

UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

WHO DOES (NOT) VOTE IN MONTENEGRO

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Voting is considered a civic virtue and high election turnout is seen as a vital indicator of a healthy democracy, suggesting engaged and representative decision-making by elected officials.



Voter turnout in Montenegro has sharply declined, particularly in the 2023 elections, raising concerns about the legitimacy of the electoral process and citizens' belief in the importance of their vote.



Key factors influencing voter turnout in Montenegro include satisfaction with democracy, age, education, and ethnicity, with significant efforts needed to address inequalities and engage more voters to ensure representative elections.



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WHY DOES TURNOUT MATTER?

Voting is often seen as a fundamental part of being a good citizen, or as academic literature phrased is – voting is an *act of civic virtue* (Clarke et al., 2004). Additionally, election turnout, or the percentage of eligible voters who cast ballots in an election, is often discussed as one of the vital indicators of the health of a democracy. Normatively speaking, high turnout is often desired because it suggests that key decisions in the society are made by officials who are elected by vibrant, engaged, and representative polity. The government, elected from the parliament, which is elected at the high turnout elections, is more likely to represent a broader spectrum of the population. This further enhances the legitimacy and acceptance of elected officials. The desirability of high turnout even led some countries to make voting on the election day compulsory, though these countries are still in minority worldwide. This idea is occasionally debated in other countries, as an attempt to make more people vote.

Voting has always been an interesting phenomenon for academic scholars, for academic debates, but also for pundits and everyday conversations. However, at first, studies and conversations dominantly focused on the question why people vote the way they do. It took a while before a *step back* has been taken, and people also started exploring the question – “Why do people vote at all?” As voter turnout has dropped in many long-established democracies, researchers have become more interested in understanding why some people choose not to vote.

Declining levels of voter turnout can present significant challenges to both the function and perception of democracy, particularly in newer European democracies where democratic institutions and norms may still be solidifying.

Thus, non-voting has become a hot topic for researchers worldwide (Aldrich, 1993; Franklin, 2004). While it happens on an individual level, studies show that non-voters tend to be concentrated in specific parts of society, and that certain groups are more likely to vote/abstain. This suggests that certain characteristics make some people more likely to vote and others more likely to abstain.

WHO VOTES AND WHO STAYS HOME?

Voluminous literature in the field discovered empirical evidence for certain patterns of lower voter turnout that can be observed across different countries and electoral systems (Avery, 2015; Franklin, 2004; Lefevere & Van Aelst, 2014).

Typically, young people are less likely to vote compared to older adults (Blais et al., 2004). Numerous studies have shown that electoral participation increases with age. Young voters may feel disconnected from the political process, believe that their vote has little impact, or lack interest in politics. Additionally, younger individuals may be less established in their communities and more transient, both of which can contribute to lower voting rates.

Also, socioeconomic status plays a significant role in voting behavior. Individuals with lower education and/or income levels are less likely to vote (Leighley & Nagler, 1992). This trend is often attributed to a variety of factors, including a lack of resources, such as time and transportation, and a lesser degree of political efficacy – the belief that one’s vote can make a difference. Research has consistently shown that as education and income levels increase, so does the likelihood of voting.

Additionally, minority groups often have lower voting rates than the majority population (Hajnal & Trounstein, 2005; Zonszein & Grossman, 2023). This can be due to structural barriers, such as voter identification laws and limited access to polling places, as well as feelings of disenfranchisement or beliefs that the political system is biased against them. For example, in the United States, Latino and African American communities historically participate at lower rates than white voters, though these gaps can vary significantly depending on the election and local contexts.

Finally, migrants and non-native citizens in many countries vote at lower rates than native-born citizens (Wass et al., 2015). This group may face legal barriers, such as not having citizenship, or practical challenges, like language barriers or unfamiliarity with the new country’s political system.

Certain patterns, noticed worldwide, are also applicable in *new democracies* of Eastern Europe (Kostadinova, 2003;

Northmore-Ball, 2016). Much like in other, more developed democracies, young people often show lower voter turnout. Socioeconomic status also plays a critical role, with those having lower income and education levels participating less in elections. Additionally, ethnic minorities and immigrants also participate less. However, this region also brings some specifics. Namely, scholars noticed that in new European democracies, factors influencing voter turnout reflect a mix of institutional settings and socio-economic conditions. New European democracies also face challenges like economic inequality and corruption, which can dampen electoral participation.

This study explores to what extent Montenegro follows these patterns, and if these findings are applicable in one of the smallest European countries, with a very turbulent political development.

CATCHING THE WAGON OF DECLINING TURNOUT

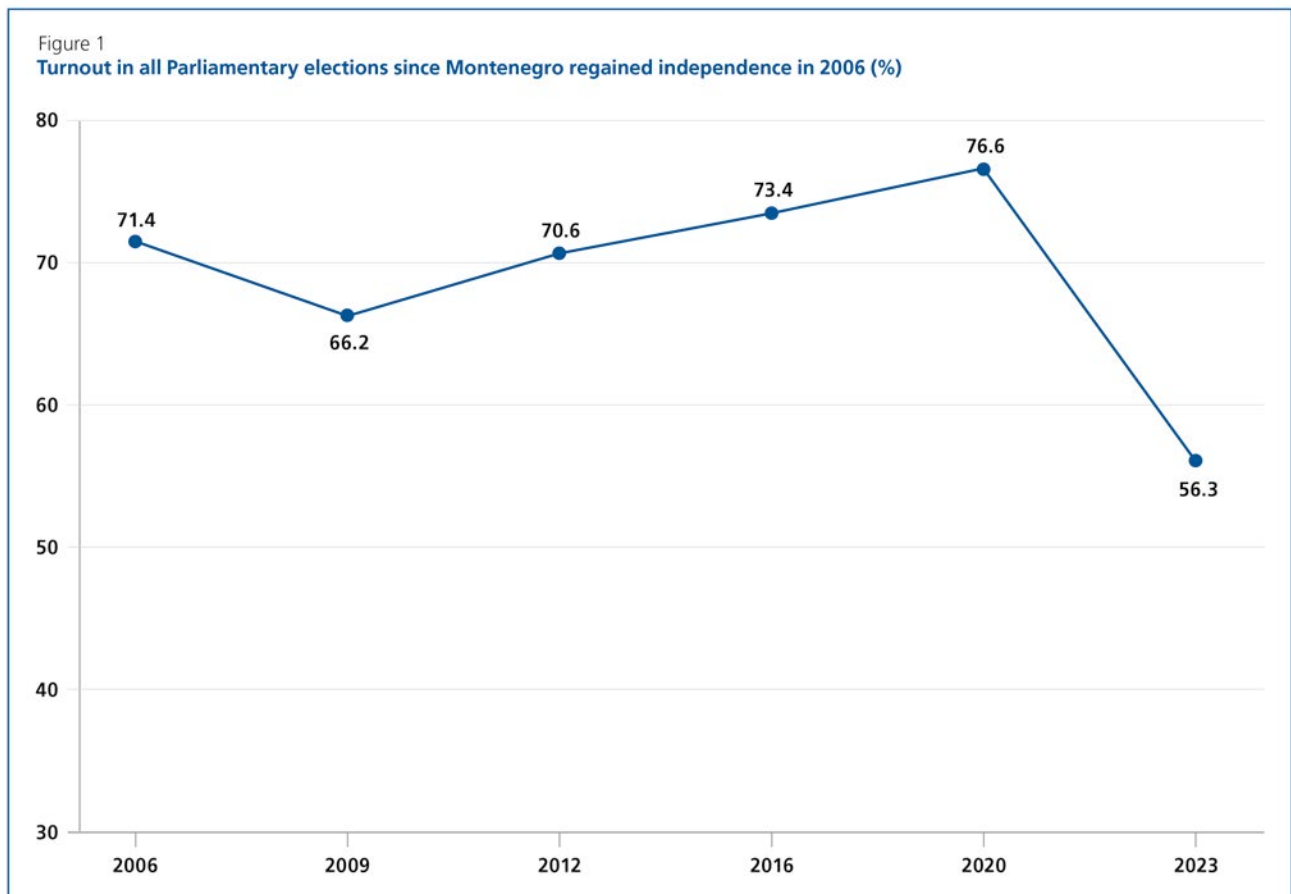
Research on voting behavior in Montenegro, a relatively young democracy, is less developed compared to other post-communist countries. Montenegro is often overlooked by researchers studying European post-socialist regions, for various reasons. However, it should be noted that this is changing in the last couple of years, as more and more scholarly work, mainly by Montenegrin political scientists is being published in international peer-reviewed outlets (Darmanovic, 2007; Dzankic, 2014; Komar, 2021; Komar & Živković, 2016; Vuković & Batrićević, 2022).

Interestingly, turnout has been one topic that did not receive that much attention. The reason for that might be that “turnout” was rarely an issue in Montenegro, with country having very high levels of citizens’ electoral participation all the way to 2023 elections.

The most recent elections, held in June 2023, have seen a huge decline in voter’s participation, for 20 percentage points compared to 2020 elections.

For a long period of time, Montenegro was criticized by pundits because of the high turnout. Some argued that high turnout in Montenegro is product of citizens emotional reaction to topics such as country’s independence, national identity, relations with Serbian Orthodox Church, and many others. These pundits claimed that high turnout is not reflection of citizens’ will to engage in topics such as public policies, or solution to “everyday problems” as they would put it.

However, even that is gone. After more than 15 years of having steadily one of the highest turnout rates in whole Europe, Montenegro is seeing a sharp decline, with almost



half of eligible voters deciding not to participate in 2023 Parliamentary election.

Low turnout opens new box of issues. Scholarly work notices that there are valid reasons for concerns when turnout is low (Lijphart, 1998; Saunders, 2012). In general, when voter turnout declines, it can erode the legitimacy of the electoral process and the government it produces. If only a small fraction of the electorate participates in an election, it raises questions about whether the government truly represents the will of the people. This can lead to decreased confidence in political leaders and institutions, and potentially increase political apathy among the population. Furthermore, lower turnout can exacerbate the influence of well-organized minority groups who may not represent the broader interests of society, leading to policies that benefit the few at the expense of the many.

Specifically, in newer European democracies – many of which emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union and are still undergoing political, economic, and social transitions – declining turnout can have additional implications. For one, these countries often face the challenge of building trust in democratic processes among citizens who may have lived through periods of authoritarian rule (Tavits, 2005). High electoral participation can be a sign of growing trust in democracy and its institutions, while declining turnout might indicate disillusionment or skepticism about the effectiveness of democracy to bring about change.

Moreover, newer democracies are often marked by fragile political landscapes where democratic norms and the rule of law are not yet fully established. Low voter turnout can weaken these evolving systems by giving undue power to extremist or populist parties that do not necessarily support the democratic process. Such parties can gain a disproportionate influence not because they have broad support from the general populace, but rather because of the apathy or disengagement of the majority (Kostadinova, 2003) party system characteristics and economic development.

Finally, in the context of European Union integration, where many newer democracies strive to meet political stability and governance criteria, declining turnout can complicate these efforts. It can make it harder for these countries to demonstrate robust democratic credentials required for deeper integration with European institutions (Pacek et al., 2009).

This paper aims at addressing the issue – who does not vote in Montenegro? We aim to discover if certain patterns exist across time, and later discuss potential implications abstention of these groups have on country's political life and democratization prospects.

RESULTS

To examine non-voters in Montenegro elections, we rely on three waves of Montenegro National Election Study (MNES), conducted straight after elections in 2012, 2016, and 2023. We focus of Parliamentary elections, as the most salient elections in country's political system. All three surveys were run on a nationally representative sample, with 1,000, 1,200 and 1,200 respondents respectively. All three surveys were published in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) modules, showing that they have been conducted in line with international methodological standards this renowned project requires¹.

We use this dataset to explore the effects of “usual suspects”, social-demographic variables on probability someone will turn out to vote. We are exploring the effects of gender, age, education, employment status, urban-rural divide, and ethnicity as country's arguably most important predictor of group political behavior.

Additionally, we add satisfaction with democracy, arguing that this is important normative variable, clearly expecting that those who are satisfied with democracy will have higher probability to turn out. Satisfaction with democracy took a turn in Montenegro politics. Namely, after 30-year of DPS reign, with this party being the dominant member in each government from 1989 to 2020, DPS moved to opposition for the first time in party's history after the 2020 elections. It is well known and established in the literature that this variable is strongly connected to the election winner-loser debate, and that those who voted for election winners tend to be significantly more satisfied with democracy in the country (Batričević, N., Vujović, Z., & Janković, U., 2024).

We run a series of logistic regression models, aiming to establish a more solid connection between probability to turn out and predicting variables. For each dataset we run a separate regression model, trying to understand if certain effects are consistent across time. Given all the changes in Montenegrin politics over time, it would be problematic to just pool all these datasets into a single model and disregard the effect of time. The results are displayed in table 1.

The data show one, clearly consistent effect, across all three elections. People who say they are satisfied with democracy in Montenegro are significantly more likely to turn out, compared to those who say they are dissatisfied with the state of democracy in the country. Please note that there is a small difference in how this variable was measured in 2023 Montenegro National Election Study, compared to previous waves. However, results are consistent regardless of measurement differences. On average, across three different surveys, those who say they are satisfied with how democracy functions in Montenegro, are 14% more likely to turn out and vote than those who say they are not satisfied with democracy in the country.

Additionally, we also note the effect of age. It is clear that those who are older are more likely to vote than younger population. This goes in line with previous research findings, including new(er) and established democracies.

The effect might seem small, but the reader should be aware that this effect is for one unit change in the age variable, thus for each year a respondent is older, likelihood to turn out increases for roughly 1% in the 2023 elections, for example, calculated through predicted probabilities.

With the exception of 2012 election, we did not notice any differences in likelihood to vote between male and female respondents. This is probably the most surprising result, given the patriarchal nature of the country.

For education, these findings follow previous research results in Montenegro (Živković, 2017a), Contrary to general literature on turnout, Montenegro population was always characterized by the fact that people with lower education, and lower income (generally those with lower socio-economic background) vote at the same levels at least with those who have higher socio-economic background. Some attributed this to the high level of clientelism, arguing that this group is most likely target of clientelist practices political parties in Montenegro employ.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning the effect of ethnicity. Previous literature showed the evidence that Serbs are voting in lower numbers, compared to other ethnicity groups in Montenegro (Živković, 2017b). That was during times when political parties, widely perceived as pro-Serbian, were consistently losing

¹ Data can be downloaded from the CSES webpage – www.cses.org

Table 1
Voter turnout and population figures in Southeastern Europe

Turnout	2012	2016	2023
Gender			
Female	-0.725** (0.269)	0.164 (0.199)	-0.00994 (0.183)
Age			
Age of R's	0.00446 (0.0121)	0.00659 (0.00913)	0.0357*** (0.00793)
Education			
Secondary	-0.274 (0.627)	0.386 (0.307)	0.652 (0.372)
Tertiary	-0.215 (0.685)	0.249 (0.366)	0.585 (0.402)
Employment status			
Employed	0.689* (0.317)	0.393 (0.267)	0.150 (0.251)
Student	0.151 (0.532)	-0.286 (0.349)	-0.275 (0.427)
Retired	1.443* (0.608)	0.239 (0.374)	0.439 (0.450)
Home duties	0.949 (0.640)	-0.396 (0.401)	-0.0711 (0.452)
Urban-rural divide			
Urban	-0.483 (0.302)	-0.446 (0.259)	-0.231 (0.218)
Ethnicity			
Montenegrin	0.463 (0.310)	0.469* (0.222)	-0.134* (0.107)
Bosniak/Muslim	0.675 (0.570)	0.315 (0.377)	-0.367* (0.215)
Albanian	0.0330 (0.554)	0.163 (0.593)	-1.124** (0.387)
Satisfaction with democracy			
Satisfied	0.632* (0.299)	1.372*** (0.223)	1.357*** (0.219)
Neutral	—	—	0.849*** (0.220)
Constant	1.775* (0.876)	1.133 (0.579)	-0.975 (0.591)
Observations	714	1,094	1,128

Standard errors in parentheses

Source: Montenegro National Election Study (MNES)

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 2
Effect of satisfaction with democracy on the turnout across time

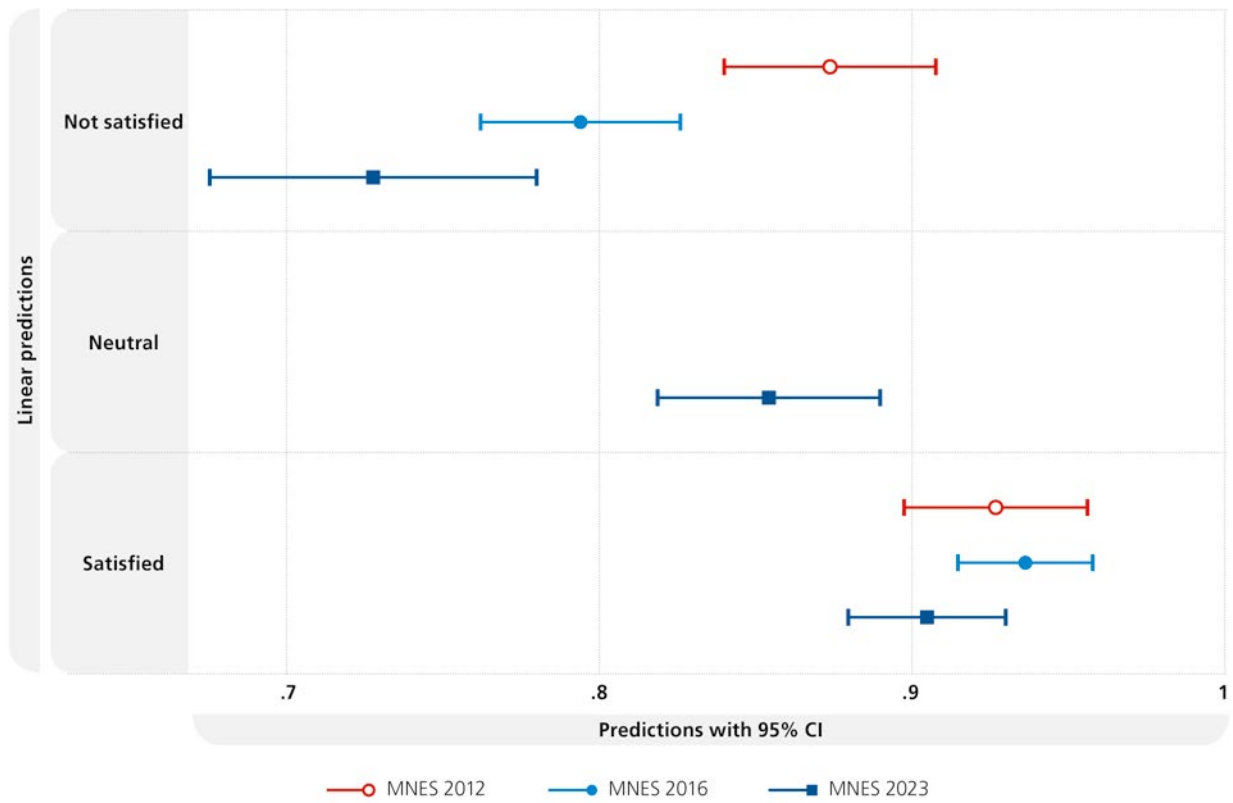
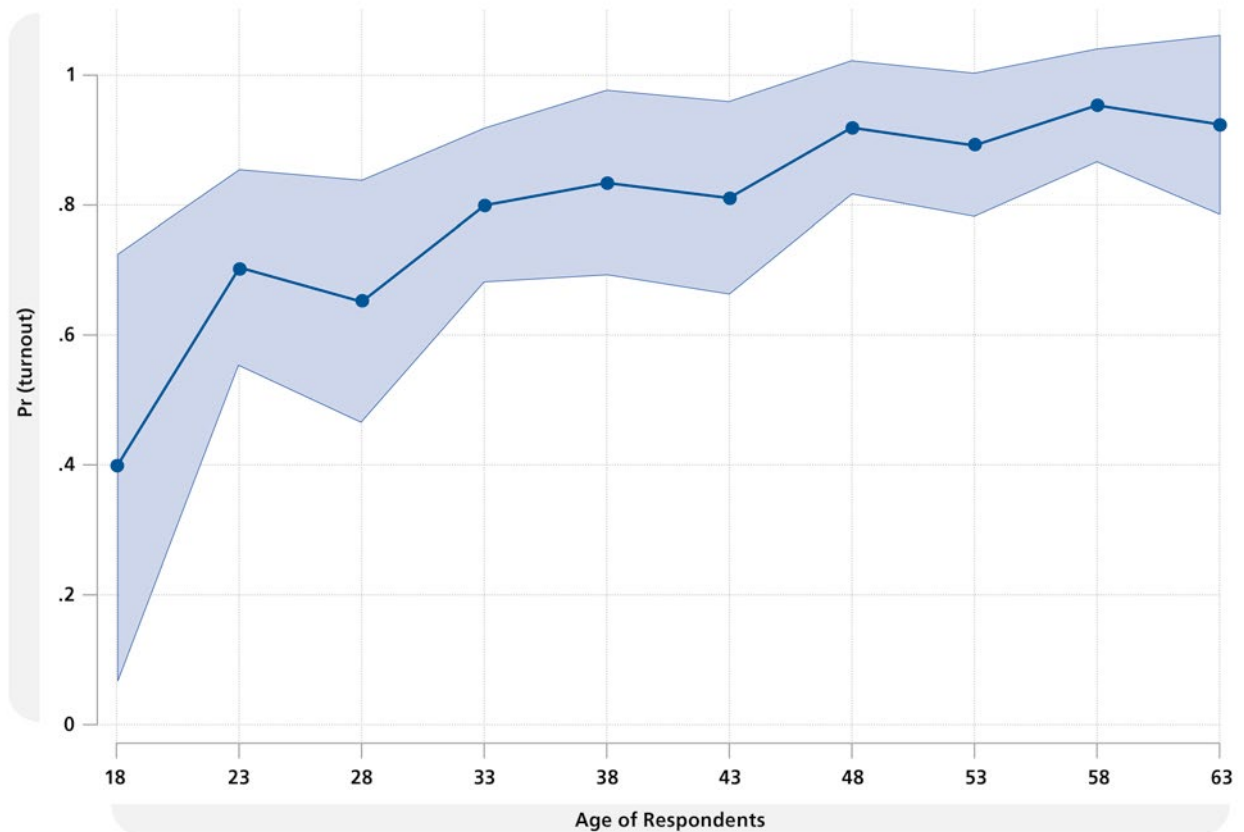
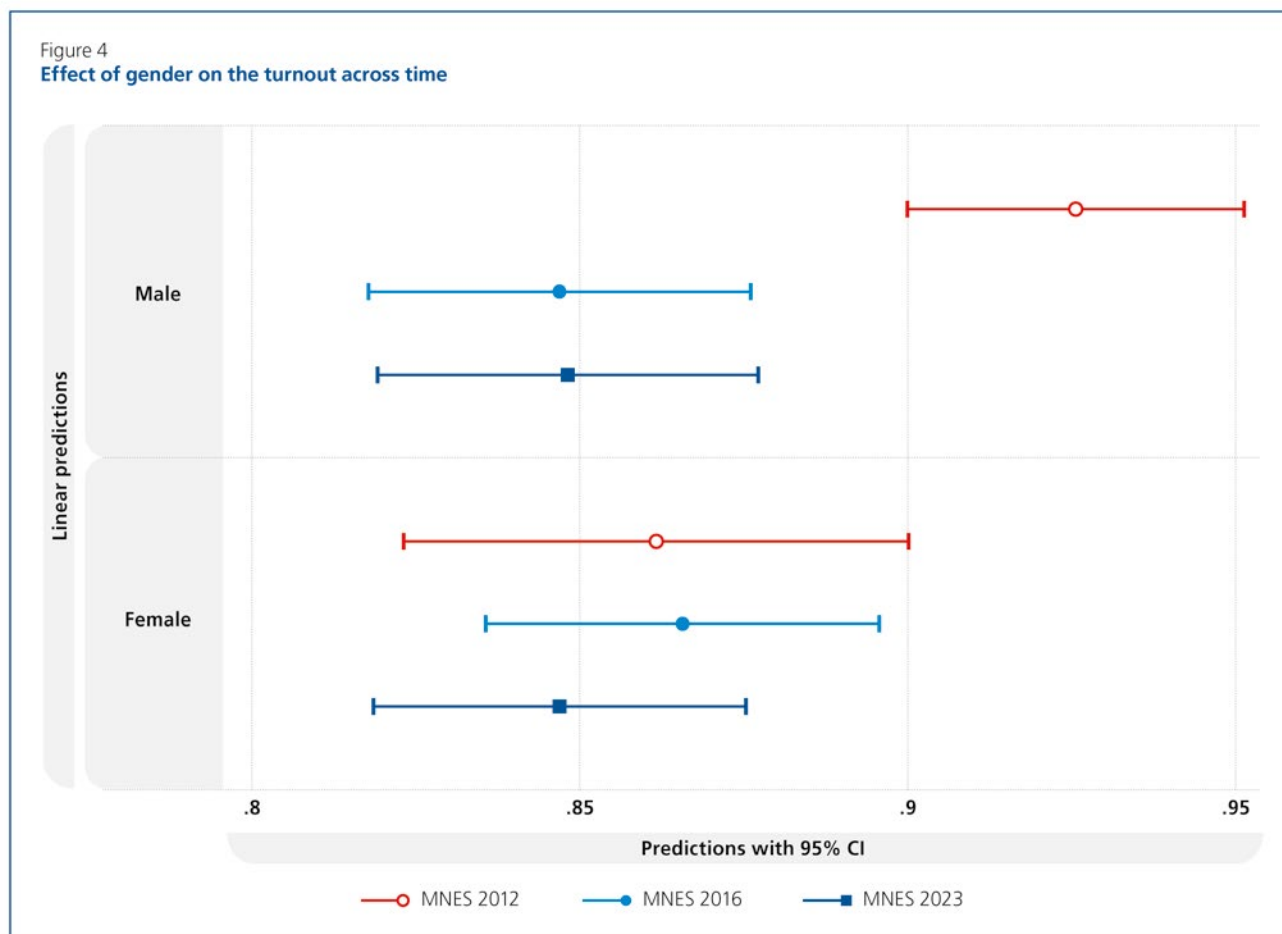


Figure 3
Effect of respondents age on the turnout for 2023 elections (Predictive margins with 95% CIs)





elections. These parties spent few decades in the opposition, and even those who voted for them, rarely believed that they can win, as DPS was perceived as invincible (Komar & Živković, 2016). It is easy to see this attitude resulting in lower turnout for this group. If they do believe that their preferred option stands no chance at the election day, they are more likely to stay at home, as why would one participate if (s)he sees election as foregone conclusion. However, things changed significantly in 2020. These were pivotal elections, witnessing the first DPS election loss. Even though the party won most votes among all other election lists, it was not enough to form a governing majority. Thus, DPS switched to the opposition benches. This shift gave a lot of confidence to pro-Serbian voters in Montenegro, and it comes as no surprise that they are the group which is, in 2023 Parliamentary elections, whose members have highest probability of voting, compared to remaining analyzed groups (Montenegrins, Bosniaks/Muslims, Albanians). This dynamic will be particularly interesting to follow in the upcoming elections.

The effect of 2020 elections on various topics about political behavior, including turnout, is yet to be explored in more details in the academic literature.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of voter turnout in Montenegro reveals various factors influencing electoral participation in the country, which can still be characterized as a young democracy. Montenegro experienced a sharp decline in voter participation in the 2023 parliamentary elections, when turnout dropped for 20 percentage points compared to 2020 elections. This decline raises concerns about the legitimacy of the electoral process, the effectiveness of the government it produces, and most importantly citizens' willingness to participate in elections, of their belief that their vote matters. The study identifies several key factors affecting voter turnout, including satisfaction with democracy, age, gender, education, and ethnicity.

One of the most consistent findings across the 2012, 2016, and 2023 elections is the strong correlation between satisfaction with democracy and voter turnout. Individuals satisfied with how democracy functions in Montenegro are significantly more likely to vote than those who are dissatisfied. This suggests that improving public perception of democratic processes could enhance voter turnout. Additionally, age plays a crucial role, with older individuals more likely to vote than younger ones, reflecting a broader trend observed in both established and newer democracies.

Contrary to common expectations in patriarchal societies, the analysis reveals no significant gender differences in voter turnout for the 2016 and 2023 elections, although a notable difference was observed in 2012. Furthermore, education and socioeconomic status, which traditionally influence voter behavior, show unique patterns in Montenegro. Historically, individuals with lower socioeconomic status have voted at rates comparable to or higher than those with higher status, likely due to clientelist practices by political parties.

Ethnicity also emerges as a significant factor, with the voting behavior of different ethnic groups varying over time. The 2020 elections marked a pivotal moment, with pro-Serbian parties gaining confidence and increasing their voter turnout, reversing previous trends of lower participation among Serbs.

Overall, Montenegro still exhibits significant inequalities in turnout, but the most worrying trend is sharp decline of citizens' participation. All the relevant institutions need to

make an effort to engage more voters, and to make sure that elections reflect will of people in the country, without some groups being left unrepresented among the electorate. For that, some recommendations are devised in the final section.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made to address the declining voter turnout and improve the democratic process in Montenegro:

Implementing policies, campaigns, and initiatives that increase public satisfaction with democratic processes could include greater transparency, anti-corruption measures, and more inclusive governance practices to ensure that citizens feel their participation is meaningful. This has significant potential to lead to higher levels of turnout.

It is important to develop targeted campaigns to engage younger voters, addressing their specific concerns and demonstrating the impact of their vote. Educational programs that emphasize the importance of civic engagement and voting could also be beneficial. This is the problem for most of the democracies around the world, and there is a potential for Montenegro to learn from other countries about successful campaigns these countries did, or to learn from the reasons why some efforts were not successful.

Public officials should aim at reducing clientelism and ensuring fair electoral practices. This is an essential step, and would surely significantly boost peoples' willingness to participate in the elections.

By addressing these areas, Montenegro can work towards reversing the trend of declining voter turnout and strengthening its democratic processes. Ensuring that elections are inclusive, representative, and reflective of the will of the people is crucial for the legitimacy and stability of the country's political system.

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

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