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LETTER

# Understanding Voter Fatigue: Election Frequency and Electoral Abstention Approval

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**Abstract**

The existing literature shows that frequent elections depress electoral participation and contribute to the global decline in voter turnout. However, the causal mechanisms remain unclear. This paper investigates the sources of voter fatigue and hypothesizes that frequent elections make electoral abstention more acceptable to citizens. It tests the main hypothesis via an original pre-registered survey experiment fielded in five countries with a total sample size of 12,221 respondents. The results provide pioneering evidence on the psychological effects of election frequency. They confirm that high election frequency increases the social acceptability of electoral abstention and that this effect is proportional to the number of past elections. It can be equally observed among all major social groups, including politically engaged citizens and those who believe that voting is a civic duty. These findings hold major implications for our understanding of voter turnout and democratic institutional engineering.

**Keywords:** elections; voter turnout; election frequency; voter fatigue; electoral abstention

## Introduction

Liberal democracies have experienced a significant increase in election frequency in recent decades, resulting from processes such as decentralization, European integration, growing popularity of direct democracy, and various idiosyncratic institutional reforms (Kostelka et al. 2023). While these processes expand voters' choices, there is also evidence that they may decrease citizen participation. The existing literature finds that high election frequency is detrimental to voter turnout (Rallings, Thrasher and Borisyuk 2003; Fauvelle-Aymar and Stegmaier 2008; Schakel and Dandoy 2014; Garmann 2017; Nonnemacher 2021; Rivard, Bodet, and Boucher-Lafleur, forthcoming; Briatte, Kelbel and Navarro 2024), even in legislative contests (Kostelka et al. 2023). It is thus not surprising that the ongoing proliferation of elections contributes to the global decline in voter turnout (Kostelka and Blais 2021). However, the causal mechanisms remain understudied. Especially, we do not know to what extent the reduction of participation is based on conscious decisions made by citizens that would reflect their conditional perception of the participatory norm.

This paper addresses these questions and theorizes how election frequency may affect citizens' acceptance of electoral abstention. Building on the classic voting calculus (Downs 1957), it hypothesizes that when election frequency increases, electoral abstention becomes more socially acceptable. It tests the hypothesized mechanism through an original and pre-registered survey experiment, fielded in five countries: Czechia, France, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. Each of

these countries holds a variety of election types, ranging from presidential to European Parliament to municipal elections, and thus exposes its citizens to considerable variation in election frequency. The experiment includes 12,221 respondents interviewed between November and December 2023.

The empirical results provide pioneering evidence on the psychological effects of election frequency. They demonstrate that frequent elections make electoral abstention more acceptable to citizens, and this effect is proportional to the number of past elections. Furthermore, neither the type of past elections nor citizens' sociodemographics and attitudes moderate this relationship. Although older citizens, those more educated, those interested in politics, and those who believe that voting is a civic duty are generally less likely to approve of electoral abstention, they are just as susceptible to the influence of election frequency as the rest of the electorate. These findings carry major implications for our understanding of voter turnout and democratic institutional engineering.

## Theory and Hypotheses

According to the voting calculus (see Equation 1), the decision to cast a ballot results from a cost-benefit analysis (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Blais 2000). Voters participate in elections when instrumental benefits $B$, multiplied by the probability of casting a decisive ballot $P$, are larger than voting costs $C$. Given that $P$ is negligible in large electorates, voting is a paradox from a purely instrumental perspective. The existing literature responds to this paradox by adding a non-instrumental term $D$ to the equation, which stands for psychological rewards from voting (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). It reflects the fact that citizens view voting as both a duty and an ethical obligation toward their fellow citizens.

$$\text{Participation} = B * P - C + D \tag{1}$$

In empirical research, the feeling that voting is a civic duty has been found as one of the main drivers of voter turnout (Blais 2000; Blais and Rubenson 2013; Blais and Achen 2019; Blais and Daoust 2020). The results of existing studies demonstrate that voters believe there is a participatory norm with which they should comply.[1] In the European Social Survey, an overwhelming majority of respondents report that good citizens vote in elections (Robison 2023). The existence of such a norm is corroborated *inter alia* by the under-reporting of electoral abstention that is observed in most post-election surveys (Morin-Chassé et al. 2017).

While the feeling that voting is a civic duty is fairly stable over time (Feitosa and Galais 2020), its effect may depend on the context. External or personal circumstances (for example, extremely adverse weather conditions, illness, or the need to care for family members) presumably mitigate the feeling of guilt in cases of abstention. When the costs of compliance with the norm augment, citizens are not only less likely to vote but also less likely to assume that their abstention makes them bad citizens. I thus postulate that the participatory norm is best seen as conditional: good citizens have the duty to vote *as long as the costs of voting remain reasonable*.

Election frequency is one of the contextual factors that determine the costs of compliance with the participatory norm. When the number of separately held elections increases,[2] remaining a citizen who votes in all elections becomes much more costly compared to a situation with low election frequency. Election frequency may thus provoke voter fatigue, which corresponds to 'a temporary reduction in willingness to act upon one's predispositions and external incentives for

[1]The role of this norm is different in autocracies, where democratically-minded opponents of the regime do not feel a duty to vote (Reuter 2021).

[2]The existing literature has devoted considerable attention to the effects of holding simultaneous elections, showing their positive impact on participation rates (Anzia 2011; Fauvelle-Aymar and François 2015; Kostelka 2017; Leininger, Rudolph and Zittlau 2018).

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voting' (Kostelka et al. 2023, 2238). When being a good citizen becomes too costly (that is, when there are too many participatory demands), the effect of the participatory norm is partially deactivated temporarily.[3] Citizens still believe that, in normal circumstances, their duty is to participate in elections, and they disapprove of electoral abstention. However, this disapproval momentarily weakens as elections proliferate. Therefore, I hypothesize that high election frequency makes electoral abstention more socially acceptable.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** *The higher the election frequency, the more socially acceptable it is to abstain in elections.*

An important theoretical and empirical question is whether the effect of different types of past elections on the acceptability of electoral abstention is interchangeable. The literature has long either explicitly or implicitly suggested that first-order (national legislative and presidential) elections contribute more to voter fatigue than second-order (transnational and subnational) elections (Norris 2002; Ezrow and Xezonakis 2016; Rallings, Thrasher and Borisyuk 2003; Fauvelle-Aymar and Stegmaier 2008; Schakel and Dandoy 2014; Garmann 2017; Nonnemacher 2021).[4] However, a systematic examination in the most extensive study of election frequency to date found that the difference in the effects of past first-order and second-order elections on current voter turnout is substantively small and statistically insignificant (Kostelka et al. 2023). These findings suggest that it is more important for participation whether any election was held recently, rather than whether this election was first-order or second-order. I, therefore, hypothesize that, when it comes to the effect of election frequency on the social acceptability of electoral abstention, it does not matter whether the past election was first-order or second-order.[5]

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** *Election type does not matter for the relationship between election frequency and social acceptability of voter abstention.*

Finally, it is plausible that election frequency exerts heterogeneous effects on citizens. Two types of attitudes are particularly conducive to participation (Blais and Daoust 2020): the feeling that voting is a civic duty and an interest in politics. These participation-friendly attitudes may constitute a wellspring of participatory goodwill that attenuates voter fatigue. If citizens are strongly attached to the voting norm (that is, they believe voting is a civic duty), they may resist voter fatigue and be less complacent toward abstainers. Similarly, citizens who are strongly interested in politics are likely to consider the voting act as little costly and enjoyable, thus being potentially more resistant to voter fatigue.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** *Those citizens who strongly believe that voting is a civic duty are less likely to accept the excuse of election frequency for electoral abstention.*

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** *Those citizens who are strongly interested in politics are less likely to accept the excuse of election frequency for electoral abstention.*

[3]Deactivation is a concept borrowed from psychology to account for behaviour that is not in line with the individual's attitudes. For its use in political science, see Hawkins, Kaltwasser and Andreadis (2020) and Artes and Jurado (2025).

[4]The distinction between first-order and second-order elections was first conceptualized by Reif and Schmitt 1980.

[5]It should be emphasized that Hypothesis 2 pertains to the type of preceding elections, not the type of election in which voter turnout or the acceptability of electoral abstention is measured. Regarding the latter, previous research suggests that second-order elections are more vulnerable to the negative effects of election frequency than first-order elections (Kostelka et al. 2023, 2248).

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## Data and Methods

To test the new hypotheses, I pre-registered an original vignette experiment embedded in a larger public opinion survey.[6] The survey was fielded in five European countries: Czechia, France, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. All of these countries conduct a large variety of elections,[7] which makes temporal variation in election frequency realistic and meaningful. The survey was administered via computer-assisted online interviews between November 21 and December 11, 2023. For each country, I obtained a quota-based sample defined in terms of sex, age, region, size of municipality, and education. The minimal planned sample size was 11,500 respondents (2,300 respondents per country) based on a power analysis (see Appendix E). The final sample size reached 12,221 respondents (approximately 2,450 respondents per country). This research received ethical approval from the European University Institute's Ethics Committee.

The experiment randomly divided respondents into five equally sized groups. Each group was presented with a vignette describing a scenario about a hypothetical citizen named Peter. Peter is a regular voter, but he abstained in a recent legislative election. The vignettes varied in the degree of election frequency that preceded Peter's abstention in the legislative election. This frequency ranged from zero (control group) to three elections. The vignettes are as follows:

**Vignette 1** (control group): 'In previous years, Peter regularly voted in elections. This year, one election took place: a legislative election. Peter felt busy at work and abstained in that legislative election.'

**Vignette 2** (treatment: presidential): 'In previous years, Peter regularly voted in elections. This year, two elections took place: a presidential election and a legislative election. After having voted in the presidential election, Peter felt busy at work and abstained in the legislative election.'

**Vignette 3** (treatment: municipal): 'In previous years, Peter regularly voted in elections. This year, two elections took place: a municipal election and a legislative election. After having voted in the municipal election, Peter felt busy at work and abstained in the legislative election.'

**Vignette 4** (treatment: European): 'In previous years, Peter regularly voted in elections. This year, two elections took place: a European Parliament election and a legislative election. After having voted in the European Parliament election, Peter felt busy at work and abstained in the legislative election.'

**Vignette 5** (treatment: three elections): 'In previous years, Peter regularly voted in elections. This year, four elections took place: a presidential election, a European parliament election, a municipal election, and a legislative election. After having voted in the first three elections, Peter felt busy at work and abstained in the legislative election.'

After reading their vignette, respondents were asked whether they found Peter's decision to abstain in the legislative election acceptable or not. Their answers were given on a 0–10 scale where 0 means 'totally unacceptable' and 10 means 'totally acceptable'.[8] All respondents were then invited to complete a manipulation check. They had to report how many elections took place in their vignette and in how many elections Peter abstained.

The main empirical analyses are based on an ordinary least squares regression model (see Equation 2). For each individual $i$ from country $j$, abstention acceptability is regressed on a vector of country-fixed effects $\alpha$ and a vector of treatment dummy variables *Group*. The control group

[6]Appendix F in the Supplementary Material provides a blinded version of the pre-registration.

[7]All of these countries regularly conduct presidential, legislative, regional, municipal, and European parliament elections, and they all have held at least one referendum in the last twenty years.

[8]The question reads as follows: 'Do you find Peters' decision to abstain unacceptable or acceptable? Use a 0 to 10 scale where 0 means totally unacceptable and 10 means totally acceptable.'

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(Group 1) always serves as the reference category. Hypothesis 1 is tested by comparing the control to Groups 2 to 5 (variable *Any Treatment*), and Groups 2 to 4 (*One Election*) to Group 5 (*Three Elections*). The test of Hypothesis 2 compares the coefficients of Groups 2, 3, and 4 (variables *Presidential*, *Municipal*, and *European*).

$$\text{Acceptability}_i = \alpha_j + \beta_g * Group_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Respondents' sense of civic duty and political interest are measured through two 0-10 scales (variables *Duty* and *Interest*).[9] To test Hypothesis 3, I regress the acceptability score on the variables *Any Treatment* and *Interest*, and their interaction, in addition to the country-fixed effects $\alpha_j$ (see Equation 3). The test of Hypothesis 4 replaces *Duty* with *Interest*.

$$\text{Acceptability}_i = \alpha_j + \beta_1 * \text{Any Treatment}_i + \beta_2 * \text{Duty}_i + \beta_3 * \text{Any Treatment}_i * \text{Duty}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

The Appendix shows that the results are not sensitive to the exclusion of any of the five countries. Given the full randomization, the main analyses presented in the Results section do not adjust for any observables (Mutz, Pemantle and Pham 2019). However, the Appendix demonstrates that the control and treatment groups are balanced in terms of basic socio-demographics (gender, age, education, and subjective income) and that the main results are robust to the inclusion of these variables as controls or using them to adjust the analyses via propensity score matching (Abadie and Imbens 2006).

For many reasons, any possible effects observed in this experiment may underestimate the true effects of election frequency on individuals' voting decisions. The experiment asks about Peter's and not the respondents' own hypothetical behaviour to reduce social desirability bias, endemic in surveys on turnout (Morin-Chassé et al. 2017). However, respondents tend to evaluate others' moral failures more harshly than their own. The social psychology literature shows that individuals tend to commit self-indulging attribution errors, consider situational context more heavily, and use moral license when judging their own behaviour (Jones and Nisbett 1972; Merritt, Effron and Monin 2010; Ross 2018). They are thus probably significantly more lenient toward their own abstention than the abstention of others when election frequency grows.

This experiment is also conservative in that it makes the effect of election frequency difficult to manifest. First, it focuses on participation in a legislative election, and prior research shows that voter turnout tends to be less affected by election frequency in first-order elections than in second-order elections (Kostelka et al. 2023). Second, the experiment offers a reasonable excuse for abstention: being busy at work.[10] Weaker excuses or the absence of any excuse would make respondents' approval depend entirely on election frequency. Any observed effects in this experiment may thus be stronger for participation in second-order elections and for voters who cannot claim any legitimate excuse for their abstention.[11]

[9]They are based on the following questions:

*Question 1*: 'Different people feel differently about voting. For some, voting is a DUTY. They feel that they should vote in every election, however they feel about the candidates and parties. For some, voting is a RIGHT. They feel free to vote or not to vote in an election depending on how they feel about the candidates and parties. For you personally, is voting in an election first and foremost a duty or a right? On the scale below, 0 means that "voting is a duty" and 10 means "voting is a right."'

*Question 2*: 'How interested are you in politics?' (0 = Not at all, 10 = Very much).

[10]In some countries, elections take place on Sundays, and religious Christians may disapprove of Sunday work. Model 5 in Table A5 demonstrates that the main experimental results do not differ for observant Christians.

[11]The research design is further discussed in Appendix G.

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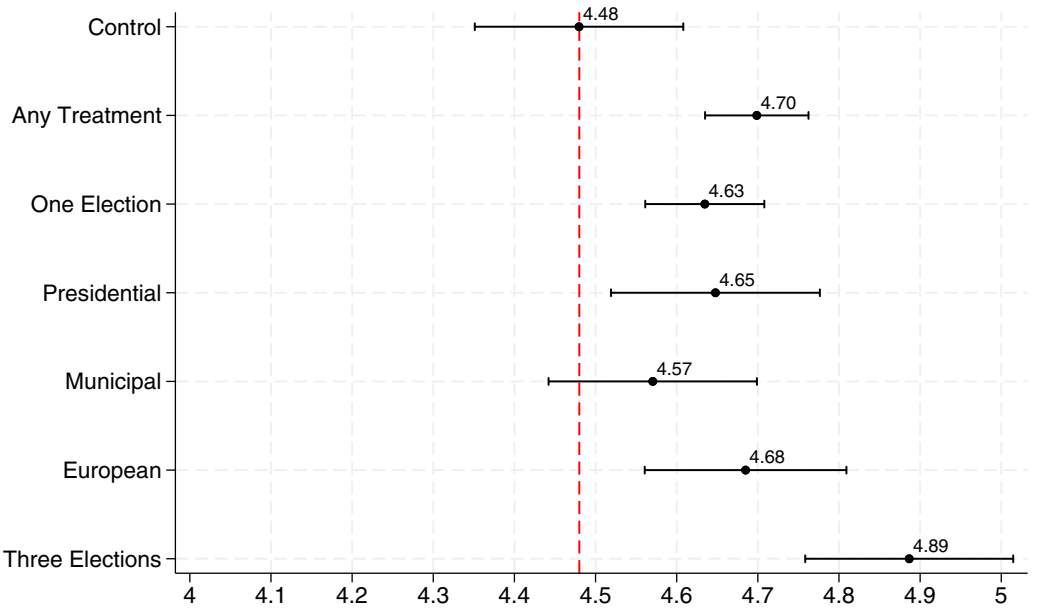


**Figure 1.** Group Means on the Dependent Variable.
***Note:*** 95 per cent confidence intervals.

## Results

Figure 1 reports the means on the dependent variable for the control group and different treatment conditions. The baseline level of electoral abstention acceptance in the control group is 4.48 on the 0–10 scale. In all the treated samples, the acceptance level is higher, and in most cases, the difference is statistically significant.[12] This provides strong preliminary evidence supporting the positive effect of election frequency on the acceptance of electoral abstention.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 are rigorously tested in Table 1, which includes country fixed effects. The results are graphically displayed in Figure 2. The different model specifications clearly support Hypothesis 1. According to Model 2, the treatments increase citizens' acceptability of abstention on average by approximately 4.5 per cent (0.21 compared to the baseline level of 4.49). Model 5 reveals that the effect is even stronger (0.27, about 6 per cent) for those who passed the manipulation check. When three elections take place, the acceptability of abstaining increases according to Model 3 by 9 per cent (0.4). The difference between the effect of one election and that of three elections is substantively and statistically significant (0.25, $p < 0.001$), which demonstrates the cumulative nature of election frequency's effects. The more elections that take place, the more socially acceptable it becomes to abstain.

The results also support Hypothesis 2. A European Parliament election, which is a quintessential example of a second-order electoral contest (Reif and Schmitt 1980), does not exert a substantively weaker effect than a presidential election. Although the regression coefficient of *Municipal* (0.07) is smaller than that of *Presidential* (0.16) and *European* (0.2), the difference is statistically insignificant ($p > 0.16$ in both cases). Altogether, there is no evidence that the type of past election matters for the effect of election frequency.

[12]T-tests show that the difference compared to the control group is statistically significant at the 0.05 level for *Any Treatment* ($p < 0.01$), *One Election* ($p < 0.05$), *European* ($p < 0.05$), and *Three elections* ($p < 0.001$). *Presidential* also nearly meets the threshold ($p = 0.07$), but *Municipal* is clearly insignificant ($p = 0.33$).

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**Table 1.** Effect of Election Frequency

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | All respondents | All respondents | All respondents | All respondents | Passed m. check |
| Any Treatment | 0.22 (0.07)** | 0.21 (0.07)** | | | 0.27 (0.09)** |
| One Election | | | | 0.15 (0.07)* | |
| Presidential | | | 0.16 (0.09)# | | |
| Municipal | | | 0.07 (0.09) | | |
| European | | | 0.20 (0.09)* | | |
| Three Elections | | | 0.40 (0.09)*** | 0.40 (0.09)*** | |
| Constant | 4.48 (0.06)*** | 4.49 (0.06)*** | 4.49 (0.06)*** | 4.49 (0.06)*** | 4.46 (0.08)*** |
| Country FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| N | 12221 | 12221 | 12221 | 12221 | 7308 |
| R2 | 0.001 | 0.016 | 0.017 | 0.017 | 0.022 |

***Note:*** OLS regression. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

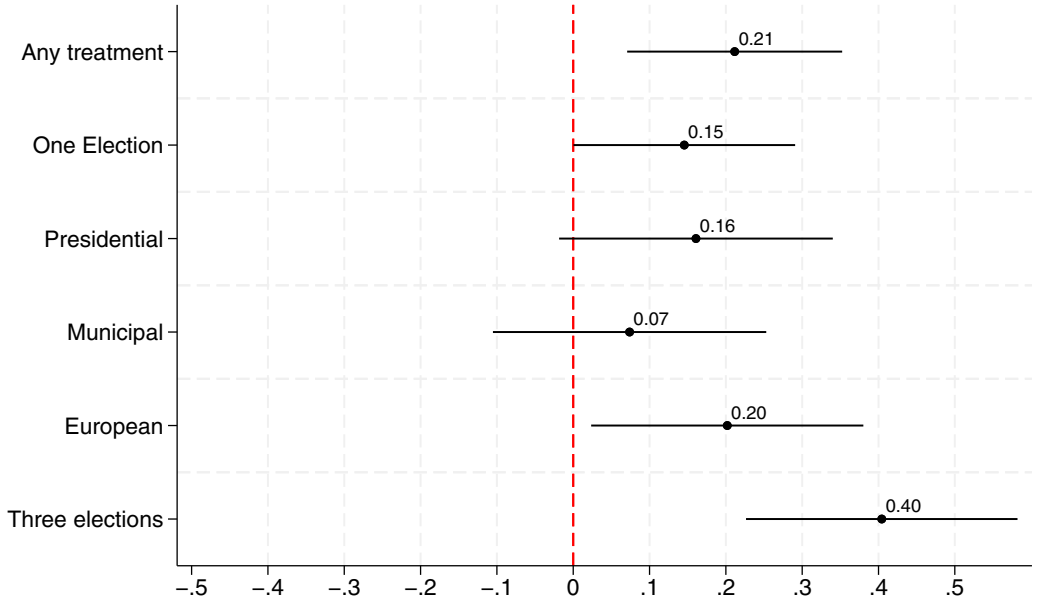


**Figure 2.** Effects of Different Types of Treatment.
***Note:*** Coefficients from Models 2 to 4 in Table 1. 95 per cent confidence intervals.

By contrast, Hypotheses 3 and 4 receive no support in Table 2. The results are graphically displayed in Figure 3. The interactions between *Any Treatment* and respondents' feelings that voting is a civic duty and political interest, respectively, are substantively and statistically insignificant. Those who believe that voting is a civic duty and those who are politically interested are less likely to condone electoral abstention, but they are not less affected by election frequency. Appendix D shows that socio-demographic characteristics and reported participation in the last legislative election do not moderate the relationship either. Although female, older, more educated, and less affluent respondents, and those who voted in the last election, are less likely to approve of abstention, they are just as reactive to election frequency as anyone else.

Appendix C shows that the positive effect of election frequency on the acceptance of electoral abstention holds even when we remove any country one at a time from the sample, when we control for basic sociodemographics (gender, age group, education, and subjective income), or

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**Table 2.** Moderation by Political Interest and Civic Duty

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Any Treatment | 0.19 (0.07)** | 0.09 (0.10) | 0.21 (0.07)** | 0.06 (0.15) |
| Duty | −0.24 (0.01)*** | −0.26 (0.02)*** | | |
| Any Treatment X Duty | | 0.02 (0.02) | | |
| Interest | | | −0.09 (0.01)*** | −0.11 (0.02)*** |
| Any Treatment X Interest | | | | 0.03 (0.02) |
| Constant | 5.51 (0.07)*** | 5.59 (0.09)*** | 4.97 (0.08)*** | 5.09 (0.13)*** |
| Country FE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| N | 12221 | 12221 | 12221 | 12221 |
| R2 | 0.092 | 0.092 | 0.023 | 0.023 |

***Note:*** OLS regression. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

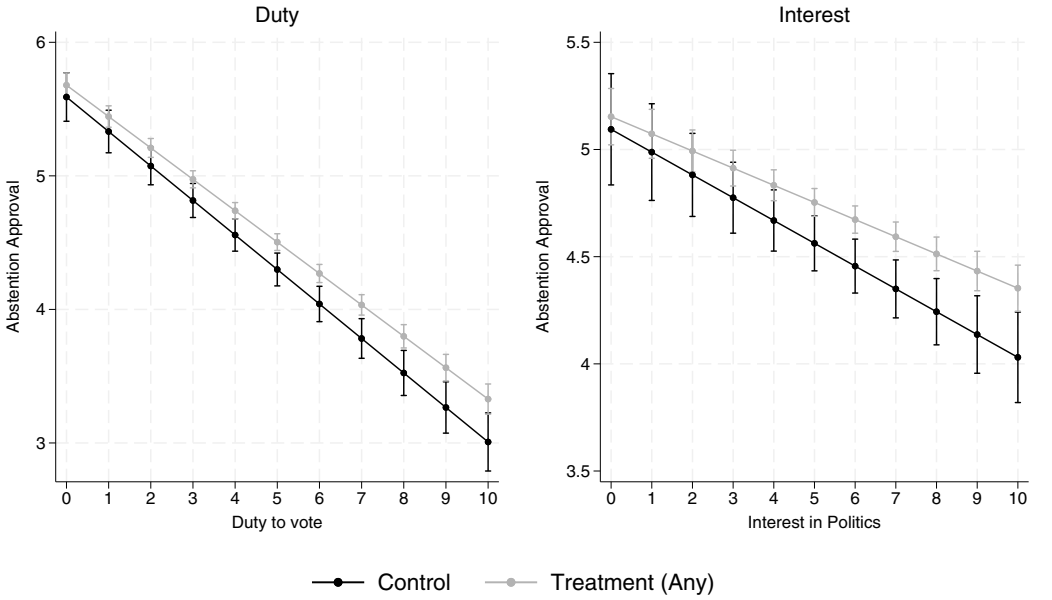


**Figure 3.** Graphical Representation of the Results from Models 2 and 4 from Table 2.

when we calculate average treatment effects using propensity score matching on the main sociodemographics.

## Discussion

This study designed an original survey experiment to investigate how election frequency conditions the perception of electoral abstention. The analyses draw on 12,221 respondents from five countries and demonstrate a strong conditioning effect of election frequency. When abstention is preceded by participation in a recent election, it becomes significantly more acceptable to citizens. This psychological effect increases with the number of recent elections, whereas the type of recent elections does not matter.[13] No major social group is immune: the effect

[13]This experiment does not test the role of snap elections, which could potentially be more disruptive to the election cycle and citizen participation. However, previous research did not find that past snap elections would contribute differently to election frequency compared to past regular elections (Kostelka et al. 2023, 2247). Therefore, I do not expect that participation in a past snap election would make abstention more or less acceptable than participation in a past regular election.

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is observed even among those who are interested in politics and those who believe that voting is a civic duty.

The magnitude of the effect detected in this experiment is substantial (up to 9 per cent), yet it may be even stronger in the real world. As humans are subject to a variety of self-indulging biases (Jones and Nisbett 1972; Merritt, Effron and Monin 2010; Ross 2018), they are more likely to excuse their own abstention due to contextual factors than excuse that of others.

These findings align with recent analyses of voter turnout and help elucidate the mechanism behind voter fatigue. They suggest that when elections proliferate, citizens' willingness to participate declines. There is, thus, a trade-off between the number of opportunities for electoral participation and the actual level of electoral participation. As low turnout carries undesirable consequences for equality, representation, and party competition (Blais, Dassonneville and Kostelka 2020), policymakers should strive to empower citizens without increasing the participatory burden. The most effective strategy is to reorganize electoral agendas and, when possible, hold multiple elections simultaneously, which prior research has shown to boost voter turnout (Anzia 2011; Fauvelle-Aymar and François 2015; Kostelka 2017; Leininger, Rudolph and Zittlau 2018).

Future studies should corroborate the present findings with observational data and expand on them. In particular, they should explore the extent to which election frequency makes citizens perceive changes in the external social pressure to participate in their environment. They should also investigate the temporality of voter fatigue.[14] More generally, future research should investigate the degree of political participation that citizens in democracies consider appropriate and realistic.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article, which includes all the appendices referred to in the text, can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425000171.

**Data availability statement.** Replication data for this article can be found in Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/XY7EM6.

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**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

**Ethical standards.** This research received ethical approval from the European University Institute's Ethics Committee.

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[14]This experiment shows that high election frequency makes electoral abstention more acceptable. However, future studies should examine how long this effect persists.

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