

# 1 GENERAL AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

## ЖАЛПЫ ЖӘНЕ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ПСИХОЛОГИЯ

## ОБЩАЯ И СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ПСИХОЛОГИЯ

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### SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ABSENTEEISM

#### Abstract

This comprehensive review examines the socio-psychological factors influencing political participation and absenteeism in contemporary democracies. Drawing on classical and modern theoretical frameworks including social identity theory, political efficacy models, rational choice theory, and civic voluntarism, this article synthesizes empirical findings from cross-national studies published between 2010 and 2025. The review identifies multiple levels of determinants affecting political behavior: individual psychological characteristics (political efficacy, civic duty, political interest), social factors (social capital, network embeddedness, group identification), and systemic factors (institutional trust, electoral system design, political opportunity structures). Special attention is given to emerging trends including digital political participation, generational differences in civic engagement, and the paradoxical relationship between information abundance and political apathy. The analysis reveals that political absenteeism cannot be understood simply as rational disengagement or apathy, but rather as a complex phenomenon rooted in feelings of political inefficacy, institutional distrust, systemic barriers to participation, and socio-economic marginalization. The review concludes with evidence-based recommendations for enhancing democratic participation through civic education programs, institutional reform, social capital development, and inclusive political design.

**Keywords:** political participation, voter turnout, absenteeism, political efficacy, civic engagement, social identity, political behavior.

#### Introduction

Political participation constitutes the cornerstone of democratic governance, representing the primary mechanism through which citizens influence governmental decision-making and hold leaders accountable. Yet contemporary democracies face a persistent challenge: declining rates of political participation, particularly among younger generations, and growing political disengagement across multiple forms of civic involvement [1]. This phenomenon, commonly termed political absenteeism, threatens the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic institutions worldwide.

The study of political participation has evolved significantly since the pioneering work of Verba and Nie in the 1970s. Early research focused primarily on voting behavior and conventional forms of political activity. Contemporary scholarship, however, recognizes a broader spectrum of participatory

behaviors ranging from traditional electoral participation to unconventional activism, from offline community organizing to digital political engagement [2]. This expanded conceptualization reflects both the diversification of participatory opportunities in modern democracies and the changing nature of citizenship in the digital age. Understanding why some citizens actively engage in political processes while others remain disengaged requires a multi-level analytical framework that integrates individual psychology, social dynamics, and institutional structures. Socio-psychological approaches to political participation offer particularly valuable insights by examining how individual attitudes, beliefs, and identities interact with social contexts to produce patterns of political behavior [3].

Political absenteeism manifests in multiple forms: electoral abstention (non-voting), civic withdrawal (non-participation in community organizations), political disengagement (lack of political interest or discussion), and alienation from political institutions (cynicism and distrust). Data from established democracies reveal troubling trends. Voter turnout in national elections has declined in many Western democracies over the past four decades, with particularly steep declines among young adults [1]. Membership in political parties and civic organizations has similarly contracted, contributing to what Putnam [13] termed the decline of social capital.

The consequences of widespread political absenteeism extend beyond simple numerical representation. When participation becomes unequal – with some demographic groups consistently more engaged than others – the resulting “participatory distortion” can skew policy outcomes toward the preferences of active participants, potentially exacerbating inequality and undermining democratic responsiveness [2]. Furthermore, low participation may signal deeper problems of legitimacy, indicating that significant portions of the citizenry feel disconnected from political institutions or believe their participation makes no meaningful difference.

This comprehensive literature review pursues four primary objectives:

1. To synthesize current theoretical understanding of political participation and absenteeism from socio-psychological perspectives, identifying points of convergence and remaining debates.
2. To systematically analyze empirical evidence regarding individual, social, and systemic determinants of political behavior across different national contexts.
3. To examine emerging trends and challenges in political participation, including the impact of digital technologies, generational shifts, and rising political polarization.
4. To derive evidence-based recommendations for enhancing democratic participation and addressing political absenteeism.

## Materials and methods

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology, following established protocols for comprehensive synthesis of scholarly research. The systematic approach ensures transparency, replicability, and comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature while minimizing selection bias.

Literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage: Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, Political Science Complete, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest Political Science, and national scientific databases. Search terms combined concepts of political participation and psychological factors using Boolean operators.

The search was conducted in December 2024 – January 2025, covering publications from January 2010 through December 2024, with selective inclusion of seminal earlier works.

Initial database searches yielded 847 potentially relevant publications. After removing duplicates (n=213), 634 unique records underwent title and abstract screening. This process excluded 458 records that clearly did not meet inclusion criteria. The remaining 176 full-text articles were retrieved and assessed in detail, with 89 meeting all inclusion criteria for final review. Additionally, 26 sources were added through citation tracking and reference list examination, bringing the final corpus to 115 sources.

## Results and discussion

The rational choice framework, originating with Downs [7] and refined by subsequent scholars, posits that individuals engage in political participation when expected benefits exceed costs. This

seemingly straightforward calculus faces a fundamental challenge known as the “paradox of voting”: given that a single vote has infinitesimal probability of determining electoral outcomes, rational individuals should abstain. Yet millions participate in elections worldwide [8].

Aldrich [8] and subsequent scholars have addressed this paradox by expanding the benefit calculation beyond instrumental outcomes. Expressive benefits (satisfaction from expressing one's preferences), consumption benefits (enjoyment of the participatory act itself), and social benefits (approval from peers, fulfillment of social norms) all contribute to the participation decision.

Tajfel and Turner's [4] social identity theory provides a powerful framework for understanding political behavior. The theory proposes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, and they are motivated to maintain positive distinctiveness for their ingroups relative to outgroups. When political groups become sources of social identity, participation serves identity-related functions: expressing group loyalty, differentiating from opponents, and enhancing collective self-esteem.

Huddy's [10] comprehensive review identifies several key mechanisms. First, identification with political groups increases attention to group-relevant information and mobilization appeals. Second, identity-based participation is less sensitive to rational cost-benefit calculations; identity expression itself becomes the benefit. Third, threats to the ingroup intensify identification and mobilize defensive participation.

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's [2] civic voluntarism model provides perhaps the most comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding political participation. The model identifies three categories of factors:

Resources. Time, money, and civic skills constitute the capacity to participate. Civic skills—the ability to communicate effectively, organize groups, and navigate political processes – are particularly important and are acquired through education, workplace experiences, and organizational involvement.

Psychological engagement. Political interest, efficacy beliefs, and information about politics create the motivation to participate. Without engagement, resources alone do not translate into participation.

Recruitment. Direct requests to participate from social networks, organizations, or campaigns significantly increase participation likelihood. Recruitment is especially important for non-electoral forms of participation.

Political efficacy – the belief that one can understand politics and that political participation can influence outcomes – represents one of the most robust predictors of political engagement [3]. Pollock [11] distinguished between internal efficacy (self-perceived competence) and external efficacy (perceived governmental responsiveness), a distinction that has proven theoretically and empirically valuable.

Internal efficacy reflects individuals' confidence in their own political competence: their ability to understand political issues, make informed decisions, and navigate political processes. External efficacy reflects beliefs about political institutions' responsiveness to citizen input. When individuals believe government officials care about their opinions and respond to citizen demands, they are more motivated to participate.

Civic duty – the sense that political participation is a moral obligation of citizenship – functions as a powerful motivator independent of instrumental concerns about outcomes. Blais [12] demonstrated that civic duty is among the strongest predictors of voter turnout, often outweighing rational calculations about electoral competitiveness or individual vote impact.

The concept of civic duty reflects internalized norms about appropriate citizenship behavior. When individuals view voting as a moral responsibility comparable to obeying laws or paying taxes, they participate regardless of whether their vote affects outcomes.

Political knowledge – factual information about political institutions, processes, issues, and actors – facilitates effective participation. Delli Carpini and Keeter [14] demonstrated that political knowledge enables citizens to connect their interests and values with political choices, hold leaders accountable, and resist manipulation.

Knowledge affects both the likelihood and quality of participation. Well-informed citizens participate at higher rates across most forms of political engagement. Moreover, their participation is

more likely to advance their interests, as they can better identify which candidates and policies align with their preferences.

Putnam's [13] concept of social capital – networks, norms, and trust that enable coordination and cooperation – has profoundly influenced understanding of political participation. Social capital operates through multiple mechanisms: information flows (networks transmit political information), mobilization (networks provide channels for recruitment), social pressure (networks create accountability), and collective efficacy (networks enable coordination).

Putnam [13] documented declining social capital in American society – decreasing membership in civic organizations, reduced social trust, and weakening community ties – and linked these trends to political disengagement.

Building on social identity theory, group consciousness – awareness of one's group position in society and feelings of solidarity with fellow group members – powerfully motivates political participation, especially among marginalized groups [10]. When these elements align, group consciousness produces high levels of political mobilization to advance group interests.

Trust in political institutions – confidence that governmental institutions and actors are competent, responsive, and act in the public interest – significantly affects political participation. For system-affirming participation (voting, contacting representatives), institutional trust shows positive relationships. For system-challenging participation (protests, demonstrations), trust shows negative relationships. Contemporary democracies face a troubling trend of declining institutional trust [1].

Electoral systems shape participation patterns through multiple mechanisms. Proportional representation systems typically achieve higher turnout than plurality/majoritarian systems. Registration requirements significantly affect participation—automatic or same-day registration removes key barriers [12]. Electoral competitiveness affects participation through both instrumental calculations and mobilization effects.

Education consistently emerges as the strongest sociodemographic predictor of political participation. More educated individuals participate at substantially higher rates across all participatory acts [2]. Education affects participation through developing cognitive skills, socializing civic norms, providing credential benefits, and structuring life experiences.

Younger generations in many democracies participate at lower rates than previous generations did at the same age [15]. However, generational differences show distinctive patterns: lower conventional participation but higher unconventional activism, protest participation, and online engagement. Sloam [15] argues that youth participation reflects different citizenship conceptions—from duty-based to engaged citizenship emphasizing direct action.

Boulianne's [5] meta-analysis found predominantly positive relationships between social media and civic/political participation. Social media enables novel participation forms and reduces information and coordination costs. However, effects show complexity: filter bubbles, echo chambers, clicktivism concerns, and misinformation spread [6].

Contemporary democracies face a paradox: unprecedented information access coexists with substantial political ignorance and growing disengagement. Factors include selective exposure (individuals avoid political content), information overload (excessive information creates cognitive burden), fragmentation (proliferation of sources fragments discourse), and misinformation (pollution reduces trust) [6].

Political absenteeism encompasses: electoral abstention (non-voting), civic withdrawal (non-participation in organizations), political disengagement (lack of interest or discussion), and political alienation (active rejection of or cynicism toward institutions). These forms often co-occur but can exist independently.

Individual factors include low political efficacy (doubt about understanding politics or making a difference), weak civic duty (absent sense of obligation), limited political interest, knowledge deficits, resource constraints (lack of time, money, skills), and psychological costs (stress, anxiety from political engagement).

Systemic factors include institutional distrust (belief that institutions are corrupt or unresponsive), perceived ineffectiveness (participation seems unlikely to influence outcomes), procedural barriers (registration requirements, inconvenient procedures), representation failures (available options poorly represent preferences), and corruption signaling that politics serves private rather than public interests.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that political participation and absenteeism must be understood through multi-level analysis integrating individual psychology, social relationships, and institutional structures. No single theoretical framework fully explains participatory patterns; effective understanding requires synthesis across perspectives.

At the individual level, psychological factors – efficacy, civic duty, interest, knowledge – powerfully predict engagement. At the social level, networks, organizations, and group identities shape participation through information transmission, mobilization, social pressure, and collective efficacy. At the institutional level, political structures shape participation through opportunity structures, incentive structures, and trust relationships.

Effective strategies for enhancing participation must operate across these levels simultaneously. Individual-focused interventions prove insufficient without addressing social inequalities. Similarly, institutional reforms have limited impact if individuals lack efficacy, interest, and mobilization networks. Comprehensive approaches must simultaneously build individual capacities, strengthen mobilizing networks, and reform institutions.

Digital technology's impact constitutes one of the most significant contemporary developments. Optimistic perspectives emphasize democratizing potential: reduced costs, lowered barriers, novel forms, rapid mobilization. Pessimistic perspectives emphasize risks: filter bubbles, misinformation, slacktivism, manipulation, digital divides [5, 6].

Current evidence suggests technology effects are highly contingent on design, context, and use patterns. Three policy implications emerge: first, digital participation requires parallel attention to digital literacy and information quality. Second, platform governance matters enormously for whether digital spaces facilitate constructive engagement. Third, digital participation should complement rather than replace offline engagement.

## Conclusion

Political participation constitutes the lifeblood of democratic governance. Yet contemporary democracies face persistent challenges of political absenteeism – citizens who abstain from voting, avoid civic engagement, distrust institutions, and feel disconnected from political processes. Understanding and addressing absenteeism represents a crucial task for sustaining democratic vitality.

This comprehensive literature review demonstrates that political participation and absenteeism reflect complex interactions among individual psychology, social relationships, and institutional structures. At the individual level, political efficacy, civic duty, political interest, and knowledge powerfully predict engagement. At the social level, networks, organizations, and group identities shape participation through multiple mechanisms. At the institutional level, political structures shape both opportunities and motivations.

Political absenteeism cannot be dismissed as mere apathy or rational disengagement. Rather, abstention often reflects low political efficacy, weak civic norms, institutional distrust, procedural barriers, resource constraints, and social marginalization. Addressing absenteeism requires not just mobilizing individuals but also reforming institutions to be more accessible, responsive, and deserving of trust.

Evidence-based strategies for enhancing participation must operate across multiple levels simultaneously. Institutional reforms reduce barriers and strengthen incentives. Educational interventions build capacities and motivations. Social capital development provides mobilizing networks. Targeted mobilization connects individuals to participatory opportunities. Reducing inequalities ensures genuine accessibility.

The future of democratic governance depends substantially on successfully engaging citizens across diverse backgrounds in meaningful political participation. As this review demonstrates, extensive knowledge exists about factors promoting and inhibiting engagement. The challenge now is translating this knowledge into practice through comprehensive strategies that simultaneously build individual capacities, strengthen social infrastructure, reform political institutions, and adapt to technological change.

The stakes are high. Declining participation threatens not merely electoral turnout rates but the broader health of democratic societies. When large portions of populations feel disconnected from

politics, democracies lose legitimacy, responsiveness, and problem-solving capacity. Conversely, vigorous participation across diverse populations strengthens democratic resilience, ensures representative governance, and enables collective action on shared challenges.

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## САЯСИ ҚАТЫСУДЫҢ ЖӘНЕ АБСЕНТЕИЗМНІҢ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК-ПСИХОЛОГИЯЛЫҚ ФАКТОРЛАРЫ

### Аннотация

Бұл кешенді шолу қазіргі заманғы демократияларда саяси қатысуға және абсентеизмге әсер ететін әлеуметтік-психологиялық факторларды зерттейді. Әлеуметтік идентификация теориясы, саяси тиімділік модельдері, рационалды таңдау теориясы және азаматтық еріктілік концепциясын қоса алғанда, классикалық және заманауи теориялық негіздерге сүйене отырып, бұл маңала 2010-2025 жылдар аралығында жарияланған трансұлттық зерттеулердің әмпирикалық нәтижелерін синтездейді. Шолу саяси мінез-құлыққа әсер ететін көп деңгейлі детерминанттарды аныктайды: жеке психологиялық сипаттамалар (саяситиімділік, азаматтық міндет, саяси қызығушылық), әлеуметтік факторлар (әлеуметтік капитал, желілік енуі, топтық идентификация) және жүйелік факторлар (институционалдық сенім, сайлау жүйесінің дизайны, саяси мүмкіндіктер құрылымдары). Цифрлық саяси қатысу, азаматтық белсенділіктері үрпақтар арасындағы айырмашылықтар және ақпарат молдығы мен саяси апатия арасындағы парадоксалды қатынас сияқты пайда болып жатқан үрдістерге ерекше

назар аударылады. Талдау саяси абсентеизмді жай ғана рационалды қатыспаушылық немесе апатия ретінде түсінуге болмайтынын, керісінше оны саяси тиімсіздік сезімінде, институционалдық сенімсіздікте, қатысуға жүйелік кедергілерде және әлеуметтік-экономикалық маргинализацияда тамыр жайған күрделі феномен ретінде қарастыру керектігін көрсетеді. Шолу азаматтық білім беру бағдарламалары, институционалдық реформалар, әлеуметтік капиталды дамыту және инклюзивті саяси дизайн арқылы демократиялық қатысуды күшетуге арналған ғылыми негізделген ұсныстырмен аяқталады.

**Тірек сөздер:** саяси қатысу, сайлаушылардың келуі, абсентеизм, саяси тиімділік, азаматтық белсенділік, әлеуметтік идентификация, саяси мінез-құлық.

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## СОЦИАЛЬНО-ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ФАКТОРЫ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОГО УЧАСТИЯ И АБСЕНТЕИЗМА

### Аннотация

Данный комплексный обзор исследует социально-психологические факторы, влияющие на политическое участие и абсентеизм в современных демократиях. Опираясь на классические и современные теоретические рамки, включая теорию социальной идентичности, модели политической эффективности, теорию рационального выбора и концепцию гражданского волонтеризма, настоящая статья синтезирует эмпирические данные из кросс-национальных исследований, опубликованных в период с 2010 по 2025 гг. Обзор выявляет множественные уровни детерминант, влияющих на политическое поведение: индивидуальные психологические характеристики (политическая эффективность, гражданский долг, политический интерес), социальные факторы (социальный капитал, включенность в сети, групповая идентификация) и системные факторы (институциональное доверие, дизайн избирательной системы, структуры политических возможностей). Особое внимание уделяется возникающим тенденциям, включая цифровое политическое участие, поколенческие различия в гражданской вовлеченности и парадоксальные отношения между изобилием информации и политической апатией. Анализ показывает, что политический абсентеизм не может быть понят просто как рациональное неучастие или апатия, а скорее представляет собой сложный феномен, укорененный в ощущении политической неэффективности, институциональном недоверии, системных барьерах для участия и социально-экономической маргинализации. Обзор завершается научно обоснованными рекомендациями по усилению демократического участия через программы гражданского образования, институциональные реформы, развитие социального капитала и инклюзивный политический дизайн.

**Ключевые слова:** политическое участие, явка избирателей, абсентеизм, политическая эффективность, гражданская вовлеченность, социальная идентичность, политическое поведение.

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