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## Article

# Political engagement, media, or satisfaction? Finding determinants of voter turnout in the Czech Republic

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# Political Engagement, Media, or Satisfaction? Finding Determinants of Voter Turnout in the Czech Republic

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## Abstract

Many democracies across the world are experiencing issues with declining voter turnout, and the Czech Republic is not exempt to this trend. Over the past 30 years, turnout has decreased in this country by almost 20 percentage points. The aim of this research is to identify the determinants that mobilize (or demobilize) citizens to vote in the context of the Czech political environment and to describe the relationships between them. Specifically, we focus on the mobilizing effect of political engagement, mainstream and alternative media, and citizen satisfaction in various aspects of life. The research is based on the responses of a representative sample of respondents (N = 807) and uses structural equation modelling to analyse the responses. Our results show that of all the determinants examined, turnout is particularly influenced by citizens' political engagement. Surprisingly, consumption of mainstream and alternative media content, and citizen satisfaction are not shown to mobilize citizens to vote. However, these determinants have been shown to be significantly related to political engagement and it can be suggested that political engagement is a mediating variable. Thus, we show that it is appropriate to pay attention not only to the direct effects of individual determinants on turnout when examining the determinants of turnout, but also to examine decision-making processes in a broader context.

## Keywords

Election, Voter turnout, Media, Satisfaction, Political engagement

## JEL Classification

D072

## Introduction

The act of citizens voting in public elections is fundamental to democracy (Holbein et al., 2023). The essence of democratic decision-making is the pooling of citizens' individual preferences into society-wide preferences through voting (List, 2018). This process not only legitimises governments but also mirrors the diverse nature of society, allowing for the formation of representative governance. Based on these preferences, governmental policymakers design and execute diverse spending programs or adapt the taxation system, reflecting the priority areas and direction of the state (Schaffer, 2022). Consequently, the allocation of public resources and policy priorities can be notably influenced by voter participation, emphasising the significance of a high turnout in preserving a robust democracy (Burgoon et al., 2022). However, although high voter turnout is crucial, we observe a decline in both Central and Eastern European democracies (Linek and Petrúšek, 2016) and Western European democracies (Garmann, 2020; Schäfer et al., 2022). Using a panel of 116 democracies, Kostelka and Blais (2021) show that voter turnout in these democracies fell from 77 % to 67 % between 1960 and 2010.

The trend of declining voter turnout has thus attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines, time periods, countries, and levels of government. In their research, they tried to identify the determinants that motivate (or demotivate) voters to vote. Since the research has produced many empirical results, Smets and van Ham (2013) developed a meta-analysis of these studies. In a sample of 90 empirical studies that examined the determinants of voter turnout between 2000 and 2010, researchers identified 170 different determinants influencing voter turnout. A similar meta-analysis, including 102 studies published between 2002 and 2015, was prepared by Cancela and Geys (2016). A year later, Stockemer (2017) expanded this research with another 130 analysed articles in the period 2004-2013.

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Although the meta-analyses have revealed significant insights into voter turnout, further research is still required in this area. Previous studies had limitations since researchers often isolated determinants of turnout in their analysis (e.g., Kostelka & Blais, 2018; Ellingsen & Hernæs, 2018; Blais & Achen, 2019). For instance, academic studies have examined the relationship between voter participation and political engagement (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007), media consumption (Haenschen, 2016) or citizen satisfaction (Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2016). Hence, there is a considerable research opportunity to explore how the determinants of voter turnout interact to produce complex effects that may vary across different contexts and populations. For instance, a more comprehensive understanding of how media consumption affects turnout in the context of different levels of political engagement and civic satisfaction is called for, as current research does not fully illustrate the compounding or mediating effects that these variables may have on each other. This gap indicates the possibility of developing more advanced analytical models capable of accounting for the complexity of voter behaviour and contributing to a more comprehensive picture of the factors that drive electoral participation.

The primary motivation of this study is to overcome the above limitations and to contribute to the current state of knowledge by examining not only the influence of individual determinants on voter turnout, but also their interactions and mediating effects. Doing so, we believe that we provide following contributions. First, at the methodological level, we show that citizens' decisions about electoral participation need to be studied comprehensively, rather than as the influence of isolated independent variables. We employ Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to identify the relationships between declared voter turnout and political engagement as dependent variables, and media exposure and citizen satisfaction as independent variables. Second, on an empirical level, we present findings on the determinants of electoral participation from the Czech Republic. With respect to the current political situation, we selected media influence and citizen satisfaction as important predictors of voter turnout. For this purpose, we use unique data, consisting of responses from a representative sample of respondents (N=807).

The structure of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background and hypothesis, followed by the data and methodology in Section 3. Section 4 provides a detailed account of the results, which is then followed by the discussion in Section 5 and the conclusion in Section 6.

## **Theory and literature review**

### ***Political Engagement and Voter Turnout***

Political engagement is defined by Le & Nguyen (2021) as the emotional and cognitive involvement of citizens in political affairs. A politically engaged citizens are politically informed, knowledgeable, interested, opinionated and attitudinal. They seek to make an impact on public affairs, through voting in elections or other forms of engagement, such as various forms of protest or political membership. Such engagement, specifically voting, is influenced by various personal factors, as evidenced by Smets and van Ham (2013). Nevertheless, a fundamental condition for political engagement is a high level of political interest among the citizens (Robison, 2017). It is because an individual's political interest motivates them not only to engage, but also to spend their leisure time reading political news or discuss on social media (Svirak & Urbánek, 2023). Enhanced political knowledge has the potential to improve an individual's factual response to political questions (Boudreau & Lupia, 2011), as evidenced by research (Dubois & Blank, 2018). Evidence of the relationship between the consumption of political content and political knowledge has been provided, for example, by Park and Gil de Zúñiga (2021). In this study, the authors used a sample of 11 countries to show that individuals' political knowledge increases when they are exposed to political content in the press, television, online news sources and social media. However, the same effect – a higher level of political knowledge – can also be achieved through frequent political conversations with friends and family (Moore & Coronel, 2022).

However, for citizens with high levels of engagement, voting can be seen as a fundamental expression of social interest. As evidenced by the work of Boulding (2010) and Nawara (2016), people who vote in elections often participate in the functioning and development of society through other activities, including volunteering in their daily lives. This assumption is supported by the results of a study by Daniller and Gilberstadt (2020), according to which approximately half of American voters were involved in at least one of the six activities studied, such as donating money to candidates or participating in their campaigns. Higher levels of political participation are also found among citizens who engage in civic life in other ways, such as attending church. For example, Gerber et al. (2016) show that church attendance has a crucial causal relationship with voter participation in the United States. However, comparable results are also reported for Central Europe. Kurek and Fałkowski's (2022) findings suggest that voter turnout is higher in Polish cities, where citizens are more likely to attend church. Nevertheless, also membership in non-governmental non-profit groups (Boulding, 2010) and unions contribute to citizens' political engagement (Santana & Aguilar, 2021).

From the above, it seems that a regular voter can be characterised as a citizen with a higher level of political interest and knowledge, who often participates in the development of society through activities other than just voting. However, even these assumptions may not be sufficient to determine whether a citizen will participate in the election (Šaparnienė et al., 2021). Following this line of arguments, Cruz (2023) shows that it is primarily trust in

parliament that influences a citizen's vote within OECD countries. These results are also confirmed in cases of Hong Kong (Wang, 2016) and selected European countries (Kiess, 2022). However, it is widely known that trust in political institutions (parliaments) is undermined in many countries, including Czech Republic (Naxera, 2018), by corruption scandals of politicians. The erosion of trust in parliament due to corruption can distort the relationship between political engagement and voter turnout. The negative effect of distrust caused by corruption scandals on turnout has been demonstrated in Italy (Giommoni, 2021), but also in Hungary (Snegovaya, 2020). According to Ares and Hernández (2017), people become politically cynical or apathetic after a loss of trust. But contrary to this, Dahlberg and Solevid (2016), argue that corruption increases voter turnout because people want to overthrow a corrupt government. Discussing the impact of corruption on voter turnout, Školník (2020) highlights that it can have both positive and negative effects. This study therefore focuses on the relationship between citizens' political engagement and voter turnout and examines whether recent corruption scandals have affected this relationship.

### ***Influence of Mainstream and Alternative Media on Voter Turnout***

One of the primary roles of the media is to provide the public with information about the activities and programs of political parties. This is crucial for individuals to make informed decisions in political markets. Nevertheless, the media may also serve as interest organizations and publish content that primarily aligns with the economic and political interests of their owners (Sjøvaag & Ohlsson, 2019). This could harm media objectivity (Auel, 2019), resulting in the dissemination of asymmetric information and distortions within the political arena. Such media issues in political contexts gain considerable attention globally, including in Western democracies (Vonbun-Feldbauer & Matthes, 2018), Hong Kong (Lee et al., 2017), and Africa (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019). These studies suggest inadequate or misleading information could reduce voter turnout. For instance, low voter turnout in European Parliament elections has been linked to a lack of information provided to the public (Clark, 2014).

The impact of media on voter turnout remains unclear due to incomplete research. However, scholarly investigations conducted by Boulianne (2011) and Strömbäck & Shehata (2019) have demonstrated that political content consumption correlates with greater political interest, which in turn potentially influences voter turnout (Butler, 2011). Other studies (e.g., de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000) indicate that exposure to political content is associated with an improvement in political knowledge, which can also determine voter turnout. Another set of studies has examined the immediate effects of media consumption on voter turnout. Baek's (2009) analysis of 74 countries has confirmed the impact of media sources on voter turnout. This conclusion is supported by the works of Kuenzi and Lambright (2007) and Baekgaard et al. (2014). However, Prior's (2005) research suggests that voter turnout is not solely determined by the amount of information consumed, but also by consumer preferences, specifically the type of content consumed. Ellingsen and Hernæs' (2018) study provides evidence that commercial mass media can decrease individuals' political engagement. Although media and their impact can be assessed using various criteria, for our study, it is suitable to classify media as mainstream or alternative (in relation to electoral results), drawing on prior research conducted, for instance, in Austria (Reiter & Matthes, 2023).

According to Holt et al. (2019), mainstream media refers to traditional media organisations that have a structured organisational system and serve an important social function. By providing a platform for public discourse, they present topics of general interest based on information selected and published by professionals, following established protocols. As suggested by Wimmer and Dominick (2013), these news sources have a wide audience. Mainstream media, whether it is public or commercial, encompasses conventional media such as daily newspapers, radio, and television, as well as online media (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019; Malik & Shapiro, 2019) – publishers of print media frequently operate online news websites. Alternative media, often in a digital format, are media that oppose the general trends in public discourse perceived as dominant in a given system, as described by Holt et al. (2019). These media address issues underrepresented in mainstream media and may exhibit anti-systemic elements, criticize connections between mainstream media and political elites, and occasionally offer radical content (Holt, 2018). The contrast between mainstream and alternative media and their impact on mobilising citizens can be observed in various ways. According to De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006), a crucial characteristic of mainstream media, such as public broadcasting and major newspapers, is their transmission of political content. This enhances political engagement (Park & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021) and contributes to voter participation. The mobilisation effect of public service TV has also been evidenced by Sørensen (2019) in Norway. This highlights the crucial role of the media, particularly public service broadcasting, in fostering the information society and potentially impacting voter turnout.

Compared to mainstream media, the effects of alternative media on voting behaviour are varied. Previous research has explored the connection between the use of alternative digital media and political participation in protests, political knowledge, political confidence, and voter turnout (e.g., Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009; Leung & Lee, 2014). Nevertheless, these studies mainly focus on the United States and Hong Kong and do not provide sufficient attention to Europe. Additionally, publications in the alternative media field have commonly concentrated on the reasons for individuals consuming media content, rather than the outcomes associated with alternative media. In context of political engagement, political interest, and a lack of trust in mainstream media are some of the most significant factors contributing to the consumption of alternative media (Schulz, 2020). Because these media

frequently utilise conspiratorial and disinformation rhetoric (Štětka et al., 2020), they can engender distrust of mainstream media and a sense of dissatisfaction with politics and society, ultimately resulting in voter apathy. In this context, Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2006) found that negative news (mainly published by alternative media) has a significant impact on trust in party leadership, which can lead to a long-term reduction in voter turnout. On the contrary, it is noteworthy that the assertive language employed by alternative media can also prompt citizens to act. Boyle and Schmierbach (2009) present evidence that alternative media can encourage political participation amongst citizens through political protest or through oppositional knowledge, as Lee (2015) has suggested. Therefore, the contradictory outcomes of these studies imply that alternative media can facilitate both political engagement and disengagement among citizens, and thus necessitate further examination in the context of other political systems.

### ***Citizen's Satisfaction and Turnout***

The issue of (dis)satisfaction of citizens and their participation in political life, especially in elections, is intensively studied in political science and sociology. In the context of electoral participation, citizen satisfaction is considered one of the most important determinants of citizens' decision to vote (Smets & van Ham, 2013). However, research on the relationship between voter satisfaction and political engagement (including turnout) identifies several types of (dis)satisfaction. Warda (2019) focused on the role of life satisfaction and found that happier people are more likely to engage in politics and vote mainly for traditional established parties. In this context, Lorenzini (2015) adds that life satisfaction can increase voter turnout. However, he adds that individuals' political activity can also be driven by their dissatisfaction, but this leads more to alternative forms of political participation, such as protesting. Empirical evidence supporting this assumption comes from Hong Kong, where Cheng et al. (2023) find that dissatisfied individuals are more likely to engage in radicalized actions such as strikes and boycotts. In contrast to these results is research by Ojeda et al. (2020), who show that personal crises that disrupt life satisfaction (such as job loss) dampen individuals' political actions rather than boost them. Hence, it is evident that citizen dissatisfaction, like distrust, can promote apathy, cynicism, and disengagement from formal political participation, including electoral participation (Norris, 2011). In this vein, Zheng et al. (2017) conducted research that observed a negative relationship between trust, which is disrupted by perceptions of corruption, and political participation. They found that life satisfaction moderates this association and therefore it is possible that higher levels of life satisfaction may serve as a protective measure of political participation, even in the face of highly perceived corruption. This demonstrates the important mediating role of life satisfaction.

Other studies, however, focus more on citizens' satisfaction with the country's political and economic situation. Schafer et al. (2022) and Park (2023) examine economic factors and show that economic uncertainty and the relative economic performance of a country can have a significant impact on voter turnout. This highlights the relationship between economic factors and political participation. Similarly, Markovich and White (2022) conclude that economic policies, particularly minimum wage increases, can have democratic consequences by increasing the turnout of low-wage workers. However, the role of citizens' satisfaction with democracy is also relevant, although recent studies often do not demonstrate this effect or clarify the causality of the relationship (Kostecka & Blais, 2018). Grönlund and Setälä (2007), for example, confirmed a positive relationship between citizens' satisfaction with democracy and voter turnout after examining a sample of 22 European nations. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the work of Karp and Milazzo (2016), who also examined these relationships in 22 countries in Eastern and Western Europe. However, the results are complemented by the fact that citizens of Eastern Europe are more likely to express scepticism towards democracy and dissatisfaction with how it works in practice. According to Vlachova (2018), individuals in Central Europe are less satisfied with the performance of democracy compared to those in Western Europe. Their satisfaction increases especially in countries where the economy is doing well, economic performance brings better living standards and people share a sense of economic optimism. In contrast to these findings is the work of researchers Ezrow and Xezonakis (2016), who find that increases in citizens' satisfaction with democracy over time in 12 democracies between 1976 and 2011 were associated with significant declines in turnout in national elections in those countries. These differences in the studies' findings contribute to the discourse on the need for further research on the relationship between satisfaction and turnout.

## **The context of the Czech Republic and Hypothesis development**

### ***Political environment in the Czech Republic***

Analyses by Smets and van Ham (2013), Cancela and Geys (2016) and Stockemer (2017) found that empirical research on voter turnout produces ambiguous and contradictory results on many issues. These contradictions are due to differences in research methods, but also to the political or economic context of the countries studied. To gain a more profound insight into the Czech voters and to identify the most relevant determinants of their voting behaviour, we will first present the political environment and the historical context of the Czech Republic.

The Czech Republic is part of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. The country underwent

democratization and adoption of Western values after the 1989 revolution, when the totalitarian regime was overthrown. Democracy in the Czech Republic is still an unstable regime that faces numerous challenges when compared to Western European democracies, as noted by Guasti (2020). The Czech Republic has gradually joined NATO and then the European Union. Membership of these international organisations offered the country many opportunities, but also challenges, both in the political and economic spheres (Kuba et al., 2022). Particularly since 2009, the political landscape of the Czech Republic underwent significant transformations. The worldwide financial crisis and an increasing economic disparity between regions gradually contributed to the polarisation and radicalisation of society (Rolník, 2023). Moreover, the corruption scandal that led to the premature fall of Prime Minister Petr Nečas' cabinet in 2013 led to a decline in public trust in political institutions and the emergence of new populist movements (Naxera, 2018). The change in media markets also contributed to this. In this context, Urbániková (2023) has shown that these markets have become commercialised and oligarchised. However, the rise of alternative media has also brought challenges. As shown by Štětka et al. (2020), alternative media disseminated pro-Chinese and pro-Russian propaganda that undermined trust and provoked citizens' dissatisfaction with established democracy, the EU and NATO.

### **Hypotheses development**

A citizen's engagement in politics can take many different forms, including volunteering, giving to charities (Boulding, 2010), joining trade unions (Santana & Aguilar, 2021), and casting a ballot in elections (Le & Nguyen, 2021). Even though prior research indicates a strong correlation between voter turnout and political engagement - measured by political interest (Robison, 2017) and knowledge (Boudreau & Lupia, 2011), it seems that this relationship might not be valid in the Czech Republic, where scandals including corruption and failure to take care of significant local and economic problems could undermine citizen trust in politicians (Naxera, 2018; Rolník, 2023). Considering the emergence of populist parties as alternative political groups in the current political landscape, we infer, based on the research conducted by Leininger and Meijers (2021), that voter apathy could potentially decrease. Furthermore, we anticipate that the positive relationship between voter turnout and citizens' political engagement will persist in the future.

*H1: Citizens' political engagement is positively associated with declared electoral participation in the upcoming elections.*

However, trust in politicians can be undermined by alternative media that spread disinformation and propaganda from foreign powers (Štětka et al., 2020). By contrast, the mainstream media (especially public service media), which are characterized by objectivity and educational activities (Holt et al., 2019), can determine citizens' vote in elections (Sørensen, 2019). We focused on understanding how these two media groups are different in their effects on voter turnout and political engagement of citizens. The questions are: Does the media directly influence voter turnout by mobilizing citizens, or does it indirectly mobilize citizens by providing political information and knowledge? Does the effect of alternative and mainstream media differ? Based on theoretical findings (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Bulter, 2011; Baekgaard et al., 2014), we expect that the consumption of any political content determines political engagement (increases political interest and knowledge) and turnout (has a mobilizing effect), and test the following hypotheses:

*H2a: Consumption of content in mainstream media is positively related to declared electoral participation in the upcoming elections.*

*H2b: Consumption of content in mainstream media is positively related to citizen's political engagement.*

*H3a: Consumption of content in alternative media is positively related to declared electoral participation in the upcoming elections.*

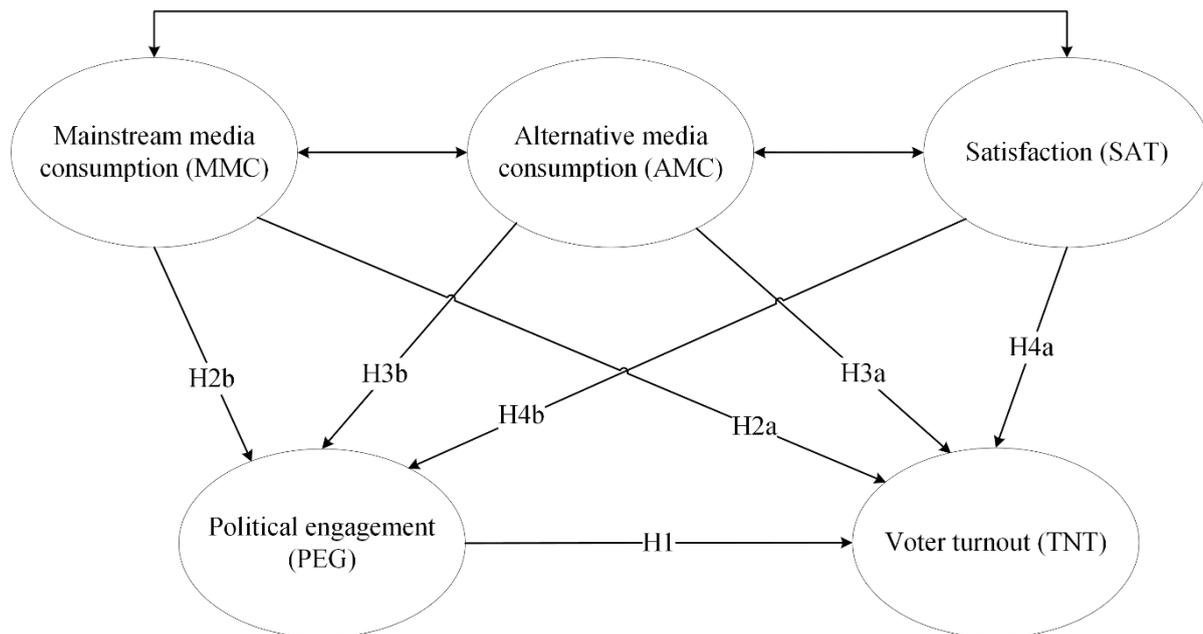
*H3b: Consumption of content in alternative media is positively related to citizen's political engagement.*

In connection with corruption scandals, the rise of populist parties, and the increasing distrust amplified by alternative media, we examine hypotheses related to the relationship between citizen satisfaction and electoral participation. Civic satisfaction, which includes factors such as life satisfaction and views on the functioning of democracy, often correlates with political behavior and voting participation (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007; Ward, 2019). Some studies suggest that higher satisfaction can boost political engagement and support for incumbent parties (Lorenzini, 2015). However, other studies point to the complexity of these relationships and their potential bidirectionality (Kostelka & Blais, 2018). There are even views that dissatisfaction with political institutions might motivate citizens to vote (Immerzeel & Pickup, 2015). Therefore, we decided to test the relationship between citizen satisfaction and voter turnout in the Czech Republic. We are inclined to the opinion that citizen satisfaction positively influences political engagement (political interest and knowledge), but also electoral participation and we test the following hypotheses:

*H4a: Citizen's overall satisfaction is positively associated with declared electoral participation in the upcoming elections.*

*H4b: Citizen's overall satisfaction is positively associated with citizen's political engagement.*

All the postulated hypotheses and scrutinized associations among variables are illustrated in the subsequent Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) framework (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1.** Structural Equation Model.

Source: authors' own processing

Hypotheses have only been formulated for those relationships that have a sufficiently robust theoretical and empirical basis. For other relationships, where the literature is less clear, we have chosen not to hypothesise and instead leave our analyses open to the possibility of interactions without pre-specified expectations.

## Data and research methodology

The data used for analysis is sourced from participant responses in a survey conducted in the Czech Republic.

**Table 1.** Sample of survey respondents.

Quota	Category	Percentage
Age	18-29 years	15.737
	30-49 years	37.299
	50-64 years	23.296
	65 years and over	23.668
Education	Primary education (including incomplete)	14.746
	Lower secondary education	36.679
	Upper secondary education	34.820
	College education	13.755
Sex	Male	48.947
	Female	51.053

Source: Sociores research (2020)

Participants completed an online questionnaire during the first week of May 2020. Prior to this, a pilot survey in April 2020 was conducted to evaluate the clarity, comprehensibility and appropriateness of the questions and responses. The survey questions were formulated based on a thorough analysis of relevant literature. Data collection and consultancy services were provided by the sociological agency Sociores. The sample consisted of 808 respondents selected from the Czech National Panel, with the selection criteria being age, gender, and educational background. To ensure representativeness, a quota selection of participants was employed, as presented in Table 1.

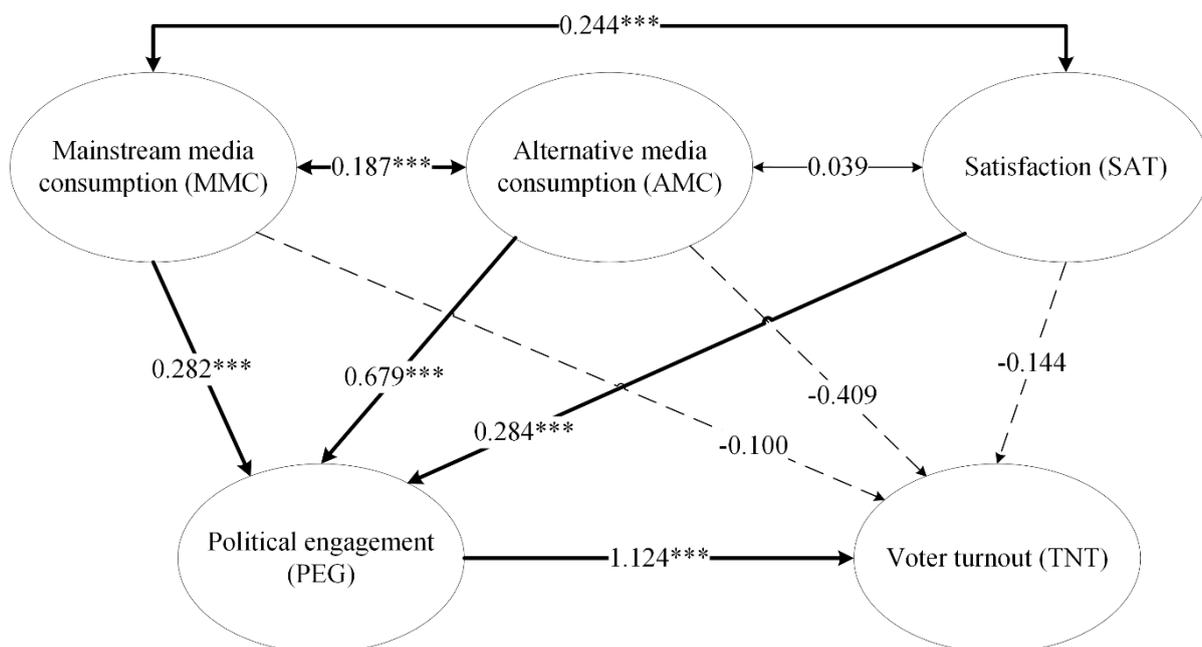
The collected data were checked and cleaned. One respondent was excluded from the sample. This respondent does not have Czech citizenship and therefore does not have the right to vote. The final sample of respondents, which is used as a dataset in the analysis, consists of 807 respondents. The collected data were adjusted according to common sociological rules and transformed into model variables in the required format. Typically, these

modifications included categorisation or transformation of the data into dichotomous or ordinal format. The variables generated are displayed in Table 2.

A statistical model employing Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was constructed to test the hypotheses. SEM is a reliable statistical technique that allows researchers to explore and test complex causal relationships between observed and latent variables. Observable variables are variables which can be measured directly, while latent variables, on the other hand, cannot be measured directly but are derived from other indicators as explained by Wang & Wang (2019). The SEM model has proven to be useful in the study of voter turnout, due to its ability to include many factors that influence the decision-making process of voting or abstaining from voting. Moreover, it allows to identify the relationships between these factors. An example of an SEM model would be to test the direct and indirect effects of political interest on voter turnout via mediators. The use of SEM modelling in several contexts related to voter turnout has been supported by analyses in studies such as Fowler et al. (2008) and Aldrich et al. (2011). Parameters were estimated using Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) due to the variables being dichotomously or ordinally scaled, as recommended by Rosseel (2012). JAMOVI software was selected for the modelling process because of its ability to handle complex statistical analyses. Our models were carefully evaluated for adequacy and fit by assessing several indices that indicate good fit, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Model indicates a good model fit based on the following criteria: CFI  $\geq 0.90$  (Bentler, 1992), TLI  $\geq 0.90$  (Bentler, 1992), and RMSEA  $\leq 0.08$  (Browne & Cudeck, 1992).

## Results

Our study initially investigates how mainstream media consumption (MMC), alternative media consumption (AMC), and citizen satisfaction (SAT) impact voter turnout (TNT) and political interest (PEG) employing an SEM model. In addition, we examine whether political engagement determines voter turnout. The findings are presented in Table 3 and Figure 2.



**Fig. 2.** Structural Equation Model.  
Source: authors' own processing

**Table 2.** Description of the used variables.

Latent variable	Observed variable	Description	Justification
Political engagement (PEG)	PEG1	Turnout index for the previous three parliamentary elections expressed as actual turnout divided by potential turnout.	We adopt Le & Nguyen's (2021) definition of political engagement as the emotional and cognitive involvement of citizens in political affairs. Engaged citizens possess political
	PEG2	Citizen recognizes differences in the	

		programs of political parties (1: definitely not, 5: definitely yes).	knowledge (Boudreau & Lupia, 2011; C. S. Park & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021), interest (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Robison, 2017), and participate in other voluntary activities (Boulding, 2010; Nawara, 2016; Santana & Aguilar, 2021).
	PEG3	Monitoring of pre-election opinion polls (0: no, 1: yes).	
	PEG4	Political parties provide sufficient information (1: definitely not, 5: definitely yes).	
	PEG5	Member of NGO (0: no, 1: yes)	
Mainstream media consumption (MMC)	MMC1	Watching public television (0: no, 1: yes).	
	MMC2	Reading news in the daily press (0: no, 1: yes).	The chosen variables quantify the consumption of mainstream media. Following Holt et al. (2019), we chose public television (as well as other channels that publish mainstream information), radio stations, daily press and web platforms as mainstream media.
	MMC3	Watching news on the TV (0: no, 1: yes).	
	MMC4	Listening news on the radio (0: no, 1: yes).	
	MMC5	Watching the news on the internet (0: no, 1: yes).	
Alternative media consumption (AMC)	AMC1	Reading and trust in alternative right-wing media (0: no, 1: yes).	
	AMC2	Receiving and forwarding emails with unverified political content (0: no, 1: yes).	
	AMC3	Following unverified political content on social media (0: no, 1: yes).	
Satisfaction (SAT)	SAT1	Satisfaction with life situation (1: extremely dissatisfied, 5: extremely satisfied).	The variables measure satisfaction levels in various domains, such as living conditions, financial circumstances, the economic situation of the country, and its political conditions. For instance, researchers such as Pirralha (2018), Lorenzini (2015), and Schafer et al. (2022) have examined these variables in their respective studies.
	SAT2	Satisfaction with finance situation (1: extremely dissatisfied, 5: extremely satisfied).	
	SAT3	Satisfaction with the economic situation of the country (1: extremely dissatisfied, 5: extremely satisfied).	
	SAT4	Satisfaction with the political situation of the country (1: extremely dissatisfied, 5: extremely satisfied).	

**Source:** authors' own processing. Note: The dependent variable is the declared voter turnout in the next parliamentary election held in 2021 (TNT), which was 80.4%.

The Figure 2 shows  $\beta$  coefficients, maintaining fixed residual deviations (up to 1). The goodness-of-fit indices are as follows: CFI 0.936 ( $\geq 0.90$ ), TLI 0.922 ( $\geq 0.90$ ), and RMSEA 0.045 ( $\leq 0.08$ ). According to Bentler (1992) and Browne and Cudeck (1992), these measures point to an acceptable model. The bold line next to the arrow indicates a significant relationship between the variables, the thin line indicates a non-significant relationship. The solid line indicates a positive relationship, the dotted line a negative relationship. One-way arrows indicate the causality of the relationship between variables; two-way arrows indicate only the existence of a relationship between variables, not causality.

The results show significant, positive relationships between political engagement and mainstream media consumption ( $\beta=0.282$ ,  $p<.001$ ), alternative media consumption ( $\beta=0.679$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and satisfaction ( $\beta=0.284$ ,  $p<.001$ ). These results indicate that greater levels of media consumption (in both mainstream and alternative forms) and satisfaction are connected to higher levels of political engagement. In contrast, no statistically significant relationship was found between voter turnout and the levels of mainstream media consumption ( $\beta =-0.100$ ,  $p=0.467$ ), alternative media consumption ( $\beta=-0.409$ ,  $p=0.233$ ), or satisfaction ( $\beta=-0.144$ ,  $p =0.295$ ). Therefore, these factors do not appear to have a significant impact on voter turnout.

**Table 3.** Parameters estimates.

Dependent variable	Predictor variable	Estimate	Standard error	95% Confidence Intervals		$\beta$	z	p
				Lower	Upper			
PEG	MMC	0.562	0.159	0.249	0.874	0.282	3.524	< .001***

PEG	AMC	1.353	0.392	0.584	2.121	0.679	3.450	< .001***
PEG	SAT	0.566	0.156	0.260	0.872	0.284	3.626	< .001***
TNT	MMC	-0.040	0.055	-0.147	0.067	-0.100	-0.728	0.467
TNT	AMC	-0.162	0.136	-0.429	0.105	-0.409	-1.192	0.233
TNT	SAT	-0.057	0.055	-0.165	0.050	-0.144	-1.047	0.295
TNT	PEG	0.224	0.051	0.125	0.324	1.124	4.416	< .001***

Source: authors' own processing. Notes: \*p<.01, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\*p<.001

One remarkable finding is the impact of political engagement, exhibiting a substantial favourable correlation with voter turnout ( $\beta=1.124$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), suggesting that higher political engagement is associated with higher voter turnout. However, to gain greater insight into the intricate connections that link media consumption and satisfaction to turnout, we conducted further analysis of indirect effects. This process is vital for determining whether political engagement acts as a mediator between media use, satisfaction, and voter participation. Furthermore, it helps us to comprehend the mechanisms that shape voter behaviour. Table 4 presents the results.

**Table 4.** Defined parameters (indirect effects).

Description	Estimate	St. error	95% Confidence Intervals		$\beta$	z	p
			Lower	Upper			
MMC $\Rightarrow$ PEG $\Rightarrow$ TNT	0.126	0.054	0.021	0.231	0.317	2.344	0.019**
AMC $\Rightarrow$ PEG $\Rightarrow$ TNT	0.303	0.135	0.038	0.568	0.764	2.244	0.025**
SAT $\Rightarrow$ PEG $\Rightarrow$ TNT	0.127	0.054	0.020	0.233	0.320	2.335	0.020**

Source: authors' own processing. Notes: \*p<.01, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\*p<.001

The significant indirect impacts of consuming both mainstream media ( $\beta = 0.317$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ) and alternative media ( $\beta = 0.764$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ), as well as satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.320$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ) on voter turnout via political engagement, have been observed. This confirms the moderate function of political engagement and the marginal mobilizing effect of media and citizen satisfaction (dissatisfaction). However, in addition to the influence of direct and indirect effects, it is important to examine the relationships between the predictor variables (MMC, AMC, and SAT) to understand to what extent, they are coordinated. This analysis allows to determine whether the variables share a common underlying construct or have distinct effects on political engagement and voting. The results of this part of the analysis are presented in Table 5.

There is a considerable positive relationship between satisfaction and the consumption of mainstream media ( $\beta = 0.244$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that people who are more satisfied tend to consume more mainstream media. However, the association between satisfaction and the consumption of alternative media is not significant ( $\beta = 0.039$ ,  $p = 0.251$ ), indicating that the relationship between these two variables is not meaningful. Furthermore, a statistically significant positive correlation has been found between the consumption of both mainstream and alternative media ( $\beta = 0.187$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that individuals who consume more mainstream media also tend to consume more alternative media, or vice versa.

**Table 5.** Variances and Covariances.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Estimate	Standard error	95% Confidence Intervals		$\beta$	z	p
				Lower	Upper			
SAT	MMC	0.244	0.026	0.193	0.295	0.244	9.410	<.001***
SAT	AMC	0.039	0.034	-0.028	0.105	0.039	1.150	0.251
MMC	AMC	0.187	0.043	0.102	0.272	0.187	4.330	<.001***

Source: authors' own processing. Notes: \*p<.01, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\*p<.001

Table 6 presents the findings of the hypotheses that have been tested. Through analysis, significant relationships and patterns in political engagement, media content consumption, satisfaction, and participation in the upcoming elections have been uncovered. The subsequent section will discuss these findings in detail.

**Table 6.** Decision on the hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Decision
H1: Citizen's political engagement is positively associated with declared electoral participation in the upcoming elections.	Accepted

H2a:	Consumption of content in mainstream media is positively related to declared electoral participation in the upcoming elections.	Rejected
H2b:	Consumption of content in mainstream media is positively related to citizen's political engagement.	Accepted
H3a:	Consumption of content in alternative media is positively related to declared electoral participation in the upcoming elections.	Rejected
H3b:	Consumption of content in alternative media is positively related to citizen's political engagement.	Accepted
H4a:	Citizen's overall satisfaction is positively associated with declared electoral participation in the upcoming elections.	Rejected
H4b:	Citizen's overall satisfaction is positively associated with citizen's political engagement.	Accepted

**Source:** authors' own processing.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the relationships between political engagement, media consumption, satisfaction, and voter turnout in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic. The findings highlighted that political engagement was positively impacted by the consumption of content from both mainstream and alternative media, as well as by satisfaction with the current situation. Moreover, the research found that political engagement was a significant predictor of electoral participation, mediating the effects of media consumption and satisfaction. These findings are a valuable addition to the current body of knowledge on political communication and behaviour and offer insights into the Czech electorate.

In our research, firstly, we explored the relationship between citizens' political engagement and their declared intent to participate in the upcoming elections. Our primary hypothesis H1 was confirmed, meaning citizen political engagement is positively associated with their intent to vote in the next election. This finding is consistent with prior research in political engagement (Le & Nguyen, 2021). It's been proven that higher political interest does indeed lead to higher political engagement and participation in the political process (Denny & Doyle, 2008; Robison, 2017). This is also true in the context of the Czech Republic, which is facing significant political developments such as corruption scandals and unequal regional development (Naxera, 2018; Rolník, 2023). While there's evidence that corruption can have a negative impact on political participation and electoral outcomes (Giommoni, 2021; Snegovaya, 2020), our findings suggest that politically engaged citizens still intend to participate in the upcoming elections.

Next, we focused on the influence of the media. We made the interesting finding that while watching mainstream media has a positive effect on citizens' political engagement (H2b), there is no direct evidence that it increases their planned participation in the upcoming election (H2a). This conclusion is in line with prior research (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Sørensen, 2019; Park & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021), which argues that mainstream media, especially public broadcasting, can stimulate political interest and indirectly support electoral participation. The findings from our study suggest that while mainstream media can motivate citizens to be politically engaged, it doesn't mean that they will participate in specific elections; thus, these media do not have a direct mobilising effect. Regarding alternative media, our findings (H3a and H3b) show that watching alternative media has a positive influence on citizens' political engagement. However, as with mainstream media, no direct relationship was proven between this consumption and planned participation in the upcoming elections. This is consistent with Boyle & Schmierbach (2009) and Lee (2015), who argued that alternative media can play a crucial role in the democratic process by stimulating engagement and activism but not directly electoral participation. Given the content of these media, Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2006) would expect that emotionally charged statements could undermine trust in political institutions to the extent that citizens lose interest in voting, even if they are politically engaged. Our results thus highlight the complexity of the influence of alternative media on political participation, deserving further attention in research.

We also focused on citizen satisfaction and their electoral participation. Hypothesis H4a, which assumed that general citizen satisfaction (covering satisfaction with various aspects of personal life and the political-economic situation in the country) has a positive impact on planned participation in the upcoming elections, was rejected. This result contrasts with some previous studies, e.g., Lorenzini (2015) and Ward (2019), which stated that more satisfied people participate more often in elections. On the other hand, our findings might confirm studies like Pirralha (2018) and Kostelka and Blais (2018), which show that the relationship between political participation and life satisfaction can be intricate and influenced by many other factors. Our results, however, indicate a relationship between satisfaction and political engagement (hypothesis H4b was confirmed). This might suggest that while satisfaction might not necessarily lead to election participation, it can stimulate other forms of political involvement, as confirmed by Lorenzini (2015). Simultaneously, findings suggest that while some forms of dissatisfaction might lead to apathy and cynicism, as stated by Norris (2011), they can also inspire citizens towards alternative forms of political involvement. This aligns with the research of Cheng et al. (2023), which showed that dissatisfied individuals

more often engage in radicalized actions.

## Conclusion

This research examined the dynamics of political engagement, media consumption (mainstream and alternative) and citizen satisfaction in relation to voter turnout, specifically in the context of the Czech parliamentary elections in 2021. Key findings show that while mainstream and alternative media influence political engagement, they do not directly determine intended voter turnout. Interestingly, citizen satisfaction did not translate into higher predicted turnout either but was related to increased political engagement. Regarding political engagement, our results were consistent with previous studies predicting that increased political engagement is associated with intention to vote. Empirically, our study provides a new perspective on how different types of media influence political behaviour in the specific Czech context. While most previous studies have focused on traditional media, our research provides an expanded understanding of the influence of alternative media on political engagement and voting behaviour. Methodologically, our study is significant for its comprehensiveness. Our findings underscore the importance of understanding the complex interplay of various factors when examining voter turnout and political engagement. We show that future research needs to examine not only direct effects but also mediating effects.

There are limitations to this study that should be noted. Our investigation into the 2021 Czech parliamentary elections provided valuable insights, but its exclusive focus on the 2021 election cycle in the Czech Republic constrains its relevance for other electoral contexts and democratic societies. The distinct political, social, and economic circumstances of 2021, including the COVID-19 pandemic, potentially impacted voter behaviour beyond that which is typical of ordinary election periods. Additionally, our study's sample size of 807 participants, while noteworthy, may not be wholly representative of the entire Czech population. Therefore, certain demographic groups may be inadequately represented, impinging on our findings' generalisability throughout society. And finally, the methodology used, the use of structural equation modelling (SEM), has inherent limitations that need to be acknowledged. Although SEM is a powerful analytical tool, it may not completely comprehend the various determinants of voter turnout or may be prone to model misspecification. This could potentially affect the interpretation and validity of our findings.

Based on the findings of this study, we recommend that future research on political engagement, media consumption and civic satisfaction in the context of electoral participation should broaden its scope and focus on a few key areas. It is important to explore how different types of media (both mainstream and alternative) can influence political behaviour and voter decision-making in different democratic contexts and countries. This could provide a deeper understanding of specific media dynamics and their impact on political participation. It is also important to examine how different levels of civic satisfaction affect political behaviour and electoral participation. While this study has identified a relationship between satisfaction and political engagement, there is a need to better understand how these factors play out in different forms of political participation, including alternative forms such as protest or activism. In addition, future research should consider larger and more representative samples of the population to better generalise the findings. This would include examining the influence of demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and socio-economic status on political behaviour and voting decisions. Finally, it would be useful to explore other potential mediators and moderators of the relationship between media consumption, political engagement, and turnout. These could include factors such as personal values, political identity, trust in political institutions and perceptions of political efficacy. Given the limitations of the methodology used, including the use of structural equation modelling (SEM), future research should also consider using different methodological approaches to avoid potential errors in modelling and interpreting the results.

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