

Understanding Non-Voting: An Exploratory Study Using Focus Group Research

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A decrease in voter turnout, is problematic in several respects and usually has different reasons: In the 1930s, Tingsten (1937) was able to demonstrate a simple relationship involving the so-called representation gap. According to this, decreasing voter turnout leads to social distortion in the sense of privileged status groups being placed in a better position. In concrete terms, this means that certain population groups, especially those with fewer resources, are less well represented, measured by their share of the total population, than other social groups that are generally better resourced and politically overrepresented. Due to the presumed or empirically proven connection between descriptive representation and political responsiveness, underprivileged groups feel disadvantaged. Although they do not necessarily have to be actually disadvantaged – this depends essentially on the realisation of substantial representation – the presumed circumstance of not being heard with their own concerns is already perceived negatively (Elsässer/Schäfer 2021: 8).

In Germany, participation in elections varies greatly: elections to the Bundestag regularly have the highest voter turnout. Elections to the federal parliaments, European elections and especially local elections have lower participation rates. In general, elections are considered a crucial participatory instrument for establishing democratic legitimacy (Bytzek/Roßteutscher 2011). In this study, we conduct focus groups to qualitatively question reasons for not voting. We expect that individual reasons go beyond what is known so far from quantitative research. If voter turnout decreases, it is often people from disadvantaged social classes who abstain from voting. In addition to a poorer formal education, they usually have lower incomes and more often a migration background. The individual endowment with participation-relevant resources thus plays a role in deciding whether people go to the polls or not. In addition, mobilisation reasons can be cited to explain voting and non-voting. These include socialisation experiences and peer group effects, which can have a positive or negative effect on the willingness to participate. Whether or not people go to the polls also depends to a large extent on whether politics played a role at home and whether people talk about parties and elections among peers. Finally, reasons of personal cost-benefit considerations can help to explain voter turnout: If people perceive voting as costly and consider their individual benefit or collective

benefits of political participation to be low, the likelihood of their participation in elections decreases. On the other hand, perceived political self-efficacy and party ties can have a positive effect on the willingness to participate.

The topic being addressed in our study is crucial for several reasons: First, it is necessary but difficult to find politically inactive people and activate them to participate in focus group talks. Secondly, voting is of high social desirability. Beyond radical convictions, i.e. not voting because one wants to abolish democracy, for example, people do not necessarily want to talk voluntarily about why they do or do not participate politically.

In the paper we proceed as follows: In the next section, material and method are presented. For this purpose, the city of Duisburg¹ is presented as a case study because here, for many years and in all elections, voter turnout has been and still is the lowest in national state as well as federal state comparison. In a next step, the data will be analysed qualitatively and results will be presented. We contextualise the results of the focus group discussions with regard to relevant theories and empirical results of election research and studies. Finally, we draw our conclusions and discuss them briefly at the end of the paper. It turns out that, among other aspects, an underdeveloped political knowledge prevails across all educational levels, and this finding complements or expands on previous findings from non-electoral studies – mainly survey research.

Method and Material

To gain new insights about voter absenteeism, focus group discussions were conducted in Duisburg. This chapter first provides an overview about focus group research. Second, the chapter sheds light on Duisburg as a case of a superdiverse metropolis, turnout in Duisburg across different elections and some socioeconomic parameters of the city. Third, this chapter describes the qualitative design of the study including the three stages definition of the population and preparation of the study, data generation and the analysis and interpretation of the results.

¹ The data used in the paper originates from a third-party funded research project that was carried out on behalf of the City of Duisburg in the summer and autumn of 2021.

Focus Group Research

According to a broad definition, the focus group is "Any group discussion (...) as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction" (Barbour/Kitzinger 1999: 20). In practice, focus groups are often carried out in order to get individual statements as "quickly and cheaply and and easy" (Bürki 2000: 102) rather than to interpret the interaction of the participants comprehensively (Bär et al. participants' interactions (Bär et al. 2020: 210). A narrow definition accordingly refers to the analysis of what is said (Flick 2012) and only takes into account the moderated discussion of a specific topic, which is discussed in the group in a targeted manner, (Bär et al. 2020: 212). The focus here is on the content and not on the group dynamics. Focus groups therefore focus on the content of a discussion. During the evaluation, the statements are collected and summarised rather than extensively interpreted. It is recommended that the participants do not know each other well (Bär et al. 2020: 210). Critics complain that this approach would not be fully exploited the potential of the method and that further insights could be gained by analysing the interaction and dynamics within the group (Bohnsack et al. 2010: 8). Furthermore, it is disputed whether the focus group is suitable as a stand-alone method.

Despite all the criticism, the methodological use of focus groups it is gradually increasing in the social sciences. This increase has various reasons. Integrated into a mixed-methods design (Krueger/Casey 2015; Morgan 1996: 133), the focus group is most often used in exploratory research. In the exploratory phase of quantitative surveys it supports the interpretation of survey data (Schulz 2012: 12; Bloor et al. 2001: 9f.; Hennink 2007: 13f.). In addition, focus groups are well suited to investigating group processes and dynamics (Cyr 2019: 113 and 16), which are often the very subject of social science research. In addition hypotheses can be generated through the inductive approach. The latter is one of the research goals of this study.

The Case of Duisburg

Duisburg serves as an example for a superdiverse metropolis exhibiting a low voter turnout across different elections. Duisburg's turnout declined to a rock bottom of 39 percent during the municipal elections on September 13th, 2020 (Stadt Duisburg 2020a. The timeline depicted in figure 1 illustrates that the turnout in 2020 does not solely represent a dip due to the COVID-19 pandemic – rather the number sets forth a slow trend of decline. Furthermore, the decline matches the overall development in North Rhine Westphalia, the state where Duisburg is

located (IT.NRW 2023). Despite similar developments, the turnout in Duisburg is 7.9 percent lower than on the state level when comparing similar elections. These averages do not reveal the dispersion of the turnout in local elections in Duisburg: While some districts such as Marxloh only reach a turnout of 16.6 percent, roughly 55 percent of eligible voters showed up in Großenbaum (Stadt Duisburg 2020a).

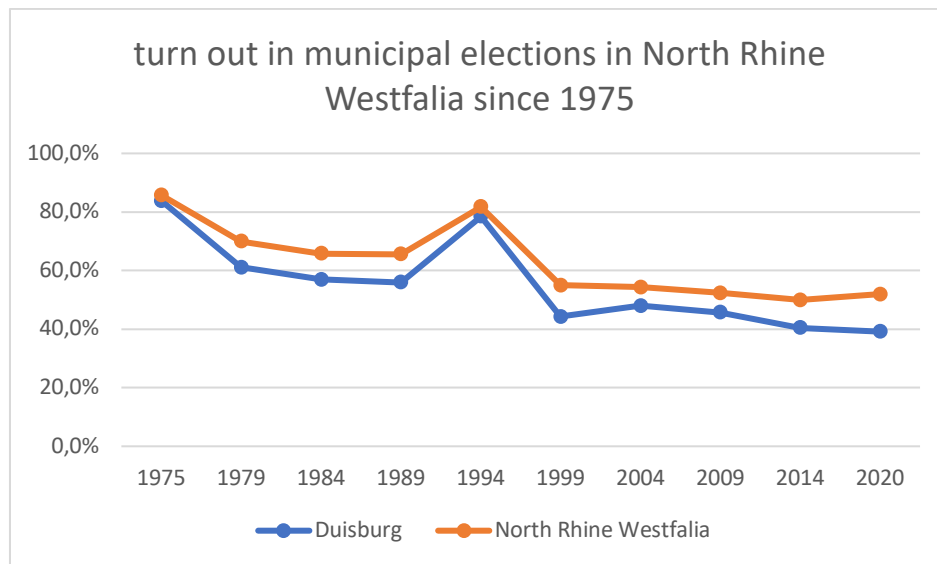


Figure 1: Turnout in municipal elections in Duisburg and the state average in North Rhine Westfalia (Stadt Duisburg 2020a; IT.NRW 2023; own depiction)

The most recent elections on state and federal level reveal a similar pattern – although on a higher level as these elections arguably do not fall into the category of second order elections. While the average turnout for the federal elections in September 2021 equals 76.6 percent on federal level (IT.NRW 2023), turnout in Duisburg averaged 68 percent. Again, the dispersion between districts is large: In district I, 72.6 percent voted; in district II 63.3 percent managed to do so (Der Landeswahlleiter 2021).

The North Rhine Westphalian state elections in May 2022 depict a similar picture: On state level, 55.5 percent of potential voters decided to cast their vote (IT.NRW 2023). In contrast to that, turnout in Duisburg only reached 46.8 percent. Again, there is a large dispersion between districts – ranging from 38.1 percent in district III – the lowest turnout state-wide – through 47.8 percent in district II up to 54.1 percent in district I (Der Landeswahlleiter 2022). Even the highest turnout in one of the Duisburg districts does not match the state average.

One might quickly attribute the low turnout in Duisburg to its status as a superdiverse metropolis with a high percentage of inhabitants with a migration background and a higher

unemployment rate. 44 percent of the population in Duisburg have a migration background compared to 26.7 percent in Germany in 2020 (Stadt Duisburg 2020b; BAMF 2021). When zooming in in detail, the dispersion in Duisburg ranges from 15 percent in Baerl to 84 percent in Bruckhausen in 2019 (Keck Atlas 2019). Similarly, the unemployment rate in Duisburg is higher than in Germany as a whole – 12.1 percent compared to 5.9 percent in 2020 (Keller 2023; Statista Research Group 2023). In line with that, the average income per person per year equals 17,741 Euro in Duisburg in 2019 (Seils/Pusch 2022). The average income per person per year in Germany reaches 23,706 Euro in the same year (Ibid.). Again, these averages hide large differences within Duisburg. When looking at the number of unemployed people per 1,000 inhabitants, figures range from 22.3 in Baerl up to 198.5 in Hochfeld in 2020 (Stadt Duisburg 2020c).

When putting these figures into the context of the municipal elections in 2020, the following picture emerges: Just four out of 36 districts barely surpassed the state average of 51.9 percent.² Four other electoral districts came close to this average.³ Some of the districts revealing a higher turnout – such as Großenbaum, Rahm or Buchholz – depict low levels of unemployment and a lower number of inhabitants with a migration background.⁴ However, other districts reveal the opposite: Hüttenheim, for example, does not score low on turnout but lies on the higher end concerning unemployment and migration background; Baerl on the opposite scores low on all of the three figures. Other districts exhibit a mixed picture. Overall, this mixed picture points to the fact that explaining turnout and election absenteeism based on the socioeconomic status and the origin of a voter might be too simplistic and other factors might play a role for not voting.

The qualitative design of the study

The qualitative design of this study involved three stages, namely the definition of the population and preparation of the study, data generation and the analysis and interpretation of the results.

² These include Duissern (53.02 percent), Bergheim-Nord (52.14 percent), Großenbaum/Rahm (54.49 percent) and Mündelheim/Hüttenheim-Süd/Ungelsheim/Huckingen-Süd (53.40 percent; Stadt Duisburg 2020).

³ Including Neudorf-Nord (51.7 percent), Rumeln-Kaldenhausen-West (51.06 percent), Buchholz-West/Huckingen-Mitte (51.39) and Wedau/Bissingheim/Buchholz-Ost (51.73 percent; Stadt Duisburg 2020).

⁴ As electoral districts and general districts are not completely congruent, these numbers just represent approximations.

- *Definition and preparation*

The first stage consists of three important parts. Firstly, the population was defined as *inhabitants of Duisburg who did not exercise their right to vote in the municipal elections in September 2020*. Secondly, the stage encompasses the recruitment of participants from this population for focus group discussions. To recruit participants from a group that is hard to reach, the authors opted to cooperate with INFO GmbH market and opinion research. The company is experienced in conducting focus group discussions and has built a pool of potential participants over years. Furthermore, the Ruhr area is an area INFO GmbH is specialized in. Apart from not having exercised the right to vote, several other characteristics were considered during the recruitment process, including age, gender, district, migration background, education, and occupation. The reason for this is to create homogeneous groups regarding education and to exclude “experts” for the topic based on occupation.

Thirdly, the stage involved the preparation for the group discussions. The training of discussion hosts through coaching by experts from the INFO GmbH and the construction of a questionnaire to stimulate group discussions formed the building blocks at this point. Theory and empirics guided the development of discussion questions. The first version was revised after a round of feedback with representatives from the INFO GmbH. Moreover, additional adaptations were made after two group discussions. The questionnaire started with some questions on “the good life in Duisburg” and the participants’ local environment to assist them to get to know each other and to create an atmosphere of trust. Furthermore, this start was supposed to get participants talking and not upset or frustrate participants by addressing a sensitive topic like voter absenteeism immediately. After discussing the personal and social environment, the questionnaire moved the discussion towards perceptions of and opinions about (local) politics in general and in Duisburg in particular. Finally, participants were posed a question about their needs to vote in future elections.

- *Data generation*

After the preparation stage, five group discussions were conducted online on three dates in September 2021. The discussions lasted 90 minutes each and included four to six participants per group, thus 27 in total. Two of the five groups comprised participants with a high formal education – in this case at least a higher education entrance qualification –; three groups

consisted of participants with a lower formal education like vocational training. All group discussions were recorded and transcribed to allow for a systematic analysis as a next step.

- *Analysis and interpretation*

Based on the transcripts of the group discussions, the authors opted for a qualitative content analysis supported by the software MAXQDA. The coding scheme was developed based on the questions for the discussion. The questions were grouped into categories and translated into codes. Two coders coded the data independent from each other reaching an intercoder reliability of approximately 80 percent. The coders harmonized the remaining 20 percent after a discussion. To analyze and interpret the data, similar statements were grouped, and dissenting views were contrasted.

Results

The results of the focus group discussions can be clustered along four dimensions: 1. Daily life and politics; 2. Interest in politics and political knowledge; 3. Perceptions of (local) politics and 4. Reasons for not voting.

1. Daily life and politics

The group discussions reveal that most participants do not have difficulties to get in touch with neighbors, friends, and colleagues. However, when talking to friends and acquaintances, conversation topics only rarely include politics. Instead, typical conversations range from small talk through the local football team to pets. If politics is a topic at all, conversations are limited to current issues like the pandemic and upcoming elections. The daily life of participants thus seems to be out of touch concerning politics.

Despite getting in touch with other people easily, the contact to other people seems to be limited to the participants' personal environment. Few participants engage in church organizations, sports clubs, social organizations, or other forms of organized civil society. As a reason for this lack of engagement, participants state a lack of interesting options close by and the lack of free time for additional time-consuming obligations.

In line with this lack of civic engagement and politics not being a popular conversation piece, the discussions suggest that participants value democracy in general but show a narrow understanding of the concept. All participants agree that democracy as a form of government

is important and value the opportunity to participate, especially through the right to vote. Nonetheless, other characteristics of liberal democracies such as the trias politica, the rule of law or basic rights were not mentioned in any of the discussions. Apart from that some participants reflected that Germans probably got used to a functioning democracy and accept democracy as self-evident. A minority of participants dissented from this view and criticized that democratic governance in Germany came to an end after the refugee situation in 2015.

2. Interest in politics and political knowledge

Interestingly, while not talking much about politics, almost all participants expressed a general interest in politics. However, the discussion revealed that the participants' political interest is often limited to electoral campaigns. Outside these time periods, participants do not seem to care about politics. Even during the limited time period of electoral campaigns for upcoming elections, the participants' interest was not pronounced and active attempts to inform oneself about the coming election were rather an exception than the rule. Most participants mentioned that they noted the presence of posters as a part of the electoral campaign. However, their perception of these posters was limited to their presence in the street; participants did not pay attention to and could not recall the content of posters. Apart from that, very few participants stated that they noticed other campaigning activities such events, street campaigns or flyers. To sum up, campaigning activities, topics and messages did not reach the participants of the focus group discussions.

Beyond elections, participants did not express a strong interest in politics. As a reason for that, some stated that there is no overlap between politics and their daily life. Some participants even felt invisible to politicians between elections. In combination with other parts of the discussion, these results point to a lack of political knowledge and a deficient civic education. Most participants, for example, expressed a very limited or no knowledge of the responsibilities of different levels of government within the federal system and assigned the most encompassing competences to the EU level and the federal government. In addition, it is striking that many participants were neither able to recognize Duisburg's city hall as a focal political arena nor to assign its mayor to a political party. Moreover, not a single participant was able to name any other elected representative on municipal level or understood that being a local representative is a voluntary activity and not a paid job. Finally, many participants

did not understand the relationship between elected representatives and representatives of the administration. They often confused or even equated the two as *the city hall*.

3. Perceptions of (local) politics

Despite this lack of knowledge, most participants did not feel the obligation or need to inform and educate themselves about (local) politics. Instead, most participants expected politicians to provide information more actively for voters and reach out to them. Two participants named the age of candidates and politicians and the resulting generational differences as a hurdle for communication and a reason why they do not feel informed properly. According to them, older representatives would not care about young people and their needs. Just one participant critically reflected that it could be one's own fault to not gather and therefore, lack information.

Notwithstanding the little knowledge and no motivation to inform themselves, participants expressed strong opinions about the municipality's problem-solving abilities, capacities, and competences. The assessment ranged from competent to completely incapable to resolve local problems. While some participants were satisfied with the municipality's attempts to solve local problems, others formulated higher expectations for improvement. Another group was completely disillusioned and articulated that local politics is incapable of solving problems.

Approximately half of the participants located themselves between these poles. Many argued that external influences and restrictions limit the room of maneuver for municipalities and explicitly point to decisions taken by other levels of government – most notably the EU and the federal government – that restrict municipalities. In addition to that, many participants mention the limited financial resources of the municipality as a restriction for problem-solving capacities and express an understanding that local representatives try the best, they can given the resources available.

4. Political participation and reasons for not voting

During the discussions, it became clear that participants are either unable or unwilling to participate and become active politically. Concerning the former, one participant mentioned that identifying the relevant contact person presents a large obstacle to get involved and point out problems to local representatives. Others expressed a lack of time, doubts to be able to

facilitate change or the positive evaluation of ones' own situation and the thereby lacking need to get active to account for the latter. Accordingly, political participation was limited to very few occasions when participants perceived an individual advantage, and the costs of participation were low like signing a petition.

All participants had in common that they did not exercise their right to vote in the municipal elections in September 2020. Many participants argued that personal circumstances – like moving, vacation or having a child – prevented them from voting. Others mentioned the pandemic, the resulting difficulties in their daily life and the fear to contract a COVID-infection as a reason for not voting. Most participants agreed that they wanted to vote – if at all – through postal voting. However, they argued that applying for postal voting was too complicated. One participant for example explained that a malfunctioning QR-code to apply for postal voting online prevented her from voting. In the end, the stakes to vote were not high enough to make an attempt at postal voting.

Apart from individual reasons and the formal prerequisites for postal voting, many participants brought up that they perceived the access to information as too complicated and the content of the information – once accessed – was too hard to understand and sometimes unintelligible. Many criticized that the amount of information did not meet their expectations as it was too little and hard to access. The other extreme included participants who were overwhelmed by the large amount of information – for example in party manifestos – and were unable to understand differences between parties and candidates based on the information given.

Discussion and Conclusion

So far, non-voting explanations are offered by resource endowment and mobilisation models. Resource endowment includes the aspect of political knowledge; mobilisation can be achieved through political conversations, individual learning and group-specific socialisation experiences. While research has so far assumed that non-voting is "inherited" in the sense of the mobilisation and socialisation thesis (Schäfer 2021), more recent studies specifically draw attention to corresponding socialisation spaces in order to reach first-time voters and voters with a migration history: "To increase voter turnout, it is very important to turn first-time voters into habitual voters. (...) Political education in schools can strengthen the socialisation of pupils with the aim of political participation. The disadvantages that tend to exist due to

lower activation at home can be partly counteracted by political education in schools" (Goerres et al. 2022, translated by authors).

The results of our study support findings from quantitative research. For example, people in the focus group discussions stated that they are rarely involved in social and other non-profit associations or in the collective spirit in general. Moreover, we found language barriers are a major problem in terms of participation in elections because basic information is not understood based on the level of complexity of the language used.

A new finding of our study is that political knowledge is underdeveloped. Especially details about the political system, politics, policies and responsibilities at the different levels of the German system are unclear or completely unknown to the participants in the focus groups. This includes participants from all levels of formal education, ranges from participants with a migration background to participants without one and applies to participants of all socioeconomic backgrounds: all of them lacked political knowledge and exhibited a narrow understanding of democracy. According to the findings of the group discussions, lack of political and democratic knowledge does not seem to be a problem of disadvantaged groups exclusively! This reveals an interesting new aspect, which should be pursued and examined in quantitative studies. For it would also promise new approaches to increasing voter turnout. With respect to Goerres et al. (2022) and the claim that to increase voter turnout, it is very important to turn first-time voters into habitual voters, it seems logical that democracy has to be learned. Preferably this could already start in school.

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