



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Steadily Declining Voter Turnout in Norwegian Local Election, 1963-1999

Bjorklund. T.

Citation

The Steadily Declining Voter Turnout in Norwegian Local Election, 1963-1999. (2002). The Steadily Declining Voter Turnout in Norwegian Local Election, 1963-1999. *Acta Politica*, 37: 2002(4), 380-399. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450859>

Version: Publisher's Version
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450859>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Steadily Declining Voter Turnout in Norwegian Local Elections, 1963-1999

Tor Bjørklund

University of Oslo

Abstract

From 1963 to 1999, the electoral participation in Norwegian local elections declined steadily. The downturn in voter turnout coincided with an increase in single-issue participation. These opposite trends may be interpreted according to both a *normative* and an *instrumental* explanation. According to the normative explanation, people vote because they see it as a civic duty. The instrumental explanation, on the other hand, emphasizes people's rational behaviour in favour of their self-interest. A generally lower adherence to the civic duty norm accounts for the declining voter turnout, while rational self-interest has paved the way for single-issue participation. The young are the foremost carriers of both trends: they are the least active on Election Day, and the most active in terms of single-issue participation.

1 Introduction: causes and consequences

The subject for this paper is the declining voter turnout in Norwegian local elections. A certain decline is a general trend in western countries (Topf 1995a; Rose 1997). In Norwegian parliamentary elections the trend has not been so pronounced, although the turnout in the last two elections was clearly at a lower level than previously. In local elections, however, the situation is different; these elections have experienced an unambiguously downward trend (see Figure 1). A steadily declining participation can be observed from the beginning of the 1960s to the last election in 1999. Before that period there was an upward curve. Thus, the history of voter turnout in Norwegian local elections in the last century has two separate periods: first an upward trend (from 1901 to 1963) and then a downward trend (from 1963 to 1999).

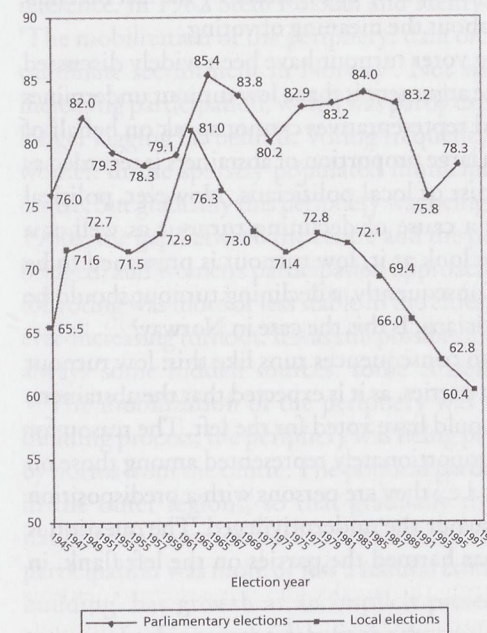
The decline is a complex subject. We will try to single out various aspects. The analysis can focus on causes and consequences. Concerning the causes one point of departure is structural and social changes. In fact, in the light of fundamental transformations during the last decades it is easier to mention factors that should cause an increase rather than a decrease in voter turnout.

Such transformations include an educational revolution, the launching of nationwide television from 1973, the surge in the number of printed newspapers, and, more recently, an information society with easy access to political sources via various mass media and the Internet.

In addition, the political role of the 435 Norwegian municipalities has grown in importance. The municipalities represent a cornerstone of the welfare state. They function as a distributor and producer of welfare services. Since the 1960s the municipality sector has steadily been extended. Approximately 20 per cent of the labour force is employed in the municipalities and the counties, most of them in the welfare sector. Citizens are not only confronted with the municipality as a part of the welfare state; the municipalities also have the authority to regulate and to plan areas for housing and economic life. And yet, despite their enhanced political importance voter turnout has dropped. Consequently, two opposite trends can be observed which have been dubbed the "participation paradox" (Baldersheim & Rose 2000).

In analysing the voter turnout two explanations will be introduced: a normative explanation and an instrumental explanation. Sticking to norms means that the question of voting is a normative one. A central norm in this paper is civic duty: as a citizen and member of a democratic society, you have

Figure 1: Voter turnout in Norwegian parliamentary and local elections, from 1945 to 1999. Percent.



an obligation to vote. A recently published study empirically measured the impact of civic duty and the instrumental benefits of voting. The conclusion is that "... rational considerations are much less important in voting than people's sense of duty: the feeling that one has a moral obligation to vote appears to be the overriding motivation for going to the polls" (Blais et al. 2000: 190). Our own data do not make it possible to measure the relative weight of civic duty versus instrumental benefits, but a reasonable guess is that this conclusion can also be applied to Norwegian voters. The question is if there has been a shift in the support for civic duty.

The normative approach will be contrasted with an instrumental view, which emphasizes self-interest: has the act of voting any impact on my own interests or my own position? This is the rational choice approach with antecedent to Downs (1957). According to this approach the individual vote is regarded as a theoretical irrationality. As the costs of voting often exceed the benefits, the puzzle is why so many vote. The so-called 'voting paradox' stems from this recognition.

Since the turnout dropped steadily in the period 1963 to 1999, our hypothesis is that the support for voting as a civic duty has diminished; regardless of the election's importance, citizens' view of voting as a civic duty has lost support. Civic duty as a norm is presumed to be internalized in a process of socialization and can be studied easily by looking at political generations. Our forecast is that the pre-war generations had an instrumental approach to voting more often than the post-war generations. Consequently, the decline in voting as a civic duty can partly be explained by the fact that new generations have different views about the meaning of voting.

The consequences of declining voter turnout have been widely discussed (Key jr. 1958; Lijphart 1994). One argument is that a low turnout undermines political legitimacy, as the elected representatives cannot speak on behalf of most voters. In addition, having a large proportion of abstainers is regarded as an indicator of widespread distrust of local politicians. However, political distrust can also be regarded as a cause of declining turnout as well as a consequence. Whichever way we look at it, low turnout is presumed to be connected to political distrust. Consequently, a declining turnout should be followed by reduced trust in politicians. Is this the case in Norway?

Another argument that refers to consequences runs like this: low turnout will systematically harm the leftist parties, as it is expected that the abstainers, if they had been forced to vote, would have voted for the left. The reason for this is that the abstainers are disproportionately represented among those on the lower end of the social ladder, i.e., they are persons with a predisposition to support political parties that favour the underprivileged. The question is whether the declining turnout has harmed the parties on the left flank, in particular the labour party.

Finally, single-issue participation is discussed. In contrast to electoral participation this form of participation has in fact shown an upward trend (Topf 1995b; Tøgeby 1989). This fact raises various questions. Can we separate the participants into two different groups, one group being those who take part in various forms of direct political actions and the other those who participate in elections? According to this view the non-voters are predominantly engaged in single-issue participation. As the number of non-voters is growing, the recruits to direct political action must also be increasing.

Another hypothesis connects the opposite participation trends to a change in social values and norms. The spread of an instrumental view on political participation with self-interest as the driving force facilitates or promotes single-issue participation. Consequently, the presumed growing number of voters who regard the act of voting in terms of self-interest will take part more often in single-issue participation than those voters who perceive the act of voting as a civic duty. This suggestion will be tested empirically.

1.1 Causes

The background of voting is related to the question: Why do some go to the polls and some abstain? What are the driving forces behind voting or abstaining? The answer to this question is greatly dependent on the time of reference. In 1962 Stein Rokkan and Henry Valen published an article called 'The mobilisation of the periphery: data on turnout, party membership and candidate recruitment in Norway'. Not surprisingly, the focus was on the increasing participation, which was partly explained by a periphery that was no longer lagging far behind. Voting frequency had been especially low among women in the sparsely populated municipalities far from the geographical centre, but gradually this periphery was being politically mobilized. In the early 1960s, the gap between the centre and the periphery was in a process of being bridged, and women's participation approached that of men. As the propensity for voting was more or less stable in the cities, the electoral statistics showed an ever-increasing turnout. It was still possible for turnout to increase, as there were always some hidden sources, some citizens who had never voted before.

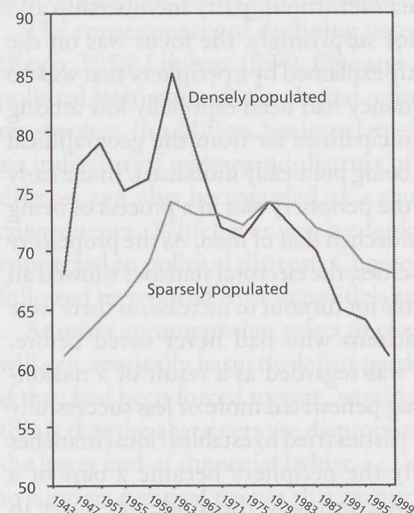
The mobilization of the periphery was regarded as a result of a nation-building process; the periphery was being penetrated more or less successfully by norms from the centre. The political parties tried to establish local branches in the outer regions, so that gradually the periphery became a part of a nationwide communication network. According to the model the surge in participation was more or less a natural consequence. The metaphor 'nation-building' has growth as an implicit prerequisite that also concerns voter turnout. In this case the data fit the theoretical model.

Soon after the publication of Rokkan and Valen's article, the long-term trend of increased voter turnout came to a halt. A new phase started. As we want to concern ourselves with the beginning of the 21st century, it is not our aim to explain why the turnout increased. On the contrary, the question we aim to answer is: why has voter participation steadily declined since 1963? In order to shed some light on this subject we will first map some of the changes in the propensity for voting among different socio-demographic groups.

The process of levelling out the differences between the centre and the periphery as well as between men and women continued in the period of declining voter participation. Initially, the differences disappeared, and then – at least with regards to centre and periphery – a new pattern was established in the opposite direction, as is shown in Figure 2. The figure maps the voter turnout from 1945 to 1999 in the most sparsely populated and the most densely populated municipalities.¹ The differences levelled out during the 1970s, and then, from the 1980s onwards, a difference arose that increased steadily up to 1999, so that the highest participation was then in the periphery.

With respect to gender and turnout the difference levelled out in 1987. It looked as if a new pattern was emerging in the 1995 local elections, when voter turnout among women was higher than among men (see Figure 3). However, in the 1999 local elections there was no difference between men and women.

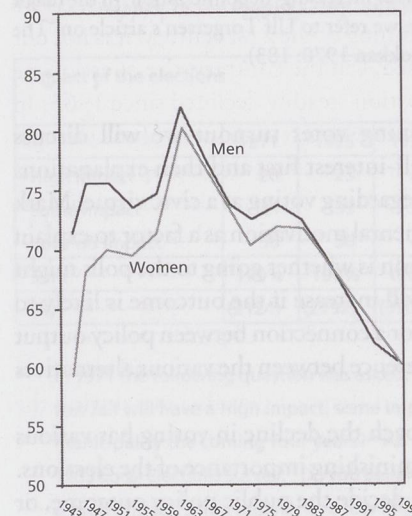
Figure 2. Voter turnout in Norwegian local elections in densely populated* and sparsely populated** municipalities, form 1945 to 1999



* More than 60000 inhabitants. There are seven such municipalities in Norway.

** Less than 2500 inhabitants.

Figure 3. Voter turnout by sex, in Norwegian local elections from 1945 to 1999



A closer look at the data reveals that this was due to a high rate of participation among older men. Among citizens less than 50 years of age women clearly voted more frequently.² If this difference can be interpreted as a result of different habits in various generations, one may forecast that women will vote more often than men in the future.

What is clear is that patterns have changed. At one time men living in the cities were ranked as the group with the highest propensity to vote, and women in the periphery as the most passive group. The former were the avant-garde, the latter the latecomers. Now the picture seems to be the opposite. Generally speaking, women in the periphery surpass men in the cities with regard to voting frequency.³ It is tempting to say that the latecomers have become the avant-garde, however, this would be somewhat misleading. The level of participation among women in the periphery has not increased but in fact levelled out or even decreased a bit.

Rokkan and Valen summed up the period before 1963 with the phrase: "The mobilisation of the periphery." The ensuing period, from 1963 to 1999, cannot be characterized by mobilization. A more appropriate characterization might be the demobilization of the centre and stabilization of the periphery. Rokkan and Valen appear to have foreseen this demobilization of the centre:

It is paradoxical that it is just in this period of belated 'politicization' in the peripheral areas that we find a number of indications of increasing 'depoliticization' in the major cities: on this development at the centre we refer to Ulf Torgersen's article on 'The Trend toward Political Consensus' (Rokkan 1970: 183).

In an attempt to interpret the declining voter turnout we will discuss explanations based on some form of self-interest first and then explanations based on norms, or to be more precise regarding voting as a civic virtue. Mark Franklin (1996) emphasizes the instrumental motivation as a factor to explain voting or non-voting. The central question is whether going to the polls might affect the election outcome. Turnout will increase if the outcome is likely to determine public policy. A prerequisite for a connection between policy output and election outcome is a perceived difference between the various alternatives for the executive power.

According to the instrumental approach the decline in voting has various causes. The drop can be explained by diminishing importance of the elections. Forces other than the election outcome decide the public policy outcome, or the differences between the alternatives offered by the political parties are seen to be more or less non-existent. According to Kirchheimer's 'catch-all party' theory (1966) the political parties are becoming more and more similar. With regards to the Norwegian municipalities their political importance has grown during the last decades. The question is, however, how the voters regard the importance of the local elections. From 1971 to 1999 the turnout dropped from 81.0 per cent to 60.4 per cent. Following the instrumental approach the perceived impact of the election result on public policy is also expected to have dropped. As almost identical questions were posed in the 1971, 1995 and 1999 election surveys, this expectation can be tested. In spite of the fact that the electoral turnout in this period dropped by 12.6 percentage points, the election was regarded to be more important in 1999 than in 1971 (see Table 1). The percentage holding the opinion that the election result has a high impact "on what will happen in the municipality in the coming four years" was more or less stable, but there was an increase in those who felt that the result would have 'some impact' and a decrease in those who felt that it would have a 'low or no impact'.

Next, the turnout in the various categories was checked. The drop is especially pronounced among those who hold the opinion that the election has a 'low or no' impact on what will happen in the municipality in the coming four years. Consequently, in 1971 it was more common for voters to go to the polls despite the fact that they felt that the election was of no importance: 71 per cent of those placed in this category voted in 1971 compared with only 51 per cent in 1999. This is an indication that the norm related to voting as a civic

Table 1. Perceptions in 1971, 1995, and 1999 of the impact of local elections on what will happen in the municipality, and voter turnout within the different categories. *

Impact of the elections				Percent voter turnout**			Diff. 9-71***
	1971	1995	1999	1971	1995	1999	
High impact	20	23	21	86	75	73	-13
Some impact	24	39	38	79	67	65	-14
Low/ no impact	56	38	41	71	54	51	-20
Sum	100%	100%	100%				
(N)	(2124)	(2792)	(3105)				

* In 1971 the following question was asked: "Do you believe that the outcome of the election this fall will have a high impact, some impact, or a low impact on what will happen in the municipality the coming four years?" An almost identical question was formulated in the 1995 Local Elections Survey: "Do you believe that the outcome of the local elections will have a high impact, some impact, or a low impact on what will happen in the municipality the coming four years?" In 1999, the question was worded as follows: "Do you believe that the outcome of the local elections this fall will have a high impact, some impact, or a low or no impact on what will happen in the municipality the coming four years?"

** Weighted by actual voter turnout.

*** The group answering "don't know" was larger in 1971, and the election turnout was particularly low in that group.

Source: SSB's Local Elections Survey of 1971, and The Local Elections Surveys of 1995 and 1999.

obligation has lost ground. However, as voters were only questioned about civic duty in 1999, we cannot be sure.

In 1999 the support for voting as a civic duty was widespread. Admittedly, it is difficult to measure support for a norm that is regarded as attractive.⁴ However, not everyone supports the norm, and not surprisingly there is a clear difference in voting frequency. Among those who chose the self-interest alternative only 24 per cent voted in contrast to 64 per cent of the proponents of the civic duty alternative.

The self-interest alternative is an indicator of an instrumental approach: the act of voting is a form of calculation related to importance and relevance. Following the instrumental approach the frequency of voting is expected to vary sharply between those who regard the election as important and those who regard it as more or less irrelevant. If the election in focus is considered unimportant, the turnout is expected to be especially low among those who support the self-interest alternative. Those who perceive voting to be a civic duty are expected to vote regardless of importance. In Table 2 these expectations are

confirmed to a certain degree. The propensity for voting is clearly more dependent on consideration of the election's importance with those who support the self-interest alternative than those who support the civic duty alternative.

Table 2. (a) Perceptions of the impact of the council's political composition on what will happen in the municipality, and (b) voter turnout by whether voting is considered a civic duty or a matter of self-interest.

(a) The impact of the balance of power in the local council		(b) Percent turnout*		N	
		Civic duty+	Self-interest	Civic duty	Self-interest
High impact	21	75	52	543	48
Some impact	38	71	28	995	156
Low/ no impact	41	61	16	1041	238
Total/ mean	100	68	24	2579	442
(N)	(3106)				

* Weighted by actual voter turnout.

+ Based on the following question: "Some people believe that voting is a civic duty, others that one should only vote if the election is considered important for one's self-interest. What is your opinion, do you consider it a duty as a citizen to vote, or should people only vote when the election becomes a matter of their self-interest?"

Source: The 1999 Local Elections Survey.

For the 1971 local elections survey we are not able to distinguish between 'civic duty' and 'self-interest', but the difference in turnout between those who regard the impact of the election to be high and those who regard it to be low is not so pronounced (15 percentage points, cf. Table 1). The form of this distribution does not lend much support to the instrumental approach of voting, thus, leading us to believe that voting as a form of civic duty was a central factor in 1971. The distribution in the 1999 elections is more in accordance with the instrumental approach than the distribution in the 1971 local elections.⁵

Civic duty can easily be regarded as a value that is implanted during a socialization process. Thus, the support can be expected to differ between various generations. However, as the question about civic duty is only posed in 1999, a cohort analysis is impossible. Nevertheless, the respondents can be divided into various cohorts or generations. In Table 3 the support for the self-interest alternative and the voter turnout are shown in the various cohorts.

Table 3. Percent who say that voting is a matter of one's self interest and voter turnout in the Norwegian local elections of 1999, by generation.

	Self interest	Voter turnout*	N	
Born after 1975	29	31	272	427
Born 1966 - 1975	19	47	523	744
Born 1956 - 1965	10	63	608	822
Born 1946 - 1955	13	68	654	866
Born 1930 - 1945	6	72	723	971
Born 1920 - 1929	5	63	340	469
Total	12	60	3120	4299

* Weighted by actual voter turnout.

Source: The 1999 Local Elections Survey.

Table 4. Voter turnout* in Norwegian local elections within different generations, from 1971 to 1999.

	1971	1995	1999	N		
Born after 1975	–	46	31	–	112	427
Born 1966 - 1975	–	42	47	–	597	744
Born 1956 - 1965	–	65	63	–	586	822
Born 1946 - 1955**	53	67	68	254	586	866
Born 1930 - 1945	72	73	72	731	568	971
Born 1920 - 1929	76	75	63	509	328	469
Born 1910 - 1919***	82	74	–	477	77	–
Born before 1910	74	–	–	564	–	–
Total	73	63	60	2535	2854	4299

* Weighted by actual voter turnout.

** In 1971, the youngest respondents in the survey were born in 1951.

*** In 1995, the oldest respondents in the survey were born in 1915.

Source: The 1999 Local Elections Survey.

A clear pattern can be seen: the higher the support for the self-interest alternative the lower the turnout. The variation in voter turnout by cohort is pronounced, and it is tempting to suggest that the dwindling support for voting as a civic duty in the younger cohorts is a cause of the low turnout.

The support for the civic duty alternative is expected to have been higher in earlier elections partly due to the fact that the youngest generations, where proponents of self-interest most frequently occur, were not a part of the

electorate. Consequently, the variation in turnout according to cohort is expected to have been less clear-cut in earlier elections than in 1999.

In Table 4 the voter turnouts in the 1971, 1995 and 1999 local elections are shown according to cohorts. A well-known pattern is confirmed: the voting turnout is dependent on life cycle (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993). Participation increases as voters grow older. The reason for this is simple: on leaving their schools and universities to get a job, establish a family, etc., the voters gradually become more integrated in society. Integrated voters go the polls more often than voters who are not integrated. Consequently, as voters become old the turnout decreases again. Job retirement and the disappearance of old networks contribute to the decline.

It is also possible to explain the decreasing turnout by looking at the generations. The difference in turnout between the youngest and the oldest cohorts increases from 1971 to 1995, and again from 1995 to 1999. Consequently, the generation profile has become more clear-cut. This is partly due to an especially low turnout among the new cohorts entering the electorate. Among those voters who were born after 1966 the turnout did not exceed 50 per cent. Participation in the 1999 local elections was a record low among those who were born after 1975, only 31 per cent. Thus, the decline in voter turnout can be attributed to two factors: a period effect that affects all cohorts and a generation effect because less of the younger generations voted compared to previous elections.

Warren E. Miller (1992) has emphasized the importance of political generation in an analysis of the declining voter turnout in the US between 1950 and 1980. A generation consists of individuals with common formative experiences. As times go by the generational composition of the electorate changes. The inclusion of the post-war generations, or what is called the post-'new deal' generation, in the electorate has contributed to a decline in voting participation. The point is that these new generations have a systematically lower propensity for voting than the new deal generation, which experienced the Great Depression in its formative years. Consequently, the decline in voter turnout can partly be explained by the fact that the share of the post-new deal generations is rising, and on the other hand the new deal generation is gradually disappearing.

1.2 Consequences

In the introduction we mentioned two possible consequences: the low turnout undermines the political legitimacy and systematically harms the leftist parties. The question is how the various consequences can be applied to the Norwegian local elections. Concerning legitimacy of the political system and

trust in their politicians Norwegians voters are normally ranked high compared to voters in other countries (Aardal 1999). According to the World Value Survey, Norwegians were ranked as number one when questioned about their 'confidence in parliaments'; they had the highest level of trust in Europe (Listhaug & Wiberg 1995: 304-305). In addition, if there was a simple link between turnout and political trust, then mistrust should have increased dramatically from 1963 to 1999. This was not the case.

Consequences have also been related to the impact of the election result: which parties are harmed by a high electoral abstention? Arend Lijphart (1997) emphasizes the well-documented evidence that turnout is linked to socio-economic status. The non-voters are disproportionately recruited from groups with low educational attainment, from the lower income categories and from those with low-ranking occupational status. This biased class composition has a political impact; unequal turnout could mean unequal political influences. As V. Key (1958) underlines, politicians do not need to pay much attention to non-voters. Thus a vicious circle can appear as abstainers become alienated from the political process. They become dropouts, and it can be difficult to integrate them later on, if politicians do not take into account the interests of the non-voters. In line with this argument, the leftist parties are expected to get a larger share of the votes in countries with a high turnout, since these parties normally recruit voters at the lower end of the social ladder. Although this empirical connection has not been widely confirmed, a study of national elections in 19 industrial democracies in the period from 1950 to 1990 does, however, confirm a tendency in that direction (Pacek & Radcliff 1995).

The impact of non-voting on the strength of the various political parties has not been studied thoroughly in Norway. At first glance, it makes sense that the labour party's position has been undermined by a declining turnout. In the 1963 local elections, when the turnout was 81.0 per cent, labour received 45.8 per cent of the votes. In 1999 the corresponding figures were 60.4 per cent and 28.6 per cent. However, the argument that labour's loss is due to the declining turnout is too simple. Support for labour has also diminished in parliamentary elections in spite of the fact that the turnout has not varied much during the last decades.

The decline in turnout for the 1999 local elections compared to those of 1995 in relation to labour's electoral position has been studied (Bjørklund & Saglie 2000). No support could be found for the hypothesis that labour suffered more than the other parties because of a high rate of abstainers among its previous voters. However, the evidence in this case is somewhat restricted as it only covers what happened at two elections. Therefore, we will try to look at the problem from a longer perspective.

The argument that the leftist parties lost voters in the period 1963 to 1999 because of a drop in voter turnout is based on the assumption that a declining

turnout increases the biased class-composition of the voters. As voters in socially underprivileged categories have been predisposed traditionally to vote leftist this will harm labour. This is, however, an empirical question. Has the decline in turnout in fact had any impact on the composition of the voters? Does the class-biased composition become more pronounced as the share of active voters decreases? From 1971 to 1995 the turnout reduced by ten percentage points. According to two socio-economic indicators, income and level of education, the concomitant changes in the voter composition was small; in fact the changes tended to show a *diminishing* of social divisions between voters and non-voters (Bjørklund 1999). However, the data are somewhat contradictory. The drop in turnout from 1971 to 1999 was especially pronounced among blue-collar workers (Bjørklund & Saglie 2000: 61). This is in line with the conclusion drawn by Jørgen Goul Andersen and Jens Hoff (2000), who stress that the declining turnout in Scandinavia may be explained by class demobilization. Anyway, the development from 1971 to 1999 gives no unambiguous indication that the drop in voter turnout has increased the biased social-composition of the voters. What is certain is that during the last decades the labour voters have been somewhat less inclined to come from the low-status categories. However, given as an assumption that the social composition of the voters in relation to the non-voters was more or less constant in the same period, one can conclude that other political parties have developed a less clear-cut high-class profile than previously, or that the launching of new parties (such as the Progress Party) have attracted voters at the lower end of the social ladder. If this is correct, then one cannot conclude that the drop in the voter turnout has especially harmed labour with relation to social composition. Indeed, this is a tentative conclusion, as there is still much empirical study to be carried out in this field.

2 Voter turnout and single-issue participation

Robert Topf (1995b: 52) concludes that, "whereas electoral turnout in Western European countries has remained remarkably stable, political participation beyond voting has been rising dramatically." In fact, the voter turnout in Norwegian local elections has not even been stable, but also in Norway "the political participation beyond voting" has clearly increased (Bjørklund & Saglie 2000: 86). This form of participation is often called unconventional in contrast to the conventional form of electoral participation. The term 'unconventional' can be somewhat misleading, since this form of participation has always been fairly widespread. Consequently, if unconventional is equated with abnormal the wrong associations arise. The term unconventional participation includes any sort of participation that is not directed through

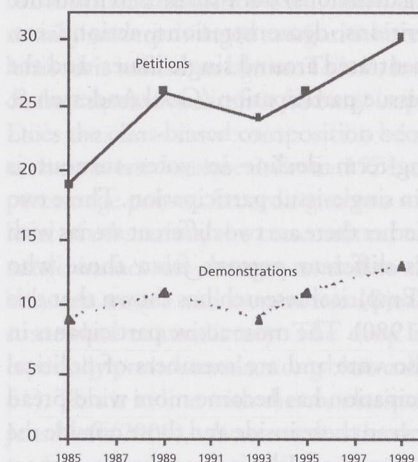
representative channels (parties and organizations) but that aims to influence decision-makers directly through petitions, demonstrations, actions, etc. Unconventional participation is concentrated around single issues, and the most appropriate term may be single-issue participation (Goul Andersen & Hoff 2000).

To summarize, in Norway a long-term decline in voter turnout is accompanied by a long-term increase in single-issue participation. These two opposite trends trigger the question whether there are two different arenas with different participants; are the voters different persons from those who participate in direct political actions? Empirical research has shown that this is not at all the case (Olsen & Sætren 1980). The most active participants in single-issue actions are those who also vote and are members of political parties. However, as single-issue participation has become more widespread during the last years, the difference between those inside and those outside the electoral channel has diminished. In other words, the increase has been most pronounced among the non-voters and those who are not members of political parties.⁶

Two forms of direct political action will be analysed: signing petitions and participation in demonstrations.⁷ As is shown in Figure 4, an increasing curve can be observed for both activities and especially for signing petitions. An additive index has been constructed for these two activities.⁸ On the basis of the mean score of the index the voters have been somewhat more active than the non-voters (cf. Table 5). The activity, however, varies significantly according to cohorts. Among those born after 1975 two records can be registered: a record high single-issue participation and a record low voter turnout. In addition, this cohort is the only one where single-issue participation is at a somewhat higher level among non-voters than among voters, though not statistically significant. In the other cohorts, except for the next youngest (born between 1966 and 1975), the difference is pronounced.

Concerning the level of activity regardless of voting, a dividing line can be drawn between the post-war cohorts, those born after 1945, and the older cohorts (cf. Table 5). Direct political action is most widespread in the post-war cohorts. These cohorts acquired the right to vote from 1965, a period with a declining voter turnout. It is tempting to give both the increase in single-issue participation and the decline in voter turnout a generation interpretation. Concerning electoral participation the opposite is the case. The post-war generations steadily recruit new members and the pre-war generations lose members and gradually shrink; this explains an upward trend in the single-issue participation and a downward one in voter turnout. However, one can remark that the unambiguously declining voter turnout does not apply to the parliamentary elections.

Figure 4. Percent having signed petitions or demonstrated from 1985 to 1999



Sources: The Norwegian Election Studies 1985-1993, the 1995 and 1999 Local Election Survey

Table 5. Mean score on an index of having demonstrated and/or signed petitions by generation dependent on voting or not voting

	Mean	Voters	Non-voters	N		
Born after 1975	0,59	0,57	0,61	280	125	154
Born 1966 – 1975	0,48	0,51	0,44	530	314	216
Born 1956 – 1965	0,55	0,60	0,40	613	465	148
Born 1946 – 1955	0,46	0,49	0,33	660	523	138
Born 1930 – 1945	0,32	0,34	0,22	742	613	128
Born 1920 – 1929	0,22	0,26	0,06	352	280	72
Mean	0,43	0,45	0,38	3177	2320	857

Source: The 1999 Local Elections Survey.

Voting and single-issue participation can also be interpreted according to various values. Action groups with a focus on single issues are expected to be attractive for voters with an instrumental approach to political activity. In contrast to action groups, political parties do not only *articulate* interests they also *aggregate* them. Consequently, the political parties are forced to balance interests and have a comprehensive view of the society. For the single-issue action groups the mobilizing platform can be more easily one-sided. Our expectations are that those with an instrumental approach to voting, or those who regard the act of voting in terms of self-interest, are more easily attracted

to single-issue participation than those who regard voting as a civic virtue. Contrary to expectation there is no difference in the propensity for single-issue participation between those who regard the act of voting as a form of civic duty and those who vote out of self-interest (cf. Table 6). One ready interpretation is that the various single-issues reflect a broad spectrum: with some issues the participants are driven by self-interest and with others by altruistic considerations.

Table 6. Percent receiving different scores on an index of having demonstrated and/or signed petitions, by whether voting is considered a civic duty or a matter of self-interest.

	0 (Neither)	1 (One or the other)	2 (Both)	N
Civic duty	65	27	8	2731
Self-interest	65	27	7	376

Source: The 1999 Local Elections Survey.

3 Concluding remarks

The drop in voter turnout in Norwegian local elections has led to a new participation pattern. At one time men in cities had the highest propensity for voting, whereas women in the geographical periphery had the lowest propensity. Now the picture seems to be the opposite. Consequently, the decline has been most pronounced among men in the highly populated areas. This drop in electoral participation has been interpreted with respect to some aspects of its consequences and its causes, and then the fact that single-issue participation increased in the same period was discussed.

One of the consequences of the drop in voter turnout is said to be that political parties on the left flank are harmed. However, the thesis that labour has suffered electorally by the declining turnout is not confirmed. Admittedly, our empirical base is not strong.

Regarding the causes, the discussion concentrated on two approaches towards voting: an instrumental approach emphasizing self-interest as a driving force, and a normative approach with civic duty as the decisive impetus. A central point in the instrumental approach is how important an election is regarded to be. Declining turnout is presumed to lead to the view that local elections are of growing unimportance. However, it is documented that the opposite is the case. In 1971 a larger share of the voters supported the notion that the election would have a low or no impact on what would happen in the municipality the coming four years than in 1999. The drop in turnout

was especially pronounced among those who regarded the elections to be unimportant. This is an indication of dwindling support for voting as a form of civic virtue. Those who regard voting as a civic duty felt that one is obliged to go to the polls regardless of the importance of the election. Unfortunately, a question about the support for voting as a civic virtue is only posed in the 1999 election survey. Consequently, we have no time-series. The view that people should only vote if the election becomes a matter of their self-interest has, however, been analysed by cohorts. The difference between cohorts is pronounced. Those in the youngest cohort tend to stick to the self-interest alternative most often.

Also the propensity for voting was analysed by cohorts. The difference in voting propensity by cohorts has widened during the last decades. In the youngest cohorts the turnout in 1999 was dramatically low. It is tempting to connect this observation to a shift in values towards the act of voting. Consequently, a conclusion is that a more widespread instrumental view of the meaning of voting is a cause of the declining voter turnout.

The youth does not show political passivity on a broad base. In single-issue activity, which in contrast to electoral participation has shown an upward trend, the youth is the most active group. In addition, the youngest cohort (born after 1975) breaks with the general trend, as the non-voters are somewhat more active in single-issue participation than the voters. Political engagement is thus channelled into other directions than the electoral arena. This may be interpreted in terms of life cycle, i.e., it may be that as they grow older the pattern will change. If a generation interpretation is more appropriate, the decline in voting turnout as well as the increase in single-issue participation is expected to continue.

Finally, we wish to raise a critical question: Why has the weakened support for voting as a civic duty not harmed the turnout in Storting elections to the same degree as in local elections? As can be seen from Figure 1 the difference between turnout in local elections and Storting elections has widened gradually. One possibility is that the Storting elections are regarded to be much more important than municipal elections.⁹ As the civic duty is weakened the importance of the election becomes more crucial for voting. The fact that the voter turnout in local elections, in contrast to the Storting elections, is highest in the sparsely populated municipalities can be explained by the fact that the local elections are regarded to be more important the fewer inhabitants there are in the municipalities. The Storting election is indeed perceived to be more important than the local elections, but the difference in perception depends on the size of the municipality. In 1995, in municipalities with less than 2,500 inhabitants the difference in favour of Storting elections was 11 percentage points compared with 61 percentage points in municipalities with more than 60,000 inhabitants.

In the public debate the most frequent argument for the unimportance of local elections is the statement that the room for political manoeuvre by the municipality is very restricted as the municipalities often appear to be used as instruments for state-governed policy. Analyses of economical priorities between different sectors (administration, education welfare, etc.) also reveal small differences according to political colour of the municipality council. Against this background Sørensen (1989: 288) concludes (admittedly with a question mark) that voting in local elections is "a symbolic expression of political citizenship." However, many voters are of a different opinion and support the statement that local elections matter both with regard to their own position and the future of the municipalities.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Johannes Bergh for research assistance and Jo Saglie for valuable comments on the draft version of this contribution

Notes

1. The cut is less than 2,500 inhabitants for the sparsely populated municipalities (120 municipalities), and more than 600,000 inhabitants for the densely populated municipalities (just six municipalities).
2. 57 per cent of women versus 50 per cent of men.
3. The difference is not pronounced, and as we have to rely on surveys for the period since the 1987 elections, the empirical ground is not so solid. However, in the 1987 local elections the turnout was a bit higher among women in municipalities with less than 2,500 inhabitants than among men in municipalities with more than 60,000 inhabitants (Bjørklund 1999: 213).
4. The following question was posed: "Some people believe that voting is a civic duty, others that one should only vote if the election is considered important for one's self-interest. What is your opinion, do you consider it a duty as a citizen to vote, or should people only vote when the election becomes a matter of their self-interest?" 87 per cent supported the civic duty alternative and 13 per cent the self-interest alternative.
5. According to Table 1 the variation is from 73 per cent (high impact) to 51 per cent (low/no impact). The corresponding figures in 1971 are 86 and 71 per cent, respectively.
6. This can be illustrated by referring to the frequency with which people sign a petition. Questions about participation are limited to the last four years. In 1985, 19 per cent had signed a petition compared with 30 per cent in 1999. Among voters the increase was from 20 to 31 per cent, and among non-voters from 15 to 28 per

- cent. The corresponding figures among party-members are 30 to 35 per cent, and among non-members 17 to 30 percent (Bjørklund & Saglie 2000: 95).
7. This is done by looking at the answers to the question: "There are different ways of exerting political influence. Have you tried in the course of the last four years to influence a decision concerning a specific issue in the municipality council or county council by (i) signing a petition, (ii) participating in an action-group, protest-meeting or demonstration?" This question was originally posed in the Norwegian election studies regarding Storting elections but in a slightly different way. The scope of activity was not restricted to "a decision concerning a specific issue in the municipality council or county council" but included all sorts of unspecific areas "in the course of the last four years." In spite of the fact that the question posed in the local election studies was more restricted than the similar question from the Storting elections, it revealed a higher level of activity.
 8. The index goes from 0 to 2 separating those who have participated in both demonstrations and petition signing (2), those who have taken part in one or the other (1) and those who have been non-active (0).
 9. In the 1995 local election survey this question was posed: "Which election do you regard as the most important, the Storting election, the county council election or the municipality election?" 71 % answered the Storting election, 1 % the county council election and 28% the municipality election.

Bibliography

- Aardal, B. (1999), 'Politikerforakt og politisk mistillit', in: B. Aardal et al., *Velgere i 90-årene*. Oslo: NKS-Forlaget.
- Baldersheim, H., and L.E. Rose (2000), 'Kommunale reformer som teoretiske utfordringer: Linjer og paradokser i lokal politikk og organisering', in: H. Baldersheim and L.E. Rose (eds.), *Det kommunale laboratorium. Teoretiske perspektiver på lokal politikk og organisering*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.
- Bjørklund, T. (1999), *Et lokalvalg i perspektiv. Valget i 1995 i lys av sosiale og politiske endringer*. Oslo: Tano-Aschehoug.
- Bjørklund, T., and J. Saglie (2000), *Lokalvalget i 1999. Rekordlav og rekordhøy deltakelse*, Rapport 12. Oslo: Institutt for samfunnsforskning.
- Blais, A., R. Young and M. Lapp (2000), 'The calculus of voting: an empirical test', *European Journal of Political Research* 37, pp. 181-201.
- Downs, A. (1957), *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Franklin, M.N. (1996), 'Electoral participation', in: L. LeDuc, R.G. Niemi and P. Norris (eds.), *Comparing Democracies. Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*. London: Sage.
- Goul Andersen, J., and J. Hoff (2000), *Democracy and Citizenship in the Scandinavian Welfare State*. Hampshire: Macmillan (forthcoming).

- Kirchheimer, O. (1966), 'The transformation of Western European party system', in: J. LaPalombara and M. Weiner (eds.), *Political Parties and Political Development*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Key, V.O. Jr. (1958), *Politics, Parties and Pressure Groups*. New York: Crowell.
- Lijphart, A. (1997), 'Unequal participation: democracy's unresolved dilemma', *American Political Science Review* 91, pp. 1-14.
- Listhaug, O., and M. Wiberg (1995), 'Confidence in political and private institutions', in: H.-D. Klingemann and D. Fuchs (eds.), *Citizens and the State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, W.E. (1992), 'The puzzle transformed: explaining declining turnout', *Political Behavior* 14, pp. 1-43.
- Olsen, J.P., and H. Sætre (1980), *Aksjoner og demokrati*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.
- Pacek, A., and B. Radcliff (1955), 'Turnout and the vote for left-of-centre parties: a cross-national analysis', *British Journal of Political Science* 25, pp. 137-143.
- Rokkan, S., and H. Valen (1962), 'The mobilization of the periphery: data on turnout, party membership and candidate recruitment in Norway', *Acta Sociologica* 6, pp. 111-158. Also printed in S. Rokkan (1970), *Citizens, Elections, Parties*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Rose, R. (1997), 'Evaluating election turnout', in: *Voter Turnout from 1945 to 1997: a Global Report on Political Participation*, published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, IDEA, Stockholm.
- Rosenstone, S., and J.M. Hansen (1993), *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan.
- Sørensen, R. (1989), 'Det kommunale demokrati: En fortsettelse av rikspolitikken med andre midler?', *Norsk Statsvitenskapelig Tidsskrift* 4, pp. 267-292.
- Topf, R. (1995a), 'Electoral participation', in: H.-D. Klingemann and D. Fuchs (eds.), *Citizens and the State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Topf, R. (1995b), 'Beyond electoral participation', in: H.-D. Klingemann and D. Fuchs (eds.), *Citizens and the State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.