

Disaffected citizens in Croatia: Analysis of socio-demographic and media use influences on political participation



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ABSTRACT: Political scientists have noted a rising popular indifference to politics which is indicated with declining voter turnout in advanced democracies. Similar trends emerged in the radically changing “high choice” media environments. Studies in political communication (Blekesaune et al., 2012; Prior, 2005; Strömbäck et al., 2012) have shown that audiences are “tuning out” of the news and current affairs programs and that the gap between the politically active and inactive is widening. The aim of this paper is to analyze those who abstain from political participation in Croatia in terms of socio-demographic characteristics and media use. National media systems are important factors in explaining differences in news consumption and political knowledge. This analysis will serve as a case study of how a changing media environment interacts with political participation in a post-socialist political culture. In the analysis binary logistic regression will be used on the data from the online survey on media audiences.

KEYWORDS: participation, media use, entertainment, post-socialism, survey



INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation is seen as crucial for representative democracy by democratic theorists, although they differ in proposing the scope and nature of participation in range from minimalistic to maximalist dimensions of participation (Carpentier, 2011, p. 17). The levels of participation have been evaluated in relation to performances of democratic institutions, especially in the times of “crises of democracy”

Pharr and Putnam (2000) evaluated the state of democracy in the Western developed countries and found that after removing obstacles to liberal democracy and market economy, support for democracy is unquestioned, but there is growing “public unhappiness with government and institutions of representative democracy throughout the Trilateral world” (Pharr & Putman, 2000, p. 6). This public unhappiness is followed by the decline of political participation that

became an important focus of inquiry (Mair, 2006; Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Putnam, 2002; Norris, 2002). Mair (2006) noticed the consistent decline in voter turnout that started in the 1970s in OECD countries. Putnam (2002) found a trend of declining public engagement in political parties and union membership in established democracies, Norris (2002, p. 47) confirmed the decline in turnout on the wider range of older democracies and Gray and Caul (2000, p. 1093) found a consistent pattern of decline in voter turnout in “advanced industrial mass democracies” on both an aggregate and national level. The declining participation is apparently caused by the “mismatch between the supply and demand of the representative process” — political parties are unable to follow the changes in democratic politics as social and political circumstances profoundly changed since the establishment of the European’s party systems in the 1920s (Tworzecki, 2008, p. 49). As Mair (2006, p. 33) states — while the citizens are withdrawing from conventional politics into their private lives or to less conventional types of participation, parties retreat to institutions. This is worrying as there is a correlation between engaged civil society and effectiveness of government (Whiteley, in: Fox, 2013). Lipset (in: Gray & Caul, 2000) showed that lower turnout also means higher socio-demographic inequalities in participation, which has important implications for policy as elected officials are more oriented towards those that participate — more affluent and educated.

Political participation is a multidimensional concept hard to determine and measure — as forms of participation are changing, indicators of political participation should be widened as well. Political participation is defined in various ways by different researchers depending on the research goal and extends from the narrower to increasingly more extensive definitions. Verba and Nie in their pivotal research of political participation defined it as repertoires through “regular and legal channels through which citizens can express their preferences and apply pressure on the government to comply with those preferences” (Verba et al., 1978, p. 2) with which they narrowed the term to more institutional forms of participation. Fox (2013, p. 3) extensively outlined criteria for conceptualizations of political participation made so far, which range from the type of activity, its target, purpose, legality, possible outcomes. In more recent decades the definition of participation has broadened, and researchers more commonly distinguished between “traditional” and “protest” politics. As repertoires of “protest” politics have also become mainstream in Western democracies (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001), Norris suggests a distinction between “citizen oriented” and “cause oriented” repertoires of political action (Norris, 2003, pp. 3–4).

The decline in political participation is followed by significant changes of media environments, that are becoming “high-choice” media environments (Prior, 2005) with declining newspaper readership and news and current affairs audiences (Lauf, 2001; Blekesaune et al., 2012). Information environments influence political knowledge as more information correlates with higher knowledge and could also reduce the gaps between different social groups, but the effect is not the same for all media

and not equally distributed among all social groups. While newspaper media make “informationally rich get richer” (Price & Zaller, 1993, in: Jerit et al., 2006, p. 267) more political information in television benefits the less-educated in gaining political knowledge and political participation (Jerit et al., 2006; Shehata, 2010). As for the internet, its influence was questioned through mobilization and reinforcement theories. The former states that the internet mobilizes previously disadvantaged groups for political participation, as internet skills should have a positive cognitive effect for participation. The latter theory postulates that the internet engages the advantaged groups that were already engaged and that it is “a weapon of the strong” (Schlozman et al., 2010 in: Oser et al., 2012, p. 2). A study conducted by Oser et al. (2012) gave results that may partly answer the mobilization/reinforcement puzzle: the internet seems to diminish the age and gender gaps in participation, while it reproduces inequalities in education and income when it comes to political participation.

Media system characteristics offer a structural field in which some patterns of media use are more likely to develop than others (Blekesaune et al., 2012; Curran et al., 2009). Political information consumption is more likely to be higher and more equally distributed in public service programming with news in peak-time (Aalberg et al., 2010). Shehata (2010) proposed that a broad reach of newspapers and strong public service broadcasting in democratic corporatist countries may narrow the gaps between socioeconomic groups in gaining political information, which is less likely in liberal and polarized pluralist models. Blekesaune et al. (2012, p. 114) suggested that countries belonging to the democratic corporatist model media system may have the smallest proportion of disconnected citizens due to active media policies, while a politicized media market in polarized pluralist countries excludes those who are not very politically engaged and thus increases the proportion of disconnected citizens. As for the Eastern European countries, there is no clear consensus — Hallin and Mancini argue that their media systems share similarities with democratic corporatist countries, whereas other authors claim they should be considered as a separate group and that their short democratic history should increase the number of disconnected (Blekesaune et al., 2012, p. 114). Nordic countries really do have significantly smaller proportions of disconnected citizens than other media systems, while Southern and Eastern countries have higher proportions of citizens that do not use news media (Blekesaune et al., 2012).

Political participation could be explained by individual characteristics (like gender, or education) or by structural ones (the nature of political or media system). This article has two purposes: first, to determine the existing dimensions of political participation of online audiences in Croatia and second, to empirically analyze the effects of individual variables (socio-demographic and media use characteristics), on these dimensions of participation in a specific political and media system of post-socialist Croatia. This text will attempt to interpret the data with the help of known characteristics of the Croatian political and media system which will be described in the following text prior to the analysis.

youngest age groups from the 2003 research (Šalaj, 2007, p. 222). Social capital in Croatia has the highest correlation with membership in civil society organizations and educational achievement, which also points to strong socioeconomic determinants of social capital in Croatia. The Croatian political system is troubled with clientelism inherited from the one-party system in the socialist era that continued in the “authoritarian democratic” period during the 1990s. Although the perception of clientelism as a malfunction that should be abolished is rising, the problem still persists in Croatian society (Turković, 2006, in: Peruško, 2013). Rimac and Štulhofer (2003) found that Croatia is more similar to the EU average on the basis of post-materialist values, which they explain with higher economic standards and Western influences throughout the socialist period. On the other hand, general trust, trust in institutions and trust in social norms is lower than the EU average. Croatian citizens are also more critical towards democracy and government than the EU average. As for representation, analyses of political cleavages in Croatia found that they form mostly around ethnic, religious and cultural lines rather than on socioeconomic position in society. Dolenc (2013) demonstrates that there are growing socioeconomic inequalities and distinctive preferences in regard to economic policies in Croatia that are not represented in the existing party system, or in other words “the arena of representative democracy in Croatia indeed does not reflect existing structural cleavages in society” (Dolenc, 2013, p. 79). This could explain the growing abstention of Croatian citizens from the electoral process — as representative democracy is not shaped around winners and losers of transition, the analysis of the ones who abstain from participation should shed light on the causes for abstention.

Although comparative analyses have usually put Croatia into the same group with Eastern European post-communist countries, the Croatian media system is distinctive; Croatia is a state that had self-managed “market” socialism and had a different experience than the Eastern bloc countries (Peruško, 2013, p. 3). The Croatian media system had its own transition in the 1990s from centralized state-controlled, towards liberalization with opening of the market and new media regulation (Peruško & Čuvalo, in print). The Croatian media system from Peruško’s analysis (2013), contrary to the authors that put Croatia together with Eastern countries, describes the transition of the Croatian media system from authoritarian to Mediterranean or polarized pluralist (Peruško, 2013). More recent empirical research shows that post-socialist and Southern European countries cluster together in a group defined by lower quality of public television, lower newspaper circulation per capita, weaker journalistic culture of independence and stronger party and owner influence (Peruško et al., 2013).

Due to the more liberal media system in Yugoslavia, introduction of commercial television channels did not bring devastating consequences to public television audiences, as entertainment programs were widely available during the socialist era (Peruško & Čuvalo, in print). Peruško and Čuvalo (in print) on the basis of content

Factor analysis produced four factors or dimensions that are clearly determined by the amount of involvement, energy and motivation needed for the participation and closeness to institutional politics. With the higher involvement needed the percentage of citizens not involved in certain dimensions of participation is rising — these dimensions are listed in Table 2 in order from lower cost to higher cost activities and are labeled by the following titles: voting and signing petitions, activism, membership and volunteering for NGOs and citizen groups and membership and volunteering for political parties.⁵ Table 2 shows the percentage of “disaffected” citizens on each of these dimensions, that is, those who have never participated in a certain dimension of participation. There are the least disaffected citizens in the first dimension that requires the least time and resources — *voting and signing petitions*. Petitioning is usually referred to as an unconventional form of participation, but as “unconventional” forms of participation have become mainstream and normalized, it is not strange that it forms the same dimension with the more “institutional” form of participation. Voting and petitioning are also individual acts that do not require higher social capital, which makes entrance costs lower for the less-privileged and excluded. Although voting turnout is in decline, the media mobilization effects for this kind of participation are probably the strongest in comparison to other forms of participation and it is expected that political interest will be a weaker predictor for this kind of participation in comparison to others. The dimension *activism* is determined by its much higher requirements of involvement and its extra-institutionalism. This dimension could also be named protest activity, and it is expected that higher socioeconomic groups, especially better educated groups are overrepresented in these types of activities. Lower-status groups do not have organizational resources and are more often socially excluded; therefore they lack the most important resources for protest activity. Some authors claim that the institutionalization of protests has decreased opportunities for lower-status groups and made protests an elitist form of participation (Piven & Cloward, 1991, in: Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001, p. 466).

Volunteering and membership in NGOs and parties require the highest resources in terms of social capital and leisure time, as well as high motivation for involvement, but differ in relation to institutional politics. For this reason it is expected that education and income as indicators of socioeconomic status will be significant predictors for participation in both of these dimensions. As Norris (2002, p. 128) shows, gender and age are commonly associated with conventional participation, “because of the life experiences, community networks, and social skills that are

⁵ Dimension *voting and signing petitions* was formed by two variables (voter turnout and signing petitions), *activism* dimension is formed by four variables (writing letters to representatives, organizing petition signing, involvement in protests and strikes, organizing protests and strikes). *NGO membership and volunteering* and *party membership and volunteering* were each formed by two variables obvious from the dimension title. Political participation dimensions were turned into indexes and later dichomotized (on values 0=never participated on any indicator under this dimension and 1 = participated on at least one indicator in this dimension).

related to these background characteristics.” She also emphasizes the underrepresentation of women in party membership.

These four dimensions of political participation were used as dependent variables in binary logistic regression with seven predictors which will be explained in the section on independent variables. The method chosen for the regression analysis is *forward*, as it includes in the model only the statistically significant predictors.

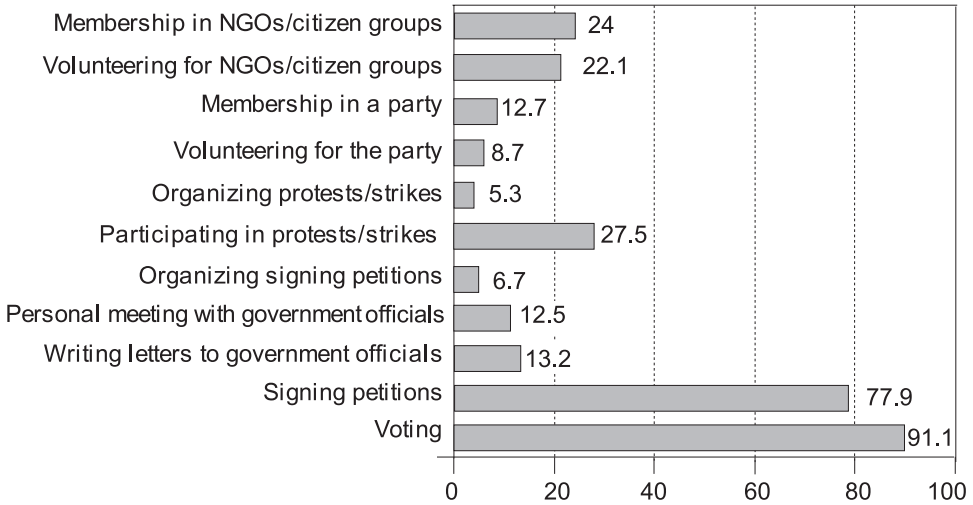


Figure 1. Citizens participating in individual indicators of political participation (per cent)

Source: research data.

Table 2. Dimensions of political participation

Dimension of participation	%	N
Voting and signing petitions	9.1	109
Activism	66.9	808
NGO membership and volunteering	75.5	912
Party membership and volunteering	85.1	1028

Source: research data.

Independent variables

The civic voluntarism model by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995, in: Oser et al., 2012, p. 92) demonstrated that the main factors that influence stratification in political participation are resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment into politics. Socio-demographic inequalities “lead to inequalities in other civic assets, such as skills, knowledge, experience, time, and money” which “makes some better placed than others to take advantage of the opportunities for participation” (Norris, 2002, p. 88).

The independent variables that will be used in this study to determine inequalities in participation are interest in politics, education, gender, age, residence size, income and relative entertainment preference.⁶ Relative entertainment preference is a variable constructed on the basis of Prior's research (2005) and presents the relative preference of entertainment over news and current affairs programs. This variable is constructed by dividing the number of entertainment genres being watched by total television programs watched (entertainment and news and current affairs genres). REP traces only preferences in television programs, but as television is the most used medium in Croatia, television is chosen as the most appropriate medium for measuring entertainment preference. Prior (2005) proved how changes in the media environment in the USA that offer greater media choice have an impact on lower news consumption and indirectly political participation. He suggested that "gaps based on socioeconomic status will be eclipsed by preference-based gaps once access to new media becomes cheaper and more widely available" (Prior, 2005, p. 578). Repeated research in a different media system, the democratic-corporatist one (Strömbäck et al., 2012), also confirmed that political interest becomes a more significant factor that determines news consumption over time. Since this article is dealing with different types of participation that require different modes of mobilization, it is expected that REP will be a significant predictor only for those types where media mobilization is more important than mobilization through social networks or "face to face" contact.

H1: REP will be a significant predictor in determining *voting and signing petitions and activism*

Research on political participation usually found a gender gap, with more men engaged in participation (Verba et al., 1978), but it seems that the gap in voter turnout is narrowing, diminishing or even reversing in advanced countries since the 1980s and 1990s (Norris, 2002, p. 90). The same is not true for post-communist countries where men participate significantly more than women (Norris, 2002, p. 91). Although previous research found a gender gap in internet use and use of the internet for political participation, a newer study (Oser et al., 2012) found that gender differences in online participation are becoming insignificant. As Norris (2002, p. 91) shows, women are less interested in conventional politics than men and less inclined to join unions, but there was no gender gap present in measuring protest politics (2002, p. 205).

⁶ Interest in politics is measured by the question, "In your opinion, how interested are you in politics?" with a response range from 1 (not at all interested) to 4 (very interested). The education level is measured by 8 educational levels (lowest level is unfinished primary education and the highest level is a PhD degree). Residence size variable consists of 4 categories (From big city to country village). Respondents were asked to determine their personal income level in relation to the Croatian average at the time research was conducted on a scale from 1 (a lot below average) to 5 (a lot above average). Age is an interval variable.

number of people around a greater number of issues (Ramsey, 2008, p. 4). For this reason, I would expect that smaller communities contribute more to participation in institutional politics, while urban contexts are beneficial for participating in extra-institutional politics.

H5: Citizens in larger communities will be more likely to participate in extra-institutional politics

H6: Citizens in smaller communities will be more likely to participate in institutional politics.

RESULTS

Table 3 presents logistic regression coefficients (B), standard errors (SE) and odds ratio (ExpB). Positive B coefficient shows that respondents with higher scores on the predictor variable are more likely to have participated in political activity. The value of odds ratio indicates the change in odds which results from a unit change in the predictor. If the value of odds ratio is higher than 1, the odds of an outcome occurring increase, and if the value is lower than 1, odds of the outcome occurring decreases with the increase in the predictor. For example, if political interest increases by one unit, citizens are two times more likely to have participated in the first dimension of participation.

Table 3. Regression model

	B (SE)	Exp (B)
<i>Voting and signing petitions</i>		
Constant	-1.733 (.821)	
Political interest	0.760 (0.204)***	2.139
Education	.416 (.165)**	1.516
Gender	-.682 (.349)	0.505
Age	.055 (.016) **	1.056
R ²	.045 (Cox and Snell); .146 (Nagelkerke)	
<i>Activism</i>		
Constant	-1.382 (.309)	
Political interest	.592 (.082)***	1.808
REP	-1.039 (.314)**	0.354
R ²	.093 (Cox and Snell); .127 (Nagelkerke)	
<i>NGO membership and volunteering</i>		
Constant	-2.423 (0.434)	
Political interest	.492 (0.087) ***	1.574
REP	-.981 (0.335)*	0.375
Education	0.177 (0.057)*	1.193
R ²	0.072 (Cox and Snell); 0.105 (Nagelkerke)	

	B (SE)	Exp (B)
<i>Party membership and volunteering</i>		
Constant	-4.991 (0.420)	
Political interest	0.954 (0.114)***	2.595
Residence size	0.411 (0.086)***	1.509
R ²	0.105 (Cox and Snell); 0.177 (Nagelkerke)	

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

Source: research data.

Significant predictors in determining the first dimension of participation, *voting and signing petitions*, are political interest, education and age and the values show that the more politically interested, educated and older citizens are, the more likely are they to have participated in the first dimension of participation. Political interest and REP have shown to be significant predictors for the dimension called *activism*. Citizens with a higher preference for entertainment are less likely to have participated in this kind of participation. Significant predictors for NGO membership and volunteering are political interest, REP and education. Those citizens that have a higher political interest and live in smaller communities are more likely to be members and volunteer for political parties. Political interest is logically a significant predictor for all forms of participation; however, it has a much stronger effect for this type of participation. Those who are more politically interested are 2.5 times more likely to participate in party membership and volunteering. Gender and income were proven not to be significant predictors in any form of participation.

Relative entertainment preference is proven to be a significant factor in determining *activism* and *NGO membership and volunteering*. The first hypothesis is confirmed only for one type of participation, *activism*, which suggests that dependence on media mobilization could not explain the effect of REP. Relative entertainment preference rather seems to account for extra-institutional forms of participation, which hints that REP performs as another dimension of political interest. The effect of political interest is lowest for these extra-institutional types of participation, so it seems that it is “supplemented” by REP. Extra-institutional political participation is more cause-oriented and therefore requires knowledge in specific political and social issues. As Prior suggested, large segments of citizens in a high choice environment “do not voluntarily watch, read or listen to political information” (2005, p. 588). They are more likely to be confronted with political information by political commercials. Those citizens who usually avoid news and political information will not be able to avoid political media campaigns during elections. This could be a probable explanation why “news seekers” are more likely to participate in extra-institutional types of activity, but not significantly in voting. However, additional research should be done to demonstrate if REP performs as a specific dimension of political interest.

As gender was proven not to be a significant predictor in determining any form of political participation examined in this study, it could be concluded that gender differences have been leveled in online audiences. Additional research should show if online audiences differ from the general population in this regard. It seems that this analysis confirmed a life-cycle effect for *voting and signing petitions*, since older age cohorts are more likely to have participated in this kind of activity, but age is not significant for other forms of participation. Income is not a significant factor for any form of participation, but could be proven significant in the general population. On the other hand, education is significant in predicting *voting and signing petitions* and *NGO membership and volunteering*, even among more educated online audiences. Residence size is a significant predictor only for *party membership and volunteering*, with residents in smaller communities more likely to participate in this kind of activity. Smaller residential size may be a source of residential stability which has a positive effect on civic participation (Kang & Kwak, 2003) and social capital with stronger ties.

CONCLUSIONS

As media choice increases, the knowledge gap increases as well, or in other words, the gap between “news seekers” and “news avoiders” (Strömbäck et al., 2012). After commercialization of the Croatian media system, the share of news program significantly dropped and now it is lower than in Western European countries. Combined with the high media concentration and characteristics of a polarized pluralist model such as lower newspaper circulation and high political parallelism, it is expected that the Croatian media environment will not function as a leveler, but that increasing media choice, and more importantly, increasing entertainment choice will not act favorably toward political participation.

Analysis of socio-demographic and media use influences on political participation of online audiences in Croatia found that relative entertainment preference is proven to be a significant factor in determining *activism* and *NGO membership and volunteering*, age in *voting and signing petitions*, education is significant in predicting *voting and signing petitions* and *NGO membership and volunteering*, and residence size for *party membership and volunteering*. Gender and income were proven not to be significant predictors in any form of participation. Additional research ought to be done as to how online audiences differ from the general population in political participation and media use.

It seems that media choice measured as relative entertainment preference is a significant predictor only for extra-institutional types of political activity which points that REP functions as a different dimension of political interest. Therefore, it could be argued that citizens who participate in extra-institutional form of politics have a qualitatively different dimension of political interest, but this finding is yet to be confirmed with further analysis. Extra-institutional political participation is

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