



Voter Turnout Database Codebook





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International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

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Introduction



Voter turnout is one of the crucial indicators of how citizens participate in the governance of their country. Higher voter turnout is in most cases a sign of the vitality of democracy, while lower turnout is usually associated with voter apathy and mistrust of the political process (Solijonov 2016).

Because of its importance, media and civil society actors, as well as the democracy support community and many other stakeholders are concerned when citizens do not turn out to vote. They are also keen to understand the reasons behind low turnouts. Collecting comprehensive data on voter turnout from across the globe and trying to understand what affects people's decisions to vote or not to vote is therefore also important (Solijonov 2016).

This Codebook provides detailed explanations of the variables and answer options in International IDEA's Voter Turnout Database (VT Database), which has become the most authoritative global data set providing data on elections conducted since 1945.

About the Voter Turnout Database

Since its establishment in 1995, International IDEA has keenly engaged in research on voter participation. One outcome of this effort is the VT Database, which was established in 1999 and has been continually updated ever since. The Database is a widely acknowledged and well-respected resource for researchers, media organizations, practitioners and other stakeholders. International IDEA has also published several publications on the topic of voter participation, which have inspired further research and debates in the elections field.

The information in the VT Database is based on data gathered from desk research by International IDEA staff; surveys of electoral management bodies

(EMBs); and the publications *Voter Turnout since 1945* (López Pintor and Gratschew 2002) and *Voter Turnout in Western Europe since 1945* (International IDEA 2004).

Updates to the Database

Since the launch of the VT Database, International IDEA's Electoral Processes Programme has ensured that the data is regularly updated. The primary sources for the data on voter registration, total vote and corresponding voter turnout are the national EMBs and national statistical bureaus of countries listed in the Database. Data from EMBs are obtained from either their official reports or information provided in their official web portals. In a small number of cases, when data are not available from the EMB, the information on voter turnout is obtained from secondary sources. Population data and Freedom House indicators are always obtained from secondary sources.

In addition, inputs and suggestions from the users of the database are also regularly taken into account. Like all International IDEA Databases, the VT Database has a feature which allows users to provide voter turnout or other related information for a specific country and/or election. When a user suggests an update for the data available in the Database or provides information for the missing data, this information is sent automatically to the respective staff in the Electoral Processes Programme who can verify this information and make updates if the data provided are correct.

Criteria for including an election in the Database

Not every election is included in the VT Database. The following criteria are applied.

1. The election must have been held after 1945.
2. The election must have been for national political office in an independent nation state, with the exception of nations which held elections on the eve of their independence from colonial rule (e.g. Nigeria in 1959); small island nations whose sovereignty is limited by 'free association' with a larger power (e.g. Aruba); and elections to the European Parliament.
3. There must have been a degree of competitiveness (i.e. more than one party contesting the elections, or one party and independents contesting the elections, or an election contested only by independent candidates). This criterion excludes one-party states such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea), China, and the former Soviet Union, but has led to the inclusion of electoral events such as the 1995

elections in Uganda (in which parties were banned) and the 1976 elections in Egypt (in which a number of independent candidates ran against the ruling party). Within the grey area of competitiveness, International IDEA has erred on the side of inclusion and, at least where the data is available, included the turnout figures and explanatory variables in the tables for each country.

4. The franchise must be universal. However, for the purposes of comparison, elections in Argentina (1947), Bahrain (1973), Belgium (1948), Greece (pre-1956), Kuwait (1992–96), Liechtenstein (pre-1986) and Switzerland (pre-1971), which excluded women from voting, have been included. In these cases, the voting-age population figures only include men. Elections where the franchise was limited to a very small (and ethnically defined) segment of the population—as in South Africa prior to 1994 and Western Samoa before 1991—have not been included.

A note on voting-age population and registered voters

The VT Database includes two variables—voting-age population (VAP) and the number of registered voters (NRV)—as denominators to calculate voter turnout. The VAP refers to the total number of potential voters of voting age in a given country, while the NRV comprises the actual number of people on the electoral roll.

The figure for the VAP is a rough estimate and does not take account of the fact that people of voting age may still not be enfranchised due to legal or systemic barriers. The estimate provides an approximate figure of the number of eligible voters but does not reflect the exact number. The VAP might differ greatly from the NRV since registration in many countries is voluntary or often inaccurate. In countries where registration is compulsory and automatic, or based on the civil register (e.g. the Scandinavian countries), the VAP figure and the NRV are quite similar.

In some countries the NRV is higher than the estimate of the VAP, which might seem odd. In some cases, this is the result of an administrative error or inaccurate information provided by the EMB, but there may be other reasons related to either the registration process or the method of estimating the VAP.

It is important to remember that the VAP is always an estimate. As with all estimates, the number might be significantly different from the true value. Also worthy of note is the fact that the age-disaggregated population data collected for the purposes of estimating the VAP and the data on registered voters are acquired from different sources: the age-disaggregated population statistics from the United States Census Bureau's International Database, and the registered voter

data from national EMBs. These sources might, in turn, use different estimates, resulting in discrepancies between the two measures.

Finally, the NRV will be inaccurate if the electoral roll is flawed. There could be inaccuracies or discrepancies in the registration process. Some voters might be registered twice or the authorities might have failed to remove people who are no longer eligible to vote, such as deceased voters or voters who have left the country. This could be because of shortcomings in the way that the registration of voters is organized, such as unclear delegation of responsibilities between institutions, problems of communication and so on. In addition, other factors might over- or underestimate the number of voters to be registered.

It is important to emphasize that the NRV figures are, in most cases, more recently updated than population figures. The VAP is based on the most recent population census figure available. Although not an exact number, it is a reflection of demographic trends and estimated population growth in a given country.

Variables used in the Voter Turnout Database



Variable name	Country
Explanation	The name of the country for which the voter turnout and other relevant statistics are provided.
Answer options	Text

Variable name	Election type
Explanation	The type of election, at the national level, for which the voter turnout and other relevant statistics are provided. If a country has bicameral parliament, the VT Database provides data only for the lower house.
Answer options	Parliamentary Presidential EU Parliament

Variable name	Year
Explanation	The year in which the election took place.
Answer options	Year (YYYY)

Variable name	Voter turnout
Explanation	The total vote (see 'Total vote' variable) divided by the number of registered voters (see 'Registration' variable) and presented in percentage terms.
Answer options	Percentage (%)

Variable name	Total vote
Explanation	The actual number of people who voted in an election as reported by the national EMB, including invalid and blank votes (see 'Invalid votes' variable).
Answer options	Number

Variable name	Registration
Explanation	The number of people who were registered for to vote in an election as reported by the national EMB.
Answer options	Number

Variable name	VAP turnout
Explanation	The total vote (see 'Total vote' variable) divided by the estimated voting-age population (see 'Voting-age population' variable) and presented in percentage terms.
Answer options	Percentage (%)

Variable name	Voting-age population
Explanation	The total number of potential voters of voting age in a given country (see 'A note on voting-age population and registered voters').
Answer options	Number

Variable name	Population
Explanation	The number of people living in a given country in the year in which the election took place.
Answer options	Number

Variable name	Invalid votes
Explanation	The number of invalid votes (including blank votes) divided by the number of total votes (see 'Total vote' variable) and presented in percentage terms.
Answer options	Percentage (%)

Variable name	Freedom House
Explanation	Average of the scores for the 'Political Rights' and 'Civil Liberties' indicators (see separate variables) assigned by Freedom House to a specific country in the year when the election was held.
Answer options	Number, range: 1 (free) to 7 (not free)

Variable name	Freedom House: Political Rights
Explanation	Freedom House indicator score for a given country on the dimension of political rights in the year in which the election was held.
Answer options	Number, range: 1 (free) to 7 (not free)

Variable name	Freedom House: Civil Liberties
Explanation	Freedom House indicator score for a given country on the dimension of civil liberties in the year in which the election was held.
Answer options	Number, range: 1 (free) to 7 (not free)

Variable name	Compulsory voting
Explanation	Indicates whether voting is compulsory in the country for which the voter turnout and other relevant statistics are provided. More information on compulsory voting can be found on the Voter Turnout Database website: https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout/compulsory-voting .
Answer options	Yes: Voting is compulsory No: Voting is not compulsory

References and further reading



Ellis, A. et al., *Engaging the Electorate: Initiatives to Promote Voter Turnout from Around the World* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2006), <<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/engaging-electorate-initiatives-promote-voter-turnout-around-world?lang=en>>

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Solijonov, A., *Voter Turnout Trends around the World* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2016), <<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/voter-turnout-trends-around-world?lang=en>>

About International IDEA



The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

What do we do?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work. We provide analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produce comparative knowledge on good international democratic practices; offer technical assistance and capacity-building on democratic reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convene dialogues on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

Where do we work?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

<<http://www.idea.int>>

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Higher voter turnout is in most cases a sign of the vitality of democracy, while lower turnout is usually associated with voter apathy and mistrust of the political process.

International IDEA's Voter Turnout Database contains the most comprehensive global collection of voter turnout statistics from presidential and parliamentary elections since 1945. This Codebook provides detailed of the variables and answer options in the Database.

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