

To Vote or Not to Vote? Declining Voter Turnout in the Republic of Cyprus

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Abstract

Both the 2011 parliamentary election and the 2013 presidential election in the Republic of Cyprus produced the lowest levels of voter turnout. This obliges the researchers concerned with democratic legitimacy to dig into the political psychology literature and combine it with empirical analysis to understand who votes in the Republic of Cyprus, who does not, and why. Only then can we expound on the possible explanations for declining voter turnout. The results in this paper show that party identification is an important determinant of voter turnout. The author argues that the recent decline in party identification might be the main cause of falling voter turnout. Results also suggest that younger people's abstention rates are increasing over time. It is debated here that surveys should be repeated periodically and panel data should be gathered in order to overcome the problem with spurious relationships and explain why voter turnout is dwindling.

Keywords: electoral participation, generational change, party identification, Republic of Cyprus, voter turnout

Introduction

In the Republic of Cyprus the parliamentary election of 2011 and the presidential election of 2013 produced the lowest levels of voter turnout. As it is a crucial indicator of democratic legitimacy, an attempt should be made to understand the reasons behind the declining number of voters. In the first part of this paper the author explains who does and does not vote in the Republic of Cyprus and the whys and wherefores for doing so. In the second part, plausible hypotheses are generated in order to throw light on the causes for the deterioration in voter turnout. The results indicate that party identification is an important determinant of voter turnout. Having this in mind, party identification data from 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010 suggest that the declining number of party identifiers could be the main reason for the waning voter attendance. Also, results show that younger people are abstaining more frequently with time. Therefore, generational change may be

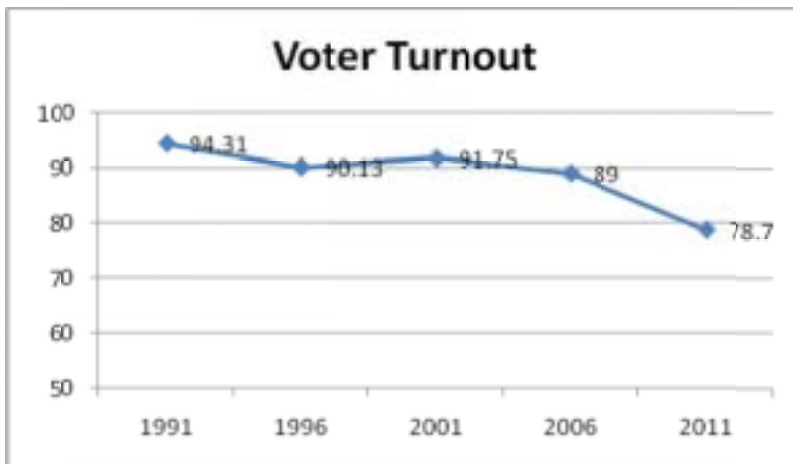
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contributing to this decline. So far, there is very limited literature on political participation in the Republic of Cyprus. The results in this paper aim to provide a step towards overcoming the sizeable knowledge gap apropos the electoral participation tendencies of the Greek Cypriot citizens.

Voter Turnout in Historical Perspective

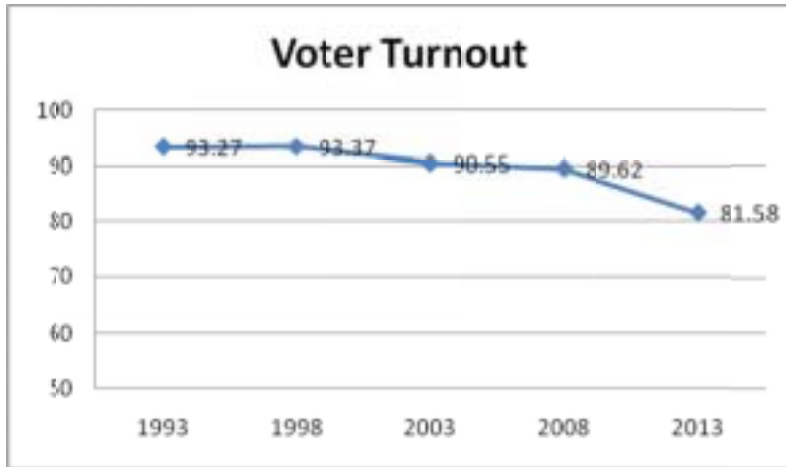
Voting in the Republic of Cyprus is compulsory even if the enforcement of this law is not strictly upheld. The average voter turnout in the parliamentary elections creates optimism compared with the very low figures recorded in many other European Union member-states. However, the decreasing number of people participating in the act of voting might suggest that the Republic of Cyprus is not aloof from the malaise that has been threatening Europe. A virtually monotonic graph is observed in the case of both parliamentary and presidential elections. Voter turnout was as high as 94.31% in the 1991 parliamentary election whereas it was only 78.7% in 2011. Similarly, turnout in the 1993 presidential election was 93.27% but it was only 81.58% in 2013. What may also be worthy of mention is the sharp drop in voter turnout in the second European Parliament election. Indeed, it might be the case that the cause of the 72.5% turnout was the temporary enthusiasm of the Greek Cypriot citizens as the Republic of Cyprus had recently joined the European Union. It may be plausible to expect to see numbers in the future European Parliament elections resembling the 2009 election where turnout was just 59.4%.

Figure 1:
Voter Turnout in Parliamentary Elections in the Republic of Cyprus



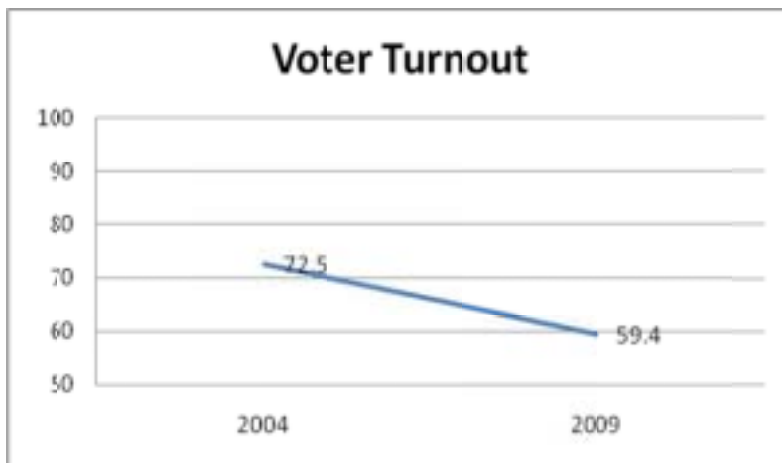
Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

Figure 2:
Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections in the Republic of Cyprus



Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

Figure 3:
Voter Turnout in the European Parliament Elections in the Republic of Cyprus



Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

What Determines the Act of Voting?

Voter turnout literature illustrates that those who identify themselves with a political party are more likely to turn out to vote (Van Egmond *et al.*, 1998, p. 288; Wattenberg, 2002; Heath *et al.*, 1985; Clarke *et al.*, 2004). People who feel an attachment to a political party probably care more about getting out and voting for that party than someone who does not feel emotionally involved with any specific party. One of the expectations in this paper is that the effect of partisanship in the Republic of Cyprus concerning the choice of whether to vote or not should be very strong. It is known that the number of individuals who are attached to a political party is not only high but equally those who are attached are also committed to that political party in a passionate way. Partisanship deeply influences almost all social relations (Dunphy and Bale, 2007, p. 300; Charalambous, 2007, p. 444; Vasilara and Piaton, 2007, p. 117).

Some scholars argue that people with higher socioeconomic status, measured with variables such as age or income, are more likely to vote as the integration of the people to society increases the level of commitment to that society (Stein *et al.*, 2005, p. 3; Martikainen *et al.*, 2005; Hout and Knoke, 1975; Rose, 1974; Pattie and Johnston, 1998, p. 265; Van Egmond *et al.*, 1998, pp. 284 and 288; Bratton *et al.*, 2010, p. 108). Even though there is no consensus as to how its effect comes to take place, the literature also suggests that a high level of formal education and better access to information have a positive effect on turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Crewe, 1981; Verba *et al.*, 1995; Nie *et al.*, 1996; Freedman *et al.*, 2004; Lassen, 2005; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Other scholars have found that religiosity is positively correlated with voter turnout (Van Egmond *et al.*, 1998, p. 284). Bratton, Chu and Lagos (2010, p. 116) assert that men are more likely to vote than women. Nevertheless, the impact of gender on turnout is not completely clear (Van Egmond *et al.*, 1998, p. 288; Van Der Eijk and Oppenhuis, 1990). Additionally, married people are expected to turn out to vote more than singles (Lipset, 1981).

Civic engagement can be influential in facilitating access to political information and creating a sense of civic duty to vote (Van Egmond *et al.*, 1998, p. 284; Stein *et al.*, 2005, p. 4; Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba and Nie, 1972; Teixeira, 1992). Furthermore, trade union membership could increase turnout by making information available and creating a feeling of civic duty (Van Egmond, 2003, p. 2; Delaney *et al.*, 1988; Van Egmond *et al.*, 1998, p. 285). Likewise, being a member of a political party may also strengthen people's psychological bonding with their group identity and elections (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Dawson, 1994; Shingles, 1981; Uhlaner, 1989). However, the impact of civic engagement is not uncontested so further exploration is needed to test its effect (Miller, 1980; Miller, 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). What is more, research shows that a high level of interpersonal trust is associated with greater civic activism, and consequently it may lead to higher turnout (Cox, 2003, p. 62). Political interest may also have a causal effect on voter turnout. It is reasonable to argue that an individual would care less to go out to vote if s/he has no interest in politics (Van Egmond *et al.*, 1998, p. 284). People who trust the system and sense that their vote will have an effect on the outcome are more likely

to turn out to vote (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Ragsdale and Rusk, 1993; Crewe *et al.*, 1977; Sabucedo and Cramer, 1991; Narud and Valens, 1996; Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba and Nie, 1972). Moreover, individuals who view the government positively would be more optimistic about what the government can do for them (Stein *et al.*, 2003, p. 4), but this argument does not always fit reality. Various analyses suggest that there is no relationship or even a negative relationship (Citrin, 1974; Abramson and Aldrich, 1982; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Shaffer, 1981; Miller *et al.*, 1979; Timpone, 1998). Other scholars included not only trust in government but also trust in all public institutions into their analysis (Cox, 2003).

Data Analysis and Results

Cumulative European Social Survey dataset (2006; 2008; 2010) is used to make the statistical analysis. Income is excluded from the analysis since it is measured in a different way for the three waves (2006, 2008 and 2010) of the European Social Survey. The author abstained from selecting the subjective household income as a substitute. Due to issues with multicollinearity, creating a trust in institutions and politicians index is preferable to analysing trust in different institutions and politicians separately. Since there is no measure of trust in government in the dataset, only trust in politicians, trust in parliament and trust in political parties are included in the index. The Greek Cypriots who say that they voted in the last national election are coded as 1 and those who say they did not vote are coded as 0 (**Voter Turnout**). The Greek Cypriots who feel close to a political party are coded as 1 and those who do not are coded as 0 (**Party Identification**). Years of education received is an interval variable (**Education**). The age of the respondents is also an interval variable (**Age**). On an 11-point religiosity scale, subjective religiosity of the respondents increases from 'not at all religious' (0) to 'very religious' (10) (**Religiosity**). Males are coded as 1 and females are coded as 0 (**Gender**). Married people are coded as 1 and singles are coded as 0 (**Marital Status**). Respondents who are members of a trade union are coded as 1 and those who are not are coded as 0 (**Trade Union Membership**). Party members are coded as 1 and non-members are coded as 0 (**Party Membership**). Interpersonal trust is measured on an 11-point scale where 10 is the score for the respondents who think that most people can be trusted and 0 is the score for the people who think that you cannot be too careful when dealing with others (**Interpersonal Trust**). Trust in politicians, political parties and the parliament is measured with a single 11-point scale where 0 is no trust and 10 is complete trust (**Trust in Institutions and Politicians**). People who are very interested in politics are coded as 3, people who are quite interested in politics are coded as 2, people who are hardly interested in politics are coded as 1 and people who are not at all interested in politics are coded as 0 (**Political Interest**).

$$\text{Logit (Voter Turnout)} = (\text{Party Identification}) + (\text{Education}) + (\text{Age}) + (\text{Religiosity}) + (\text{Gender}) + (\text{Marital Status}) + (\text{Trade Union Membership}) + (\text{Party Membership}) + (\text{Interpersonal Trust}) + (\text{Trust in Institutions and Politicians}) + (\text{Political Interest}) + c$$

P-values are calculated as two-tailed due to the preliminary stage of voting behaviour analysis in Cyprus. The model can explain up to 31% of the variance if we rely on the Nagelkerke's R-squared. All variables except years of education received are significant with differing confidence levels with odds ratios reported accordingly (see table 1).

Table 1: Determinants of Voter Turnout

	<i>Odds Ratios</i>	<i>P-values</i>
Party Identification	5.62	0.01***
Years of Education	1.02	0.47
Age	1.04	0.01***
Religiosity	0.93	0.06*
Gender	0.54	0.01***
Marital Status	1.49	0.01***
Trade Union Membership	1.58	0.01***
Party Membership	2.8	0.03**
Trust in People	0.95	0.05**
Trust in Institutions and Politicians	1.07	0.03**
Political Interest	1.47	0.01***
<i>Model Fit</i>		
N	2863	
McFadden's R-squared	0.25	
Nagelkerke's R-squared	0.31	
Log-Likelihood	-663	

Note: * significant at p<0.1 level, ** significant at p<0.05 level, *** significant at p<0.01 level (two-tailed)

How Can We Explain the Declining Voter Turnout?

The predominant explanation for the declining voter turnout in the literature is the generational change hypothesis (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003; Levine and Lopez, 2002; Lopez *et al.*, 2005; Phelps, 2004, 2006; Gidengil *et al.*, 2003; Lyons and Alexander, 2000; Konzelmann *et al.*, 2012; Johnston *et al.*, 2007; Boyd, 1981; Gallego, 2009; Smets, 2012). The first variant of this explanation argues that young people are voting less and less in time because of delayed transitions to adulthood. Currently, young people face more burdens in the sense of more years of education, finding a partner at a later age and not being able to establish a steady career or risk the move to another country. They are therefore unable to settle down, grow attachment to civic life and have knowledge and interest in politics (Smets, 2012; Jankowski and Strate, 1995; Strate *et al.*, 1989; Blais *et al.*, 2004; Blais, 2006; Kimberlee, 2002, p. 87). The second variant of this hypothesis suggests that young people are much more likely to vote when elections are competitive but recently, competition is less fierce in advanced democracies. As voting is a habitual practice, young people tend to abstain in upcoming elections (Franklin, 2004; Franklin *et al.*, 2004). The second argument fared worse when confronted with data compared to the value change argument (Blais and Rubenson, 2013).

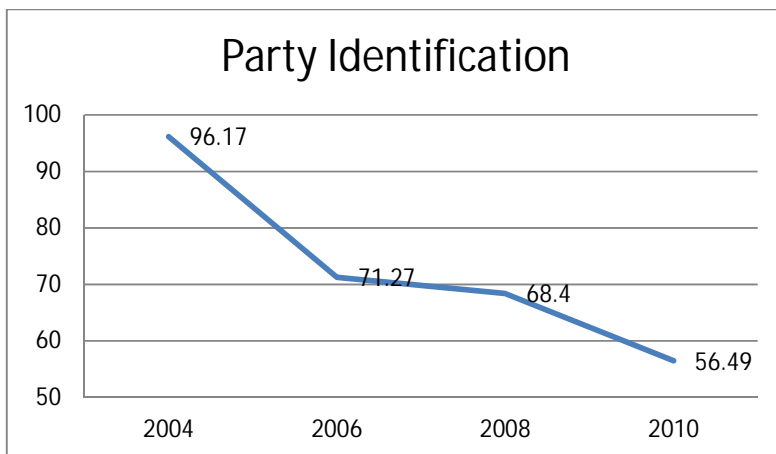
If the generational change hypothesis is true, then we should observe the effect of younger age on the abstention rate increasing in time. Initial analysis indicates that this may be the case as is shown by correlations between age and voting in 2006, 2008 and 2010 which are respectively 0.19, 0.23 and 0.32. Yet, we should note that the generational change hypothesis is more appropriate to explain long-term change in voter turnout. The recent drastic drop in turnout levels in the Republic of Cyprus may not be effectively explained by theories that refer to long-term change.

Another group of scholars point to the declining partisanship levels for explaining the diminishing voter turnout (Abramson and Aldrich, 1982; Shaffer, 1981; Kleppner, 1982, p. 130; Vowles, 2002; Heath, 2007). The number of party identifiers has sharply declined over the years (Wattenberg, 2000, 2002; Dalton, 2000). Cognitive mobilisation argument claims that as people become more educated and competent in acquiring independent information and making independent and learned choices, dependence on parties and party identification decreases (Dalton, 1984; Shively, 1979). Political competition argument on the other hand debates that polarisation of the party system is positively correlated with party identification. The more differences there are between the parties, the more likely the people are to be partisans. As party polarisation is decreasing over the years, less people may be identifying with political parties (Schmitt and Holmberg, 1995).

Figure 4 shows that there is a sharp decline in party identification in the Republic of Cyprus. Bearing in mind that party identification is an important determinant of voter turnout in the Republic of Cyprus (see table 1), figure 4 may suggest that the decline in party identification could be the main reason for the dip in voter turnout. Figure 4, however, does not say anything about why party identification is dropping. It may be the case that dissatisfaction with politics, mistrust

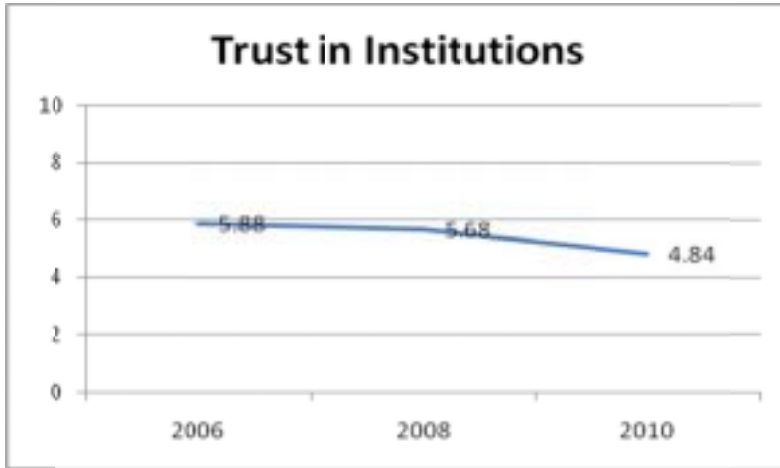
in political institutions and politicians and a waning interest in political matters are responsible for why party identification is falling: In which case party identification might be treated as a mediator rather than an antecedent of turnout. It may also be the case that the relationship between party identification and voter turnout is simply spurious. Dissatisfaction, mistrust and declining interest may be responsible for both declining party identification as well as voter turnout, and party identification may not have any effect on turnout in time-series analysis. Figure 5, which measures averages of trust in institutions and politicians on an 11-point scale in time, figure 6, which measures averages of political interest on a 4-point ordered scale in time, and figure 7, which measures averages of satisfaction with the way democracy works on an 11-point scale in time suggest that both of these explanations might be possible. In order to increase our confidence in relation to the causes of declining voter turnout, we should begin to gather panel data or repeat surveys that are comparable in time. Only then can we run the appropriate time-series analyses that can shed light upon the true causes of falling voter turnout.

Figure 4:
Declining Party Identification in the Republic of Cyprus



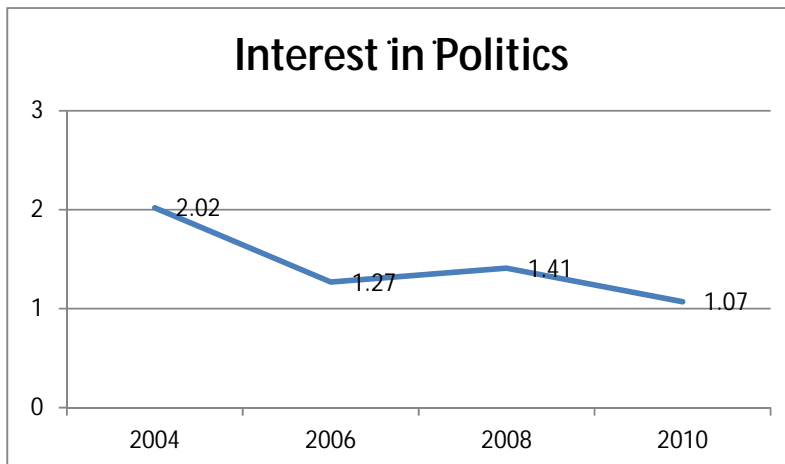
Source: International Social Survey Programme and European Social Survey

Figure 5:
Trust in Institutions and Politicians in Time



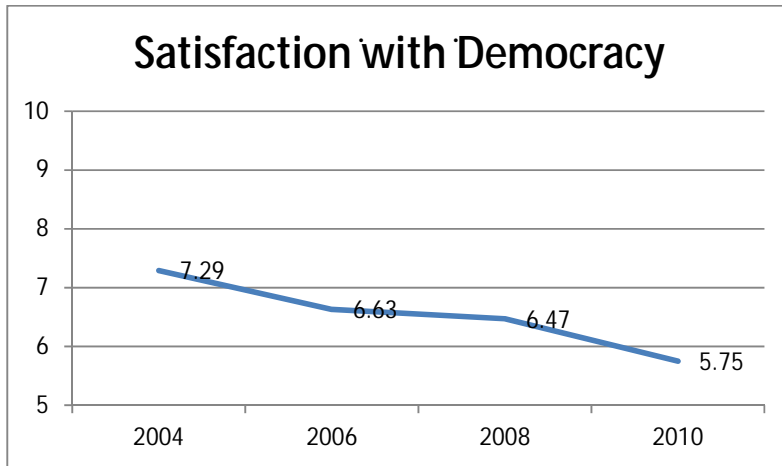
Source: European Social Survey

Figure 6:
Interest in Politics



Source: International Social Survey Programme and European Social Survey

Figure 7:
Satisfaction with the Way Democracy Works



Source: International Social Survey Programme and European Social Survey

Conclusion

Voter turnout is a crucial indicator of democratic legitimacy. Voting is an act that among other things demonstrates that the citizens are willing to solve the social, economic and political problems within the realm of the political system. The author of this paper has shown that declining party identification in the Republic of Cyprus may be responsible for the declining voter turnout. Data constraints, however, do not allow us to put this hypothesis to a robust time-series test. Party identification may be an antecedent, a mediator or may even have a spurious relationship with voter turnout. Dissatisfaction with politics, mistrust in institutions and politicians and falling interest in politics may be responsible for both the reduction in party identification as well as the decline in voter turnout. Also, generational change hypothesis may have some relevance in the context of Cyprus. We see that younger people are abstaining more than ever in time. Nonetheless, we need to observe this relationship in the long term before coming to any conclusions. Conducting surveys, which are comparable in time as well as collecting panel data, are indispensable tools for understanding why voter turnout is declining and researchers should get their hands dirty in order to realise these goals.

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