

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

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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 analyzing the difference between each country’s institutions and their impact on voter turnout. The investigation also addresses contemporary structural challenges, including globalization, 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: political trust, voter turnout, democratic legitimacy, comparative politics, electoral participation, social trust, democratic disengagement, compulsory voting, globalization

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 globalization 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 mobilized 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 centers 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 characterized 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

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.



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, 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, globalization, corporate power, and the erosion of national boundaries and shows that they contribute to the decline of trust in politics. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes 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 analyzes empirical data on voter turnout and trends spanning across multiple years. The tables 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 years chosen for the voter turnout present in Tables 1-4 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 behavior. 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 analyzed 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 prioritized 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 globalization—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 "mobilizing" 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 generalized understanding of this phenomenon. David Easton's systems theory creates a distinction between diffuse support, a generalized connection to the democratic regime as a whole, and specific support for leaders or policies (Easton, 1957). 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 analyzing 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 stabilizing 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 disintegrating 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 polarizing 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 polarization. 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.

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.

Table 1: Austria Voter turnout from 1990 to 2024

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

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 globalization have contributed to this decline in support (Sciocluna, 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 delegitimizes 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 Table 2, reflecting how citizens have learned to trust democracies and move on from the traumatic past (German Elections: Voter Turnout, 2025; Statista, 2025).

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

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

As Table 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 Table 3 (National Election Commission, n.d.).

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

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

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 favor 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 mobilization elections indicate partisan alarm, and low mobilization 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 Table 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.

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 polarization. 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.

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

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

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 mobilization. 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. Globalization 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 subsection presents empirical data that tests the globalization–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 (Choi, 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 globalization 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 globalization 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. (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, 2018). 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 Table 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%) (Zalc, 2024). This imbalance between the trust levels of both types of institutions highlights that not only does globalization 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 analyzed in this paper.

Table 5: Eurobarometer indicators of national versus supranational institutional trust

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



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 globalization 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 system's fairness naturally declines. Citizens who think that 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 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. 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 acknowledgment, 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 citizens' 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 does not fail dramatically. It gradually erodes, mandate by mandate, election by election. The turnout crisis, in this context, is not just about civic engagement; it is a crisis of faith. Once lost, restoring faith is incredibly challenging.

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Author Biography

Rachel Luo is a Year 13 student at Chinese International School, Hong Kong, she is interested in studying politics and history hence she chose to write the paper on voter turnout and the factors that influence it. She has a strong foundation in public speaking, critical thinking and research writing. Interested in pursuing politics or law to contribute in roles that combine analytical thinking with people and society. She is eager to apply her problem solving skills and communication skills to wider contexts.

Mentor Contribution Statement

The mentor's contribution was limited to sharing reading material with the author, brainstorming ideas, and proofreading and commenting on drafts. The writing and the prose belongs to the author entirely.

