

## The suffrage age and democratic election turnout

The number of citizens, who use their right to vote, are often used as a objectives to measure the status of democracy. Research shows that a lowering of the suffrage age would improve the voting percentage. Democratic election turnout is not just a question of influence, but also of habit, which is influenced by the surrounding environment.

Since the mid 1960s, election turnout has steadily decreased in both the US and Europe. According to American professor Mark Franklin, an expert in election turnout, the reason was that during this period the suffrage age was lowered to 18 on both sides of the Atlantic<sup>1</sup>.

At the age of 18, the conditions of life and surroundings are not as conducive for election turnout as they are at a lower or higher suffrage age.

Franklin has researched election turnout at European and

American elections for over twenty years, and has charted these factors<sup>2</sup>.

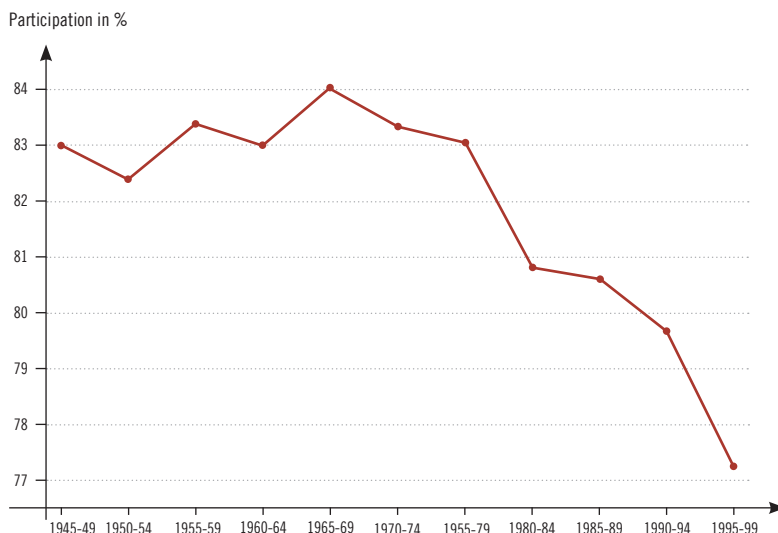
### Surroundings drive you to the ballot

The decision to vote depends on whether the vote is experienced as rational and meaningful. The individual's turnout is to a high degree based on social surroundings. Fixed social frameworks, such as school and work, play an important part in creating an opinion about politics in general and for the individual voting specifically. Surroundings also play a key role in encouraging people to vote. If you find yourself outside a fixed context and have loose social surroundings, opinion formation becomes harder, and the probability of not voting in the election becomes greater.

### 18 year olds' social backgrounds in upheaval

When you are 18, your social framework breaks up on several fronts. The majority finish secondary education and leave home at the time, when they face their first election. The stable context in the form of school, parents and friends, which would all encourage them to vote, is weakened at the point of turning 18. In contrast, the framework for 16-17 year olds, for example, is strong. This age group is generally still in school, where there is

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to be continued...

<sup>1</sup> Mark N. Franklin (2004): Voter Turnout and the Dynamics and Electoral Competition in established Democracies since 1945. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Countries in the study: Malta, Sweden, Australia, Denmark, Holland, Norway, Belgium, Iceland, Germany, Israel, Ireland, England, Luxembourg, USA, Canada, Italy, New Zealand, France, Finland, Austria and Switzerland.

### 14 – 25 YEAR OLDS IN DENMARK, WHO FINISHED THEIR SECONDARY EDUCATION IN 2008 SPREAD ACROSS AGE GROUPS

Age	Number	Percent
16 – 17 year olds	8	0 %
18 – 19 year olds	12,833	20 %
20 – 21 year olds	22,799	36 %
22 – 23 year olds	7,602	12 %
Others	19,567	31 %
In total	62,809	

*Technical secondary education, normal secondary education and vocational training*

focus on forming opinions, and their social framework is stable. The table shows when the shift from basic education to new surroundings takes place.

#### Turnout – a habit that starts early

Mark Franklin's studies highlights that one of the most significant reasons for a decline in turnout since the 1960s is that people's political turnout is strongly driven by habit: If you normally go out to vote, then there is greater chance of doing it again next time you get the chance, then if you do not normally vote. The habit of voting at elections is established early on. After just three voting opportunities, your habit will, according to Franklin, be rooted.

However, it is normal that many start voting over the years, but the age trend never fully compensates if an "election deficit" has formed in a new generation of voters.

The same phenomenon, which other researchers have documented, explains why it took up to 50 years to close the "gap" between men and women's turnout percentage after women got the vote in the US<sup>3</sup>. Women were not used to voting, and therefore for many years did not make use of their newly-won right to vote.

#### High turnout and stable surroundings

The 18 year old first-time voters have developed a passive voting habit since 60s and 70s. A habit that sticks for the rest of their voting lives.

If we are to reverse the negative effect on election turnout, an effect that has been recognized in the majority of Western demo-

cracies, then we need to move the formation of people's turnout habits to more stable surroundings.

Mark Franklin and Peter Nedergaard, a Danish professor in political science, have both suggested a lowering of the suffrage age as a possible solution. "This suggestion builds on a basic socio-psychological idea that the democratic culture that determines whether you vote in elections, is easier to pass to a suffrage age that is lower than the one we have today"<sup>4</sup>.

The ages of 15-16 represent, purely contextually, a more stable period, whereby family and schools have greater opportunity to encourage young people to use their democratic rights to vote. Both researchers believe that a lower suffrage age in the long-term would reverse the negative turnout trend.

#### An independent vote?

It is worth noting that a lower suffrage age puts major responsibility on teachers who have to teach young voters about democracy. The obvious question is: Will the context not have too great an influence on what young people vote?

In 2008 Gallup carried out a study for the Danish Youth Council about young people's perception of democracy and politics. Here 67% of the 16-25 year olds answered that they were interested in politics. This is a larger share than both the 36-45 year olds and the 46-55 year olds in the study. The study also showed that at least half of the 16-25 year olds believe that Danish politicians should listen more to young people's opinions. This also implies that young people are informed on politics and feel that they have something independent to add in the political debate.

Franklin acknowledges that teachers and parents have a major influence on young people's turnout. He is, however, also convinced that a lower suffrage age would strengthen young people's ability to relate critically to politics, because it would lead to an increased focus on a high standard of citizenship education.

3 Pippa Norris (2001): "Women's power at the ballot box" in International IDEA Handbook on Democracy Assessment of David Bentham (2002). Kluwer Law International.

4 Berlingske Tidende, Kultur og Debat d. 9.10.2008