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Underprivileged Voters and Electoral Exclusion in Contemporary Europe

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Tuorto, D. (2022). Underprivileged Voters and Electoral Exclusion in Contemporary Europe. London : Palgrave MacMillan [10.1007/978-3-030-97505-0].

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/860303> since: 2024-10-13

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97505-0>

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ELECTORAL EXCLUSION IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

### **Abstract:**

The initial chapter introduces the volume's principal theme, and explains its relevance to the on-going debate in the literature, its topicality in public discussion, and the methodological implications of its study. By dealing with the question of the disparities in electoral participation and the dynamics of the deliberate exclusion of the more deprived sectors of society, we can gain an insight into the broader transformation of political parties, of politics in general and of the concept of representation in contemporary democracies.

**Keywords:** turnout; political inequalities; centre-periphery

21<sup>st</sup>-century democracy was established in the name of participation. Thanks to the consolidation of democratic institutions in the post-war period, and to the development of new technologies during the transition to the new millennium, it has become easier for citizens to access the world of politics. Today's voters exhibit a greater degree of political awareness, and can use various tools with which to interact with candidates, acquire information on political actors, express their opinions, and above all, equip themselves with the basic instruments to vote consciously. All this has happened despite the fact that political parties have radically changed their organizational arrangements, seen their social rootedness significantly weakened, and lost their capacity to represent broad sections of society and be something which voters can identify with in the long-term (Katz and Mair 1994; Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Ignazi 2017).

Regardless of this favourable scenario, democracy has been increasingly under challenge in the form of the growing instability of government and the party system, and greater criticism of politics in the form of both radical protests and deep disaffection. Since the 1980s, and increasingly so after the global crisis of 2008, a large number of citizens in many Western European democracies have become less trustful of politicians, political parties and democratic institutions, to the point of delegitimizing the act of voting itself (Dalton 2004; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Norris 2011). When coupled with evidence of different approaches to partisan politics, and new patterns of political participation, this would suggest that the ideals of a democratic political culture are changing significantly. The profound transformation of political behaviour and attitudes has also altered the consensus on which democratic life is based, and has brought to the fore the problem of participative inequality, that is, the different ability of social groups to keep in touch with conventional political actors and institutions and to react to changing conditions by adapting their relationship (and the quality of the relationship) with politics (Lutz and Marsh 2007; Bartels 2008).

Voting remains the most expected form of political behaviour in Western democracies, and in nearly all such countries those who do vote represent the majority of peoples entitled to do so, at least in first-order elections. The average voter generally has a variety of different resources, information and stimuli, and this translates into the probability of their turning out to vote. However, in a situation

characterised by people's freedom to vote or not, there will always be a certain share of the electorate who abstain, as a result of unconscious processes or as the effect of deliberate choices. This becomes a problem when the share of non-voters increases from one election to the next. In particular, the effects of low turnouts below the natural limit may be significant when certain sectors of the population, identified by specific socio-demographic or socio-political characteristics, refrain from choosing those who are going to govern them, and thus from submitting their own demands to the ruling class.

In his well-known article *Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma*, Lijphart (1997) raised the question of the weak inclusiveness of voting in the presence of very high, increasing rates of abstention, and the need to adopt institutional mechanisms capable of boosting voter turnout, to the point where a democratic constraint like compulsory voting gets introduced. Lijphart's underlying assumption is that institutional participation is shrinking and that this will lead to a deficit of democracy and to incomplete citizenship. In Lijphart's view, the problem was not that of the number of participations (*how many* participate), but rather *who* participated, that is, which electors actually voted, and whether such dynamics result in the under-representation (within Parliament, on the political agenda) of the most economically disadvantaged groups.

This concern was not always a priority issue in academic debate. With reference to the case of the USA, Lipset (1960) saw as plausible a scenario of a low-turnout democracy which, having enjoyed success almost unchallenged, could afford to generate forms of democratic relaxation – a sort of apathy from well-being - among wealthy, fully-integrated, loyal categories of citizens, in regard to a system capable of functioning almost automatically, and of managing social conflict without producing any deep divisions within that system.

According to Lipset, class solidarity and politically virtuous forms of behaviour such as voting, proved necessary during those phases of history, and in those national contexts, dominated by scarcity and/or strong competition between rival social groups; in mature democracies, on the other hand, the achievement of generalised economic well-being, and the acquisition of civil rights and citizenship, effectively freed the masses from the need to cooperate for the collective good. Fifty years after its formulation, the optimistic reading of a democratic process no longer requiring citizens' participation, has been challenged by the opposing problem. The main risk inherent in contemporary politics is not only that few sections of the population participate, but that they are mainly or exclusively select groups of those better-equipped and more central, in terms of resources, interests and motivations, while the spread of socio-economic hardship, together with the exhaustion of the inclusive action of the political parties, makes participatory investment difficult for the most problematic sections of the electorate. Underprivileged groups have become increasingly marginalised from mainstream politics. As Evans and Tilley have suggested, given that political decisions are no longer based on social class, we have in fact seen increased class-based *non-voting*, with people in working-class jobs, together with the temporarily employed and the unemployed, now much less likely to turn out to vote (Evans and Tilley 2017).

The book deals with participatory inequalities in the context of voting, and in particular with how they redefine, in the face of increasing socio-economic and socio-territorial inequalities, the decline in the welfare state's redistributive mechanisms, and access to regular, continuous employment. In a post-democratic scenario, where national governments hand over power to the global processes of the economy (Crouch 2004; Mouffe 2005), the political elites have become self-referential, and the crisis is perceived as an act of betrayal by the ruling class (Mair 2013), most political parties find it hard (or do not consider it very useful) to dedicate their energies to helping the more disadvantaged groups; the latter, although larger than they were in the past, remain fragmented and electorally weak due to the fact that they are unwilling to establish long-term links with those collective actors who would like to, or could, represent them. From the voters' perspective, there has been a fragmentation of the political experiences of involvement, as a consequence of the more general process of

individualization (Beck 1992). Unlike the significant degree of mobilization during the epoch of mass parties, contemporary participation is increasingly organised outside of the traditional representative institutions, and requires a greater endowment of individual skills which are not equally available to all sections of the population, and consequently the less well-equipped sections of the electorate are at greater risk of marginalization. New forms of direct action are even more dependent on the skills and resources offered by social status, and as such may widen the participation gap between lower-status groups and higher-status individuals (Dalton and Klingemann 2007; Dalton 2017).

Our study intends to re-examine certain key issues that have emerged following the decline of Fordism and mass parties, and that have been significantly exacerbated in the recent years of global recession. These issues include: the relationship between socioeconomic status and political exclusion; the participation gap between privileged and underprivileged groups; the question of whether the disadvantage at individual level is correlated to that at aggregate level. Are the current political parties still able to represent powerless voters? What is the role of each nation's institutions in promoting or discouraging the political participation of the more disadvantaged groups? Moreover, is there an alternative to electoral demobilization, and if so, for which disaffected voters?

In an attempt to provide satisfactory answers to these questions, the book examines the various issues concerning electoral inequality, through a combination of theoretical reflections and empirical analyses based on existing data gathered at both aggregate and individual levels.

Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical debate on democracy, and discusses the question of political representation in constituting democratic practices, with particular reference to the patterns of inclusion and exclusion of disadvantaged groups in the electoral arena. It retraces the steps taken during the twentieth century towards the progressive extension of universal suffrage, and the affirmation and rooting of mass parties, as well as their decline, as aggregators of collective participation. The chapter points to international evidence of declining voter turnout in the advanced industrial democracies as an expression of a “democratic deficit”, a crisis of the legitimacy of political institutions (Klingemann and Fuchs 1995; Pharr and Putnam 2000). Finally, the chapter analyses the dynamics of voter turnout over the last two decades, during a period in which the acceleration of globalization has had a dramatic impact on the political sphere, and the question of the political representation of the disadvantaged classes has taken on even greater importance.

Chapter 3 offers a detailed analysis of the differences in turnout rates resulting from the individual characteristics of voters. In this section of the book I analyse the effect of socio-economic status, in an attempt to try and establish whether the most disadvantaged sections of the electorate actually participate less, how this relationship varies, and whether the participation gap between economically advantaged and economically disadvantaged voters has widened in correspondence to the general decline in turnout rates. The added value of this chapter consists in its focus on the changes in the labour market and on the effects that the economic crisis has had on the characteristics of employment, by making it more fluid, consequently conditioning the relationship between voters, politics and voting. The chapter also deals with the closely related question of perceptions, by looking at the dimension of the subjective status inconsistency and the role of relative deprivation.

Chapter 4 offers an overview of the macro institutional and contextual factors that may motivate underprivileged groups to vote, or discourage them from doing so. I examine the procedures governing the course of elections in a given country, such as the registration requirements and the policy instruments determining who is entitled to vote and who is not (as non-eligible residents or non-resident citizens). The chapter also evaluates the impact of institutional and political variables such as the electoral system, the existence of compulsory voting, the importance of elections and the number of parties involved; all of these elements may influence the perceived importance of voting. Another set of variables examined here concern the characteristics of welfare systems, that is, the

capacity they have to promote forms of inclusiveness for the more disadvantaged groups of individuals, but also to produce stigmatizing societal perceptions of the poor or the socially excluded.

The final chapter seeks to place the question of participatory inequalities within a broader interpretative framework that considers the evolution of the party supply and the choices available to electors in a period of economic crisis. It focuses on the challenge launched by populist parties, and more generally by those new parties taking advantage of the emerging establishment/anti-establishment cleavage, and legitimising themselves as alternatives to the globalized left, whilst re-politicizing social and economic inequalities and social questions in general. The chapter aims to establish whether the presence of a strong supply of anti-establishment parties has curbed declining voter turnout, and if so, whether it has done so by getting the most deprived social groups to vote once again.

The present volume investigates the underlying reasons for contemporary participatory inequality, the form and entity of this inequality in relation to the institutional constraints regulating access to the electoral arena, and the socio-cultural changes that have altered both the class nature and the territorial basis of voting behaviour. At the same time, here I reflect on the effects that the intensification of these processes could have, if left uncontrolled, on the stability of the democratic system as such and on the individual lives of voters deprived of political institutional representation and left with the choice between protesting (through existing parties or through organisations outside of the party system), and becoming totally detached from politics.

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## CHAPTER 2

# Voter turnout and imperfect inclusivity: a democratic problem

One of the key viewpoints from which to observe the question of electoral participation in western democracies is that of the historical, social and political conditions that have rendered voting an inclusive or exclusive experience. This chapter shall provide an overview of the changes during the twentieth century that led first of all to universal suffrage, then to the establishment of mass parties as the activators of mobilization for a broad section of the population, and finally to the decline of those parties. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the dynamics of voter participation over the course of the last decade, during which the effects of globalisation and the economic crisis on the relationship between citizens and the institutional political sphere have emerged more clearly.

**Keywords:** political inclusion; representation; enfranchisement; cleavages; post-democracy

## Democracy and representation: the theoretical debate

Western representative institutions initially emerged around the idea that the citizens of a given area choose the politicians who are to govern them, and that said politicians duly undertake to respond to the demands they receive, and to take care of their community's interests. An open dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives is created through representation and elections. Society's various projects compete with one another, and a country's political parties ask citizens to express their judgement in this regard. Nevertheless, it is also reasonable to assume that politicians are more likely to respond to those who chose them, that is, those who voted (Franko et al. 2016). Consequently, in order for the democratic ideal to take root, the political process must take equal account of the interests and demands of all citizens, with no forms of exclusion or inequality permitted (Dahl 1989). Each person must have the same right of participation in collective decisions, and thus in the selection of their institutional representatives. Clearly, such rights are not guaranteed if any citizens are denied a voice, due to their exclusion, on legal or private grounds, from access to the sociocultural tools required to choose between different political options.

Electors' participation in the collective rite of voting is a key aspect of democratic life. Various different positions have emerged with regard to the question of the extent and intensity of citizens' involvement in political life (Clark et al. 2001). One early position taken up in this regard was that of the theory of *elite competition* or the *realist school* (Schumpeter 1942; Sartori 1965), according to which representative democracy is inevitably aristocratic and meritocratic, unlike the idea of government by ordinary citizens (Manin 1997) whose involvement in the construction of political action represents the expression of utopian demands (Urbinati and Warren 2008). This elite competition theory assumes that citizens do not possess adequate information, and that they base their decisions on emotional ideas, prejudices and irrational impulses, which prevent them from formulating a measured view of things. The limited involvement of electors, who are seen

fundamentally extraneous to political affairs and to possess very limited intellectual and moral capacities, is considered by this school of thought to be the necessary condition for governability, and ultimately for the stability of the democratic order (Held 1996, p. 197). According to this elitist view of representative democracy, ordinary citizens are offered little chance of actually participating in the political process. Public politics is left to those few with the necessary experience and expertise. Everyone else's involvement should be limited to merely voting, that is, they should be granted the "right to periodically choose and authorise governments to act in their interests, and only have the right to replace one government with another, and thus safeguard themselves against the danger that governments become an immovable force" (*ibid*, p. 244).

Basically speaking, the elitist school conceives democracy as a means of choosing, through elections, those who are to take the decisions, without electors having to concern themselves also with establishing which political questions are to be considered of greatest importance. Ordinary citizens merely benefit from the minimum requirements of liberal democracy: elections at regular intervals, equal voting rights, freedom of expression, association and access to information, and the present of a multi-party system (Dahl 1989, p. 37; Ferrin and Kriesi 2016, p. 5). As Pizzorno has observed, this form of democracy means that the electorate do not possess any real power of control, or exercise any pressure, over the representatives: "on election day, citizens do not go to choose their representatives, but merely to nominate a fixed number of functionaries they have no control over, and whose powers the same citizens are not aware of" (Pizzorno 2017, p. XI).

Unlike the elitist theory's limited representation of public life and of politics' transformational capacities, the theory of "participatory citizenship" (Pateman 1970; Machperson 1977; Barber 1984), on the other hand, sees voting as a minimum expression of citizenship. The reason for this is that only full participation in civic-political life can result in responsible government. In order to survive and regenerate itself, democratic life requires a large number of active citizens who adopt a positive position and submit proposals to a country's institutions. By doing so, they can get their interests onto the political agenda, thus encouraging a positive form of feedback between the governors and the governed. The theory of participatory citizenship overlaps to some extent with various ideas of democracy that emerged during the course of the twentieth century. For example, deliberative democracy theory (Habermas 1984; Rawls 1971; Dryzek 2002) focused on the formation of public opinion, and on those conditions guaranteeing broader forms of inclusion. This theory conceives the great limitation of representative democracy as being the replacement of popular self-government by oligarchical governments that exclude ordinary people from political life. In order to overcome the consequent disparity, representative democracy should be counterbalanced by forms of small-scale direct participation in the community's political life (Pitkin 2004). This can be achieved through the attentive presence of citizens, thus permitting a better understanding of individual and public interests compared to that offered by simple consent and delegation (Urbinati 2006). Citizens should be consulted not only through voting mechanisms, but also in regard to the entire process leading up to the vote, and in particular during the establishment of the political agenda, and the discussion of options and arguments. This would constitute deliberation among equals (Landmore 2020). Like deliberative theory, direct democracy theory (Cheneval and el-Wakil 2018; Gastil and Richards 2013) also underlines the importance of measures designed to promote bottom-up initiatives, utilising referenda where necessary, in order to approve or reject individual decisions, and to offer citizens direct control over the legislative process.

Unlike elitist theory, democratic theory's acceptance of broader forms of participation marks a greater focus on the micro dimension and on individual agency. Participation is understood to be a voluntary act; a way of expressing political positions and individual opinions beyond the limited framework of the electoral process. It entails the direct involvement of citizens in multiple consultations or extra-institutional political actions. Where it underscores the limitations of an exclusively electoral form of

democracy, this approach, however, tends to avoid or undervalue the issue of representation and voting, which are considered of little importance, or in any case less important than other occasions for participation. This means that the question of elections is left to those theories that consider democracy as the mere selection and organisation of the governing class.

Another equally important question deriving from a broader understanding of participation, is that regarding access. The promotion of other forms of participation could weaken the already fragile election process, and accentuate inequality among citizens. Beyond the voting booth, the expression of personal political ideas requires a greater number of skills and capacities than when simply voting. Other forms of participation beyond the electoral sphere, and also the deliberative process in which individuals may get involved, are more demanding in terms of the time required, and could consequently be accessible to more privileged social groups only (Verba *et al.* 1995). As Dalton has pointed out: “nearly all can vote, and most do. But very few citizens can (or do) file a lawsuit, make requests under a Freedom of Information Act, attend an Environmental Impact Review hearing, or attend local planning meetings’ (Dalton *et al.* 2003, 262). This risk attributed to the more difficult forms of democratic participation, should in truth also apply to the relationship with conventional politics. While voting itself is in fact a simple enough act, how is it possible to guarantee that everyone (or at least a majority of electors) exercises their right to vote, and are not prevented from participating, or dissuaded from doing so by their own disinterest or their belief that their voting is a complete waste of time? Furthermore, how can all citizens be guaranteed political representation? In other words, how can they not only possess the capacity to knowingly choose who to vote for, but also have parties to vote for who will listen to their demands? These questions call for a detailed overview of when, and how, electoral democracy was established during the course of the twentieth century, and of the role that political parties played in promoting participation through elections.

## The management of participation in the age of mass parties

For a long period in history, democracy was marked by the battle for universal suffrage. Elections have historically played a key part as the principal means by which people’s aspirations have influenced the policymaking process in capitalist democracies (Skocpol and Amenta 1986). Nevertheless, the removal of restrictions on voting eligibility proved to be a long, complicated process that was played out in various stages. The first important period of democratisation was seen in Europe between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This period witnessed the gradual removal of the existing restrictions on voting eligibility based on wealth, education, religion and race. As a result, all adult males were gradually included in the electorate. The first major European nation to grant voting rights to all males was France, in 1848, followed by Germany, while in the rest of Europe this goal was achieved between the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the onset of the First World War (Table 1). The significant extension of democracy to larger sections of the population accompanied a series of technical improvements of the systems of representation, which led to the application of less unequal mechanisms capable of guaranteeing compliance with the principle of one vote per person, and the transformation of votes into parliamentary seats (Bartolini 1996).

During the second wave of democratisation, which affected many European countries during the first thirty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were enfranchised, thus meaning that the entire population of Europe was now eligible to vote. Finland was the first country to extend the franchise to women (in 1906), followed by Norway (1913) and Denmark (1915), and then other European countries during, or immediately after, the First World War, following considerable pressure from the suffragette movement (Rubio-Marín 2014). In other countries, such as France and Italy, this barrier was only overcome some 25-30 years later, at the end of the Second World War. From then onwards, universal

suffrage became a rather generalised phenomenon. The last two countries to grant the vote to women were Greece (in 1952) and Switzerland (in 1971), during what can be considered the third wave of democratisation that was to lead to the overthrow of the remaining European dictatorships, and the establishment of universal suffrage (Ferrin and Kriesi 2016; Paxton 2000).

#### TABLE 1 HERE

The achievement of universal suffrage coincided with the establishment of more egalitarian policies in general. The real point, however, was to see whether the working class, having obtained the right to vote, would actually exercise that right, and whether that class was to be part of the new democratic experiences emerging at the time. Political mobilisation was rendered more tangible through the intervention of mass parties, who gathered and channelled workers' demands on a large scale. These parties were established at the end of the 19th century. However, it was not until after the Second World War that they managed to fully embody, in completely democratic forms, the new opportunities granted to citizens to experiment with political participation in a democratic setting, by expressing their needs and expectations through the voting booth. During this phase of democratisation, and aided by strong economic growth, political inclusion also implied socio-economic inclusion for large sections of the working class. It was the expansion of the State's actions, in fact, that permitted – through the formulation of the famous Marshall Plan – the achievement of a form of full citizenship, whereby the social rights deriving from the welfare system, rendered previously-acquired civil and political rights effective, thus freeing citizens from a situation of deprivation.

For around twenty years after the Second World War, political participation in Europe was channelled through the various countries' political parties, and was identified with activism and voting (Katz and Mair 1994). The parties were a fundamental means by which people could participate in public life, and as such they developed enormously within the space of just a few decades. During the era of Europe's dictatorships, the parties of total integration came to the fore (Neumann 1956); their ambitious aim was to radically transform society through the complete commitment and obedience of their members. After the Second World War, the mass party model took on new significance and a new central role within a context characterised by the emergence of political and cultural liberalism, the politicisation of social cleavages, and the intensification of participatory demands from the more marginal sections of the population previously excluded from the political scene (Duverger 1954).

The action that led to the spread of economic democracy and the extension of the welfare state, was mirrored, as we know, by the existence of deep cleavages in society. The theory of cleavages, originally formulated by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and further developed by Rokkan (1970), sees national party systems and the support for such systems as an expression of underlying social conflict or division between: the State and the Church; centre and periphery; rural areas and towns; and employers and blue-collar workers. These divisions in society acted, in other words, as external forces capable of feeding lasting rifts, such that they impacted the structure of the party system and the workings of democracy (Hooghe and Marks 2018). It was during this very phase of partisan politics that political parties established stable links with the electorate, the members of which identified with one or other of such parties, and the extensive inclusion of the masses came about through their voting at elections.

The diffusion, relevance and role of the mass parties was particularly important in terms of their channelling participation, extending the scope of activism, and contributing to the subaltern classes' political education and integration; to the extent where they promoted forms of inclusion, including that at the social level, thanks to the impetus they received from the grassroots, and managed to impose such inclusion on the political sphere. The parties' actions together with those of workers' organisations and of other large organisations present nationwide, such as the Church, aimed to bring the various components of society back to the electoral arena, and to keep them there. Such

components included the factory workers and the working classes as a whole. The key to triggering this participation was that of ideological polarisation. Socialist and confessional parties embodied this approach, being the only political families together with the British conservatives that reached a mass dimension in Europe (Ignazi 2017, p. 123). The socialists were an expression of the political mobilisation of the working class, and they succeeded, more than anyone else, in enhancing the value of membership, by establishing a sound relationship with the trade unions and other collateral organisations capable of projecting the party's political agenda from the electoral sphere to other spheres (Duverger 1954, p. 70-72). Following the example of the socialist model, parties that were not on the political left – nationalist parties and, more frequently, confessional parties – adopted similar forms of arrangement, and tried to incorporate their supporters into official organisations by broadening the membership base, thus adapting to the mass party model (Duverger 1954; Katz and Mair 1994).

Each large party not only boasted a considerable number of members, but was also organised into local units spread across the country and constantly politically active. In this phase, political parties could count on numerous, democratically-elected representatives at both local and national levels, and it pursued political education and training objectives (Heidar 2006; Allern and Pedersen 2007). Activism took multiple forms, including official membership, the provision of electoral campaign support, and attendance at party meetings. Each activist was part of a much larger family which influenced personal life and opportunities (Manoukian 1968). Being a member of a party was considered to be the best way of meeting electoral demands (voting, counting electors during canvassing campaigns), of increasing organisational resources (through voluntary work and networking initiatives), and finally, of increasing the party's power. During this period, the experience of affiliation was particularly widespread: in the early 1960s, there were more than 4 million party members in Italy, over 3 million in the UK, and over 1 million in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Party members represented a considerable percentage of the electorate, in some cases as much as 20% (Katz and Mair 1994). These figures reflected what was almost constant growth from the end of the Second World War onwards, and this upward trajectory continued into the 1970s before eventually coming to an end in the 1980s.

The channelling of the more marginal sections of the population's participatory impetus was also the result of the parties' ability to offer new forms of identification to those masses that had previously been excluded from the political system. It enabled them to have their partial, partisan interests represented within the State (Pizzorno 1993). The parties operated as channels for the transmission of people's views to the political policy sphere (Dalton 2002), and in doing so the left-wing forces in particular stood out for the greater political importance they gave to social class. The broad debate on the class vote (Nieuwbeerta 1996; Evans et al. 1999; Manza et al. 1995) focused for some considerable time on analysing those conditions which over time, and in numerous countries, had made the political integration of manual workers possible through their special relationship with left-wing parties. In the decades following the Second World War, the composition of the party system substantially shaped the nature of State intervention and conditioned economic and social policies. Social democracy managed to guide workers' movements towards the development of the welfare state system, and led them to fight against market inequalities (Castles 1982; Korpi 1983; Huber et al. 1993). This institutionalisation of the conflict had a standardising effect on the way people voted. In particular within the world of work, citizens of a particular social class tended to form a positive connection with the party that defended the interests of that class (Butler and Stokes 1974). As well as having a social basis, the class vote also possessed a clear spatial nature. For a long time, the existence of territorially-circumscribed organisations guaranteed the construction of lasting relations and the stabilisation of social and political affiliation. Much social activity and interaction operated on a local basis, and such interaction acted as a channel for the informal transmission of group rules. Socially-homogeneous local units (the neighbourhood, the district, the community) populated by long-term residents, made it possible to express voting preferences along class lines, thus

strengthening collective participation and party affiliation (Butler and Stokes 1974; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987; Harrop *et al.* 1991).

As a result of all this, the problem of participatory inequality was of little numerical relevance at this stage and, when present, it was handled by the parties, who were capable of strengthening their local presence if necessary in order to facilitate the political socialisation of new electors. The rigid, stable nature of the socio-economic system during Fordism, the sound reasons for being a party member, and the close relationship between the electors and the parties, had clear effects on political behaviour at the time. So it should come as no surprise to discover that the percentage of the population going to the poll booths during the long successful era of the mass parties, was particularly high. During the period between the 1940s and the 1970s, the average voter turnout stood at around 84-85%, and this positive trend only began to wane at the end of the 1970s, with a more pronounced downward trend from the 1980s onwards. If we look at individual countries, in some such as Italy, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands, voter turnout during those peak years stood at over 90%<sup>1</sup> In other countries, although voter turnout was not quite as high, it still ranged between 70% and 80% over the period as a whole (Table 2).

The aforesaid extremely high voter turnout occurred at a time when party membership was also very common. Identification with the mass parties, and the persistence of class voting, guaranteed high levels of participation also among the working classes. Voting for a socialist party and being a manual worker were closely correlated everywhere, albeit to varying degrees from one country to another. The closest correlation between the two was to be found in the UK and Scandinavia, and was particularly high both during the period 1945-60 and in the years from 1961 to 1970 (Neuwbeerta 1996, p. 53). Moreover, where social class was not particularly relevant (as in the case of Ireland or the Netherlands), other factors of identification contributed towards binding the majority of electors at elections. This was not the case in the USA, however, where economic divides and restrictions on voting continued to exclude large swathes of the poorer sections of the population, even during the period of economic growth and democratic consolidation (Fox Piven and Cloward 1977; 1988).

TABLE 2 HERE

## After the Golden Age: streamlined parties and new inequalities

The socio-economic arrangements and the party system that had driven considerable levels of electoral participation during the immediate post-war decades, began to be radically transformed from the late 1970s onwards. It was the mass party that now entered a period of crisis. It could no longer preserve its close ties with the corresponding social class or group. From an organisational viewpoint, the mass party with its great many members was replaced by a party dominated by governing groups, while in “ideological” terms, political parties had now become “catch-all” entities deprived of their

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<sup>1</sup> The extremely high levels of voter turnout were partly the result of compulsory voting in certain cases. Legal provisions on voting of a more or less binding nature, had been introduced in the following European countries: Belgium, Luxembourg, Cyprus, Greece, the Netherlands (until 1970), Switzerland and Austria (individual regions and cantons). In Italy, penalties were officially introduced for those failing to vote, although they were never applied. For more detailed information, see the website: [www.idea.int](http://www.idea.int).

traditional support, but particularly adept at generating support among diverse segments of the population (Kirchheimer 1966).

The internal reorganisation of political parties thus marked the weakening of the close link between social class and voting behaviour which for a long time had guaranteed the stability of voting. The strong shaping of the social and economic divide that for many years had characterised the European political system, had “thawed” (Sarvlik and Crewe 1983) following the economic changes leading to the emergence of new social groupings and the increased fragmentation of the middle class (Franklin 1985; Kriesi 1998). Another important factor that contributed towards this development was the intensification of residential instability as a result of processes of social mobility (Teixeira 1992; Campbel 2006), which loosened the ties holding communities together, and thus also the workplace relationships within which the majority of political activity took place (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Consequently, all of these changes favoured the detachment of large sectors of the population, who had previously been party members and active in public life, but whose ties with such had now loosened considerably.

The literature on this question points to a clear decline in class voting in the major European nations, from the early 1980s onwards. This was the case in the UK, Germany and also in the Scandinavian countries (Evans 1999). Lane and Ersson (1991, p. 94) compared two decades (1950-60 and 1970-80), and discovered that there had been a weakening of the correlation between social class and voting behaviour in 9 western nations. Knutsen (2004) confirmed this decline in class voting between 1975 and 1997, albeit with the exception of two nations, Denmark and the Netherlands (2004, p. 236). A generalised decline in class voting was also the conclusion reached by Nieuwbeerta (1996), who discovered a negative trend in a total of 18 of the 20 countries analysed. During this period characterised by the weakening of one of the resilient traditional cleavages, the socialist parties saw a radical change in the socio-demographic characteristics of their membership, with party members now coming from diverse social classes (Rennwald 2020). This finding is in line with the overall reduction in the number of people comprising the working class.

Social, technological and political changes had rendered the traditional mass parties obsolete. Instead of being sought after, party membership was now viewed as a cost. Parties began to look to broadening their appeal, and they even offered non-members the opportunity to participate through lighter, less expensive forms of affiliation. One result of all this was a significant decline in party membership. The figures gathered by Van Biezen and colleagues (2012), and previously by Mair and Van Biezen (2001), clearly show that during the period from 1980 to the end of the century, the parties’ membership bases were gradually pulverised, and the proportion of people active within a political party was now minimal. Overall membership numbers fell significantly in nearly all of the European nations taken into consideration. They were down by 60% in France (- one million), 50% in Italy (- two million) and the UK (- 800,000). In Scandinavia as well, party membership fell dramatically, in particular in Norway (-8 points in the membership/electorate [M/E] ratio, with a 50% fall in the number of members). Those parties heir to the old mass parties gradually discovered that they had less need for activists and members in order to compete electorally, and to mobilise and gather electors’ votes (Ignazi 1996; Allern and Pedersen 2007). The secularisation process, the expansion of education even among the more disadvantaged social classes (particularly among the younger generations), meant that the educational value of political action, which had accompanied the history of the mass parties, became more marginal, indeed superseded. The role of party activists inexorably declined in importance, becoming of symbolic/representative value and less capable of impacting parties’ internal dynamics and decision making.



In this regard, Katz and Mair (1995; 2009; 2018) have examined the institution of the “cartel party” as a new form of organisation led by an elite and dominated by diverse parliamentary groups. With the onset of this cartelization, elections become oligopolistic. State agencies have increasingly penetrated the political party’s vital nerve centres. Political parties are now increasingly dependent upon subsidies and public funding. They have developed organisations that are less firmly rooted in civil society, and have instead become semi-state or public utility agencies (Katz and Mair 1995, p. 23), with a procedural function rather than one of representation and recruitment (Bartolini and Mair 2001, p. 336). Rather than being a means of mass integration of citizens in political life, the new parties emerging from this transformation tend to assume a more professional, streamlined structure, employing the services of external experts specialised in public relations and market research when called for. The difficulty of retaining increasingly demanding and heterogeneous militants has led to a shift in the organisations’ barycentre, away from the membership towards an opinion-oriented electorate; from a direct, binding form of communication to a model in which, as we shall see in the following section, preference is given to the importance of the media, and where recourse to manipulative methods prevails in the effort to understand what the public thinks. Electoral campaigns, on the other hand, tend to focus increasingly on the personalisation of politics and on the competing candidates (Wattenberg 1991; Karvonen 2009).

The decline of mass organisations, class voting and party membership, has meant a radical change in the relationship between citizens and politics. The reduction in political parties’ grassroots structures has been mirrored by the growing disaffection of the electorate (Klingemann and Fuchs 1995). Unlike during the preceding period (from the late 1970s onwards) and, increasingly so, in the subsequent decade, citizens became more and more dissatisfied with their political representatives, and they began to display clear signs of alienation, cynicism, apathy and disillusionment. This development emerged within the broader context of the legitimacy crisis affecting political institutions in general. Such a crisis was to lead to a widening of the gap between perceived democratic performances and public expectations (Klingemann and Fuchs 1995; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Dalton and Wattenberg 2002).

Reduced participation in traditional channels led to a massive dealignment trend, affecting voters who had been deprived of their anchorage to political parties in both intensive and extensive terms (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995; Rose e McAllister 1986). The sense of belonging to a political party – the psychological attachment or party identification - is one of the key factors affecting the way in which people vote. It is something that guides voters, acting as a general framework within which judgements and evaluations are organised. At the same time, this party identification constitutes a marker of the development in time of the emotional relationship between the political parties and the citizens of a nation (Budge et al. 2010; Bartle and Bellucci 2014). In terms of this relationship, decline was intense and uninterrupted, as various studies have shown (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Dalton 2016). It concerned not only the number of electors identified with a given political party, but also the strongly partisan. The downward trend was significant in major European nations such as the UK, France, Germany and Italy. Pharr and Putnam (2000, p. 16) discovered similar, persistent downward trends in 17 different democracies. The diminishing degree of party identification was accompanied by a growing sense of frustration among the electorate. This took the form of mistrust and a feeling of political ineffectiveness, and was also accompanied by the emergence of forms of antiparty sentiment. Such developments have been systematically identified by the national surveys conducted during the 1990s in countries like Italy (Bardi 1996) and the UK (Curtice and Jowell 1995), as well as in Scandinavia (Strøm and Svåsand 1997).

Negative feelings of detachment, nevertheless, did not result solely in the decline of political activity as such. Various scholars have also pointed to the emergence, particularly among the new generations, of a model of critical citizenship (Norris 1999; 2002) which shows less interest in forms of political action directed from outside, but a greater interest in individualised, unconventional forms of participation. These reflections centre around Inglehart's well-known assumption regarding the changes in political cultural values and the transition to post-materialism. According to Inglehart, citizens in contemporary democratic societies are increasingly less likely to support institutional hierarchies and large organisations, such as political parties, that are founded on duty and exclusive membership: this is because they intend to participate directly in public issues through forms of spontaneous, self-centred action no longer governed by ideology (Inglehart 1990, p. 339-340) The "cognitive mobilization" scenario portrayed by Russell Dalton (1984; 2007) sees a discontinuity between old and new forms of participation. Within western electorates there has been for some time now an increase in the number of educated young people oriented towards post-materialist values, and possessing growing knowledge of political matters, who are capable of acquiring information and using that information to judge a government's performance. Close attention to the world of politics offers citizens the means by which they can participate in full and express clear, cogent choices. At the same time, however, it also feeds a kind of malaise which can be transformed into protest against the entire party system, or against specific political forces and their positions in regard to certain questions. This is why better educated, interested, well-informed citizens tend to be those most dissatisfied with the performance of governments, and the most inclined to protest against those governments.

The wave of criticism against traditional politics has resulted in a gradual, generalised decline in turnout, and in the emergence of new parties, independent candidates, and less highly-organised collective actors. In terms of electoral preferences, on the other hand, there has been an increase in more individualised, volatile voting centred on specific issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Thomassen 2005). Nevertheless, the dimension of turnout is the one that best indicates the change witnessed, in virtue of the significant decrease in turnout during the 1980s, and in particular during the 1990s. This decline in electoral participation has affected all European countries, and more generally the western democracies as a whole (Blais 2000; Wattenberg 2002; Franklin 2004). Data reported in Table 3 and Figure 1 clearly reveal this trend. Average voter turnout in Europe (at Parliamentary elections) in the period 1970-80 stood at around 85-86%, which was the maximum value ever reached in the case of many of the countries concerned. This figure remained stable at 84% in the following decade, but fell further to 77% during the course of the 1990s. In the period 1980-1990, the decline in voter turnout was particularly pronounced in Portugal (-12.8 percentage points), Austria (-7.8), Germany (-7.7) and the Netherlands (-7.5); a significant increase was recorded in Spain alone. As far as regards elections for the European Parliament, the decline in voter turnout was of a similar entity (-5.6 p.p. compared with -6.5 in Parliamentary elections), despite the point of departure in (1979 European first elections) being considerably lower than that of the first-order elections of more than 20 percentage points. In addition to this downward trend characterising the EU-15 countries, as from the 1990s a similar negative trend was witnessed among the new democracies of Eastern Europe; this was to continue into the new millennium, in particular with regard to European elections (see Table 3 and Figure 1).

#### HERE TABLE 3

These profound changes, the main characteristics of which have been set out above, contributed towards redefining the very meaning of voting. Once a moral obligation – the expression of an ideological political culture binding upon the entire electorate – going to the polling stations became one of a variety of possible options available. With the declining presence of political parties in

society, electors became more reluctant to exercise their voting rights, also because voting was seen as less of a duty than it had been before (Blais and Rubenson 2013, p. 112). At the same time, abstaining from voting has taken on the significance of a legitimate expression of personal convictions; it has become a means of flagging up the imperfect workings of the mechanism of representation, or more polemically, of showing a person's hostility towards, or dissatisfaction with, the actions of politicians and institutions.

The behaviour of the electorate during the phase of withdrawal of the mass parties can be read in a number of different ways. One particularly significant consequence of the decline in voter turnout is the increase in participatory inequality. Going back to the concerns expressed by Lijphart (1997) mentioned in chapter 1, the section of the population that lost the most ground during the transitional phase was that comprising, in fact, those electors less well-equipped from a cognitive perspective to remain in touch with political developments; those persons whose participation was connected to political habits, symbols and traditional ideals, and who were unable to cope with the reduced input from the political parties concerned. For a large percentage of the working class, and for older voters in general, the end of the mass parties corresponded to a weakening of the stimuli received, of the social and political channels of identification by means of which they had managed to perform the simple act of voting. In the absence of adequate inner resources or a mobilising impetus from others, the manifestation of their dissatisfaction prevailed. Moreover, the question of the relationship between social centrality and voting behaviour has been examined at length in the literature, both in regard to the case of the USA (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba et al. 1995), and from a cross-national perspective (Verba et al. 1978). Nevertheless, subsequent studies have confirmed the existence of a significant, increasing turnout gap between different socioeconomic categories, with an average difference between the highest income quintile and the lowest income quintile of as much as 20 percentage points.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the image of increasing abstention as the consequence of the withdrawal from elections of groups previously integrated into politics, there is now another question concerning diverse social dynamics and classes. The ground lost by the weaker members of the electorate is a process that is compatible with certain changes to the political parties concerned; however, it alone does not account for the rise in voter abstention. With regard to this question, several years beforehand Richard Brody had pointed to the "puzzle of participation", that is, to the unexpected fall in voter turnout despite improving education and other social conditions traditionally perceived as hindrances to access to the political sphere (Brody 1978, p. 296-297). In order to overcome this paradox, a second category of abstaining electors needs to be taken into consideration, in addition to the hard core of peripheral, generally apathetic sections of the electorate. This second category is composed of socially central, integrated, politically aware individuals whose abstaining from voting is not the result of their incapacity to decide who to vote for («I don't know who to vote for and there's nobody telling me who to choose»), but represents a deliberate choice not to go to vote («I could vote but I've decided not to»). The underlying reason for this decision to abstain lies in that such electors do not identify with any of the parties concerned, and do not believe that politicians offer the kind of responses that would induce them to go and vote. These are electors driven by their dissatisfaction with the state of things: they are intent on using abstention as a means with which to punish those parties they feel closest to, but who are perceived as largely ineffective.

The literature has interpreted these two aspects of abstention - apathy and protest - in terms of the distinction between the *social condition-abstention* of those "out of the game" (Blais 2000; Cautres and Mayer 2002; Muxel 2007), and the *intermittent abstention/voting* of those still "in the game" who act strategically. While habitual voters, as the term suggests, have formed a habit of going to the polling station, and remain faithful to this position, intermittent voters are more easily influenced by

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<sup>2</sup> These studies, based on data from the CSES (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems), are contained in the numerous reports published by the OECD, entitled *How's Life? Measuring Well Being*.

contingent factors, that is, by their specific views of political parties, of the electoral campaign and of the leaders concerned. Selective abstention can be seen as a weapon used by part of the electorate to punish one of the competing parties, depending on the circumstances, thus affecting the outcome of the election. This interpretation of the problem has led to the introduction, in analyses of voter turnout, of reflections on the protest vote, first of all in terms of the “vote with the boot” (Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996), and then in that of the populist vote, which shall be examined in greater detail later in the present work.

## The voters we have lost in a global world

Looking at the last two decades, and in particular at the period from the start of the economic recession in 2008 up until the present day, one can see the new, much more complex challenges that political parties have had to face, and the effects that these have had on citizens’ participation and choice of vote. The changes witnessed in this period have concerned various aspects of social and economic life, in addition to the political scenario. In some cases, we have witnessed the acceleration of ongoing processes, while in others there has been genuine discontinuity, leading to disruption, tension and stress for western democratic systems. With regard to this politically tumultuous period, certain scholars have introduced the concept of “post-democracy” in order to emphasise the transition to a completely new phase in history. This term “post-democracy” was first coined just before the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although it was not commonly used in mainstream scholarship until a decade later, following the publication of the work of the same name by Colin Crouch (2004).

Post-democracy, understood as “government by experts” (Rancière 1995; 2005), refers to a trend marking the transition of modern democracies towards norms and practices similar to those that prevailed in pre-democratic times (Crouch 2004, p. 6). One of the characteristics of post-democracy is the decline of democratic processes which have traditionally operated within a national framework, but which are now situated in an indefinite space independent from popular sovereignty. Post-democracy coincides with the electors’ generalised feeling of a loss of control when they observe national governments struggling to manage resources that they had ably controlled in the past, to independently implement policies, and to safeguard public interests, in the presence of distant, not easily identifiable supranational entities (Crouch 2004). There is an underlying perception that citizens themselves count very little, and at the same time that politics has limited power and authority, and consequently bears increasingly less on everyday issues, insofar as it cannot deal with and resolve the questions concerned (Castells 2011).

These critical observations regarding democracy have become increasingly significant since the onset of the recent economic crisis. However, the cultural background concerned goes back some way further, and is rooted in the reflections on what has been labelled the “risk society”. Ulrich Beck (1992) was one of the first scholars to use this expression when referring to the transition from a society ideally based on equality, to one preoccupied with safety. This transition has also impacted the political sphere. While in the past, political parties and institutions were capable of controlling the market, at present governments have given up their direct responsibility for the management of the majority of public services, by subcontracting such out to third-party providers. From this point onwards, citizens have failed to see their demands translated into political action, since the subject responsible for such is no longer immediately identifiable. A similar transition was identified by Bauman, according to whom contemporary political institutions have failed in their attempt to render people’s lives less uncertain, since they no longer possess the collective safety nets with which to counter instability. They merely adopt palliative measures dealing with uncertainty at the private level only, thus leaving more general concerns unresolved. Through this strategy politics gives the

impression of actually doing something, by acting in regard to questions which it seems capable of governing (personal safety, the family, personal goods), rather than facing the more complex, deeper processes deriving from globalisation (Bauman 1999, pp. 5-8).

In reflections on post-democracy, the absence of control is attributed to the fact that even though parliaments continue to operate, politics and government have fallen into the hands of elite groups and the financially-powerful major corporations, resulting in a situation in which “liberal oligarchies” govern (Zolo 1992). According to Schedler, there are two types of *antipolitics*. The first type removes politics, considering them dispensable given that society does not exist, there are no public goods, and individuals cannot be subjected to restrictions. The second type is the one that colonises, imposing its rationality by placing technocrats in positions of power, treating the human world as a natural thing and politics as a game of strategies (Schedler 1997, p. 2-14). In this scenario, non-democratic institutions, experts of various kinds, and mass media, become increasingly powerful. The “mediatisation” of politics, in particular, has had a powerful impact on the way the messages of leaders and parties are produced and received. In regard to this process of transformation, various scholars, following Robinson (1976), have spoken of “videomalaise” (Holz-Bacha 1990) to indicate the negative effects of exposure to news in which anti-institutional themes, the negative aspects of candidates (incompetence, gaffes), personal rivalries and corruption are to the fore, at the expense of real problems and factual information about events. The main effect of videomalaise is to generate disaffection, superficiality, the rejection of politics (Hall Jamieson 1993; Mutz and Reeves 2005; Avery 2009). While the most careful observers can manage to benefit from the various sources of information required to take advantage of the stimulus received, the contrary is true of the less committed who, faced with a media-driven electoral campaign, end up shunning any electoral messages, becoming demotivated and abstaining from voting (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Norris 2000). By representing elections as passive spectacles, the mass media offer the image of elections as arenas for advertising, gossip and calculations (Bogg 2001, pp. 82-83). A spectacle managed by professionals, who also choose the topics of debate, neglecting the interests of normal people (Crouch 2004, p. 4). The political system loses its credibility insofar as it is enclosed in a media bubble and forced to place its trust in a personalised leadership guided by the search for scandals (Castells 2011).

In regard to this de-politicization process, Rancière has spoken of the legitimization of democracy after the people: the people have been removed from the equation, as democracy has now been reduced to a technical game of administration by the State (Rancière 1999, p. 102). In other words, what has emerged is a situation in which the democratic deficit impacts popular sovereignty, restricting opportunities for popular participation and decision making (Canovan 2005; Laclau 2005). According to Crouch, the political class strives to obtain the passive support it needs to get elected, and undertakes to encourage the “maximum degree of minimum participation” (Crouch 2004, p. 126). This marginalisation of the people is claimed to reflect a shift from the political, as antagonism and rupture, to the post-political management of consensus (Katsambekis 2014).

The other reaction witnessed in post-democracy is the superseding of politics as exclusively, or prevalently, electoral. In addition to dissatisfaction with a system that fails to resolve problems, and whose decisional processes are hermetically sealed, there is a growing need among citizens for a new form of mobilisation that goes beyond the traditional forms and the existing representative institutions (Beck 1992). While many are totally deprived of opportunities for participation, others organise themselves into autonomous groups specialised in matters that no longer require party membership. This tendency to move away from conventional politics has grown in these first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in virtue of the increasing importance given to the media aspect of political movements, and to the return of oppositional forms of action on the public stage (Kelly et al. 2018; Castells 2015). For the new generations, participation has shifted towards activities characterised by a considerable

investment of knowledge. There are new forms of political activism, of critical consumption, of boycotting, of involvement in campaigns, and of mobilisation via the Web.

The changes in democracy outlined so far have accelerated considerably over the past decade or so of economic recession. The worsening of the working conditions and wages of one section of the population has resulted in an exacerbation of inequality and the strengthening of people's feelings of insecurity and frustration. Within this scenario, the question of the economy and of the global impact of the economic crisis has affected the electorate's expectations, and has created new cleavages. During this crisis, inequalities have also taken on a territorial dimension, and thus have emphasised the burden of the crisis and favoured the decline of traditional parties. Certain social groups have found themselves exposed to the negative effects of globalisation, such as the outsourcing of work at a lower cost. Other social groups – the global elites – have taken advantage of the changes on the other hand. Globalisation has increased political competition between states and supranational actors, creating a new cleavage between winners and losers (Kriesi et al. 2008; Bornschieer 2010). During the prolonged recession over the course of the last decade, the deprived categories have increased in size and number, and the sense of being at risk has begun to also regard certain citizens previously unaffected by such concerns. This has shaped what is, to all effects and purposes, a true hierarchy of citizenship and participation. It is no surprise to discover that national surveys have begun to reveal an increase, in many European countries, in the percentage of families with a negative view of the economy, and sceptical about the future. These perceptions have helped create a political climate in which citizens first challenge, and then punish, outgoing governments and their leaders, who are held responsible for the difficulties the country is going through.

The impact of the economic cycle on voting has been widely studied (Lewis-Beck 1990; Powell et al. 1993; Nadeau et al. 2002). The unsurprising conclusion reached by such studies is that the worsening of individual working conditions following unemployment or temporary working, can negatively impact workers' identification with political parties. Citizens no longer feel protected by politicians due to uncontrollable processes affecting them and conditioning their existing living standards and future prospects, and the prospects for the country they live in. Nevertheless, the reactions to such changes vary. When faced with periods of economic adversity or uncertainty, electors may respond positively, acting in an attempt to attract greater attention, by changing their votes to punish those they hold responsible for their individual or collective malaise. However, it is more likely that they will be distracted from voting following a lengthy period of difficulty: they may well doubt the efficacy of political action. In a situation of economic adversity and unemployment, electors tend to shoulder responsibility for their own problems, and no longer feel the urgent need to participate and to punish the incumbent government. In Radcliff's view (1992), an economic crisis can lead to a decline in voter turnout in the developed nations, particularly where the relationship between parties and citizens is already impaired, and their disaffection does not favour the opposition. In such cases, instead of opting for political action, the population tends to refrain from voting and reduce its own investment in the electoral process. People tend to become sceptical not only of the government, but also of the validity of the political system as a whole, and thus tend to favour the abstention option.

As far as parliamentary elections are concerned, there has been a progressive fall in turnout during the new millennium: from an average figure of 77.2% for the period 1990-2000, voter turnout fell to 70.0% during the decade 2000-2010, and fell further to 66.9 % in the subsequent decade (2010-2020). The downward trend was more pronounced in the decade 2000-2010, particularly in France and the UK among the Western countries. The following decade, from 2010 to 2020, was significantly affected by the economic crisis, and this influenced voters' expectations especially in the Mediterranean area, where abstention grew faster than in the other countries. A similar downward trend was also witnessed in the case of the European elections, with an all-time minimum turnout of 43% recorded in 2009 and 2014. Furthermore, extremely low voter turnout was recorded in the new

Eastern European democracies, although the figure rose once more, up to 51%, at the most recent elections held in 2019.

#### HERE TABLE 4 AND FIG.1

As I will show more detailed in the Chapter 5, during the years of the economic crisis the increase of abstentionism among the electorate coupled with a growing propensity to sanction the mainstream parties and/or the incumbent government. This has come about also in virtue of the difficulties encountered in attributing clear responsibility for the economic downturn. One of the reasons for this difficulty has been that in certain countries, the handling of the crisis has entailed having recourse to inclusive governments comprising both majority and opposition parties, generating considerable confusion among the citizens. In such cases, it is more difficult for disenchanted voters to vote against the government, due to the absence of any clear distinction between the roles played (Anderson and Hecht 2012), and to the fact that decisions are increasingly taken in situations of emergency and without going through Parliament. However, recent years have also seen a partial (albeit weak) trend reversal, with a slight improvement in voter turnout in certain countries and certain elections. Going back to what Kriesi (2012) notes in regard to the disruption of voting patterns, those same voters who were critical of the incumbent government (*and the same goes for the poor or disadvantaged voter: our aside*) find themselves faced with a wide range of options which are not only feasible but also potentially capable of proving successful or effective: to vote for the traditional opposition; to abstain without favouring either government or opposition; to channel one's dissatisfaction with the elites into votes for the new challengers.

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