

UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

WHO DOES (NOT) VOTE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC?

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June 2025



Why it matters: This report addresses the decline in voter turnout in the Czech Republic, particularly among young people, those with lower levels of education, and socially disadvantaged citizens—posing a threat to equal political representation and democratic legitimacy.



Key findings: Individuals with higher education, economic stability, political interest, and ties to political parties or trade unions are more likely to vote. The lowest turnout is found among the unemployed, young people, and those who lack trust in democracy.



Recommended actions: Strengthen civic education, invest in inclusive schooling, regulate debt enforcement, restore trust in public services, and support the legitimacy of trade unions as democratic actors.



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INTRODUCTION

The rise of populism, hybrid threats, the spread of disinformation, and the declining resilience of democracies in turbulent times have become central concerns for researchers and policymakers alike. While democracies still make up more than half of the world's regimes, growing public dissatisfaction and weakening civic engagement indicate deeper problems beneath the surface. One of the most telling indicators of democratic health is political participation – especially participation in elections. Elections are not only the primary mechanism by which citizens can hold politicians accountable; they are also the only institutionalised and peaceful way to change political leadership.

As highlighted in numerous studies, including the comparative report (Elsässer et al. 2022) in the *Unequal Democracies series* – of which this country report is a part of – low voter turnout poses a serious challenge to any democracy. Not only because it calls into question the legitimacy of elected representatives, but also because it leads to unequal political representation. Socially excluded and low-income groups, who are often underrepresented at the polls, also tend to be absent from public and political discourse (see Lijphart 1997). High turnout helps reduce these gaps, fosters inclusive representation, and strengthens trust in the system. In an era of concerns over the oligarchisation of politics, elections that reflect the full diversity of society are one of the few effective tools for restoring balance.

This issue is especially pronounced in post-communist democracies. While declining voter turnout is a pan-European trend, the decline has been significantly more intense in Central and Eastern Europe. According to IDEA, between the late 1980s and 2015, turnout in established Western democracies dropped by about 10%, while in post-communist countries it declined by roughly 20% from the time of their first free elections (Solijonov 2016). The Czech Republic, often considered a success story of post-communist transition, is no exception.

Despite achieving relatively fast economic liberalisation and institutional consolidation in the 1990s, voter turnout in the Czech Republic has fallen sharply over the past three decades. And while age is not the primary determinant of turnout, young people are statistically the most likely to abstain from voting. For first-time voters, the experience can be stressful and confusing – especially in the absence of guid-

ance from family or peers. This points to the essential role of schools, particularly for adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds. Civic education must go beyond abstract democratic values and equip students with practical tools and confidence to participate.

Education more broadly emerges as one of the strongest predictors of political engagement. Those with secondary or higher education are far more likely to vote, while people with only a primary education face up to a 50% probability of abstention. Educational inequality, which remains entrenched in the Czech Republic, thus contributes to political inequality. Increasing funding for education, modernising the system, and ensuring equal access – such as by embedding the role of school social pedagogues – can all positively influence voter turnout.

Economic status also plays a critical role. While entrepreneurs and retirees tend to vote in higher numbers, unemployment and debt (especially foreclosures) are associated with political disengagement. For many economically or socially marginalised individuals, abstaining from voting is not a symptom of apathy but a rational decision – one rooted in distrust toward a system they feel does not serve them. However, if this pattern continues, these groups risk being politically silenced, and their interests excluded from the public agenda.

That said, the data also offer a more hopeful perspective. Citizens who believe the political system is responsive to their needs, or who feel their actions can make a difference, are significantly more likely to vote. Two of the most powerful factors that positively affect turnout are political interest and identification with a political party. In the Czech parliamentary elections of 2021, the difference in turnout between politically interested and disinterested voters reached nearly 60%. This underscores the need for political parties to forge stronger ties with the public.

Interestingly, one factor with mobilising potential that remains underutilised in the Czech context is trade union membership. Unions not only provide members with political information and foster a sense of internal efficacy (“my activism can change things”), but they also have proven potential to mobilise voters – as shown in international research. Ultimately, robust trade union participation supports the functioning of liberal democracy. However, in the Czech Republic,

unions are often viewed through the lens of their role during the communist regime – when they were state-controlled, mandatory, and closely tied to propaganda.

Let us now take a closer look at the individual factors influencing voter turnout in the Czech Republic, along with proposals aimed at encouraging greater citizen participation in the political process.

HOW CAN WE ANALYZE VOTER PARTICIPATION?

To answer our research questions, we must first define the variables and indicators used in the analysis. This study primarily relies on individual-level voter data.

Existing research offers several theoretical explanations for voter turnout. This study focuses on three key approaches: socioeconomic status theory, motivation theory, and mobilization theory. Drawing on the work of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), voter abstention can be broadly explained through three main lenses:

A. LACK OF MOTIVATION

According to motivation theory, some individuals simply choose not to vote because they lack interest in politics. They may view elections as irrelevant or ineffective, believing their participation would not make a meaningful difference.

B. LACK OF MOBILIZATION

Mobilization theory emphasizes the importance of social networks and external encouragement in prompting political participation. Factors such as membership in civic organizations, participation in religious communities, or employment status can influence whether someone is mobilized to vote.

C. LACK OF RESOURCES

Socioeconomic status theory assumes that political participation requires certain resources – such as time, money, and cognitive skills. As Oppenhuis (1995) points out, these resources are unequally distributed across society, making it more difficult for some groups to engage in the political process.

WHAT DRIVES VOTER ABSENTEEISM?

This study uses individual-level data collected between 1998 and 2021 by the Czech Centre for Public Opinion Research, publicly available through its online database. To complement this data and provide deeper insight into voter behavior, we also incorporate findings from in-depth interviews conducted as part of research projects at Palacký University in Olomouc. This mixed-methods approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to voter absenteeism.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

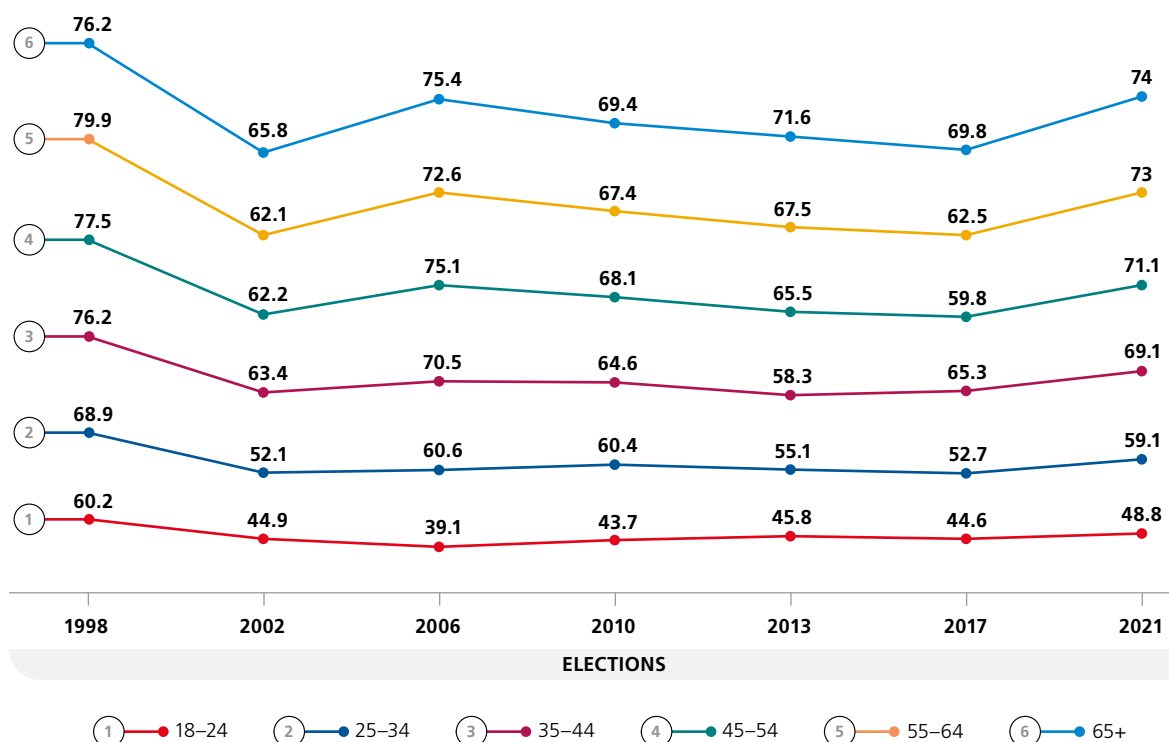
Numerous international studies have confirmed that socio-economic factors – such as age, education, income, and social

status – positively influence voting behaviour (see Verba & Nie 1972; Blais 2000; Wilford 2020; Martikainen P., Martikainen T., & Wass 2005, among others). This study will also examine the impact of these variables in the Czech case.

YOUTH AND VOTING

Empirical research consistently shows a strong relationship between age and voter turnout, with the youngest age groups participating the least (Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil, & Nadeau 2009). The same pattern is evident in the Czech Republic. Between 1998 and 2021, voters aged 18–24 consistently had the lowest turnout, while those over 65 were the most likely to vote (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Voter turnout by age



Source: Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Election Study 2013–2021. Calculated by the author.

Table 1
Number of electors on the register and estimated voting-age population

Elections	Turnout of the youngest age group (%)	Turnout of the oldest age group (%)	Difference in voter turnout (%)
1998	60.2	76.2	16
2002	44.9	65.8	20.9
2006	39.1	75.4	36.3
2010	43.7	69.4	25.7
2013	45.8	71.6	25.8
2017	44.6	69.8	25.2

Source: Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Election Study 2013–2021. Calculated by the author

The difference between these two age groups is significant – on average, around 25 percentage points. The gap was most pronounced in 2006, when turnout among older voters exceeded that of young voters by more than 36 percentage points (see Table 1).

Let's take a closer look at how different age groups vary in their likelihood of participating – or not participating – in elections. The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 2.

Young people, particularly those in the youngest age group (18–24), are the most likely to abstain from voting. In this group, the probability of non-participation is around 50%. Among those aged 25–64, the probability drops slightly to an average of 32%. The lowest rate of absenteeism is found among the oldest voters – those aged 65 and above – where only 26% are likely to skip the polls.

What explains the higher rates of absenteeism among young voters? Group interviews with 18–22-year-olds revealed several key factors. Many of them perceive elections not as a tool for real societal change, but rather as a formal obligation or symbolic civic duty. They are often not driven by strong ideals, hopes for change, or positive emotions. In fact, for some, the voting process itself was confusing and anxiety-inducing (Ostrá & Merklová, 2021):

When I first went to vote, I was very confused. I didn't know what to do, where to go, or how it worked.

Jana, 20 years old

I was terribly confused about preferential votes and these things. I told myself I could never handle that. Then I was stressed about putting it in the right ballot box. It was a little stressful, too.

Patrik, 21 years old

Beyond the anxiety surrounding the voting process, the interviews uncovered another important reason for young voters' reluctance to participate: an unwillingness to com-

promise. Many young people feel they should only vote if they can fully identify with a party or candidate. If no option aligns with their views completely, they prefer not to vote at all:

It would have to be someone I trust and support 100% and agree with 100% on everything.

Aneta, 18 years old

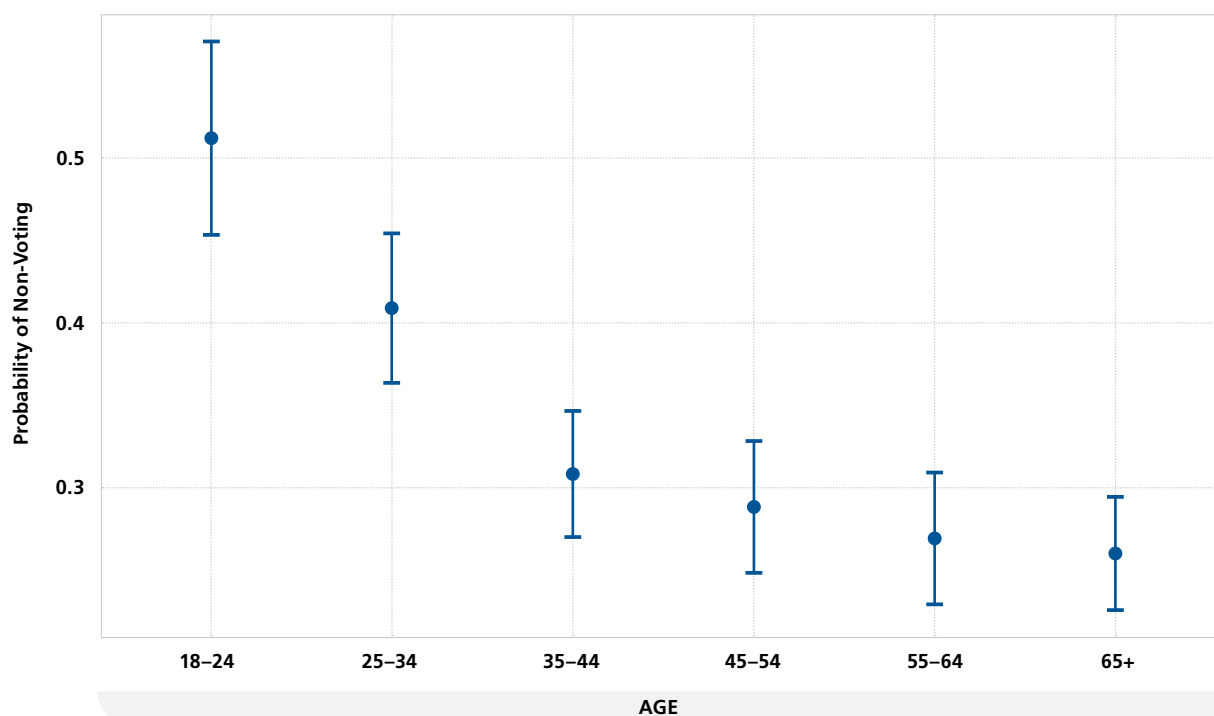
EDUCATION MATTERS

Some scholars argue that age alone does not sufficiently explain why young people are less likely to participate in elections (e.g., Linek 2013). It is therefore important to examine how age intersects with other variables – particularly education and socio-economic status – both of which tend to increase with age.

As early as 1980, Wolfinger and Rosenstone demonstrated a strong empirical relationship between education and voter turnout. They argued that education reduces the costs associated with making electoral decisions by equipping individuals with the cognitive skills needed to understand complex and abstract processes, such as politics. A person who understands politics is more likely to develop an interest in it and to participate actively (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Another explanation for the strong influence of education on political behaviour is that individuals with higher education are more likely to adopt civic norms and values that emphasize the importance of participation (Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil, & Nadeau, 2009).

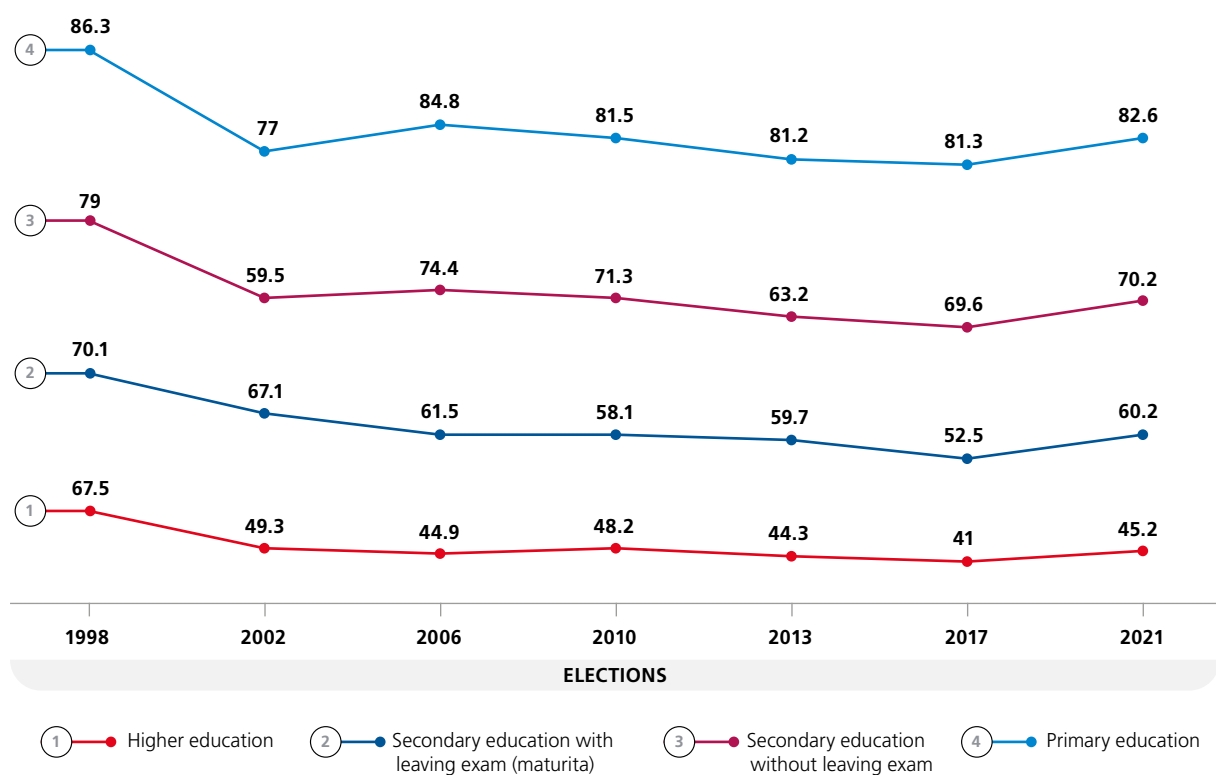
In the Czech context, the pattern is similar. Between 1998 and 2021, the average voter turnout gap between individuals with only primary education and those with a university degree exceeded 33 percentage points. In the 2017 elections, this gap was even greater – over 40 percentage points (see Figure 3 and Table 2).

Figure 2
Probabilities of non-participation in elections by age group



Source: the Czech Election Study 2017 and 2021. N = 1450, Confidence interval at the 95% level.
Author: Veronika Opletalová, Palacky University in Olomouc.

Figure 3
Voter turnout based on educational level



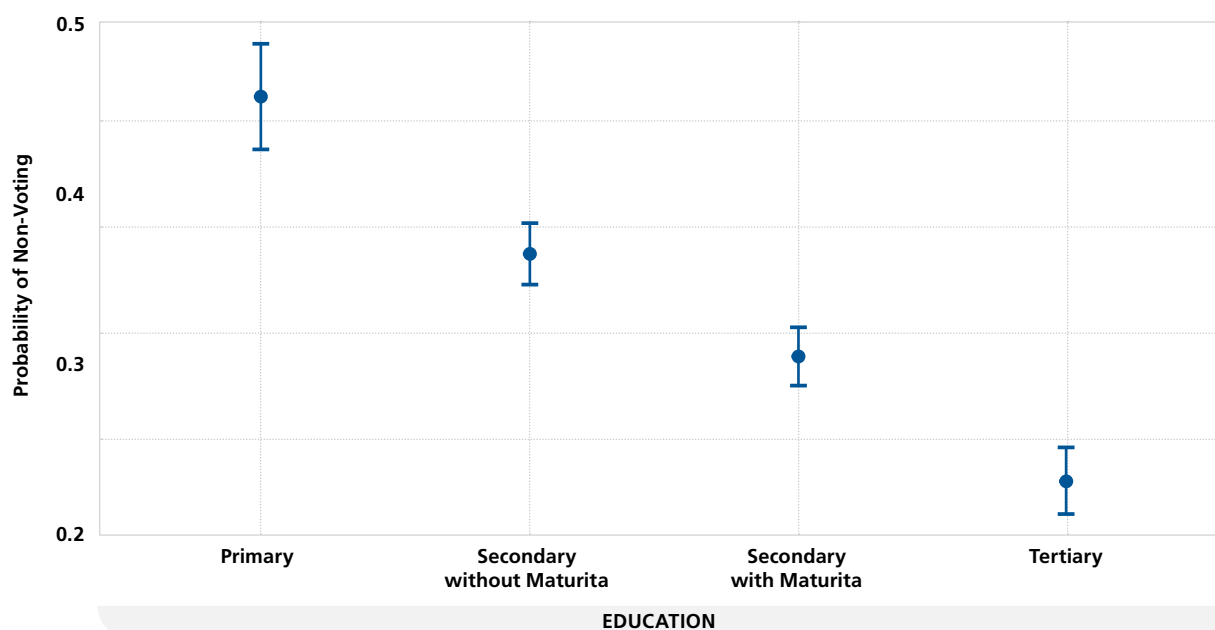
Source: Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Election Study 2013–2021. Calculated by the author.

Table 2
Differences in voter turnout by educational level

Elections	Voter turnout - people with primary education (%)	Voter turnout - people with higher education (%)	Difference in voter turnout (%)
1998	67.5	86.3	18.8
2002	49.3	77.0	27.7
2006	44.9	84.8	39.9
2010	48.2	81.5	33.3
2013	44.3	81.2	36.9
2017	41.0	81.3	40.3
2021	45.2	82.6	37.4

Source: Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Election Study 2013–2021. Calculated by the author.

Figure 4
Probabilities of non-participation in elections by level of education



Source: the Czech Election Study 2017 and 2021. N = 1450, Confidence interval at the 95% level.
Author: Veronika Opletalová, Palacky University in Olomouc.

Let us look again at the probability of non-participation by education level (see Figure 4) reveals the same trend. Individuals with only primary education face up to a 50% chance of not voting. In contrast, university graduates have just a 16% likelihood of electoral absenteeism.

The level of education attained reflects more than just formal qualifications – it can also serve as a proxy for broader personal and familial factors. Among all demographic variables,

education perhaps best captures the quality of a person's family background or early social environment. Those with higher education often come from households where parents are also educated, where books are present, and where public affairs are regularly discussed (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).

Finally, education is closely linked to another important socio-demographic factor that will be explored in the next section: economic activity.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND TURNOUT

The positive relationship between higher socio-economic status and voter turnout has been well documented since the 1970s. The underlying arguments are similar to those made for other socio-demographic variables. People who are economically active – those who go to work – are more likely to socialize, engage in discussions about public affairs, and stay informed about political issues. In this way, economic activity itself has a mobilizing potential.

A second key explanation relates to the availability of resources. As noted in earlier sections of this study, resources such as time, money, and mental energy are not distributed equally in society. People who are financially secure and do not face daily existential pressures are more likely to engage in political life. In contrast, socially disadvantaged individuals – especially those struggling to meet their basic needs – tend to focus their energy on survival. For them, the political system may appear unresponsive or irrelevant. Why would they participate in preserving a system that offers them nothing in return?

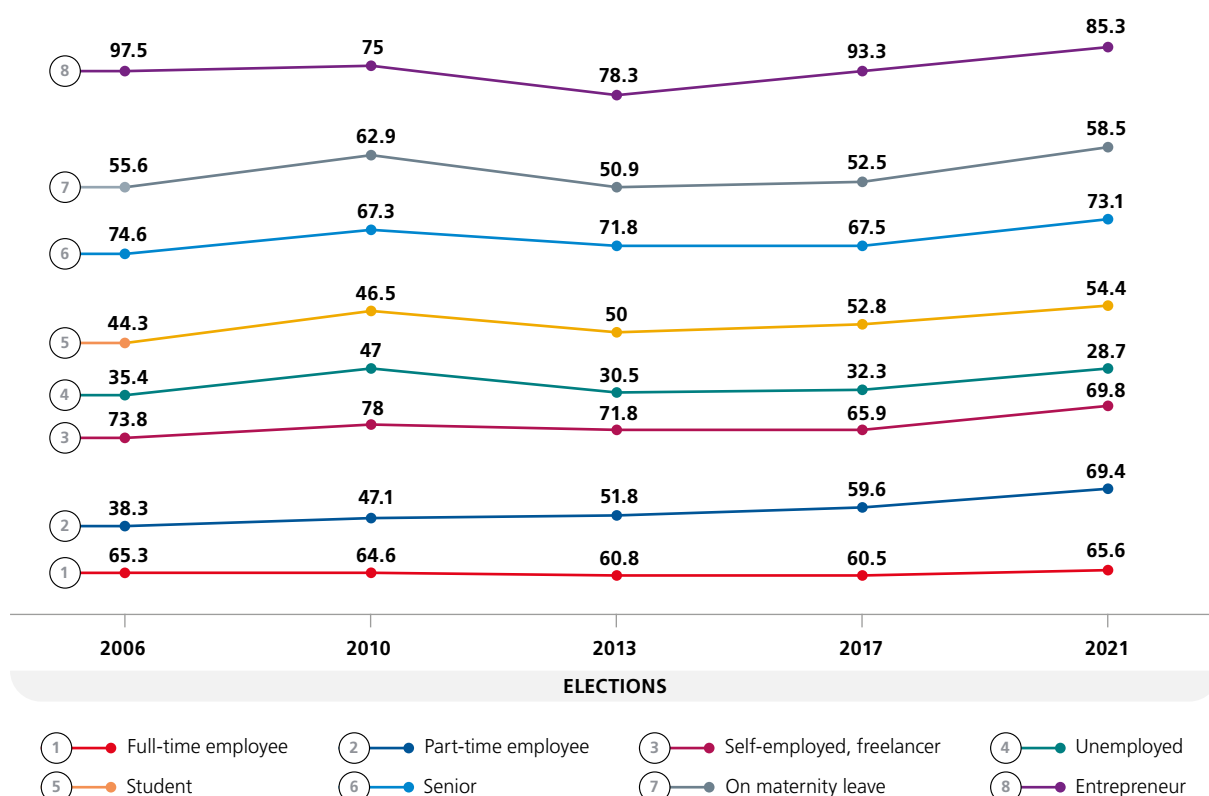
The data confirms this dynamic in the Czech context. As shown in Figure 5, voter turnout among the unemployed is notably low. The difference between entrepreneurs and unemployed individuals in the 2021 general election was nearly 57 percentage points, a staggering gap.

Similarly, there are significant differences between the group of entrepreneurs and the unemployed in the probability of non-participation. Entrepreneurs and older adults show the lowest likelihood of abstaining, with around 25% probability of non-voting. In contrast, unemployed individuals face up to a 70% chance of not voting at all.

The conclusions of the analyses thus confirm the assumption that people with lower socio-economic status, especially those experiencing economic hardship, are significantly less likely to participate in elections. One particularly important factor negatively affecting voter turnout in the Czech Republic is the high prevalence of personal foreclosures. According to the Chamber of Executors, over 625,000 residents are currently in foreclosure. Alarming, 23% of these individuals face ten or more foreclosure cases simultaneously.

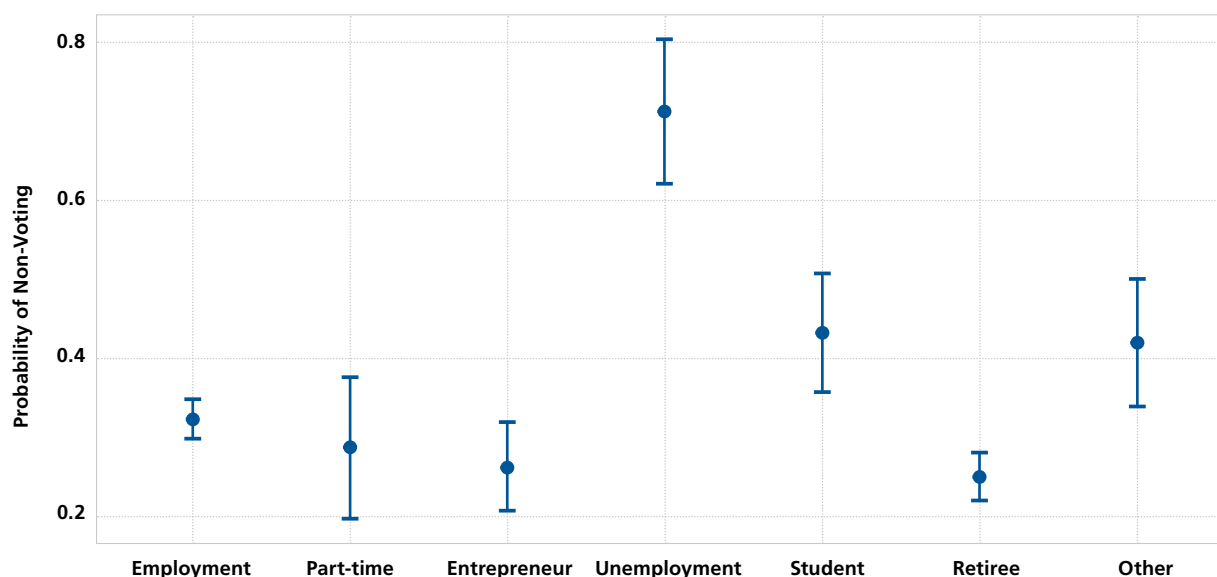
While we lack individual-level data, aggregate-level analyses illustrate the broader impact of foreclosures on political engagement. According to researchers from IDEA Cerge, in municipalities where the foreclosure rate increases by 10 percentage points, voter turnout declines by one percentage point. These areas also experience a rise in support for far-right parties (by 1%) and populists (by 3%). This suggests that even individuals not directly affected by foreclosure may be influenced by living in communities with high levels of economic distress (Grossman, Jurajda, & Zapletalová, 2023).

Figure 5
Voter turnout by economic status (%)



Source: Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Election Study 2013–2021. Data are weighted. Calculated by the author.

Figure 6
Probabilities of non-participation in elections by economic status



Source: the Czech Election Study 2017 and 2021. N = 1450, Confidence interval at the 95% level.
Author: Veronika Opletalová, Palacky University in Olomouc.

Foreclosures, poor living standards, and a general sense of economic and social decline influence not only people's willingness to vote, but also their perception of democracy itself. Qualitative findings from the *Erosion of Democracy* research project reveal that perceptions of democratic legitimacy are deeply intertwined with economic experience and personal well-being. Respondents who reported a deteriorating standard of living cited issues such as unaffordable housing, rising retirement age, increasing costs, declining food quality, and overreliance on imported goods – all of which they viewed as signs of democracy's failure.

For example, the retirement age... and the prices of food and medicine, the shortages... It has something to do with democracy, that these people are getting worse and worse off. That's what is happening in democracies.

Respondent, group interview, Erosion of Democracy project, NMS 2023

I see it in terms of finances – the price increases and the inequality in the quality of food, which is simply better abroad. I connect it, at least partially, with the regime change here.

Respondent, group interview, Erosion of Democracy project, NMS 2023

MOTIVATION, MOBILISATION AND POLITICAL INTEREST

Beyond socio-economic factors, other variables – particularly those related to citizens' motivation and engagement – also play a significant role in shaping voter turnout. This section is based on a straightforward assumption: individuals who are

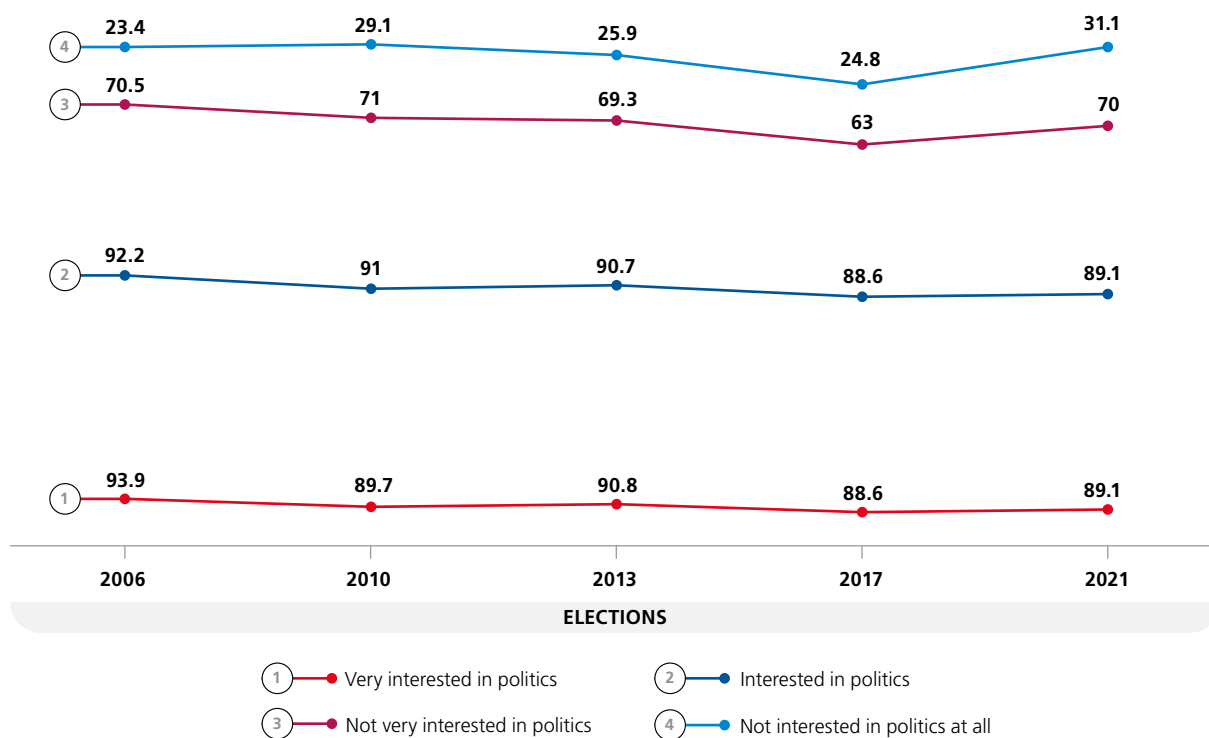
disinterested in politics or lack confidence in the political system are unlikely to see any reason to participate in elections.

Unfortunately, data on voter turnout from 2006 to 2021 support this premise. Individuals who express low levels of interest in public affairs are consistently much less likely to vote than those who are politically engaged. For example, in 2006, the difference in turnout between politically interested and uninterested citizens was as high as 70 percentage points (see Figure 7).

Perceptions of democracy also play a significant role in shaping voter turnout. As discussed in the previous section, there is a clear link between an individual's deteriorating economic and social conditions and their view of how democracy functions. Citizens who distrust democratic institutions – or who express a preference for authoritarian regimes – are often less motivated to participate in elections. For these individuals, voting may seem like a pointless exercise with no meaningful outcome.

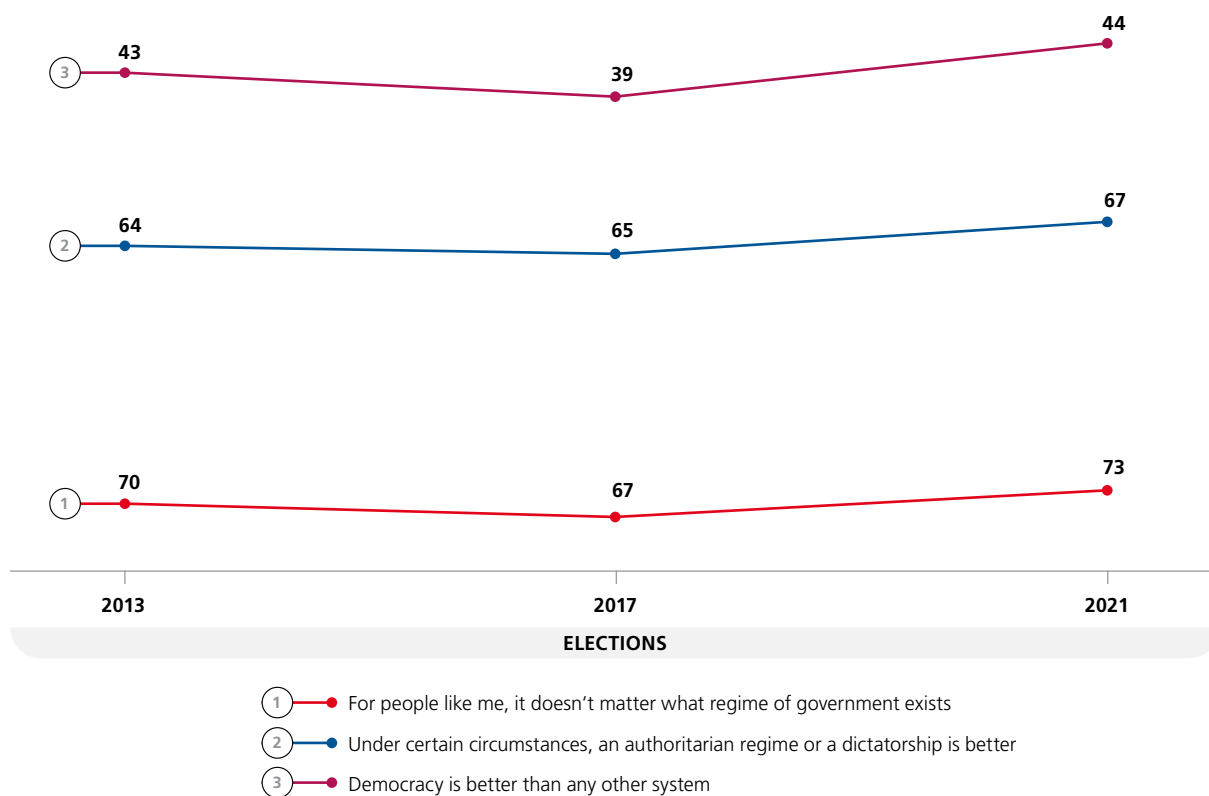
Data from 2013 to 2021 supports this notion. During this period, only around 40% of individuals who did not consider the nature of their political system important chose to vote. Interestingly, even those who expressed conditional support for authoritarian alternatives voted less frequently than the general population. It is likely that individuals who see no clear distinction between democracy and authoritarianism are also those who lack interest in politics or come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. They may no longer believe that any political system – democratic or otherwise – can meaningfully improve their lives. This disillusionment often results in withdrawal from the electoral process (see Figure 8).

Figure 7

Voter turnout by level of interest in politics (%)

Source: Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Election Study 2013–2021. Data are weighted. Calculated by author.

Figure 8

Voter turnout by opinion on democracy (%)

Source: Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Election Study 2013–2021. Data are weighted. Calculated by author.

The present study also explores motivation using two commonly studied concepts in political science: internal and external political efficacy. External political efficacy refers to the belief that the political system responds to the needs of citizens. Individuals who hold this belief are generally more likely to vote. Similarly, internal political efficacy – defined as the belief that one can personally influence political events – also positively correlates with electoral participation. The relationship between these variables is further examined in the logistic regression model presented at the end of this study.

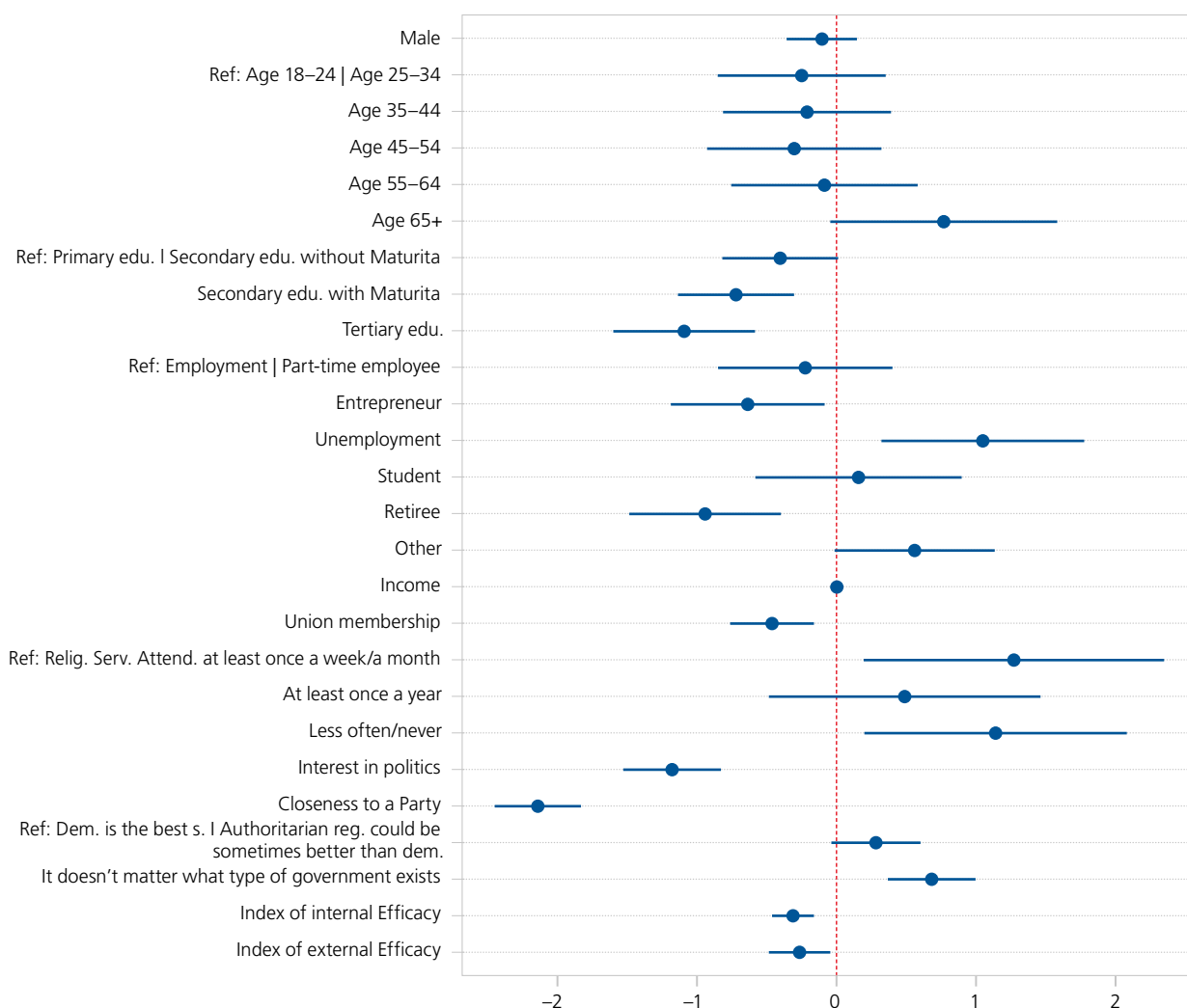
Before turning to that analysis, we briefly address one final factor: the mobilizing effect of organizational membership or strong affiliation with a political party. Theoretical frameworks suggest that individuals who are active in religious communities or civic organizations (such as trade unions) tend to be more politically engaged. These networks serve as important channels for political mobilisation. Likewise, citizens who feel this closeness.

'TYPICAL' ACTIVE CZECH VOTERS

This study has explored a range of theoretical explanations for voter turnout, focusing on socio-demographic characteristics, motivational factors, and opportunities for mobilisation. Initial descriptive data and probability models have

largely supported these assumptions. In the final step, we tested all relevant variables using a logistic regression model, which reveals the degree to which each factor influences the likelihood of voting or abstaining.

Figure 6
Model 1 Binary logistic regression model



Notes: N = 1450 P-values below 0.05 indicate that the effect of this variable is statistically significant.
The graph shows that if the confidence interval for a factor touches
Source: 2017 and 2021 Czech Election Study.

The model yields the following key findings:

- **Age:** There are no statistically significant differences in turnout between age groups. Age, therefore, does not appear to be a decisive factor in determining voter participation.
- **Gender:** Gender has no measurable effect on voter turnout.
- **Education:** The higher an individual's level of education, the lower their likelihood of abstaining. Individuals with a high school diploma or university degree are significantly less likely to be non-voters compared to those with only primary education.
- **Employment status:** Unemployed individuals are more likely to abstain compared to those in full-time employment. In contrast, entrepreneurs and retirees show a significantly lower likelihood of non-participation. No statistically significant differences were found for other economic groups.
- **Union membership:** Being a member of a trade union has a positive effect on turnout.
- **Interest in politics:** A strong interest in politics significantly reduces the likelihood of absenteeism. Politically engaged individuals are much more likely to vote.
- **Partisan affiliation:** Feeling a sense of closeness to a political party has one of the strongest positive effects on voter turnout. Individuals with no party affiliation are much more likely to stay away from the polls.
- **Views on democracy vs. authoritarianism:** Those who believe that authoritarian regimes may be preferable to democracy have a significantly higher probability of not voting, compared to individuals who firmly support democracy. Even individuals with more moderate views (e.g., "authority can sometimes be better than democracy") show an increased likelihood of non-participation, though the effect is less pronounced.
- **Political efficacy:** Belief that the political system is responsive to citizens' needs (external efficacy) is associated with lower rates of abstention. Likewise, individuals who feel they can influence political events (internal efficacy) are more likely to vote.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study on the causes of voter non-participation among Czech citizens largely confirms findings from empirical research in other countries. However, unlike some international studies, our results suggest that age alone does not adequately explain why young people abstain from voting. Instead, other factors must be considered.

In-depth interviews with young voters highlight the need for more effective civic education in schools and support for NGO's promoting political education as well. This is especially important for students from complex or disadvantaged family backgrounds, who may lack opportunities to discuss politics or elections at home. Schools should not only foster democratic values but also demystify the voting process itself. Although elections in the Czech Republic are relatively simple and do not require pre-registration, many young people still find the experience stressful and confusing.

Among socio-demographic characteristics, education emerged as the most influential factor affecting voter turnout. The effect is most pronounced among university-educated individuals, who vote significantly more often than those with only primary education. Education is not only essential for building an active and informed civil society but also a cornerstone of long-term prosperity. Unfortunately, in the Czech Republic, educational outcomes are still largely shaped by social background. Despite education being one of the most powerful tools for social mobility, public education remains underfunded, and regional disparities persist. In some structurally disadvantaged areas, up to one-sixth of pupils fail to complete even primary or secondary education. The state must invest both in improving the quality of schools across the country and in supporting socially disadvantaged families, for instance, through the involvement of school-based social workers. A better-educated population is not only more socially and economically resilient, but also more likely to participate in the democratic process.

Education is also closely linked to economic status. The lowest levels of voter participation are found among the unemployed – who also tend to have lower levels of education. While we lack individual-level data, it is likely that a significant portion of the unemployed population is also affected by foreclosures, further decreasing their willingness to vote. To motivate participation, people need to believe that the political system can meaningfully improve their life condi-

tions. There is no simple solution to this challenge. Instead, it requires a comprehensive package of economic and social measures – including stricter regulation of foreclosures and a supportive, not punitive, welfare system.

Another growing concern is distrust in democracy and the political system. Citizens who are open to authoritarian alternatives – or who believe the nature of the regime doesn't matter – are significantly more likely to abstain from voting. Restoring their trust will require more than rhetorical appeals to “freedom” or “democratic values.” Research shows that many economically and socially deprived individuals do not separate democracy from the market economy, which, in its unregulated form, has produced growing inequality. Issues such as unaffordable housing, rising costs of medicine and food, and deteriorating public services are all associated in their minds with democracy's failings. A necessary – though not sufficient – step toward rebuilding their trust is the provision of quality, accessible public services. As long as nearly one million citizens lack access to a general practitioner, the poorest households spend 40% of their income on housing, and prices continue to rise while incomes stagnate, these individuals will remain alienated from the system. If we fail to engage them, they will continue to be politically unrepresented, and their voices will be absent from public discourse.

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge the role of trade unions. This study has shown that union membership has a positive impact on voter turnout. Unions provide workers with platforms to express political views and build a sense of internal efficacy – the belief that one's actions can make a difference. However, union membership is steadily declining, and questions remain about the unions' capacity to actively engage members. In the Czech Republic, trade unions suffer from negative historical associations. Many still link them, along with left-wing parties, to the pre-1989 political regime. As a result, unions have been unfairly portrayed by some right-wing politicians and commentators as remnants of an undemocratic past.

This presents a paradox: while unions are falsely associated with the previous communist regime and ideology, empirical data confirms their positive contribution to democratic functioning. The goal of all democratic actors – regardless of political orientation – should be to restore the legitimacy and relevance of the trade union movement.

A healthy democracy depends on a functioning social dialogue and a shared consensus that defending workers' rights through organized action is legitimate and necessary, even within a liberal democracy. For readers in Western Europe – where trade unions remain respected institutions – this may seem self-evident. However, in post-communist Central Europe, neoliberal narratives that frame workers' rights as a threat to the free market still resonate. Countering these narratives is vital for democratic renewal.

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IMPRINT

Publisher:
FES Regional Office for International Cooperation
Democracy of the Future
Reichsratsstr. 13/5
A-1010 Vienna

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Design: pertext, Berlin | www.pertext.de

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ISBN 978-3-98628-730-6

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ABOUT UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

Unequal Democracies is a project by FES Democracy of the Future. The main goal is to promote comparative understanding of why inequality in voting, political representation and other democratic processes hurt our democracies.

In the series **Who does (not) have a seat in Parliament?** we analyse the social representation of European parliaments.

In the series **Who does (not) vote?** we investigate election turnout levels across the parameters gender, age, social class and education in European democracies.

Both series contain comparative studies and selective country reports. The comparative studies lay out general trends while the country reports provide country-specific analyses about the state of particular national contexts with the aim to develop and discuss political recommendations for decision-makers.

More information at:
<https://democracy.fes.de/topics/inequality-democracy>



WHO DOES (NOT) VOTE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC?



Why it matters: This report addresses the decline in voter turnout in the Czech Republic, particularly among young people, those with lower levels of education, and socially disadvantaged citizens—posing a threat to equal political representation and democratic legitimacy.



Key findings: Individuals with higher education, economic stability, political interest, and ties to political parties or trade unions are more likely to vote. The lowest turnout is found among the unemployed, young people, and those who lack trust in democracy.



Recommended actions: Strengthen civic education, invest in inclusive schooling, regulate debt enforcement, restore trust in public services, and support the legitimacy of trade unions as democratic actors.

