ultimately cyclical.

Several avenues for future research arise from these findings. First, scholars should look into the specific ways that certain institutional actions interact with trust to either maintain or restore participation. Citizens' assemblies, deliberative mini-publics, ranked-choice voting, and participatory budgeting are all innovations that aim to make democratic processes seem more legitimate and responsive. Their long-term effects on trust, and how that trust affects turnout, need thorough investigation. Second, the growing research on digital media and political communication includes a less-explored area. Social media platforms are now significant players in shaping political trust. They can both engage new participants and deepen cynicism through the algorithmic spread of distrust and outrage. It is crucial to understand how information environments influence the trust-turnout link in today's digital world. Third, the connection between corporate influence and democratic participation needs more focused theoretical and empirical study. If rising market concentration accounts for a quarter of the global decline in democracy, as the evidence suggests, then managing private economic power also presents a challenge for democratic participation—something the voter turnout research has yet to fully address.

Democracy has never been a self-sustaining system. It relies on the belief that ordinary people will return to vote, giving their trust to imperfect institutions. When that belief falters—when citizens view their vote as merely a pointless gesture in a rigged

496 system—democracy doesn't fail dramatically. It gradually erodes, mandate by mandate,
 497 election by election. The turnout crisis, in this context, isn't just about civic engagement; it's
 498 a crisis of faith. Once lost, restoring faith is incredibly challenging.

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The manuscript addresses a potentially relevant topic and draws on a broad body of literature. However, in its current form, there are several foundational issues that limit its analytical robustness and clarity.

1. Unit of Analysis

A key concern relates to the comparative framework adopted in the study. The manuscript compares Austria, Australia, and Asia, which represent incommensurate units of analysis. Austria and Australia are individual nation-states with defined governance structures, policy systems, and datasets, whereas Asia is a highly heterogeneous region comprising multiple countries with diverse political, economic, and institutional contexts. This mismatch in scale and aggregation undermines the validity of the comparison and makes it difficult to draw meaningful or interpretable conclusions.

The authors should reconsider and clearly justify their unit of analysis. This could involve:

- Narrowing the regional case to specific Asian countries, or
- Reframing the comparison as country-to-country or region-to-region, ensuring analytical consistency throughout the manuscript.
- finally, if the authors intend to retain this comparative framework, they should provide a clear and explicit justification explaining how and on what analytical basis the comparison between Austria, Australia, and Asia is considered methodologically sound.

2. Methodological Clarity

The manuscript currently lacks a clearly articulated methodology. There is insufficient information on how the literature was identified, selected, and analysed. Without clarity on data sources, inclusion/exclusion criteria, analytical approach, or synthesis methods, it is difficult to assess the rigor, transparency, or reproducibility of the study.

The authors should include a dedicated methodology section outlining: The scope and purpose of the literature review, Search strategies and databases used and criteria for selecting and analysing sources

3. Presentation and Synthesis of Findings

The authors are encouraged to present key findings in a more constructive and analytical manner, for example by organising results around thematic or conceptual categories or including comparative tables or matrices to demonstrate similarities and differences across cases.

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Trust as the Cornerstone of Democracy:

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Political Trust, Voter Turnout, and Democratic Legitimacy in a Comparative European

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Perspective

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ABSTRACT

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Voter turnout is an essential and volatile element of democracy, a representation of the

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trust and relationship that citizens have with their government. There are many factors that

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can impact the desire of citizens to vote, and overall, there has been a declining trend in

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political participation. This research explores the reason for this, positing that the erosion of

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political and social trust is the primary driver behind this trend. While traditional models

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focus on socio-economic resources or institutional rules, this paper argues that trust acts as

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the main variable that determines whether a citizen feels their vote possesses any genuine

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efficacy. The research addresses a gap in the literature, which often examines these factors in

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isolation rather than comparatively, and responds to the current global ‘trust recession’ and its

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implications for democratic stability. The essay will use a range of countries globally as case

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studies, identifying the trend of declining voter turnout across the world and analysing the

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difference between each country’s institutions and their impact on voter turnout. The

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investigation also addresses contemporary structural challenges, including globalisation,

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corporate capture, and the fragmentation of national identity. Rather than offering alternative

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explanations for low turnout, the paper finds that these forces exert their influence by making

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national governments appear obsolete or unresponsive, thus further corroding institutional

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faith. The study concludes that the modern turnout crisis is fundamentally a “crisis of faith”.

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It suggests that engineering higher participation through mechanical means is insufficient;

rather, democratic vitality depends on restoring the belief that political institutions are both legitimate and capable of serving the public good.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a dramatic paradox has emerged within the world's democracies: despite the fact that the tools for political participation have proliferated and access to information has become universal, a fundamental act of citizenship, voting, has become less active. From the United States to European states, the trend of voter disengagement is a global phenomenon. For instance, in the 2022 French legislative elections, turnout fell to a record low (France: Voter Turnout in the Legislative Elections, 2024). There are also recent democracies facing similar issues: the 11.2% turnout in Tunisia's 2022 election demonstrated a deep-seated political disengagement (Tunisia Assembly of People's Representatives December 2022 Election, 2022). Rather than representing a short-lived issue, the decline that signifies a creeping crisis of democratic legitimacy is part of a growing crisis of democracy worldwide.

In this paper, I will argue that although factors such as civil society, economic conditions, and globalisation are substantial, the primary overarching phenomenon that determines voter turnouts in democracies—and, accordingly, contributes to the recent downturns—is political trust. This research is important, given the current global crisis of trust and its potential consequences for democratic stability; it fills a void in the current research that examines these factors in isolation rather than comparatively, under a broader category such as political trust. To ground this research, the paper will focus on a broad comparative analysis of cases from Europe and Oceania. Within Europe, the essay will focus on Austria, Hungary and Germany. Austria serves as an example of declining trust and turnout to

49 demonstrate a great trend in Europe. Germany is the largest democracy in Europe and faces
50 post-war reconstruction populist pressure. Hungary illustrates the democratic backsliding
51 driven by the erosion of institutional trust. In contrast, Australia offers a model of stable
52 engagement through an institutional framework that promotes voter participation. Ultimately,
53 the conclusion posits that trust is an essential precondition, as without it, other factors fail to
54 sustain consistent electoral participation. Therefore, restoring trust is important to the vitality
55 of democratic societies.

56 The erosion of voter turnout poses a significant statistical issue and a serious threat to
57 the democratic health and equity of our society. Low and declining voter turnout leads toward
58 a concentration of political power in mobilised and usually more affluent sections of the
59 populace, which skews the outcomes of policy decisions and, therefore, weakens the
60 principle of representation. This loss of legitimacy for governments elected through political
61 processes also increases the likelihood of creating instability in the political system by
62 widening the divide between a government and its electorate. Therefore, understanding the
63 root causes of the erosion of voter turnout is critical to identifying the crisis currently faced
64 by democratic systems.

65 This investigation centres on political and social trust as a multidimensional concept.
66 Political trust refers to citizens' confidence in the impartiality, efficiency, and integrity of core
67 institutions such as the government, parliament, the electoral commission, and the legal
68 system (Vitale, 2018). Social trust is characterised as interpersonal trust that includes
69 perceptions of honesty, the capacity to work together, and the existence of common social
70 norms among other citizens (Kirby, 2025). The critical hypothesis is that these forms of trust
71 will reduce perceived 'costs' of voting. If you believe your vote will be counted fairly and that

72 you are part of a collective citizenry, you will be more likely to vote. Without this underlying
73 basis, people will view their votes as irrelevant regardless of the particular circumstances.

74 The case studies selected for this paper are appropriate cases as they span a range of
75 institutional settings, which makes them well-suited for isolating the effect of trust from other
76 potential confounding variables. Europe is chosen for its shared political and historical
77 background and post-war democratic heritage, in particular, the rebuilding of democracy
78 under the Marshall Plan. Australia provides a contrasting perspective to this case but still
79 works alongside as it shares a similar Western heritage to countries in Europe. The essay
80 focuses on the countries Austria, Germany and Hungary and Australia. They are developed,
81 stable democracies with established civil societies, yet they diverge sharply in turnout
82 stability, which is due to differences in institutional design and the nature of the trust created
83 through these institutions. Crucially, while the analysis is focused on these specific cases, the
84 evidence from the example cases refers to a global trend: when people lose faith in the
85 institutions that govern them, the will to participate in the democratic process diminishes.

86 The essay is structured in four sections. First, it reviews the established literature on
87 voter turnout and develops a theoretical rationale for political trust as the primary mediating
88 variable influencing turnout rates. Second, it uses comparative empirical analysis through
89 evidence from Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, to test the relative explanatory
90 strength of trust. Third, it examines additional structural forces, globalisation, corporate
91 power, and the erosion of national boundaries and shows that they contribute to the decline of
92 trust in politics. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the findings, arguing that while economic
93 deprivation or weak civic networks can depress turnout, their impact is conditional on a
94 bedrock of trust, the erosion of which presents the most fundamental challenge to electoral
95 democracy globally.

96 1.1 Methodology

97 The research uses a three-pronged qualitative and analytical approach to construct a
98 theoretically grounded and empirically supported argument. The first part is the background
99 readings and literature analysis. A review of the existing literature on voter turnout was
100 conducted, focusing on peer-reviewed articles. The main databases consulted were JSTOR,
101 Google Scholar, and SSRN using search terms related to voter turnout and political trust.
102 Sources were selected based on their relevance to the field and credibility. The review
103 encompasses works in comparative politics, social and systems theory, coupled with
104 empirical studies. The second part analyses empirical data on voter turnout and trends
105 spanning across multiple years. The figures are compiled from databases such as
106 cross-national datasets published by Statista and national election commission reports.
107 Longitudinal data is used to track changes over time, and comparative tables are used to
108 present data and trends clearly that support the argument. This ensures that the essay's claims
109 will be grounded in both theory and factual evidence as well. The third part is the
110 development of a theory of political trust as the primary link of the relationship between
111 structural conditions and individual electoral behaviour. This essay suggests that trust is the
112 prerequisite condition that is necessary for individuals to choose to participate in election
113 voting, contributing to the trend of voter turnout. This theoretical framework will be fleshed
114 out in section 2 and analysed comparatively between different countries in sections 3 and 4.
115 The methodology is mainly qualitative and analysis-based, which correlates trust with turnout
116 and how it operates through different national contexts.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

120 This literature review and theoretical framework will involve two related areas of
 121 scholarship: the extensive literature on the determinants of voter turnout and the evolving
 122 scholarship on political trust and social capital. The prior research has traditionally prioritised
 123 socio-economic models and institutional models of voting, while the latter treats trust as a
 124 background variable. This paper presents an argument for the importance of elector-focused
 125 political trust as the most significant proximate factor mediating the effects of more general,
 126 structural variables—civil society, economic conditions, and globalisation—on turnout in
 127 contemporary democracies. The existing studies on voter participation have generally
 128 followed two paths. The first path follows the rational choice and socioeconomic models,
 129 which views voting as a cost-benefit calculation that is influenced by the availability of
 130 resources (Blais et al., 2019). Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady's
 131 'Civic Voluntarism Model' remains foundational, arguing that turnout is a function of
 132 resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks (Verba et al., 1995). This
 133 explains correlations between higher turnout and factors like education and income. The
 134 second path, which is represented by the work of scholars including Arend Lijphart and Mark
 135 Franklin, offers an institutionalist perspective of the voter turnout with specific reference to
 136 the 'rules of the game', identifying how facilitative laws (Franklin, 2004), including
 137 proportional representation, automatic voter registration, and weekend voting, result in lower
 138 costs of voting and greater participation in elections (Lijphart, 1997). However, a growing
 139 body of work identifies a puzzle: even in democracies with facilitative institutions and rising
 140 education levels, turnout is often stagnant or declining. This leads to the conclusion that an
 141 independent factor is contributing to low turnout rates, which cannot be accounted for by
 142 resources or through the application of regulations. Scholars like Pippa Norris point to a shift
 143 from 'mobilising' citizens to 'critical' citizens, who have become distrustful of the system,

144 resulting in their energy being diverted towards alternative forms of civic engagement (Noris,
145 2011).

146 This paper contends that while socio-economic models explain capacity and
147 institutional models explain opportunity, they do not adequately explain an individual's will
148 to participate in the electoral process. That will is fundamentally shaped by political trust. It
149 serves as the vehicle through which broader structural conditions impact an individual's
150 decision to vote.

151 Political trust is a complex, multi-dimensional concept. Different scholars use
152 different approaches to create a generalised understanding of this phenomenon. David
153 Easton's systems theory creates a distinction between diffuse support, a generalised
154 connection to the democratic regime as a whole, and specific support for leaders or policies
155 (Easton, 2010). Marc Hetherington makes an important distinction between confidence in
156 institutions and confidence in current officeholders, claiming that a lack of relative
157 confidence in institutions is a more corrosive factor to civic engagement than a lack of
158 confidence in politicians (Hetherington, 1998). Robert Putnam's work on social capital links
159 interpersonal trust to political trust, but the causal relationship is still a point of contention
160 regarding whether civic engagement helps to develop trust, or if pre-existing trust is
161 necessary for civic engagement (Boix & Posner, 1996). Furthermore, Ronald Inglehart
162 provides a cultural perspective that associates high levels of trust with post-materialist and
163 safe societies (Inglehart, 1988). Yet critical theorists such as Claus Offe question whether
164 trust can be extended beyond the relationship between individuals to abstract forms of
165 political authority where citizens have limited means to monitor the actions of those
166 authorities (Offe, 1999). These nuances reveal that 'low political trust' can mean many things:
167 tension with a ruling party, cynicism about any politicians, or a widespread view that the

168 political system has been rigged or is not responsive. The most damaging variation to turnout
169 is mistrust of the system itself. Therefore this paper focuses on developing a focused
170 conceptualization of political trust as it relates specifically to the electoral process and its
171 expected fairness. The concept builds upon the perspective articulated by Adrian Leftwich —
172 that politics is the main mechanism by which society arrives at collective decisions regarding
173 the distribution of resources and values (Leftwich, 1993). When citizens lose confidence in
174 this primary function, the incentive to participate in elections diminishes.

175 Here, political trust is defined as the citizen's eroding or sustained belief in the
176 fairness, integrity, and functional efficacy of the electoral process and the key institutions that
177 animate it. It encompasses two critical dimensions. First, belief in procedural fairness: the
178 conviction that elections are free from manipulation and that all major interests have a
179 roughly equal opportunity to compete for power. Second, belief in output responsiveness: the
180 expectation that the government emerging from this process will function effectively and be
181 responsive to public will. Erosion of this trust breeds a specific sense of electoral
182 hopelessness; this hopelessness is the direct antagonist of voter turnout.

183 Electoral hopelessness does not automatically mean political apathy in all domains.
184 Rather, Norris' 'critical citizens' thesis states that residents may withdraw entirely from
185 participation as a classic abstainer or they will divert their energy and resources into
186 alternative venues such as social movements or protests which they perceive as more genuine
187 than the compromised electoral venue (Norris, 2011). This represents a flight from
188 participation rather than a flight from politics in general. Using this framework to understand
189 the factors associated with diminished voter turnout could be useful in determining whether
190 or not weak civil societies, economic distress, or globalization directly impact voter turnout,
191 because the relationships among these variables do not have a direct influence on voter

turnout. However, in using political trust as a filter, the economy has a detrimental impact on trust through "output" responsiveness, while the perception of elite capture has a corrosive effect on trust with regard to "procedural" fairness. Therefore, the state of electoral hopelessness is the most deterrent to voting. Consequently, in order to understand the crisis in voter participation, it is necessary to identify the crisis in trust in the electoral system itself.

3. ON WANING TRUST AND ERODING VOTES

Trust in political institutions is the foundational public belief in the integrity, competence, and legitimacy of democratic institutions. Once that trust declines, citizens will disengage because they consider democracy to be unresponsive to their needs and too far removed from them. The clearest way to measure this disengagement from the democratic system is through declining electoral participation. The instability in turnout is an indication of an individual's belief that their vote does not matter and is a reflection of electoral hopelessness. This section explores the link between political trust and voter turnout through a comparative lens. This will involve examining Austria, Germany and Hungary as European case studies of unstable levels of political trust and electoral turnout, and then contrasting it with Australia's model of stability under compulsory voting, then finally analysing the different political trust and voter turnout trends across. Ultimately, this section will conclude that effective and stronger institutional design can help sustain political trust in an age of democratic uncertainty.

3.1 Why Europe

Although a big continent, Europe possesses a coherent unit of comparative analysis for the study as the countries have a shared political culture, post-war heritage and the legacy of the Marshall Plan. The countries of Western and Central Europe have a similar political culture founded in liberal democratic values and constitutional governance. Although there are

significant differences, there is a common normative framework on participation and trust in institutions. This common ground makes comparison of voter turnout more interpretable than a comparison between all the continents, where there are strong differences in political structure and culture which can make isolating the relationship of political trust and voter turnout more complicated.

Additionally, these European countries experienced the destruction and reconstruction post-World War II. World War II caused a devastating blow to political stability and institutions across Europe. After the war, countries had to rebuild political institutions and the foundations of political legitimacy. Many of the citizens who experienced authoritarian leaders and totalitarian rule were willing to embrace democratic institutions. Electoral participation in the immediate decades was high; Austria's turnouts were 90% (Gaebler et al., 2020), Germany 85% (Federal Government, 2016) and Hungary at above 90% (Kostadinova, 2003). Most significantly, the Marshall Plan from 1948 to 1952 helped to consolidate the post-war democratic trust across Western Europe. The 13 billion subsidy provided by the plan aided Europe in economic reconstruction, but more importantly, it embedded liberal democratic values and markets within European states (Holm, 2016). Through stabilising the economy and diminishing the appeal of communism, the plan validated the democratic order and generated political trust in democracies in the immediate post-war years. The results were high voter turnout rates during the 1950s and 1960s, yet the present decline from these rates can be attributed to the erosion of this post war trust in institutions, as it is unlikely to be caused by structural design. This historical framing gives the comparative analysis in Europe a baseline to assess the trust and turnout relationship effectively.

3.2 Austria

Austria presents an interesting European model because it is not an extreme example of democratic failure, but rather a bellwether of broader continental trends. It is a stable, prosperous, democratic country; however, constant changes in the country give insight into some of the vulnerabilities within a stable democracy. Located in Central Europe, Austria faces both the integrationist pull of the EU and the disintegrationist impulses related to populism, immigration discussions, and complex coalition politics (Sus, 2016).

Voter turnout in Austrian national elections is declining and is very volatile as seen in Figure 1 (*IFES Election Guide | Country Profile: Austria*, 2024). Turnout was approximately 90% for much of the second half of the 20th century, but for the first time ever, has dropped below 80% at 77.5% in the 2008 elections, then rebounded to 84.3% in the 2017 elections likely due to an extremely polarising campaign, but fell again at the snap elections to only 75.6% in 2019 (Gaebler et al., 2020). The pattern of spikes in turnout seems to occur when there is an apparent major crisis or when there is high-stakes polarisation. But it is difficult for spikes to sustain with an instrumentally motivated electorate who only votes when the stakes are sufficiently acute so as to break through their general disillusionment, but is unlikely due to deep-seated habitual voting or because of deep trust in their institutions.

Year	Voter turnout
1990	86.1%
2008	77.5%
2019	75.6%
2024	77.7%

Figure 1: Austria Voter turnout from 1990 to 2024

The Austrian government's 2007 decision to lower the voting age to 16 has been referred to as an ambitious effort at advancing civic participation among young residents. The idea behind this was to create a stronger habit of voting and encourage civic engagement by

allowing young people to vote as they develop their civic identities (Bronner & Ifkovits, 2019). However, the results have been mixed. While young people have been highly engaged in specific issues like climate, their overall turnout rates remain the lowest of any age group, for example in the United States, only 40% of 18 year olds registered as voters, compared to 80% of those aged 45 and above. This suggests that providing access does not automatically build confidence in participating in elections and that the underlying factors behind low turnout must be addressed, which in turn can be a symptom of low turnout. Thus, this intervention is addressing a symptom without addressing some of the larger issues underlying the cause

Austria's story is not unique. Rather, it plays out against the backdrop of a wider European tale of decline. Surveys, including the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, consistently show falling confidence in parliaments, political parties, and governments across the continent (European Commission, 2026). The EU technocracy's growing distance from citizens, the 2008 financial crisis and austerity measures, the 2015 migration crisis, and longstanding fears of inequality and globalisation have caused this decline of support (Scicluna, 2019). The turnout crisis is directly caused by the erosion of trust. When citizens see institutions as unresponsive or beholden to elites, the cost of voting, in time, effort and emotional burden, begins to exceed the benefits. In this way, abstention becomes a rational choice, a semantic protest, or apathy. The European pattern communicates clearly that an emptying trust reservoir is connected with the electoral participation rate. This creates a vicious cycle where turnout further delegitimises governing mandates and undermines public trust in the system's legitimacy and effectiveness.

281 **3.3 Germany**

Germany is an interesting case because it experienced one of the most fluctuating exercises in building political trust. The establishment of courts, basic laws and federal republics prevented fragmentation and helped Germany's transition. This, coupled with support from the Marshall Plan funds and the Allied powers, enabled Germany to transform from an authoritarian state that rejected democracy to a stable liberal democracy within a short period of time. This institutional change created high voter turnout rates during the 1970s to 1980s as presented in Figure 2, reflecting how citizens have learned to trust democracies and move on from the traumatic past (German Elections: Voter Turnout 2025| Statista, 2025).

Year	Voter turnout
1972	91.1%
1983	89.1%
2002	79.1%
2009	70.8%
2025	82.5%

Figure 2, Germany's voter turnout from 1972 to 2025

As Figure 2 demonstrates, there is a decline in voter turnout from the post-war period to a low of 70.8% in 2009, which can be attributed to the aftermath of the financial crisis and the growing distrust that the government was becoming unresponsive. Although there has been a recovery to 82.5% in 2025, Germany's trends mirror Austria's patterns where there is an underlying distrust and erosion of institutions' credibility, preventing turnouts from returning to the trust people had before in 1972. The disparity seen in the decline compared to initial periods of democracy highlights the discontent citizens have in their governments, with the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland or Alternative for Germany party being a symptom

of this decrease. It represents a form of protest and an outlet for voters who do not agree with the mainstream party or have lost trust.

Germany thus portrays a second-generation trust dynamic: the institutional structure built post World War II successfully rebuilt democratic desire and trust, but this success is not long-lasting. In the new generation of citizens, they do not have the experience or memory of Nazism or war, so the contrast between democracy and its alternatives has weakened. The contrast had been essential in maintaining the foundations of trust that democratic participation had depended on. Without renewed substantive performance and responsiveness to replace this historical motivation and memory, turnouts have trended downwards.

3.4 Hungary

Hungary provides a vivid illustration of what occurs when political trust is not only destroyed but dismantled. Similar to Germany, Hungary's transition to democracy built considerable institutional trust as citizens welcomed democracy after their liberation from communist rule. Voter turnout in the 1990 election demonstrated a genuine civic investment in the system. However, since then, turnouts have been volatile and unstable, not showing the expected strengthening of democratic participation, as seen in Figure 3 (National Election Commission, n.d.).

Year	Voter turnout
1990	65.1%
2002	70.5%
2014	61.8%
2026	70.2%

Figure 3: Hungary's parliamentary elections voter turnout from 1990 to 2022

319 Throughout the years, Hungarian voter turnout has been unstable and repressed. The
 320 rewriting of the constitution, gerrymandering of electoral boundaries following Viktor
 321 Orban's election in 2010, have caused an assault on the dimensions of political trust in the
 322 theoretical framework. When citizens do not trust that elections are fair and just, the basic
 323 motivation for participation is undermined as the outcome is drawn in favour of the desired
 324 party, and votes are controlled by the media. This causes voter turnouts to decline as citizens
 325 are unmotivated to participate in elections when the results have seemingly already been
 326 determined. The limited turnout that exists is not caused by civic enthusiasm and confidence
 327 but by fear. High mobilisation elections indicate partisan alarm, and low mobilisation
 328 elections suggest people have concluded that the electoral and democratic system cannot be
 329 changed through voting. This is the most serious case of erosion of procedural trust where
 330 citizens believe that voting does not cause meaningful change.

331 Hungary's situation also demonstrates a relationship between democratic resilience
 332 and the Marshall Plan. Western European states such as Austria and Germany, which received
 333 and benefited most from the Plan's democratic norms, have democratic institutions with high
 334 resilience, although there has been a decline in trust. Hungary only came into democratic
 335 governance in 1990 and did not benefit from the support that the Marshall Plan provided, and
 336 proved to be more vulnerable and fragile. This fragility shows the necessary depth of
 337 investment in democratic trust required for democracies to be stable and trust to remain
 338 resilient.

339 **3.5 Australia**

340 Australia offers a clear and insightful contrast. Voter turnout in federal elections is
 341 consistently high, remaining around 90 to 95% for decades, seen in Figure 4 (*Participation in*
 342 *the 2025 Federal Election*, 2025). This impressive turnout reflects a strong trust in the

democratic system. Australians generally believe in the system's fairness and legitimacy, which is known as procedural trust.

Year	Voter turnout
1990	95.8%
2013	93.2%
2025	93.1%

Figure 4, Australia's voter turnout from 1990 to 2025

The foundation of this stability is compulsory voting, introduced in 1924. Its success however is not due to a modest fine (approximately \$20 AUD). For many citizens, the fine is financially insignificant. Instead, the law has a sociological and normative effect (Fowler, 2013). First, it encourages a lifelong habit of voting, making it a regular civic duty like paying taxes. Second, over generations, the norm of participating has become deeply embedded, so not voting is seen as unusual and neglectful of civic duty. Third, and most importantly, it changes political incentives. With the entire electorate voting, political parties must develop broad, centrist policies that appeal to all groups, not just their base. This strengthens the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which is the second pillar of political trust.

Consider a thought experiment: if Austria, Germany and Hungary adopted a similar system with a meaningful fine, the result would likely be an immediate, mechanical increase in turnout. However, whether it would restore trust is a more complex question. It would force the parties to appeal to a broader electorate, potentially mitigating polarisation. Yet, if citizens perceived compulsory voting as an authoritarian imposition on a system they already distrusted, it could breed resentment rather than renewed civic commitment. Australia's lesson is thus nuanced: compulsory voting appears most effective as a prophylactic measure.

363 It sustains civic habit and social norms, preventing the trust-turnout spiral from starting in the
 364 first place, rather than serving as a simple cure for an already advanced condition of
 365 disengagement. The intervention works with trust, not despite its absence.

366 Australia's experience shows that compulsory voting works best as a preventive
 367 measure. It helps maintain civic habits and social norms, stopping the decline of trust and
 368 turnout before it starts rather than acting as a simple remedy for a serious problem of
 369 disengagement. This approach interacts with trust rather than ignoring its absence. Over
 370 generations, the norm of 'showing up' has become deeply rooted; not voting feels unusual and
 371 irresponsible. Most importantly, it changes political incentives. Knowing that everyone will
 372 vote, political parties must create broad, centrist policies and engage all groups, not just their
 373 core supporters. This enhances the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which
 374 is crucial for building political trust.

375 3.6 Summary

376 Examining Europe's changing turnout and Australia's steady results, demonstrates
 377 that political trust and voter turnout have a mutually reinforcing relationship. However, this
 378 relationship is shaped by political culture and institutional design. Austria illustrates that
 379 when trust diminishes, turnout becomes unpredictable which is a reflection of temporary
 380 crises rather than a solid foundation of democracy. Germany demonstrates that trust building
 381 exercises can be non-sustaining across generations. Hungary highlights the extremity where
 382 lost in trust of the credibility and legitimacy of voting systems can transform participation to
 383 partisan mobilisation. Europe's broader challenges serve as a warning about this gradual
 384 decline. In contrast, Australia provides a powerful, practical lesson; simply the requirement to
 385 vote can cultivate a strong civic habit that protects the political system from the serious
 386 erosion of trust, making participation the norm rather than a calculated choice. In all

instances, some level of trust is essential. Democracies worried about declining trust should not just try to boost turnout with penalties; the deeper goal should be to create a responsive, legitimate, and effective political environment that encourages citizens to participate.

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391

4. BEYOND POLITICAL TRUST

The previous section showed how political trust connects citizens to the electoral process. When trust in government declines, the motivation to vote often drops as well. This is evident from the evidence in Austria, Germany, Hungary, and beyond. However, looking solely at political trust does not tell the whole story. A direct loss of faith in political institutions is clearly significant, but broader structural changes in society might also play a role. These changes can lead citizens to feel less dependent on their national government, making them less willing to participate in national elections, even if they do not have overly negative views of politicians or institutions. The question is whether these structural forces provide separate reasons for declining voter turnout or if they function through the same trust mechanism already identified.

Three interconnected phenomena are especially important in this context: globalization, the weakening of national boundaries, and the increasing reliance on markets and corporations to provide goods and services that were once the responsibility of the state. These forces do not replace political trust as the main explanatory factor. Instead, they work alongside it as additional contributors that guide citizens toward the same outcome, lowering turnout through the feelings of detachment and disincentive discussed earlier. This section will explore how these additional phenomena collectively reduce political trust and lessen the perceived importance of national elections, which contributes to lower electoral participation.

4.1 Globalisation and the Fragmentation of National Identity

411 The first factor is globalization, which has changed how people view their identity
412 and their connection to their nation. In the past, the average person in a democratic country
413 was more likely to identify with one national identity. They were born, educated, employed,
414 and expected to live within the borders of a single country. This sense of belonging to a
415 national community created a duty; voting was not just a right but an obligation to fellow
416 citizens and the nation's future. Globalization has made this picture much more complex
417 (Mahoney, 2022).

418 Increased mobility means that more people now hold dual or multiple citizenships.
419 They may be born in one country, educated in another, and work in a third, with family
420 members spread across various continents. For these individuals, figuring out where they
421 truly belong can be complicated. This mix of identities can weaken the sense of responsibility
422 toward any single national political system. If one's future is not tied exclusively to a specific
423 country, the outcome of that country's election may seem less personally important. Besides
424 the issue of multiple citizenships, globalization has also encouraged the growth of
425 transnational identities. (Marko Mrakovčić et al., 2020) An environmental activist may feel a
426 stronger connection with activists in other countries than with neighbors who do not share
427 their concerns. A tech professional might feel more aligned with a global industry network
428 than with political discussions in their home country. These transnational identities are real
429 and significant, but they do not easily lead to electoral participation.

430 Immigration and demographic change have also played a role. In many developed
431 democracies, the population is now more diverse than ever before. This diversity enriches
432 society in many ways, but it can complicate the relationship between citizenship and political
433 participation. First-generation immigrants may face barriers to voting, even after gaining
434 citizenship, such as not being familiar with the issues, candidates, or voting process, or

435 coming from countries where elections were not meaningful or where political participation
 436 posed real dangers (Pratsinakis, 2017). More fundamentally, they may not yet feel a full sense
 437 of belonging to their new country. The feeling of being an outsider, even a permanent one,
 438 does not easily translate into the sense of civic duty that drives people to vote. The processes
 439 of globalization have created a world where a singular, unquestioned national identity is no
 440 longer the common experience it once was, weakening the sense of obligation to participate
 441 in the political life of any one nation.

442 **4.2 Corporate Power and the Capture of Democratic Institutions**

443 The second factor is the growing concentration of economic power among large
 444 corporations and the influence these companies have on politics. Increased market
 445 concentration accounts for about one-quarter of the recent decline in democracy worldwide
 446 (OECD, 2024). Large, profitable firms can turn their economic strength into political sway
 447 through campaign contributions, lobbying, and other forms of political involvement that
 448 ordinary citizens cannot access.

449 This situation creates a widespread belief that the political system favors wealthy
 450 interests, undermining the fairness of political trust identified in the theoretical framework. In
 451 the United States, for instance, a small group of wealthy donors makes up a significant
 452 portion of total election spending (Albert & Raja, 2020). Polls consistently show that many
 453 Americans feel donors have too much sway over Congress, while regular citizens have too
 454 little (Beshay, 2023). This view is not limited to the United States; citizens in many
 455 developed democracies are increasingly skeptical of the relationship between business and
 456 government. When people believe that the economy's rules benefit corporate interests over
 457 the public, faith in the political system's fairness naturally declines. Citizens who think that
 458 elections are mostly decided by the highest bidder have little motivation to take part. Their

distrust often targets the system itself rather than individual politicians, as they see it as fundamentally compromised.

Besides directly influencing policy, corporations are also stepping into roles typically held by the government. They are taking positions on social issues, enhancing healthcare benefits, and providing social support to employees. While these actions may be well-intentioned, they can lower expectations for government responsibilities. This distances citizens from political life and strengthens the belief that voting is not the best way to create meaningful change. This represents a decline in output responsiveness: if the private sector provides social benefits instead of elected officials, people's motivation to vote to influence public services goes down.

4.3 The Erosion of National Boundaries

The third factor involves the decreasing importance of national borders as globalization deepens and corporate power rises (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). For much of the twentieth century, the nation-state was the main unit of political, economic, and cultural life (Held, 1989). Elections mattered because governments controlled power within clearly defined areas. Today, the sense of a bounded community has weakened. Capital flows freely across borders. Multinational media companies increasingly shape culture instead of national institutions. Even the experience of place has changed, as cities and regions connect more to global networks than to their own surrounding areas.

When national identity weakens, and people no longer see the nation-state as the natural framework for economic and social life, participating in a national election can seem less meaningful (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). Citizens may feel a stronger connection to their region, profession, or transnational networks than to their fellow citizens. They might view

global corporations as the main agents of change, not governments. In this situation, electoral politics can seem outdated, a remnant from a time when the nation-state truly mattered.

4.4 Summary: Ancillary Factors and the Trust Mechanism

In summary, the decline in voter turnout is not just about a loss of faith in government. It also stems from structural changes that have made the nation-state seem less relevant. Globalization has limited the policy choices available to national governments, forcing them to respond to external market pressures rather than the will of the people. The concentration of corporate power has created a perception that the political system serves wealthy interests. Corporations have taken on roles traditionally held by the state. Combined with the erosion of national boundaries, these factors have made national elections feel less significant to many citizens.

These elements do not function independently of political trust. Instead, they alter the environment in which political trust develops. Citizens do not simply think the government is performing poorly; they increasingly see it as unable to succeed because of global capital constraints, corporate agendas, or the redundancy of its traditional roles. This form of distrust comes from a belief that the government is ineffective and outdated—a collapse in output responsiveness shaped by structural conditions. In this way, globalization and corporate power do not compete with political trust; they are key drivers of its decline. Their overall impact on voter turnout goes through the same trust mechanism that this paper emphasizes.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper aims to address a seemingly simple question: among the numerous factors that scholars propose to explain declining voter turnout in modern democracies, which is the most significant? A comparative analysis of Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, along

505 with a theoretical exploration of globalization, corporate power, and the decline of national
506 identity, points to a clear answer: political trust. Trust in institutions is not just one factor
507 among many. It is the foundational element through which all other factors work—the lens
508 that shapes whether economic conditions, civic infrastructure, or structural changes result in
509 participation or abstention.

510 The findings can be summarized as follows. The literature review and theoretical
511 framework show that existing voter turnout models—socio-economic and
512 institutional—explain capacity and opportunity but fail to capture the will to participate. This
513 willingness, the paper argues, is mainly influenced by political trust, defined as citizens'
514 belief in the fairness of the electoral process and the responsiveness of the resulting
515 governments. The comparative case studies then tested this framework empirically. Austria
516 showed that a loss of institutional trust leads to erratic turnout instead of stable civic
517 participation. It also demonstrated that measures like lowering the voting age fail if the
518 underlying trust issues remain unaddressed. Germany contends that post war trust building
519 can be non-sustaining when there is a lack of renewed institutional performance. Hungary
520 offers that the dismantling of procedural trust through institutional capture changes electoral
521 participation. It turns participation into a tool for partisan mobilization instead of creating
522 democratic confidence. Australia showed the opposite: that institutional design can create
523 conditions for trust—by normalizing participation across the electorate and encouraging
524 parties to be responsive—thus preventing the trust-turnout spiral from starting. Finally,
525 Section 4 illustrates that the structural forces of globalization, corporate power, and
526 diminishing national boundaries are not competing explanations for the turnout crisis.
527 Instead, they are significant contributors to the erosion of institutional trust, confirming that
528 trust is the central factor through which structural conditions influence individual political
529 behavior.

This paper has two notable limitations, which deserve acknowledgement, along with reasons why its main findings remain compelling. The first limitation is the lack of detailed longitudinal quantitative data. A more thorough study would systematically use panel datasets like the World Values Survey, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and European Social Survey to connect trust scores with turnout rates across a broad, representative sample of democracies over time. This paper mainly relies on qualitative and structural comparisons. However, this method suits an exploratory, theory-building endeavor rather than a hypothesis-testing approach. The consistency of the trust variable in diverse contexts like Austria, Australia, Germany, and Hungary strongly indicates it captures a real causal mechanism rather than just a contextual artifact—robustness that purely quantitative studies, which may struggle to reflect the qualitative nature of trust across different political systems, cannot easily match. The second limitation concerns the possibility of reverse causation. The assertion that declining trust leads to lower turnout faces a valid counter-argument: declining turnout may also damage trust by creating governments with weak mandates and questionable legitimacy, which in turn depresses future participation. This circularity exists, yet it does not weaken the argument; instead, it enhances it. The negative cycle shown in Europe's case supports trust's importance. Conversely, the Australian case serves as a near-natural experiment in the opposite direction—compulsory voting interrupts the downward trend by ensuring widespread participation regardless of temporary fluctuations in trust. This stabilizes the conditions under which trust is built. This imbalance supports the view that trust is the initial factor, even if the relationship is ultimately cyclical.

Several avenues for future research arise from these findings. First, scholars should look into the specific ways that certain institutional actions interact with trust to either maintain or restore participation. Citizens' assemblies, deliberative mini-publics, ranked-choice voting, and participatory budgeting are all innovations that aim to make

democratic processes seem more legitimate and responsive. Their long-term effects on trust, and how that trust affects turnout, need thorough investigation. Second, the growing research on digital media and political communication includes a less-explored area. Social media platforms are now significant players in shaping political trust. They can both engage new participants and deepen cynicism through the algorithmic spread of distrust and outrage. It is crucial to understand how information environments influence the trust-turnout link in today's digital world. Third, the connection between corporate influence and democratic participation needs more focused theoretical and empirical study. If rising market concentration accounts for a quarter of the global decline in democracy, as the evidence suggests, then managing private economic power also presents a challenge for democratic participation—something the voter turnout research has yet to fully address.

Democracy has never been a self-sustaining system. It relies on the belief that ordinary people will return to vote, giving their trust to imperfect institutions. When that belief falters—when citizens view their vote as merely a pointless gesture in a rigged system—democracy doesn't fail dramatically. It gradually erodes, mandate by mandate, election by election. The turnout crisis, in this context, isn't just about civic engagement; it's a crisis of faith. Once lost, restoring faith is incredibly challenging.

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Trust as the Cornerstone of Democracy:

Political Trust, Voter Turnout, and Democratic Legitimacy in a Comparative European Perspective

Response to Editors

S.No	Issue	Addressal
1.	Unit of analysis; the countries chosen are too broad; the focus needs to be narrowed.	The countries have now been narrowed to focus only on Europe and Australia, specifically mentioning Austria, Hungary, and Germany. Singapore and other mentions of countries in Asia have been removed. For changes in the introduction, see the highlighted paragraph from pages 2 to 3. For the justification for focusing on Europe, see the highlighted paragraphs on pages 9-10. For additions to the analysis of the mentioned countries, see the highlighted paragraphs from pages 12 to 15. For changes to the conclusion, see the highlighted paragraphs on page 23.
2.	Methodological clarity; there needs to be a clear method of the research stated and outlined.	There is now an added method sub-section in the introduction. For changes, see the highlighted paragraphs on page 5.
3.	Presentation and synthesis of findings; findings need to be presented in a more analytical and constructive way.	There are now tables added to present data regarding voter turnouts more clearly and empirically. For additions of tables, see the highlighted tables from page 11 to 15.

Reviewer Report: Trust as the Cornerstone of Democracy: Political Trust, Voter Turnout, and Democratic Legitimacy in a Comparative European Perspective

This is an interesting and important topic. The author has done well to interrogate the question of trust in politics in relation to voter turnout in modern democracies. On a positive note, the methodology and justification for the selected case studies: Austria, Germany, Hungary, and Australia are sound, and the author effectively highlights the generalisability of these cases. The author has argued persuasively that the different levels and patterns of electoral participation in these democracies can be linked to varying levels of political trust. The key takeaway the author consistently demonstrates throughout the paper is that political trust is an important variable determining whether citizens of a particular state believe that participation in elections is meaningful and important to them.

The paper makes some convincing points, such as the idea that “when citizens do not trust that elections are fair and just, the basic motivation for participation is undermined...” It is also important to note that the literature review is sound, and the author has engaged well with key scholars in the field. Even more impressive is the author’s use of a comparative approach to demonstrate how trust operates across different contexts.

Areas of revision:

Although the arguments are convincing, other sections of the paper require serious intervention:

1. The paper needs some serious editing. The grammar and sentence construction need some serious thought and work. The paper would benefit from language editing. Coupled with this, the essay makes some bold claims (for example, that access to information has become universal – the author would benefit from reading some places in the world where this is not the case).
2. The section on Hungary, for example, treats it as a democracy, even though it is common knowledge that Viktor Orbán ruled it as a dictator.
3. Sometimes I was left thinking that the role of political trust has been overstated. There is no doubt that political trust is important, but the author could benefit by addressing other variables rather than dismissing them quickly. Inasmuch as other factors, such as globalisation, corporate power, national boundaries, and national identity, are discussed, the analysis has not been demonstrated empirically.
4. Although the methodology is sound, as highlighted above, and the author has noted the absence of extensive quantitative evidence, the paper presents strong causal claims. For example, on p. 2, line 40, the author argues that political trust is the ‘primary overarching phenomenon’ that determines voter turnout in democracies, but falls short of providing substantive evidence to support these claims. It would have been much more convincing if such statements were validated by data from sources such as Eurobarometer. As such, the author would benefit from consulting some of these sources.
5. In the section on Austria, youth voter turnout in the United States is used to substantiate claims about Austria’s voting-age reforms. This raises concerns about generalisability, as evidence from a different political context should be used with caution.

6. Lastly, the sources used require some careful review. There are some minor inconsistencies that should be addressed. For example, Norris is sometimes spelt as Noris.

Final Recommendation:

Revise and resubmit

Convergence Journal Review of

“Trust as the Cornerstone of Democracy”

What an interesting paper! I recommend **revise and resubmit**. The article has several strengths – it demonstrates some effort at originality, the topic is interesting, the writing and structure of the paper are relatively clear and coherent, and research is used at an appropriate level for a high school project. The writing is generally polished and mostly free of major errors.

One strength of the paper is its identification of a puzzle. It notices that voter turnout may be low in countries with institutional characteristics that might be thought of as facilitating higher voter turnout. A central question of the paper is what affects voter turnout, and part of this paper's work is examining the role of political trust on voter turnout. Another strength is the identification of a research question, elaboration of a theory and an attempt to systematically engage is comparison to infer causal conclusions. The independent variable of interest is the concept of public trust, while the dependent variable of interest is voter turnout. A literature review goes over important work relevant to the paper.

There are opportunities to consider for improving the paper. Although the empirical data on voter turnout across the four cases is interesting, more work could be done on the rationale behind the decision to select the years that were selected. Why 1990, 2013 and 2025 are selected for Australia but other years are selected for other countries might be stated more clearly. In addition, there are occasions where assertions are made but the empirical data marshalled is unclear and there aren't citations for transparency. For example, Hungary is used as a case of eroding public trust, yet the recent election that ousted him from the Prime Ministership had one of the highest levels of voter turnout in the four years selected.

Section 4 might be either incorporated briefly into the theory build or literature review or even condensed or removed. The main focus of the paper seems to be on analyzing political trust's effect on voter turnout. Going off to other variables that then aren't empirically tested seems to distract from the main goal of the paper. Just something to consider.

There are opportunities where another once over for polish, grammar and error can improve the paper. For example, the section heading on Page 5 is missing what looks like should be a “2” in front of the section label “Literature Review and Theoretical Framework” Also in Lines 102 – 104 on Page 5, there is a sentence: “The review encompasses works in comparative politics, social and systems theory, coupled with empirical studies.” It might improve the paper to reword it to be more grammatically smooth. For example, instead of a third comma, perhaps the conjunction “and”.

Overall, very nice job. Keep up the interesting political research!

Trust as the Cornerstone of Democracy:

Political Trust, Voter Turnout, and Democratic Legitimacy in a Comparative European Perspective

ABSTRACT

Voter turnout is an essential and volatile element of democracy, a representation of the trust and relationship that citizens have with their government. There are many factors that can impact the desire of citizens to vote, and overall, there has been a declining trend in political participation. This research explores the reason for this, positing that the erosion of political and social trust is the primary driver behind this trend. While traditional models focus on socio-economic resources or institutional rules, this paper argues that trust acts as the central variable that determines whether a citizen feels their vote possesses any genuine efficacy. The research addresses a gap in the literature, which often examines these factors in isolation rather than comparatively, and responds to the current global ‘trust recession’ and its implications for democratic stability. The essay will use a range of countries globally as case studies, identifying the trend of declining voter turnout across the world and analysing the difference between each country’s institutions and their impact on voter turnout. The investigation also addresses contemporary structural challenges, including globalisation, corporate capture, and the fragmentation of national identity. Rather than offering alternative explanations for low turnout, the paper finds that these forces exert their influence by making national governments appear obsolete or unresponsive, thus further corroding institutional faith. The study concludes that the modern turnout crisis is fundamentally a “crisis of faith”. It suggests that engineering higher participation through mechanical means is insufficient; rather, democratic vitality depends on restoring the belief that political institutions are both legitimate and capable of serving the public good.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a notable paradox has emerged within the world's democracies: despite the fact that the tools for political participation have proliferated and access to information has become mainly widespread, a fundamental act of citizenship, voting, has become less active. From the United States to European states, the trend of voter disengagement is a global phenomenon. For instance, in the 2022 French legislative elections, turnout fell to a record low (France: Voter Turnout in the Legislative Elections, 2024). There are also recent democracies facing similar issues: the 11.2% turnout in Tunisia's 2022 election demonstrated a deep-seated political disengagement (Tunisia Assembly of People's Representatives December 2022 Election, 2022). Rather than representing a short-lived issue, the decline signifies a creeping crisis of democratic legitimacy that is part of a challenge to democracies worldwide.

In this paper, I will argue that although factors such as civil society, economic conditions, and globalisation are substantial, the primary overarching phenomenon that determines voter turnouts in democracies—and, accordingly, contributes to the recent downturns—is political trust. This research is important, given the current global crisis of trust and its potential consequences for democratic stability; it adds to current research that examines these factors in isolation rather than comparatively, under a broader category such as political trust. To ground this research, the paper will focus on a broad comparative analysis of cases from Europe and Oceania. Within Europe, the essay will focus on Austria, Hungary and Germany. Austria serves as an example of declining trust and turnout to demonstrate a great trend in Europe. Germany is the largest democracy in Europe and faces post-war reconstruction populist pressure. Hungary illustrates the democratic backsliding driven by the erosion of institutional trust, even though its status as a fully consolidated

democracy is itself contested for part of the period examined.¹ In contrast, Australia offers a model of stable engagement through an institutional framework that promotes voter participation. Ultimately, the conclusion posits that trust is an essential precondition, as without it, other factors fail to sustain consistent electoral participation. Therefore, restoring trust is important to the vitality of democratic societies.

The erosion of voter turnout poses a significant statistical issue and a serious threat to the democratic health and equity of our society. Low and declining voter turnout can lead toward a concentration of political power in mobilised and usually more affluent sections of the populace, which skews the outcomes of policy decisions and, therefore, weakens the principle of representation. This loss of legitimacy for governments elected through political processes also increases the likelihood of creating instability in the political system by widening the divide between a government and its electorate. Therefore, understanding the root causes of the erosion of voter turnout is critical to identifying the crisis currently faced by democratic systems.

This investigation centres on political and social trust as a multidimensional concept. Political trust refers to citizens' confidence in the impartiality, efficiency, and integrity of core institutions such as the government, parliament, the electoral commission, and the legal system (Vitale, 2018). Social trust is characterised as interpersonal trust that includes perceptions of honesty, the capacity to work together, and the existence of common social norms among other citizens (Kirby, 2025). The critical hypothesis is that these forms of trust

¹ The V-Dem Institute's 2022 Democracy Report classified Hungary as an 'electoral autocracy' and Freedom House rates it only 'Partly Free' making it the first EU member state to receive that designation (V-Dem Institute, 2022; Freedom House, 2024). Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the Fidesz party rewrote the constitution, redraw electoral districts, and held control over the courts and media (Democratic Erosion Project, 2025). This development leads Hungary to be included in the analysis where it is the only case here that the erosion of political trust coincides with an erosion of procedural fairness, thus allowing for testing the connection between political trust and turnout even when procedural fairness is undermined. Hungary also did not receive Marshall Plan aid, deeming it a contrasting perspective to Austria and Germany.

78 will reduce perceived 'costs' of voting. If you believe your vote will be counted fairly and that
79 you are part of a collective citizenry, you will be more likely to vote. Without this underlying
80 basis, people will view their votes as irrelevant regardless of the particular circumstances.

81 The case studies selected for this paper are appropriate cases as they span a range of
82 institutional settings, which makes them well-suited, though not completely conclusive, for
83 isolating the effect of trust from other potential confounding variables. Europe is chosen for
84 its shared political and historical background and post-war democratic heritage, in particular,
85 the rebuilding of democracy under the Marshall Plan, with the exception of Hungary.
86 Australia provides a contrasting perspective to this case but still works alongside as it shares
87 a similar Western heritage to countries in Europe. The essay focuses on the countries Austria,
88 Germany and Hungary and Australia. They are developed, stable democracies with
89 established civil societies, yet they diverge sharply in turnout stability, which is due to
90 differences in institutional design and the nature of the trust created through these institutions.
91 Crucially, while the analysis is focused on these specific cases, the evidence from the
92 example cases refers to a global trend: when people lose faith in the institutions that govern
93 them, the will to participate in the democratic process diminishes.

94 The essay is structured in four sections. First, it reviews the established literature on
95 voter turnout and develops a theoretical rationale for political trust as the primary mediating
96 variable influencing turnout rates. Second, it uses comparative empirical analysis through
97 evidence from Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, to test the relative explanatory
98 strength of trust. Third, it examines additional structural forces, globalisation, corporate
99 power, and the erosion of national boundaries and shows that they contribute to the decline of
100 trust in politics. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the findings, arguing that while economic
101 deprivation or weak civic networks can depress turnout, their impact is conditional on a

102 bedrock of trust, the erosion of which presents one of the most fundamental challenges to
103 electoral democracy.

104 **1.1 Methodology**

105 The research uses a three-pronged qualitative and analytical approach to construct a
106 theoretically grounded and empirically supported argument. The first part is the background
107 readings and literature analysis. A review of the existing literature on voter turnout was
108 conducted, focusing on peer-reviewed articles. The main databases consulted were JSTOR,
109 Google Scholar, and SSRN using search terms related to voter turnout and political trust.
110 Sources were selected based on their relevance to the field and credibility. The review will
111 include and cite from other works in comparative politics, social and systems theory and
112 empirical studies. The second part analyses empirical data on voter turnout and trends
113 spanning across multiple years. The figures are compiled from databases such as
114 cross-national datasets published by Statista and national election commission reports.
115 Longitudinal data is used to track changes over time, and comparative tables are used to
116 present data and trends clearly that support the argument.

117 The year chosen for the voter turnout present in the Figures 104 were chosen
118 purposely rather than at even intervals. The starting year for each country marks the baseline
119 after democratic consolidation and stability, the middle year represents a period of change
120 and shock, while the final year reflects the most recent results for the elections available. The
121 selection process was applied across Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, thus while
122 not identical, the years are comparable.

123 This ensures that the essay's claims will be grounded in both theory and factual
124 evidence as well. The third part is the development of a theory of political trust as the primary
125 link of the relationship between structural conditions and individual electoral behaviour. This

126 essay suggests that trust is the prerequisite condition that is necessary for individuals to
127 choose to participate in election voting, contributing to the trend of voter turnout. This
128 theoretical framework will be fleshed out in section 2 and analysed comparatively between
129 different countries in sections 3 and 4. The methodology is mainly qualitative and
130 analysis-based, which correlates trust with turnout and how it operates through different
131 national contexts.

132 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

133 This literature review and theoretical framework will involve two related areas of
134 scholarship: the extensive literature on the determinants of voter turnout and the evolving
135 scholarship on political trust and social capital. The prior research has traditionally prioritised
136 socio-economic models and institutional models of voting, while the latter treats trust as a
137 background variable. This paper presents an argument for the importance of elector-focused
138 political trust as the most significant proximate factor mediating the effects of more general,
139 structural variables—civil society, economic conditions, and globalisation—on turnout in
140 contemporary democracies. The existing studies on voter participation have generally
141 followed two paths. The first path follows the rational choice and socioeconomic models,
142 which views voting as a cost-benefit calculation that is influenced by the availability of
143 resources (Blais et al., 2019). Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady's
144 'Civic Voluntarism Model' remains foundational, arguing that turnout is a function of
145 resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks (Verba et al., 1995). This
146 explains correlations between higher turnout and factors like education and income. The
147 second path, which is represented by the work of scholars including Arend Lijphart and Mark
148 Franklin, offers an institutionalist perspective of the voter turnout with specific reference to
149 the 'rules of the game', identifying how facilitative laws (Franklin, 2004), including

150 proportional representation, automatic voter registration, and weekend voting, result in lower
151 costs of voting and greater participation in elections (Lijphart, 1997). However, a growing
152 body of work identifies a puzzle: even in democracies with facilitative institutions and rising
153 education levels, turnout is often stagnant or declining. This leads to the conclusion that an
154 independent factor is contributing to low turnout rates, which cannot be accounted for by
155 resources or through the application of regulations. Scholars like Pippa Norris point to a shift
156 from 'mobilising' citizens to 'critical' citizens, who have become distrustful of the system,
157 resulting in their energy being diverted towards alternative forms of civic engagement (Norris,
158 2011).

159 This paper contends that while socio-economic models explain capacity and
160 institutional models explain opportunity, they do not adequately explain an individual's will
161 to participate in the electoral process. That will is fundamentally shaped by political trust. It
162 serves as the vehicle through which broader structural conditions impact an individual's
163 decision to vote.

164 Political trust is a complex, multi-dimensional concept. Different scholars use
165 different approaches to create a generalised understanding of this phenomenon. David
166 Easton's systems theory creates a distinction between diffuse support, a generalised
167 connection to the democratic regime as a whole, and specific support for leaders or policies
168 (Easton, 2010). Marc Hetherington makes an important distinction between confidence in
169 institutions and confidence in current officeholders, claiming that a lack of relative
170 confidence in institutions is a more corrosive factor to civic engagement than a lack of
171 confidence in politicians (Hetherington, 1998). Robert Putnam's work on social capital links
172 interpersonal trust to political trust, but the causal relationship is still a point of contention
173 regarding whether civic engagement helps to develop trust, or if pre-existing trust is

174 necessary for civic engagement (Boix & Posner, 1996). Furthermore, Ronald Inglehart
175 provides a cultural perspective that associates high levels of trust with post-materialist and
176 safe societies (Inglehart, 1988). Yet critical theorists such as Claus Offe question whether
177 trust can be extended beyond the relationship between individuals to abstract forms of
178 political authority where citizens have limited means to monitor the actions of those
179 authorities (Offe, 1999). These nuances reveal that 'low political trust' can mean many things:
180 tension with a ruling party, cynicism about any politicians, or a widespread view that the
181 political system has been rigged or is not responsive. The most damaging variation to turnout
182 is mistrust of the system itself. Therefore this paper focuses on developing a focused
183 conceptualization of political trust as it relates specifically to the electoral process and its
184 expected fairness. The concept builds upon the perspective articulated by Adrian Leftwich —
185 that politics is the main mechanism by which society arrives at collective decisions regarding
186 the distribution of resources and values (Leftwich, 1993). When citizens lose confidence in
187 this primary function, the incentive to participate in elections diminishes.

188 Here, political trust is defined as the citizen's eroding or sustained belief in the
189 fairness, integrity, and functional efficacy of the electoral process and the key institutions that
190 animate it. It encompasses two critical dimensions. First, belief in procedural fairness: the
191 conviction that elections are free from manipulation and that all major interests have a
192 roughly equal opportunity to compete for power. Second, belief in output responsiveness: the
193 expectation that the government emerging from this process will function effectively and be
194 responsive to public will. Erosion of this trust breeds a specific sense of electoral
195 hopelessness; this hopelessness is the direct antagonist of voter turnout.

196 Electoral hopelessness does not automatically mean political apathy in all domains.
197 Rather, Norris' 'critical citizens' thesis states that residents may withdraw entirely from

198 participation as a classic abstainer or they will divert their energy and resources into
199 alternative venues such as social movements or protests which they perceive as more genuine
200 than the compromised electoral venue (Norris, 2011). This represents a flight from
201 participation rather than a flight from politics in general. Using this framework to understand
202 the factors associated with diminished voter turnout could be useful in determining whether
203 or not weak civil societies, economic distress, or globalization directly impact voter turnout,
204 because the relationships among these variables do not have a direct influence on voter
205 turnout. However, in using political trust as a filter, the economy has a detrimental impact on
206 trust through "output" responsiveness, while the perception of elite capture has a corrosive
207 effect on trust with regard to "procedural" fairness. Therefore, the state of electoral
208 hopelessness is the most deterrent to voting. Consequently, in order to understand the crisis in
209 voter participation, it is necessary to identify the crisis in trust in the electoral system itself.

210 **3. ON WANING TRUST AND ERODING VOTES**

211 Trust in political institutions is the foundational public belief in the integrity,
212 competence, and legitimacy of democratic institutions. Once that trust declines, citizens will
213 disengage because they consider democracy to be unresponsive to their needs and too far
214 removed from them. The clearest way to measure this disengagement from the democratic
215 system is through declining electoral participation. The instability in turnout is an indication
216 of an individual's belief that their vote does not matter and is a reflection of electoral
217 hopelessness. This section explores the link between political trust and voter turnout through
218 a comparative lens. This will involve examining Austria, Germany and Hungary as European
219 case studies of unstable levels of political trust and electoral turnout, and then contrasting it
220 with Australia's model of stability under compulsory voting, then finally analysing the
221 different political trust and voter turnout trends across. Ultimately, this section will conclude

that effective and stronger institutional design can help sustain political trust in an age of democratic uncertainty.

3.1 Why Europe

Although a big continent, Europe possesses a coherent unit of comparative analysis for the study as the countries have a shared political culture, post-war heritage and the legacy of the Marshall Plan. The countries of Western and Central Europe have a similar political culture founded in liberal democratic values and constitutional governance. Although there are significant differences, there is a common normative framework on participation and trust in institutions. This common ground makes comparison of voter turnout more interpretable than a comparison between all the continents, where there are strong differences in political structure and culture which can make isolating the relationship of political trust and voter turnout more complicated. It is worth noting that Hungary did not receive the assistance of the Marshall Plan, as it fell under Soviet influence in 1948, providing a point of contrast with Austria and Germany.

Additionally, these European countries experienced the destruction and reconstruction post-World War II. World War II caused a devastating blow to political stability and institutions across Europe. After the war, countries had to rebuild political institutions and the foundations of political legitimacy. Many of the citizens who experienced authoritarian leaders and totalitarian rule were willing to embrace democratic institutions. Electoral participation in the immediate decades was high; Austria's turnouts were 90% (Gaebler et al., 2020), Germany 85% (Federal Government, 2016) and Hungary at above 90% (Kostadinova, 2003). Most significantly, the Marshall Plan from 1948 to 1952 helped to consolidate the post-war democratic trust across Western Europe. The 13 billion subsidy provided by the plan aided Europe in economic reconstruction, but more importantly, it embedded liberal

democratic values and markets within European states (Holm, 2016). Through stabilising the economy and diminishing the appeal of communism, the plan validated the democratic order and generated political trust in democracies in the immediate post-war years. The results were high voter turnout rates during the 1950s and 1960s, yet the present decline from these rates can be attributed to the erosion of this post war trust in institutions, as it is unlikely to be caused by structural design. This historical framing gives the comparative analysis in Europe a baseline to assess the trust and turnout relationship effectively.

3.2 Austria

Austria presents an interesting European model because it is not an extreme example of democratic failure, but rather a bellwether of broader continental trends. It is a stable, prosperous, democratic country; however, constant changes in the country give insight into some of the vulnerabilities within a stable democracy. Located in Central Europe, Austria faces both the integrationist pull of the EU and the disintegrations impulses related to populism, immigration discussions, and complex coalition politics (Sus, 2016).

Voter turnout in Austrian national elections is declining and is very volatile as seen in Figure 1 (*IFES Election Guide | Country Profile: Austria*, 2024). Turnout was approximately 90% for much of the second half of the 20th century, but for the first time ever, has dropped below 80% at 77.5% in the 2008 elections, then rebounded to 84.3% in the 2017 elections likely due to an extremely polarising campaign, but fell again at the snap elections to only 75.6% in 2019 (Gaebler et al., 2020). The pattern of spikes in turnout seems to occur when there is an apparent major crisis or when there is high-stakes polarisation. But it is difficult for spikes to sustain with an instrumentally motivated electorate who only votes when the stakes are sufficiently acute so as to break through their general disillusionment, but is unlikely due to deep-seated habitual voting or because of deep trust in their institutions.

Year	Voter turnout
1990	86.1%
2008	77.5%
2019	75.6%
2024	77.7%

Figure 1: Austria Voter turnout from 1990 to 2024

The Austrian government's 2007 decision to lower the voting age to 16 has been referred to as an ambitious effort at advancing civic participation among young residents. The idea behind this was to create a stronger habit of voting and encourage civic engagement by allowing young people to vote as they develop their civic identities (Bronner & Ifkovits, 2019). However, the results have been mixed. At the first election where 16 year olds could vote in 2008, their voter turnout matched the national average at 88% (Wagner et al., 2016; Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2014). Yet in 2013, this turnout decreased to 63% (Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2014). Spotting this pattern in another context, in the United States, only 40% of 18 year olds registered as voters, compared to 80% of those aged 45 and above, implying that the pattern of fluctuations in young voter turnout is not unique to Austria. This suggests that providing access such as lowering the voting age does not automatically build confidence in participating in elections and that the underlying factors behind low turnout must be addressed, which in turn can be a symptom of low turnout. This pattern exposes how expanding voting accessibility does not automatically build the trust that sustains participation once initial novelty fades. Thus, this intervention is addressing a symptom without confronting some of the larger issues underlying the cause.

Austria's story is not unique. Rather, it plays out against the backdrop of a wider European tale of decline. Surveys, including the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, consistently show falling confidence in parliaments, political parties, and

governments across the continent (European Commission, 2026). The 2024 Eurobarometer indicated a 67% of average satisfaction in national governments and parliaments in the EU, a fall of 3%, compared to the previously recorded 70% in Autumn 2023 (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2024). Declines were seen sharpest in the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland and Finland. The EU technocracy's growing distance from citizens, the 2008 financial crisis and austerity measures, the 2015 migration crisis, and longstanding fears of inequality and globalisation have contributed to this decline in support (Scicluna, 2019). The turnout crisis is directly caused by the erosion of trust. When citizens see institutions as unresponsive or beholden to elites, the cost of voting, in time, effort and emotional burden, begins to exceed the benefits. In this way, abstention becomes a rational choice, a semantic protest, or apathy. The European pattern communicates clearly that an emptying trust reservoir is connected with the electoral participation rate. This creates a vicious cycle where turnout further delegitimises governing mandates and undermines public trust in the system's legitimacy and effectiveness.

3.3 Germany

Germany is an interesting case because it experienced one of the most fluctuating exercises in building political trust. The establishment of courts, basic laws and federal republics prevented fragmentation and helped Germany's transition. This, coupled with support from the Marshall Plan funds and the Allied powers, enabled Germany to transform from an authoritarian state that rejected democracy to a stable liberal democracy within a short period of time. This institutional change created high voter turnout rates during the 1970s to 1980s as presented in Figure 2, reflecting how citizens have learned to trust democracies and move on from the traumatic past (German Elections: Voter Turnout 2025| Statista, 2025).

Year	Voter turnout
1972	91.1%
1983	89.1%
2002	79.1%
2009	70.8%
2025	82.5%

Figure 2: Germany's voter turnout from 1972 to 2025

314

315 As Figure 2 demonstrates, there is a decline in voter turnout from the post-war period
316 to a low of 70.8% in 2009, which can be attributed to the aftermath of the financial crisis and
317 the growing distrust that the government was becoming unresponsive. Although there has
318 been a recovery to 82.5% in 2025, Germany's trends mirror Austria's patterns where there is
319 an underlying distrust and erosion of institutions' credibility, preventing turnouts from
320 returning to the trust people had before in 1972. The disparity seen in the decline compared to
321 initial periods of democracy highlights the discontent citizens have in their governments, with
322 the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland or Alternative for Germany party being a symptom
323 of this decrease. It represents a form of protest and an outlet for voters who do not agree with
324 the mainstream party or have lost trust.

325 Germany thus portrays a second-generation trust dynamic: the institutional structure
326 built post-World War II successfully rebuilt democratic desire and trust, but this success is not
327 long-lasting. In the new generation of citizens, they do not have the experience or memory of
328 Nazism or war, so the contrast between democracy and its alternatives has weakened. The
329 contrast had been essential in maintaining the foundations of trust that democratic
330 participation had depended on. Without renewed substantive performance and responsiveness
331 to replace this historical motivation and memory, turnouts have trended downwards.

332 3.4 Hungary

333 Hungary provides a vivid illustration of what occurs when political trust is not only
 334 destroyed but dismantled². Similar to Germany, Hungary's transition to democracy built
 335 considerable institutional trust as citizens welcomed democracy after their liberation from
 336 communist rule. Voter turnout in the 1990 election demonstrated a genuine civic investment
 337 in the system. However, since then, turnouts have been volatile and unstable, not showing the
 338 expected strengthening of democratic participation, as seen in Figure 3 (National Election
 339 Commission, n.d.).

Year	Voter turnout
1990	65.1%
2002	70.5%
2014	61.8%
2022	70.2%
2026	79.6%

340 Figure 3: Hungary's parliamentary elections voter turnout from 1990 to 2026

341 Throughout the years, Hungarian voter turnout has been unstable and repressed. The
 342 rewriting of the constitution, gerrymandering of electoral boundaries following Viktor
 343 Orban's election in 2010, have caused an assault on the dimensions of political trust in the
 344 theoretical framework. When citizens do not trust that elections are fair and just, the basic
 345 motivation for participation is undermined as the outcome is drawn in favour of the desired
 346 party, and votes are controlled by the media. This has widely been thought to decline voter
 347 turnouts as citizens are unmotivated to participate in elections when the results have
 348 seemingly already been determined. The limited turnout that exists is not caused by civic

349 ² Even though Hungary's status as a consolidated democracy has been contested, it allows the
 350 paper to examine the impact of strained procedural fairness on the voter trust–turnout
 351 relationship.

enthusiasm and confidence but by fear. High mobilisation elections indicate partisan alarm, and low mobilisation elections suggest people have concluded that the electoral and democratic system cannot be changed through voting. This is the most serious case of erosion of procedural trust where citizens believe that voting does not cause meaningful change. The 2026 election in April complicates this account where it removed Orban and became one of the highest turnouts of the period examined (79.6%, a record high since 1990) (Voter Turnout for Hungarian Parliamentary Elections 2010-2026, 2026). This election result is consistent in the pattern seen in Austria's case. Turnout increases when citizens perceive elections as a chance to cause change in society and institutions, following Norris's 'critical citizens' framework. There was a suspension of electoral hopelessness because the election was perceived to bring about change, due to faith in the opposition Tisza party to unseat Orban, so citizens who desire this transformation in rule increased their participation to produce a shift in society.

Hungary's situation also demonstrates a relationship between democratic resilience and the Marshall Plan. Western European states such as Austria and Germany, which received and benefited most from the Plan's democratic norms, have democratic institutions with high resilience, although there has been a decline in trust. Hungary only came into democratic governance in 1990 and did not benefit from the support that the Marshall Plan provided, and proved to be more vulnerable and fragile. This fragility shows the necessary depth of investment in democratic trust required for democracies to be stable and trust to remain resilient.

3.5 Australia

Australia offers a clear and insightful contrast. Voter turnout in federal elections is consistently high, remaining around 90 to 95% for decades, seen in Figure 4 (*Participation in*

the 2025 Federal Election, 2025). This impressive turnout reflects a strong trust in the democratic system. Australians generally believe in the system's fairness and legitimacy, which is known as procedural trust.

Year	Voter turnout
1990	95.8%
2013	93.2%
2025	93.1%

Figure 4: Australia's voter turnout from 1990 to 2025

The foundation of this stability is compulsory voting, introduced in 1924. Its success however is not due to a modest fine (approximately \$20 AUD). For many citizens, the fine is financially insignificant. Instead, the law has a sociological and normative effect (Fowler, 2013). First, it encourages a lifelong habit of voting, making it a regular civic duty like paying taxes. Second, over generations, the norm of participating has become deeply embedded, so not voting is seen as unusual and neglectful of civic duty. Third, and most importantly, it changes political incentives. With the entire electorate voting, political parties must develop broad, centrist policies that appeal to all groups, not just their base. This strengthens the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which is the second pillar of political trust.

Consider a thought experiment: if Austria, Germany and Hungary adopted a similar system with a meaningful fine, the result would likely be an immediate, mechanical increase in turnout. However, whether it would restore trust is a more complex question. It would force the parties to appeal to a broader electorate, potentially mitigating polarisation. Yet, if citizens perceived compulsory voting as an authoritarian imposition on a system they already distrusted, it could breed resentment rather than renewed civic commitment. Australia's lesson is thus nuanced: compulsory voting appears most effective as a prophylactic measure.

398 It sustains civic habit and social norms, preventing the trust-turnout spiral from starting in the
399 first place, rather than serving as a simple cure for an already advanced condition of
400 disengagement. The intervention works with trust, not despite its absence.

401 Australia's experience shows that compulsory voting works best as a preventive
402 measure. It helps maintain civic habits and social norms, stopping the decline of trust and
403 turnout before it starts rather than acting as a simple remedy for a serious problem of
404 disengagement. This approach interacts with trust rather than ignoring its absence. Over
405 generations, the norm of 'showing up' has become deeply rooted; not voting feels unusual and
406 irresponsible. Most importantly, it changes political incentives. Knowing that everyone will
407 vote, political parties must create broad, centrist policies and engage all groups, not just their
408 core supporters. This enhances the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which
409 is crucial for building political trust.

410 **3.6 Summary**

411 Examining Europe's changing turnout and Australia's steady results, demonstrates
412 that political trust and voter turnout have a mutually reinforcing, though not just causal,
413 relationship. However, this relationship is shaped by political culture and institutional design.
414 Austria illustrates that when trust diminishes, turnout becomes unpredictable which is a
415 reflection of temporary crises rather than a solid foundation of democracy. Germany
416 demonstrates that trust building exercises can be non-sustaining across generations. Hungary
417 highlights the extremity where lost in trust of the credibility and legitimacy of voting systems
418 can transform participation to partisan mobilisation. Yet, the same erosion when reaching a
419 critical threshold can create a turnout that aims to reverse that destruction. Europe's broader
420 challenges serve as a warning about this gradual decline. In contrast, Australia provides a
421 powerful, practical lesson; simply the requirement to vote can cultivate a strong civic habit

that protects the political system from the serious erosion of trust, making participation the norm rather than a calculated choice. In all instances, some level of trust is essential. Democracies worried about declining trust should not just try to boost turnout with penalties; the deeper goal should be to help create a responsive, legitimate, and effective political environment that encourages citizens to participate.

4. BEYOND POLITICAL TRUST

The previous section showed how political trust connects citizens to the electoral process. When trust in government declines, the motivation to vote often drops as well. This is evident from the evidence in Austria, Germany, Hungary, and beyond. However, looking solely at political trust does not tell the whole story. A direct loss of faith in political institutions is clearly significant, but broader structural changes in society might also play a role. These changes can lead citizens to feel less dependent on their national government, making them less willing to participate in national elections, even if they do not have overly negative views of politicians or institutions. The question is whether these structural forces provide separate reasons for declining voter turnout or if they function through the same trust mechanism already identified.

Three interconnected phenomena are especially important in this context: globalization, the weakening of national boundaries, and the increasing reliance on markets and corporations to provide goods and services that were once the responsibility of the state. These forces do not replace political trust as the main explanatory factor. Instead, they work alongside it as additional contributors that guide citizens toward the same outcome, lowering turnout through the feelings of detachment and disincentive discussed earlier. This section will explore how these additional phenomena collectively reduce political trust and lessen the perceived importance of national elections, which contributes to lower electoral participation.

446 **4.1 Globalisation and the Fragmentation of National Identity**

447 The first factor is globalization, which has changed how people view their identity
448 and their connection to their nation. This sub section presents empirical data that tests the
449 globalisation–trust link. In the past, the average person in a democratic country was more
450 likely to identify with one national identity. They were born, educated, employed, and
451 expected to live within the borders of a single country. This sense of belonging to a national
452 community created a duty; voting was not just a right but an obligation to fellow citizens and
453 the nation’s future. Globalization has made this picture much more complex (Mahoney,
454 2022). Fischer and Somogyi’s analysis of a survey from 260,000 respondents in 80 different
455 countries between 1981 and 2007 reveals the significant effect of economic globalisation on
456 lowering trust particularly amongst citizens with low political interest and education (Fischer
457 & Somogyi, 2012). These citizens are the least able to hold governments accountable for
458 results caused by forces beyond their control. This reveals that globalisation restricts
459 government policy choices, which weakens citizens' sense that voting for that government
460 can change their circumstances.

461 Increased mobility means that more people now hold dual or multiple citizenships.
462 They may be born in one country, educated in another, and work in a third, with family
463 members spread across various continents. For these individuals, figuring out where they
464 truly belong can be complicated. This mix of identities can weaken the sense of responsibility
465 toward any single national political system. If one's future is not tied exclusively to a specific
466 country, the outcome of that country's election may seem less personally important. Besides
467 the issue of multiple citizenships, globalization has also encouraged the growth of
468 transnational identities. (Marko Mrakovčić et al., 2020) An environmental activist may feel a
469 stronger connection with activists in other countries than with neighbours who do not share
470 their concerns. A tech professional might feel more aligned with a global industry network

471 than with political discussions in their home country. These transnational identities are real
472 and significant, but they do not easily lead to electoral participation.

473 Immigration and demographic change have also played a role. In many developed
474 democracies, the population is now more diverse than ever before. This diversity enriches
475 society in many ways, but it can complicate the relationship between citizenship and political
476 participation. First-generation immigrants may face barriers to voting, even after gaining
477 citizenship, such as not being familiar with the issues, candidates, or voting process, or
478 coming from countries where elections were not meaningful or where political participation
479 posed real dangers (Pratsinakis, 2017). More fundamentally, they may not yet feel a full sense
480 of belonging to their new country. The feeling of being an outsider, even a permanent one,
481 does not easily translate into the sense of civic duty that drives people to vote. The processes
482 of globalization have created a world where a singular, unquestioned national identity is no
483 longer the common experience it once was, weakening the sense of obligation to participate
484 in the political life of any one nation.

485 **4.2 Corporate Power and the Capture of Democratic Institutions**

486 The second factor is the growing concentration of economic power among large
487 corporations and the influence these companies have on politics. Increased market
488 concentration accounts for about one-quarter of the recent decline in democracy worldwide
489 (OECD, 2024). Large, profitable firms can turn their economic strength into political sway
490 through campaign contributions, lobbying, and other forms of political involvement that
491 ordinary citizens cannot access.

492 This situation creates a widespread belief that the political system Favors wealthy
493 interests, undermining the fairness of political trust identified in the theoretical framework. In

the United States, for instance, a small group of wealthy donors makes up a significant portion of total election spending (Albert & Raja, 2020). Polls consistently show that many Americans feel donors have too much sway over Congress, while regular citizens have too little (Beshay, 2023). This view is not limited to the United States; citizens in many developed democracies are increasingly sceptical of the relationship between business and government as shown in Figure 5 below. National-level trust is shown to be more volatile than trust in the European Union (EU), mirroring the instability illustrated in Austria and Germany's trend. More strikingly, citizens now trust the EU (52%, highest record since 2007), which they have little control over more than their national government (Eurobarometer Shows Record High Trust in the EU, and Strong Support for the Euro and a Common Defence and Security Policy, 2025a). Decreased trust towards national parliaments is most apparent in the Netherlands (-9%), Germany and Ireland (both -8%), and Finland (-7%) (Julien Zalc, 2024). This imbalance between the trust levels of both types of institution highlights that not only does globalisation compete with national political trust, it also relocates citizen's trust. This relocation is often toward institutions that have less of a direct connection to voter turnout that is analysed in this paper.

Indicator	Value
Average trust in the European Union	52% (2025)
Average change in trust in national governments and parliaments	-3%
EU average change in trust, national parliaments, Spring 2024 vs Autumn 2023	+2%, -3% in mistrust

Figure 5: Eurobarometer indicators of national versus supranational institutional trust

The consistent patterns found from Standard Eurobarometer findings have found where citizens have lower trust in national governments, and higher trust in the European Union demonstrates that globalisation and the transfer of effective authority to harder to hold

514 accountable institutions disintegrates the link between voting and perceived control over
515 one's circumstances. When people believe that the economy's rules benefit corporate interests
516 over the public, faith in the political system's fairness naturally declines. Citizens who think
517 that elections are mostly decided by the highest bidder have little motivation to take part.
518 Their distrust often targets the system itself rather than individual politicians, as they see it as
519 fundamentally compromised.

520 Besides directly influencing policy, corporations are also stepping into roles typically
521 held by the government. They are taking positions on social issues, enhancing healthcare
522 benefits, and providing social support to employees. While these actions may be
523 well-intentioned, they can lower expectations for government responsibilities. This distances
524 citizens from political life and strengthens the belief that voting is not the best way to create
525 meaningful change. This represents a decline in output responsiveness: if the private sector
526 provides social benefits instead of elected officials, people's motivation to vote to influence
527 public services goes down.

528 **4.3 The Erosion of National Boundaries**

529 The third factor involves the decreasing importance of national borders as
530 globalization deepens and corporate power rises (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). For much of the
531 twentieth century, the nation-state was the main unit of political, economic, and cultural life
532 (Held, 1989). Elections mattered because governments controlled power within clearly
533 defined areas. Today, the sense of a bounded community has weakened. Capital flows freely
534 across borders. Multinational media companies increasingly shape culture instead of national
535 institutions. Even the experience of place has changed, as cities and regions connect more to
536 global networks than to their own surrounding areas.

537 When national identity weakens, and people no longer see the nation-state as the
538 natural framework for economic and social life, participating in a national election can seem
539 less meaningful (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). Citizens may feel a stronger connection to their
540 region, profession, or transnational networks than to their fellow citizens. They might view
541 global corporations as the main agents of change, not governments. In this situation, electoral
542 politics can seem outdated, a remnant from a time when the nation-state truly mattered.

543 **4.4 Summary: Ancillary Factors and the Trust Mechanism**

544 In summary, the decline in voter turnout is not just about a loss of faith in
545 government. It also stems from structural changes that have made the nation-state seem less
546 relevant. Globalization has limited the policy choices available to national governments,
547 forcing them to respond to external market pressures rather than the will of the people. The
548 concentration of corporate power has created a perception that the political system serves
549 wealthy interests. Corporations have taken on roles traditionally held by the state. Combined
550 with the erosion of national boundaries, these factors have made national elections feel less
551 significant to many citizens.

552 These elements do not function independently of political trust. Instead, they alter the
553 environment in which political trust develops. Citizens do not simply think the government is
554 performing poorly; they increasingly see it as unable to succeed because of global capital
555 constraints, corporate agendas, or the redundancy of its traditional roles. This form of distrust
556 comes from a belief that the government is ineffective and outdated—a collapse in output
557 responsiveness shaped by structural conditions. In this way, globalization and corporate
558 power do not compete with political trust; they are key drivers of its decline. Their overall
559 impact on voter turnout goes through the same trust mechanism that this paper emphasizes.

5. CONCLUSION

561 This paper aims to address a seemingly simple question: among the numerous factors
562 that scholars propose to explain declining voter turnout in modern democracies, which is the
563 most significant? A comparative analysis of Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, along
564 with a theoretical exploration of globalization, corporate power, and the decline of national
565 identity, points to a clear answer: political trust. Trust in institutions is not just one factor
566 among many. It is the foundational element through which all other factors work—the lens
567 that shapes whether economic conditions, civic infrastructure, or structural changes result in
568 participation or abstention.

569 The findings can be summarized as follows. The literature review and theoretical
570 framework show that existing voter turnout models—socio-economic and
571 institutional—explain capacity and opportunity but fail to capture the will to participate. This
572 willingness, the paper argues, is mainly influenced by political trust, defined as citizens'
573 belief in the fairness of the electoral process and the responsiveness of the resulting
574 governments. The comparative case studies then tested this framework empirically. Austria
575 showed that a loss of institutional trust leads to erratic turnout instead of stable civic
576 participation. It also demonstrated that measures like lowering the voting age fail if the
577 underlying trust issues remain unaddressed. Germany contends that post war trust building
578 can be non-sustaining when there is a lack of renewed institutional performance. Hungary
579 offers that the dismantling of procedural trust through institutional capture changes electoral
580 participation. However, the same erosion produced the highest turnout in 2026 when citizens
581 believed the election was capable for the opposition Tisza party to reverse Orban's rule,
582 refining the paper's outlined relationship between trust and turnout. Australia showed the
583 opposite: that institutional design can create conditions for trust—by normalizing

584 participation across the electorate and encouraging parties to be responsive—thus preventing
585 the trust-turnout spiral from starting. Finally, Section 4 illustrates that the structural forces of
586 globalization, corporate power, and diminishing national boundaries are not competing
587 explanations for the turnout crisis. This claim is further supported by the empirical evidence
588 given by Eurobarometer survey data and Fischer and Somogyi’s findings. Instead, they are
589 significant contributors to the erosion of institutional trust, confirming that trust is the central
590 factor through which structural conditions influence individual political behaviour.

591 This paper has two notable limitations, which deserve acknowledgement, along with
592 reasons why its main findings remain compelling. The first limitation is the lack of detailed
593 longitudinal quantitative data. A more thorough study would systematically use panel
594 datasets like the World Values Survey, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and
595 European Social Survey to connect trust scores with turnout rates across a broad,
596 representative sample of democracies over time; although the Eurobarometer data introduced
597 moves toward this direction, it still remains descriptive rather a formal analysis. This paper
598 mainly relies on qualitative and structural comparisons. However, this method suits an
599 exploratory, theory-building endeavour rather than a hypothesis-testing approach. The
600 consistency of the trust variable in diverse contexts like Austria, Australia, Germany, and
601 Hungary strongly indicates it captures a real causal mechanism rather than just a contextual
602 artifact. The Hungary case provides a unique example where citizen’s perception of an
603 election to be an opportunity for change can generate substantially different outcomes. It
604 provides a robustness that purely quantitative studies, which may struggle to reflect the
605 qualitative nature of trust across different political systems, cannot easily match. The second
606 limitation concerns the possibility of reverse causation. The assertion that declining trust
607 leads to lower turnout faces a valid counter-argument: declining turnout may also damage
608 trust by creating governments with weak mandates and questionable legitimacy, which in turn

depresses future participation. This circularity exists, yet it does not weaken the argument; instead, it enhances it. The negative cycle shown in Europe's case supports trust's importance. Conversely, the Australian case serves as a near-natural experiment in the opposite direction—compulsory voting interrupts the downward trend by ensuring widespread participation regardless of temporary fluctuations in trust. This stabilizes the conditions under which trust is built. This imbalance supports the view that trust is the initial factor, even if the relationship is ultimately cyclical.

Several avenues for future research arise from these findings. First, scholars should look into the specific ways that certain institutional actions interact with trust to either maintain or restore participation. Citizens' assemblies, deliberative mini-publics, ranked-choice voting, and participatory budgeting are all innovations that aim to make democratic processes seem more legitimate and responsive. Their long-term effects on trust, and how that trust affects turnout, need thorough investigation. Second, the growing research on digital media and political communication includes a less-explored area. Social media platforms are now significant players in shaping political trust. They can both engage new participants and deepen cynicism through the algorithmic spread of distrust and outrage. It is crucial to understand how information environments influence the trust-turnout link in today's digital world. Third, the connection between corporate influence and democratic participation needs more focused theoretical and empirical study. If rising market concentration accounts for a quarter of the global decline in democracy, as the evidence suggests, then managing private economic power also presents a challenge for democratic participation—something the voter turnout research has yet to fully address. Prompted by the Hungarian case, future work can also study if crisis incentive turnout spikes seen in that case can lead to sustainably increase in institutional trust.

Democracy has never been a self-sustaining system. It relies on the belief that ordinary people will return to vote, giving their trust to imperfect institutions. When that belief falters—when citizens view their vote as merely a pointless gesture in a rigged system—democracy doesn’t fail dramatically. It gradually erodes, mandate by mandate, election by election. The turnout crisis, in this context, isn’t just about civic engagement; it’s a crisis of faith. Once lost, restoring faith is incredibly challenging.

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Trust as the Cornerstone of Democracy:

Political Trust, Voter Turnout, and Democratic Legitimacy in a Comparative European Perspective

ABSTRACT

Voter turnout is an essential and volatile element of democracy, a representation of the trust and relationship that citizens have with their government. There are many factors that can impact the desire of citizens to vote, and overall, there has been a declining trend in political participation. This research explores the reason for this, positing that the erosion of political and social trust is the primary driver behind this trend. While traditional models focus on socio-economic resources or institutional rules, this paper argues that trust acts as the ~~main~~central variable that determines whether a citizen feels their vote possesses any genuine efficacy. The research addresses a gap in the literature, which often examines these factors in isolation rather than comparatively, and responds to the current global ‘trust recession’ and its implications for democratic stability. The essay will use a range of countries globally as case studies, identifying the trend of declining voter turnout across the world and analysing the difference between each country’s institutions and their impact on voter turnout. The investigation also addresses contemporary structural challenges, including globalisation, corporate capture, and the fragmentation of national identity. Rather than offering alternative explanations for low turnout, the paper finds that these forces exert their influence by making national governments appear obsolete or unresponsive, thus further corroding institutional faith. The study concludes that the modern turnout crisis is fundamentally a “crisis of faith”. It suggests that engineering higher participation through mechanical means is insufficient; rather, democratic vitality depends on restoring the belief that political institutions are both legitimate and capable of serving the public good.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a ~~dramatic~~ notable paradox has emerged within the world's democracies: despite the fact that the tools for political participation have proliferated and access to information has become universal, a fundamental act of citizenship, voting, has become less active. From the United States to European states, the trend of voter disengagement is a global phenomenon. For instance, in the 2022 French legislative elections, turnout fell to a record low (France: Voter Turnout in the Legislative Elections, 2024). There are also recent democracies facing similar issues: the 11.2% turnout in Tunisia's 2022 election demonstrated a deep-seated political disengagement (Tunisia Assembly of People's Representatives December 2022 Election, 2022). Rather than representing a short-lived issue, the decline ~~that~~ signifies a creeping crisis of democratic legitimacy ~~that is~~ part of a ~~growing challenge-crisis-of to~~ democracies worldwide.

In this paper, I will argue that although factors such as civil society, economic conditions, and globalisation are substantial, the primary overarching phenomenon that determines voter turnouts in democracies—and, accordingly, contributes to the recent downturns—is political trust. This research is important, given the current global crisis of trust and its potential consequences for democratic stability; it ~~fills a void~~ adds ~~to in the~~ current research that examines these factors in isolation rather than comparatively, under a broader category such as political trust. To ground this research, the paper will focus on a broad comparative analysis of cases from Europe and Oceania. Within Europe, the essay will focus on Austria, Hungary and Germany. Austria serves as an example of declining trust and turnout to demonstrate a great trend in Europe. Germany is the largest democracy in Europe and faces post-war reconstruction populist pressure. Hungary illustrates the democratic backsliding driven by the erosion of institutional trust-, ~~even though its status as a fully~~

consolidated democracy is itself contested for part of the period examined.¹ In contrast, Australia offers a model of stable engagement through an institutional framework that promotes voter participation. Ultimately, the conclusion posits that trust is an essential precondition, as without it, other factors fail to sustain consistent electoral participation. Therefore, restoring trust is important to the vitality of democratic societies.

The erosion of voter turnout poses a significant statistical issue and a serious threat to the democratic health and equity of our society. Low and declining voter turnout can lead toward a concentration of political power in mobilised and usually more affluent sections of the populace, which skews the outcomes of policy decisions and, therefore, weakens the principle of representation. This loss of legitimacy for governments elected through political processes also increases the likelihood of creating instability in the political system by widening the divide between a government and its electorate. Therefore, understanding the root causes of the erosion of voter turnout is critical to identifying the crisis currently faced by democratic systems.

This investigation centres on political and social trust as a multidimensional concept. Political trust refers to citizens' confidence in the impartiality, efficiency, and integrity of core institutions such as the government, parliament, the electoral commission, and the legal system (Vitale, 2018). Social trust is characterised as interpersonal trust that includes perceptions of honesty, the capacity to work together, and the existence of common social norms among other citizens (Kirby, 2025). The critical hypothesis is that these forms of trust will reduce perceived 'costs' of voting. If you believe your vote will be counted fairly and that

¹ The V-Dem Institute's 2022 Democracy Report classified Hungary as an 'electoral autocracy' and Freedom House rates it only 'Partly Free' making it the first EU member state to receive that designation (V-Dem Institute, 2022; Freedom House, 2024). Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the Fidesz party rewrote the constitution, redraw electoral districts, and held control over the courts and media (Democratic Erosion Project, 2025). This development leads Hungary to be included in the analysis where it is the only case here that the erosion of political trust coincides with an erosion of procedural fairness, thus allowing for testing the connection between political trust and turnout even when procedural fairness is undermined. Hungary also did not receive Marshall Plan aid, deeming it a contrasting perspective to Austria and Germany (see 3.1).

you are part of a collective citizenry, you will be more likely to vote. Without this underlying basis, people will view their votes as irrelevant regardless of the particular circumstances.

The case studies selected for this paper are appropriate cases as they span a range of institutional settings, which makes them well-suited-, *though not completely conclusive*, for isolating the effect of trust from other potential confounding variables. Europe is chosen for its shared political and historical background and post-war democratic heritage, in particular, the rebuilding of democracy under the Marshall Plan, *with the exception of Hungary*. Australia provides a contrasting perspective to this case but still works alongside as it shares a similar Western heritage to countries in Europe. The essay focuses on the countries Austria, Germany and Hungary and Australia. They are developed, stable democracies with established civil societies, yet they diverge sharply in turnout stability, which is due to differences in institutional design and the nature of the trust created through these institutions. Crucially, while the analysis is focused on these specific cases, the evidence from the example cases refers to a global trend: when people lose faith in the institutions that govern them, the will to participate in the democratic process diminishes.

The essay is structured in four sections. First, it reviews the established literature on voter turnout and develops a theoretical rationale for political trust as the primary mediating variable influencing turnout rates. Second, it uses comparative empirical analysis through evidence from Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, to test the relative explanatory strength of trust. Third, it examines additional structural forces, globalisation, corporate power, and the erosion of national boundaries and shows that they contribute to the decline of trust in politics. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the findings, arguing that while economic deprivation or weak civic networks can depress turnout, their impact is conditional on a

bedrock of trust, the erosion of which presents one of the most fundamental challengechallenges to electoral democracy-globally.

1.1 Methodology

The research uses a three-pronged qualitative and analytical approach to construct a theoretically grounded and empirically supported argument. The first part is the background readings and literature analysis. A review of the existing literature on voter turnout was conducted, focusing on peer-reviewed articles. The main databases consulted were JSTOR, Google Scholar, and SSRN using search terms related to voter turnout and political trust. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the field and credibility. The review encompasses works in comparative politics, social and systems theory, coupled with empirical studies. The second part analyses empirical data on voter turnout and trends spanning across multiple years. The figures are compiled from databases such as cross-national datasets published by Statista and national election commission reports. Longitudinal data is used to track changes over time, and comparative tables are used to present data and trends clearly that support the argument.

The year chosen for the voter turnout present in the Figures 104 were chosen purposely rather than at even intervals. The starting year for each country marks the baseline after democratic consolidation and stability, the middle year represents a period of change and shock, while the final year reflects the most recent results for the elections available. The selection process was applied across Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, thus while not identical, the years are comparable.

This ensures that the essay's claims will be grounded in both theory and factual evidence as well. The third part is the development of a theory of political trust as the primary link of the relationship between structural conditions and individual electoral behaviour. This

essay suggests that trust is the prerequisite condition that is necessary for individuals to choose to participate in election voting, contributing to the trend of voter turnout. This theoretical framework will be fleshed out in section 2 and analysed comparatively between different countries in sections 3 and 4. The methodology is mainly qualitative and analysis-based, which correlates trust with turnout and how it operates through different national contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This literature review and theoretical framework will involve two related areas of scholarship: the extensive literature on the determinants of voter turnout and the evolving scholarship on political trust and social capital. The prior research has traditionally prioritised socio-economic models and institutional models of voting, while the latter treats trust as a background variable. This paper presents an argument for the importance of elector-focused political trust as the most significant proximate factor mediating the effects of more general, structural variables—civil society, economic conditions, and globalisation—on turnout in contemporary democracies. The existing studies on voter participation have generally followed two paths. The first path follows the rational choice and socioeconomic models, which views voting as a cost-benefit calculation that is influenced by the availability of resources (Blais et al., 2019). Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady's 'Civic Voluntarism Model' remains foundational, arguing that turnout is a function of resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks (Verba et al., 1995). This explains correlations between higher turnout and factors like education and income. The second path, which is represented by the work of scholars including Arend Lijphart and Mark Franklin, offers an institutionalist perspective of the voter turnout with specific reference to

the 'rules of the game', identifying how facilitative laws (Franklin, 2004), including proportional representation, automatic voter registration, and weekend voting, result in lower costs of voting and greater participation in elections (Lijphart, 1997). However, a growing body of work identifies a puzzle: even in democracies with facilitative institutions and rising education levels, turnout is often stagnant or declining. This leads to the conclusion that an independent factor is contributing to low turnout rates, which cannot be accounted for by resources or through the application of regulations. Scholars like Pippa Norris point to a shift from 'mobilising' citizens to 'critical' citizens, who have become distrustful of the system, resulting in their energy being diverted towards alternative forms of civic engagement (Norris, 2011).

This paper contends that while socio-economic models explain capacity and institutional models explain opportunity, they do not adequately explain an individual's will to participate in the electoral process. That will is fundamentally shaped by political trust. It serves as the vehicle through which broader structural conditions impact an individual's decision to vote.

Political trust is a complex, multi-dimensional concept. Different scholars use different approaches to create a generalised understanding of this phenomenon. David Easton's systems theory creates a distinction between diffuse support, a generalised connection to the democratic regime as a whole, and specific support for leaders or policies (Easton, 2010). Marc Hetherington makes an important distinction between confidence in institutions and confidence in current officeholders, claiming that a lack of relative confidence in institutions is a more corrosive factor to civic engagement than a lack of confidence in politicians (Hetherington, 1998). Robert Putnam's work on social capital links interpersonal trust to political trust, but the causal relationship is still a point of contention

regarding whether civic engagement helps to develop trust, or if pre-existing trust is necessary for civic engagement (Boix & Posner, 1996). Furthermore, Ronald Inglehart provides a cultural perspective that associates high levels of trust with post-materialist and safe societies (Inglehart, 1988). Yet critical theorists such as Claus Offe question whether trust can be extended beyond the relationship between individuals to abstract forms of political authority where citizens have limited means to monitor the actions of those authorities (Offe, 1999). These nuances reveal that 'low political trust' can mean many things: tension with a ruling party, cynicism about any politicians, or a widespread view that the political system has been rigged or is not responsive. The most damaging variation to turnout is mistrust of the system itself. Therefore this paper focuses on developing a focused conceptualization of political trust as it relates specifically to the electoral process and its expected fairness. The concept builds upon the perspective articulated by Adrian Leftwich — that politics is the main mechanism by which society arrives at collective decisions regarding the distribution of resources and values (Leftwich, 1993). When citizens lose confidence in this primary function, the incentive to participate in elections diminishes.

Here, political trust is defined as the citizen's eroding or sustained belief in the fairness, integrity, and functional efficacy of the electoral process and the key institutions that animate it. It encompasses two critical dimensions. First, belief in procedural fairness: the conviction that elections are free from manipulation and that all major interests have a roughly equal opportunity to compete for power. Second, belief in output responsiveness: the expectation that the government emerging from this process will function effectively and be responsive to public will. Erosion of this trust breeds a specific sense of electoral hopelessness; this hopelessness is the direct antagonist of voter turnout.

Electoral hopelessness does not automatically mean political apathy in all domains. Rather, Norris' 'critical citizens' thesis states that residents may withdraw entirely from participation as a classic abstainer or they will divert their energy and resources into alternative venues such as social movements or protests which they perceive as more genuine than the compromised electoral venue (Norris, 2011). This represents a flight from participation rather than a flight from politics in general. Using this framework to understand the factors associated with diminished voter turnout could be useful in determining whether or not weak civil societies, economic distress, or globalization directly impact voter turnout, because the relationships among these variables do not have a direct influence on voter turnout. However, in using political trust as a filter, the economy has a detrimental impact on trust through "output" responsiveness, while the perception of elite capture has a corrosive effect on trust with regard to "procedural" fairness. Therefore, the state of electoral hopelessness is the most deterrent to voting. Consequently, in order to understand the crisis in voter participation, it is necessary to identify the crisis in trust in the electoral system itself.

3. ON WANING TRUST AND ERODING VOTES

Trust in political institutions is the foundational public belief in the integrity, competence, and legitimacy of democratic institutions. Once that trust declines, citizens will disengage because they consider democracy to be unresponsive to their needs and too far removed from them. The clearest way to measure this disengagement from the democratic system is through declining electoral participation. The instability in turnout is an indication of an individual's belief that their vote does not matter and is a reflection of electoral hopelessness. This section explores the link between political trust and voter turnout through a comparative lens. This will involve examining Austria, Germany and Hungary as European case studies of unstable levels of political trust and electoral turnout, and then contrasting it

with Australia's model of stability under compulsory voting, then finally analysing the different political trust and voter turnout trends across. Ultimately, this section will conclude that effective and stronger institutional design can help sustain political trust in an age of democratic uncertainty.

3.1 Why Europe

Although a big continent, Europe possesses a coherent unit of comparative analysis for the study as the countries have a shared political culture, post-war heritage and the legacy of the Marshall Plan. The countries of Western and Central Europe have a similar political culture founded in liberal democratic values and constitutional governance. Although there are significant differences, there is a common normative framework on participation and trust in institutions. This common ground makes comparison of voter turnout more interpretable than a comparison between all the continents, where there are strong differences in political structure and culture which can make isolating the relationship of political trust and voter turnout more complicated. -It is worth noting that Hungary did not receive the assistance of the Marshall Plan, as it fell under Soviet influence in 1948, providing a point of contrast with Austria and Germany.

Additionally, these European countries experienced the destruction and reconstruction post-World War II. World War II caused a devastating blow to political stability and institutions across Europe. After the war, countries had to rebuild political institutions and the foundations of political legitimacy. Many of the citizens who experienced authoritarian leaders and totalitarian rule were willing to embrace democratic institutions. Electoral participation in the immediate decades was high; Austria's turnouts were 90% (Gaebler et al., 2020), Germany 85% (Federal Government, 2016) and Hungary at above 90% (Kostadinova, 2003). Most significantly, the Marshall Plan from 1948 to 1952 helped to consolidate the

post-war democratic trust across Western Europe. The 13 billion subsidy provided by the plan aided Europe in economic reconstruction, but more importantly, it embedded liberal democratic values and markets within European states (Holm, 2016). Through stabilising the economy and diminishing the appeal of communism, the plan validated the democratic order and generated political trust in democracies in the immediate post-war years. The results were high voter turnout rates during the 1950s and 1960s, yet the present decline from these rates can be attributed to the erosion of this post war trust in institutions, as it is unlikely to be caused by structural design. This historical framing gives the comparative analysis in Europe a baseline to assess the trust and turnout relationship effectively.

3.2 Austria

Austria presents an interesting European model because it is not an extreme example of democratic failure, but rather a bellwether of broader continental trends. It is a stable, prosperous, democratic country; however, constant changes in the country give insight into some of the vulnerabilities within a stable democracy. Located in Central Europe, Austria faces both the integrationist pull of the EU and the disintegrationist impulses related to populism, immigration discussions, and complex coalition politics (Sus, 2016).

Voter turnout in Austrian national elections is declining and is very volatile as seen in Figure 1 (*IFES Election Guide | Country Profile: Austria*, 2024). Turnout was approximately 90% for much of the second half of the 20th century, but for the first time ever, has dropped below 80% at 77.5% in the 2008 elections, then rebounded to 84.3% in the 2017 elections likely due to an extremely polarising campaign, but fell again at the snap elections to only 75.6% in 2019 (Gaebler et al., 2020). The pattern of spikes in turnout seems to occur when there is an apparent major crisis or when there is high-stakes polarisation. But it is difficult for spikes to sustain with an instrumentally motivated electorate who only votes when the

stakes are sufficiently acute so as to break through their general disillusionment, but is unlikely due to deep-seated habitual voting or because of deep trust in their institutions.

Year	Voter turnout
1990	86.1%
2008	77.5%
2019	75.6%
2024	77.7%

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2024	77.7%

Figure 1: Austria Voter turnout from 1990 to 2024 (years selected with the rationale in 1.1)

The Austrian government's 2007 decision to lower the voting age to 16 has been referred to as an ambitious effort at advancing civic participation among young residents. The idea behind this was to create a stronger habit of voting and encourage civic engagement by allowing young people to vote as they develop their civic identities (Bronner & Ifkovits, 2019). However, the results have been mixed. Yet in 2013, this turnout decreased to 63% (Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2014). Similarly, in Spotting this pattern in the another context, in the United States, only 40% of 18 year olds registered as voters, compared to 80% of those aged 45 and above—, implying that the pattern of fluctuations in young voter turnout is not unique to Austria. This suggests that providing access such as lowering the voting age does not automatically build confidence in participating in elections and that the underlying factors behind low turnout must be addressed, which in turn can be a symptom of low turnout. This

pattern exposes how expanding voting accessibility does not automatically build the trust that sustains participation once initial novelty fades. Thus, this intervention is addressing a symptom without confronting some of the larger issues underlying the cause.

Austria's story is not unique. Rather, it plays out against the backdrop of a wider European tale of decline. Surveys, including the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, consistently show falling confidence in parliaments, political parties, and governments across the continent (European Commission, 2026). The 2024 Eurobarometer indicated a 67% of average satisfaction in national governments and parliaments in the EU, a fall of 3%, compared to the previously recorded 70% in Autumn 2023 (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2024). Declines were seen sharpest in the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland and Finland. The EU technocracy's growing distance from citizens, the 2008 financial crisis and austerity measures, the 2015 migration crisis, and longstanding fears of inequality and globalisation have ~~caused~~ contributed to this decline of support (Scicluna, 2019). The turnout crisis is directly caused by the erosion of trust. When citizens see institutions as unresponsive or beholden to elites, the cost of voting, in time, effort and emotional burden, begins to exceed the benefits. In this way, abstention becomes a rational choice, a semantic protest, or apathy. The European pattern communicates clearly that an emptying trust reservoir is connected with the electoral participation rate. This creates a ~~vicious~~ vicious cycle where turnout further delegitimises governing mandates and undermines public trust in the system's legitimacy and effectiveness.

3.3 Germany

Germany is an interesting case because it experienced one of the most fluctuating exercises in building political trust. The establishment of courts, basic laws and federal republics prevented fragmentation and helped Germany's transition. This, coupled with

support from the Marshall Plan funds and the Allied powers, enabled Germany to transform from an authoritarian state that rejected democracy to a stable liberal democracy within a short period of time. This institutional change created high voter turnout rates during the 1970s to 1980s as presented in Figure 2, reflecting how citizens have learned to trust democracies and move on from the traumatic past (German Elections: Voter Turnout 2025| Statista, 2025).

Year	Voter turnout
1972	91.1%
1983	89.1%
2002	79.1%
2009	70.8%
2025	82.5%

Figure 2, Germany's voter turnout from 1972 to 2025 (years selected with the rationale in 1.1)

As Figure 2 demonstrates, there is a decline in voter turnout from the post-war period to a low of 70.8% in 2009, which can be attributed to the aftermath of the financial crisis and the growing distrust that the government was becoming unresponsive. Although there has been a recovery to 82.5% in 2025, Germany's trends mirror Austria's patterns where there is an underlying distrust and erosion of institutions' credibility, preventing turnouts from returning to the trust people had before in 1972. The disparity seen in the decline compared to initial periods of democracy highlights the discontent citizens have in their governments, with the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland or Alternative for Germany party being a symptom of this decrease. It represents a form of protest and an outlet for voters who do not agree with the mainstream party or have lost trust.

Germany thus portrays a second-generation trust dynamic: the institutional structure built post World War II successfully rebuilt democratic desire and trust, but this success is not long-lasting. In the new generation of citizens, they do not have the experience or memory of Nazism or war, so the contrast between democracy and its alternatives has weakened. The contrast had been essential in maintaining the foundations of trust that democratic participation had depended on. Without renewed substantive performance and responsiveness to replace this historical motivation and memory, turnouts have trended downwards.

3.4 Hungary

Hungary provides a vivid illustration of what occurs when political trust is not only destroyed but dismantled². Similar to Germany, Hungary's transition to democracy built considerable institutional trust as citizens welcomed democracy after their liberation from communist rule. Voter turnout in the 1990 election demonstrated a genuine civic investment in the system. However, since then, turnouts have been volatile and unstable, not showing the expected strengthening of democratic participation, as seen in Figure 3 (National Election Commission, n.d.).

Year	Voter turnout
1990	65.1%
2002	70.5%
2014	61.8%
2026 ²	70.2%
2026	79.2%

Figure 3: Hungary's parliamentary elections voter turnout from 1990 to 2026²(years selected with the rationale in 1.1)

² Even though Hungary's status as a consolidated democracy has been contested, it allows the paper to examine the impact of strained procedural fairness on the voter trust–turnout relationship.

Throughout the years, Hungarian voter turnout has been unstable and repressed. The rewriting of the constitution, gerrymandering of electoral boundaries following Viktor Orban's election in 2010, have caused an assault on the dimensions of political trust in the theoretical framework. When citizens do not trust that elections are fair and just, the basic motivation for participation is undermined as the outcome is drawn in favour of the desired party, and votes are controlled by the media. This ~~causes~~ has widely been thought to decline voter turnouts ~~to decline~~ as citizens are unmotivated to participate in elections when the results have seemingly already been determined. The limited turnout that exists is not caused by civic enthusiasm and confidence but by fear. High mobilisation elections indicate partisan alarm, and low mobilisation elections suggest people have concluded that the electoral and democratic system cannot be changed through voting. This is the most serious case of erosion of procedural trust where citizens believe that voting does not cause meaningful change. The 2026 election in April complicates this account where it removed Orban and became one of the highest turnouts of the period examined (79.6%, a record high since 1990). This election result is consistent in the pattern seen in Austria's case. w Turnout increases when citizens perceive elections as a chance to cause change in society and institutions, following Norris's 'critical citizens' framework. There was a suspension of electoral hopelessness because the election was perceived to bring about change, so citizens who desire this transformation in rule increased their participation to produce a shift in society. ~~turnout spikes when an election is perceived as a high-stakes, once-in-a-generation opportunity to change an outcome that citizens had previously regarded as fixed. On Norris's (2011) 'critical citizens' framework, this is best understood as crisis-driven, instrumental mobilisation — a mass, temporary suspension of electoral hopelessness precisely because the election was seen as capable, for once, of producing genuine change — rather than as evidence of routine, settled institutional trust of the kind seen in Australia. Whether the 2026 result will translate into a durable~~

~~recovery of Hungarian political trust, or instead prove to be another temporary spike of the Austrian type, is a question this paper cannot resolve and flags as an important avenue for future research (see Section 5).~~

Hungary's situation also demonstrates a relationship between democratic resilience and the Marshall Plan. Western European states such as Austria and Germany, which received and benefited most from the Plan's democratic norms, have democratic institutions with high resilience, although there has been a decline in trust. Hungary only came into democratic governance in 1990 and did not benefit from the support that the Marshall Plan provided, and proved to be more vulnerable and fragile. This fragility shows the necessary depth of investment in democratic trust required for democracies to be stable and trust to remain resilient.

3.5 Australia

Australia offers a clear and insightful contrast. Voter turnout in federal elections is consistently high, remaining around 90 to 95% for decades, seen in Figure 4 (*Participation in the 2025 Federal Election*, 2025). This impressive turnout reflects a strong trust in the democratic system. Australians generally believe in the system's fairness and legitimacy, which is known as procedural trust.

Year	Voter turnout
1990	95.8%
2013	93.2%
2025	93.1%

Figure 4, Australia's voter turnout from 1990 to 2025 (years selected with the rationale in 1.1)

The foundation of this stability is compulsory voting, introduced in 1924. Its success however is not due to a modest fine (approximately \$20 AUD). For many citizens, the fine is financially insignificant. Instead, the law has a sociological and normative effect (Fowler, 2013). First, it encourages a lifelong habit of voting, making it a regular civic duty like paying taxes. Second, over generations, the norm of participating has become deeply embedded, so not voting is seen as unusual and neglectful of civic duty. Third, and most importantly, it changes political incentives. With the entire electorate voting, political parties must develop broad, centrist policies that appeal to all groups, not just their base. This strengthens the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which is the second pillar of political trust.

Consider a thought experiment: if Austria, Germany and Hungary adopted a similar system with a meaningful fine, the result would likely be an immediate, mechanical increase in turnout. However, whether it would restore trust is a more complex question. It would force the parties to appeal to a broader electorate, potentially mitigating polarisation. Yet, if citizens perceived compulsory voting as an authoritarian imposition on a system they already distrusted, it could breed resentment rather than renewed civic commitment. Australia's lesson is thus nuanced: compulsory voting appears most effective as a prophylactic measure. It sustains civic habit and social norms, preventing the trust-turnout spiral from starting in the first place, rather than serving as a simple cure for an already advanced condition of disengagement. The intervention works with trust, not despite its absence.

Australia's experience shows that compulsory voting works best as a preventive measure. It helps maintain civic habits and social norms, stopping the decline of trust and turnout before it starts rather than acting as a simple remedy for a serious problem of disengagement. This approach interacts with trust rather than ignoring its absence. Over

generations, the norm of 'showing up' has become deeply rooted; not voting feels unusual and irresponsible. Most importantly, it changes political incentives. Knowing that everyone will vote, political parties must create broad, centrist policies and engage all groups, not just their core supporters. This enhances the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which is crucial for building political trust.

3.6 Summary

Examining Europe's changing turnout and Australia's steady results, demonstrates that political trust and voter turnout have a mutually reinforcing, *though not just causal*, relationship. However, this relationship is shaped by political culture and institutional design. Austria illustrates that when trust diminishes, turnout becomes unpredictable which is a reflection of temporary crises rather than a solid foundation of democracy. Germany demonstrates that trust building exercises can be non-sustaining across generations. Hungary highlights the extremity where lost in trust of the credibility and legitimacy of voting systems can transform participation to partisan mobilisation. *Yet, the same erosion when reaching a critical threshold can create a turnout that aims to reverse that destruction.* Europe's broader challenges serve as a warning about this gradual decline. In contrast, Australia provides a powerful, practical lesson; simply the requirement to vote can cultivate a strong civic habit that protects the political system from the serious erosion of trust, making participation the norm rather than a calculated choice. In all instances, some level of trust is essential. Democracies worried about declining trust should not just try to boost turnout with penalties; the deeper goal should be to create a responsive, legitimate, and effective political environment that encourages citizens to participate.

4. BEYOND POLITICAL TRUST

The previous section showed how political trust connects citizens to the electoral process. When trust in government declines, the motivation to vote often drops as well. This is evident from the evidence in Austria, Germany, Hungary, and beyond. However, looking solely at political trust does not tell the whole story. A direct loss of faith in political institutions is clearly significant, but broader structural changes in society might also play a role. These changes can lead citizens to feel less dependent on their national government, making them less willing to participate in national elections, even if they do not have overly negative views of politicians or institutions. The question is whether these structural forces provide separate reasons for declining voter turnout or if they function through the same trust mechanism already identified.

Three interconnected phenomena are especially important in this context: globalization, the weakening of national boundaries, and the increasing reliance on markets and corporations to provide goods and services that were once the responsibility of the state. These forces do not replace political trust as the main explanatory factor. Instead, they work alongside it as additional contributors that guide citizens toward the same outcome, lowering turnout through the feelings of detachment and disincentive discussed earlier. This section will explore how these additional phenomena collectively reduce political trust and lessen the perceived importance of national elections, which contributes to lower electoral participation.

4.1 Globalisation and the Fragmentation of National Identity

The first factor is globalization, which has changed how people view their identity and their connection to their nation. In the past, the average person in a democratic country was more likely to identify with one national identity. They were born, educated, employed,

and expected to live within the borders of a single country. This sense of belonging to a national community created a duty; voting was not just a right but an obligation to fellow citizens and the nation's future. Globalization has made this picture much more complex (Mahoney, 2022).

Increased mobility means that more people now hold dual or multiple citizenships. They may be born in one country, educated in another, and work in a third, with family members spread across various continents. For these individuals, figuring out where they truly belong can be complicated. This mix of identities can weaken the sense of responsibility toward any single national political system. If one's future is not tied exclusively to a specific country, the outcome of that country's election may seem less personally important. Besides the issue of multiple citizenships, globalization has also encouraged the growth of transnational identities. (Marko Mrakovčić et al., 2020) An environmental activist may feel a stronger connection with activists in other countries than with neighbors who do not share their concerns. A tech professional might feel more aligned with a global industry network than with political discussions in their home country. These transnational identities are real and significant, but they do not easily lead to electoral participation.

Immigration and demographic change have also played a role. In many developed democracies, the population is now more diverse than ever before. This diversity enriches society in many ways, but it can complicate the relationship between citizenship and political participation. First-generation immigrants may face barriers to voting, even after gaining citizenship, such as not being familiar with the issues, candidates, or voting process, or coming from countries where elections were not meaningful or where political participation posed real dangers (Pratsinakis, 2017). More fundamentally, they may not yet feel a full sense of belonging to their new country. The feeling of being an outsider, even a permanent one,

does not easily translate into the sense of civic duty that drives people to vote. The processes of globalization have created a world where a singular, unquestioned national identity is no longer the common experience it once was, weakening the sense of obligation to participate in the political life of any one nation.

4.2 Corporate Power and the Capture of Democratic Institutions

The second factor is the growing concentration of economic power among large corporations and the influence these companies have on politics. Increased market concentration accounts for about one-quarter of the recent decline in democracy worldwide (OECD, 2024). Large, profitable firms can turn their economic strength into political sway through campaign contributions, lobbying, and other forms of political involvement that ordinary citizens cannot access.

This situation creates a widespread belief that the political system favors wealthy interests, undermining the fairness of political trust identified in the theoretical framework. In the United States, for instance, a small group of wealthy donors makes up a significant portion of total election spending (Albert & Raja, 2020). Polls consistently show that many Americans feel donors have too much sway over Congress, while regular citizens have too little (Beshay, 2023). This view is not limited to the United States; citizens in many developed democracies are increasingly skeptical of the relationship between business and government as shown in Figure 5 below. National-level trust is shown to be more volatile than trust in the European Union (EU), mirroring the instability illustrated in Austria and Germany's trend. More strikingly, citizens now trust the EU (52%, highest record since 2007), which they have little control over more than their national government (Eurobarometer Shows Record High Trust in the EU, and Strong Support for the Euro and a Common Defence and Security Policy, 2025a). Decreased trust towards national parliaments

is most apparent in the Netherlands (-9%), Germany and Ireland (both -8%), and Finland (-7%) (Julien Zalc, 2024). This imbalance between the trust levels of both types of institution ~~asymmetry~~ highlights that not only does globalisation compete with national political trust, it also ~~relocate~~relocates citizen's ~~locate~~trust. This relocation is often toward institutions that have less of a direct connection to voter turnout that is analysed in this paper. ~~The consistent patterns found from Standard Eurobarometer findings have found~~ a consistent pattern: where citizens have lower trust in ~~the institution they can vote out such as~~ national governments, and higher trust in the European Union ~~instead. This~~ demonstrates that globalisation and the transfer of effective authority to harder to hold accountable institutions ~~such as the EU~~ disintegrates the link between voting and perceived control over one's circumstances.

Besides directly influencing policy, corporations are also stepping into roles typically held by the government. They are taking positions on social issues, enhancing healthcare benefits, and providing social support to employees. While these actions may be well-intentioned, they can lower expectations for government responsibilities. This distances citizens from political life and strengthens the belief that voting is not the best way to create meaningful change. This represents a decline in output responsiveness: if the private sector provides social benefits instead of elected officials, people's motivation to vote to influence public services goes down.

4.3 The Erosion of National Boundaries

The third factor involves the decreasing importance of national borders as globalization deepens and corporate power rises (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). For much of the twentieth century, the nation-state was the main unit of political, economic, and cultural life (Held, 1989). Elections mattered because governments controlled power within clearly defined areas. Today, the sense of a bounded community has weakened. Capital flows freely

across borders. Multinational media companies increasingly shape culture instead of national institutions. Even the experience of place has changed, as cities and regions connect more to global networks than to their own surrounding areas.

When national identity weakens, and people no longer see the nation-state as the natural framework for economic and social life, participating in a national election can seem less meaningful (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). Citizens may feel a stronger connection to their region, profession, or transnational networks than to their fellow citizens. They might view global corporations as the main agents of change, not governments. In this situation, electoral politics can seem outdated, a remnant from a time when the nation-state truly mattered.

4.4 Summary: Ancillary Factors and the Trust Mechanism

In summary, the decline in voter turnout is not just about a loss of faith in government. It also stems from structural changes that have made the nation-state seem less relevant. Globalization has limited the policy choices available to national governments, forcing them to respond to external market pressures rather than the will of the people. The concentration of corporate power has created a perception that the political system serves wealthy interests. Corporations have taken on roles traditionally held by the state. Combined with the erosion of national boundaries, these factors have made national elections feel less significant to many citizens.

These elements do not function independently of political trust. Instead, they alter the environment in which political trust develops. Citizens do not simply think the government is performing poorly; they increasingly see it as unable to succeed because of global capital constraints, corporate agendas, or the redundancy of its traditional roles. This form of distrust comes from a belief that the government is ineffective and outdated—a collapse in output

responsiveness shaped by structural conditions. In this way, globalization and corporate power do not compete with political trust; they are key drivers of its decline. Their overall impact on voter turnout goes through the same trust mechanism that this paper emphasizes.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper aims to address a seemingly simple question: among the numerous factors that scholars propose to explain declining voter turnout in modern democracies, which is the most significant? A comparative analysis of Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, along with a theoretical exploration of globalization, corporate power, and the decline of national identity, points to a clear answer: political trust. Trust in institutions is not just one factor among many. It is the foundational element through which all other factors work—the lens that shapes whether economic conditions, civic infrastructure, or structural changes result in participation or abstention.

The findings can be summarized as follows. The literature review and theoretical framework show that existing voter turnout models—socio-economic and institutional—explain capacity and opportunity but fail to capture the will to participate. This willingness, the paper argues, is mainly influenced by political trust, defined as citizens' belief in the fairness of the electoral process and the responsiveness of the resulting governments. The comparative case studies then tested this framework empirically. Austria showed that a loss of institutional trust leads to erratic turnout instead of stable civic participation. It also demonstrated that measures like lowering the voting age fail if the underlying trust issues remain unaddressed. Germany contends that post war trust building can be non-sustaining when there is a lack of renewed institutional performance. Hungary offers that the dismantling of procedural trust through institutional capture changes electoral participation. ~~It turns participation into a tool for partisan mobilization instead of creating~~

~~democratic confidence.~~ However, the same erosion produced the highest turnout in 2026 when citizens believed the election was capable for the opposition Tisza party to reverse Orban's rule, refining the paper's outlined relationship between trust and turnout. Australia showed the opposite: that institutional design can create conditions for trust—by normalizing participation across the electorate and encouraging parties to be responsive—thus preventing the trust-turnout spiral from starting. Finally, Section 4 illustrates that the structural forces of globalization, corporate power, and diminishing national boundaries are not competing explanations for the turnout crisis. ~~This claim is further supported by the empirical evidence given by Eurobarometer survey data and Fischer and Somogyi's findings.~~ Instead, they are significant contributors to the erosion of institutional trust, confirming that trust is the central factor through which structural conditions influence individual political behavior.

This paper has two notable limitations, which deserve acknowledgement, along with reasons why its main findings remain compelling. The first limitation is the lack of detailed longitudinal quantitative data. A more thorough study would systematically use panel datasets like the World Values Survey, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and European Social Survey to connect trust scores with turnout rates across a broad, representative sample of democracies over time—; ~~although the Eurobarometer data introduced moves toward this direction, it still remains descriptive rather a formal analysis.~~ This paper mainly relies on qualitative and structural comparisons. However, this method suits an exploratory, theory-building endeavor rather than a hypothesis-testing approach. The consistency of the trust variable in diverse contexts like Austria, Australia, Germany, and Hungary strongly indicates it captures a real causal mechanism rather than just a contextual artifact—. ~~The Hungary case provides a unique example where citizen's perception of an election to be an opportunity for change can generate substantially different outcomes. It provides a~~ robustness that purely quantitative studies, which may struggle to reflect the

qualitative nature of trust across different political systems, cannot easily match. The second limitation concerns the possibility of reverse causation. The assertion that declining trust leads to lower turnout faces a valid counter-argument: declining turnout may also damage trust by creating governments with weak mandates and questionable legitimacy, which in turn depresses future participation. This circularity exists, yet it does not weaken the argument; instead, it enhances it. The negative cycle shown in Europe's case supports trust's importance. Conversely, the Australian case serves as a near-natural experiment in the opposite direction—compulsory voting interrupts the downward trend by ensuring widespread participation regardless of temporary fluctuations in trust. This stabilizes the conditions under which trust is built. This imbalance supports the view that trust is the initial factor, even if the relationship is ultimately cyclical.

Several avenues for future research arise from these findings. First, scholars should look into the specific ways that certain institutional actions interact with trust to either maintain or restore participation. Citizens' assemblies, deliberative mini-publics, ranked-choice voting, and participatory budgeting are all innovations that aim to make democratic processes seem more legitimate and responsive. Their long-term effects on trust, and how that trust affects turnout, need thorough investigation. Second, the growing research on digital media and political communication includes a less-explored area. Social media platforms are now significant players in shaping political trust. They can both engage new participants and deepen cynicism through the algorithmic spread of distrust and outrage. It is crucial to understand how information environments influence the trust-turnout link in today's digital world. Third, the connection between corporate influence and democratic participation needs more focused theoretical and empirical study. If rising market concentration accounts for a quarter of the global decline in democracy, as the evidence suggests, then managing private economic power also presents a challenge for democratic participation—something

the voter turnout research has yet to fully address. Prompted by the Hungarian case, future work can also study if crisis incentive turnout spikes seen in that case can lead to sustainably increase in institutional trust.

Democracy has never been a self-sustaining system. It relies on the belief that ordinary people will return to vote, giving their trust to imperfect institutions. When that belief falters—when citizens view their vote as merely a pointless gesture in a rigged system—democracy doesn’t fail dramatically. It gradually erodes, mandate by mandate, election by election. The turnout crisis, in this context, isn’t just about civic engagement; it’s a crisis of faith. Once lost, restoring faith is incredibly challenging.

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Trust as the Cornerstone of Democracy:

Political Trust, Voter Turnout, and Democratic Legitimacy in a Comparative European Perspective

Response to Peer reviewers

Peer reviewer 1:

S.No	Issue	Addressal
1.	The paper would benefit from language editing. Coupled with this, the essay makes some bold claims.	The grammar and language edits have been made, for changes see highlighted parts throughout the essay. Bold claims such as line 28 have also been modified, for changes see highlights.
2.	The section on Hungary, for example, treats it as a democracy, even though it is common knowledge that Viktor Orbán ruled it as a dictator.	The issue of Hungary's status as a democracy has been addressed, see changes made in highlights on page 2, footnote on page 3, page 10, footnote on page 15
3.	The role of political trust has been overstated. The author could benefit by addressing other variables rather than dismissing them quickly. In as much as other factors, such as globalisation, corporate power, national boundaries, and national identity, are discussed, the analysis has not been demonstrated empirically.	Empirical evidence provided for supporting the other factors besides political trust have been given. See changes highlighted on page 20, 22, 23
4.	Lack of validation by data from sources such as Eurobarometer. As such, the author would benefit from consulting some of these sources.	Databases such as Eurobarometer have been consulted. See changes highlighted on page 13, 20, 22, 23
5.	In the section on Austria, youth voter turnout in the United States is used to substantiate claims about Austria's voting-age reforms. This raises concerns about generalisability	Additional sources on similar political contexts have been provided in addition to the United States. See changes highlighted on page 12

6	The sources used require some careful review. There are some minor inconsistencies that should be addressed. For example, Norris is sometimes spelt as Noris.	Spellcheck and inconsistencies have been checked and edited. See highlighted changes throughout the paper.

Peer reviewer 2:

S.No	Issue	Addressal
1.	More work could be done on the rationale behind the decision to select the years that were selected. Why 1990, 2013 and 2025 are selected for Australia but other years are selected for other countries might be stated more clearly.	The rationale for the years chosen for each country have been given, please see changes highlighted on page 5, lines 114-119, page 12, 14, 15, 17
2.	Hungary is used as a case of eroding public trust, yet the recent election that ousted him from the Prime Ministership had one of the highest levels of voter turnout in the four years selected.	The issue of Hungary's high voter turnout after Orban is discussed and addressed. See changes highlighted in page page 16 in the data table and lines 353 - 362, pages 26 lines 578 - 580, page 28
3.	Going off to other variables that then aren't empirically tested seems to distract from the main goal of the paper.	Empirical evidence provided for supporting the other factors besides political trust have been given. See changes highlighted on page 20, 22, 23
4.	Lack of validation by data from sources such as Eurobarometer. As such, the author would benefit from consulting some of these sources.	Databases such as Eurobarometer have been consulted. See changes highlighted on page 13, 20, 22, 23
5.	Another once over for polish, grammar and error can improve the paper.	Spellcheck and inconsistencies have been checked and edited. See highlighted changes throughout the paper.

Convergence Journal Review of
“Trust as the Cornerstone of Democracy”

Nice job addressing the recommendations of the reviewer. I recommend **accept with minor recommended revisions**. The author clearly engaged with some of the suggestions and the paper is improved. There are a few possibilities for minor improvement, but overall this paper is publishable.

While the paper improved its explanation of case selection, there is no need to explicitly label this for the Figures. In Line 108, the paper should change the “Figures 104” to what looks like should be “Figures 1 through 4”. The labels for Figures 1 through 4 does not need to explicitly say that the rationale is in Section 1.1. The explanation in Section 1.1 should suffice.

I like the addition of the future Hungarian case research on Lines 610 and 611. I can also imagine a separate project for Section 4. Overall, this project demonstrated sufficient understanding of a research puzzle, explanatory question of what influences voter turnout, and advanced a test for the idea that political trust itself provides independent influence on that voter turnout. The citations are thorough, the thinking is reasonable and the writing is polished. It looks like it took a lot of effort to think through this project. Nice work with the revisions.

Trust as the Cornerstone of Democracy:

Political Trust, Voter Turnout, and Democratic Legitimacy in a Comparative European Perspective

ABSTRACT

Voter turnout is an essential and volatile element of democracy, a representation of the trust and relationship that citizens have with their government. There are many factors that can impact the desire of citizens to vote, and overall, there has been a declining trend in political participation. This research explores the reason for this, positing that the erosion of political and social trust is the primary driver behind this trend. While traditional models focus on socio-economic resources or institutional rules, this paper argues that trust acts as the central variable that determines whether a citizen feels their vote possesses any genuine efficacy. The research addresses a gap in the literature, which often examines these factors in isolation rather than comparatively, and responds to the current global ‘trust recession’ and its implications for democratic stability. The essay will use a range of countries globally as case studies, identifying the trend of declining voter turnout across the world and analysing the difference between each country’s institutions and their impact on voter turnout. The investigation also addresses contemporary structural challenges, including globalisation, corporate capture, and the fragmentation of national identity. Rather than offering alternative explanations for low turnout, the paper finds that these forces exert their influence by making national governments appear obsolete or unresponsive, thus further corroding institutional faith. The study concludes that the modern turnout crisis is fundamentally a “crisis of faith”. It suggests that engineering higher participation through mechanical means is insufficient; rather, democratic vitality depends on restoring the belief that political institutions are both legitimate and capable of serving the public good.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a notable paradox has emerged within the world's democracies: despite the fact that the tools for political participation have proliferated and access to information has become mainly widespread, a fundamental act of citizenship, voting, has become less active. From the United States to European states, the trend of voter disengagement is a global phenomenon. For instance, in the 2022 French legislative elections, turnout fell to a record low (France: Voter Turnout in the Legislative Elections, 2024). There are also recent democracies facing similar issues: the 11.2% turnout in Tunisia's 2022 election demonstrated a deep-seated political disengagement (Tunisia Assembly of People's Representatives December 2022 Election, 2022). Rather than representing a short-lived issue, the decline signifies a creeping crisis of democratic legitimacy that is part of a challenge to democracies worldwide.

In this paper, I will argue that although factors such as civil society, economic conditions, and globalisation are substantial, the primary overarching phenomenon that determines voter turnouts in democracies—and, accordingly, contributes to the recent downturns—is political trust. This research is important, given the current global crisis of trust and its potential consequences for democratic stability; it adds to current research that examines these factors in isolation rather than comparatively, under a broader category such as political trust. To ground this research, the paper will focus on a broad comparative analysis of cases from Europe and Oceania. Within Europe, the essay will focus on Austria, Hungary and Germany. Austria serves as an example of declining trust and turnout to demonstrate a great trend in Europe. Germany is the largest democracy in Europe and faces post-war reconstruction populist pressure. Hungary illustrates the democratic backsliding driven by the erosion of institutional trust, even though its status as a fully consolidated

democracy is itself contested for part of the period examined.¹ In contrast, Australia offers a model of stable engagement through an institutional framework that promotes voter participation. Ultimately, the conclusion posits that trust is an essential precondition, as without it, other factors fail to sustain consistent electoral participation. Therefore, restoring trust is important to the vitality of democratic societies.

The erosion of voter turnout poses a significant statistical issue and a serious threat to the democratic health and equity of our society. Low and declining voter turnout can lead toward a concentration of political power in mobilised and usually more affluent sections of the populace, which skews the outcomes of policy decisions and, therefore, weakens the principle of representation. This loss of legitimacy for governments elected through political processes also increases the likelihood of creating instability in the political system by widening the divide between a government and its electorate. Therefore, understanding the root causes of the erosion of voter turnout is critical to identifying the crisis currently faced by democratic systems.

This investigation centres on political and social trust as a multidimensional concept. Political trust refers to citizens' confidence in the impartiality, efficiency, and integrity of core institutions such as the government, parliament, the electoral commission, and the legal system (Vitale, 2018). Social trust is characterised as interpersonal trust that includes perceptions of honesty, the capacity to work together, and the existence of common social norms among other citizens (Kirby, 2025). The critical hypothesis is that these forms of trust

¹ The V-Dem Institute's 2022 Democracy Report classified Hungary as an 'electoral autocracy' and Freedom House rates it only 'Partly Free' making it the first EU member state to receive that designation (V-Dem Institute, 2022; Freedom House, 2024). Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the Fidesz party rewrote the constitution, redraw electoral districts, and held control over the courts and media (Democratic Erosion Project, 2025). This development leads Hungary to be included in the analysis where it is the only case here that the erosion of political trust coincides with an erosion of procedural fairness, thus allowing for testing the connection between political trust and turnout even when procedural fairness is undermined. Hungary also did not receive Marshall Plan aid, deeming it a contrasting perspective to Austria and Germany.

78 will reduce perceived 'costs' of voting. If you believe your vote will be counted fairly and that
79 you are part of a collective citizenry, you will be more likely to vote. Without this underlying
80 basis, people will view their votes as irrelevant regardless of the particular circumstances.

81 The case studies selected for this paper are appropriate cases as they span a range of
82 institutional settings, which makes them well-suited, though not completely conclusive, for
83 isolating the effect of trust from other potential confounding variables. Europe is chosen for
84 its shared political and historical background and post-war democratic heritage, in particular,
85 the rebuilding of democracy under the Marshall Plan, with the exception of Hungary.
86 Australia provides a contrasting perspective to this case but still works alongside as it shares
87 a similar Western heritage to countries in Europe. The essay focuses on the countries Austria,
88 Germany and Hungary and Australia. They are developed, stable democracies with
89 established civil societies, yet they diverge sharply in turnout stability, which is due to
90 differences in institutional design and the nature of the trust created through these institutions.
91 Crucially, while the analysis is focused on these specific cases, the evidence from the
92 example cases refers to a global trend: when people lose faith in the institutions that govern
93 them, the will to participate in the democratic process diminishes.

94 The essay is structured in four sections. First, it reviews the established literature on
95 voter turnout and develops a theoretical rationale for political trust as the primary mediating
96 variable influencing turnout rates. Second, it uses comparative empirical analysis through
97 evidence from Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, to test the relative explanatory
98 strength of trust. Third, it examines additional structural forces, globalisation, corporate
99 power, and the erosion of national boundaries and shows that they contribute to the decline of
100 trust in politics. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the findings, arguing that while economic
101 deprivation or weak civic networks can depress turnout, their impact is conditional on a

102 bedrock of trust, the erosion of which presents one of the most fundamental challenges to
103 electoral democracy.

104 **1.1 Methodology**

105 The research uses a three-pronged qualitative and analytical approach to construct a
106 theoretically grounded and empirically supported argument. The first part is the background
107 readings and literature analysis. A review of the existing literature on voter turnout was
108 conducted, focusing on peer-reviewed articles. The main databases consulted were JSTOR,
109 Google Scholar, and SSRN using search terms related to voter turnout and political trust.
110 Sources were selected based on their relevance to the field and credibility. The review will
111 include and cite from other works in comparative politics, social and systems theory and
112 empirical studies. The second part analyses empirical data on voter turnout and trends
113 spanning across multiple years. The figures are compiled from databases such as
114 cross-national datasets published by Statista and national election commission reports.
115 Longitudinal data is used to track changes over time, and comparative tables are used to
116 present data and trends clearly that support the argument.

117 The year chosen for the voter turnout present in the Figures 104 were chosen
118 purposely rather than at even intervals. The starting year for each country marks the baseline
119 after democratic consolidation and stability, the middle year represents a period of change
120 and shock, while the final year reflects the most recent results for the elections available. The
121 selection process was applied across Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, thus while
122 not identical, the years are comparable.

123 This ensures that the essay's claims will be grounded in both theory and factual
124 evidence as well. The third part is the development of a theory of political trust as the primary
125 link of the relationship between structural conditions and individual electoral behaviour. This

126 essay suggests that trust is the prerequisite condition that is necessary for individuals to
127 choose to participate in election voting, contributing to the trend of voter turnout. This
128 theoretical framework will be fleshed out in section 2 and analysed comparatively between
129 different countries in sections 3 and 4. The methodology is mainly qualitative and
130 analysis-based, which correlates trust with turnout and how it operates through different
131 national contexts.

132 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

133 This literature review and theoretical framework will involve two related areas of
134 scholarship: the extensive literature on the determinants of voter turnout and the evolving
135 scholarship on political trust and social capital. The prior research has traditionally prioritised
136 socio-economic models and institutional models of voting, while the latter treats trust as a
137 background variable. This paper presents an argument for the importance of elector-focused
138 political trust as the most significant proximate factor mediating the effects of more general,
139 structural variables—civil society, economic conditions, and globalisation—on turnout in
140 contemporary democracies. The existing studies on voter participation have generally
141 followed two paths. The first path follows the rational choice and socioeconomic models,
142 which views voting as a cost-benefit calculation that is influenced by the availability of
143 resources (Blais et al., 2019). Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady's
144 'Civic Voluntarism Model' remains foundational, arguing that turnout is a function of
145 resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks (Verba et al., 1995). This
146 explains correlations between higher turnout and factors like education and income. The
147 second path, which is represented by the work of scholars including Arend Lijphart and Mark
148 Franklin, offers an institutionalist perspective of the voter turnout with specific reference to
149 the 'rules of the game', identifying how facilitative laws (Franklin, 2004), including

150 proportional representation, automatic voter registration, and weekend voting, result in lower
151 costs of voting and greater participation in elections (Lijphart, 1997). However, a growing
152 body of work identifies a puzzle: even in democracies with facilitative institutions and rising
153 education levels, turnout is often stagnant or declining. This leads to the conclusion that an
154 independent factor is contributing to low turnout rates, which cannot be accounted for by
155 resources or through the application of regulations. Scholars like Pippa Norris point to a shift
156 from 'mobilising' citizens to 'critical' citizens, who have become distrustful of the system,
157 resulting in their energy being diverted towards alternative forms of civic engagement (Norris,
158 2011).

159 This paper contends that while socio-economic models explain capacity and
160 institutional models explain opportunity, they do not adequately explain an individual's will
161 to participate in the electoral process. That will is fundamentally shaped by political trust. It
162 serves as the vehicle through which broader structural conditions impact an individual's
163 decision to vote.

164 Political trust is a complex, multi-dimensional concept. Different scholars use
165 different approaches to create a generalised understanding of this phenomenon. David
166 Easton's systems theory creates a distinction between diffuse support, a generalised
167 connection to the democratic regime as a whole, and specific support for leaders or policies
168 (Easton, 2010). Marc Hetherington makes an important distinction between confidence in
169 institutions and confidence in current officeholders, claiming that a lack of relative
170 confidence in institutions is a more corrosive factor to civic engagement than a lack of
171 confidence in politicians (Hetherington, 1998). Robert Putnam's work on social capital links
172 interpersonal trust to political trust, but the causal relationship is still a point of contention
173 regarding whether civic engagement helps to develop trust, or if pre-existing trust is

174 necessary for civic engagement (Boix & Posner, 1996). Furthermore, Ronald Inglehart
175 provides a cultural perspective that associates high levels of trust with post-materialist and
176 safe societies (Inglehart, 1988). Yet critical theorists such as Claus Offe question whether
177 trust can be extended beyond the relationship between individuals to abstract forms of
178 political authority where citizens have limited means to monitor the actions of those
179 authorities (Offe, 1999). These nuances reveal that 'low political trust' can mean many things:
180 tension with a ruling party, cynicism about any politicians, or a widespread view that the
181 political system has been rigged or is not responsive. The most damaging variation to turnout
182 is mistrust of the system itself. Therefore this paper focuses on developing a focused
183 conceptualization of political trust as it relates specifically to the electoral process and its
184 expected fairness. The concept builds upon the perspective articulated by Adrian Leftwich —
185 that politics is the main mechanism by which society arrives at collective decisions regarding
186 the distribution of resources and values (Leftwich, 1993). When citizens lose confidence in
187 this primary function, the incentive to participate in elections diminishes.

188 Here, political trust is defined as the citizen's eroding or sustained belief in the
189 fairness, integrity, and functional efficacy of the electoral process and the key institutions that
190 animate it. It encompasses two critical dimensions. First, belief in procedural fairness: the
191 conviction that elections are free from manipulation and that all major interests have a
192 roughly equal opportunity to compete for power. Second, belief in output responsiveness: the
193 expectation that the government emerging from this process will function effectively and be
194 responsive to public will. Erosion of this trust breeds a specific sense of electoral
195 hopelessness; this hopelessness is the direct antagonist of voter turnout.

196 Electoral hopelessness does not automatically mean political apathy in all domains.
197 Rather, Norris' 'critical citizens' thesis states that residents may withdraw entirely from

198 participation as a classic abstainer or they will divert their energy and resources into
199 alternative venues such as social movements or protests which they perceive as more genuine
200 than the compromised electoral venue (Norris, 2011). This represents a flight from
201 participation rather than a flight from politics in general. Using this framework to understand
202 the factors associated with diminished voter turnout could be useful in determining whether
203 or not weak civil societies, economic distress, or globalization directly impact voter turnout,
204 because the relationships among these variables do not have a direct influence on voter
205 turnout. However, in using political trust as a filter, the economy has a detrimental impact on
206 trust through "output" responsiveness, while the perception of elite capture has a corrosive
207 effect on trust with regard to "procedural" fairness. Therefore, the state of electoral
208 hopelessness is the most deterrent to voting. Consequently, in order to understand the crisis in
209 voter participation, it is necessary to identify the crisis in trust in the electoral system itself.

210 **3. ON WANING TRUST AND ERODING VOTES**

211 Trust in political institutions is the foundational public belief in the integrity,
212 competence, and legitimacy of democratic institutions. Once that trust declines, citizens will
213 disengage because they consider democracy to be unresponsive to their needs and too far
214 removed from them. The clearest way to measure this disengagement from the democratic
215 system is through declining electoral participation. The instability in turnout is an indication
216 of an individual's belief that their vote does not matter and is a reflection of electoral
217 hopelessness. This section explores the link between political trust and voter turnout through
218 a comparative lens. This will involve examining Austria, Germany and Hungary as European
219 case studies of unstable levels of political trust and electoral turnout, and then contrasting it
220 with Australia's model of stability under compulsory voting, then finally analysing the
221 different political trust and voter turnout trends across. Ultimately, this section will conclude

that effective and stronger institutional design can help sustain political trust in an age of democratic uncertainty.

3.1 Why Europe

Although a big continent, Europe possesses a coherent unit of comparative analysis for the study as the countries have a shared political culture, post-war heritage and the legacy of the Marshall Plan. The countries of Western and Central Europe have a similar political culture founded in liberal democratic values and constitutional governance. Although there are significant differences, there is a common normative framework on participation and trust in institutions. This common ground makes comparison of voter turnout more interpretable than a comparison between all the continents, where there are strong differences in political structure and culture which can make isolating the relationship of political trust and voter turnout more complicated. It is worth noting that Hungary did not receive the assistance of the Marshall Plan, as it fell under Soviet influence in 1948, providing a point of contrast with Austria and Germany.

Additionally, these European countries experienced the destruction and reconstruction post-World War II. World War II caused a devastating blow to political stability and institutions across Europe. After the war, countries had to rebuild political institutions and the foundations of political legitimacy. Many of the citizens who experienced authoritarian leaders and totalitarian rule were willing to embrace democratic institutions. Electoral participation in the immediate decades was high; Austria's turnouts were 90% (Gaebler et al., 2020), Germany 85% (Federal Government, 2016) and Hungary at above 90% (Kostadinova, 2003). Most significantly, the Marshall Plan from 1948 to 1952 helped to consolidate the post-war democratic trust across Western Europe. The 13 billion subsidy provided by the plan aided Europe in economic reconstruction, but more importantly, it embedded liberal

democratic values and markets within European states (Holm, 2016). Through stabilising the economy and diminishing the appeal of communism, the plan validated the democratic order and generated political trust in democracies in the immediate post-war years. The results were high voter turnout rates during the 1950s and 1960s, yet the present decline from these rates can be attributed to the erosion of this post war trust in institutions, as it is unlikely to be caused by structural design. This historical framing gives the comparative analysis in Europe a baseline to assess the trust and turnout relationship effectively.

3.2 Austria

Austria presents an interesting European model because it is not an extreme example of democratic failure, but rather a bellwether of broader continental trends. It is a stable, prosperous, democratic country; however, constant changes in the country give insight into some of the vulnerabilities within a stable democracy. Located in Central Europe, Austria faces both the integrationist pull of the EU and the disintegrations impulses related to populism, immigration discussions, and complex coalition politics (Sus, 2016).

Voter turnout in Austrian national elections is declining and is very volatile as seen in Figure 1 (*IFES Election Guide | Country Profile: Austria*, 2024). Turnout was approximately 90% for much of the second half of the 20th century, but for the first time ever, has dropped below 80% at 77.5% in the 2008 elections, then rebounded to 84.3% in the 2017 elections likely due to an extremely polarising campaign, but fell again at the snap elections to only 75.6% in 2019 (Gaebler et al., 2020). The pattern of spikes in turnout seems to occur when there is an apparent major crisis or when there is high-stakes polarisation. But it is difficult for spikes to sustain with an instrumentally motivated electorate who only votes when the stakes are sufficiently acute so as to break through their general disillusionment, but is unlikely due to deep-seated habitual voting or because of deep trust in their institutions.

Year	Voter turnout
1990	86.1%
2008	77.5%
2019	75.6%
2024	77.7%

Figure 1: Austria Voter turnout from 1990 to 2024

The Austrian government's 2007 decision to lower the voting age to 16 has been referred to as an ambitious effort at advancing civic participation among young residents. The idea behind this was to create a stronger habit of voting and encourage civic engagement by allowing young people to vote as they develop their civic identities (Bronner & Ifkovits, 2019). However, the results have been mixed. At the first election where 16 year olds could vote in 2008, their voter turnout matched the national average at 88% (Wagner et al., 2016; Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2014). Yet in 2013, this turnout decreased to 63% (Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2014). Spotting this pattern in another context, in the United States, only 40% of 18 year olds registered as voters, compared to 80% of those aged 45 and above, implying that the pattern of fluctuations in young voter turnout is not unique to Austria. This suggests that providing access such as lowering the voting age does not automatically build confidence in participating in elections and that the underlying factors behind low turnout must be addressed, which in turn can be a symptom of low turnout. This pattern exposes how expanding voting accessibility does not automatically build the trust that sustains participation once initial novelty fades. Thus, this intervention is addressing a symptom without confronting some of the larger issues underlying the cause.

Austria's story is not unique. Rather, it plays out against the backdrop of a wider European tale of decline. Surveys, including the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, consistently show falling confidence in parliaments, political parties, and

governments across the continent (European Commission, 2026). The 2024 Eurobarometer indicated a 67% of average satisfaction in national governments and parliaments in the EU, a fall of 3%, compared to the previously recorded 70% in Autumn 2023 (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2024). Declines were seen sharpest in the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland and Finland. The EU technocracy's growing distance from citizens, the 2008 financial crisis and austerity measures, the 2015 migration crisis, and longstanding fears of inequality and globalisation have contributed to this decline in support (Scicluna, 2019). The turnout crisis is directly caused by the erosion of trust. When citizens see institutions as unresponsive or beholden to elites, the cost of voting, in time, effort and emotional burden, begins to exceed the benefits. In this way, abstention becomes a rational choice, a semantic protest, or apathy. The European pattern communicates clearly that an emptying trust reservoir is connected with the electoral participation rate. This creates a vicious cycle where turnout further delegitimises governing mandates and undermines public trust in the system's legitimacy and effectiveness.

3.3 Germany

Germany is an interesting case because it experienced one of the most fluctuating exercises in building political trust. The establishment of courts, basic laws and federal republics prevented fragmentation and helped Germany's transition. This, coupled with support from the Marshall Plan funds and the Allied powers, enabled Germany to transform from an authoritarian state that rejected democracy to a stable liberal democracy within a short period of time. This institutional change created high voter turnout rates during the 1970s to 1980s as presented in Figure 2, reflecting how citizens have learned to trust democracies and move on from the traumatic past (German Elections: Voter Turnout 2025| Statista, 2025).

Year	Voter turnout
1972	91.1%
1983	89.1%
2002	79.1%
2009	70.8%
2025	82.5%

Figure 2: Germany's voter turnout from 1972 to 2025

As Figure 2 demonstrates, there is a decline in voter turnout from the post-war period to a low of 70.8% in 2009, which can be attributed to the aftermath of the financial crisis and the growing distrust that the government was becoming unresponsive. Although there has been a recovery to 82.5% in 2025, Germany's trends mirror Austria's patterns where there is an underlying distrust and erosion of institutions' credibility, preventing turnouts from returning to the trust people had before in 1972. The disparity seen in the decline compared to initial periods of democracy highlights the discontent citizens have in their governments, with the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland or Alternative for Germany party being a symptom of this decrease. It represents a form of protest and an outlet for voters who do not agree with the mainstream party or have lost trust.

Germany thus portrays a second-generation trust dynamic: the institutional structure built post-World War II successfully rebuilt democratic desire and trust, but this success is not long-lasting. In the new generation of citizens, they do not have the experience or memory of Nazism or war, so the contrast between democracy and its alternatives has weakened. The contrast had been essential in maintaining the foundations of trust that democratic participation had depended on. Without renewed substantive performance and responsiveness to replace this historical motivation and memory, turnouts have trended downwards.

3.4 Hungary

333 Hungary provides a vivid illustration of what occurs when political trust is not only
 334 destroyed but dismantled². Similar to Germany, Hungary's transition to democracy built
 335 considerable institutional trust as citizens welcomed democracy after their liberation from
 336 communist rule. Voter turnout in the 1990 election demonstrated a genuine civic investment
 337 in the system. However, since then, turnouts have been volatile and unstable, not showing the
 338 expected strengthening of democratic participation, as seen in Figure 3 (National Election
 339 Commission, n.d.).

Year	Voter turnout
1990	65.1%
2002	70.5%
2014	61.8%
2022	70.2%
2026	79.6%

340 Figure 3: Hungary's parliamentary elections voter turnout from 1990 to 2026

341 Throughout the years, Hungarian voter turnout has been unstable and repressed. The
 342 rewriting of the constitution, gerrymandering of electoral boundaries following Viktor
 343 Orban's election in 2010, have caused an assault on the dimensions of political trust in the
 344 theoretical framework. When citizens do not trust that elections are fair and just, the basic
 345 motivation for participation is undermined as the outcome is drawn in favour of the desired
 346 party, and votes are controlled by the media. This has widely been thought to decline voter
 347 turnouts as citizens are unmotivated to participate in elections when the results have
 348 seemingly already been determined. The limited turnout that exists is not caused by civic

349 ² Even though Hungary's status as a consolidated democracy has been contested, it allows the
 350 paper to examine the impact of strained procedural fairness on the voter trust–turnout
 351 relationship.

enthusiasm and confidence but by fear. High mobilisation elections indicate partisan alarm, and low mobilisation elections suggest people have concluded that the electoral and democratic system cannot be changed through voting. This is the most serious case of erosion of procedural trust where citizens believe that voting does not cause meaningful change. The 2026 election in April complicates this account where it removed Orban and became one of the highest turnouts of the period examined (79.6%, a record high since 1990) (Voter Turnout for Hungarian Parliamentary Elections 2010-2026, 2026). This election result is consistent in the pattern seen in Austria's case. Turnout increases when citizens perceive elections as a chance to cause change in society and institutions, following Norris's 'critical citizens' framework. There was a suspension of electoral hopelessness because the election was perceived to bring about change, due to faith in the opposition Tisza party to unseat Orban, so citizens who desire this transformation in rule increased their participation to produce a shift in society.

Hungary's situation also demonstrates a relationship between democratic resilience and the Marshall Plan. Western European states such as Austria and Germany, which received and benefited most from the Plan's democratic norms, have democratic institutions with high resilience, although there has been a decline in trust. Hungary only came into democratic governance in 1990 and did not benefit from the support that the Marshall Plan provided, and proved to be more vulnerable and fragile. This fragility shows the necessary depth of investment in democratic trust required for democracies to be stable and trust to remain resilient.

3.5 Australia

Australia offers a clear and insightful contrast. Voter turnout in federal elections is consistently high, remaining around 90 to 95% for decades, seen in Figure 4 (*Participation in*

the 2025 Federal Election, 2025). This impressive turnout reflects a strong trust in the democratic system. Australians generally believe in the system's fairness and legitimacy, which is known as procedural trust.

Year	Voter turnout
1990	95.8%
2013	93.2%
2025	93.1%

Figure 4: Australia's voter turnout from 1990 to 2025

The foundation of this stability is compulsory voting, introduced in 1924. Its success however is not due to a modest fine (approximately \$20 AUD). For many citizens, the fine is financially insignificant. Instead, the law has a sociological and normative effect (Fowler, 2013). First, it encourages a lifelong habit of voting, making it a regular civic duty like paying taxes. Second, over generations, the norm of participating has become deeply embedded, so not voting is seen as unusual and neglectful of civic duty. Third, and most importantly, it changes political incentives. With the entire electorate voting, political parties must develop broad, centrist policies that appeal to all groups, not just their base. This strengthens the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which is the second pillar of political trust.

Consider a thought experiment: if Austria, Germany and Hungary adopted a similar system with a meaningful fine, the result would likely be an immediate, mechanical increase in turnout. However, whether it would restore trust is a more complex question. It would force the parties to appeal to a broader electorate, potentially mitigating polarisation. Yet, if citizens perceived compulsory voting as an authoritarian imposition on a system they already distrusted, it could breed resentment rather than renewed civic commitment. Australia's lesson is thus nuanced: compulsory voting appears most effective as a prophylactic measure.

398 It sustains civic habit and social norms, preventing the trust-turnout spiral from starting in the
399 first place, rather than serving as a simple cure for an already advanced condition of
400 disengagement. The intervention works with trust, not despite its absence.

401 Australia's experience shows that compulsory voting works best as a preventive
402 measure. It helps maintain civic habits and social norms, stopping the decline of trust and
403 turnout before it starts rather than acting as a simple remedy for a serious problem of
404 disengagement. This approach interacts with trust rather than ignoring its absence. Over
405 generations, the norm of 'showing up' has become deeply rooted; not voting feels unusual and
406 irresponsible. Most importantly, it changes political incentives. Knowing that everyone will
407 vote, political parties must create broad, centrist policies and engage all groups, not just their
408 core supporters. This enhances the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which
409 is crucial for building political trust.

410 **3.6 Summary**

411 Examining Europe's changing turnout and Australia's steady results, demonstrates
412 that political trust and voter turnout have a mutually reinforcing, though not just causal,
413 relationship. However, this relationship is shaped by political culture and institutional design.
414 Austria illustrates that when trust diminishes, turnout becomes unpredictable which is a
415 reflection of temporary crises rather than a solid foundation of democracy. Germany
416 demonstrates that trust building exercises can be non-sustaining across generations. Hungary
417 highlights the extremity where lost in trust of the credibility and legitimacy of voting systems
418 can transform participation to partisan mobilisation. Yet, the same erosion when reaching a
419 critical threshold can create a turnout that aims to reverse that destruction. Europe's broader
420 challenges serve as a warning about this gradual decline. In contrast, Australia provides a
421 powerful, practical lesson; simply the requirement to vote can cultivate a strong civic habit

that protects the political system from the serious erosion of trust, making participation the norm rather than a calculated choice. In all instances, some level of trust is essential. Democracies worried about declining trust should not just try to boost turnout with penalties; the deeper goal should be to help create a responsive, legitimate, and effective political environment that encourages citizens to participate.

4. BEYOND POLITICAL TRUST

The previous section showed how political trust connects citizens to the electoral process. When trust in government declines, the motivation to vote often drops as well. This is evident from the evidence in Austria, Germany, Hungary, and beyond. However, looking solely at political trust does not tell the whole story. A direct loss of faith in political institutions is clearly significant, but broader structural changes in society might also play a role. These changes can lead citizens to feel less dependent on their national government, making them less willing to participate in national elections, even if they do not have overly negative views of politicians or institutions. The question is whether these structural forces provide separate reasons for declining voter turnout or if they function through the same trust mechanism already identified.

Three interconnected phenomena are especially important in this context: globalization, the weakening of national boundaries, and the increasing reliance on markets and corporations to provide goods and services that were once the responsibility of the state. These forces do not replace political trust as the main explanatory factor. Instead, they work alongside it as additional contributors that guide citizens toward the same outcome, lowering turnout through the feelings of detachment and disincentive discussed earlier. This section will explore how these additional phenomena collectively reduce political trust and lessen the perceived importance of national elections, which contributes to lower electoral participation.

446 **4.1 Globalisation and the Fragmentation of National Identity**

447 The first factor is globalization, which has changed how people view their identity
448 and their connection to their nation. This sub section presents empirical data that tests the
449 globalisation–trust link. In the past, the average person in a democratic country was more
450 likely to identify with one national identity. They were born, educated, employed, and
451 expected to live within the borders of a single country. This sense of belonging to a national
452 community created a duty; voting was not just a right but an obligation to fellow citizens and
453 the nation’s future. Globalization has made this picture much more complex (Mahoney,
454 2022). Fischer and Somogyi’s analysis of a survey from 260,000 respondents in 80 different
455 countries between 1981 and 2007 reveals the significant effect of economic globalisation on
456 lowering trust particularly amongst citizens with low political interest and education (Fischer
457 & Somogyi, 2012). These citizens are the least able to hold governments accountable for
458 results caused by forces beyond their control. This reveals that globalisation restricts
459 government policy choices, which weakens citizens' sense that voting for that government
460 can change their circumstances.

461 Increased mobility means that more people now hold dual or multiple citizenships.
462 They may be born in one country, educated in another, and work in a third, with family
463 members spread across various continents. For these individuals, figuring out where they
464 truly belong can be complicated. This mix of identities can weaken the sense of responsibility
465 toward any single national political system. If one's future is not tied exclusively to a specific
466 country, the outcome of that country's election may seem less personally important. Besides
467 the issue of multiple citizenships, globalization has also encouraged the growth of
468 transnational identities. (Marko Mrakovčić et al., 2020) An environmental activist may feel a
469 stronger connection with activists in other countries than with neighbours who do not share
470 their concerns. A tech professional might feel more aligned with a global industry network

471 than with political discussions in their home country. These transnational identities are real
472 and significant, but they do not easily lead to electoral participation.

473 Immigration and demographic change have also played a role. In many developed
474 democracies, the population is now more diverse than ever before. This diversity enriches
475 society in many ways, but it can complicate the relationship between citizenship and political
476 participation. First-generation immigrants may face barriers to voting, even after gaining
477 citizenship, such as not being familiar with the issues, candidates, or voting process, or
478 coming from countries where elections were not meaningful or where political participation
479 posed real dangers (Pratsinakis, 2017). More fundamentally, they may not yet feel a full sense
480 of belonging to their new country. The feeling of being an outsider, even a permanent one,
481 does not easily translate into the sense of civic duty that drives people to vote. The processes
482 of globalization have created a world where a singular, unquestioned national identity is no
483 longer the common experience it once was, weakening the sense of obligation to participate
484 in the political life of any one nation.

485 **4.2 Corporate Power and the Capture of Democratic Institutions**

486 The second factor is the growing concentration of economic power among large
487 corporations and the influence these companies have on politics. Increased market
488 concentration accounts for about one-quarter of the recent decline in democracy worldwide
489 (OECD, 2024). Large, profitable firms can turn their economic strength into political sway
490 through campaign contributions, lobbying, and other forms of political involvement that
491 ordinary citizens cannot access.

492 This situation creates a widespread belief that the political system Favors wealthy
493 interests, undermining the fairness of political trust identified in the theoretical framework. In

the United States, for instance, a small group of wealthy donors makes up a significant portion of total election spending (Albert & Raja, 2020). Polls consistently show that many Americans feel donors have too much sway over Congress, while regular citizens have too little (Beshay, 2023). This view is not limited to the United States; citizens in many developed democracies are increasingly sceptical of the relationship between business and government as shown in Figure 5 below. National-level trust is shown to be more volatile than trust in the European Union (EU), mirroring the instability illustrated in Austria and Germany's trend. More strikingly, citizens now trust the EU (52%, highest record since 2007), which they have little control over more than their national government (Eurobarometer Shows Record High Trust in the EU, and Strong Support for the Euro and a Common Defence and Security Policy, 2025a). Decreased trust towards national parliaments is most apparent in the Netherlands (-9%), Germany and Ireland (both -8%), and Finland (-7%) (Julien Zalc, 2024). This imbalance between the trust levels of both types of institution highlights that not only does globalisation compete with national political trust, it also relocates citizen's trust. This relocation is often toward institutions that have less of a direct connection to voter turnout that is analysed in this paper.

Indicator	Value
Average trust in the European Union	52% (2025)
Average change in trust in national governments and parliaments	-3%
EU average change in trust, national parliaments, Spring 2024 vs Autumn 2023	+2%, -3% in mistrust

Figure 5: Eurobarometer indicators of national versus supranational institutional trust

The consistent patterns found from Standard Eurobarometer findings have found where citizens have lower trust in national governments, and higher trust in the European Union demonstrates that globalisation and the transfer of effective authority to harder to hold

514 accountable institutions disintegrates the link between voting and perceived control over
515 one's circumstances. When people believe that the economy's rules benefit corporate interests
516 over the public, faith in the political system's fairness naturally declines. Citizens who think
517 that elections are mostly decided by the highest bidder have little motivation to take part.
518 Their distrust often targets the system itself rather than individual politicians, as they see it as
519 fundamentally compromised.

520 Besides directly influencing policy, corporations are also stepping into roles typically
521 held by the government. They are taking positions on social issues, enhancing healthcare
522 benefits, and providing social support to employees. While these actions may be
523 well-intentioned, they can lower expectations for government responsibilities. This distances
524 citizens from political life and strengthens the belief that voting is not the best way to create
525 meaningful change. This represents a decline in output responsiveness: if the private sector
526 provides social benefits instead of elected officials, people's motivation to vote to influence
527 public services goes down.

528 **4.3 The Erosion of National Boundaries**

529 The third factor involves the decreasing importance of national borders as
530 globalization deepens and corporate power rises (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). For much of the
531 twentieth century, the nation-state was the main unit of political, economic, and cultural life
532 (Held, 1989). Elections mattered because governments controlled power within clearly
533 defined areas. Today, the sense of a bounded community has weakened. Capital flows freely
534 across borders. Multinational media companies increasingly shape culture instead of national
535 institutions. Even the experience of place has changed, as cities and regions connect more to
536 global networks than to their own surrounding areas.

537 When national identity weakens, and people no longer see the nation-state as the
538 natural framework for economic and social life, participating in a national election can seem
539 less meaningful (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). Citizens may feel a stronger connection to their
540 region, profession, or transnational networks than to their fellow citizens. They might view
541 global corporations as the main agents of change, not governments. In this situation, electoral
542 politics can seem outdated, a remnant from a time when the nation-state truly mattered.

543 **4.4 Summary: Ancillary Factors and the Trust Mechanism**

544 In summary, the decline in voter turnout is not just about a loss of faith in
545 government. It also stems from structural changes that have made the nation-state seem less
546 relevant. Globalization has limited the policy choices available to national governments,
547 forcing them to respond to external market pressures rather than the will of the people. The
548 concentration of corporate power has created a perception that the political system serves
549 wealthy interests. Corporations have taken on roles traditionally held by the state. Combined
550 with the erosion of national boundaries, these factors have made national elections feel less
551 significant to many citizens.

552 These elements do not function independently of political trust. Instead, they alter the
553 environment in which political trust develops. Citizens do not simply think the government is
554 performing poorly; they increasingly see it as unable to succeed because of global capital
555 constraints, corporate agendas, or the redundancy of its traditional roles. This form of distrust
556 comes from a belief that the government is ineffective and outdated—a collapse in output
557 responsiveness shaped by structural conditions. In this way, globalization and corporate
558 power do not compete with political trust; they are key drivers of its decline. Their overall
559 impact on voter turnout goes through the same trust mechanism that this paper emphasizes.

5. CONCLUSION

561 This paper aims to address a seemingly simple question: among the numerous factors
562 that scholars propose to explain declining voter turnout in modern democracies, which is the
563 most significant? A comparative analysis of Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, along
564 with a theoretical exploration of globalization, corporate power, and the decline of national
565 identity, points to a clear answer: political trust. Trust in institutions is not just one factor
566 among many. It is the foundational element through which all other factors work—the lens
567 that shapes whether economic conditions, civic infrastructure, or structural changes result in
568 participation or abstention.

569 The findings can be summarized as follows. The literature review and theoretical
570 framework show that existing voter turnout models—socio-economic and
571 institutional—explain capacity and opportunity but fail to capture the will to participate. This
572 willingness, the paper argues, is mainly influenced by political trust, defined as citizens'
573 belief in the fairness of the electoral process and the responsiveness of the resulting
574 governments. The comparative case studies then tested this framework empirically. Austria
575 showed that a loss of institutional trust leads to erratic turnout instead of stable civic
576 participation. It also demonstrated that measures like lowering the voting age fail if the
577 underlying trust issues remain unaddressed. Germany contends that post war trust building
578 can be non-sustaining when there is a lack of renewed institutional performance. Hungary
579 offers that the dismantling of procedural trust through institutional capture changes electoral
580 participation. However, the same erosion produced the highest turnout in 2026 when citizens
581 believed the election was capable for the opposition Tisza party to reverse Orban's rule,
582 refining the paper's outlined relationship between trust and turnout. Australia showed the
583 opposite: that institutional design can create conditions for trust—by normalizing

584 participation across the electorate and encouraging parties to be responsive—thus preventing
585 the trust-turnout spiral from starting. Finally, Section 4 illustrates that the structural forces of
586 globalization, corporate power, and diminishing national boundaries are not competing
587 explanations for the turnout crisis. This claim is further supported by the empirical evidence
588 given by Eurobarometer survey data and Fischer and Somogyi’s findings. Instead, they are
589 significant contributors to the erosion of institutional trust, confirming that trust is the central
590 factor through which structural conditions influence individual political behaviour.

591 This paper has two notable limitations, which deserve acknowledgement, along with
592 reasons why its main findings remain compelling. The first limitation is the lack of detailed
593 longitudinal quantitative data. A more thorough study would systematically use panel
594 datasets like the World Values Survey, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and
595 European Social Survey to connect trust scores with turnout rates across a broad,
596 representative sample of democracies over time; although the Eurobarometer data introduced
597 moves toward this direction, it still remains descriptive rather than a formal analysis. This paper
598 mainly relies on qualitative and structural comparisons. However, this method suits an
599 exploratory, theory-building endeavour rather than a hypothesis-testing approach. The
600 consistency of the trust variable in diverse contexts like Austria, Australia, Germany, and
601 Hungary strongly indicates it captures a real causal mechanism rather than just a contextual
602 artifact. The Hungary case provides a unique example where citizen’s perception of an
603 election to be an opportunity for change can generate substantially different outcomes. It
604 provides a robustness that purely quantitative studies, which may struggle to reflect the
605 qualitative nature of trust across different political systems, cannot easily match. The second
606 limitation concerns the possibility of reverse causation. The assertion that declining trust
607 leads to lower turnout faces a valid counter-argument: declining turnout may also damage
608 trust by creating governments with weak mandates and questionable legitimacy, which in turn

depresses future participation. This circularity exists, yet it does not weaken the argument; instead, it enhances it. The negative cycle shown in Europe's case supports trust's importance. Conversely, the Australian case serves as a near-natural experiment in the opposite direction—compulsory voting interrupts the downward trend by ensuring widespread participation regardless of temporary fluctuations in trust. This stabilizes the conditions under which trust is built. This imbalance supports the view that trust is the initial factor, even if the relationship is ultimately cyclical.

Several avenues for future research arise from these findings. First, scholars should look into the specific ways that certain institutional actions interact with trust to either maintain or restore participation. Citizens' assemblies, deliberative mini-publics, ranked-choice voting, and participatory budgeting are all innovations that aim to make democratic processes seem more legitimate and responsive. Their long-term effects on trust, and how that trust affects turnout, need thorough investigation. Second, the growing research on digital media and political communication includes a less-explored area. Social media platforms are now significant players in shaping political trust. They can both engage new participants and deepen cynicism through the algorithmic spread of distrust and outrage. It is crucial to understand how information environments influence the trust-turnout link in today's digital world. Third, the connection between corporate influence and democratic participation needs more focused theoretical and empirical study. If rising market concentration accounts for a quarter of the global decline in democracy, as the evidence suggests, then managing private economic power also presents a challenge for democratic participation—something the voter turnout research has yet to fully address. Prompted by the Hungarian case, future work can also study if crisis incentive turnout spikes seen in that case can lead to sustainably increase in institutional trust.

Democracy has never been a self-sustaining system. It relies on the belief that ordinary people will return to vote, giving their trust to imperfect institutions. When that belief falters—when citizens view their vote as merely a pointless gesture in a rigged system—democracy doesn’t fail dramatically. It gradually erodes, mandate by mandate, election by election. The turnout crisis, in this context, isn’t just about civic engagement; it’s a crisis of faith. Once lost, restoring faith is incredibly challenging.

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Please change from Bibliography to References (page 28)

Citation APA issues, Journals should be italicized, not the title of the article:

Aichholzer, J., & Zeglovits, E. (2014, January 8). *Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Among 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria*. Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties; Taylor & Francis.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17457289.2013.872652>

Current way:

Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties; Taylor & Francis

The publisher **Taylor & Francis** should **not** appear in a journal reference.

Should simply be:

Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties

References that appear to not be cited in the paper

These references appear to be present in the references though I did not find them cited in the body of the paper.

- Arioli (2025)
- Jaitman (2013)

These should either

- be cited in the text, or be removed from the reference list.

Cited in the paper though not cited in the references page

- V-Dem Institute, 2022
- Democratic Erosion Project, 2025
- Both are located in the footnote on page 3

Spelling / citation inconsistencies

A. "Noris" should be "Norris"

Page 7 contains

(Noris, 2011)

Further APA Reference Formatting Issues

Fischer & Somogyi (2012)

Current reference contains duplicated wording.

It currently reads approximately

Globalization and Protection of Employment Globalization and Protection of Employment...

Arioli (2025)

Current

[Review of Rising Anti-Pluralism in Hungary's Fidesz Party]

Unless this is actually a review article, the square-bracketed "Review of..." is incorrect APA formatting.

Multiple APA formatting issues for: Holm, M. (2016). *THE MARSHALL PLAN A new deal for europe*. Taylor & Francis.

Correct APA 7 reference should be:

Zalc, J. (2024, September 12). *Trust in the EU, national parliament and national government*.

Verian.

<https://www.veriangroup.com/news-and-insights/trust-in-the-eu-national-parliament-and-national-government>

Please change to the above

In-text citation:

- Parenthetical: (Zalc, 2024), not Julien Zalc (page 22)

IFES

Current

IFES election guide | country profile: Austria

APA sentence case would be

IFES election guide: Country profile: Austria

Statista references

Examples

- France: voter turnout...

- German elections...
- etc.

Need consistent capitalization.

Currently they alternate between

France: voter turnout...

and

German elections: voter turnout...

APA requires sentence case for webpage titles.

Freedom House

Contains a tracking URL.

APA recommends removing unnecessary tracking parameters.

URLs

Several URLs contain long tracking strings

For example

- ?srsltid=...
- Cloudflare parameters

These should be removed.

Only the clean URL should remain.

Italics consistency

Several book/report titles should be italicized consistently.

Examples include

- *Political Theory and the Modern State*
- *The Marshall Plan*
- government reports

5. Duplicate year suffixes

You have

- 2024a

- 2024b
- For example, *IFES election guide | country profile: Austria*. (2024b). Electionguide.Org.
<https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/15/> --- why is there a “b” after the year?
- 2025a, For example Eurobarometer Shows Record High Trust in the EU, and Strong Support for the Euro and a Common Defence and Security Policy, (2025a). Why is there an “a” after the year? Also why is this cited in-text this way? It should simply be European Commission, Representation in Malta. (2025). *Eurobarometer shows record high trust in the EU, and strong support for the euro and a common defence and security policy*.
https://malta.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/eurobarometer-shows-record-high-trust-eu-and-common-defence-and-security-2025-05-28_en
Should be cited in-text on page 22 as (European Commission, Representation in Malta, 2025)
- 2025b
- 2025c, For example *Participation in the 2025 federal election*. (2025c). Australian Electoral Commission. <https://www.aec.gov.au/election/fe25/participation-rates.htm> - please remove the c, why is there a “c” after the year?

These suffixes are **only** needed when the **same author has multiple works in the same year**.

They appear appropriate for

- European Commission (2024)
- Statista (2024)

though I would verify every suffix to ensure there are actually multiple works by that author in that year.

Other writing issues affecting citations

These are not APA errors though should be fixed.

- "post war" → "post-war"
- "citizen's" vs "citizens"
- inconsistent quotation marks around "critical citizens"
- inconsistent use of en dashes and hyphens

- "conceptualization" vs "conceptualisation" (choose one)

Trust as the Cornerstone of Democracy:

Political Trust, Voter Turnout, and Democratic Legitimacy in a Comparative European Perspective

Abstract

Voter turnout is an essential and volatile element of democracy, a representation of the trust and relationship that citizens have with their government. There are many factors that can impact the desire of citizens to vote, and overall, there has been a declining trend in political participation. This research explores the reason for this, positing that the erosion of political and social trust is the primary driver behind this trend. While traditional models focus on socio-economic resources or institutional rules, this paper argues that trust acts as the central variable that determines whether a citizen feels their vote possesses any genuine efficacy. The research addresses a gap in the literature, which often examines these factors in isolation rather than comparatively, and responds to the current global 'trust recession' and its implications for democratic stability. The essay will use a range of countries globally as case studies, identifying the trend of declining voter turnout across the world and analysing the difference between each country's institutions and their impact on voter turnout. The investigation also addresses contemporary structural challenges, including globalisation, corporate capture, and the fragmentation of national identity. Rather than offering alternative explanations for low turnout, the paper finds that these forces exert their influence by making national governments appear obsolete or unresponsive, thus further corroding institutional faith. The study concludes that the modern turnout crisis is fundamentally a "crisis of faith". It suggests that engineering higher participation through mechanical means is insufficient; rather, democratic vitality depends on restoring the belief that political institutions are both legitimate and capable of serving the public good.

Keywords: [insert keywords here]



1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a notable paradox has emerged within the world's democracies: despite the fact that the tools for political participation have proliferated and access to information has become mainly widespread, a fundamental act of citizenship, voting, has become less active. From the United States to European states, the trend of voter disengagement is a global phenomenon. For instance, in the 2022 French legislative elections, turnout fell to a record low (France: Voter Turnout in the Legislative Elections, 2024). There are also recent democracies facing similar issues: the 11.2% turnout in Tunisia's 2022 election demonstrated a deep-seated political disengagement (Tunisia Assembly of People's Representatives December 2022 Election, 2022). Rather than representing a short-lived issue, the decline signifies a creeping crisis of democratic legitimacy that is part of a challenge to democracies worldwide.

In this paper, I will argue that although factors such as civil society, economic conditions, and globalisation are substantial, the primary overarching phenomenon that determines voter turnouts in democracies—and, accordingly, contributes to the recent downturns—is political trust. This research is important, given the current global crisis of trust and its potential consequences for democratic stability; it adds to current research that examines these factors in isolation rather than comparatively, under a broader category such as political trust. To ground this research, the paper will focus on a broad comparative analysis of cases from Europe and Oceania. Within Europe, the essay will focus on Austria, Hungary and Germany. Austria serves as an example of declining trust and turnout to demonstrate a great trend in Europe. Germany is the largest democracy in Europe and faces post-war reconstruction populist pressure. Hungary illustrates the democratic backsliding driven by the erosion of institutional trust, even though its status as a fully consolidated democracy is itself contested for part of the period examined.¹ In contrast, Australia offers a model of stable engagement through an

¹ The V-Dem Institute's 2022 Democracy Report classified Hungary as an 'electoral autocracy' and Freedom House rates it only 'Partly Free' making it the first EU member state to receive that designation (Glass, 2022; Freedom House, 2024). Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the Fidesz party rewrote the constitution, redraw electoral districts, and held control over the courts and media (Sarris, 2025). This development leads Hungary to be included in the analysis where it is the only case here that the erosion of political trust coincides with an erosion of procedural fairness, thus allowing for testing the connection between political trust and turnout even when procedural fairness is undermined. Hungary also did not receive Marshall Plan aid, deeming it a contrasting perspective to Austria and Germany.



65 institutional framework that promotes voter participation. Ultimately, the conclusion posits that trust is an essential
66 precondition, as without it, other factors fail to sustain consistent electoral participation. Therefore, restoring trust is
67 important to the vitality of democratic societies.

68 The erosion of voter turnout poses a significant statistical issue and a serious threat to the democratic health and
69 equity of our society. Low and declining voter turnout can lead toward a concentration of political power in mobilised and
70 usually more affluent sections of the populace, which skews the outcomes of policy decisions and, therefore, weakens the
71 principle of representation. This loss of legitimacy for governments elected through political processes also increases the
72 likelihood of creating instability in the political system by widening the divide between a government and its electorate.
73 Therefore, understanding the root causes of the erosion of voter turnout is critical to identifying the crisis currently faced by
74 democratic systems.

75 This investigation centres on political and social trust as a multidimensional concept. Political trust refers to citizens'
76 confidence in the impartiality, efficiency, and integrity of core institutions such as the government, parliament, the electoral
77 commission, and the legal system (Vitale, 2018). Social trust is characterised as interpersonal trust that includes perceptions
78 of honesty, the capacity to work together, and the existence of common social norms among other citizens (Kirby, 2025). The
79 critical hypothesis is that these forms of trust will reduce perceived 'costs' of voting. If you believe your vote will be counted
80 fairly and that you are part of a collective citizenry, you will be more likely to vote. Without this underlying basis, people will
81 view their votes as irrelevant regardless of the particular circumstances.

82 The case studies selected for this paper are appropriate cases as they span a range of institutional settings, which
83 makes them well-suited, though not completely conclusive, for isolating the effect of trust from other potential confounding
84 variables. Europe is chosen for its shared political and historical background and post-war democratic heritage, in particular,
85 the rebuilding of democracy under the Marshall Plan, with the exception of Hungary. Australia provides a contrasting

86



perspective to this case but still works alongside as it shares a similar Western heritage to countries in Europe. The essay focuses on the countries Austria, Germany and Hungary and Australia. They are developed, stable democracies with established civil societies, yet they diverge sharply in turnout stability, which is due to differences in institutional design and the nature of the trust created through these institutions. Crucially, while the analysis is focused on these specific cases, the evidence from the example cases refers to a global trend: when people lose faith in the institutions that govern them, the will to participate in the democratic process diminishes.

The essay is structured in four sections. First, it reviews the established literature on voter turnout and develops a theoretical rationale for political trust as the primary mediating variable influencing turnout rates. Second, it uses comparative empirical analysis through evidence from Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, to test the relative explanatory strength of trust. Third, it examines additional structural forces, globalisation, corporate power, and the erosion of national boundaries and shows that they contribute to the decline of trust in politics. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the findings, arguing that while economic deprivation or weak civic networks can depress turnout, their impact is conditional on a bedrock of trust, the erosion of which presents one of the most fundamental challenges to electoral democracy.

1.1 Methodology

The research uses a three-pronged qualitative and analytical approach to construct a theoretically grounded and empirically supported argument. The first part is the background readings and literature analysis. A review of the existing literature on voter turnout was conducted, focusing on peer-reviewed articles. The main databases consulted were JSTOR, Google Scholar, and SSRN using search terms related to voter turnout and political trust. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the field and credibility. The review will include and cite from other works in comparative politics, social and systems theory and empirical studies. The second part analyses empirical data on voter turnout and trends spanning across multiple years. The figures are compiled from databases such as cross-national datasets published by Statista and national election commission reports. Longitudinal data is used to track changes over time, and comparative tables are



109 used to present data and trends clearly that support the argument.

110 The year chosen for the voter turnout present in the Figures 104 were chosen purposely rather than at even
111 intervals. The starting year for each country marks the baseline after democratic consolidation and stability, the middle
112 year represents a period of change and shock, while the final year reflects the most recent results for the elections
113 available. The selection process was applied across Austria, Germany, Hungary and Australia, thus while not identical, the
114 years are comparable.

115 This ensures that the essay's claims will be grounded in both theory and factual evidence as well. The third part is
116 the development of a theory of political trust as the primary link of the relationship between structural conditions and
117 individual electoral behaviour. This essay suggests that trust is the prerequisite condition that is necessary for individuals
118 to choose to participate in election voting, contributing to the trend of voter turnout. This theoretical framework will be
119 fleshed out in section 2 and analysed comparatively between different countries in sections 3 and 4. The methodology is
120 mainly qualitative and analysis-based, which correlates trust with turnout and how it operates through different national
121 contexts.

122 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

123 This literature review and theoretical framework will involve two related areas of scholarship: the extensive
124 literature on the determinants of voter turnout and the evolving scholarship on political trust and social capital. The prior
125 research has traditionally prioritised socio-economic models and institutional models of voting, while the latter treats trust
126 as a background variable. This paper presents an argument for the importance of elector-focused political trust as the most
127 significant proximate factor mediating the effects of more general, structural variables—civil society, economic conditions,
128 and globalisation—on turnout in contemporary democracies. The existing studies on voter participation have generally
129 followed two paths. The first path follows the rational choice and socioeconomic models, which views voting as a
130 cost-benefit calculation that is influenced by the availability of resources (Blais et al., 2019). Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman



Schlozman, and Henry Brady's 'Civic Voluntarism Model' remains foundational, arguing that turnout is a function of resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks (Verba et al., 1995). This explains correlations between higher turnout and factors like education and income. The second path, which is represented by the work of scholars including Arend Lijphart and Mark Franklin, offers an institutionalist perspective of the voter turnout with specific reference to the 'rules of the game', identifying how facilitative laws (Franklin, 2004), including proportional representation, automatic voter registration, and weekend voting, result in lower costs of voting and greater participation in elections (Lijphart, 1997). However, a growing body of work identifies a puzzle: even in democracies with facilitative institutions and rising education levels, turnout is often stagnant or declining. This leads to the conclusion that an independent factor is contributing to low turnout rates, which cannot be accounted for by resources or through the application of regulations. Scholars like Pippa Norris point to a shift from 'mobilising' citizens to 'critical' citizens, who have become distrustful of the system, resulting in their energy being diverted towards alternative forms of civic engagement (Norris, 2011).

This paper contends that while socio-economic models explain capacity and institutional models explain opportunity, they do not adequately explain an individual's will to participate in the electoral process. That will is fundamentally shaped by political trust. It serves as the vehicle through which broader structural conditions impact an individual's decision to vote.

Political trust is a complex, multi-dimensional concept. Different scholars use different approaches to create a generalised understanding of this phenomenon. David Easton's systems theory creates a distinction between diffuse support, a generalised connection to the democratic regime as a whole, and specific support for leaders or policies (Easton, 2010). Marc Hetherington makes an important distinction between confidence in institutions and confidence in current officeholders, claiming that a lack of relative confidence in institutions is a more corrosive factor to civic engagement than a lack of confidence in politicians (Hetherington, 1998). Robert Putnam's work on social capital links interpersonal trust to political trust, but the causal relationship is still a point of contention regarding whether civic engagement helps to develop trust, or if pre-existing trust is necessary for civic engagement (Boix & Posner, 1996). Furthermore, Ronald Inglehart



154 provides a cultural perspective that associates high levels of trust with post-materialist and safe societies (Inglehart, 1988).
155 Yet critical theorists such as Claus Offe question whether trust can be extended beyond the relationship between
156 individuals to abstract forms of political authority where citizens have limited means to monitor the actions of those
157 authorities (Offe, 1999). These nuances reveal that 'low political trust' can mean many things: tension with a ruling party,
158 cynicism about any politicians, or a widespread view that the political system has been rigged or is not responsive. The
159 most damaging variation to turnout is mistrust of the system itself. Therefore this paper focuses on developing a focused
160 conceptualization of political trust as it relates specifically to the electoral process and its expected fairness. The concept
161 builds upon the perspective articulated by Adrian Leftwich — that politics is the main mechanism by which society arrives
162 at collective decisions regarding the distribution of resources and values (Leftwich, 1993). When citizens lose confidence in
163 this primary function, the incentive to participate in elections diminishes.

164 Here, political trust is defined as the citizen's eroding or sustained belief in the fairness, integrity, and functional
165 efficacy of the electoral process and the key institutions that animate it. It encompasses two critical dimensions. First,
166 belief in procedural fairness: the conviction that elections are free from manipulation and that all major interests have a
167 roughly equal opportunity to compete for power. Second, belief in output responsiveness: the expectation that the
168 government emerging from this process will function effectively and be responsive to public will. Erosion of this trust
169 breeds a specific sense of electoral hopelessness; this hopelessness is the direct antagonist of voter turnout.

170 Electoral hopelessness does not automatically mean political apathy in all domains. Rather, Norris' 'critical citizens'
171 thesis states that residents may withdraw entirely from participation as a classic abstainer or they will divert their energy
172 and resources into alternative venues such as social movements or protests which they perceive as more genuine than the
173 compromised electoral venue (Norris, 2011). This represents a flight from participation rather than a flight from politics in
174 general. Using this framework to understand the factors associated with diminished voter turnout could be useful in
175 determining whether or not weak civil societies, economic distress, or globalization directly impact voter turnout, because
176 the relationships among these variables do not have a direct influence on voter turnout. However, in using political trust as



a filter, the economy has a detrimental impact on trust through "output" responsiveness, while the perception of elite capture has a corrosive effect on trust with regard to "procedural" fairness. Therefore, the state of electoral hopelessness is the most deterrent to voting. Consequently, in order to understand the crisis in voter participation, it is necessary to identify the crisis in trust in the electoral system itself.

3. ON WANING TRUST AND ERODING VOTES

Trust in political institutions is the foundational public belief in the integrity, competence, and legitimacy of democratic institutions. Once that trust declines, citizens will disengage because they consider democracy to be unresponsive to their needs and too far removed from them. The clearest way to measure this disengagement from the democratic system is through declining electoral participation. The instability in turnout is an indication of an individual's belief that their vote does not matter and is a reflection of electoral hopelessness. This section explores the link between political trust and voter turnout through a comparative lens. This will involve examining Austria, Germany and Hungary as European case studies of unstable levels of political trust and electoral turnout, and then contrasting it with Australia's model of stability under compulsory voting, then finally analysing the different political trust and voter turnout trends across. Ultimately, this section will conclude that effective and stronger institutional design can help sustain political trust in an age of democratic uncertainty.

3.1 Why Europe

Although a big continent, Europe possesses a coherent unit of comparative analysis for the study as the countries have a shared political culture, post-war heritage and the legacy of the Marshall Plan. The countries of Western and Central Europe have a similar political culture founded in liberal democratic values and constitutional governance. Although there are significant differences, there is a common normative framework on participation and trust in institutions. This common ground makes comparison of voter turnout more interpretable than a comparison between all the continents, where there are strong differences in political structure and culture which can make isolating the relationship of political trust and



199 voter turnout more complicated. It is worth noting that Hungary did not receive the assistance of the Marshall Plan, as it
200 fell under Soviet influence in 1948, providing a point of contrast with Austria and Germany.

201 Additionally, these European countries experienced the destruction and reconstruction post-World War II. World
202 War II caused a devastating blow to political stability and institutions across Europe. After the war, countries had to rebuild
203 political institutions and the foundations of political legitimacy. Many of the citizens who experienced authoritarian leaders
204 and totalitarian rule were willing to embrace democratic institutions. Electoral participation in the immediate decades was
205 high; Austria's turnouts were 90% (Gaebler et al., 2020), Germany 85% (Federal Government, 2016) and Hungary at above
206 90% (Kostadinova, 2003). Most significantly, the Marshall Plan from 1948 to 1952 helped to consolidate the post-war
207 democratic trust across Western Europe. The 13 billion subsidy provided by the plan aided Europe in economic
208 reconstruction, but more importantly, it embedded liberal democratic values and markets within European states (Holm,
209 2016). Through stabilising the economy and diminishing the appeal of communism, the plan validated the democratic order
210 and generated political trust in democracies in the immediate post-war years. The results were high voter turnout rates
211 during the 1950s and 1960s, yet the present decline from these rates can be attributed to the erosion of this post war trust
212 in institutions, as it is unlikely to be caused by structural design. This historical framing gives the comparative analysis in
213 Europe a baseline to assess the trust and turnout relationship effectively.

214 3.2 Austria

215 Austria presents an interesting European model because it is not an extreme example of democratic failure, but
216 rather a bellwether of broader continental trends. It is a stable, prosperous, democratic country; however, constant
217 changes in the country give insight into some of the vulnerabilities within a stable democracy. Located in Central Europe,
218 Austria faces both the integrationist pull of the EU and the disintegrating impulses related to populism, immigration
219 discussions, and complex coalition politics (Sus, 2016).

220 Voter turnout in Austrian national elections is declining and is very volatile as seen in Figure 1 (IFES Election Guide



Country Profile: Austria, 2024). Turnout was approximately 90% for much of the second half of the 20th century, but for the first time ever, has dropped below 80% at 77.5% in the 2008 elections, then rebounded to 84.3% in the 2017 elections likely due to an extremely polarising campaign, but fell again at the snap elections to only 75.6% in 2019 (Gaebler et al., 2020). The pattern of spikes in turnout seems to occur when there is an apparent major crisis or when there is high-stakes polarisation. But it is difficult for spikes to sustain with an instrumentally motivated electorate who only votes when the stakes are sufficiently acute so as to break through their general disillusionment, but is unlikely due to deep-seated habitual voting or because of deep trust in their institutions.

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Year	Voter turnout
1990	86.1%
2008	77.5%
2019	75.6%
2024	77.7%

Figure 1: Austria Voter turnout from 1990 to 2024

The Austrian government's 2007 decision to lower the voting age to 16 has been referred to as an ambitious effort at advancing civic participation among young residents. The idea behind this was to create a stronger habit of voting and encourage civic engagement by allowing young people to vote as they develop their civic identities (Bronner & Ifkovits, 2019). However, the results have been mixed. At the first election where 16 year olds could vote in 2008, their voter turnout matched the national average at 88% (Wagner et al., 2016; Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2014). Yet in 2013, this turnout decreased to 63% (Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2014). Spotting this pattern in another context, in the United States, only 40% of 18 year olds registered as voters, compared to 80% of those aged 45 and above, implying that the pattern of fluctuations in young voter turnout is not unique to Austria. This suggests that providing access such as lowering the voting age does not automatically build confidence in participating in elections and that the underlying factors behind low turnout must be



addressed, which in turn can be a symptom of low turnout. This pattern exposes how expanding voting accessibility does not automatically build the trust that sustains participation once initial novelty fades. Thus, this intervention is addressing a symptom without confronting some of the larger issues underlying the cause.

Austria's story is not unique. Rather, it plays out against the backdrop of a wider European tale of decline. Surveys, including the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, consistently show falling confidence in parliaments, political parties, and governments across the continent (European Commission, 2026). The 2024 Eurobarometer indicated a 67% of average satisfaction in national governments and parliaments in the EU, a fall of 3%, compared to the previously recorded 70% in Autumn 2023 (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2024). Declines were seen sharpest in the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland and Finland. The EU technocracy's growing distance from citizens, the 2008 financial crisis and austerity measures, the 2015 migration crisis, and longstanding fears of inequality and globalisation have contributed to this decline in support (Scicluna, 2019). The turnout crisis is directly caused by the erosion of trust. When citizens see institutions as unresponsive or beholden to elites, the cost of voting, in time, effort and emotional burden, begins to exceed the benefits. In this way, abstention becomes a rational choice, a semantic protest, or apathy. The European pattern communicates clearly that an emptying trust reservoir is connected with the electoral participation rate. This creates a vicious cycle where turnout further delegitimises governing mandates and undermines public trust in the system's legitimacy and effectiveness.

3.3 Germany

Germany is an interesting case because it experienced one of the most fluctuating exercises in building political trust. The establishment of courts, basic laws and federal republics prevented fragmentation and helped Germany's transition. This, coupled with support from the Marshall Plan funds and the Allied powers, enabled Germany to transform from an authoritarian state that rejected democracy to a stable liberal democracy within a short period of time. This institutional change created high voter turnout rates during the 1970s to 1980s as presented in Figure 2, reflecting how citizens have learned to trust democracies and move on from the traumatic past (German Elections: Voter Turnout 2025|



262 Statista, 2025).

Year	Voter turnout
1972	91.1%
1983	89.1%
2002	79.1%
2009	70.8%
2025	82.5%

263 Figure 2, Germany's voter turnout from 1972 to 2025

264 As Figure 2 demonstrates, there is a decline in voter turnout from the post-war period to a low of 70.8% in 2009,
 265 which can be attributed to the aftermath of the financial crisis and the growing distrust that the government was becoming
 266 unresponsive. Although there has been a recovery to 82.5% in 2025, Germany's trends mirror Austria's patterns where there
 267 is an underlying distrust and erosion of institutions' credibility, preventing turnouts from returning to the trust people had
 268 before in 1972. The disparity seen in the decline compared to initial periods of democracy highlights the discontent citizens
 269 have in their governments, with the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland or Alternative for Germany party being a symptom
 270 of this decrease. It represents a form of protest and an outlet for voters who do not agree with the mainstream party or have
 271 lost trust.

272 Germany thus portrays a second-generation trust dynamic: the institutional structure built post-World War II
 273 successfully rebuilt democratic desire and trust, but this success is not long-lasting. In the new generation of citizens, they
 274 do not have the experience or memory of Nazism or war, so the contrast between democracy and its alternatives has
 275 weakened. The contrast had been essential in maintaining the foundations of trust that democratic participation had
 276 depended on. Without renewed substantive performance and responsiveness to replace this historical motivation and
 277 memory, turnouts have trended downwards.



3.4 Hungary

Hungary provides a vivid illustration of what occurs when political trust is not only destroyed but dismantled². Similar to Germany, Hungary's transition to democracy built considerable institutional trust as citizens welcomed democracy after their liberation from communist rule. Voter turnout in the 1990 election demonstrated a genuine civic investment in the system. However, since then, turnouts have been volatile and unstable, not showing the expected strengthening of democratic participation, as seen in Figure 3 (National Election Commission, n.d.).

Year	Voter turnout
1990	65.1%
2002	70.5%
2014	61.8%
2022	70.2%
2026	79.6%

Figure 3: Hungary's parliamentary elections voter turnout from 1990 to 2026

Throughout the years, Hungarian voter turnout has been unstable and repressed. The rewriting of the constitution, gerrymandering of electoral boundaries following Viktor Orban's election in 2010, have caused an assault on the dimensions of political trust in the theoretical framework. When citizens do not trust that elections are fair and just, the basic motivation for participation is undermined as the outcome is drawn in favour of the desired party, and votes are controlled by the media. This has widely been thought to decline voter turnouts as citizens are unmotivated to participate in elections when the results have seemingly already been determined. The limited turnout that exists is not caused by civic enthusiasm and confidence but by fear. High mobilisation elections indicate partisan alarm, and low mobilisation elections suggest people

² Even though Hungary's status as a consolidated democracy has been contested, it allows the paper to examine the impact of strained procedural fairness on the voter trust–turnout relationship.



have concluded that the electoral and democratic system cannot be changed through voting. This is the most serious case of erosion of procedural trust where citizens believe that voting does not cause meaningful change. The 2026 election in April complicates this account where it removed Orban and became one of the highest turnouts of the period examined (79.6%, a record high since 1990) (Voter Turnout for Hungarian Parliamentary Elections 2010-2026, 2026). This election result is consistent in the pattern seen in Austria's case. Turnout increases when citizens perceive elections as a chance to cause change in society and institutions, following Norris's 'critical citizens' framework. There was a suspension of electoral hopelessness because the election was perceived to bring about change, due to faith in the opposition Tisza party to unseat Orban, so citizens who desire this transformation in rule increased their participation to produce a shift in society.

Hungary's situation also demonstrates a relationship between democratic resilience and the Marshall Plan. Western European states such as Austria and Germany, which received and benefited most from the Plan's democratic norms, have democratic institutions with high resilience, although there has been a decline in trust. Hungary only came into democratic governance in 1990 and did not benefit from the support that the Marshall Plan provided, and proved to be more vulnerable and fragile. This fragility shows the necessary depth of investment in democratic trust required for democracies to be stable and trust to remain resilient.

3.5 Australia

Australia offers a clear and insightful contrast. Voter turnout in federal elections is consistently high, remaining around 90 to 95% for decades, seen in Figure 4 (*Participation in the 2025 Federal Election*, 2025). This impressive turnout reflects a strong trust in the democratic system. Australians generally believe in the system's fairness and legitimacy, which is known as procedural trust.

Year	Voter turnout
1990	95.8%
2013	93.2%



2025	93.1%
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Figure 4, Australia's voter turnout from 1990 to 2025

The foundation of this stability is compulsory voting, introduced in 1924. Its success however is not due to a modest fine (approximately \$20 AUD). For many citizens, the fine is financially insignificant. Instead, the law has a sociological and normative effect (Fowler, 2013). First, it encourages a lifelong habit of voting, making it a regular civic duty like paying taxes. Second, over generations, the norm of participating has become deeply embedded, so not voting is seen as unusual and neglectful of civic duty. Third, and most importantly, it changes political incentives. With the entire electorate voting, political parties must develop broad, centrist policies that appeal to all groups, not just their base. This strengthens the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which is the second pillar of political trust.

Consider a thought experiment: if Austria, Germany and Hungary adopted a similar system with a meaningful fine, the result would likely be an immediate, mechanical increase in turnout. However, whether it would restore trust is a more complex question. It would force the parties to appeal to a broader electorate, potentially mitigating polarisation. Yet, if citizens perceived compulsory voting as an authoritarian imposition on a system they already distrusted, it could breed resentment rather than renewed civic commitment. Australia's lesson is thus nuanced: compulsory voting appears most effective as a prophylactic measure. It sustains civic habit and social norms, preventing the trust-turnout spiral from starting in the first place, rather than serving as a simple cure for an already advanced condition of disengagement. The intervention works with trust, not despite its absence.

Australia's experience shows that compulsory voting works best as a preventive measure. It helps maintain civic habits and social norms, stopping the decline of trust and turnout before it starts rather than acting as a simple remedy for a serious problem of disengagement. This approach interacts with trust rather than ignoring its absence. Over generations, the norm of 'showing up' has become deeply rooted; not voting feels unusual and irresponsible. Most importantly, it changes political incentives. Knowing that everyone will vote, political parties must create broad, centrist policies and engage all



groups, not just their core supporters. This enhances the public's view of a responsive and inclusive system, which is crucial for building political trust.

3.6 Summary

Examining Europe's changing turnout and Australia's steady results, demonstrates that political trust and voter turnout have a mutually reinforcing, though not just causal, relationship. However, this relationship is shaped by political culture and institutional design. Austria illustrates that when trust diminishes, turnout becomes unpredictable which is a reflection of temporary crises rather than a solid foundation of democracy. Germany demonstrates that trust building exercises can be non-sustaining across generations. Hungary highlights the extremity where lost in trust of the credibility and legitimacy of voting systems can transform participation to partisan mobilisation. Yet, the same erosion when reaching a critical threshold can create a turnout that aims to reverse that destruction. Europe's broader challenges serve as a warning about this gradual decline. In contrast, Australia provides a powerful, practical lesson; simply the requirement to vote can cultivate a strong civic habit that protects the political system from the serious erosion of trust, making participation the norm rather than a calculated choice. In all instances, some level of trust is essential. Democracies worried about declining trust should not just try to boost turnout with penalties; the deeper goal should be to help create a responsive, legitimate, and effective political environment that encourages citizens to participate.

4. BEYOND POLITICAL TRUST

The previous section showed how political trust connects citizens to the electoral process. When trust in government declines, the motivation to vote often drops as well. This is evident from the evidence in Austria, Germany, Hungary, and beyond. However, looking solely at political trust does not tell the whole story. A direct loss of faith in political institutions is clearly significant, but broader structural changes in society might also play a role. These changes can lead citizens to feel less dependent on their national government, making them less willing to participate in national elections,



even if they do not have overly negative views of politicians or institutions. The question is whether these structural forces provide separate reasons for declining voter turnout or if they function through the same trust mechanism already identified.

Three interconnected phenomena are especially important in this context: globalization, the weakening of national boundaries, and the increasing reliance on markets and corporations to provide goods and services that were once the responsibility of the state. These forces do not replace political trust as the main explanatory factor. Instead, they work alongside it as additional contributors that guide citizens toward the same outcome, lowering turnout through the feelings of detachment and disincentive discussed earlier. This section will explore how these additional phenomena collectively reduce political trust and lessen the perceived importance of national elections, which contributes to lower electoral participation.

4.1 Globalisation and the Fragmentation of National Identity

The first factor is globalization, which has changed how people view their identity and their connection to their nation. This sub section presents empirical data that tests the globalisation–trust link. In the past, the average person in a democratic country was more likely to identify with one national identity. They were born, educated, employed, and expected to live within the borders of a single country. This sense of belonging to a national community created a duty; voting was not just a right but an obligation to fellow citizens and the nation's future. Globalization has made this picture much more complex (Mahoney, 2022). Fischer and Somogyi's analysis of a survey from 260,000 respondents in 80 different countries between 1981 and 2007 reveals the significant effect of economic globalisation on lowering trust particularly amongst citizens with low political interest and education (Fischer & Somogyi, 2012). These citizens are the least able to hold governments accountable for results caused by forces beyond their control. This reveals that globalisation restricts government policy choices, which weakens citizens' sense that voting for that government can change their circumstances.

Increased mobility means that more people now hold dual or multiple citizenships. They may be born in one country, educated in another, and work in a third, with family members spread across various continents. For these individuals,



figuring out where they truly belong can be complicated. This mix of identities can weaken the sense of responsibility toward any single national political system. If one's future is not tied exclusively to a specific country, the outcome of that country's election may seem less personally important. Besides the issue of multiple citizenships, globalization has also encouraged the growth of transnational identities. (Marko Mrakovčić et al., 2020) An environmental activist may feel a stronger connection with activists in other countries than with neighbours who do not share their concerns. A tech professional might feel more aligned with a global industry network than with political discussions in their home country. These transnational identities are real and significant, but they do not easily lead to electoral participation.

Immigration and demographic change have also played a role. In many developed democracies, the population is now more diverse than ever before. This diversity enriches society in many ways, but it can complicate the relationship between citizenship and political participation. First-generation immigrants may face barriers to voting, even after gaining citizenship, such as not being familiar with the issues, candidates, or voting process, or coming from countries where elections were not meaningful or where political participation posed real dangers (Pratsinakis, 2017). More fundamentally, they may not yet feel a full sense of belonging to their new country. The feeling of being an outsider, even a permanent one, does not easily translate into the sense of civic duty that drives people to vote. The processes of globalization have created a world where a singular, unquestioned national identity is no longer the common experience it once was, weakening the sense of obligation to participate in the political life of any one nation.

4.2 Corporate Power and the Capture of Democratic Institutions

The second factor is the growing concentration of economic power among large corporations and the influence these companies have on politics. Increased market concentration accounts for about one-quarter of the recent decline in democracy worldwide (OECD, 2024). Large, profitable firms can turn their economic strength into political sway through campaign contributions, lobbying, and other forms of political involvement that ordinary citizens cannot access.



This situation creates a widespread belief that the political system favors wealthy interests, undermining the fairness of political trust identified in the theoretical framework. In the United States, for instance, a small group of wealthy donors makes up a significant portion of total election spending (Albert & Raja, 2020). Polls consistently show that many Americans feel donors have too much sway over Congress, while regular citizens have too little (Beshay, 2023). This view is not limited to the United States; citizens in many developed democracies are increasingly sceptical of the relationship between business and government as shown in Figure 5 below. National-level trust is shown to be more volatile than trust in the European Union (EU), mirroring the instability illustrated in Austria and Germany's trend. More strikingly, citizens now trust the EU (52%, highest record since 2007), which they have little control over more than their national government (Eurobarometer Shows Record High Trust in the EU, and Strong Support for the Euro and a Common Defence and Security Policy, 2025a). Decreased trust towards national parliaments is most apparent in the Netherlands (-9%), Germany and Ireland (both -8%), and Finland (-7%) (Julien Zalc, 2024). This imbalance between the trust levels of both types of institution highlights that not only does globalisation compete with national political trust, it also relocates citizen's trust. This relocation is often toward institutions that have less of a direct connection to voter turnout that is analysed in this paper.

Indicator	Value
Average trust in the European Union	52% (2025)
Average change in trust in national governments and parliaments	-3%
EU average change in trust, national parliaments, Spring 2024 vs Autumn 2023	+2%, -3% in mistrust

Figure 5: Eurobarometer indicators of national versus supranational institutional trust

The consistent patterns found from Standard Eurobarometer findings have found where citizens have lower trust in national governments, and higher trust in the European Union demonstrates that globalisation and the transfer of effective authority to harder to hold accountable institutions disintegrates the link between voting and perceived control over one's circumstances. When people believe that the economy's rules benefit corporate interests over the public, faith in the political



416 system's fairness naturally declines. Citizens who think that elections are mostly decided by the highest bidder have little
417 motivation to take part. Their distrust often targets the system itself rather than individual politicians, as they see it as
418 fundamentally compromised.

419 Besides directly influencing policy, corporations are also stepping into roles typically held by the government. They
420 are taking positions on social issues, enhancing healthcare benefits, and providing social support to employees. While these
421 actions may be well-intentioned, they can lower expectations for government responsibilities. This distances citizens from
422 political life and strengthens the belief that voting is not the best way to create meaningful change. This represents a decline
423 in output responsiveness: if the private sector provides social benefits instead of elected officials, people's motivation to vote
424 to influence public services goes down.

425 4.3 The Erosion of National Boundaries

426 The third factor involves the decreasing importance of national borders as globalization deepens and corporate
427 power rises (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). For much of the twentieth century, the nation-state was the main unit of political,
428 economic, and cultural life (Held, 1989). Elections mattered because governments controlled power within clearly defined
429 areas. Today, the sense of a bounded community has weakened. Capital flows freely across borders. Multinational media
430 companies increasingly shape culture instead of national institutions. Even the experience of place has changed, as cities and
431 regions connect more to global networks than to their own surrounding areas.

432 When national identity weakens, and people no longer see the nation-state as the natural framework for economic
433 and social life, participating in a national election can seem less meaningful (Towfigh & Weyl, 2024). Citizens may feel a
434 stronger connection to their region, profession, or transnational networks than to their fellow citizens. They might view
435 global corporations as the main agents of change, not governments. In this situation, electoral politics can seem outdated, a
436 remnant from a time when the nation-state truly mattered.



437 4.4 Summary: Ancillary Factors and the Trust Mechanism

438 In summary, the decline in voter turnout is not just about a loss of faith in government. It also stems from structural
439 changes that have made the nation-state seem less relevant. Globalization has limited the policy choices available to national
440 governments, forcing them to respond to external market pressures rather than the will of the people. The concentration of
441 corporate power has created a perception that the political system serves wealthy interests. Corporations have taken on
442 roles traditionally held by the state. Combined with the erosion of national boundaries, these factors have made national
443 elections feel less significant to many citizens.

444 These elements do not function independently of political trust. Instead, they alter the environment in which
445 political trust develops. Citizens do not simply think the government is performing poorly; they increasingly see it as unable
446 to succeed because of global capital constraints, corporate agendas, or the redundancy of its traditional roles. This form of
447 distrust comes from a belief that the government is ineffective and outdated—a collapse in output responsiveness shaped by
448 structural conditions. In this way, globalization and corporate power do not compete with political trust; they are key drivers
449 of its decline. Their overall impact on voter turnout goes through the same trust mechanism that this paper emphasizes.

450 5. CONCLUSION

451 This paper aims to address a seemingly simple question: among the numerous factors that scholars propose to
452 explain declining voter turnout in modern democracies, which is the most significant? A comparative analysis of Austria,
453 Germany, Hungary and Australia, along with a theoretical exploration of globalization, corporate power, and the decline of
454 national identity, points to a clear answer: political trust. Trust in institutions is not just one factor among many. It is the
455 foundational element through which all other factors work—the lens that shapes whether economic conditions, civic
456 infrastructure, or structural changes result in participation or abstention.



457 The findings can be summarized as follows. The literature review and theoretical framework show that existing voter
458 turnout models—socio-economic and institutional—explain capacity and opportunity but fail to capture the will to
459 participate. This willingness, the paper argues, is mainly influenced by political trust, defined as citizens' belief in the fairness
460 of the electoral process and the responsiveness of the resulting governments. The comparative case studies then tested this
461 framework empirically. Austria showed that a loss of institutional trust leads to erratic turnout instead of stable civic
462 participation. It also demonstrated that measures like lowering the voting age fail if the underlying trust issues remain
463 unaddressed. Germany contends that post war trust building can be non-sustaining when there is a lack of renewed
464 institutional performance. Hungary offers that the dismantling of procedural trust through institutional capture changes
465 electoral participation. However, the same erosion produced the highest turnout in 2026 when citizens believed the election
466 was capable for the opposition Tisza party to reverse Orban's rule, refining the paper's outlined relationship between trust
467 and turnout. Australia showed the opposite: that institutional design can create conditions for trust—by normalizing
468 participation across the electorate and encouraging parties to be responsive—thus preventing the trust-turnout spiral from
469 starting. Finally, Section 4 illustrates that the structural forces of globalization, corporate power, and diminishing national
470 boundaries are not competing explanations for the turnout crisis. This claim is further supported by the empirical evidence
471 given by Eurobarometer survey data and Fischer and Somogyi's findings. Instead, they are significant contributors to the
472 erosion of institutional trust, confirming that trust is the central factor through which structural conditions influence
473 individual political behaviour.

474 This paper has two notable limitations, which deserve acknowledgement, along with reasons why its main findings
475 remain compelling. The first limitation is the lack of detailed longitudinal quantitative data. A more thorough study would
476 systematically use panel datasets like the World Values Survey, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and European Social
477 Survey to connect trust scores with turnout rates across a broad, representative sample of democracies over time; although
478 the Eurobarometer data introduced moves toward this direction, it still remains descriptive rather a formal analysis. This
479 paper mainly relies on qualitative and structural comparisons. However, this method suits an exploratory, theory-building



endeavour rather than a hypothesis-testing approach. The consistency of the trust variable in diverse contexts like Austria, Australia, Germany, and Hungary strongly indicates it captures a real causal mechanism rather than just a contextual artifact. The Hungary case provides a unique example where citizen's perception of an election to be an opportunity for change can generate substantially different outcomes. It provides a robustness that purely quantitative studies, which may struggle to reflect the qualitative nature of trust across different political systems, cannot easily match. The second limitation concerns the possibility of reverse causation. The assertion that declining trust leads to lower turnout faces a valid counter-argument: declining turnout may also damage trust by creating governments with weak mandates and questionable legitimacy, which in turn depresses future participation. This circularity exists, yet it does not weaken the argument; instead, it enhances it. The negative cycle shown in Europe's case supports trust's importance. Conversely, the Australian case serves as a near-natural experiment in the opposite direction—compulsory voting interrupts the downward trend by ensuring widespread participation regardless of temporary fluctuations in trust. This stabilizes the conditions under which trust is built. This imbalance supports the view that trust is the initial factor, even if the relationship is ultimately cyclical.

Several avenues for future research arise from these findings. First, scholars should look into the specific ways that certain institutional actions interact with trust to either maintain or restore participation. Citizens' assemblies, deliberative mini-publics, ranked-choice voting, and participatory budgeting are all innovations that aim to make democratic processes seem more legitimate and responsive. Their long-term effects on trust, and how that trust affects turnout, need thorough investigation. Second, the growing research on digital media and political communication includes a less-explored area. Social media platforms are now significant players in shaping political trust. They can both engage new participants and deepen cynicism through the algorithmic spread of distrust and outrage. It is crucial to understand how information environments influence the trust-turnout link in today's digital world. Third, the connection between corporate influence and democratic participation needs more focused theoretical and empirical study. If rising market concentration accounts for a quarter of the global decline in democracy, as the evidence suggests, then managing private economic power also presents a challenge for democratic participation—something the voter turnout research has yet to fully address. Prompted by the



503 Hungarian case, future work can also study if crisis incentive turnout spikes seen in that case can lead to sustainably increase
 504 in institutional trust.

505 Democracy has never been a self-sustaining system. It relies on the belief that ordinary people will return to vote,
 506 giving their trust to imperfect institutions. When that belief falters—when citizens view their vote as merely a pointless
 507 gesture in a rigged system—democracy doesn't fail dramatically. It gradually erodes, mandate by mandate, election by
 508 election. The turnout crisis, in this context, isn't just about civic engagement; it's a crisis of faith. Once lost, restoring faith is
 509 incredibly challenging.

510 4. References

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Data & Code Availability Statement

625 [If you used any scripts or datasets in your study, please add a link to a publicly available repository that contains them. For

626 example, this can be a link to a GitHub repository, Google Drive folder, or Zenodo repository. This will help with the

627 transparency and reproducibility of the results in your study, in case somebody wanted to use similar datasets or build

628 upon your techniques. If your study contains no such scripts or datasets, please delete this section entirely. **Please ensure**

629 **that this repository is anonymous for double-blind peer review.**]

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Author Biography

633 Rachel Luo is a Year 13 student at Chinese International School, Hong Kong, she is interested in studying politics and

634 history hence she chose to write the paper on voter turnout and the factors that influence it. She has a strong foundation

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636 combine analytical thinking with people and society. She is eager to apply her problem solving skills and communication

637 skills to wider contexts.

Mentor Contribution Statement

639 The mentor's contribution was limited to sharing reading material with the author, brainstorming ideas, and proofreading

640 and commenting on drafts. The writing and the prose belongs to the author entirely.

