

Committee/Council: Special Political and Decolonization (GA4)

Issue: The rising phenomenon of apolitical citizens

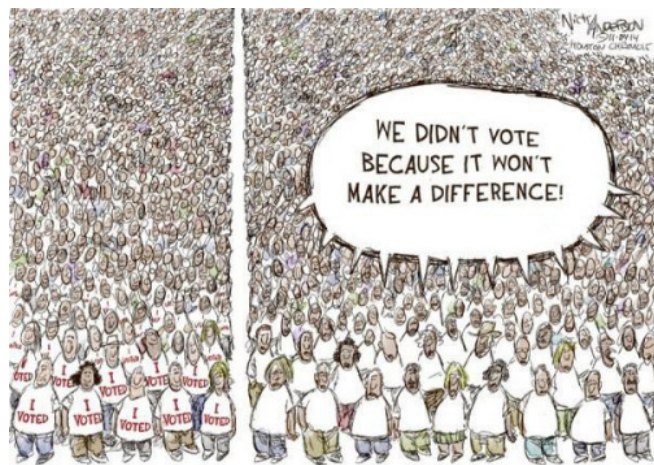
Student Officer: Maria Deliporanidou

Position: Co- Chair

Introduction

“The human being is in the most literal sense a political animal, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can only indicate itself in the midst of society.” (Karl Marx)

Being apolitical is a choice. Apoliticism is a weapon against democracy and one may wonder why such a phenomenon exists or why it even appeared in first place. This phenomenon only concerns democratic states, since in authoritarian regimes the freedoms and the rights of people, especially their right to vote, is restricted whereas democracy is based on the sovereignty of the citizens and their right to exercise power; authoritarianism is a consequence of apoliticism and political chaos. During the last years, this situation got worse especially because an important



#1: “Why don’t people vote?”

percentage of Millennials refuse to go to the poll. However, the phenomenon is notably alarming when one is referring to older citizens as well. By reacting passively¹ to the decisions of the government, which may sometimes be extreme or violate essential democratic principles, the whole society is affected. This can be easily understood with the help of the social contract theory by Locke and Rousseau that concerns the legitimacy of the state over the individual and claims that if the governor violates essential principles and the rights and freedoms of the individual, then the people have the right to resist. It is obvious that the higher the proportion of the voting population is, the more democratically elected can the government be considered.

When referring to an apolitical stance, one should differentiate between those who do not participate in civic life because they think that the political system does not match their principles and those who are simply not interested. However, in the end both stances are to be considered as apolitical.

¹Abstaining from voting or ignoring important socioeconomic and political matters can be perceived as a passive attitude.

One ought to question the reasons behind people's abstention from voting or the passive nature of their decisions regarding politics. Should one blame the unawareness of the youth which probably arise out of the lack of the needed education or should one blame the politicians who do not inspire their people? Or is apoliticism a way of exercising one's free will?

Definition of Key-Terms

Apoliticism²

The term apoliticism has a rather complex meaning and one can perceive it in different ways. Apoliticism is the apathy or the antipathy towards political matters. According to Collins dictionary the term apolitical refers to someone who is "not interested in politics or politically neutral and generally not concerned or connected with political matters". However, the act of being "blindly" politically active, which means being involved with politics without knowing the ideology of the party one supports, can also be considered as apoliticism.

Voter turnout³

The voter turnout is the percentage of people who are taking part in the voting procedure in every kind of election. It refers to eligible voters but ought not to be confused with the percentage of adult citizens. As it is understood, a low voter turnout can hurt a democratic system, because it is likely that the election result does not match the preferred outcome by all potential voters.

Filter bubble⁴

Filter bubble is a term formulated by Eli Pariser which describes the internet phenomenon of intellectual isolation which occurs when websites develop certain algorithms that keep track of the preferences of the user (for example through their research history) and thus they can control and decide what they are going to publish on their websites.

Active citizenship⁵

Active citizenship is the philosophy on the basis of which citizens should take action so as to improve their community, for example, by being politically and economically active. Apoliticism can also be perceived as the lack of active citizenship.

² Apolitical definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary and Humansupport.gr

³ Definitions.net

⁴ Technopedia

⁵ Open Society Foundations

Background Information

Origin of the phenomenon

In order to understand the rising phenomenon of apolitical citizens nowadays, one has to trace back to the moment when humans were characterized citizens for the first time; since then they were considered as “subjects”. Admittedly the relation between an individual and the state began in Ancient Greece with the city-states⁶. Through the centuries the term “citizen” has been given different attributes. However, the meaning of the word as people use it today has been assigned to it during the years of Enlightenment and finalized in the French Revolution with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. The Declaration did not grant the right of active citizenship to all citizens. In other words, women, slaves, foreigners were excluded from the voting procedure. Over the years, every person obtained the right to exercise power through other Declarations (e.g. Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen). Nowadays, the word “citizenship” is substantially connected with political participation. In the following diagram one may notice the different types of political participation, which are also considered as a solution to apoliticism.



#2: Political participation can be conceptualized in a hierarchical manner. Political involvement is understood in terms of different level. (Adapted from Milbrath, 1965: 18)

Lastly, highly interesting is the fact that in Ancient Athens people who deliberately abstained from the political scene were called “ιδιώτες” from which derives the English word “idiot”. This shows that people who abstained from politics were judged negatively by the society and excluded from the civic life in general.

⁶ “City-state is a political system consisting of an independent city having sovereignty over contiguous territory and serving as a center and leader of political, economic, and cultural life”, - “City-State | Definition, History, & Facts.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Web. 18 June 2018.

Citizens' reaction

The phenomenon of apolitical citizens is connected with the modern states and the socioeconomic crises they may face which affect the phenomenon in two opposing but interconnected ways. First of all, the citizens find the government unsuitable and try to take matters in hand, by protesting against the way the government officials handle the situation. Moreover, they might try to solve the issues by focusing on their own. By doing so, they replicate the state structure in a regional level. For instance, Mediterranean countries, like Italy, Spain and Greece, that have been faced with a severe economic and, by extension, social crisis are a typical example of the former scenario. In those countries, one may notice a fall in the voter turnout (e.g. in the Spanish general election of 2016 the voter turnout was the lowest since 1975 and in the Greek legislative elections of 2015 the voter turnout was also reduced by 7%). The rise of right-wing parties in those countries can also be perceived as a consequence of misinformation or apathy towards politics. The second scenario precedes or is subsequent to the former one: Citizens disappointed by the lack of change they see in their society become politically apathetic.

Reasons

School system

In most of the countries of the world, students are taught about citizenship and their rights and obligations already in secondary education. They are taught about the principles of the different political systems and their role in the community. Since our societies have reached the a point where people are talking about the phenomenon of apolitical citizens, one may come to the conclusion that the school system did not convey its message. Many argue that the political education in schools requires more open-mindedness and that it should awake the critical thinking of the students. Another opinion states that citizenship and political participation in general should be taught more practically; the schools should reflect democratic practices by allowing students to take part in the decision-making, to a certain extent. For instance, in school students are being taught the consequences of WW2 or the negative impact of fascist regimes. Educators hope that the future generations will learn from the mistakes of the previous ones; however it is a fact that history repeats itself. This is also the reason why the school system should keep on teaching the youth about the mistakes of the past. For instance, the educators can try to help the students come to the conclusion concerning the causes of an event and by doing so learn how to avoid repeating them.

“We learn from history that we do not learn from history.” — Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Media distraction

Social media often build a bubble of distraction that is connected with the definition of apoliticism which describes the misunderstanding of political systems and ideas. It is an undeniable fact that social media have a huge impact on the citizens and can control the information published online. The recent allegations against the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, that Facebook helped the spread of “fake news” during the US presidential elections of 2016 are reminiscent of the phenomenon of propaganda and the distraction of citizens. Sometimes people decide to follow the crowd rather than to do the right thing which is one of the most significant reasons why young people are becoming apolitical. The state of the filter bubble in combination with the confirmation bias, which describes the tendency of people to search only for information they agree, results in a false orientation. Nowadays, the social media play an important role in that state, since people with authority express their thoughts online and through sheer repetition achieve to — unconsciously— make their point of view commonly accepted.

Disappointment by politics and corruption

It is thought that even though young people do care about politics, they just don't like it. When one is analyzing the phenomenon of the Millennials one notices that one of the reasons why they act apathetically is because politicians do not serve their interests. But the reason why they are not satisfied with the decisions of the government is that they do not vote and thus they do not have a say and get their chance and opportunity. This forms a vicious circle: citizens abstain from politics because they do not feel represented and by their abstention, they lose their voice. It is important to understand that one cannot just demand from politicians to guess what people need as a society. All citizens have to accept the responsibility to express our opinion actively. How can we be heard if we remain silent?

Corruption can lead to political instability and corrupted leaders do not inspire their people due to the lack of trust. Such leaders disappoint the citizens who eventually feel betrayed. A typical example is the former South African President, Jacob Zuma, who was charged with corruption and resigned some months later. Now, the country is governed by his successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, who was not elected directly by the people —he was voted only by the National Assembly.

Disappointment by extreme living conditions

In the developing nations, people may also feel disappointed by the extreme living conditions which are usually a consequence of inefficient governing. Every revolution in mankind started from the middle class. People who had a solid conceptual instrumentarium and had secured financial independency were the ones to stand against injustice and corruption and for the rights of the poor. On the other hand, people who had to work hard on a daily basis just in order to survive were not the ones with the idealistic basis needed to support a revolution at its core. This is a very important rule in history that is also valid today. That means —in conjunction with the phenomenon of apoliticism— that the more one needs a welfare system

the less one has the time, knowledge or even ability to fight for it. One typical example is Venezuela which is analyzed below.

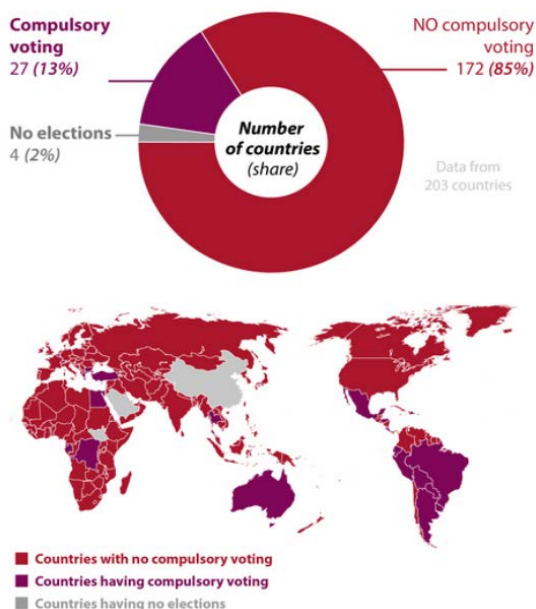
Major Countries and Organizations Involved

The phenomenon of apolitical citizens becomes evident in the percentage of people voting in the elections.

In the following diagram (#5) one can see the percentage of the registered citizens as well as the voting age population (the ones eligible for voting) in the elections. (The fact that the voters are registered does not necessarily mean that they are present and vote in the elections.) It is clear that countries like Belgium ($\approx 90\%$), Australia ($\approx 95\%$), Sweden ($\approx 83\%$), Denmark ($\approx 80\%$) and Luxemburg ($\approx 92\%$) have high voter turnout rates, whereas countries like Slovenia ($\approx 50\%$), Portugal ($\approx 55\%$), and Greece ($\approx 57\%$) have lower ones. One can conclude that countries with high voter turnout rates follow the welfare state model, whereas countries with lower voting percentage are comparatively facing difficulties. With that in mind, one can understand how the social and political situation has an impact on the citizens' willingness to vote.

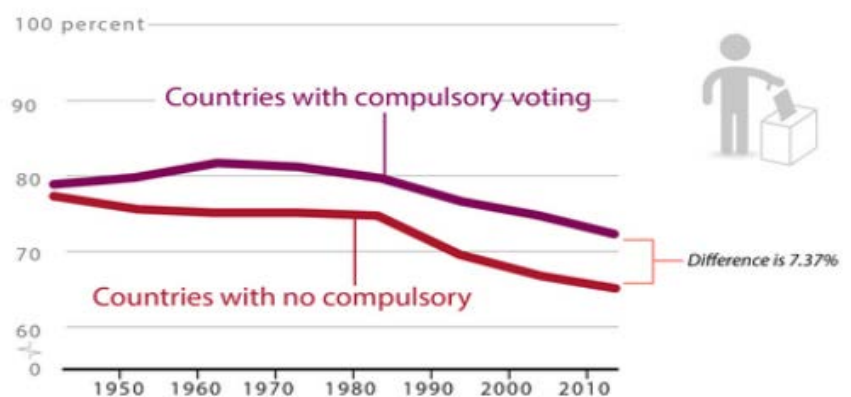
The reason why countries like Belgium have high voter turnout is also related to the voting restrictions. For example, in Belgium and in Australia voting is compulsory⁷. These are also the countries with the higher voter turnouts.

COMPULSORY VOTING IN THE WORLD



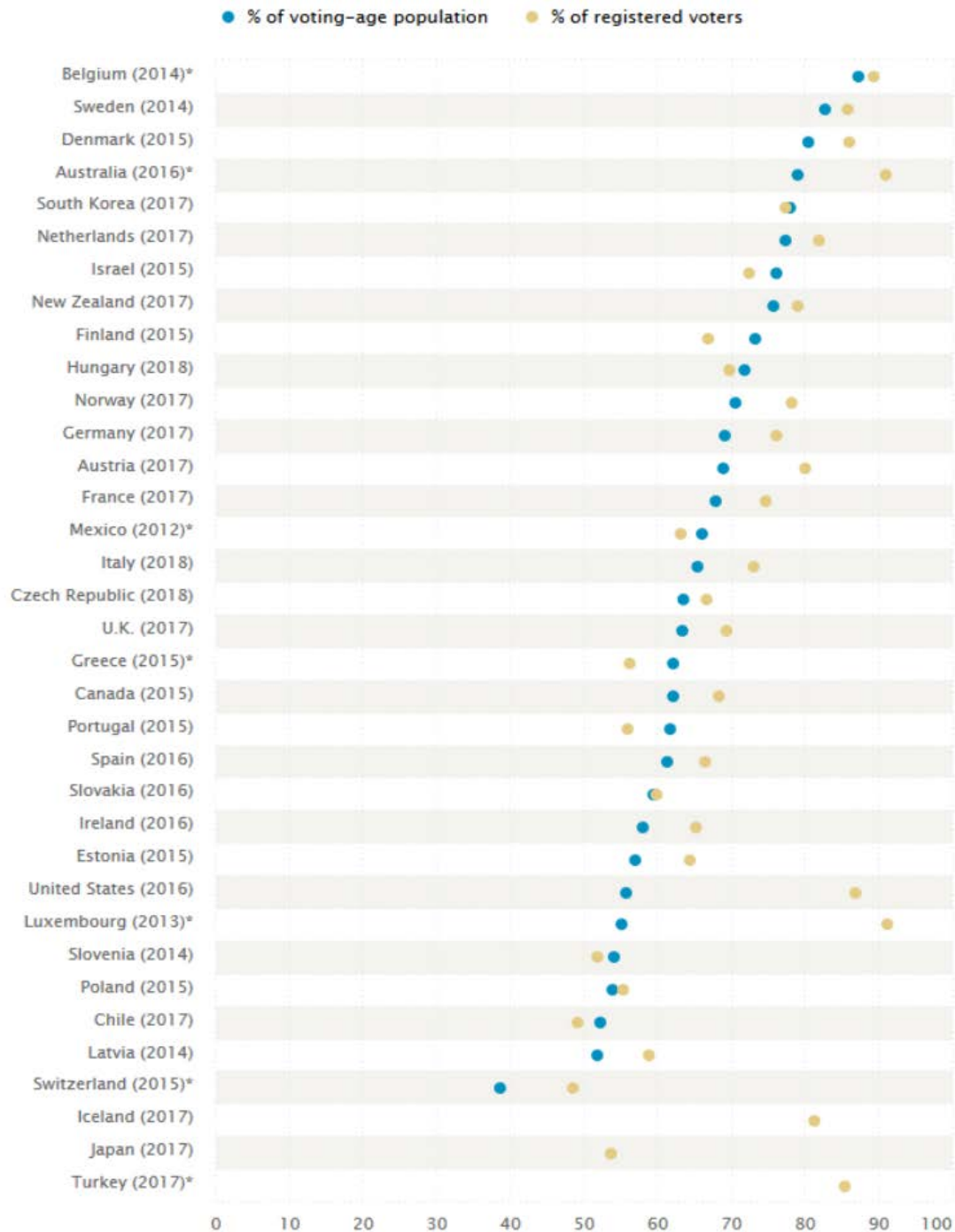
#3 Map which depicts the number of countries that practice compulsory voting.

VOTER TURNOUT TRENDS



#4 The difference in the voter turnout between countries where voting is mandatory.

⁷ According to International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)



#5: Diagram which depicts the percentage of citizens eligible for voting and of registered voters respectively in different countries.

Latin America - Venezuela

In Latin American countries, one notices discrimination and inequalities in the decision-making. One of the goals of the United Nations Development Programs is to boost political participation and contribution of minorities in Latin American countries as well as in African nations.

In the Venezuelan presidential elections of 2018 only 45,71% of the people voted. Without considering whether or not the elections were fair, one comes to the conclusion that the 45% is in that case equivalent of the 100% of the votes, which means that a government can be formed by half of the voter turnout. As far as the Venezuelan kind of apoliticism is concerned, one can spot three reasons: the poor school system, the disappointment of the citizens by politicians, the widespread corruption and the really devastating living conditions.

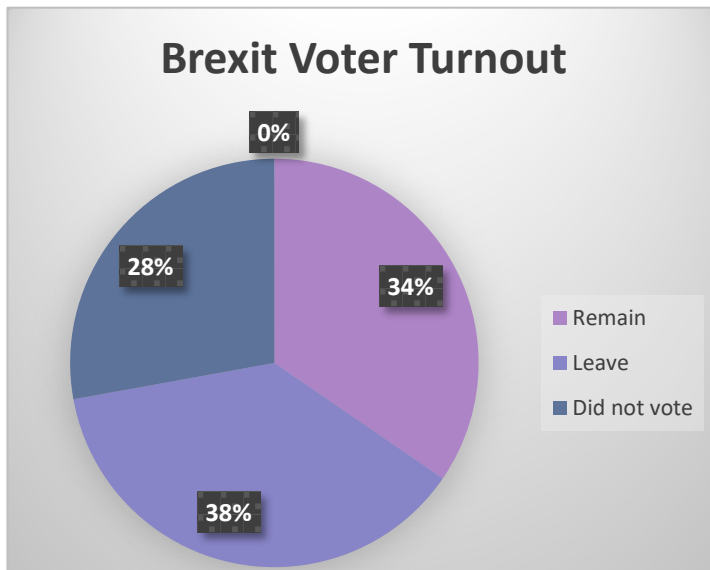
Western-Southern Europe

According to the Treaty of the European Union (Article 17 (1)) "... every person holding the nationality of a Member State shall be a citizen of the Union". This apparently is reinforcing the identity of European citizens, since their opinion not only matters for national issues but also affects the relation of their country to the rest of the Union as well as its decisions (indirectly).

There is a really remarkable difference among the voter turnout between the Western and the Southern European nations. While in Western European countries the percentage of people voting is high (e.g. Austria \approx 73%) in Southern European nations one observes a lower participation in the presidential elections (e.g. Slovenia \approx 42%, Serbia \approx 55%). This is attributable to the different economic and social development of the two regions. For instance, Western European countries are rich and the average citizen has a high standard of living. In the South there are countries that were affected by the Global Financial Crisis which consequently affected their political situation (e.g. Italy, Greece). However, even in Western European countries with high voter turnout, a part of the population is misinformed as a result of propaganda which leads to extremist opinions and fundamentalism. In this case, one may talk about "random" votes; this situation leads to the rising of right-wing parties which is noticed in countries like France, Belgium or the United Kingdom. More specifically, Belgium is the earliest country that introduced laws for compulsory voting. On the one hand, there are those who argue that voting is one of the most important responsibilities of a citizen; on the other hand, there are those who believe that voting should be a civic right and not a civic duty. In addition to that, in the latest parliamentary election in France, Emmanuel Macron, who has also been characterized for his right-wing policies⁸ won the elections in 2016, even though the low voter turnout (\approx 49%) was a surprise for many. The point is that citizens, who are obligated to vote but have no knowledge of national political matters, may have an impact on the legitimacy of the elected government.

United Kingdom

⁸ Jones, Owen. "Don't Be Fooled By Emmanuel Macron The 'Moderate' | Owen Jones." *the Guardian*. N.p., 2018. Web. 30 June 2018.



#6: Pie chart which shows the results of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom (the percentages above are according to the eligible voters).

It is a fact that referendums are more “attractive” to people, since the result is more drastic and the vote of people is stark. In the EU referendum of 2016, 51,9% of the voters voted for Britain to leave the EU and 48,1% for Britain to stay. However, only 72,21% of the eligible voters decided to go to the polls. This referendum was undeniably serious, since it was / is about to determine not only the future of the United Kingdom, but also the future of the European Union as a whole. Furthermore, nearly

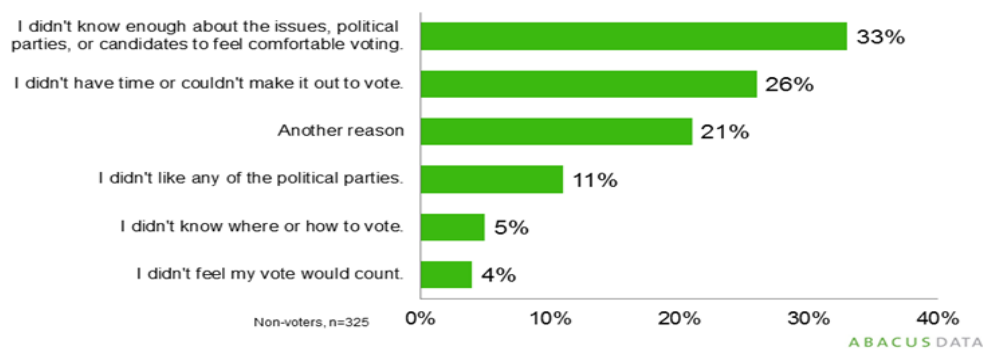
28% of the registered voters did not eventually vote and now that they observe the aftermath of the Brexit they are probably reconsidering their choice.⁹

Canada

The voter turnout in the presidential elections of Canada in 2015 was 68,5% which happens to be the highest since 1993; although this voter turnout is not ideal, the results show an increasing participation of the youth, more specifically of those aged 18-24, in the civic life. The percentage increased from 37% in 2011 to 57% in 2015. Despite this positive change in Ca

Main Reason for Not Voting

From the following list, which was the main reason you did not vote in the 2015 Canadian election?



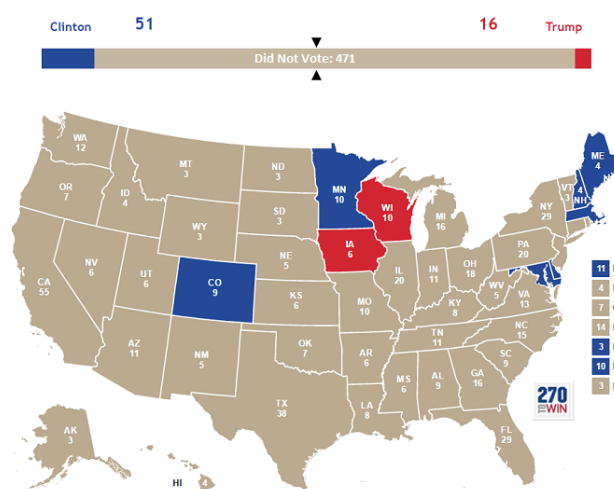
7: Reason why Canadians did not vote

⁹ Payne, Adam. "Brits Who Didn't Vote In The EU Referendum Now Wish They Voted Against Brexit." *Business Insider*.

nada, one cannot disregard the people who decided not to vote. In the following diagram one notices the reasons why people abstained from voting and it is clear that most of them were not informed about the political matters. This confirms the alarming tendency of people to distance themselves from politics.

United States of America

If “Did Not Vote” Had Been A Candidate In The 2016 US Presidential Election



#8: If “Did not vote” had been a candidate in the 2016 US Presidential Elections $\approx 45\%$

Since 2010 there are new voting restrictions in the US; either through restricted voter ID laws (voter identification law) or through complicated registration systems. Moreover, sometimes it is difficult for people to restore their voting rights in case they have a criminal record. This voter ID laws are discriminatory against minorities and multiracial Americans and can indeed change the voter turnout, especially in states with high poverty rates. In the 2016 US Presidential elections millions —almost half of the eligible voters— did not vote which undeniably shows the tendency citizens have to

distance themselves from the political scene and the alarming fact that this voter turnout was the lowest since 1996. However, this election should be considered a special case on the one hand because of the events that took place (involvement of the FBI and of Russian agents) and on the other hand because of the difference between electoral and popular votes.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
594 -593 BC	Democracy was founded in Ancient Greece, Athens
1798	Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

1893	Belgium introduces the first law for compulsory voting (only for men)
1976	The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
2008	1 st International Day of Democracy: It is an event held every September by the United Nations General Assembly
2012	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
2013	The United Nations Development Program published the plan “Enhancing youth political participation throughout the electoral cycle” which suggests practices for increased youth participation
2015	EU Referendum in UK (Brexit) → low voter turnout
2015	The UNSC passes a resolution which recognized the importance of youth participation (S/RES 2250)
2016	2016 US Presidential elections → low voter turnout
December 2016	IDEA organized a discussion: “Political Participation in Times of Mass Migration and Refugee Crises” supported by the UNDP
2017	Catalan referendum: Voter turnout ≈ 42%
8th of June 2018	The UNSC passes a resolution which supports the participation of the Youth in negotiating, implementing peace agreements (S/RES 2419)

Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions and Events

Since this is a topic concerning the national and domestic governing of a state, there are no UN Treaties and Resolutions that address the issue directly. However, there are Resolutions and Declarations that address the issue of political participation in different groups.

[\(A/RES/66/130\)](#)

The United Nations General Assembly adopted on the 19th of December 2011 a resolution against discrimination between men and women regarding politics.

[S/RES 2419 \(2018\)](#)

On the 8th of June 2018, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution, unanimously, which boosts the participation of the youth in peace efforts (Clause number 2, 14 and 16).

There are also recent events which show that apoliticism is reaching its zenith; the voter turnout by the 2016 US Presidential elections, the 2018 Venezuelan elections as well as the Brexit.

[The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#)

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is a UN-Treaty adopted by the General Assembly (resolution 2200A (XXI)) and has 74 signatories and 171 parties. These member states respect the civil and political rights of the citizens and recognize further rights to the individuals, which are also recognized by the UN Declaration of Human Rights (right to life, freedom of religion, speech etc.)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Relevant Declaration that boosts political participation

The United Nations have tried to boost political participation in the past, always focusing on specific groups. In 2012, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights encouraged all nations to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities so as to ensure that people with disabilities have the right to participate in civic life. Moreover, UN Women, which is an entity of the United Nations, is trying to overcome the barriers of gender discrimination and reinforce women's participation in the elections and their right to exercise power in general. In 2017, UN Women published a map which depicts the status of women concerning politics in the different countries.

Possible Solutions

One can approach this issue in two major ways. First and foremost, the educational system should teach the students how to be citizens of their country and, by extension, citizens of the world. The youth should have global knowledge of political matters and be able to think and decide what is best for the society, which brings us to the next point which is boosting political participation. The governments can get people to vote by educating them early so that they find themselves in a position, where they can learn from the mistakes of the past and focus on how to avoid repeating them; in order to manage that they should use their right to exercise power. One way to accomplish that is through funding and supporting regional political associations in order to extend their actions and attract more citizens. Furthermore, communities can hold formal discussions and meetings between individuals and members of the candidate parties in order to prevent the random votes and misinformation in general. Lastly, the use of media can ease the situation, since public awareness campaigns and platforms with information regarding the voting procedure and the candidate will attract many people online; however, this is a measure that should be enforced carefully.

Moreover, considering the voting age or reconsidering the already existing electoral laws can also be a solution. Especially the latter one should be examined carefully and separately. It is a fact that in modern societies no one can oblige all citizens to vote, although one can make them understand that they can form their own opinion and that this opinion matters.

Additionally, citizens need a reason to care about politics. They have to feel that their voice matters and that they can indeed bring the change they wish in the societies. In every society there are people who are fatalists¹⁰ and their belief is blocking their way to the polls. One remarkable way in order to avoid mistrust between government and individuals and combat electoral fraud allegations is the adoption of anti-corruption policies. For example, the World Bank as well as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) should provide financial aid and should give recommendations to the nations with high corruption rates. Moreover, transparency and UN investigation can also be helpful.

Last but not least, in democratic regimes participation in the voting process is considered a civic responsibility. Thus, regulating the voting participation, or even making it compulsory, through the national constitution and the electoral laws, may also be a significant solution to the problem. However, there are those who argue that by enforcing such a law, the government goes against the freedom of the citizens. As mentioned above, apoliticism is also connected with “blind” political decisions; there is a greater possibility of random votes in countries with strict electoral laws. In addition to that, in countries with compulsory voting, the enforcement of the related law should be checked either by the government officials or by a separate body.

¹⁰ The theory which suggests that everything is predetermined and inevitable.

Bibliography

Text

Isin, Engin F, and Bryan S Turner. *Handbook Of Citizenship Studies*. Los Angeles [u.a.]: SAGE, 2011. Print.

["Adopting Resolution 2419 \(2018\), Security Council Calls For Increasing Role Of Youth In Negotiating, Implementing Peace Agreements | Meetings Coverage And Press Releases." *Un.org*. N.p., 2018. Web. 23th of June 2018.](#)

["Avalon Project - Declaration Of The Rights Of Man - 1789." *Avalon.law.yale.edu*. Web. 18th of June 2018.](#)

["Adopting Resolution 2419 \(2018\), Security Council Calls For Increasing Role Of Youth In Negotiating, Implementing Peace Agreements | Meetings Coverage And Press Releases." *Un.org*. N.p., 2018. Web. 22th of June 2018.](#)

[Goodwin, Tom, and Adriana Stan. "Social Media, Politics, And The Bubble Of Distraction." *TechCrunch*. N.p., 2018. Web. 23th of June 2018.](#)

["Emmanuel Macron Set For Biggest Parliamentary Landslide Victory Since 1945." *The Independent*. N.p., 2018. Web. 30th of June 2018.](#)

[Nekola, Martin. "POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GOVERNANCE EFFECTIVENESS - DOES PARTICIPATION MATTER?. «Political participation and governance effectiveness- Does participation matter?. Web. 29th of June 2018.](#)

Images

#1 : [Esaili, Hanan. "Why Don't Young People Vote?." *HuffPost*. N.p., 2017. Web. 19th of June 2018.](#)

#2: [Salim. "Political Participation." *Slideshare.net*. N.p., 2018. Web. 30th of June 2018.](#)

#3,4: ["Compulsory Voting | International IDEA." *Idea.int*. Web. 28th of June 2018.](#)

#5: [DeSilver, Drew. "U.S. Trails Most Developed Countries In Voter Turnout." *Pew Research Center*. N.p., 2018. Web. 22th of June 2018.](#)

#7: ["The Next Canada: Politics, Political Engagement, And Priorities Of Canada's Next Electoral Powerhouse: Young Canadians.." *Abacus Data*. N.p., 2016. Web. 23th of June 2018.](#)

#8: ["If "Did Not Vote" Had Been A Candidate In The 2016 US Presidential Election, It Would Have Won By A Landslide." *Brilliant Maps*. N.p., 2016. Web. 18th of June 2018.](#)