

POLITICAL ABSENTEEISM IN "LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES" AS AN ACADEMIC AND NORMATIVE PROBLEM

Svitlana Naumkina¹, Oleksandra Popova², Oleksandr Horbach³

Abstract. The relevance of the study is determined by the significant and steady decline in the level of citizen participation in political and public life in recent decades in so-called liberal democracies, which cannot guarantee a fair value of political freedoms for all their members. In this light, the purpose of our study is to identify and reveal the problem areas of the study of "political absenteeism" in so-called liberal democracies. The study is based on a systemic and interdisciplinary approach, as well as on a critical approach, the use of which allowed to determine the relevance and originality of our research. Special scientific methods were also used: content analysis and the method of reconstruction. They allowed us to critically rethink the existing approaches to the study of "political absenteeism" and "electoral absenteeism". It turns out that so-called liberal democracies do not currently guarantee a fair price for political freedoms for their poorest (and usually less enlightened and younger) members. "Liberal democracies" may no longer be able (or, indeed, willing) to provide the necessary conditions for citizens to articulate their demands in a way that others can understand and accept and feel as citizens united in one coherent political team. There is not only a concentration of power and influence among the newest associations, but also a strengthening of the ruling "political" class, whose members tend to have a higher socio-economic status, participate more actively in various formal and informal political activities, and have higher levels of political knowledge and influence, along with an "apolitical" class whose members have lower socio-economic status, participate less actively in politics and have lower levels of political knowledge and influence.

Key words: political absenteeism, electoral absenteeism, political participation, liberal democracy, electoral participation, national elections, political parties, trade unions, political institutions, social reforms, elite.

JEL Classification: P20, P26

1. Introduction

Currently, one of the most pressing theoretical and practical problems associated with the functioning of states (especially so-called liberal democracies) is the low and increasingly unequal participation of citizens in the political and social life of these states.

The active participation of citizens in political and public life is believed to be at least a deterrent to the uncontrolled power of elites. Among other things, it prevents the growth and consolidation of oligarchy and the takeover of democratic institutions by privileged groups, and ultimately ensures that non-elites cannot be systematically excluded.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the number of theoretical and empirical studies devoted to the

problems of political absenteeism among citizens of various (but primarily "liberal-democratic") states has increased significantly in recent decades. In particular, these issues have been studied by these Western scholars: L. Bouza (Bouza, 2014), S. Björch, N. Blomley, R. Dalton, R. Lawrence, Ph. Parvin (Parvin, 2018), R. Putnam (Putnam, 2002), Ch. Patti (Patti, et al., 2004), P. Seyd, Th. Skocpol (Skocpol, 2003), G. Stoker, P. Whiteley, K. Scholzman, and L. Jacobs. At the same time, in the post-Soviet space, similar issues were investigated by K. Arinina (Arinina, 2014), O. Baranchikov, M. Buchin (Buchin, 2011), D. Havryliuk (Havryliuk, 2011), O. Galkin (Galkin, 2004), O. Gorodnina, O. Grabar, A. Gryazev, V. Kryzhanivska, O. Kuzin, O. Kuleba (Kuleba, 2011), T. Pryadko, M. Rosenko, L. Russkikh, A. Sumina,

¹ State Institution "South Ukrainian National Pedagogical University named after K.D. Ushynsky", Ukraine (*corresponding author*)

E-mail: svetlana.naumkina@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2268-5181>

² State Institution "South Ukrainian National Pedagogical University named after K. D. Ushynsky", Ukraine

E-mail: alex-popova@ukr.net

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6244-5473>

³ Lviv Polytechnic National University, Ukraine

E-mail: Gorbachon@gmail.com

M. Folomiejew, T. Frantsuz-Yakovets, O. Tsarenko, I. Shchebetun and others. However, the vast majority of the work presented is burdened by essentially normative attitudes that supposedly require no evidence and/or meaningful explanation. And while critical, less ideological studies on the subject have recently (especially in the West) begun to appear, they tend to be "captive" to some of the most entrenched normative ideas.

2. Methodology

Therefore, the study aims to identify and uncover problem areas related to the study of "political absenteeism" in so-called liberal democracies. Research methods are used in accordance with the specifics of the study, which is based on systemic and interdisciplinary approaches, as well as a critical approach, which largely determined the relevance and originality of our research. Some general scientific methods of cognition were used, in particular, the methods of induction and deduction, analysis and synthesis, comparison and analogy, generalization and abstraction, as well as special scientific methods, such as content analysis and deconstruction method. This allowed us to critically rethink the existing approaches to studying "political absenteeism" and "electoral absenteeism".

3. Results and discussion

To better understand the phenomenon "political absenteeism", let us turn to dictionary sources first. The word "absenteeism" is associated with:

- frequent or habitual absence from work, school, etc. (DictionaryCom);
- chronic absence (as from work or school) (Merriam Webster Dictionary);
- the fact or habit of frequently being away from work or school, usually without a good reason (Collins Dictionary).

When it comes to political absenteeism, it refers to absence from political events, such as national elections, social and political conventions, without any adequate reason.

It is worth noting that the so-called political absenteeism is considered by both Western and post-Soviet researchers to be an ambiguous political phenomenon that has not yet been fully elucidated and requires further scientific research. Such Western scholars as G. Almond, S. Verba (Almond & Verba, 1965), R. Wolfinger, S. Rosenstone (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980), J. Campbell (Campbell, 1993), A. Downs (Downs, 1957), A. Cohen (Cohen, 2009), P. Lazarsfeld (Lazarsfeld, et al. 1967), S. Lipset (Lipset, 1959), R. Merton (Merton, 1938), D. Riesman (Riesman, 2010), W. Mishler, R. Rose (Mishler &

Rose, 2001), T. Parsons (Parsons, 1957), M. Fiorina, et al. identify various motives and factors underlying political (primarily electoral and conventional) absenteeism. On this basis, there are different approaches to the study of political absenteeism and different groups of factors that significantly affect the level of political absenteeism in the state.

At the same time, post-Soviet researchers, including O. Galkin (Galkin, 2004) and M. Rosenko (Rosenko, 2011) distinguish between fundamentally different groups of absentees: those who have a negative attitude to the existing order in society and/or do not believe in the possibility (personally) to change something for the better, and those who do not have serious claims to the current situation in society and/or do not seek any radical (political) changes in it. It is considered quite appropriate that post-Soviet authors emphasize various motives for political absenteeism, but they (the scholars) usually do not substantiate these motives, but "season" them with an obvious oriental flavor (which does not even provide a (sufficient) evidentiary basis). For example, K. Arinina (Arinina, 2014) and D. Havryliuk (Havryliuk, 2011) associate political absenteeism in the post-Soviet space mainly with people's despair in the political system as a whole, and political absenteeism in the so-called Western liberal democracies – with people's satisfaction with the current state of affairs in society (which is not true).

Numerous empirical studies show that the level of political (including electoral) participation in the so-called Western liberal democracies is currently low and continues to decline on many important indicators and indices.

In the European Union (European Economic Community), there has been a steady decline in popular participation in national elections since the mid-1980s (with the exception of national elections in Belgium, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Greece – those countries where voting is compulsory). In principle, the situation in local and European elections is not the best (if not the worst).

Accordingly, membership in political parties and trade unions is also becoming less attractive to European citizens. This concerns, above all, young people and the most vulnerable segments of the population, those who show an even greater level of distrust of traditional political parties and institutions (both national and European) than the citizens of the respective states as a whole (Arinina, 2014, p. 6–11).

Similar trends have generally been observed in other member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Despite some short-term setbacks and exceptions, in these countries the turnout in national and local elections,

as well as membership in political parties and trade unions decreases quantitatively (and qualitatively) (Parvin, 2018, p. 34). As in the countries of the European Union, this is related to the youngest age group (up to 24 years of age) and social groups representing lower levels of wealth and income possession (Arinina, 2014, p. 5, 9; Parvin, 2018, p. 34).

Finally, the Ukrainian researchers O. Kuleba and M. Buchyn divide all the factors that significantly affect the level of political absenteeism in the country into these categories:

- 1) subjective, which are direct characteristics of the voters themselves. Subjective factors include demographic (age, gender, place of residence, income level and social status, and in heterogeneous societies also religious, ethnic, linguistic factors, etc.) and mental-psychological (education and level of political culture) factors;
- 2) objective (social, economic and political), characterizing the situation in the country as a whole and the peculiarities of the political and electoral process in particular;
- 3) market-related that have arisen as a result of a particular set of circumstances (e.g., weather conditions, seasonal work, certain personal or family matters, etc.);
- 4) Initiative, which is understood as the purposeful influence on the electors of other subjects of political and electoral process. Such factors include various appeals to boycott elections, pressure, intimidation, direct appeals or actions to strengthen the mobilization of "their" or demobilization of "foreign" electorate, etc. (Buchyn, 2011, p. 178; Kuleba, 2011, p. 99–101).

According to the analysis of the European Parliament elections, all major socio-demographic factors, such as age, gender, place of residence, income and social status, as well as mental and psychological factors, especially educational and professional, directly or indirectly affect the likelihood of citizens voting.

In this case, the main subjective factors influencing the level of political absenteeism are as follows:

1. Age: young people between the ages of 15 and 34 are significantly more likely than the national average not to vote in elections, and the under-25 age group is significantly more likely to vote than the 25-34 age group.
2. Gender: young women abstain from voting more often than young men. This inequality is more acutely felt in the younger subgroup than in the older subgroup, where the rates of absenteeism among men and women are generally similar.
3. Place of residence: absenteeism among young voters is higher in medium-sized cities and lower in small towns, rural areas, and large cities.
4. Income level and social class: absenteeism is more common among young people who identify themselves as belonging to lower social classes.

Absenteeism is higher among students, the unemployed, and those employed in physical labor than among young professionals.

Thus, the sociological profile of a typical absentee is a woman under 25, who classifies herself as belonging to the lower social strata, has only a secondary education, has a low salary or is unemployed and lives in a medium-sized city (Bouza, 2014, p. 9–10).

However, numerous empirical studies suggest that subjective and objective factors are closely intertwined and have a decisive influence on the level of political and civic participation in so-called liberal democracies.

As Ph. Parvin rightly points out, the scientific literature already has a well-established correlation between socioeconomic status and political (especially electoral) participation in the so-called liberal democracies, as well as the correlation between their existing socioeconomic inequality and the general level of political (primarily electoral) participation. In general, the more socially and economically unequal a society is, the less its civic community is involved in politics; and the lower the socioeconomic status of a citizen compared to other members of society, the less he/she will participate in politics compared to others.

Thus, "social democracies" with relatively low levels of social and economic inequality, such as Norway, Sweden and Denmark, have one of the highest and most stable levels of political and civic participation among all OECD member countries. Conversely, market-oriented and unequal countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Canada, and New Zealand, show significant inequalities in political and civic participation, as well as an overall decline in political and civic participation in society as a whole.

The corresponding configurations and trends can be traced not only in electoral participation, but also, for example, in the involvement of citizens of the aforementioned states in traditional membership associations, among which the most influential are political parties and trade unions (Parvin, 2018, p. 34).

On the other hand, one must take into account the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected all civil, economic and political spheres throughout the world. The Ukrainian scholars M. Spivak, M. Pluhaty, L. Kochubei, A. Nekriach, S. Matchuk note rightly that even if people make up their minds to take part in presidential, parliamentary or local elections or referenda, their dates are postponed or, in some countries which keep to severe restrictive measures, there is hardly ever any opportunity to hold relevant elections and referendums (Spivak, Pluhaty, et al., 2021). Consequently, it is possible to broaden the spectrum of causes of political absenteeism in "liberal democracies" by adding a pandemic component.

It may be noted that the nature of political participation in liberal democracies has changed in recent decades (from formal and traditional to informal and non-traditional). In particular, citizens of liberal democracies are more active in signing petitions, demonstrations, and boycotts of goods or companies, as well as various NPOs (non-profit organizations) and interest groups, in contrast to the decrease in traditional membership associations, such as political parties and trade unions. But despite current trends, the level of citizen participation in informal forms of political participation is still quite low, and the nature of this participation is essentially elitist.

Numerous empirical studies show that citizen involvement in informal political participation corresponds to broader patterns of inequality among citizens, since not only is the proportion of citizens involved very low, but socially and economically advantaged members dominate. In Britain, for example, informal political participation prevails, especially among middle-aged people, professionals and managers, the rich and highly educated, residents of London and the (rich) southern counties. They are less common among the elderly, employed in the field of manual labour, the poor and the low-skilled, the (peripheral) Scottish and Welsh (Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2004, p. 85–89).

At the same time, existing inequalities not only persist but are intensifying, despite initiatives ostensibly involving greater use of electronic petitions and various targeted campaigns ostensibly aimed at "getting the vote" of youth and other disadvantaged groups. In fact, these actions only marginally increased middle-class participation, with little or no socio-economic "outsiders. Ultimately, this further deepened the inequality of political and civic participation, and thus the unequal distribution of power and influence, instead of their expected equalization among citizens. After all, the problem is much deeper than just a lack of time and/or opportunity, and has to do with broader trajectories of change in the structure of liberal democracy and civil society (Parvin, 2018, p. 37–38).

The continuing decline of civil society and traditional membership associations has contributed to the emergence and consolidation of various interest groups and lobbying organizations that have little or no direct contact with people at the grassroots level. As a result, "mass" civic associations have shrunk in number, size, and influence, and have been supplanted by new, more hierarchical organizations that operate at a distance from civil society and its members. As a result, traditional membership associations have been forced to choose between becoming "cartels", professionally managed lobbying organizations capable of interacting with other

such organizations at the elite level, or losing their influence in the democratic debate (Katz, & Mair, 2018, p. 124–150).

According to T. Skocpol's research, professionally managed, centralised elite organizations, which eventually "pushed traditional mass membership associations to the side-lines", are much less suitable for mobilising activists from less prosperous, less literate environment, and, no less, for protecting their interests in political debates. Thus, the decline of traditional membership associations has a disproportionate impact on poorer citizens and further entrenches their displacement from (mainstream) politics (Parvin, 2018, p. 203–221).

Moreover, as R. Katz and P. Mair note, "the governance of the leading parties [in liberal democracies] becomes so similar to each other (in terms of structural characteristics, political proposals, type of staff and self-interest) that it becomes appropriate to consider them as a single group, not as separate groups that should be considered independently" (Katz, & Mair, 2018, p. 127).

This process represents a shift from a model of democracy in which elected representatives make their decisions in consultation with citizens to a model in which they are made by elected representatives in consultation with insider organizations. Governance is becoming increasingly centralized in elite institutions and conducted in language and according to rules that "ordinary" citizens, for the most part, do not understand. As a result, decision-making becomes disconnected from civil society as a whole and disproportionately disconnected from the poorer sectors of the population, whose representatives do not use even the minimal opportunities formally provided to them by the political system (Katz, & Mair, 2018, p. 124–150).

Thus, as Ph. Parvin rightly points out, the problem facing modern liberal democracies is not only that poorer people do not want to be involved in politics. The fact is that modern liberal democracies have reconfigured themselves to devalue the participation of their poorer members. In liberal democracies, low-income citizens are no longer given the opportunity to develop their democratic potential and political knowledge through participation in "democratic politics". As a result, poorer citizens lose both their desire to participate in politics and their ability to participate effectively and consciously.

The problem is, above all, that many people of low socio-economic status do not feel like citizens (in anything other than a purely legal sense) and do not participate in "democratic politics." And what they do participate in is, for the most part, uncoordinated and ineffective.

These people are not interested in and do not participate in "democratic politics" because, by their

own explanation, these politics are too disconnected from life. They feel that mainstream politicians do not listen to them because the debates taking place in political institutions hardly touch the fundamental interests of the people.

After all, they do not trust either traditional politicians or the political system. Mostly they talk about feeling isolated from the political process and being insulted by it. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of these people are aware of the need for a radical change in the status quo, either in the form of Brexit or the presidency of Donald Trump (Parvin, 2018, pp. 36–38). One way or another, these people support anti-systemic political slogans, parties, and politicians, especially those deemed "populist". According to Cas Mudde, they are based on the belief that "corrupt elites have seized the political system and silenced the voice of the people by concluding backstage agreements and conspiring to silence" (Mudde, 2012, p. 7).

Thus, the process understood as the degradation of liberal democracy, and the associated rise of right-wing and left-wing populism, is seen by most researchers as a threat that must be eliminated. But both those who see the need for new mass "progressive" parties and blocs and those who propose to go beyond electoralism and make greater use of the possibilities of "direct democracy" are, according to the authors, in a "logical trap" (for example (A Collective of Anarchist Geographers, 2017; Putnam, 2002)). They acknowledge the decline of civil society in liberal democracies, but make recommendations for "rebuilding" liberal democracies as if "civil society" in them were still strong and productive. At the same time, those who believe that the process of "healing" liberal democracies must begin "from above" rather than "from below," according to the authors, are in a "logical trap" (for example (Katz, & Mair, 2018; Parvin, 2018)). They recognize that the metamorphosis (which liberal democracies have undergone in recent decades) was planned and occurred in the interests of the ruling socio-economic (and ultimately political) class. It is believed that this policy was in the fundamental interests of the elites, so it is unclear

why the socio-economic (and with it the political) elites would begin to pursue a fundamentally different policy. Thus, in the view of the authors, current trends are likely to continue, regardless of to whom and how "social reformers" might address their programs aimed at "restoring" liberal democracies (no matter how much they criticize the "critical approach").

4. Conclusions

So-called liberal democracies do not currently guarantee a fair value for the political freedoms of their poorest (and usually less educated and younger) members. "Liberal democracies" can no longer (and in fact do not want to) provide the necessary conditions for citizens to formulate their requests in a way that others can understand and accept, and, last but not least, to feel like citizens united as a whole political team.

The reconfiguration of civil society and its associations has closed the main avenues for poorer citizens to obtain political representation and social capital. And as traditional associations with mass membership are displaced by newer associations that mobilize citizens of predominantly higher socioeconomic status, social capital continues to be concentrated among wealthier people. As a result, there is not only a concentration of power and influence among the newest associations, but also a strengthening of the ruling "political" class, whose members tend to have a higher socio-economic status, who participate more actively in various formal and informal political activities and have a higher level of political knowledge and influence, and the "apolitical" class, whose members tend to have a lower socioeconomic status, are less actively involved in politics, and have a lower level of political knowledge and influence.

Nevertheless, the authors firmly believe that current trends will continue regardless of to whom and how "social reformers" may address their programs aimed at "restoring" liberal democracies. The authors hope that none of the pandemics associated with COVID-19 will ever affect the political activism of citizens in both liberal and illiberal countries.

References:

- Almond, G., & Verba, S. (1965). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*.
- Arinina, K. I. (2014). Political Absenteeism: Causes and Consequences. *Proceedings of Kazan University. Humanities Series*, 156(1), 214–220. (in Russian)
- Buchyn, M. A. (2011). Absenteeism as a type of electoral behavior. *Political science studies*, 2, 174–182. (in Ukrainian)
- Cohen, E. (2009). *Semi-citizenship in democratic politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, J. E. (1993). *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Collins Dictionary (n. d.). *Absenteeism*. Available at: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/absenteeism>
- DictionaryCom. (n. d.). *Absenteeism*. Available at: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/absenteeism>
- Downs, A. (1957). An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy. *Journal of Political Economy*, 65(2), 135–150.

- Fiorina, M. P. (1992). *Divided Government*. New York: Macmillan.
- Galkin, A. A. (2004). About the sensation that didn't happen. *Polis*, 1, 6–9. (in Russian)
- Havryliuk, D. Yu. (2011). Political research on the causes of the phenomenon of absenteeism in political practice. *Scientific Journal of National Pedagogical Dragomanov University [Series 22], Political Sciences and Teaching Methodology of Socio-Political Disciplines*, 6, 106–112. (in Ukrainian)
- Kuleba, O., & Buchyn, M. (2011). Absenteeism as the form of low political activity. *Ukrainian National Idea: Realities and Prospects of Development*, 23, 98–102. (in Ukrainian)
- Rosenko, M. (2011). Absenteeism and its influence on the formation of parliamentarism. *Public administration: theory and practice*, 3, 99–105. (in Ukrainian)
- A Collective of Anarchist Geographers (2017). Beyond electoralism: reflections on anarchy, populism, and the crisis of electoral politics. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 16(4), 607–642.
- Bouza, L. (2014). Addressing Youth Absenteeism in the European Elections. *European Youth Forum*. Brussels, 48 p.
- Katz, R. S., & Mair, P. (2018). *Democracy and the Cartelization of Political Parties*. Oxford University Press, xiv+219 p.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1967). *The People's Choice*. 3a ed. Nova York: Columbia University Press.
- Lipset, S. (1959). Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy. *The American Political Science Review*, 53(1), 69–105.
- Merriam Webster Dictionary (since 1828). *Absenteeism*. Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/absenteeism>
- Merton, R. K. (1938). Social Structure and Anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3(5), 672–682.
- Mishler, W., & Rose, R. (2001). Political Support for Incomplete Democracies: Realist vs. Idealist Theories and Measures. *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique*, 22(4), 303–320.
- Mudde, C. (2012). Three Decades of Populist Radical Right parties in Western Europe: So What? *European Journal of Political Research*, 52, 1–19.
- Parsons, T. (1957). The Distribution of Power in American Society. *World Politics*, 10, 123–143.
- Parvin, Ph. (2018). Democracy Without Participation: A New Politics for a Disengaged Era. *Res Publica*, 24, 31–52.
- Pattie, Ch., Seyd, P., & Whiteley, P. (2004). *Citizenship in Britain: values, participation and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, xvii+364 p.
- Putnam, R. A. (ed.) (2002). *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Societies*. New York: Oxford University Press, vi+516 p.
- Riesman, D. (2010). *From Law to Social Criticism*. 58 Buff. L. Rev. 1005.
- Skocpol, Th. (2003). *Diminished democracy: from membership to management in American civic life*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, xviii+366 p.
- Spivak, M., Pluhaty, M., Kochubei, L., Nekriach, A., & Matchuk, S. (2021). Features of public electoral administration in situation of pandemic. *Amazonia Investiga*, 10(47), 54–61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2021.47.11.6>
- Wolfinger, R. E., & Rosenstone, S. J. (1980). *Who Votes?* New Haven, Yale University Press.