

**Kimmo Grönlund**  
Department of Political Science  
Åbo Akademi University  
FIN-20500 Åbo, Finland

Tel. +358 2 215 4586  
e-mail: [kimmo.gronlund@abo.fi](mailto:kimmo.gronlund@abo.fi)

**Maija Setälä**  
Department of Political Science  
University of Turku  
FIN-20014 Turku, Finland

Tel. +358 2 333 5955  
e-mail: [maija.setala@utu.fi](mailto:maija.setala@utu.fi)

## **Low Electoral Turnout: An Indication of a Legitimacy Deficit?**

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### **1. Introduction**

Legitimacy can be defined as general acceptance of the regime among the citizens. Legitimacy is a source of obligation to comply with the norms set by governments, and is thus an alternative to coercion as a basis of authority (cf. Miller 1974). Although there are various forms of legitimacy, this paper focuses on *democratic legitimacy*. Democratic legitimacy refers to citizens’ commitment to the particular principles characteristic to democratic decision-making, and citizens’ perceptions on the extent to which decision-making actually follows these principles. Democratic legitimacy requires the approval of a system allowing *popular influence and control* over decision-making, especially the opportunity to change the government in elections. The concept of democratic legitimacy has similarities with Easton’s (1975) conception of diffuse support, which refers to support to the regime principles, rather than support to those in power.

Since the early 1980s, survey results have shown a decrease of trust in governmental institutions in advanced democracies (Norris 1999). More particularly, there are surveys showing the decline of trust especially in *democratic* institutions, such as parliaments (Miller & Listhaug 1999). *Electoral turnout*, on the other hand, is often seen as voters’ manifestation

of legitimacy: “National elections are powerful symbols of the democratic legitimacy of a nation-state” (Topf 1995, 27). At the same time as distrust in governmental institutions and actors has grown, mature democracies have witnessed a decline in turnout at parliamentary elections (Idea 2004). The aim of this paper is to study whether there is a causal relationship between democratic legitimacy and electoral turnout. Can a low turnout be interpreted as an indication of a deficit of democratic legitimacy in advanced democracies?

This question is answered in two phases. First, the concept of democratic legitimacy and its empirical operationalisations are discussed. Especially the relationship between democratic legitimacy and different forms of political trust and satisfaction are clarified theoretically. Secondly, the aspects of democratic legitimacy are analysed empirically in relation to voting. Based on our theoretical analysis, we use the measurements of trust in democratic institutions and processes separately from the measurements of trust in politicians and satisfaction with the government. *Our empirically testable hypothesis is that electoral turnout depends primarily on trust in democratic institutions and processes, whereas the linkage from trust in politicians as well as satisfaction with the government’s performance to turnout is expected to be less obvious.* There are some studies showing no or weak relationship between political trust and turnout (e.g. Citrin 1974). We argue that these results are based on measurements of political trust that entail too many elements, typically satisfaction with governmental performance. A similar empirical approach to ours has been adopted, for example by Cox (2003), who studied how trust in the European Parliament and trust in national parliaments affect turnout in respective elections.

The paper is organised as follows. The second part of the paper analyses the theoretical relationship between political trust and legitimacy on the basis of democratic theory. It is argued that certain types of political trust, especially trust in democratic institutions, can be used as a proxy for democratic legitimacy. The third part of the paper analyses the empirical relationship between measurements of trust and satisfaction and voting. The empirical data consist of the first round of the European Social Survey conducted in 21 different countries. The empirical analysis is carried out through comparisons between nations on the one hand, and analyses at the individual level on the other hand. In the final section, the findings are related to the earlier discussion on the legitimacy of democratic systems.

## 2. Democratic Legitimacy and Political Trust

### Can there be such a thing as trust in democratic institutions?

Our paper focuses on democratic legitimacy defined in *procedural* terms. Trust and support for democratic processes and institutions is therefore kept distinct from the support for political actors. Our view is that the lack of trust in democratic actors does not automatically mean that democratic processes and institutions suffer from the lack of legitimacy. In fact, democracy is a specific system in the sense that it allows different forms of citizens' *control* over decision-makers, and therefore the relationship between citizens and decision-makers does not need to be based merely on trust. Distrust towards democratically elected decision-makers and, to some extent, democratic institutions, can be regarded as a sign of a healthy democracy. Democracy requires attentive citizens who evaluate the performance of political actors and institutions and hold them accountable in elections.

Trust in governmental institutions, such as governments, parliaments, the legal system, the police, the bureaucracy and the military, are regularly measured in surveys. Is it meaningful, more theoretically speaking, to talk about trust in institutions? Trust can be defined as an agent's subjective probability that other agent's actions will not be detrimental (cf. Gambetta 2000). Trust requires that the agent who trusts will have sufficient information on the other agent's trustworthiness. Trust also requires that the one trusted has some degree of freedom of action: trust and control are mutually exclusive. The definition of trust seems to entail the view that trust is a characteristic of interpersonal relationships. There is, however, another view according to which it is meaningful to talk about trust in institutions. Following Warren (1999, 350), trust in institutions requires that there is a shared knowledge on the principles that constitute an institution, that these principles are accepted, and that the institutions actually work according to these principles.

In Warren's interpretation, trust in governmental institutions is dependent on the legitimacy of the principles constituting them, and democratic control and discourse maintains the connection between people's values and the principles constituting institutions. From this perspective, maintaining trust in governmental institutions depends on democratic processes that allow revising the institutional principles in accordance with the opinions prevailing in the society. Furthermore, Warren (1999, 348-9) argues that *institutional actors* – e.g.

parliamentarians, policemen, judges and civil servants – can be trusted as far as: i) the normative idea of the institution is legitimate; and ii) there are guarantees (e.g. incentive structures) that institutional actors act according to these norms. When defined in this way, it is likely that trust in institutional actors and institutions are closely correlated. However, because the relationship between citizens and institutional actors can be an interpersonal relationship, there may be other than institutional bases of trust, such as familiarity and personal characteristics.

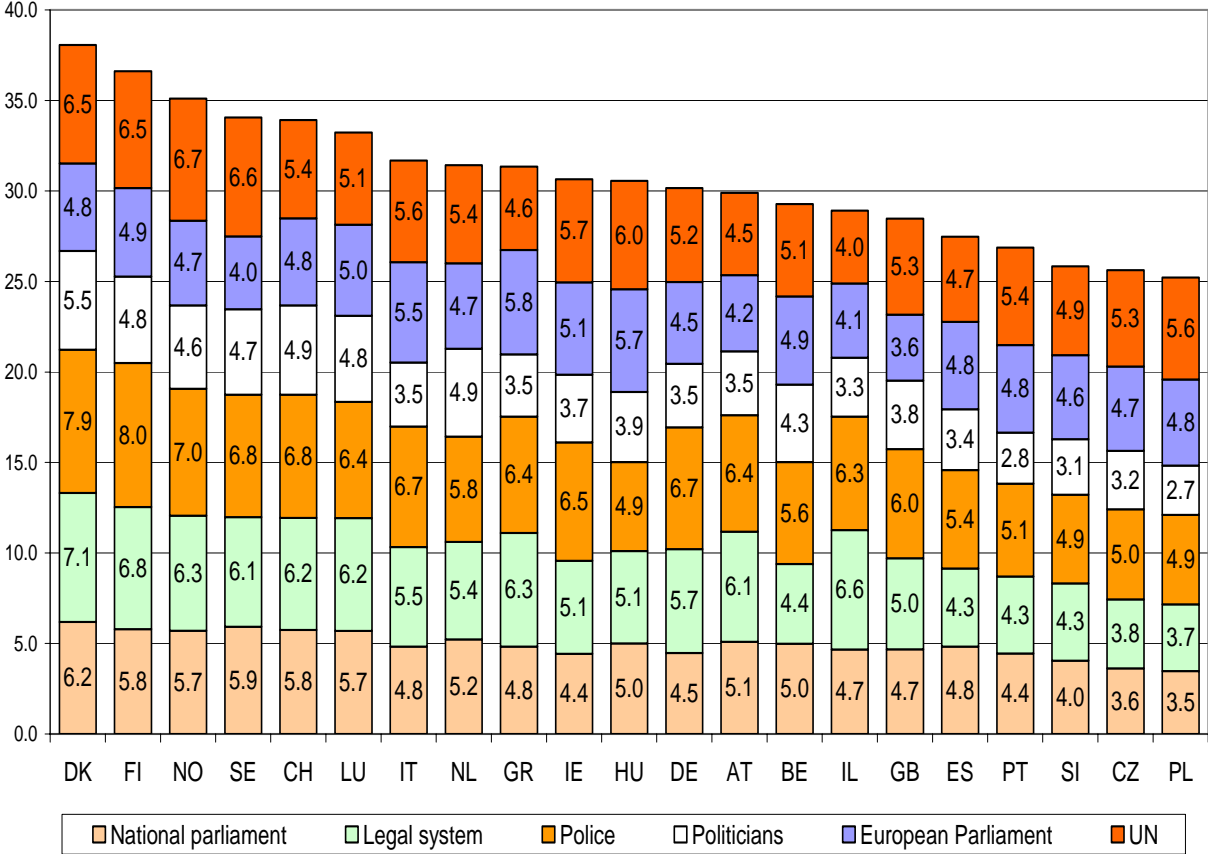
Democratic institutions have a specific mediating role, but it may be asked in which sense democratic institutions themselves can be trusted. It seems that the bases of trust are quite different as far as democratic and implementation institutions are concerned. Democratic institutions can be characterized by contest, that is, conflicts between different values and goals. Hence, there is not necessarily a normative consensus, for example, on the role of the elected representatives (Pitkin 1967). There is no straightforward answer to the question of what kind of behaviour by a member of parliament could be characterized as trustworthy (Warren 1999, 350). The norms defining the functions of the parliament are not as straightforward as the ones defining the role of the police, for example. For this reason, it remains questionable whether the conditions on trust can be fulfilled when talking about democratic institutions.

Following Warren's view, the acceptance of the democratic principles, such as participation, autonomy, political equality and toleration, can be regarded as a *precondition* for that we can meaningfully talk about trust in democratic institutions. Moreover, trust in democratic institutions requires that decision-making actually happens according to the widely endorsed democratic principles. Therefore, the definitions of democratic legitimacy and trust in democratic institutions are very similar, and trust in democratic institutions measured in surveys can be regarded as a proxy for democratic legitimacy.

Because democratic institutions are characterized by contest, the basis of trust may be particularly weak as far as democratic institutions and actors are concerned. This view is confirmed by survey results that show lower levels of trust in democratic, representative institutions and actors than in the governmental institutions involved in implementation or production of services. Figure 1 compares aggregated trust in six public institutions in the 21 countries that are included in the European Social Survey. The institutions and actors in

whom trust was measured are the national parliament, the legal system, the police, politicians, the European Parliament and the United Nations. The countries are sorted according to the mean sum of total trust in these public institutions. Trust was measured on a scale from 0 to 10, where zero indicates “no trust all” and ten “complete trust”.

Figure 1. Trust in public institutions in 21 countries.



The highest average trust in public institutions is shown among the Danes, followed by the Finns. Even in Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Luxembourg citizens have a high level of overall trust in the measured six institutions. Least trust is measured in Poland and the Czech Republic. Even in Slovenia, Portugal and Spain overall trust levels are low. The mean trust in the institutions in the whole measured area is as follows: 4.7 (Parliament), 5.2 (Legal system), 6.1 (Police), 3.6 (Politicians), 4.7 (European Parliament) and 5.4 (UN).<sup>i</sup>

Of the individual institutions, Europeans seem to have most trust most in implementation institutions. The police is considered the most trustworthy, although there is a clear variation

across countries and trust in the police is highest in the old European democracies. After the police, the UN and the legal system are trusted most. Democratic institutions and actors are found the least trustworthy. National parliaments and the European Parliament are trusted to the same extent. Politicians are considered the least trustworthy among the Europeans. It should be noted, however, that even trust in the national parliament and politicians varies across countries. Most trust in the national parliament show citizens in the Nordic countries, Switzerland and Luxembourg. The lowest trust is measured in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Ireland and Germany. Trust in politicians follows mainly the same national pattern as trust in the parliament, but also in Israel, Italy, Greece and Austria trust in politicians is low.

### **Components of democratic legitimacy**

On the basis of Easton's (1975) three-fold classification, Norris (1999) distinguishes between five aspects of political support, that is, support for political community, regime principles, regime performance, regime institutions and political actors. Our primary interest is in the support for regime principles and institutions which closely correspond to the concept of democratic legitimacy defined earlier. Regime performance and political actors are of secondary interest, and they are dealt with in relation to democratic legitimacy.

A precondition for trust in democratic institutions is that they function in according to democratic principles that are widely endorsed. On the basis of survey data, Norris (1999, 10-12) concludes that there are continuously high levels of support to the democratic principles in Western societies. Moreover, there seems to be a consensus that democracy is the best form of government. The legitimacy of democratic principles can be undermined by the perception that the institutions based on them cannot tackle those problems requiring collective solutions. Moreover, there may be different interpretations of what these democratic principles are exactly or there may conflicts between these principles.

The overall satisfaction with the democratic process may be measured by the questions of the type "are you satisfied with the way in which democracy is functioning in your country?" Norris (1999) points out that cross-national comparisons show varied levels of satisfaction with how democracy functions in practice. There are various interpretations of the overall dissatisfaction with democratic systems. Dissatisfaction with how democratic system works

may grow because democratic institutions do not actually function according to democratic principles, or because the powers of democratic institutions are undermined by other decision-making forums. However, the answers to the above-mentioned question may not be based only on the evaluations on the state of democracy, but also on the satisfaction with regime performance, i.e. outputs (cf. Lockerbie 1993; Miller & Listhaug 1999, 205; Linde & Ekman 2003).

In addition to trust in the democratic system as a whole, one may talk about trust in particular democratic institutions, such as parliaments and elected governments. Based on survey results, Norris (1999) concludes that in Western democracies there is a declining trend in trust in governmental institutions, including democratic, representative institutions. Distrust towards representative institutions may be explained by the fact that institutions are not sufficiently organized according to democratic principles, or that people are dissatisfied with the way in which institutions work in practice. Warren (1999, 350) also points out that distrust in democratic institutions may sometimes be explained by the lack of information. If the information on the performance of institutions is complex or too limited, citizens may withhold trust.

It seems likely that overall satisfaction with the democratic system correlates strongly with trust in democratic institutions. Wide-spread political corruption, for example, can be expected to decrease both of these. It is possible, however, that for example political scandals temporarily undermine trust in a particular democratic institution, but at the same time overall satisfaction with democratic system does not suffer. It is also possible that one is satisfied with the way in which a particular representative institution works, but at the same time is dissatisfied with overall condition of the democratic system. This may be due to the perception that, although democratic institutions seem to work according to generally acceptable norms and principles, real decision-making power has moved away from democratic bodies.

Trust in democratic institutions can further be distinguished from trust in political actors, such as politicians, political parties and governments. Norris (1999) concludes that there is a mixed trend in the trust in political actors. When Warren's view of trust in institutional actors is applied to representative actors, one could argue that they are trusted as far as they act according to the various norms and expectations defining the role of the representatives, e.g.

responsiveness, reliability and moderation. It is, however, worth pointing out again that there are competing views of the role of the representative. Furthermore, distrust in political actors belongs to a healthy democracy, and therefore trust in representatives is not necessarily an essential part of democratic legitimacy (Warren 1999, 350). Moreover, trust in *persons* acting within an institution is a form of interpersonal trust. For this reason, citizens may evaluate the trustworthiness of representatives by other standards than institutional norms, e.g. their personal characteristics.

To sum up the theoretical discussion, democratic legitimacy requires an agreement with the principles constituting the democratic regime. Assuming that such an agreement exists, trust in democratic institutions may be regarded as the most reliable indicator of democratic legitimacy. Satisfaction with how the democratic system works is also a measure of democratic legitimacy, but survey answers to this type of question may reflect, not only the satisfaction with democratic process, but the satisfaction with government performance. Trust in politicians is not necessarily a component of democratic legitimacy, although there may be strong empirical relationship between trust in institutions and actors. If trust in the parliamentarians is undermined, trust in the parliament is also likely to decrease and vice versa (cf. Hetherington 1998). Satisfaction with the performance of a particular government is not a component of democratic legitimacy. Citizens may consider the power of a particular government as legitimate regardless of whether they are satisfied with it or not.

### **3. The empirical relationship between democratic legitimacy and turnout**

In this section, the relationship between the elements of democratic legitimacy and non-voting is analysed empirically. On the basis of theoretical analysis, measures of democratic legitimacy, i.e. trust in democratic institutions (parliament) and satisfaction with how democracy works, are contrasted with the measures of trust in politicians and satisfaction with the performance of the current government. Our hypothesis is that measures of democratic legitimacy affect the probability of turning out to vote, whereas trust in political actors and satisfaction with the government may influence voters' choice but may not have a straightforward connection with turnout. The empirical evidence consists of data from the European Social Survey (ESS), where over 40,000 respondents from 21 European countries were interviewed in the autumn of 2002 and the beginning of 2003.



The survey questions of the levels of trust in the national parliament and the satisfaction with how democracy works in one's country are considered to measure democratic legitimacy. It is likely that citizens' perceptions of democratic institutions and the democratic system influence their willingness to vote. If there is distrust in parliaments and dissatisfaction with the democratic system, voting in elections may not be regarded as a meaningful way to influence politics. Abstention may also reflect the unwillingness to express tacit support for the system. Theoretically speaking, trust in politicians and satisfaction with how the government is doing its job should not affect turnout. Total disillusionment with all politicians may result in non-voting, but distrust in politicians currently in power may actually increase turnout. From the democratic-theoretical perspective, politicians, parties and governments are elements that should be influenced and even changed through democratic processes.

When it comes to methodological issues, survey-based empirical research on legitimacy often operates with long-standing questions. The use of traditional indicators, instead of trying to improve the tools based on previous findings, often signals measurement-driven research (Weatherford 1992, 151). In many sub-fields of social science, survey-researchers have to choose either a design based on comparable time-series or adjustments of questions based on previous empirical findings and theory improvements. Since the analysis in the present paper is based on secondary data, we are not able to operationalise freely the measurement of democratic legitimacy. The ESS is based on carefully monitored representative samples and the interviews have been conducted face-to-face. Therefore, what we might lose in validity, we gain in reliability.

As opposed to the concept of legitimacy that involves problems of empirical operationalisation, the dependent variable of turning out to vote is less problematic. Nevertheless, electoral turnout can have different implications in different contexts. There are differences in the process of voting in democratic and authoritarian or totalitarian states. In the former turning out to vote is a genuinely voluntary effort (except in countries with compulsory voting), whereas in the latter voting is often mandatory and does not even reflect the voters' genuine preferences since true electoral competition between parties is prohibited. In unstable democracies or democratizing countries, however, electoral participation might be genuine but the process can involve violent deaths, imprisonments and many forms of corruption or electoral fraud (Topf 1995, 28-29). Therefore, the importance of turnout differs

from system to system, largely based on the level of democracy in the country. The sample of countries in the ESS guarantees comparability in terms of democracy. The countries listed in table 1, are all contemporary democracies according to Freedom House classifications. It is, however, probable that turning out to vote is dependent on the nation's democratic tradition. Therefore, a dichotomous classification of old and new democracies is included in the table.

**Table 1.** The Countries from which respondents are included in the study.

Country	Old vs. New democracy	Electoral system	Type of electoral system	Compulsory voting	N
Austria	Old	PR	P	No	2257
Belgium	Old	PR	P	Strict	1899
Czech Republic	New	PR	P	No	1360
Denmark	Old	PR	P	No	1506
Finland	Old	PR	P	No	2000
Germany	Old/New	MMP	P	No	2919
Greece	Old	PR	P	Weak	2566
Hungary	New	MMM	M	No	1685
Ireland	Old	STV	P	No	2046
Israel	Old	PR	P	No	2499
Italy	Old	MMP	P	Weak	1207
Luxembourg	Old	PR	P	Strict	1552
Netherlands	Old	PR	P	Not enforced	2364
Norway	Old	PR	P	No	2036
Poland	New	PR	P	No	2110
Portugal	Old	PR	P	No	1511
Slovenia	New	PR	P	No	1519
Spain	Old	PR	P	No	1729
Sweden	Old	PR	P	No	1999
Switzerland	Old	PR	P	No #	2039
United Kingdom	Old	SMP	M	No	2052

Old democracies: Free according to Freedom House at least as of 1980.

Electoral systems: SMP (Single Member Plurality), MMM (Mixed Member Majoritarian),

MMP (Mixed Member Proportional) PR (Proportional Representation)

Type of electoral system: M = majoritarian, P = proportional.

# Strict in one canton

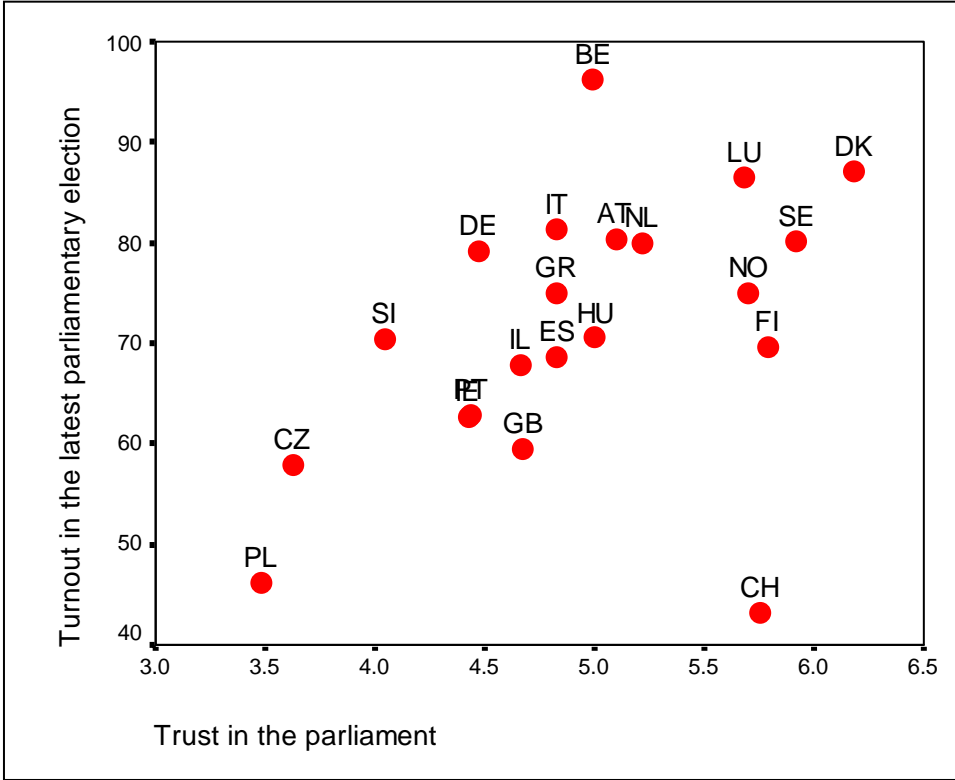
Sources: Freedom House, Idea, Ace, IPU

Table 1 lists, the dummy measure of the longevity democracy in each country, as well as the electoral system and the existence of compulsory voting. The effect of the electoral system on turnout has been established in a comparison of voting in all democracies. The main difference in turnout is between proportional systems, including corrective mixed systems, and all other systems (Blais & Dobrzynska 1998, 248). Therefore, the electoral system is dichotomised and controlled for. Compulsory voting has naturally a powerful effect on

turnout. Especially strictly enforced compulsory voting makes abstention non-optional.<sup>ii</sup> Among the countries of the ESS, Belgium and Luxembourg enforce compulsory voting strictly, whereas compulsory voting is not as strictly sanctioned in Greece and Italy. Therefore, when we analyse the effects of democratic legitimacy on voting at the individual level, Belgium and Luxembourg will be excluded, whereas Greece and Italy will be included. However, voters in the latter two will, be contextualised through a “not strictly enforced compulsory voting”-dummy.

Most of the empirical analysis is carried out at the individual level. Initially, however, we present aggregated measures of trust and satisfaction at a country level, and compare their effects on turnout. Trust in parliament and politicians, as well satisfaction with the way democracy works and satisfaction with the way the government is doing its job are aggregated means per country, whereas turnout is genuine hard data from the latest parliamentary election.<sup>iii</sup> Trust in the national parliament and turnout is presented as a scatter diagram in figure 2.

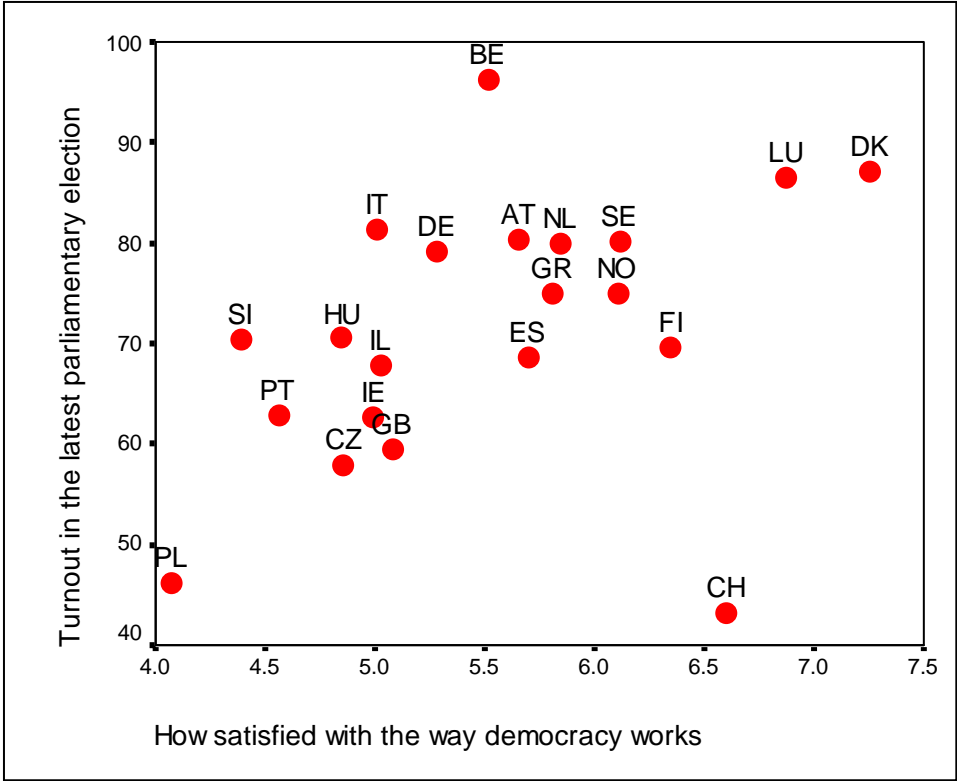
**Figure 2.** Trust in the parliament and turnout in 21 countries.



The association between aggregated trust in the parliament and turnout is strong indeed. There are two clear outliers – Belgium, where turnout is higher than a linear regression line would predict, and Switzerland, where turnout is lower. The Belgian case is explained by the strictly enforced compulsory voting. In Switzerland turnout has been traditionally low. Because of the consensual composition of the Swiss government and the extensive use of referendums, the Swiss voters might not consider parliamentary elections equally important as mechanisms for influence and control as voters elsewhere in Europe (c.f. Trechsel & Kriesi 1996).

Satisfaction with the way democracy works is scattered against turnout in figure 3. Even though the countries are more spread out than in figure 2, there is a linear correlation with Belgium and Switzerland as the clearest outliers.

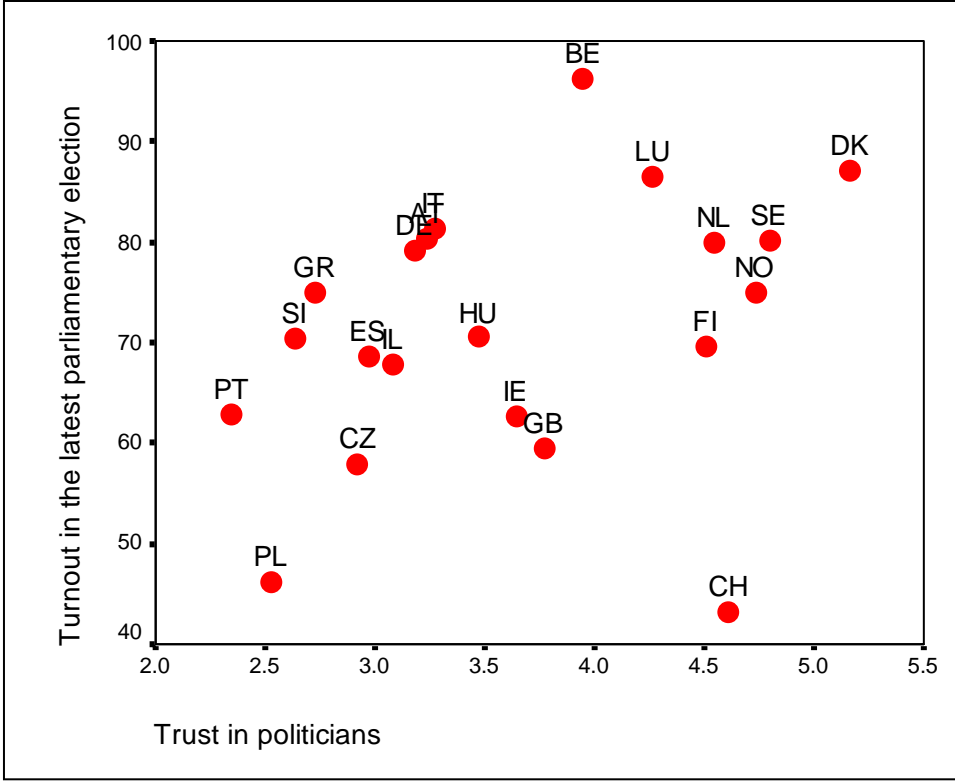
**Figure 3.** Satisfaction with democracy and turnout in 21 countries.



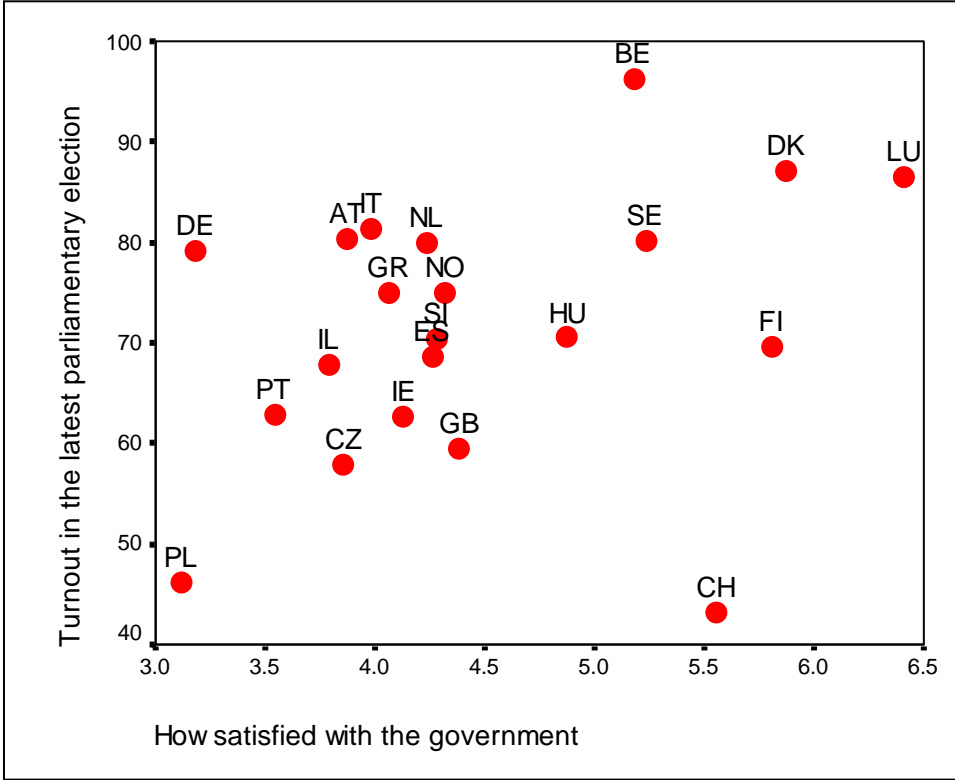
In figure 4 the independent variable is trust in politicians and the previous pattern prevails. The linear association between trust and turnout is less strong than in figures 2 and 3, but it is clearly visible. Even the most obvious outliers are the same. In the last scatter diagram, presented in figure 5, satisfaction with the way the government is doing its job is measured against turnout. As expected, the countries are more dispersed than in any of the previous

models. This reflects the fact that parties in government are accountable at elections and voters who dislike the government's policies are also inclined to vote.

**Figure 4.** Trust in politicians and turnout in 21 countries.



**Figure 5.** Satisfaction with the government and turnout in 21 countries.



The diagrams above indicate that all of the used trust and satisfaction measures affect turnout at the national level. The bivariate correlations are high at the aggregate level. In order to infer how the relationship works at the micro level, we will now turn to individuals. In the following analyses, voters in Belgium and Luxembourg are excluded due to the countries' strict enforcement of compulsory voting. Moving from bivariate associations towards a multivariate approach, the collinearity of the supposed independent variables might be an issue. Although trust in the parliament and politicians are theoretically distinct, as well as satisfaction with government and the democratic process, we must control that citizens are able to distinguish between them in practice. In table 2, bivariate correlation coefficients are presented (Spearman's  $r$ ) in order to see how independent the items are of each other.

**Table 2.** Correlations for the items of trust and satisfaction. Spearman's rho.

		Trust in the parliament	Trust in politicians	Satisfaction with the way democracy works
Satisfaction with the government	r	<b>0.50</b>	<b>0.52</b>	<b>0.55</b>
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	35660	35987	35537
Satisfaction with the way democracy works	r	<b>0.49</b>	<b>0.47</b>	
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	
	N	35463	35773	
Trust in politicians	r	<b>0.68</b>		
	Sig.	0.000		
	N	36289		

There is a positive relationship between the items. All coefficients are statistically significant but only one association flags a possible problem of collinearity in a multivariate analysis, that between trust in the parliament and in politicians. The correlation coefficient is .68. This might reflect the fact that trust was measured as items in the same question. In order to avoid multicollinearity, we have added another dimension to trust in politicians. A question: "Do you think that politicians in general care what people like you think?" was added as a measure of responsiveness.<sup>iv</sup> Logically, even the new indicator is associated with trust in the parliament, but the coefficient is somewhat lower (.615) and decreases the statistical risk of multicollinearity. From now on, pure trust in politicians is replaced by the new variable which incorporates responsiveness at the general level.

At the individual level, we start with a simple cross tabulation of the hypothetically most important items of democratic legitimacy. Citizens are dichotomised according to their trust in the parliament and their satisfaction with the democratic process. Trust and satisfaction exist if the respondent has chosen a value of 6 to 10 on the corresponding scale. In a similar manner, trust and satisfaction are coded as absent if the respondent has chosen values 4 to 0 on the scale. Those who have chosen the middle position 5 are excluded in the cross tabulations. In table 3 the two items are combined and the mean turnout level within each group is analysed.

**Table 3.** Turnout according to trust in parliament and satisfaction with democracy.

		Parliament	
		Yes	No
Democratic process	Yes	<b>87.7</b> (10 352)	<b>79.5</b> (3 615)
	No	<b>85.1</b> (1 802)	<b>73.2</b> (6 832)

ANOVA  
 F = 200.4  
 p=.000  
 All pairwise differences are significant at the .05 level.

The total number of respondents in each group within parentheses.

As anticipated, turnout (87.7 per cent) is highest among the voters who trust in the parliament and are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. This is followed by the group of voters who trust in the parliament but are not satisfied with democracy.<sup>v</sup> This group is the smallest of the four. The third highest turnout is among the group of voters who are satisfied with the democratic process but do not have trust in the parliament. Voters who lack trust and are dissatisfied have the lowest turnout, as expected. Their turnout is almost 15 percentage points lower than in the highest group. The overall difference in turnout among the groups was tested with an analysis of variance. Post hoc-tests confirm that even the pairwise differences are significant – all except the difference between the most and the second most active groups – were even significant at the .000 -level. Trust in the most important institution of representative democracy, the parliament, and satisfaction with democracy seem to strengthen the assumption that democratic legitimacy affects citizens’ propensity to vote. In order to broaden the understanding, we bring in the remaining two aspects of trust and

satisfaction. Table 4 demonstrates how turnout varies when trust in politicians and satisfaction with the current government are added to the cross tabulation.

**Table 4.** Turnout among 16 groups of voters according to trust and satisfaction.

Satisfaction with the Democratic process				Trust in the Parliament			
				Yes		No	
				Politicians		Politicians	
				Yes	No	Yes	No
Yes	the Government	Yes	<b>89.6</b> (2716)	<b>84.4</b> (1145)	<b>81.2</b> (57)	<b>78.2</b> (737)	
		No	<b>95.3</b> (588)	<b>85.3</b> (737)	<b>88.5</b> (59)	<b>79.5</b> (1584)	
No	the Government	Yes	<b>87.0</b> (70)	<b>85.0</b> (119)	<b>82.6</b> (10)	<b>79.6</b> (205)	
		No	<b>90.5</b> (160)	<b>82.9</b> (679)	<b>79.1</b> (62)	<b>72.8</b> (5353)	

The total number of respondents in each group within parentheses.

The 16-fold in table 4 does not result in as clear conclusions as the four-fold in table 3 but also here we have some visible differences. We have not tested the differences statistically, due to the reason that some of the groups of voters are very small. Turnout is the highest among the voters who trust in the parliament and the politicians, are satisfied with democracy but not with the government. In practice all of these voters, who almost certainly are supporters of the opposition, turn out to vote. The members of this small group seem to endorse the principles of the democratic system and channel their dissatisfaction in electoral participation. Most of the other groups are also small, but the largest group, those who are distrustful and dissatisfied, have also the lowest turnout. Alienation from the democratic system and dissatisfaction with the government performance seem therefore to lead to passivity at elections. It is interesting to notice that there is a rather large group of citizens (1584) who do not trust the parliament or the politicians, nor are they satisfied with the government. Still, they are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. These citizens may feel that the fundamental principles of democracy are not violated, even though they have no trust in the current actors. Furthermore, these people may see the parliament as a sum of its actors, politicians and parties.



So far, we have been able to demonstrate that the items of trust and satisfaction have some effects on turnout at aggregate level as well as at the individual level. In order to establish how these items are related to other known factors that explain the turnout, we bring in variables that have been found to explain voting in previous studies at the individual level (e.g. Topf 1995, Blais 2000, Norris 2002, Grönlund 2003, Norris 2004). Political knowledge is a powerful variable whose effect on voting has been analysed in recent years (Milner 2002, Grönlund 2003). Unfortunately, there is no genuine objective measure of knowledge in the ESS. Therefore, a comparable measure cannot be included. We have, however, created a variable that seeks to combine knowledge with interest, another often used independent variable behind voting. Exploiting pure interest places the independent variable suspiciously close to the dependent variable, participation. Therefore, we think, a variable which measures how much the respondents follow news or programmes about politics and current affairs. An arithmetic mean per respondent was calculated based on three media channels: TV, radio and newspapers. This variable is used as a proxy for political interest and knowledge. Table 5 presents three initial models of the predictors of voting, followed by a fourth, and final, model.

The first model includes only the four items on trust and satisfaction. In the second model, variables at the micro level are controlled for, whereas the third model even includes contextual data at the macro level. When we only enter the items of trust and satisfaction, all of them are statistically significant as predictors of voting. The most important of them are trust in the parliament and trust in politicians, in that order. Both of them increase the probability of voting, as does satisfaction with democracy. Satisfaction with the current government tends to decrease the probability of voting slightly, which is a logical and perhaps even desirable result from a democratic perspective. It indicates that voters, who are dissatisfied with the policies of the current regime, tend to vote more frequently than the ones that are content. In model 2, where the control variables at the individual level are entered, the model has a clearly better fit than the first one. The Nagelkerke pseudo R-squared increases from .4 to .12, and the model Chi-squared increases as well. All of the items of trust and satisfaction prevail in the new model, but the most important predictor of voting is age, followed by education. Trust in parliament is the third most important independent variable behind turning out to vote. Trust in politicians is slightly more important than the amount of time spent on following politics and current affairs via media. Gender has no effect on the probability of voting.

**Table 5.** The genuine effect of legitimacy items on voting in 19 countries. Logistic regression.

Dependent variable: voting (no=0, yes=1)	Legitimacy only			Individual model			Contextual model			Final model		
	B	Wald	p	B	Wald	p	B	Wald	p	B	Wald	p
<b>Trust in parliament</b>	0.09	134	***	0.09	121	***	0.08	92	***	<b>0.08</b>	<b>93</b>	***
<b>Satisf. with democracy</b>	0.05	40	***	0.04	30	***	0.03	13	***	<b>0.03</b>	<b>14</b>	***
<b>Trust in politicians</b>	0.10	124	***	0.09	80	***	0.10	114	***	<b>0.10</b>	<b>112</b>	***
<b>Satisf. with governm.</b>	-0.04	33	***	-0.05	33	***	-0.04	24	***	<b>-0.04</b>	<b>26</b>	***
<i>age/10</i>				0.32	1005	***	0.32	1006	***	<b>0.32</b>	<b>1097</b>	***
<i>education</i>				0.13	369	***	0.15	435	***	<b>0.15</b>	<b>444</b>	***
<i>male</i> $\alpha$				0.02	0		0.04	2				
<i>works</i> $\alpha$				0.36	52	***	0.45	83	***	<b>0.45</b>	<b>83</b>	***
<i>student</i> $\alpha$				-0.23	5	*	-0.13	2				
<i>retired</i> $\alpha$				-0.05	0		0.07	0				
<i>follows pol. via media</i>				0.10	73	***	0.10	81	***	<b>0.10</b>	<b>84</b>	***
<i>compulsory voting</i> $\alpha$							1.07	279	***	<b>1.07</b>	<b>286</b>	***
<i>majorit. elect. syst.</i> $\alpha$							-0.10	4	*			
<i>new democracy</i> $\alpha$							-0.14	15	***	<b>-0.15</b>	<b>18</b>	***
<i>Constant</i>	0.62	295	***	-1.62	528	***	-1.76	551	***	<b>-1.77</b>	<b>708</b>	***
N	33	117		32	233		32	233		<b>32</b>	<b>235</b>	
Missing cases in percent	12.8			13.8			13.8			<b>13.8</b>		
Percent correctly predicted	81.0			81.6			81.7			<b>81.8</b>		
Model Chi-sq.	840	***		2516	***		2927	***		<b>2919</b>	***	
-2 Log likelihood	30518			28689	***		27629			<b>28286</b>		
Nagelkerke R Sq.	0.04			0.12			0.14			<b>0.14</b>		

Significant \* at the .05-level, \*\* at the .01-level, \*\*\* at the .001-level.

The independent variables were coded into a scale from 0 to 10; except for dummy variables, marked with  $\alpha$ .

The third model brings in contextual control variables and the fit of the model improves a little. Of the new variables it is especially compulsory voting (i.e. Greece and Italy) that increases the probability of voting. The final model combines parsimonious variables from the previous models and the fit of the model does not increase any longer. The pseudo R-squared is .14, and the model Chi-squared approaches 3000. The model predicts correctly 81.8 of voting, but in practice it over predicts voting and under predicts abstaining (only 7.2 per cent of the abstainers are correctly predicted by the model). The most important independent variables are age, education and compulsory voting, which all increase the probability of voting. Trust in politicians is in the final model slightly more important than trust in the parliament – both of them increase the probability of voting. The effect of satisfaction with democracy is reduced in the final model. Satisfaction with the current government increases the probability of abstaining even in the final model. Citizens who work vote more frequently than others, whereas studying or being retired does not affect voting.

Voters in new democracies vote to a less extent, which was also demonstrated in the aggregated scatter diagrams.

The analyses above show convincingly that voters' evaluation of the democratic system and its actors affects their voting. Citizens who trust politicians and the parliament turn out more than citizens who are distrustful. Even satisfaction with the way democracy works in one's country increases the probability of turning out, but the effect is less powerful. Voters who are satisfied with the way the current government is doing its job are less inclined to vote than voters who disapprove of the government. This indicates that the mechanism of democratic accountability works and that dissatisfaction with policy outputs activates voters.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The theoretical starting point of our analysis has been the distinction between democratic legitimacy and support for political actors, such as politicians and governments. This distinction can be motivated by the special characteristics of representative democracy which allows citizens to hold their representatives accountable. In our light of the empirical analysis, the measures indicating democratic legitimacy, i.e. trust in democratic institutions and satisfaction with the democratic system, have independent explanatory power in terms of turnout. In a multivariate setting, however, trust in politicians and trust in the parliament seem to be more important independent variables than satisfaction with the way government is doing its job and satisfaction with the way democracy works in the respondents' country.

Therefore, our original hypothesis stating that the two main aspects of legitimacy would be more closely linked with turnout than trust in politicians and satisfaction with the government cannot be verified. But it cannot be totally falsified either. Trust in the parliament increases the probability of turning out to vote, as does trust in politicians. The latter association was not predicted, but it is understandable when we consider how the question of trust was asked in the survey. The institutions were listed one after another in the questionnaire causing a strong collinearity in the respondents' minds. This was reflected by the aggregated mean trusts at the national level in figure 1. In order to diminish the empirical association between trust in the parliament and trust in politicians we merged the latter with a question that measures politicians' responsiveness to the people. The merged variable proved to be powerful in relation to voting.

It is a generally observed phenomenon that support for governmental institutions and actors tend to be conflated in survey answers (Anderson and LoTempio 2002). We argue, however, that at least our results do not necessarily mean that citizens are particularly unsophisticated and would not understand the principles of democratic system. Because survey questions deal with citizens' perceptions of politicians *in general*, the answers are likely to be closely connected to the perceptions of the respective institutions. Disillusionment with all politicians is likely to indicate disillusionment with political institutions and vice versa. Indeed, the view that citizens are sophisticated enough to understand the democratic principles, such as accountability, is supported by the results that dissatisfaction in government actually increases the likelihood to vote.

## **5. Discussion**

In order to deepen the understanding of the interplay between political trust and turnout, a more thorough analysis of the origins of political trust would be essential. According to some views, political trust can be explained as a “bottom-up” phenomenon. These explanations emphasize the societal and cultural context as a determinant of political trust. Notably, Putnam (1993) has argued that the levels of political trust can be explained by the patterns of social interaction. He has explained the increase of distrust in governmental institutions and actors by the decrease of social capital, that is, social connectedness and interpersonal trust, in the USA (Putnam 2000). This type of explanation can be criticised for the reduction of institutional trust to a mere extension of interpersonal trust. As it was argued earlier, there may be quite different criteria for interpersonal and institutional trustworthiness. Moreover, there is some empirical evidence against the close connection between social and political trust (Newton 1999).

Inglehart (1999), on the other hand, has explained the political distrust by factors of political culture, such as citizens' value orientations. Although cultural patterns are long-standing, cultural changes may transform citizens' expectations towards democratic institutions. For example, higher levels of education may increase the sophistication of citizens so that they level higher expectations on democratic institutions (Warren 1999, 350). From a democratic theoretical perspective, increasingly critical attitudes towards the political system can involve

possibilities for improvement because criticism can be a result of informed evaluation and active citizenship, instead of passive spectatorship (Anckar 1986, 20).

Some authors have argued that political trust can be also created from “top down”. This means that the decrease of trust can be explained by factors in the government – or to be more precise, by citizens’ perceptions of the government and their relationship to the government. Offe (1999, 77) develops this view in his discussion on the concept of republican trust. Governmental institutions that are based on norms and principles such as truth-telling, promise-keeping, impartiality and solidarity can increase trust – not only in the institutions themselves – but also among individual citizens. Offe argues, therefore, that institutional trust may have spill-over effects and affect the levels of horizontal, interpersonal trust among individuals. The specific feature of democratic institutions is that they should allow citizens’ influence and control over government. Therefore, the capability of the democratic system to bring about desired changes in governmental policies is likely to influence trust in democratic institutions (cf. Koch 2003). Long-term dissatisfaction with the performance of governments and their outputs is likely to decrease trust in democratic institutions and the whole system.

We have seen that turnout is the lowest among the voters who have no trust in the system and its actors. At the aggregate level, there is also a clear and linear relationship between the aspects of democratic legitimacy and turnout. Countries whose citizens are distrustful of the parliament and politicians as well as dissatisfied with the way democracy works have lower turnout than countries, whose citizens are trustful. Of course, it is hard to say whether the levels of distrust and dissatisfaction measured indicate a major deficit in democratic legitimacy. A true democratic crisis would involve a mass disapproval of the democratic principles of government, and a deep distrust in the democratic system of a country.

How should empirical studies of democratic legitimacy be pursued in the future? Below, we have listed five suggestions that could increase our understanding of the concept, its roots and consequences.

1. Specific attention should be paid to empirical operationalisations of the notions of trust in democratic institutions and actors on the one hand and satisfaction with the system and its outputs on the other hand. Furthermore, it would be important to hold the patterns of trust in *representative institutions* and trust in *institutions for implementation* distinct. The process of designing question order in survey

questionnaires and refining the wordings of the questions are naturally vital in this aspect.

2. *Time-series* are needed in order to trace how changes in the political system (e.g. constitutional changes, political crises) affect legitimacy and how legitimacy develops and how the developments affect political participation. Time-series are also useful in deciphering the linkage between interpersonal trust and legitimacy.
3. Case studies of *deviant cases*. Countries whose citizens do not act according to the general rule provide a useful object for studies of the foundations of democratic legitimacy. Within countries analyses of groups of citizens whose evaluations and political behaviour are non-typical, could add value to the study of the foundations and effects of legitimacy.
4. The relationship between *political knowledge* and trust should be studied more systematically. As in so many areas of societal importance, the role of information remains to be analysed in relation to democratic legitimacy. An interesting research question is whether distrust merely reflects citizens' ignorance or rather indicates informed criticism.
5. Legitimacy and participation *beyond electoral turnout*. Instead of concentrating on a dichotomous dependent variable of voting contra abstention, the effects of legitimacy could be analysed in relation to other forms of political behaviour. Are there forms of distrust and dissatisfaction that lead to participation via parties; are there other forms that encourage direct action or membership in social movements; and finally are there forms that lead to political apathy?

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<sup>i</sup> The European average was not calculated as a mean of the aggregated trust figures at a country level. Instead, the sample data were weighted so that they are representative for the whole area according to the countries' population size. The average trust should therefore correspond to a genuine "European" opinion.

<sup>ii</sup> In old democracies with compulsory voting, turnout is about 14 percentage points higher than in old democracies where voting is fully optional (Norris forthcoming., chapter 7, p. 15).

<sup>iii</sup> The exact questions were as follow. *Trust*: "Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust." [Country]'s parliament... Politicians. *Satisfaction*: (1) "Now thinking about the [country] government [the people governing, the present regime], how satisfied are you with the way it is doing its job? Please answer using this card, where 0 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 means extremely satisfied." (2) "And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy [the democratic system 'in practice' is meant, as opposed to how democracy 'ought' to work.] works in [country]? Still use this card."

<sup>iv</sup> The options to answer were a scale: "Hardly any politicians care what people like me think, very few care, some care, many care, most politicians care what people like me think". The scale was recoded into a scale from 0 to 10, in accordance with the other item scales. A mean of the two items, trust in politicians and this item of responsiveness form the new item of trust in politicians in the analyses.

<sup>v</sup> Non-eligible voters are not included in the analyses where turnout is the dependent variable. The analyses are carried out with weighted data (design weight) as recommended by the ESS. Please note that this weight is not identical with the weight in the aggregated results. Design weight does not take into account the different population sizes of the countries. The interest, and therefore even the unit of analysis from now on is individual, not a country nor an individual representative for a certain country. The share of missing cases in the logistic regression analysis in table 5 is mostly explained by the fact that non-eligible voters are excluded.