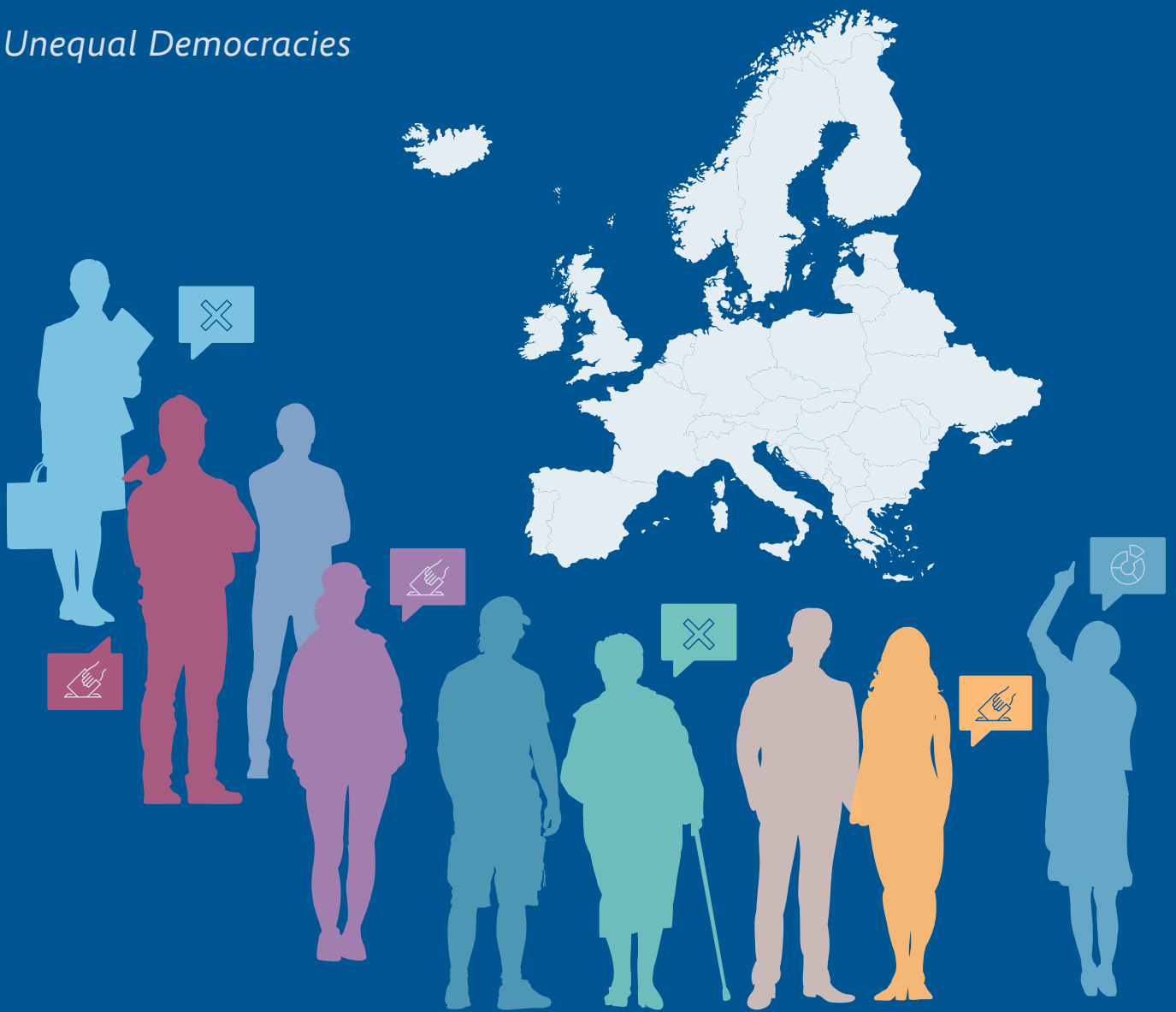


Līga Stafecka  
May 2026

# Who Does (Not) Vote in Latvia?

*Unequal Democracies*



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info@fes.de

### **Issuing Department**

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

### **Responsibility for content and editing**

Michael Jennewein  
michael.jennewein@fes.de  
Margarete Lengger  
margarete.lengger@fes.de

### **Contact**

democracy.vienna@fes.de

### **Design/Layout**

pertext | corporate publishing  
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# Why Electoral Participation Matters

Democratic equality rests on the principle that all citizens should have a genuine opportunity to influence collective decisions. Elections are the primary channel through which this principle is realized: they enable voters to evaluate political elites, articulate preferences, and shape future governance (Verba, 2003). When participation becomes uneven, this communicative link weakens, disproportionately amplifying the voices of socially advantaged groups and reducing the representativeness of elected institutions (Lijphart, 1997). Extensive comparative research shows that unequal turnout is not a marginal flaw but a structural challenge: lower participation systematically widens gaps between high- and low-resource groups and concentrates political influence among those already better positioned (Hicks & Swank, 1992; Mahler, 2008; Mueller & Stratmann, 2003). The persistence of such participation inequalities constitutes the central concern of the Unequal Democracies (UD) research series. As emphasized by the UD comparative report, unequal participation remains an unresolved dilemma of democracy, where systematic non-voting among disadvantaged groups undermines political equality (Elsässer, Schäfer, & Wenker, 2022).

Latvia's experience reflects these broader democratic risks. Following exceptionally high turnout in the early 1990s – driven by the restoration of independence – participation has gradually declined and stabilized at more moderate levels. Since then, turnout has remained relatively stable but socially uneven. Younger voters, citizens with lower income or education, and residents of economically weaker regions consistently participate less than older and more economically secure groups. These patterns place Latvia close to the Eastern European cluster identified in the Unequal Democracies comparative report, where declining participation coincides with widening socioeconomic and generational divides (Elsässer, Schäfer, & Wenker, 2022).

At the same time, Latvia exhibits several context-specific dynamics that warrant closer attention. One is the significant and widening turnout gap between Latvian- and Russian-speaking voters, driven by declining political efficacy, heightened social tensions, and increasingly fragmented information environments. Another concerns the weak societal embeddedness of political parties: despite a large

number of formally registered parties, membership levels remain extremely low, internal structures are fragile, and parties often struggle to establish stable links with voters. Together, these factors create a political environment in which participation is not only stratified but also shaped by the country's distinct historical and institutional context.

This report, prepared within the FES Unequal Democracies series, examines how these dynamics manifest in Latvia. It analyses turnout trends over time, identifies the social groups most likely to abstain, and explores the structural, attitudinal, and institutional mechanisms underpinning persistent inequalities in participation. It addresses three key questions:

- 1. How has voter turnout evolved in Latvia, and how does it compare with similar European countries?**
- 2. Which social groups participate least, and why?**
- 3. What specific barriers – socioeconomic, ethnolinguistic, and institutional – shape non-voting in Latvia today?**

By answering these questions, the report aims to provide an evidence-based understanding of who does – and does not – vote in Latvia, and to outline practical directions for strengthening democratic inclusion ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Voter participation in Latvia has not been extensively studied, and detailed data on voter behaviour beyond standard public opinion surveys remain limited. As a result, this report partly relies on secondary data sources. It is well established that survey respondents tend to overreport electoral participation. For example, turnout in the 2022 elections was 59.41%, while 79% of survey respondents claimed they had voted. Accordingly, the findings presented here should be interpreted as indicative rather than precise measures of voter behaviour.

# How Latvia Compares in Electoral Participation

In Latvia, voter turnout declined steadily after peaking in the early 1990s. Participation fell throughout the 2000s, reaching a low point of 55% in the 2018 parliamentary elections (Figure 1). A particularly sharp drop occurred in the 2006 elections, when turnout decreased by around 11 percentage points. This decline is largely attributed to a series of political corruption scandals that eroded public trust in political elites, combined with the absence of new political actors capable of mobilising protest voters. Over the past two decades, turnout has stabilized within a relatively narrow range of approximately 55–63%.

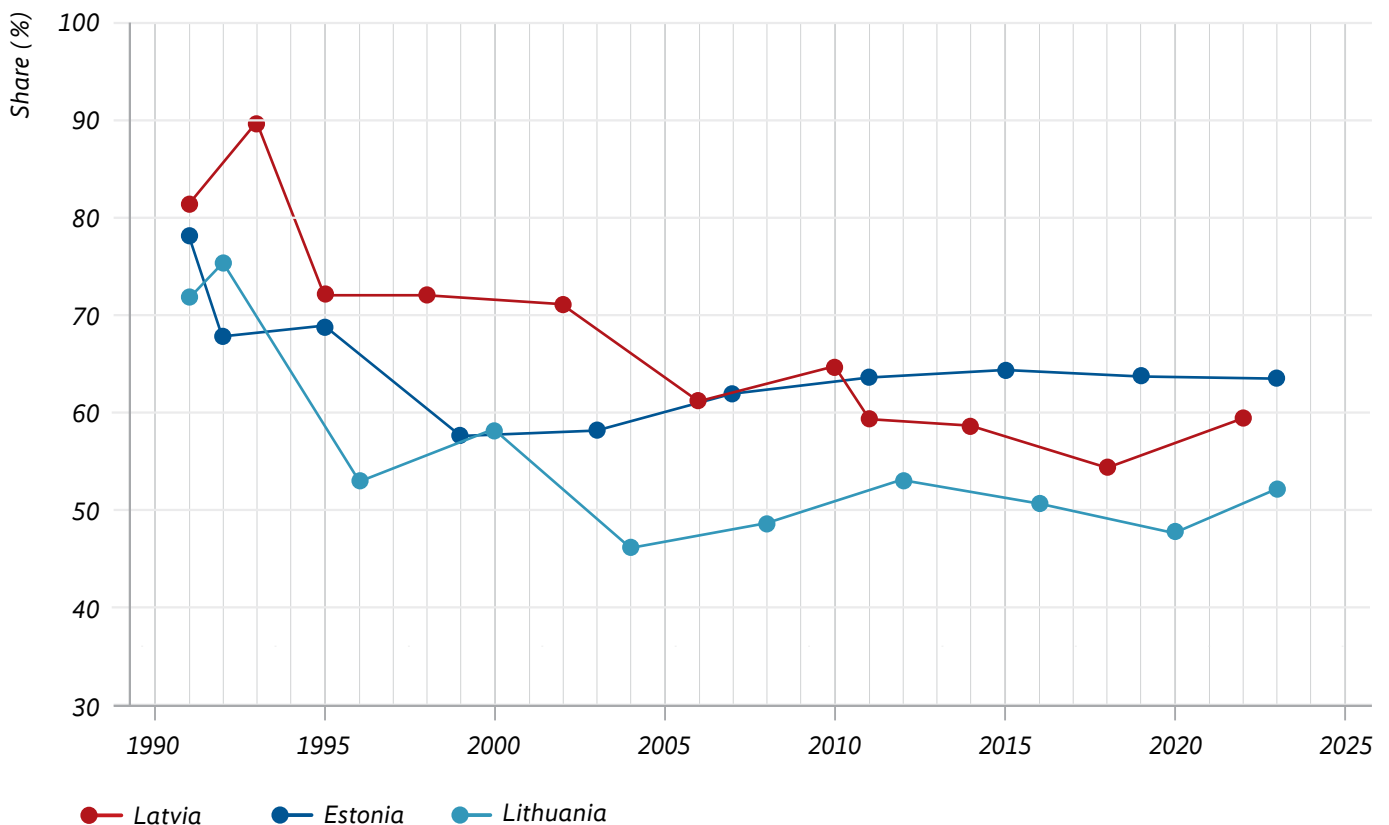
In 2011, Latvia held extraordinary parliamentary elections following a presidentially initiated referendum to dissolve the Saeima, which had been in office for only one year. The referendum was triggered by a constitutional conflict between the president and the parliamentary majority,

after the legislature repeatedly obstructed corruption-related investigations and refused to authorize a search of a member of parliament's property. In response, the president called for the dissolution of the parliament. The most recent elections, held in 2022, brought 59% of eligible voters to the polls, marking a modest recovery. The next parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2026.

The trajectory of high electoral participation in the early 1990s followed by more moderate levels in subsequent decades is not unique to Latvia but reflects a broader pattern across the Baltic states. Estonia and Lithuania have experienced similar developments, with turnout levels converging over time. Within this shared trajectory, Estonia stands out for maintaining slightly higher and more consistent levels of participation than both Latvia and Lithuania (Figure 1).

Voter turnout in parliamentary elections across the Baltic states

Figure 1



Source: UD dataset and data from the CEC of Latvia, as well as the author's compilation of recent turnout data for other Baltic states.

From a broader European perspective, Latvia's turnout levels remain below average. Compared with the European median, its turnout is about 10 percentage points lower.

*Latvia resembles a typical post-transition democracy that has stabilised at the lower end of the European turnout spectrum of around 60–70%.*

At these levels, it falls well behind the high-turnout countries of Northern and Western Europe – such as the Nordic states, the Benelux countries, and Germany – where participation rates often reach 80–90%. At the same time, it aligns more closely with countries such as Estonia and Portugal (around 60–63%), while remaining above the lower-turnout group in mostly Southern and Southeastern Europe, including Greece and Bulgaria, but also Lithuania (approximately 40–53%).<sup>2</sup>

Overall, Latvia reflects a broader Eastern European pattern characterised by comparatively low turnout and more pronounced social inequalities in electoral participation.



<sup>2</sup> Election turnout data are obtained from national election commissions or national statistical offices in the respective countries. For example, in the Nordic region, recent elections show high voter participation: Iceland recorded 80.15% in 2024, Norway 80.12% in 2025, and Finland, as well as Germany, reached 82.5% in their 2025 elections. The Netherlands also reported strong engagement, with 78.4% turnout in the 2025 elections. In contrast, voter participation in several other European countries is notably lower. Latvian voters remain more active compared to Lithuania (52% in 2024), Bulgaria (39% in 2023), and Greece (53% in 2023).

# Who Votes?

## Social Patterns of Participation



Voter turnout in Latvia is not only volatile across elections but also systematically stratified along well-defined social lines. Elections represent the institutional moment when citizens are formally equal; however, the evidence shows that different groups make unequal use of this opportunity. These disparities align with the classic resource model of political participation, which posits that political engagement is largely shaped by individuals' access to time, money, and civic skills (Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995, as cited in the UD study).

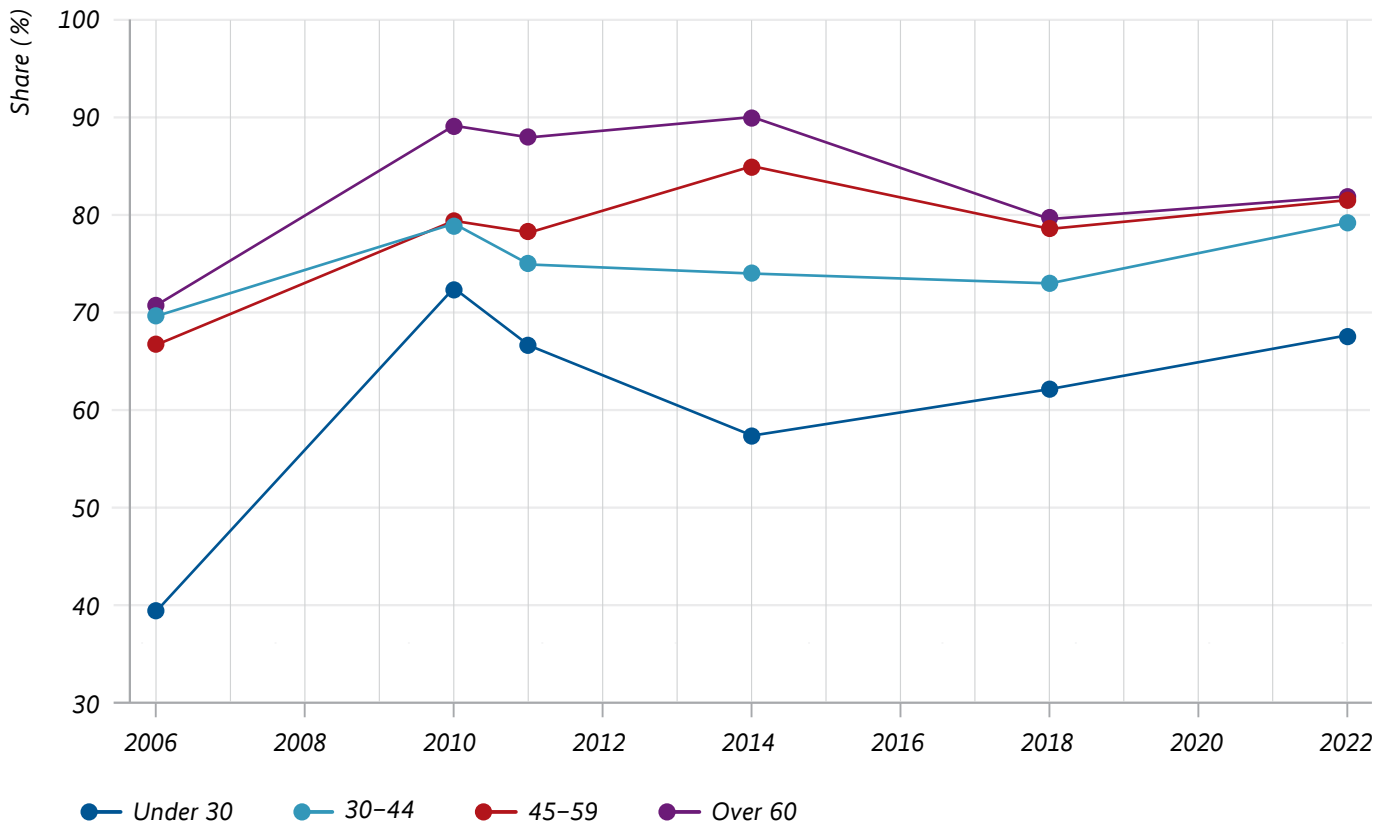
In Latvia, the most pronounced divides run along age, education, and socioeconomic status (including class, sector, and income). The data present a consistent pattern: older cohorts participate the most, individuals with tertiary education maintain high turnout across electoral

cycles, and higher-status groups – such as those in upper service occupations, public sector employees, and higher-income brackets – vote far more reliably than routine workers, the unemployed, and low-income citizens. Gender differences exist but are less pronounced compared to other factors. Taken together, these patterns help explain not only who votes, but also whose preferences are more likely to shape democratic outcomes.

Across all observed elections, turnout is highest and most stable among voters aged 45–59 and 60+, while those under 30 consistently remain the least active. Approximately 38% of voters report participating out of a sense of civic duty and hope for a better future, although this motivation has declined by nearly 8 percentage points over the past twelve years (SKDS, 2022).

Voter turnout in Latvia by age group

Figure 2



Source: UD dataset; for 2018 and 2022, data are supplemented with survey results from the Central Election Commission of Latvia, commissioned from SKDS (Vēlētāju attieksmju pētījumi / Voter Attitude Studies).

In the 2006 elections, only around 40% of voters under the age of 30 reported participating. While youth turnout has improved over time – rising by nearly 20 percentage points by 2022 (Figure 2) – a substantial gap relative to older cohorts persists. This underrepresentation is also reflected in political office: in the 2025 municipal elections, only 2.2% of elected local politicians were aged 30 or younger, whereas individuals aged 50–60 accounted for 29% of municipal councils members.<sup>3</sup>

Educational attainment is strongly associated with both the level and stability of electoral participation, indicating persistent inequalities along educational lines. People with higher education (completed university degree) demonstrate the highest and most consistent turnout, maintaining participation rates at or above 80% across election cycles (Figure 3). Those who only completed upper secondary education (middle level) vote relatively consistently, typically in the low- to mid-70% range, with a slight upward trend by 2022. In contrast, voters with no completed secondary education (low level) remain the least politically active, with turnout fluctuating between approximately 55% and 65% and declining again after 2018.

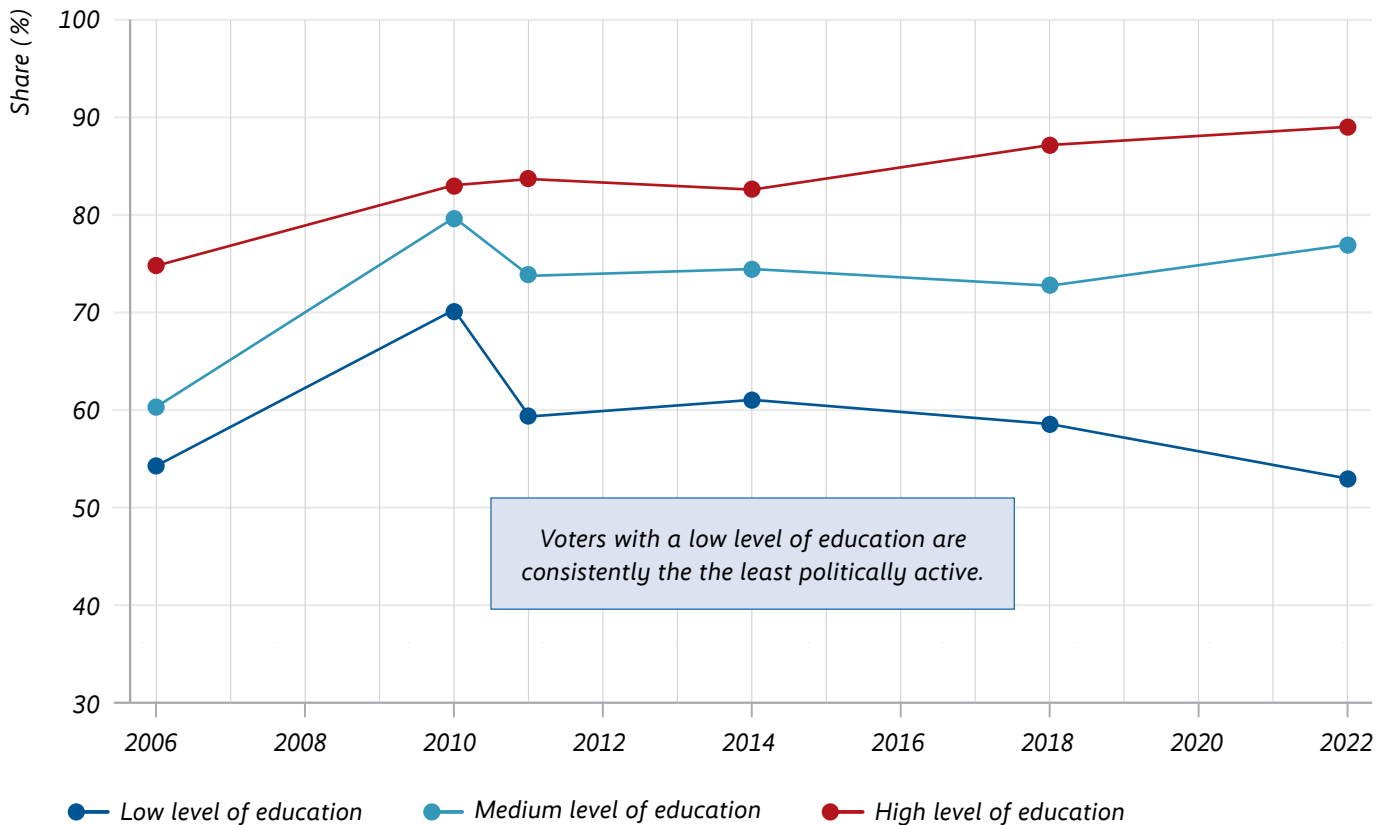
*The gap between highly educated and low-educated voters is substantial – around 36 percentage points.*

Socioeconomic indicators – such as income, employment sector, and occupational class – reveal similarly consistent patterns. Groups with higher socioeconomic status exhibit significantly higher and more stable turnout. High-income individuals and those in upper service occupations maintain participation rates near or above 85%, whereas low-income voters remain the least engaged, with turnout falling close to 60% in several election years (Figure 4). Differences across employment sectors mirror this divide: public-sector employees are consistently more likely to vote than private-sector workers and the unemployed, although this gap has narrowed somewhat since 2018 (Figure 5). This pattern is not driven solely by income stability but also by factors such as a stronger sense of civic duty. While turnout has improved in recent years among middle-income groups and private-sector employees, the overall structural gap persists.

<sup>3</sup> Central Election Commissions collected statistics about the candidates of the 2025 municipal elections (<https://dati.cvk.lv/PV2025/ieveletie-deputati/>).

### Voter turnout in Latvia by education level

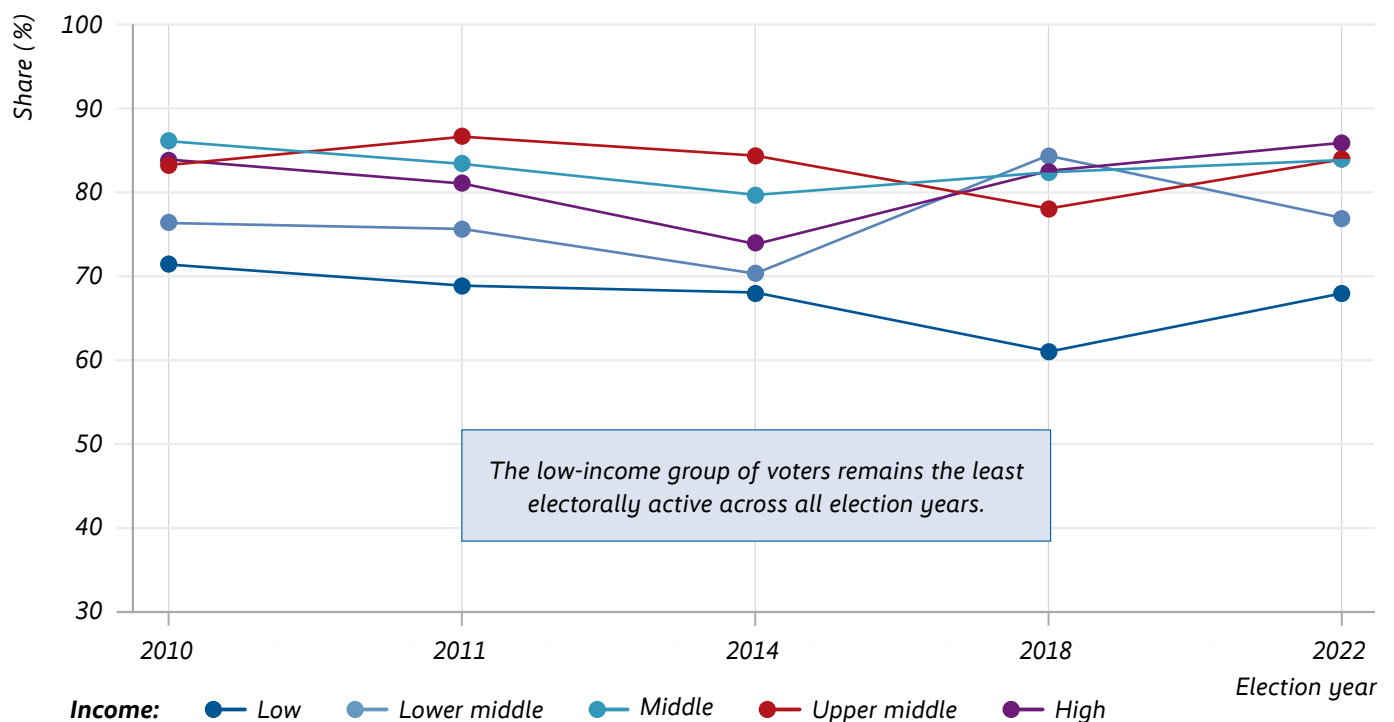
Figure 3



Source: UD dataset; for 2018 and 2022, data are supplemented with survey results from the Central Election Commission of Latvia, commissioned from SKDS (Vēlētāju attieksmju pētījumi / Voter Attitude Studies).

Figure 4

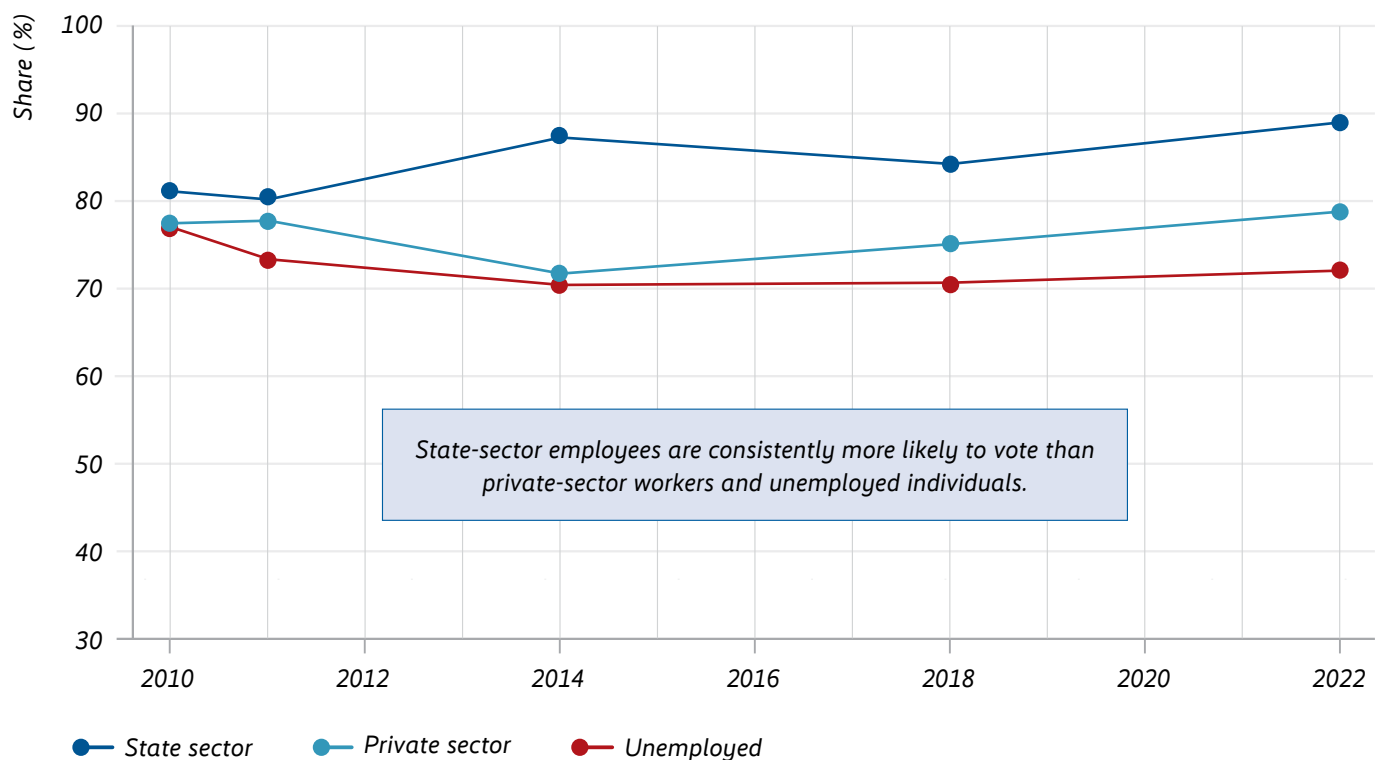
### Voter turnout in Latvia by income level



Note: Average monthly income per household member (after taxes), including all income sources:  
 low – up to €319; lower middle – €320 to €409; middle – €410 to €519; upper middle – €520 to €709; high – €710 and above.  
 Source: CEC, SKDS.

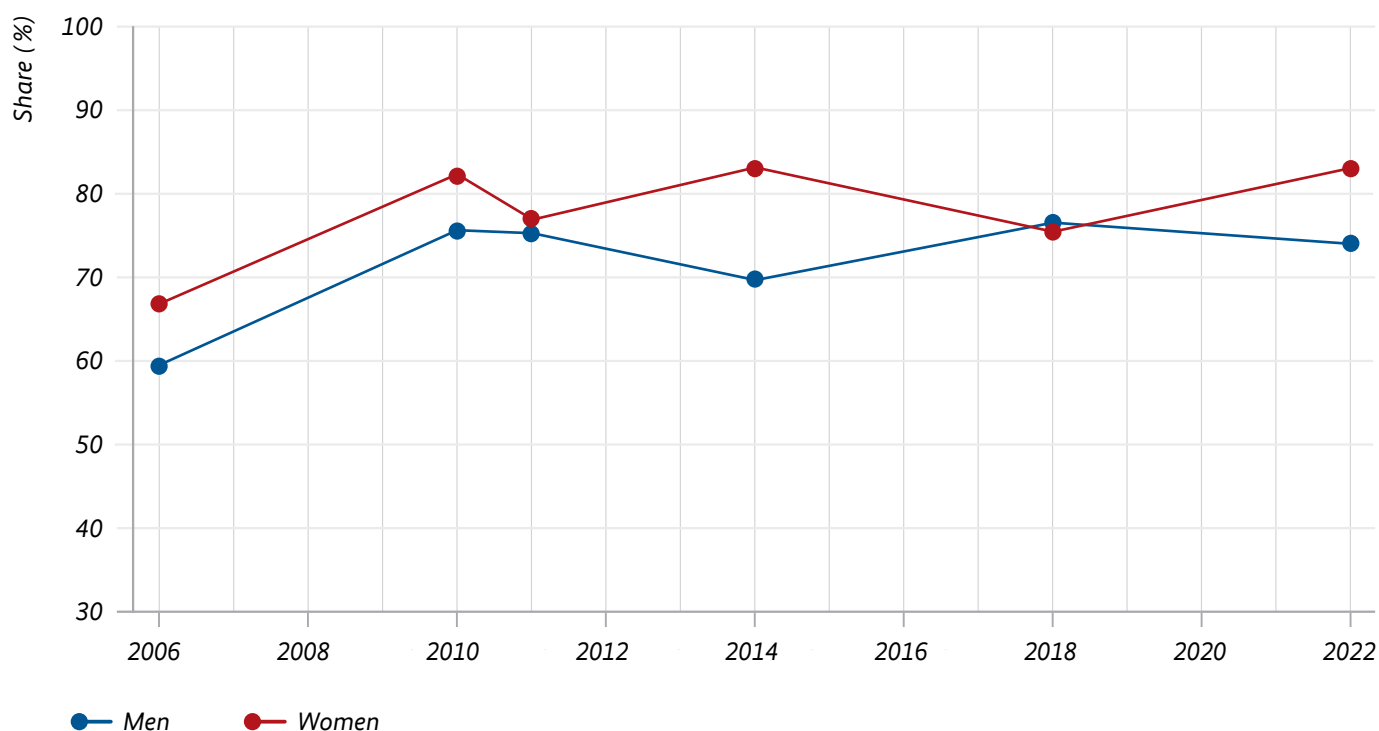
Figure 5

### Voter turnout in Latvia by sector of employment



Source: CEC, SKDS.

## Voter turnout in Latvia by gender

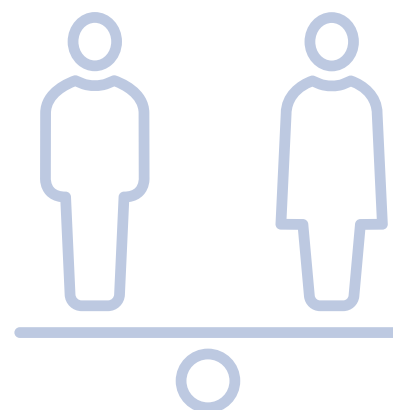


Source: UD dataset; the results for 2018 and 2022 are supplemented with data from the Central Election Commission's surveys commissioned from SKDS – Vēlētāju attieksmju pētījumi (Voter Attitude Studies) for 2022 and 2018.

Taken together, these findings suggest that socioeconomic inequalities translate into unequal political voice, with higher-status groups exercising disproportionately greater influence in electoral politics.

From a gender perspective, women in Latvia consistently report higher turnout than men. However, the size of this difference remains modest compared to disparities based on age, education, and socioeconomic status (Figure 6). In this sense, gender functions as a secondary cleavage, aligning with broader international patterns identified in the UD study. Comparative research also points to the “law of dispersion”: in systems with lower overall turnout, participation gaps tend to widen more sharply. Put differently, lower overall turnout tends to make existing differences in participation between social groups more pronounced – a pattern that closely fits the Latvian case.

*Socioeconomic inequalities translate into unequal political voice, with higher-status groups exercising disproportionately greater influence in electoral politics.*



# Who Does Not Vote in Latvia?

Latvia has one of the highest shares of non-voters in the European Union. Alongside France, it ranks among the countries with the largest proportion of citizens who have either not voted at all in the past five years or have done so only occasionally. Approximately 17% of Latvian citizens fall into this category of chronic non-voters (Social Cohesion Report, 2023).

Non-voters in Latvia form a clearly identifiable socio-demographic group, strongly shaped by education and income. Citizens with lower levels of education and lower incomes are significantly more likely to abstain from voting, while higher levels of education and income are associated with more consistent electoral participation. As illustrated in Figure 4, turnout among low-income citizens is around 18 percentage points lower than among high-income groups. This pattern is also evident from a regional perspective (Figure 7), where voter turnout closely correlates with income. Latvia exhibits greater inequality in electoral participation than Western and Northern European democracies and aligns more closely with the Eastern European cluster identified in the UD study.

Youth participation remains consistently low. Young citizens – particularly those under 30 – demonstrate the weakest electoral engagement: only about 68% of surveyed individuals in this group reported voting in the 2022 elections, which is 15 percentage points lower than among those aged 60 and above. Although research on youth political engagement in Latvia remains limited, available data point to the importance of a supportive environment in fostering participation. Findings from a recent youth survey suggest that many young people do not feel that their views are taken seriously or that they can meaningfully influence decisions that affect their lives. Only 17% of respondents believe that participation in national-level decision-making leads to outcomes that matter to them.

More broadly, youth participation depends heavily on the existence of a supportive environment. Young people feel most comfortable expressing their views within close personal networks, but significantly less so in institutional or public settings. While 55% report that it is “fully possible” to discuss important issues with friends, only 11% feel able to do so with teachers or educational staff, 12% in public discussions, and just 8% within political organisa-

tions. Around half report having little or no opportunity to express their views in these environments (Latvian Academy of Culture, 2026). Low electoral participation among youth thus reflects a broader pattern of limited civic engagement and a perception that their voices are neither heard nor influential.

Incorporating attitudinal factors provides a more nuanced understanding of non-voting. Non-voters tend to exhibit lower levels of political trust, weaker interest in politics, and lower satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. Many attribute their unfavourable socioeconomic circumstances to political actors or institutions. A key driver of abstention is a lack of belief in the importance and effectiveness of elections, combined with low political efficacy.

*Only 56% of Latvians consider participation in elections important – the lowest rate in the European Union – and just 42% believe that their vote makes a difference.*

*Social Cohesion Report, 2023*

This contributes to a broader scepticism about the ability to influence political decision-making.

Survey data from 2023 further indicate that non-participation is closely linked to political dissatisfaction. Approximately 59% of the population report being dissatisfied with the political situation in Latvia, with particularly high levels of dissatisfaction among low-income groups and Russian-speaking residents (Social Cohesion Radar, 2023). Similar patterns are evident across other forms of civic engagement – such as signing petitions, contacting public officials, or participating in protests – where participation is strongly associated with socioeconomic status, citizenship, and language spoken at home<sup>4</sup>.

Structural factors (such as low education, low income, age, and language background) and motivational factors reinforce one another. Socioeconomically disadvantaged citizens are more likely to feel politically alienated, and this sense of alienation further reduces participation, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of inequality. Overall, Latvia closely

<sup>4</sup> According to the State Statistical Bureau, in 2025 8,9% of inhabitants were; of all ethnic Russians approximately 25% are non-citizens.

follows the broader patterns identified in the UD comparative study: voter turnout is strongly stratified by education, income, and occupational class, with socioeconomic disadvantage serving as a key predictor of electoral abstention. The Latvian case also reflects the finding that generational inequalities are particularly pronounced, while gender differences remain comparatively modest.

At the same time, Latvia diverges from the typical UD pattern in two important respects. First, inequalities in turnout are more pronounced than the UD average, placing Latvia closer to the Eastern European cluster characterised by both lower overall participation and wider participation gaps – especially among younger voters. Second, Latvia exhibits a significant ethnolinguistic divide, particularly in the lower and declining participation of Russian-speaking voters, a dimension not fully captured by the UD study's primarily socioeconomic framework.

In this sense, Latvia represents both a textbook case of the socioeconomic dynamics identified by the UD project and a distinct context in which additional, country-specific factors contribute to political inequality.

*Socioeconomic disadvantage is a key predictor of electoral abstention in Latvia.*



# Regional Inequalities in Voter Turnout



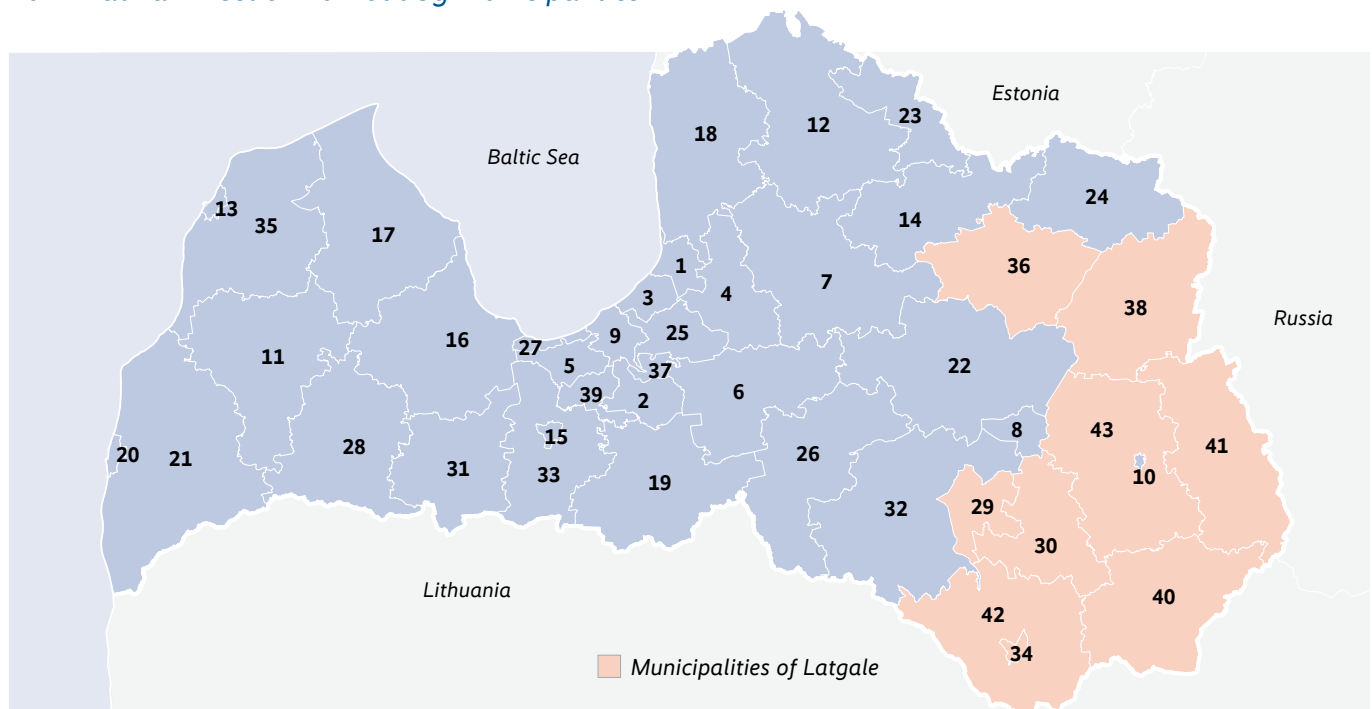
Turnout levels in Latvia reveal a pronounced regional divide. The highest participation rates are found in municipalities surrounding the capital, Riga – particularly in the suburban Riga region, the country’s most economically dynamic area. Several of these municipalities regularly exceed 70 % turnout, including Saulkrasti (84%), as well as Ķekava and Ādaži (both around 75%). In contrast, the lowest turnout is consistently recorded in Latgale, Latvia’s economically weaker and more remote eastern region, located further from Riga and bordering Russia and Belarus (Figure 7).

*In Latgale, participation frequently falls below 55%, with Rēzekne municipality reaching as low as 50%.*

Data analysis confirms that income is the strongest predictor of regional variation in electoral turnout. As illustrated in Figure 8, there is a clear positive association between municipal turnout and median registered household income per household member (Pearson’s  $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $R^2 = 0.34$ ),

## 2022 Latvian Election Turnout by Municipalities

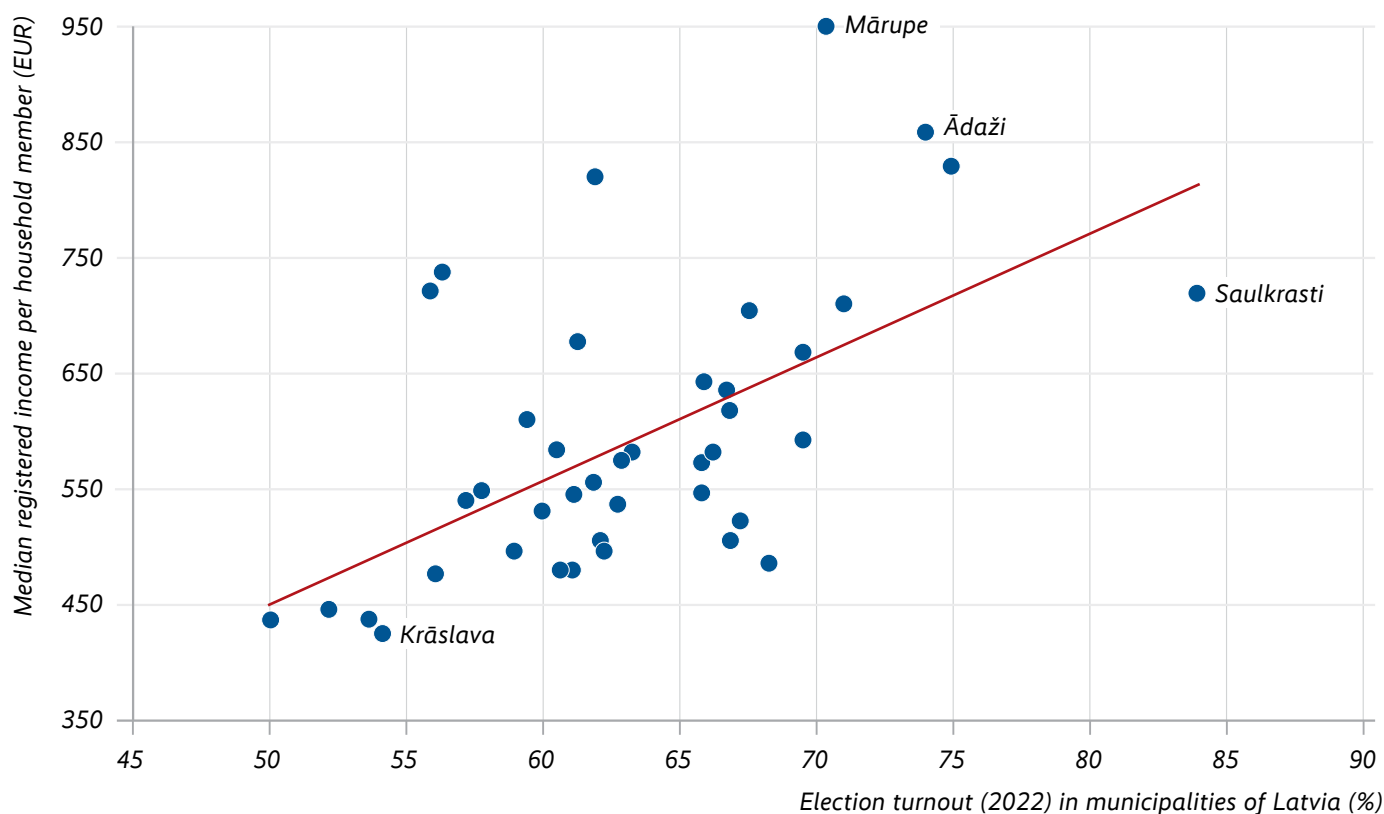
Figure 7



Municipality	Turnout	Municipality	Turnout	Municipality	Turnout	Municipality	Turnout
1 Saulkrasti novads	83.90%	12 Valmieras novads	66.80%	23 Valkas novads	62.18%	34 Daugavpils	58.96%
2 Ķekavas novads	74.89%	13 Ventspils	66.70%	24 Alūksnes novads	62.07%	35 Ventspils novads	57.73%
3 Ādažu novads	73.99%	14 Smiltenes novads	66.25%	25 Ropažu novads	61.90%	36 Gulbenes novads	57.13%
4 Siguldas novads	70.96%	15 Jelgava	65.86%	26 Aizkraukles novads	61.85%	37 Salaspils novads	56.32%
5 Mārupes novads	70.36%	16 Tukuma novads	65.78%	27 Jūrmala	61.25%	38 Balvu novads	56.04%
6 Ogres novads	69.53%	17 Talsu novads	65.77%	28 Saldus novads	61.09%	39 Olaines novads	55.85%
7 Cēsu novads	69.52%	18 Limbažu novads	63.32%	29 Līvānu novads	61.04%	40 Krāslavas novads	54.11%
8 Varakļānu novads	68.21%	19 Bauskas novads	62.82%	30 Preiļu novads	60.58%	41 Ludzas novads	53.64%
9 Rīga	67.55%	20 Liepāja	62.79%	31 Dobeles novads	60.51%	42 Augšdaugavas novads	52.15%
10 Rēzekne	67.23%	21 Dienvidkurzemes nov.	62.78%	32 Jēkabpils novads	59.96%	43 Rēzeknes novads	50.05%
11 Kuldīgas novads	66.85%	22 Madonas novads	62.75%	33 Jelgavas novads	59.37%		

Source: Central Election Commission.

## Voter turnout in Latvia by municipal income level



Note: Scatter plot shows a moderate positive association between municipal voter turnout and median registered household income per household member in 2022. Pearson  $r = 0.58$  ( $p < 0.001$ ; 95% CI [0.34, 0.75]),  $R^2 = 0.34$ ,  $n = 42$  municipalities; populationweighted  $r = 0.60$ . Municipallevel aggregates; not interpretable at the individual level (risk of ecological fallacy). Sources: Central Election Commission (turnout) and Central Statistical Bureau of the Republic of Latvia (median registered household income per household member, 2022; experimental statistics).

indicating that higher-income municipalities tend to exhibit higher participation. More affluent areas – particularly in the Riga metropolitan region – consistently report the highest turnout, reflecting the concentration of higher-income households. Conversely, the lowest participation rates in the 2022 elections – just over half of eligible voters – were recorded in several municipalities in Latgale, the country's most economically disadvantaged region. This pattern is further reinforced by demographic trends: over the past three years, Latgale has experienced the most pronounced population decline in Latvia, losing approximately 5% of its population – four times faster than the national average.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, the relationship between turnout and the population's age structure (specifically the share of residents aged 18–29) is weak and statistically insignificant ( $r = -0.087$ ), suggesting that age composition alone does not explain regional disparities. A descriptive examination indicates that higher turnout often coincides with higher levels of educational attainment. For example, municipalities such as Mārupe, Ādaži, and Saulkrasti combine relatively high

turnout with a larger share of residents holding tertiary education, whereas municipalities such as Rēzekne, Krāslava, and Augšdaugava exhibit both lower turnout and lower educational levels. While this pattern is suggestive, more detailed analysis would be required to determine whether it holds when controlling for other factors.<sup>6</sup>

Although socioeconomic factors explain much of the variation, certain cases highlight the importance of local political context. For instance, Rēzekne municipality recorded the lowest turnout in the country, while Rēzekne city – administratively separate and covering only the urban population – experienced significantly higher participation (67.23%). The presence of a prominent and controversial mayor, along with a more competitive political environment, likely contributed to stronger voter mobilisation in the city compared to the surrounding district.

<sup>5</sup> Central Statistical Bureau of the Republic of Latvia Official database "Iedzīvotāju skaits pēc tautības reģionos 2000–2024", calculated by the author.

<sup>6</sup> Central Statistical Bureau of the Republic of Latvia Official database on the level of education of the inhabitants of Latvia by region.

# Latvia's Unique Participation Dynamics

Latvia's electoral landscape is shaped not only by socio-economic divides but also by distinctive contextual factors. One of the most significant is the country's ethnolinguistic composition, where a sizeable Russian-speaking population plays a key role in understanding participation dynamics. Another important factor is the weakly institutionalised party system, characterised by low membership, fragile organisational structures, and limited societal embeddedness – all of which undermine citizens' trust and sense of political representation.

Approximately 23% of Latvia's population is of Russian ethnicity, and about one quarter of this group holds non-citizen status.<sup>7</sup> Prior to the 2014 elections, Russian-speaking voters demonstrated relatively high electoral participation. However, over the past decade, their turnout has declined significantly (Figure 9).

*By 2022, the gap in participation between Latvian- and Russian-speaking voters had widened to 12 percentage points.*

This decline coincided with a broader decrease in overall voter turnout, but it was particularly pronounced among Russian-speaking voters. A key contributing factor was the stagnation of *Saskaņa* (Harmony) – historically the most influential, though not the only, party appealing to this electorate. In the 2022 elections, *Saskaņa* lost eight parliamentary seats compared to the previous cycle, and its earlier decision to publicly criticise Russia's 2014 aggression in Ukraine had already caused internal divisions and alienated parts of its traditional voter base. These dynamics further eroded voter confidence and contributed to the party's near collapse.

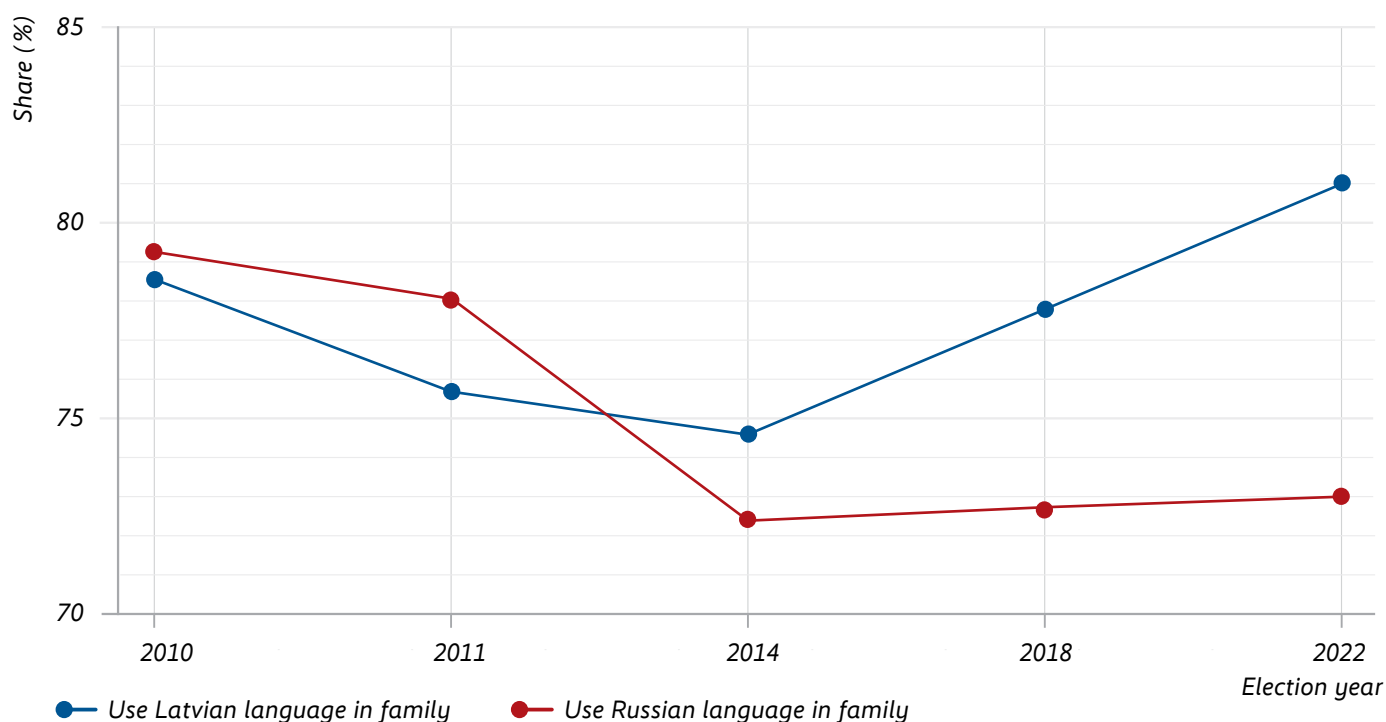
Nearly half of Russian speakers (48.8%) feel they have no chance of influencing politics, while another 23.5% believe their opportunities are very limited (Kaprāns et al., 2025). As a result, this group often perceives that people like them cannot meaningfully affect political outcomes, which reduces motivation to vote and contributes to low levels of perceived electoral efficacy. Compared with Latvians, Russian-speaking residents have historically shown lower levels of

political participation, but Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has significantly changed the context and deepened this gap (Kaprāns et al., 2025). Since 2022, political disengagement among parts of the Russian-speaking population has increasingly taken the form not only of low participation, but also of cynicism, alienation, apathy, self-censorship, fear of expressing views openly, and withdrawal from political issues, including news consumption (Kaprāns et al., 2025). This suggests that the war has made this group less reachable through ordinary democratic participation channels and has turned political disengagement into a broader issue of social cohesion and democratic inclusion in Latvia.

Media consumption patterns also differ between Latvian- and Russian-speaking audiences. This fragmentation matters because Russian-speaking voters are exposed to partly different political narratives, which may shape their perceptions of parties, state institutions, and the war in Ukraine in distinct ways. Nevertheless, a political offer for Russian-speaking citizens does exist: several parties actively target this electorate, increasing competition for these voters. It is important to note, however, that Russian speakers are not a homogeneous group: they differ in terms of ethnic origin (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians) as well as in their political identities, levels of attachment to Latvia, and attitudes toward Russia's war. Thus, the existence of a political offer for Russian-speaking citizens does not necessarily translate into clear or stable political representation. A 2025 study indicates that Russian-speaking residents often feel apprehensive about expressing their political opinions due to persistent social tensions surrounding language and ethnicity. These tensions have intensified further following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has mobilised supporters of nationally oriented political parties. This dynamic was evident, for example, in the 2025 municipal elections in the ethnically diverse capital, Riga. Another Latvia-specific factor influencing voter turnout is the weak institutionalisation of the party system, which has struggled to embed itself in society, partly due to historical legacies (Saarts, 2011). The linkage between political parties and voters remains weak: parties are fragmented, ideological positions are often unclear, and connections between social cleavages and party support are blurred. Organisational capacity is limited, and public trust in political parties is low. At the same time, parties are generously funded by the state and are among the wealthiest in the Baltic region (KNAB, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Central Statistics Bureau data, describing the demographic situation in 2025.

## Voter turnout in Latvia by family language



Source: Central Election Commission of the Republic of Latvia—commissioned surveys conducted by SKDS (2010–2022).

Although Latvia formally has a large number of political parties – 81 registered in 2021 – most have very small membership bases. By comparison, Estonia has 12 parties and Lithuania 27. The legal threshold for establishing a party in Latvia is relatively low: only 500 members are required, representing approximately 0.032% of the electorate. Political activism within parties is also underdeveloped:

*Just 1.4% of Latvian residents are party members,<sup>8</sup> – the lowest proportion in the Baltic region – compared to around 3% in Estonia and 5% in Lithuania.*

*ERR, 2023; Lithuanian Ministry of Justice, 2023*

Even the largest party, “Unity,” has just over 2,000 members.

Together, these factors weaken voters’ sense of representation and political efficacy, ultimately depressing electoral participation. Research by UD highlights a reinforcing feedback loop: parties with limited resources tend to focus mobilisation efforts on groups that already vote, thereby deepening disengagement among low-participation groups – a pattern that is particularly evident in Latvia.



<sup>8</sup> Based on the author’s calculation, there were approximately 26,000 party members out of a population of 1,857,000 at the beginning of 2025, as reported by political parties.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

This report demonstrates that non-voting in Latvia is neither random nor socially neutral. Electoral participation is shaped by a combination of socioeconomic inequalities, ethnolinguistic dynamics, and institutional features of the party system. Several key patterns stand out:

**First**, age, education, and income remain the strongest predictors of electoral participation. Older, better-educated, and higher-income citizens vote at substantially higher rates than younger people, low-income earners, and those with lower levels of education. These divides have persisted across electoral cycles and mirror patterns identified in the Unequal Democracies comparative analysis. The result is a structurally unequal distribution of political voice, in which those facing greater socioeconomic vulnerability are also the least likely to participate.

**Second**, ethnolinguistic divisions have deepened, producing a widening gap between Latvian- and Russian-speaking voters. Russian-speaking residents increasingly report lower political efficacy, limited trust, and reluctance to express political views openly, particularly in the context of heightened social tensions following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This environment not only demobilises parts of the electorate but can also indirectly increase mobilization among nationally oriented parties, reinforcing political polarisation. Improving channels of representation for Russian-speaking voters – while maintaining democratic values and national security considerations – will be complicated but essential to prevent long-term political alienation.

**Third**, the weak societal embeddedness of political parties contributes to lower turnout. Although Latvia has a large number of formally registered parties, their membership bases remain very small. Many parties lack the organisational capacity, ideological clarity, and local presence needed to sustain durable links with voters. This weak embeddedness limits opportunities for civic engagement, undermines political trust, and reinforces perceptions that politics is distant and unresponsive.

Addressing these challenges requires a targeted set of measures that tackle both structural barriers and motivational factors shaping political participation.

Boosting youth turnout requires approaches that reflect how young people engage with politics and where they feel their voices matter. Strengthening civic education, expanding

municipal-level youth initiatives, and creating structured co-creation opportunities in policy areas that directly affect young people – such as education, housing, and mobility – can help reduce feelings of political distance. Evidence shows that supportive environments are crucial: young people are more likely to engage when they feel heard not only within families but also in schools and universities. A strong sense of belonging in educational settings is closely linked to higher levels of civic participation.

Latvia already provides several participation tools for young people aged 16 and above, including participatory budgeting and collective petitions via the platform *manabalss.lv*. These instruments should be more actively promoted. A promising recent innovation is *Signālvēlēšanas* (“signal elections”), first piloted during the 2025 municipal elections and planned for repetition in the 2026 parliamentary elections. These simulated elections allow 15–17-year-olds to cast symbolic votes, learn electoral procedures, and compare their choices with actual results. Such early, low-stakes exposure can reduce informational and psychological barriers to participation. Although lowering the voting age to 16 has been debated, public support for this measure remains limited (27% in 2020; TV3, 2020).

Increasing participation among low-income citizens requires addressing underlying socioeconomic inequalities that constrain political engagement. Latvia remains among the more unequal countries in the European Union, with a Gini coefficient of around 34 (Eurostat, 2023). Reducing income disparities is therefore central to narrowing participation gaps. Political actors should prioritise clear and credible socioeconomic policies – particularly on wages, housing affordability, and public services – and communicate them through accessible and targeted outreach. Independent media also play an important role in ensuring that these issues remain visible and relevant.

A persistent challenge is the self-reinforcing cycle of political disengagement: individuals who feel unrepresented are less likely to vote, which in turn further reduces their representation. The concerns of low-income groups are more often brought onto the political agenda by populist actors, who mostly operate from opposition. As a result, they have had limited opportunities to demonstrate whether they can actually deliver on their promises to these voters. At the same time, they tend to reinforce distrust: while their political stance may resonate with disadvantaged voters, ambiguity on other important issues such as Russia's aggression

against Ukraine undermine their credibility and make their political offer appear risky. Ensuring credible, programmatic (rather than purely identity-based) political representation is essential for fostering inclusion without reinforcing divisions. Tailored, issue-based communication that addresses everyday concerns (such as cost of living and social security) can help reconnect low-income citizens to the political process.

Addressing the ethnolinguistic participation gap is particularly complex in the current geopolitical context. Political engagement among minority communities is shaped by heightened sensitivities linked to security concerns and regional tensions. Creating safe spaces for political expression and supporting cross-community initiatives can help foster trust and shared civic identity. The introduction of mandatory participatory budgeting in all municipalities since 2025 offers an opportunity to shift attention toward common local concerns rather than divisive identity issues.

Finally, rebuilding the link between political parties and society is crucial. This requires stronger incentives for parties to expand membership and actively engage supporters – for example, by linking part of public funding not only to electoral performance but also to active membership. Parties should also strengthen internal democracy through open primaries, transparent candidate selection, and regular public engagement. Expanding local party structures, particularly in regions with persistently low turnout such as Latgale and rural municipalities, is equally important. Increasing transparency in the use of public funding can further contribute to rebuilding public trust.



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## About the author

**Līga Stafecka** is Senior Policy Analyst at the Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS. Her work focuses on good governance, public administration, anti-corruption and participatory democracy, with a particular interest in how institutions can become more open, accountable and responsive to society. She has long-standing experience in policy research, advocacy, and has authored or co-authored numerous analytical reports and policy recommendations on governance, public participation and integrity systems in Latvia and internationally. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Public Administration at the University of Latvia.

## Who Does (Not) Vote in Latvia?



**Why should Latvians care about turnout?** Latvia's voter turnout has stabilized at moderate levels but remains marked by deep and persistent inequalities. Participation gaps by age, education, income and region mean that political decisions are disproportionately shaped by older, better-off, and better-educated citizens. This unequal political voice undermines democratic representation and reinforces broader social and territorial divides.



**Who are the Latvian nonvoters?** In line with European patterns, younger people, citizens with lower income and education, and those living in economically weaker regions participate least. Additionally, Latvia shows two context-specific dynamics: a decline in turnout among Russian-speaking residents, driven by low political efficacy and heightened social tensions especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and very weak societal embeddedness of political parties, reflected in extremely low membership levels and fragmented linkages between voters and parties.



**What should be done?** Reducing these participation gaps requires targeted action: strengthening civic education and youth engagement, improving programmatic outreach to low-income voters, providing safe spaces for the largest ethnic communities, and rebuilding political parties' social roots. Municipal-level tools such as participatory budgeting and new initiatives like pilot elections for youth under 18 can also help foster early civic habits and broaden democratic inclusion.

You can find further information on this topic here:  
[democracy.fes.de/topics/inequality-democracy.html](https://democracy.fes.de/topics/inequality-democracy.html)

