

VOTER APATHY

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Charles Pahud de Mortanges*

The year 2024 has been called a "super-election year," with national elections occurring in more than 60 countries worldwide. Approximately two billion voters—about a quarter of the world's population—are expected to head to the polls. This unprecedented electoral activity, featuring closely watched elections in countries like the United States, Mexico, India, and Indonesia, as well as in the 27-member European Union, presents an opportunity to examine a growing global concern: voter apathy - the disinterest or indifference of eligible voters towards participating in electoral processes.

Despite the significance of these elections, available data suggest that voter turnout has been declining steadily in many countries. This essay argues that voter apathy, manifested through low turnout rates and growing disillusionment with political systems, poses a significant threat to the health of democracies worldwide. By examining the underlying causes of this apathy and its potential consequences, we can better understand the urgent need for addressing this issue.

In turbulent times, voting should seem even more important, but in Europe turnouts are lower than ever (Oxenham, 2017). In the European Union, countries like the Czech Republic and Poland have experienced particularly low voter turnout, with rates below 40% and 50%, respectively. Even in Belgium, where voting is mandatory, more than one million voters abstained in a recent election - an unprecedented occurrence. This trend raises

* Charles Pahud de Mortanges is Full Professor (Emeritus) at the HEC School of Management of the University of Liège, Belgium. Views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author.

important questions about the state of democratic engagement and the factors contributing to widespread political disinterest.

Some commentators, like Mark Twain, have cynically suggested that "If voting made any difference, they wouldn't let us do it." Similarly, political scientist Jon Elster observed that "a rational actor has no reason to vote. The chance of having an influence on the outcome of an election is clearly less than dying in a traffic accident on the way to the polling station." (*Reason and Rationality*, p.7). While these perspectives offer a provocative lens through which to view voter behavior, they fail to capture the complexity of the issue and its implications for democratic governance.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that declining voter turnout is detrimental to democracy. When a significant portion of the population abstains from voting, the elected government may not accurately represent the will and preferences of the people, potentially leading to policy decisions that do not serve the interests of the majority. (Campbell, 1962).

Conversely, some observers, like Charles Krauthammer, have interpreted low voter turnout as "a leading indicator of contentment." Political scientists Dye and Ziegler take a more cynical stance, arguing that the masses are inherently "authoritarian, intolerant, nativistic, alienated, hateful, and violent," and thus it is preferable not to stir them from their natural (and rational) political indifference.

Regardless of these varying perspectives, I believe we should take a closer look at the current public sentiment about politics, politicians, and governance. Recent polls, such as those conducted by *Gallup* and *YouGov*, have revealed that a growing number of voters experience four distinct sentiments towards political institutions and government. These feelings range from mild concerns to deeply alarming attitudes that threaten the very foundation of democratic society: feeling unsafe, powerless, betrayed, and bewildered.

The first sentiment - feeling unsafe - stems from a pervasive sense of insecurity about the competence and integrity of political institutions. This can be likened to being aboard a ship with an untrustworthy captain, where the constant fear of disaster looms large. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments' mishandlings of the crisis eroded public trust. When officials failed to communicate effectively, provide clear guidelines, or ensure the availability of necessary resources, citizens began to worry about

their safety and well-being, feeling as though they were adrift without capable leadership.

The second sentiment – powerlessness - manifests as a feeling of disconnection from the political process. Voters often perceive that their actions have little to no impact on political outcomes, leading to a sense of detachment and ostracism. This feeling is exacerbated when even elected representatives appear unable to effect change due to overwhelming forces like globalization or institutional constraints (Belgium?). The result is a dire scenario of the powerless leading the powerless, further eroding faith in democratic processes.

The third and perhaps most troubling sentiment is betrayal. This occurs when the fundamental relationship in a democracy breaks down, and politicians fail to act in the best interests of their constituents. When leaders prioritize their own interests, party affiliations, or foreign agendas over the needs of the people, it creates a deep sense of deception and dishonesty. This erosion of trust can lead to widespread disillusionment with the political system, making it difficult for citizens to believe in the efficacy of democratic processes.

The fourth sentiment – bewilderment - arises when voters observe political and public institutions behaving in ways that no longer make sense to them. This confusion compounds the existing emotions of feeling unsafe, powerless, and betrayed, culminating in the perception that the political landscape is utterly unintelligible. Factors contributing to this sentiment include ideological polarization, the influence of special interest groups, media fragmentation, and the rapid pace of global change.

To illustrate these sentiments, consider the recent emergence of populist movements across various democracies. These movements often capitalize on voters' feelings of insecurity and powerlessness by promising simple solutions to complex problems. However, the vague nature of their promises, such as "taking back control" or "draining the swamp," often lack specific policy proposals or implementation plans. This ambiguity can lead to further confusion and disillusionment when the promised changes fail to materialize or produce unexpected consequences.

The combination of these four sentiments - feeling unsafe, powerless, betrayed, and bewildered - creates a perfect storm for voter apathy. When citizens no longer believe that their participation in the democratic process

can effect meaningful change or protect their interests, they are more likely to disengage entirely. This disengagement, in turn, can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy where the lack of broad voter participation results in governments that are indeed less representative and responsive to the needs of the populace.

As the world navigates this super-election year, it is crucial to acknowledge and address these pervasive feelings of voter apathy. The health of our democracies depends on the active participation of an informed and engaged citizenry. By understanding the root causes of voter disengagement and working to address them, we can strive to create political systems that truly serve the interests of all citizens and reinvigorate the democratic process for future generations.

The 2024 super-election year presents both a challenge and an opportunity. While the widespread occurrence of elections across the globe highlights the continued importance of democratic processes, the persistent issue of voter apathy threatens to undermine their effectiveness. By recognizing and addressing the complex emotions driving this apathy - feelings of insecurity, powerlessness, betrayal, and bewilderment - we can work towards strengthening the foundations of democracy and ensuring that it continues to serve as a viable and vibrant system of governance in the 21st century and beyond.

References.

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