

The empathy gap: understanding why some people don't vote

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By Democratic Audit UK

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Not everyone votes. Using data from the 2015 Finnish National Election Study, **Kimmo Grönlund** and **Hanna Wass** look at what factors make a person less likely to go to the polls or get involved in politics. They warn against assuming non-voting is a matter of personal choice and suggest ways to overcome the 'solidarity deficit' that emerges when some sections of society have no say in politics.



During the past decade, several influential studies have identified growing inequality as one of the most urgent risks in contemporary societies (Putnam 2015; Stiglitz 2012; Therborn 2013; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). This development has been less pronounced in the Nordic welfare states, which were traditionally characterised by progressive taxation and extensive redistribution. However, a recent OECD report reveals that income inequality has also risen in these countries since the mid-1980s. Furthermore, social status is transmitted from one generation to another, in spite of a comparatively high level of inter-generational mobility.

The Finnish National Election Study (FNES) 2015^[1] (Grönlund and Wass ed. 2016) shows how political participation reflects social inequalities. Far from being an isolated factor, political participation is an indicator of a person's overall level of well-being, social networks and life situation. This is particularly evident when it comes to voting. Using individual-level register data, where voting records are linked with data on socioeconomic background characteristics using personal identification numbers, the FNES 2015 highlights the effect of education (table 1). While turnout among those who had graduated from college was 85 percent, the corresponding figure was only 58 percent among voters with the lowest level of education. Among 25- to 34-year-olds, the difference in turnout was even more dramatic: 48 points (31% vs. 79%). Other aspects of socioeconomic status – including marital status (as a measure of social embeddedness) – also made a difference, although not as much as education. Furthermore, both parental education and parental voting had a substantial effect, even among 40-year-old voters.

[Edit](#)

	18-24 year-olds			25-34 year-olds			35-54 year-olds			55-69 year-olds			70+ year-olds			Total
	18-24 year-olds			25-34 year-olds			35-54 year-olds			55-69 year-olds			70+ year-olds			T
	(n=102 060)			(n=150 453)			(n=308 584)			(n=269 053)			(n=189 712)			(n=1 019 862)
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men									
junior high	38	44	41	31	30	31	47	44	46	69	70	70	71	61	65	58
high school	47	53	50	52	53	52	65	64	65	77	78	78	81	76	78	64
associate degree	35	32	34	52	44	48	81	79	80	88	88	88	87	86	86	84
university degree	71	73	73	78	79	79	86	85	85	92	92	92	91	88	89	86
Total	44	51	47	56	61	58	69	72	71	78	80	80	77	69	72	68

The data on turnout was compiled from electoral wards that use an electronic voter register (n=1 019 862). The data, administrated by the Ministry of Justice, were released to [Statistics Finland](#) after the elections.

A Finnish associate degree is a two-year post-secondary course.

The risks of assuming 'they just don't care'

Socio-economic factors do not just influence voting. They also increase the likelihood someone will get involved in non-parliamentary participation like taking part in demonstrations, signing petitions, someone's sense of political agency, political interest and political knowledge, the attention paid to electoral campaigns and trust in political institutions. Notably, poor health did not just have a negative impact on turnout, but also weakened institutional and social trust.

While empirical evidence points towards a strong socio-economic bias in political participation, in public debate it is usually regarded as a matter of individual choice. Emphasising the role of motivational factors easily leads to 'responsibilisation' of the individual. From that point of view, non-voters or "passive voters" do not participate because they don't want to, or are too reckless to care. Such "empathy-gap" perspective ignores the close association between various kinds of societal inequalities and participation, addressing the first component in Verba,

Schlozman, and Brady's famous civic voluntarism model (1993). The FNES 2015 results highlight that sometimes people do not take part in politics because they "can't" – they do not have adequate resources to do so.

This empathy gap and 'responsibilisation' of individuals may in turn form the basis for a solidarity deficit. If non-participation is interpreted as an outcome of political ignorance or apathy, the mobilisation of parts of the electorate who were previously passive can suddenly appear as a threat to politics as usual. In particular, a sudden rise in support for populist parties or actors may lead to some taking the "moral high ground" and questioning the judgment of newly-active voters. Arguments like this could also weaken the justification for attempts to equalise the base for political activity. This would clearly jeopardise the principle of inclusive democracy. According to its standards, practices for political participation should be accessible for all kinds of citizens, regardless of their resources (Young 2000).

How can we encourage non-voters to get involved in politics?

What can be done to reduce the empathy gap in political participation and to narrow the solidarity deficit? Firstly, we should recognise the multifaceted nature of political participation as a mixture of resources, motivation, mobilisation and institutional conditions. Instead of assuming an individual's lack of interest or knowledge, we need to identify the circumstances that can function as breeding ground for political radicalisation.

Secondly, since political participation reflects someone's level of economic and social resources, policies with a bearing on health, jobs or income redistribution are more likely to encourage it. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the relevance of social identities. [Achen and Bartels](#) recently argued that even the most sophisticated voters do not make political decisions solely based on policy issues. If most of the major parties target middle-class voters and frame their message accordingly, marginalised groups can easily become politically isolated.

Third, we need institutional change, and – especially – more channels for political participation. Citizens' subjective interest in politics has *increased* in many Western democracies (Dalton 2013), including Finland. There also seems to be a growing will to have control over one's own life as a result of a human development where every generation, on average, has better cognitive skills, a more diverse social network and better economic resources than the generation of its parents (Welzel 2013).

Interestingly, greater political interest combined with more resources has not led people to join political parties, as demonstrated by the constant decline in party membership. (The growth of the British Labour party over the past 18 months is an obvious exception.) Overall, it seems the political system has not been able to respond to the growth in human capital. Contemporary democratic societies are still very much electoral democracies.

But an interest in issue-based politics among what Dalton (2007, 2015) calls "engaged citizens" is not necessarily satisfied through a model where a person needs to commit themselves to a certain political ideology through party membership. An emerging research agenda has highlighted the importance of democratic innovations (Smith 2009), namely new means of engaging lay citizens in political agenda-setting, problem-solving and decision-making. These citizen panels, especially the model of "deliberative mini-publics", where a representative sample of people gather for deliberation – reflection, giving reasons and problem-solving in a respectful manner – could provide a means of institutional renewal of the democratic system (Grönlund et al. 2014).

We still need a systematic research agenda and politicians who are willing to promote participatory reforms. If organised in an inclusive way, direct participation has a potential to channel the voice of less privileged citizens into the decision-making processes. In addition, it may help to narrow the solidarity gap by increasing a mutual understanding of realities and needs among different parts of society.

Notes

[1] The [original study](#) is available only in Finnish.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit.

[Kimmo Grönlund](#) is a Professor of Political Science and the Director of Research of the Social Science Research Institute at Åbo Akademi University in Finland. He is also Convenor (together with André Bächtiger) of the ECPR Standing Group on Democratic Innovations and the Director of the Finnish National Election Study. His research interests include political behaviour, democratic innovations and experimental research on citizen deliberation.

[Hanna Wass](#) is an Academy Research Fellow and University Lecturer in the Department of Political and Economic Studies at the University of Helsinki. Her current project "Equality in electoral participation and vote choice", funded by the Academy of Finland, examines turnout and representation from various perspectives.

