

Why do people in new democracies stop voting?

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Are voters in new democracies so disenchanted with the political process that more and more are staying away from the polls?

To [democracy](#) watchers, the examples are legion. In the space of only a generation, many countries that went from one-party rule to free

elections saw [voter turnout](#) decline dramatically, by double digits. In Romania, for instance, turnout dropped by 47 percentage points between 1990 (the founding [election](#)) and 2010. In South Korea, turnout dropped by 30 points from 1988 to 2008. In El Salvador, it fell 29 points between 1982 and 2002. In Portugal, it was down 18 points between 1975 and 1995.

Filip Kostelka has come up with some surprising explanations. As part of his post-doctoral research in [political science](#) at Université de Montréal, the Czech-born polyglot did an exhaustive study of legislative elections in all 91 democracies that were born around the world from 1939 to 2015. He found that in half of them, there was a substantial decline in voter turnout. But what actually caused people to stay home depended on what country they lived in and how democratization had happened there.

When it was led by a strong opposition in a country where there was also high voter turnout under dictatorship, voting in the founding election was massive at first, setting a benchmark from which every subsequent turnout will inevitably be a decline. In most other new democracies, such as those where the regime change occurred at the discretion of the authoritarian regime, voter turnout was no different than in established democracies, where rates have been mildly declining since the 1970s.

All this is good news for democracy, Kostelka believes, since it means that it's not the exposure to the democratic practice itself that makes voters stay away from the polls, but rather a host of other, widely varying factors.

"We should be very careful when we interpret declines in voter turnout; it doesn't necessarily mean that people are dissatisfied," said Kostelka, 33, whose findings are published in the *American Political Science Review*. "When voters cease to participate, it's not because they are

getting disenchanted with the ideal of democracy as a form of government. That's something you hear a lot from commentators and pundits, but it's a misconception; they're really mistaken."

Kostelka is himself a product of several democracies. As a Czech, he was born under Communism but raised under its first post-communist president, Vaclav Havel. As a Canadian resident, he coordinated the UdeM political science department's Making Electoral Democracy Work project under Professor André Blais. As a European scholar, he is an associate researcher in European studies at the prestigious Institut de sciences politiques (Sciences Po), in Paris, and this September took up a new post as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Barcelona.

In his new study - the most comprehensive empirical analysis to date of voter turnout dynamics through the 20th century - Kostelka observed wide differences in how voting works between nations. Even though Spain and Portugal, for instance, both emerged from dictatorship in 1970s, turnout in Spain has decreased by only about 3 percentage points, seven times less than in Portugal. In Spain, the democratization process was tightly controlled by the country's authoritarian regime, whereas in Portugal it was driven by the democratic opposition, leading to massive voter turnout in the founding election.

Kostelka's study also confirms a number of findings from previous research. In countries such as Romania where the president is directly elected in a separately-held election, voters often don't put as much stock in legislative elections and don't turn out to vote in as large numbers. Turnout can also be low in places like Hungary or Serbia where there's currently very little competition between political parties, where the number-one party is much stronger than the opposition. Conversely, turnout tends to be higher in places like Belgium or Australia where voting is compulsory and strictly enforced.

Post-communist countries appear to be a special case. There has been some residual voter decline in many of them that is not accounted for by the democratization context or by the global trend of decreased voting. One of the reasons may be emigration: many people eligible to vote in ex-communist countries, where [voter registration](#) is automatic, have actually moved to the West. Once there, they do not participate in elections back home, in their country of origin.

Overall, exceptionally steep declines in voter turnout in new democracies "appear to be almost entirely a function of what happens before and during regime change, not what happens afterwards," Kostelka concludes in his study.

"It is true that since the 1970s, [voter](#) turnout declines have become more frequent ... Nevertheless, this is a tendency that new democracies share with established democracies."

More information: FILIP KOSTELKA, Does Democratic Consolidation Lead to a Decline in Voter Turnout? Global Evidence Since 1939, *American Political Science Review* (2017). [DOI: 10.1017/S0003055417000259](#)

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