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## Differences between voting in advance and on Election day

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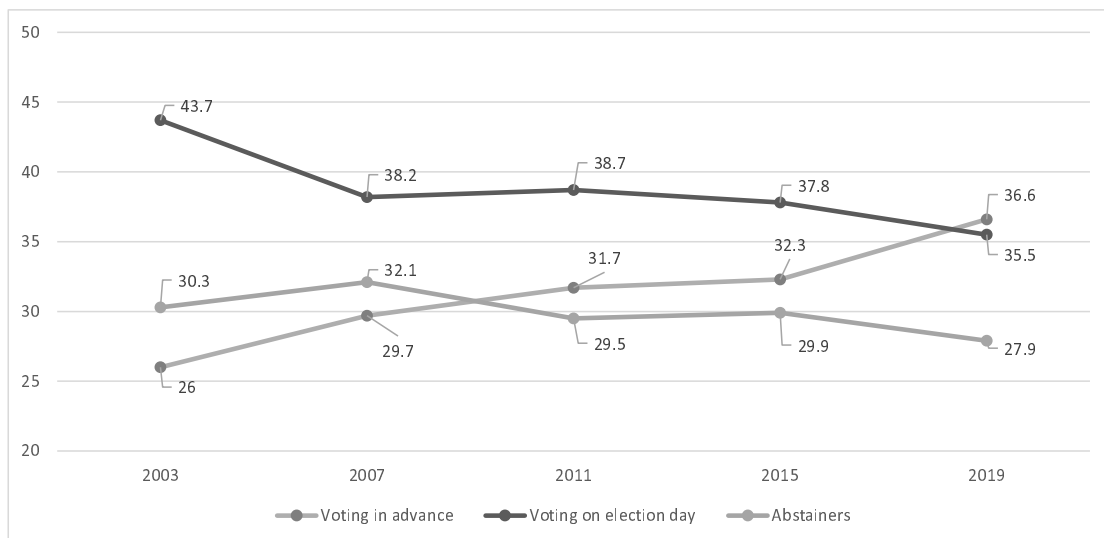
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### 3. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VOTING IN ADVANCE AND ON ELECTION DAY

Henrik Serup Christensen

The possibility for advance voting is generally perceived as a way to boost turnout, since it makes it possible to cast a vote even when a person for various reasons is unable or unwilling to turn up on the day of the elections<sup>1</sup>. While increasing turnout may be considered beneficial from a democratic perspective, the effects of early voting can also be less beneficial, since a recent study suggests that early voters tend to be less satisfied with the outcome of the elections<sup>2</sup>.

In Finland, in-person early voting is possible eleven days before Election Day and ends five days before Election Day for voters living in Finland. The proportion voting in advance has increased over time, as can be seen in Figure 3.1, which shows the percentage of all votes that have been cast in advance in the last five Parliamentary elections in Finland. In 2019, it even surpassed the number of voters who turned up on Election Day for the first time.

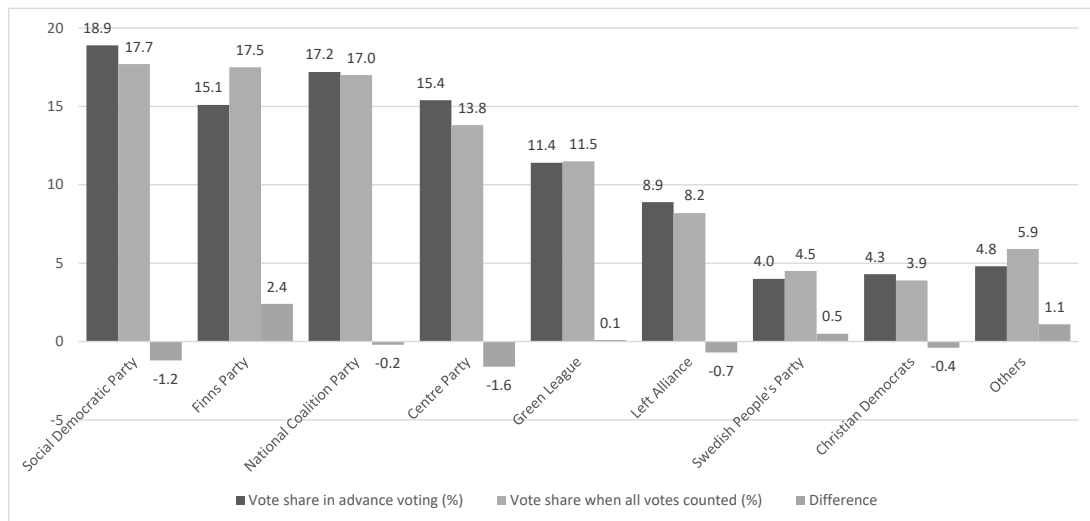


**Figure 3.1<sup>1</sup> Percent voting in advance; on Election Day; abstaining, 2003-2019.<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> The plot shows percentages of all registered voters voting in advance, on Election Day and abstaining in five national parliamentary elections 2003–2019.

The results of the advance vote are published immediately after all polling stations close on Election Day and have so far replaced the exit polls that are performed in most other democracies to get a preview of the results. Election night traditionally starts with the publication of the results from the advance vote, and this is then continuously updated as more votes are counted, ending up with a preliminary result around midnight. However, experience shows that the advance votes do not provide a reliable

estimate for the outcome of the election, since some parties tend to gain as more results come in. Some studies indicate that there are systematic differences in who votes in advance and who votes on elections day<sup>4</sup>, which may explain why there are systematic differences in the results. Figure 3.2 shows the differences between the results for all major parties when it comes to advance voting and the outcome after all votes were counted in the 2019 elections.



**Figure 3.2<sup>2</sup> Comparing vote shares in advance results and final election outcome, 2019.<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>2</sup>The figure shows vote shares of all major parties in the results from advance voting compared to the official election outcome.

While the developments were less drastic than on previous occasions, it is nonetheless noticeable that while some parties gained votes, others lost percentages as votes were counted. The advance results suggested that the Social Democrats would win comfortably (although with a smaller margin than what the latest polls had predicted). In the end, it turned out to be a close race between the Social Democratic Party, the Finns party and the National Coalition Party, who were within a 0.7 margin and all at various stages held the lead during the night. Hence, even when the developments were not decisive this time around, they are far from trivial as they affect the balance of powers between the major parties.

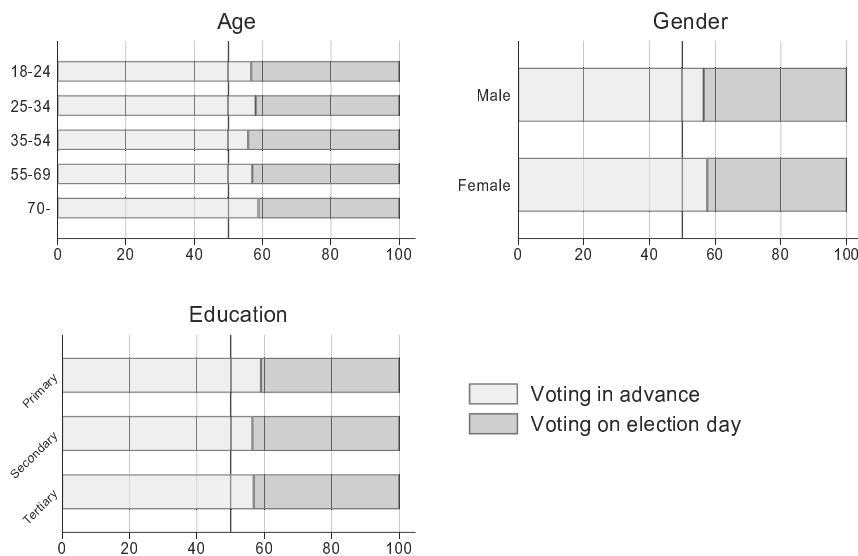
But how can we make sense of these developments? In the following, I outline some of the key differences between those who voted in advance and those who voted on Election Day. Three groups of variables are here particularly interesting:

- 1. Who are the early voters and voters on Elections Day?** Are there systematic differences in voting patterns depending on age, gender and/or education?
- 2. What are the political attitudes of early voters and voters on Election Day?** Are there systematic differences in voting patterns depending on political interest and/or political trust?
- 3. Does it matter?** Last, but by no means least, are there systematic differences in the satisfaction with the outcome between early voters and voters on Election Day?

The results reported here focus on those who reported to have either voted in advance or on Elections Day, thereby disregarding people who did not vote or who did not fill in the relevant questions to determine their status. Even if the proportions in the data does not fully reflect the official data, it should still be possible to analyze differences between the groups. While it is impossible to give definitive answers to these questions here, the final discussion will discuss the most pertinent implications of the differences found.

### **Who votes early and on Election Day?**

Considering the observed differences in electoral outcomes, it seems likely that there will be systematic differences in who are the voters in advance and on Elections Day, as also suggested by previous studies. Figure 3.3 shows the differences in voting in advance or on Election Day depending on age, gender and education, which are key predictors of political participation.



**Figure 3.3 Age, gender and education<sup>3</sup>**

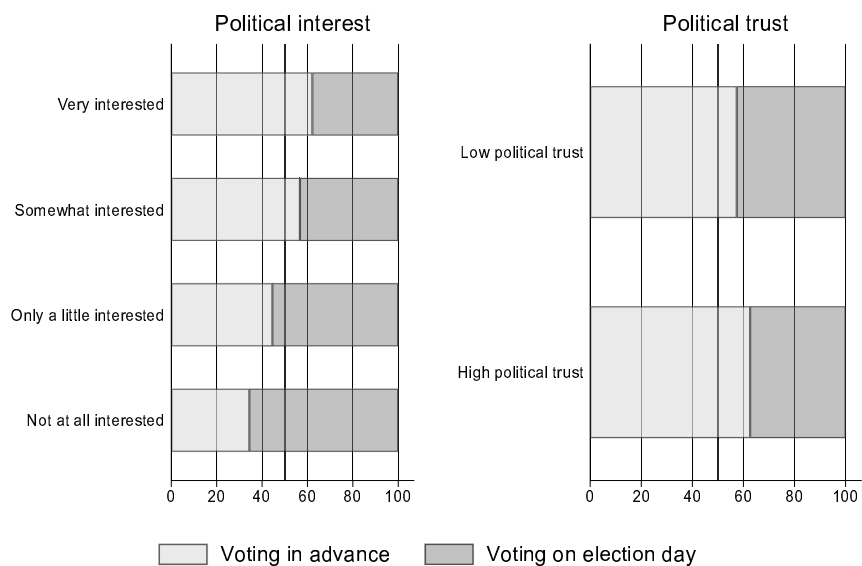
The results show that for people above 70, about 59 % voted in advance compared to the average of 57 %, but the youngest aged 18 – 4 are not far behind, since 57 % voted in advance. The 35 – 54 year olds are most likely to vote on Election Day since only 56 % voted in advance. The gender differences are miniscule (men 56%, women 58%), which may be because couples often vote together thereby evening out any differences. As concerns educational attainment, it is those only finished primary education who vote in advance the most (59 %), while for those who finished a tertiary education it is only 57 %. This is somewhat surprising since it would seem plausible that those with more education, and therefore presumably better insights into political matters, would be quicker to decide and therefore more likely to vote in advance.

Despite these differences, the proportions voting in advance or on Election Day are broadly similar across age, gender and education, which is somewhat surprising considering previous studies. Hence, these characteristics do little to explain the differences in results between advance voting and voting on Election Day outlined above.

### **Political attitudes**

Another important difference between advance voters and those who turn up on Election Day concerns their political attitudes. While it is impossible to establish causality between voting and attitude, systematic differences between advance voters and voters on Election Day in their political attitudes might help us understand why some vote in advance and others do not.

<sup>3</sup> The plots show percentages of all respondents indicating that they voted in advance or on Election Day by age (N=2,125), gender (N=2,124) and education (N=1,772). Weighted results to ensure representativeness. Source: eOpinion 2019.



**Figure 3.4 Political interest and political trust<sup>4</sup>**

The results for political trust show that about 63 % of the advance voters have high political trust compared to 57 % for the voters on Election Day – in other words, those who trust the political authorities are more likely to vote in advance. The differences are even more pronounced when it comes to political interest and voting, since 62 % of those with high political interest voted in advance compared to about 34 % of those with low political interest. While it is impossible to be certain about the underlying mechanisms, people who follow political matters on a regular basis are clearly more likely to vote in advance, whereas those who are less attentive show up on Election Day.

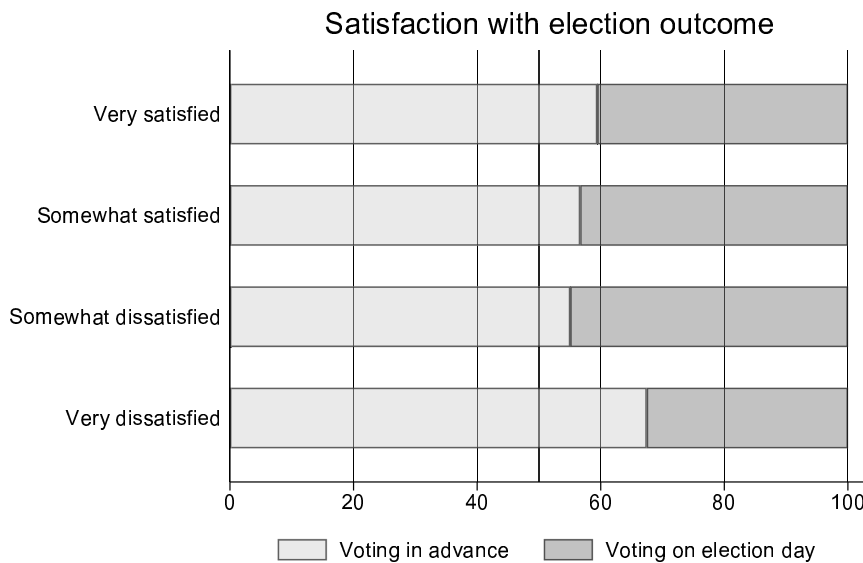
The pattern for these political attitudes seemingly contradicts the idea that advance voting mobilizes those who would not otherwise vote, since it suggests that it is people we would expect to vote anyway, who are most likely to take advantage of the possibility. The increased attention on Election Day and the surrounding spectacle might be more important for getting less interested and less trusting people to vote.

<sup>4</sup>The plots show percentages of all respondents indicating that they voted in advance or Election Day by levels of political interest (N=1,773) and political trust (N=1,644). Weighted results to ensure representativeness. Political trust is measured with a standardized index based on reported trust in Finnish government, Parliament, Politicians, Political parties and the Party closest to you. Respondents scoring below the mean (standardized to be 0) are categorized as 'Low political trust' (N=726) while respondents above the mean are categorized as 'High political trust' (N=918). Source: eOpinion 2019.

### Does it matter?

While these attitudinal differences indicate important differences in voting behavior depending on psychological involvement in political matters, they fail to address the question of whether advance voting makes people

more satisfied with electoral participation. To examine this aspect, Figure 3.5 shows differences in satisfaction with election outcome for advance voters and those who vote on Election Day.



**Figure 3.5 Satisfaction with election outcome<sup>5</sup>**

About 67 % of those who are very dissatisfied with the election outcome voted in advance compared to the average of 57 %. Based on the current analyzes, it is not possible to ascertain with any certainty why advance voting is connected to lower satisfaction. It may be that those who voted in advance changed their mind because they realized that the candidate they voted for did not honestly represent their views and opinions or because some other candidate emerged as more favorable.

Curiously, among those who are very satisfied who voted in advance there are also 59 % who voted in advance, which is clearly more than in the intermediate categories. Hence, voting in advance is under certain circumstances related to increased satisfaction with the outcome. This shows that the relationship between voting and satisfaction with the outcome is more intricate than what it is possible to unravel here.

<sup>5</sup> The plots show percentages of all respondents indicating that they voted in advance or Election Day by satisfaction with election outcome (N=1,688). Source: eOpinion 2019.

## Summary

The use of advance voting to grant citizens more flexibility in casting their vote is often considered beneficial for democracy. For the same reason, it is often seen as valuable that a large segment of the Finnish electorate takes advantage of the possibility and votes in advance. The experiences from the 2019 elections outlined here do not uniformly confirm this positive image of advance voting. Although the current results are simple analyzes that should be taken with some caution, they indicate that advance voting did not mobilize voters since it was predominantly people with high trust

and interest in politics that voted in advance. Furthermore, advance voters make up the majority of those who express dissatisfaction with the outcome, meaning the possibility to vote before Election Day may lead some people to vote prematurely.

It goes beyond the aspirations of this chapter to disentangle all possible elements in this story. But there is undoubtedly a need to examine the effects of advance voting in more detail to understand the implications for democracy. This question is particularly important for Finland, where advance voting is now even more popular than voting on Election Day.

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<sup>1</sup> Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, & Miller 2007

<sup>2</sup> Lago and Blais 2019

<sup>3</sup> Internet: <https://tulospalvelu.vaalit.fi/>

<sup>4</sup> Garnett 2018; Barreto et al. 2006; Gronke and Toffey 2008

<sup>5</sup> Internet: Ministry of Justice