

Abstainers' reasoning for not voting: The Icelandic local government election 2014

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Útdráttur: Í íslensku sveitarstjórnarkosningunum 2014 var kjörsókn minni en nokkru sinni fyrr og hafði hún þó minnkað töluvert í kosningunum 2010. Í þessari grein fjalla höfundar um hvaða ástæður fólk nefnir fyrir því að hafa ekki kosið árið 2014. Notuð eru gögn úr könnun sem gerð var sumarið 2014 meðal úrtaks 4845 kosningabærra einstaklinga á landinu öllu, þar sem þeir 630 sem sögðust ekki hafa kosið voru spurðir um ástæður þess. Sérstök áhersla er lögð á að greina ástæður eftir aldri kjósenda og eftir búsetu, auk þess sem einnig er tekið tillit til stærðar sveitarfélaga í íbúafjölda. Helstu niðurstöður eru að eldra fólk nefnir frekar efnislegar ástæður, er varða stjórnmalaflokka og stjórnmalakerfið, fyrir því að kjósa ekki, en ungt fólk að hafa ekki haft nennt því eða haft áhuga á því. Búseta virðist ekki skýra að neinu marki mun á því hvaða ástæður fólk hefur fyrir því að kjósa ekki. Því er velt upp hvort mun eftir aldri á ástæðum þess að kjósa ekki megi hugsanlega rekja til neikvæðrar reynslu eldri kjósenda af efnahagshruninu árið 2008, en jafnframt bent á að „nenna ekki að kjósa“ getur líka verið merki um óánægju með stjórnmal sem mögulega má rekja til hrunsins og atburða eftir það.

Lykilorð: Kosningaþátttaka ■ aldur ■ höfuðborg-landsbyggð ■ dreifbýli-þéttbýli

Abstract: In the Icelandic local government election in 2014 turnout was lower than ever before, and four years earlier it had already decreased considerably. In this article, the authors examine abstainers' personal reasoning for not casting a vote. Using survey data, the focus is on questions about reasons for not voting, comparing age groups and whether voters live in the centre or the periphery of Iceland, as well as the population size of the voters' municipalities. The main results are that older voters are more likely to name reasons having to do with the political supply (e.g., political parties) and the political system, and younger voters to say that they could not be bothered. We find negligible differences in reasons for not voting, depending on municipality size and centre vs periphery areas. We suggest that the age differences we find in reasoning to abstain could be due to the fact that the consequences of the financial crash in 2008 were more strongly felt by older voters. However, we also make the point that 'not bothering to vote' can indicate discontent which can possibly be traced back to the crash.

Keywords: Electoral participation ■ age ■ centre–periphery ■ rural–urban

Introduction

In this article we examine whether there is a difference in the abstainers' personal reasoning as to why they did not vote in the 2014 local government election in Iceland, depending on their age and residency. In the 2014 local election, turnout was strikingly lower than before. The overall turnout rate was 66.5 %, and had decreased by seven percentage points from the previous election in 2010. In the three biggest municipalities, turnout in 2014 was lower than the overall turnout, or approximately 60%. Furthermore, turnout has decreased sharply in local elections in Iceland over an eight-year period, in the 2006, 2010 and 2014 elections, with a total decrease of 12 percentage points. A decrease in turnout in general calls for explanations, and specifically the dramatic decrease seen in Icelandic local elections.

In modern representative democracies, electoral participation is one of the crucial elements of the implementation of democracy. We can say that one of the grounds for a representative democracy to function effectively and maintain its legitimacy is that as many as possible participate in elections. It can be argued that turnout is an important factor in the political support of elected representatives and that the lower the turnout, the more difficult it is to claim that the system works as a popular government. In elections, voters grant parties and/or candidates a mandate to make binding decisions on their behalf, and in this respect it can be regarded as a prospective mandate. At the same time, electoral participation together with party choice can also be regarded as a retrospective verdict in the sense that voters cast their verdict over parties' and candidates' past performance in office (e.g. Lijphart 1997). Electoral participation as one of the most important mechanisms in the representational bond between electors and the elected is thus crucial for representative democracy and its legitimacy. For these reasons, it is important to understand why people do not vote. The general focus in the literature on electoral turnout and electoral participation has most often been on comparing those that do vote to those that do not (e.g., Blais 2006; Geys 2006). In this paper, we draw from this body of literature but take a different approach and focus on those who do not vote and their personal reasoning for abstaining. Even though the focus in the literature about turnout and electoral participation has been on voting or not voting, it implicitly has implications for what to expect in regard to abstainers' personal reasoning for not voting.

Turnout and electoral participation

Research on voter turnout has focused on explaining turnout in first-order elections, which are national parliamentary elections and, in presidential systems, national presidential elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Turnout in second-order elections; that is, a number of other elections within political systems, such as municipal elections, by-elections, regional elections and local government elections, has been researched to a much lesser extent. This could be due to the higher importance of national elections, in which more powerful institutions are elected.

Voter turnout varies to a considerable extent between countries and between elections (e.g., Franklin et al. 2004; Blais 2006), including Western democracies, but the general trend has been a decline in turnout (e.g., Franklin et al. 2004). Various explanations as to what affects turnout have been suggested and tested (e.g., Blais 2006; Geys 2006), but the results are far from clear. There are a few general trends that seem to consistently explain turnout. Blais (2006) identifies three main impacts that have been debated, including the impact of institutions (e.g., compulsory voting and the electoral system), socio-economic development (e.g., poverty) and the impact of party systems and electoral outcomes (e.g., the number of parties and the closeness of the electoral outcome). The impact of institutions on turnout

seems to be relatively weak, apart from compulsory voting where turnout is higher. It is consistently found that turnout is lower in poorer countries and that a greater number of parties decreases turnout. Geys (2006) highlights population size, closeness of elections, stability of the population¹ and campaign expenditure as explanations for turnout. When the population is smaller and more stable, the election results are expected to be close, and when more is spent on the campaign, turnout is higher. In addition to this, age has been shown to be consistently linked to electoral participation (e.g., Franklin 2004; Blais 2006; Bengtsson 2008).

Decreasing turnout has been explained as a long-term consequence of the lowering of the minimum age for voting in the 1970s and 1980s (Franklin 2004). Age, as an individual-level factor, has also been shown to be linked to turnout, where younger voters are in general less likely to vote. Franklin (2004) argues that young voters are in a phase in their lives where the motives to vote are limited. Bhatti et al. (2012) make the point that the correlation between age and turnout is curvilinear, where both older and younger voters are less likely to vote. Lower turnout among senior citizens, specifically women, is associated with physical infirmities, a limited social network and the fact that older women vote to a lesser extent due to socialisation in their formative years (Bhatti et al. 2012, pp. 588–589).

Electoral participation can be regarded as an act of habituation. The more often one votes, the more likely he or she is to vote again (e.g., Franklin et al. 2004; Alfaro-Redondo 2014), and low turnout among younger voters is because they have not yet established the habit of voting. Franklin et al. (2004) show that low turnout in previous elections predicts an even lower turnout in later elections. They argue that this is due to a generational change, that young voters who do not participate in elections do not establish the habit of voting, and when this generation grows older and new generations of voters, who are also less likely to vote, come of age, turnout decreases even further. Franklin et al. (2004) argue that the reason for not voting is that elections today are now less competitive than they used to be in the sense that they are less likely to bring about a policy change. Thus voters, particularly young ones, are less mobilised to vote. A related explanation is that ties between political parties and interest organisations are not as strong as before, which makes it more difficult for parties to mobilise people to vote (Powell 1982; Wattenberg 2000).

Bengtsson et al. (2014) make the point that when voters do not care about voting, it could be taken as a sign of discontent or frustration. Therefore, it is important to investigate the sources for not voting. Verba et al. (1995) name three main reasons for not voting: 1) *People cannot vote*, meaning that they do not have the necessary resources to vote due to, for example, lack of time, lack of necessary knowledge or that they do not have enough economic resources to go and vote. 2) *People do not want to vote*, meaning they lack interest or motivation to vote. 3) *Nobody asked*, meaning that people cannot be reached or contacted through the diverse channels for recruitment and mobilisation, such as places of work or churches or being contacted by political parties.

Bjørklund (2013) examines whether electoral participation in Norway differs depending on how close voters live to the centre (capital), using Galtung's centre–periphery index. He finds that electoral participation and activity in Norwegian local government elections is much higher in the smaller municipalities than in the capital of Oslo – at least after 1995 (p. 134). Bjørklund argues in his conclusion that voters' relation to their municipality has to be taken into account and that voters' ties to elected representatives are stronger in smaller and more peripheral municipalities. Furthermore, he says this is even more important as the duties and roles of the municipalities expand, as has happened in Norway in the last few decades.

Given that areas further away from the centre are also usually smaller in population, Bjørklund's findings are in line with the fact that participation has generally been found to be

higher in less populated areas (e.g., Geys 2006). Olivier (2000) suggests two explanations for this. Firstly, that voters in more populated areas, such as big cities, are less mobilised to vote, because they are less likely to know their neighbours, and their social network is not limited to those that are geographically close to them. On the contrary, those who live in less-populated areas are more easily mobilised by political movements, and it is easier to get political messages through to them. Second is that voters in more populated areas are more alienated from politics – and this is so regardless of the higher stakes and greater visibility of local politics in urban areas. Blais (2006) suggests a related but slightly different explanation for the relationship between turnout and population size at the national level, which could also apply to the local level. His suggestion is that when the population size is smaller, there are fewer electors per elected member, and that makes it easier for political parties and candidates to mobilise voters.

As already mentioned, differences in turnout have been explained by different institutional settings and voters' socio-economic status, as well as socio-economic developments, party systems and electoral outcomes. All these explanations, in one way or another, touch upon how easily voters are mobilised to vote. One remaining question, analysed in this paper, is whether there is a difference in the abstainers' personal reasoning as to why they do not vote, depending on their age and residency. Age and residency are generally focused upon as mobilisation factors for electoral participation, but in this paper we focus on whether they make a difference in abstainers' personal reasoning for not voting. Electoral participation has a low cost-benefit nature, and for that reason Aarts and Wessels (2002) argue that mobilisation factors, such as age, explain turnout, but that the explanatory power is rather weak. However, as pointed out by Aarts and Wessels, age might be more important when analysing those who are indifferent toward or alienated from politics. Indifference means that people perceive little or no difference between the political parties or candidates, and alienation is when all alternatives in elections are far from people's ideal point – and both can result in a decision not to vote.

In this paper, we take a closer look at those who do not vote, focusing first on whether younger and older non-voters name different reasons for not voting. Second, we focus on whether there is a difference in abstainers' personal reasoning for not voting, on the one hand depending on how close they live to the centre (centre–periphery) and, on the other, whether they live in urban or rural areas. For the purpose of our paper, we use survey data (explained in more detail below) in which those who did not vote were asked several follow-up questions about their reasons for not voting. Self-reporting of both electoral participation and survey respondents' own reasoning for not voting can have certain limitations. It is a well-known fact that electoral participation is in general over-reported in surveys, mainly because respondents who do not vote are less likely to participate in surveys and because of a social-desirability bias in survey responses; that is, survey respondents will report that they did vote even if they did not. The social-desirability bias could be due to the fact that the act of voting is considered a civic duty or an act of a responsible citizen and thus abstainers are reluctant to admit that they did not vote (e.g., Holbrook and Krosnick 2010). The social-desirability bias could indicate that survey respondents who report that they did not vote will be on the defensive side when asked about their reasons. They might feel pressed to exaggerate their reasoning as more valid or substantive even if the 'true' reason is that they were uninterested in the election or could not be bothered to vote. A social-desirability bias of this type might even be more prominent among older generations, as they could be more likely to view it as their civic duty to vote whereas younger generations might feel less pressure towards 'being good citizens' (Blais et al. 2004). Other disadvantages than a social-desirability bias in self-reporting, which could also be related to age, can be consistency seeking, self-enhancement,

self-presentation, impression management (exaggeration, faking or lying), self-deception and inaccuracy of memory (Paulhaus and Vazire 2007). However, there are advantages using survey-data based on self-reporting. *Richness of information* by having the quantity and breadth of information about oneself is an advantage when people are asked directly (Paulhaus and Vazire 2007). Other advantages of self-reporting are motivation to report; respondents may be pleased to talk about themselves and to be asked about their own reasoning for not voting. Also, even if this should not be the main reason for using survey questions based on self-reporting, self-reporting is a practical, efficient and inexpensive method to gather information (Paulhus and Vazire 2007). Furthermore, Bertrand and Munnianthan (2001) point out the usefulness of self-reporting when comparing differences across groups, whether this is in a cross-sectional setting or over time. In this paper we compare different groups of voters and their own reasoning for not voting. By that we are able to analyse whether there are systematic differences between groups in the reasons they themselves name for abstaining, but at the same time we are aware of that those reasons are only one type of indicator, but an important one, out of many, as to why people do not vote.

Based on the discussion above, we present four hypotheses about differences in reasoning for not voting. The first relates to age and non-voting. If older people are more mobilised to vote because they have established the habit of voting, their reasoning for choosing not to vote should be more clearly defined compared to younger people. By this we mean that people who are more likely to be in the habit of voting would need more clearly specified reasoning for opting out of the vote other than not being bothered. By this, we have no intention of suggesting that younger voters are lazier or less likely to be interested in politics and thus not voting. Rather, our suggestion is that older citizens need a ‘better’ reason for not voting, while it is easier for younger citizens to say that they could not be bothered. What could also come into play here is that older people have a stronger sense of voting being their civic duty, and thus their reasoning or ‘excuse’ for not voting is more likely to be backed up by a substantial argument, such as ‘it does not matter who governs’ or ‘there are no differences between parties’ – rather than merely stating that he or she could not be bothered. What both younger and older non-voters have in common is lack of motivation for voting, but one could say that older citizens need a more clearly defined ‘excuse’ or reason for not doing so. Thus we hypothesise the following:

H1a: Older non-voters are more likely than younger non-voters to name institutional reasons that have to do with the political supply and the political system, such as ‘it does not matter who governs’ or ‘there are no differences between the parties’ as reasons for not voting.

H1b: Younger non-voters are more likely say that they did not vote because they could not be bothered.

Given that citizens in smaller municipalities and more peripheral areas have closer ties to their municipality and the services it provides than those in more populated and central municipalities, people in small and peripheral areas could also need stronger reasoning for not voting. This is a similar line of argument as with age and not voting, meaning that those who are more likely to have stronger ties to their elected institutions, as in smaller and more peripheral areas, could need stronger reasoning than simply not being bothered for opting out of voting. We test this argument by hypothesising the following:

H2a: Non-voters living outside of the capital area are more likely to name institutional reasons that have to do with the political supply and the political system, such as

‘it does not matter who governs’ or ‘there are no differences between the parties’, for not voting when compared to voters in the capital area.

H2b: Non-voters in more peripheral municipalities are more likely to name institutional reasons that have to do with the political supply and the political system, such as ‘it does not matter who governs’ or ‘there are no differences between the parties’, for not voting when compared to voters in larger municipalities.

Turnout in Iceland and the political context

Historically voter turnout in Iceland has been high, both in national and local government elections (Statistics Iceland 2015a; 2015b). In parliamentary elections, turnout has always been higher than in local elections (Eythórsson and Kowalczyk 2013, p. 4). In local government elections turnout was, until 2006, over 80% (Figure 1). Turnout in national elections in Iceland has been similar to other Nordic countries (Bengtsson et al. 2014, pp. 51–53) and in local elections approximately the same or slightly higher than in local elections in Norway and Denmark. Average turnout in Danish local elections was about 70% between 1970 and 2013 (Bhatti et al. 2014, p. 14). In Norway, turnout was between 59.0% and 69.4% in local elections between 1987 and 2007 (Bergh and Bjørklund 2009). These examples show that turnout in Iceland has been high from a comparative perspective, but that the decline from 2006 calls for explanations as to what might be going on.

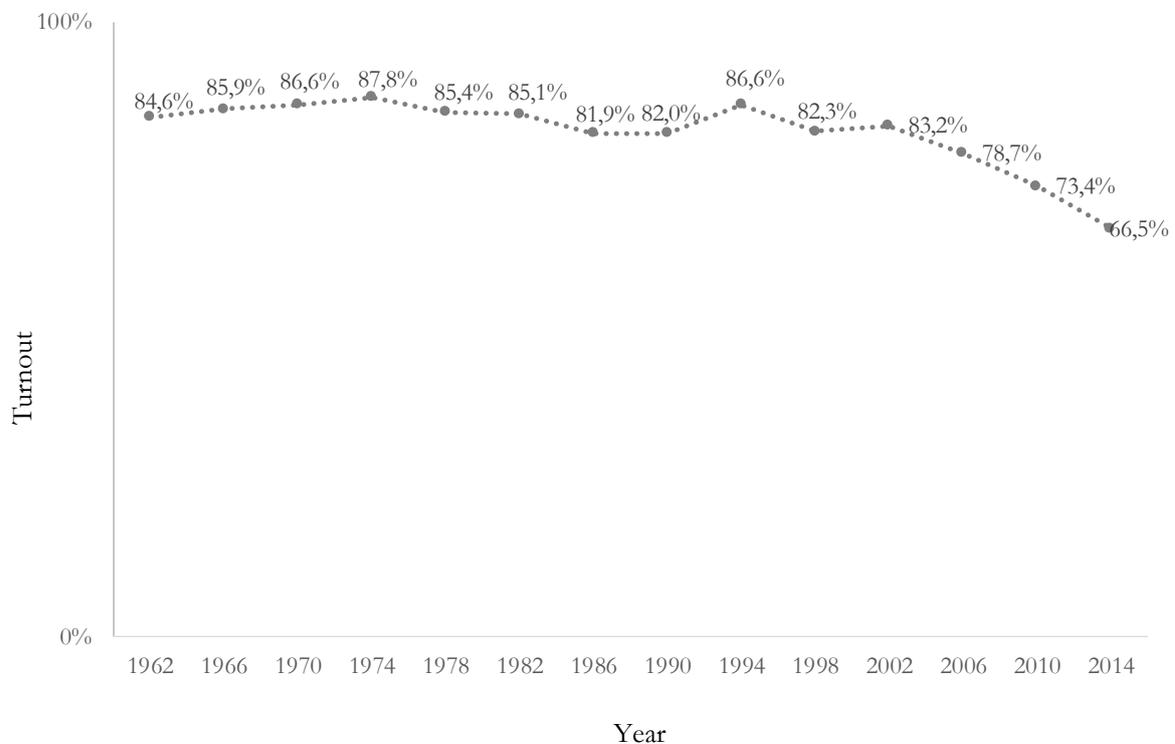


Figure 1. *Turnout in Icelandic local government elections 1962–2014 (Statistics Iceland 2015b)²*

As Figure 1 shows, the decrease in turnout in local elections seems to take off in the 2006 election and has been successively declining since. This development has not been a target for any research in Iceland, and now we face a reduction by almost 16.7 percentage points between 2002 and 2014. It has been suggested that the decline between the 2006 and 2010 elections can be explained by the publishing of the report of the Special Investigation Committee, delivered to the Icelandic Parliament on 12 April 2010, only a few weeks before the election on 27 May (Eythórsson and Kowalczyk 2013). In that report, the Central Bank and the Financial Supervisory Authority were blamed for negligence in the exercise of their duties before the crash, and it was suggested that some of the politicians and public officials named in the report could be held legally responsible. The report was published less than seven weeks before the 2010 local election – in that election turnout declined extensively, and incumbent parties in local government majorities were voted out of office in a great number of municipalities (Eythórsson et al. 2011). In the 2010 local election, new parties and lists put forth candidates in some of the biggest municipalities – and won. In Reykjavík, the capital, a new party, the Best Party, (Icel. Besti Flokkurinn), led by the well-known comedian Jón Gnarr, won 35% of the vote and six out of 15 seats in the city council. In Akureyri, the fourth largest municipality, a party outside the traditional system, the Peoples' List (Icel. Listi fólksins), won 45% of the vote and six out of 11 seats on the city council – an absolute majority. In Kópavogur, a suburb of Reykjavík and Iceland's second-largest municipality, two completely new parties competed, the Second Best Party (Icel. Næstbesti flokkurinn) and the List of the People of Kópavogur (Icel. Listi Kópavogsbúa). The Second Best Party won about 14% of the vote and the List of the People of Kópavogur received 11%.

Önnudóttir and Harðarson (2011) show how dissatisfaction with how democracy works increased extensively after the financial crash in 2008. When asked in 2003 and 2007, around 30% of voters were dissatisfied (not very or not satisfied at all) with how democracy works in Iceland. In 2009 this proportion had increased to 56%. Political trust in Iceland has decreased extensively. In February 2008, 42% said they trusted the parliament. One year later, after the economic collapse in 2008, trust for the parliament was down to 13%. In 2014 it had recovered to 24% but declined again to 18% in 2015.³ Decline in satisfaction with how democracy works and political trust could indicate that the legitimacy of democracy in Iceland has been undermined and that this could have contributed to the decreasing turnout in local elections.

Given that these suggestions about reasons for the decreasing turnout are satisfactory, one might expect that this trend would not continue as long as the political and economic situation does not deteriorate. It is not easy to determine whether the general situation in Icelandic society was better or worse in 2014 than in 2010. It can be stated that, economically, the country made some recovery during that time (e.g., Blomberg 2012; Danielsson 2013), but the question remains whether it has recovered politically. The fact that trust in the parliament had increased from 13% in 2010 to 24% in February 2014 could be taken as a sign that the political atmosphere in Iceland was somehow better in 2014. But this does not explain the continuing decrease in turnout in the 2014 local election.

This background and the new bottom record in turnout in 2014 was the inspiration behind undertaking a local election study examining turnout in the 2014 local government election, the first one of its kind in Iceland. In this article, we make use of those data.

Turnout by age, residency and municipal size

For the first time in 2014 Statistics Iceland collected information on the age of those who voted in the local election.⁴ We have already noted that the total turnout in 2014 was 66.5% – the lowest ever in the history of local government elections in Iceland. Figure 2 clearly shows

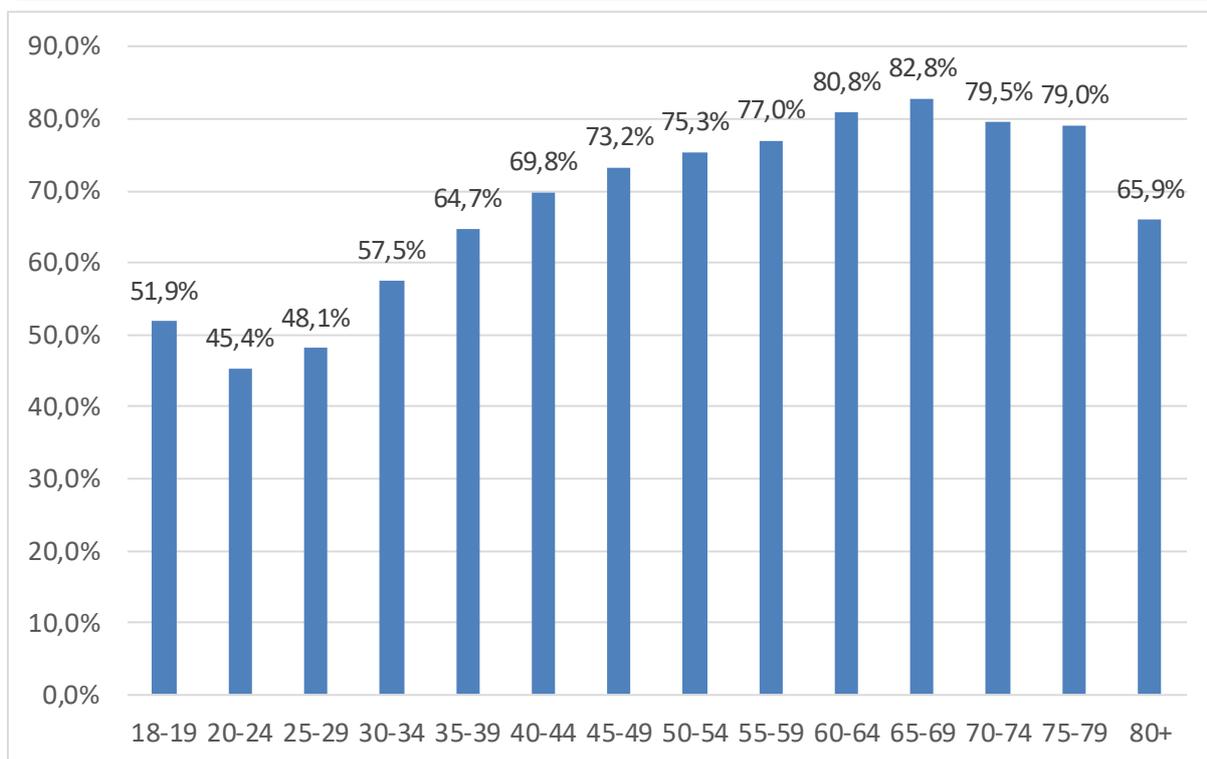


Figure 2. *Turnout by age in Icelandic local government election 2014 (Statistics Iceland 2014)*

that electoral participation was lower among younger voters. In all age groups under 35 years, turnout is lower than 60% and below 50% among voters between 20 and 29 years old. This is in line with what Bhatti et al. (2014) find in the Danish local government election in 2013, where turnout was lowest among people in the age range of 19–29 years – and they found a similar curve-shaped trend as that in Iceland, with turnout decreasing again among the oldest voters. Figure 3 shows turnout broken down by municipal population size and age. Turnout varies to a considerable extent by municipal size and also when age is taken into account. The main pattern is that turnout decreases with increasing population and is higher in municipalities with less than 5000 inhabitants. In bigger municipalities, the turnout of young people is lower than 45%, while in smaller municipalities (5,000 or fewer) it is from 55% to 62%. This pattern is also found for the older age groups but is not as clear in the groups above 40 years of age.

In line with Bjørklund's findings (2013), we should expect a lower turnout among those who live in the capital area compared to those who live outside of it. In Figure 4, we see that this is the case. Voter turnout in both 2010 and 2014 is higher in the rural and peripheral areas compared to the capital area.

Abstainers' personal reasoning for not voting in the 2014 local government election

In this article we make use of a survey fielded in 2014, shortly after the local election in May. The survey was financed by the Icelandic Ministry of the Interior (Icel. Innanríkisráðuneytið) and the Icelandic Federation of Municipalities (Icel. Samband Sveitarfélaga) and was fielded by the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Iceland. The data collection period was from 10 July to 2 September. The total net sample was 4,845 voters in the whole country. Half of the respondents were chosen randomly (a simple random sample) from the National Registry and contacted via phone, and half were chosen randomly (a simple random sample) from the Social

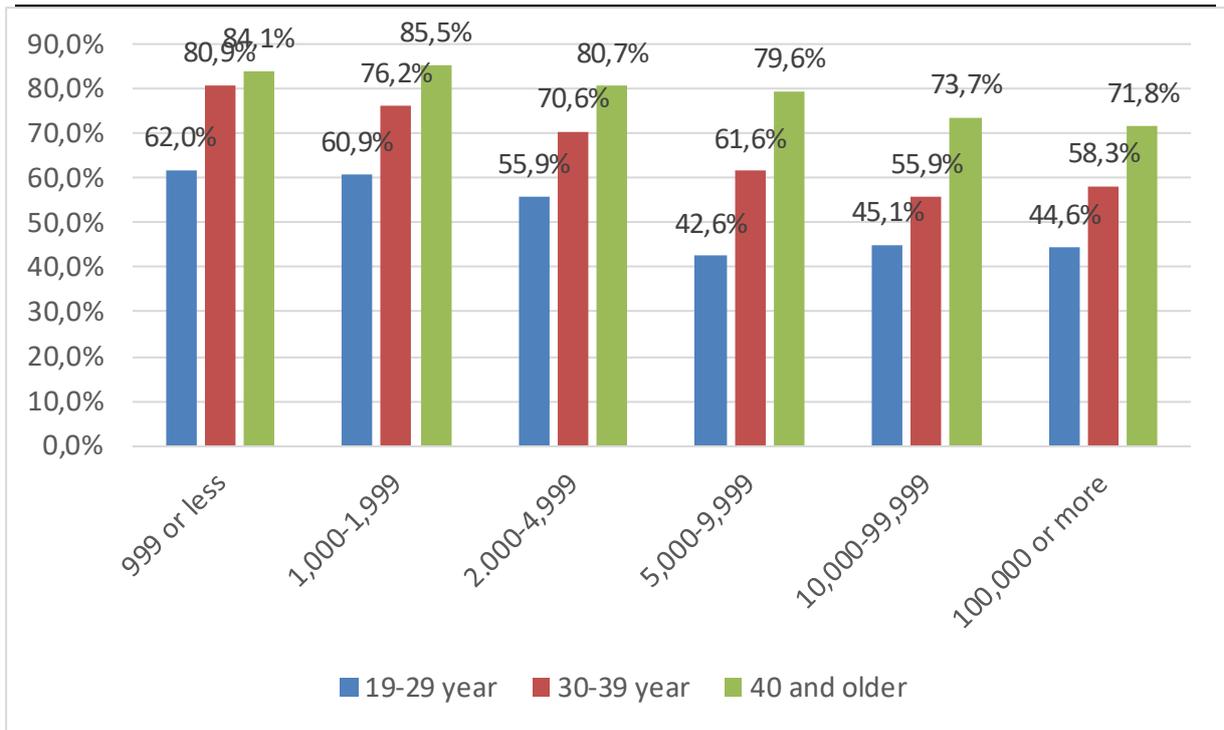


Figure 3. Turnout by age and municipal population size in Icelandic local government elections 2014 (Statistics Iceland 2014)

Science Research Institute’s internet panel and were contacted via email. The response rate was 70.2% (n = 3,402). Out of those, the 3,391, who answered the question as to whether or not they had voted, 630 reported that they had not voted. In this article, we focus on those who did not vote.

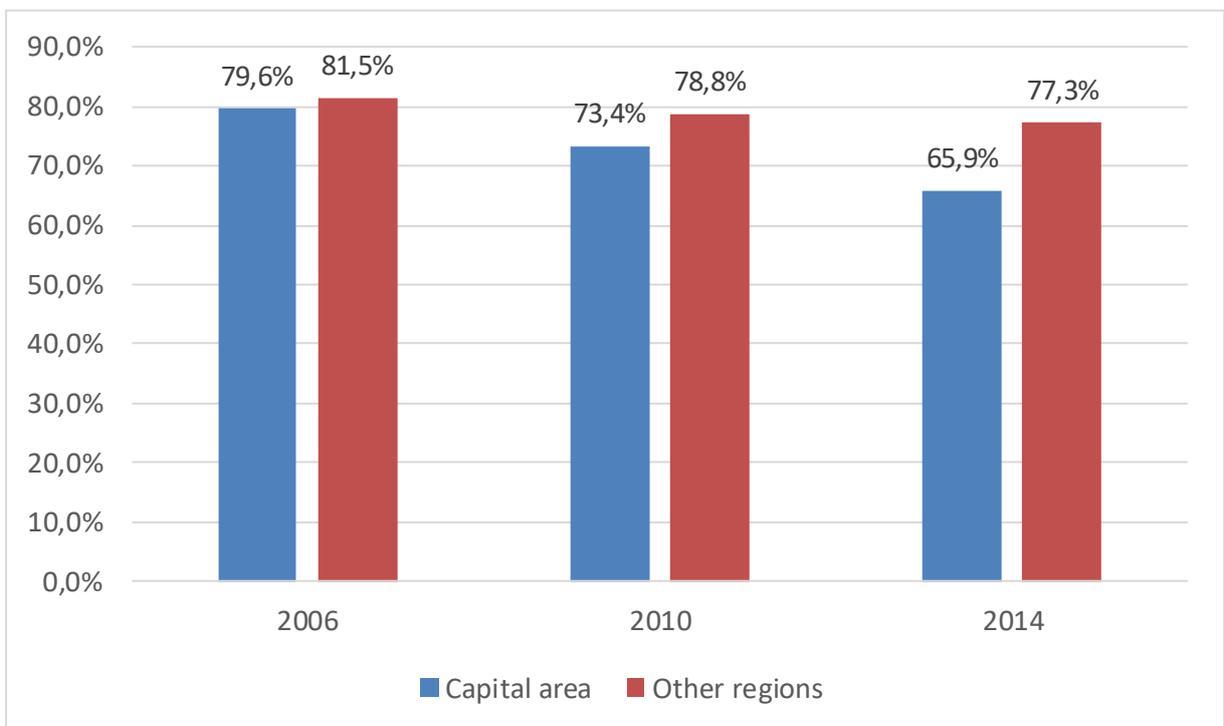


Figure 4. Electoral turnout by voters’ residence in the Icelandic local government elections 2006, 2010 and 2014 (based on private dataset)

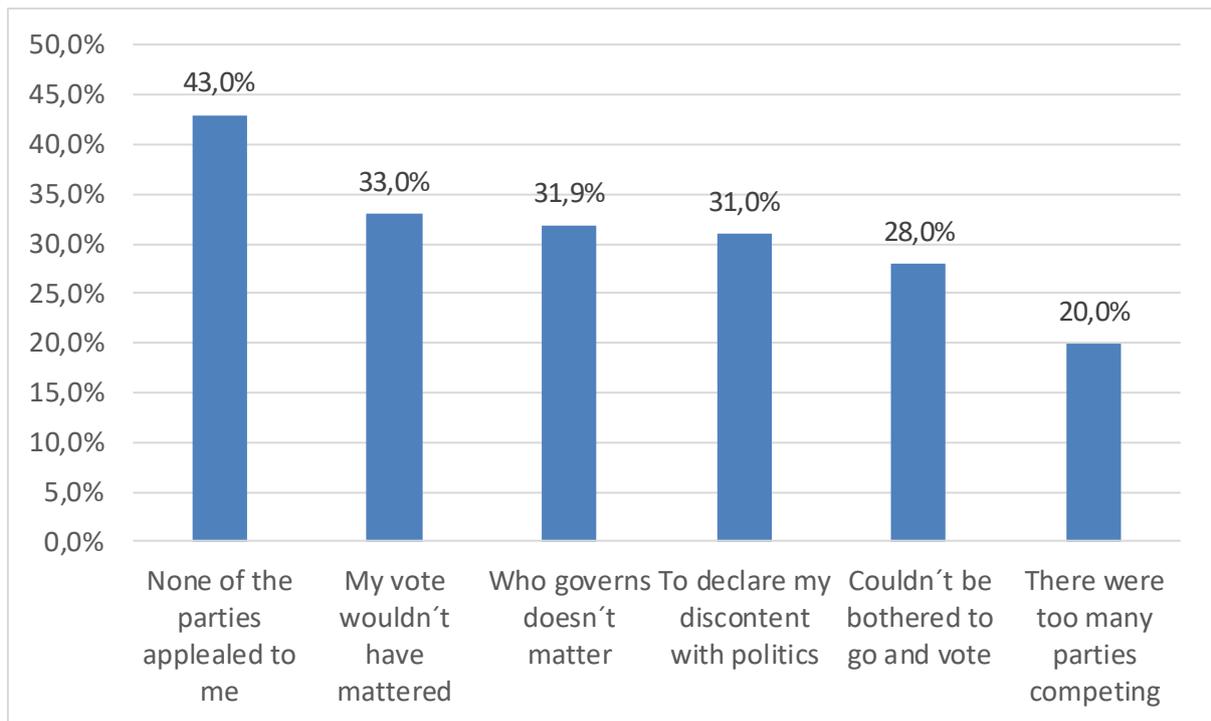


Figure 5. Six reasons for not voting in the local government elections in Iceland 2014 – those who answered ‘applies well to me’ or ‘applies to me’

In the following sections we analyse answers to six closed questions and one open-ended question where respondents who did not vote were asked follow-up questions about their reasons for abstaining.⁵ We compare whether there is a difference in people’s personal reasoning for not voting, depending on their age and residency, with the latter classified both as population size in a municipality (urban–rural) and whether or not they live close to the capital area (centre–periphery). The focus is on abstainers’ personal reasoning for not voting based on their own perception and is not meant to indicate ‘the true or the actual reasons’ for abstaining. By comparing different groups of people who did not vote, we explore whether their reasoning differs depending on age and rural-urban and centre-periphery residency. This way we hope to better understand why voters abstain from voting.

Personal reasoning for not voting

Those who reported that they did not vote were asked to what extent the following six reasons applied to their decision not to vote: ‘none of the parties appealed to me’; ‘too many parties were competing’; ‘who governs does not matter’; ‘my vote would not have mattered’; ‘to declare my discontent with politics’ and ‘could not be bothered to go and vote’.⁶ These six reasons are based on the results from the open-ended question about why people did not vote, as asked in the Icelandic National Election Study (n.d.) in 2009 and 2013.

Figure 5 shows that the most frequent reason named for not voting is that none of the parties appealed to the respondent (43.0%). A little less than one out of every three name the reasons that their vote would not have mattered, who is in power does not matter and to declare their discontent with politics (31.0–33.0%). As many as 28.0% say that it was because they could not be bothered to vote and one in every five that there were too many parties competing.

To sum up, about one-third of non-voters say that they did not vote because their vote did not matter, and who governs does not matter. This could indicate indifference among abstainers; that is, they might not see any differences between the political alternatives and

therefore they might have perceived that their electoral participation would not have mattered. That none of the parties appealed to the respondent can be considered on similar grounds, but as a perceived alienation from the political supply and as an expression of not being able to find the desired political alternative. There are 31.0% who say that the reason they did not vote was to declare their discontent with politics and 28.0% that they could not be bothered. As argued by Bengtsson et al. (2014), stating that one could not be bothered to vote can be taken as a way to express discontent. Personal reasoning for not voting, whether in the form of clearly defined reasons that have to do with the political supply and the political system or simply not being bothered to vote, could indicate indifference to and alienation from politics and lack of political trust.

Abstainers were asked an open-ended question about their reasoning for not participating. The answers and reasons given were many and diverse. We categorised respondents' replies into seven reasons for not voting. Figure 6 shows that the most common reasons respondents mentioned were 'no interest, could not be bothered or forgot' (22.5%) and that they were travelling (21.0%). These are two fundamentally different reasons. The first – 'no interest, could not be bothered or forgot' – can be linked with discontent, which could be because of lack of trust in politics. The second reason, travelling, has to do with not being around to vote on Election Day and therefore unable to participate. One might ask why these voters did not use their chance to vote absentee. Considering the extent to which these abstainers had a fair chance to cast an absentee vote, their absence might be seen as lack of interest – that is, to cast an absentee vote was not worth the cost.

With similar frequency (11.6–13.8%) we see reasons such as 'occupied', 'lack of knowledge about parties', 'no difference between parties / no choice' and 'discontent'. The open-ended answers give us clusters of reasons that in many ways match our results from the close-ended questions.

Next, we turn to analyses about whether abstainers' personal reasoning as to why they did not vote differs depending on their age and residency. For our two factors urban–rural and centre–periphery, there are negligible differences in respondents' age depending on their residency.⁷ Because there are no differences in age depending on residency, we are confident that we can run each analysis separately. In Table 1, we analyse the respondents' replies to the closed questions about their reasons for not voting, comparing different age groups. Using the chi-square significance test we see that older voters are more likely to name reasons that have to do with the political supply, the political system and political discontent. Considering political supply, we see a gradual increase in that reason for not voting from the youngest age group (31.6%) to the oldest (56.7%). Considering reasons that have to do with both the political supply and the political system – 'my vote would not have mattered' and 'who governs does not matter' – we see a similar but weaker trend: older respondents are more likely than younger ones to consider those reasons as applying to them. The same goes for political discontent: respondents in older age groups are more likely to consider this as a reason for not voting. It is only when asked whether the reason for not voting was due to 'not being bothered' that the youngest age group named that reason more often than older ones, with 31.6% in comparison to 21.5% to 24.6% in older age groups.

These age differences could indicate that younger respondents are tired or frustrated with politics to a lesser extent than the older ones – perhaps because they have not experienced politics for as long as the older respondents. The same can be argued for discontent with politics. Age plays a role in experience of politics in that the youngest people are less socialised within politics, and the very youngest group (18–24 years) could be less likely to have felt the economic hardships after the financial collapse (e.g., mortgages), which might well have caused less discontent among at least that group.⁸

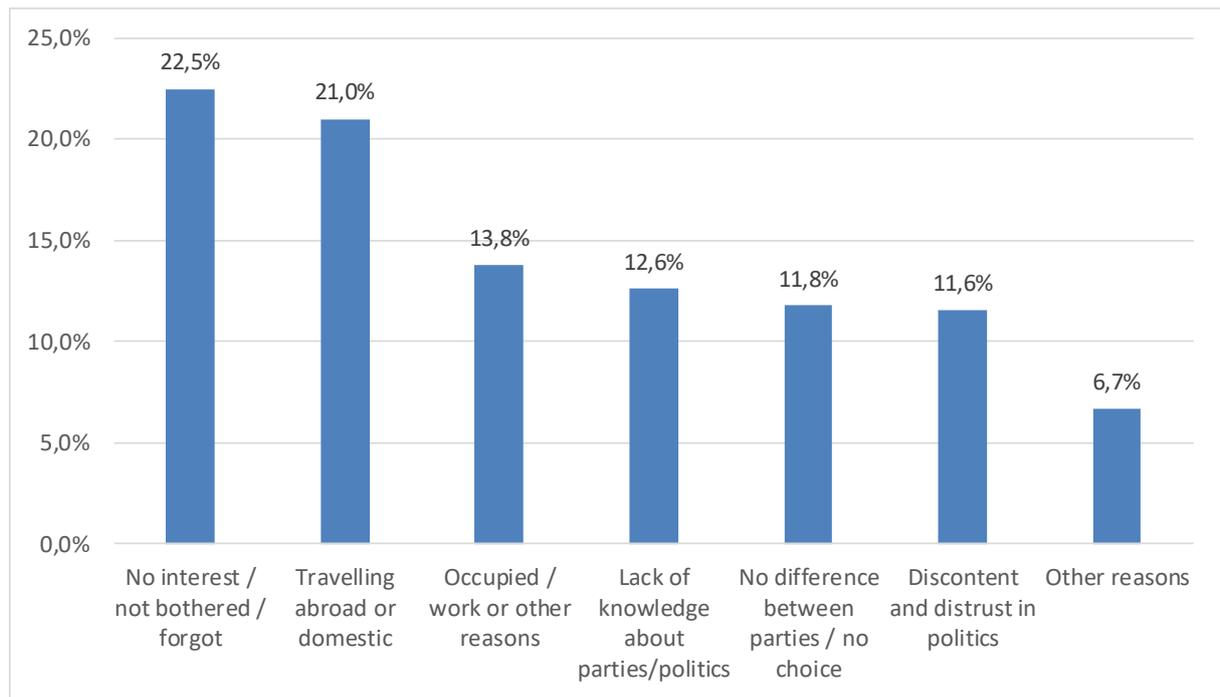


Figure 6. *Abstainers' personal reasons for not-voting (open question)*

In Table 2, we break down the replies to the open-ended question by age. For the categories, ‘no interest/could not be bothered/forgot’ and ‘travelling abroad or domestically’, the difference between the age groups is not statistically significant. However, we see that the youngest more often name ‘no interest’ as a reason and less often ‘travelling’ – but the differences compared to the other age groups are negligible. For the other categories, we see clear differences in respondents’ replies depending on their age. The youngest abstainers stand out as being far more likely to name ‘lack of knowledge about parties/politics’ (22.9% compared with others 6.1%–9.0%). Furthermore, they, together with the group aged 30–44, score highest on ‘occupied/work or other reasons’, or 19.7% and 19.0%, respectively, compared with 2.9% and 5.2% of the two older age groups. While young respondents are more likely to name reasons categorised as lack of knowledge, they are less likely to identify political discontent as a reason. It is the older respondents, specifically 45 years and older, who are more likely to name reasons having to do with political discontent.

The results from our close-ended and open-ended questions point in the same direction. There are clear differences by age in own reasoning for not voting. Older voters tend to name institutional reasons connected with the political supply and the political system to explain why they did not vote, and this supports our first hypothesis (H1a). We also find support for H1b – that younger respondents are more likely to say that they did not vote because they could not be bothered. Furthermore, we find that younger respondents are more likely to name ‘lack of knowledge about parties / politics’ as a reason for not voting.

Next, we turn our attention to centre or periphery residency as an explanatory factor for electoral participation and whether reasoning for not voting depends on residency. In Table 3, the reasons for not voting are compared between the capital area (the centre) and the rest of the country (peripheral). The central area is in the South West, including the capital (Reykjavik) and the surrounding municipalities,⁹ where close to 70% of the population of Iceland live. We only find one difference between the centre and the periphery: non-voters in the capital area are more likely to say that none of the parties appealed to them (48.9%) compared to the periphery (32.8%). This difference between the centre and the periphery

Table 1. *Age and reasons for not voting – those who answered ‘applies well to me’ or ‘applies’*

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60 and
None of the parties appealed to me**	31.6%	45.4%	54.0%	56.7%
My vote would not have mattered**	31.0%	33.0%	33.7%	42.6%
Who governs does not matter**	26.1%	36.6%	34.4%	36.3%
To declare my discontent with politics*	16.4%	29.5%	45.5%	46.6%
Did not bother to go and vote**	31.6%	24.6%	21.5%	25.3%
There were too many parties competing	13.7%	12.9%	23.4%	36.4%

Notes: A chi-square test was done for each item. Significance levels are marked with asterisks as such: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

might indicate that respondents in the capital area are more disillusioned by the political supply or that they are more alienated from politics, compared to respondents outside of the capital area.

We see some differences between centre and periphery when examining other reasons named for not voting which are worth mentioning, even though they are not substantial enough to be statistically significant. For example, respondents in the capital area are more likely to state that ‘there were too many parties competing’ compared to those living in the peripheries. This could possibly be due to differences in party supply between the centre and the periphery given that there are more parties to choose from in the centre. It is also notable that ‘to declare my discontent’ is named slightly more often in the capital area.

Examining whether the reasoning for not voting that respondents themselves identify differs between the centre and the periphery, we find negligible differences for all categories except ‘travelling’ (Table 4). Expressions of discontent, lack of interest, occupied and no differences between parties seem to be equally mentioned as reasons for not voting in both the centre and the periphery. The only difference – travelling on Election Day – could be related to occupat-

Table 2. *Age and personal reasoning for not voting*

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60 and older
No interest / not bothered / forgot	27,7%	19,6%	23,5%	17,5%
Travelling abroad or domestic	16,5%	26,5%	20,9%	19,4%
Occupied / work or other reasons**	19,7%	19,0%	5,2%	2,9%
Lack of knowledge about parties/politics**	22,9%	9,0%	6,1%	7,8%
No difference between parties / no choice*	6,4%	12,7%	15,7%	15,5%
Discontent and distrust in politics**	3,2%	8,5%	20,0%	23,3%
Other reasons**	3,8%	4,7%	8,7%	13,6%

Notes: A chi-square test was done for each item. Significance levels are marked with asterisks as such: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. N for the different reasons varied from 40 for the lowest to 134 for the highest.

Table 3. *Centre–periphery and reasons for not voting – those who answered ‘applies well to me’ or ‘applies’*

	Capital and	Other regions
None of the parties appealed to me**	48.9%	32.8%
My vote would not have mattered	33.6%	35.4%
Who governs doesn’t matter	31.9%	35.7%
To declare my discontent with politics	32.2%	28.4%
Did not bother to go and vote.	25.3%	29.9%
There were too many parties competing	20.9%	14.6%

Notes: A chi-square test was done for each item. Significance levels are marked with asterisks as such: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

ional status. For example, farmers living in the rural and peripheral areas could be less likely to travel compared to those who live in the centre. In sum, we find limited differences in reasons for not voting when comparing abstainers in the centre with those living in more peripheral areas. We hypothesised that abstainers living outside the capital area (peripheral) are more likely to name reasons for not voting that have to do with political supply and political support (H2a). The only difference we find is that abstainers in the capital area are more likely to say that none of the parties appealed to them when compared to abstainers elsewhere, and this is opposite to what we hypothesised. Furthermore, our comparison between the centre and the periphery indicates that discontent, or not being bothered to vote, as a reason given for not voting is similar in both the centre and peripheral regions in Iceland.

In Table 5 we examine the differences for not voting, with a slightly different but related independent variable, capturing an urban–rural dimension. We use both population size and how close municipalities are to the capital. We group together the municipalities surrounding the capital with the capital as one urban area, and the municipalities outside the capital area are categorised only by size. We find negligible differences in reasoning for not voting depending on the urban–rural dimension. However, there are some patterns which are

Table 4. *Centre–periphery and personal reasoning for not voting*

	Capital and	Other regions
No interest / did not bother / forgot	22.2%	23.3%
Travelling abroad or domestically*	23.1%	14.7%
Occupied / work or other reasons	13.9%	13.3%
Lack of knowledge about parties/politics	11.2%	16.7%
No difference between parties / no choice	12.1%	10.7%
Discontent and distrust in politics	11.7%	11.3%
Other reasons	5.6%	10.0%

Notes: A chi-square test was done for each item. Significance levels are marked with asterisks as such: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 5. *Population size and reasons for not voting – those who answered ‘applies well to me’ or ‘applies’*

	Big/central	Medium	Small
None of the parties appealed to me	47.9%	32.7%	26.5%
My vote would not have mattered	33.7%	44.2%	25.1%
Who governs doesn't matter	30.7%	45.3%	41.2%
To declare my discontent with politics	32.4%	30.0%	21.3%
Did not bother to go and vote	24.7%	39.2%	28.2%
There were too many parties competing	21.4%	14.6%	6.0%

Notes: (1) The municipalities we classify as big/central municipalities are the six biggest in population size plus those that are located in the centre around Reykjavík. The medium sized are those with more than 2,500 inhabitants and do not belong to the big/central group. The small ones are those with 2,500 inhabitants or fewer. (2) A chi-square test was done for each item. Significance

notable. Non-voters in big/central municipalities more often name reasons for not voting that have to do with the political supply and that none of the parties appealed to them compared to those who live in less urban areas. Abstainers in big/central municipalities are also more likely to agree with the statement that there were too many parties competing than those who live in smaller areas. When examining the reason ‘who governs does not matter’, abstainers in medium-sized and small municipalities are more likely to agree with the statement compared to abstainers in the large and central municipalities.

Table 6. *Population size and own reasoning for not voting*

	Big/central	Medium	Small
No interest / did not bother / forgot	27.7%	19.6%	23.5%
Travelling abroad or domestic	16.5%	26.5%	20.9%
Occupied / work or other reasons	19.7%	19.0%	5.2%
Lack of knowledge about parties/politics	22.9%	9.0%	6.1%
No difference between parties / no choice	6.4%	12.7%	15.7%
Discontent and distrust in politics	3.2%	8.5%	20.0%
Other reasons**	3.8%	4.7%	8.7%

Notes: (1) The municipalities we classify as big/central municipalities are the six biggest in population size plus those that are located in the centre around Reykjavík. The medium sized are those with more than 2,500 inhabitants and do not belong to the big/central group. The small ones are those with 2,500 inhabitants or fewer. (2) A chi-square test was done for each item. Significance levels are marked with asterisks as such: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Examining the differences in abstainers' open-ended replies depending on population size, as well as whether or not they live in the centre, negligible differences are noted other than in the category 'other reasons' (Table 6). It is notable, though, that 'lack of knowledge about parties' is more often named as a reason in the big/central municipalities. To sum up, even if there are some trends when comparing big/central areas and smaller municipalities, they are weak. Our hypothesis that abstainers in smaller municipalities are more likely to name institutional reasons for not voting which have to do with the political supply and the political system – is rejected.

Discussion and conclusion

We have in this article analysed abstainers' personal reasoning behind not voting in the Icelandic local government elections in 2014, an election where the turnout was lower than ever before in Iceland. Data from Statistics Iceland (2014) showed that turnout was lower among younger voters and in more populated areas. In the age group younger than 30 years of age, turnout was lower than 50%, with the exception of first time voters (18–19 years) where it was just over 50%. Turnout in the biggest municipalities (10,000+) and in the capital area was a little lower, compared to smaller and more rural municipalities. Given these differences, our focus in this paper is on whether abstainers' personal reasoning for not voting differs depending on age and residency. For the latter we test two dimensions, comparing centre–peripheral areas and urban–rural areas. Our findings show clear age differences in abstainers' personal reasoning for not voting but weak and negligible differences depending on the centre–periphery variable or municipal size.

We hypothesised that older abstainers would be more likely to name more clearly defined reasons for not voting, having to do with political supply and the political system, compared to younger people who did not vote. For this we find support. Older abstainers are more likely to name the reasons 'none of the parties appealed to me', 'my vote would not have mattered', 'who governs does not matter' and 'to declare my discontent'. All these have to do with the political supply (the political parties) and the political system (vote matters, who governs and discontent). Furthermore, the reasoning that 'none of the parties appealed to me' can be taken as sign of alienation from politics and the reasons that 'my vote or who governs does not matter' as indifference to politics. On the contrary, younger abstainers are more likely to say that they could not be bothered to vote. One possible explanation for this age difference might be that older voters are more likely have established the habit of voting and they need stronger reasoning for opting out of the vote than simply not being bothered. Older abstainers might also name more defined reasons, because they consider voting a civic duty and they need a more substantive excuse for not voting than being too lazy to vote. That being said, 'not being bothered' should not be understood as lack of interest or laziness. Rather, it should be understood as lack of motivation to vote, suggesting those abstainers have not been successfully mobilised to vote. Younger voters have, because of their age, invested less time in voting before and thus might need a less clearly defined reason not to vote, compared to older voters.

For residency, we find negligible differences in reasoning for not voting when comparing municipalities in the centre to peripheral ones and urban to rural municipalities. The only difference we find is that abstainers in the centre are more likely to say that none of the parties appealed to them as a reason for not voting. This was opposed to what we hypothesised: that abstainers in the peripheral areas would be more likely to name this as a reason.

Even though turnout in local elections in Iceland had already started to decline before

the economic crash in 2008, it can be argued that the continuing decrease after that, both in the 2010 and 2014 local elections, could have been accelerated by lack of trust in and discontent with politics after the economic crash in 2008. Regardless of whether the decline in turnout is due to the crash or simply a longer time-trend beginning before, it is important to understand the reasons behind the choice to not vote. Given that electoral participation and that as many as possible participate in democratic elections is important for the legitimacy of the political system underscores the importance of understanding abstainers personal reasoning for not voting and whether the reasons differ between different groups of abstainers. While the political system has limited scope to respond to the reasons why some voters cannot bothered to vote other than knowing that they are not mobilised to do so, it is possible, nevertheless, to respond to reasons for not voting that have to do with the political supply and the political system. That being said, how to respond is a more complicated matter, but at least we do know that part of the explanation for low voter turnout has to do with politics and the political system.

Endnotes

1. Meaning the population size is stable over time and with low in- and out-migration.
2. These data were illustrated in Eythórsson and Kowalczyk (2013), see: <http://samtid.is/index.php/samtid/article/view/2/4>
3. See: <https://datamarket.com/data/set/1wb6/traust-til-stofnana-skv-thjodarpulsi-capacent#!ds=1wb6!1xyh=1&display=line>
4. Information about Statistics Iceland's survey can be found on <http://hagstofa.is/Pages/95?NewsID=10992>.
5. In the six pre-defined statements asked about in the survey, people answered each separately. The statements were developed by the research team and partly based on replies to an open-ended question about reason(s) for not voting asked in the Icelandic National Election Study (ICENES) 2007 and 2009 available at: http://fel.hi.is/icelandic_national_election_study_icenes
6. These statements were in Icelandic: „Hversu vel eða illa átti eftirfarandi við um ástæður þess að þú kaust ekki? a) Enginn flokkanna í mínum sveitarfélagi höfðaði til mín; b) Mér fannst of margir flokkar vera í framboði; c) Mér fannst ekki skipta máli hver yrði kosinn í sveitarstjórn; d) Ég taldi að atkvæði mitt myndi ekki hafa áhrif á úrslit kosninganna; e) Til að lýsa yfir óánægju minni með kosningarnar og/eða flokkana í framboði and f) Ég nennti því ekki“.
7. An ANOVA test shows that for urban–rural residency the difference in age between those living in urban areas (mean = 41.1) and in rural areas (mean = 40.6) is not significant ($p > .05$, $df.:1.578$, $F = .06$). An ANOVA test shows that for population size the differences in age between those living in big/central municipalities (mean = 40.9), in middle-sized municipalities (mean = 40.7) and small municipalities (mean = 39.4) are not significant ($p > .05$, $df.:2.627$, $F = .20$).
8. According to a report from Arionbanki in 2010, young people between 18 and 24 years are by far the smallest group among real estate owners. See at: https://www.arionbanki.is/library/Skrar/Greiningar/Markadspunktur-/211010_Gjald%C3%BErotafrumvarp_og_skuldir_heimilanna.pdfThe municipalities in the capital area are Reykjavík, Kópavogur, Hafnarfjörður, Garðabær, Seltjarnarnes, Mosfellsbær and Kjósarhreppur.

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