

# Lower voter turnout than Sweden and Denmark

**4**  
**millioner**  
**har stemmerett i**  
**årets valg**

The next municipal and county council elections are due to be held on 14 September, and for the first time in Norway's voting history, the number of eligible voters will exceed 4 million. Voter turnout in local elections has been falling in Norway and most of Europe in recent decades. Four years ago, however, the number going to the polls in Norway increased, from 62 to 65 per cent. The share of the Norwegian electorate that exercises its right to vote is still lower than for our Scandinavian neighbours, and particularly Sweden.

In the last parliamentary election, voter turnout was 78 per cent; an increase of two percentage points from the parliamentary election in 2009. After the elections on 14 September, we will be able to see if the trend of recent decades is turning towards a steady increase. However, in this article, we must make do with examining voter turnout in previous elections.

Under the provisions of the Election Act (Valgloven), there is no specific turnout rate that needs to be achieved in order for an election to be declared valid. However, there is a widely-held view that a democracy needs a certain degree of engagement and participation in order to safeguard its long-term survival. There is a concern that political decisions are not considered legitimate when politicians have only been elected by a small number of voters. Concern has also been expressed for the legitimacy of decisions where participation does not represent all sections of society (see Klausen 2005 for an overview).

## Lower turnout for local elections than parliamentary elections

At the last municipal elections four years ago, voter turnout rose by three percentage points, from 61 to 64 per cent (total result for municipal and county council elections was 64.5 per cent, with 64.2 and 59.9 per cent respectively). These local elections were held in the shadow of the terrorist attacks of 22 July. The perpetrator had a political motive for the killings and many saw his acts as an attack on Norwegian democracy. One of the responses to the attack was therefore to support democracy by participating in the elections (Berg and Christensen 2013).

Voter turnout is consistently higher in National Assembly elections than in local elections, both in Norway and the rest of Europe. Turnout in municipal and county council elections has always been lower than in parliamentary elections. The county elections have the shortest history and the lowest voter turnout. These elections started in 1975 and are held at the same time as the municipal elections.

Comparisons of voter turnout between local elections (municipal elections), regional elections (county elections) and national elections (parliamentary elections) must take account of the fact that the eligibility criteria are not the same for all elections. In parliamentary elections, only Norwegian citizens have the right to vote, while foreign nationals who have lived in Norway for at least three years and Nordic nationals who are resident in Norway can vote in municipal and county council elections. In the upcoming elections in September 2015, foreign nationals make up about 8 per cent of the electorate.



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**Who has the right to vote in local elections?**

- Norwegian citizens who are 18 years of age by the end of 2015 and who are, or have been, registered as resident in Norway.
- Nationals of other Nordic countries who are 18 years of age by the end of 2015, and who are registered as resident in Norway on or before 30 June 2015.
- Other foreign nationals who are 18 years of age by the end of 2015, and who are registered as resident in Norway for the three years preceding the day of the election.

**Data source**

Statistics Norway conducts sample surveys on voting at elections. The electoral committees in municipalities are sent details of the respondents who were selected and who were listed on the National Population Register as resident at the specified address on 30 June. The electoral committee is then asked to check the electoral roll to see if these persons have voted, and to indicate this on the list and return it to Statistics Norway. Checking the electoral roll in this way gives more reliable estimates of voter turnout than information that is collected during interviews with eligible voters. Checking the electoral roll is a method that is more or less free of dropout errors and measurement errors.

Interview surveys on voting behaviour typically overestimate voter turnout. This is partly because people who vote in elections are more likely to participate in this type of survey (non-response error), and because some people lie about not voting as this can sometimes be frowned upon in society (measurement error) (see Zhang, Thomsen and Kleven 2013). Sampling uncertainties will apply to these samples.

In this article, we only comment on disparities that are statistically significant. Sample sizes for the surveys in this article are as follows:

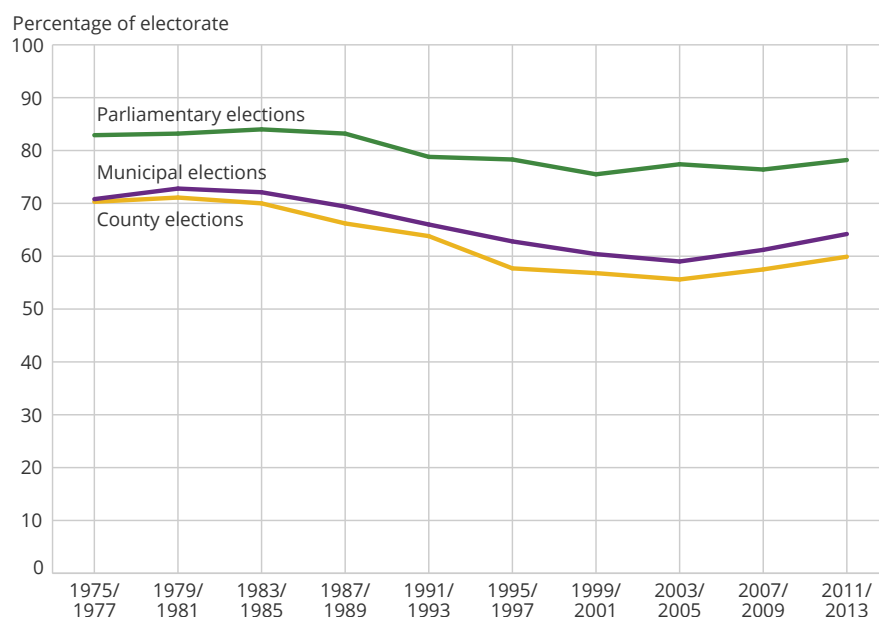
2003: Norwegian citizens 3 876, foreign nationals 6 805. 2007: Norwegian citizens 3 880, foreign nationals 6 803. 2011: Norwegian citizens 9 481, foreign nationals, 6 463.

In the period from 1975 to 2013, voter turnout fluctuated between 84 per cent at the parliamentary election in 1985 to 56 per cent at the county elections in 2003. The lowest turnout in municipal elections was in 2003, when only 59 per cent of the electorate voted. The last time more than 70 per cent of the electorate turned out at local elections was in 1983.

**Norway around the European average**

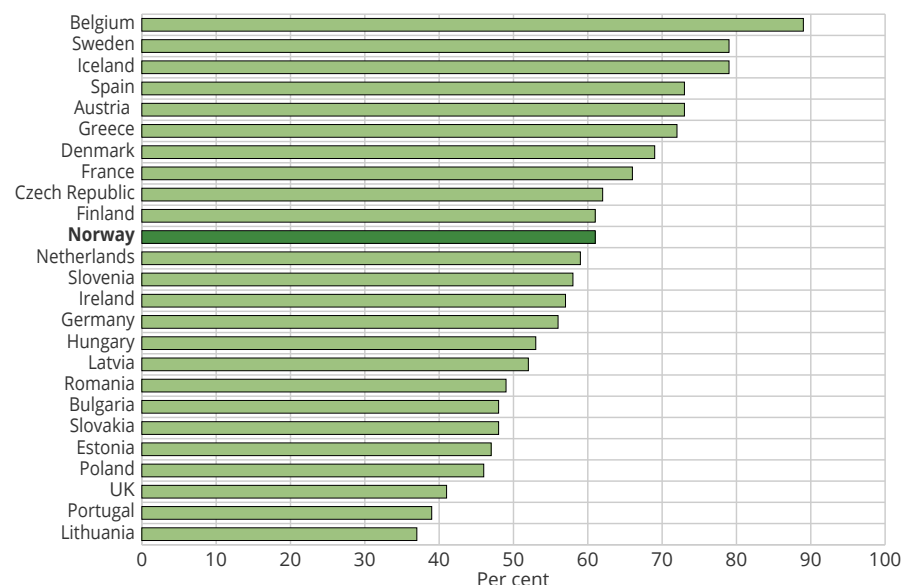
In contrast to national elections, there are no readily available European databases with information on local elections. It is therefore more difficult to compare voter turnout in local elections than in national elections in Europe. Based on data collected by the EU some years ago (2004-2008), we see that Norway's turnout was roughly average compared with the rest of Europe (see Figure 2). This tendency has also been shown in earlier periods

**Figure 1. Voter turnout in parliamentary elections and municipal and county council elections**



Source: Election statistics, Statistics Norway.

**Figure 2. Voter turnout in local elections in selected European countries (last election held in the period 2004–2008)**



Source: European Union and the Committee of the Regions (2009) Participation in the European Project: How to mobilize citizens at the local, regional, national, and European levels. European Union.

(Klausen 2005). In Belgium, voting in elections is mandatory. Unsurprisingly, Belgium has the highest voter turnout in Europe, with 90 per cent, but even there around 10 per cent of the population do not vote. Sweden and Iceland are also high on this ranking, with almost 80 per cent voter turnout in local elections. At the bottom is the UK, Portugal and Lithuania, where turnout is around 40 per cent.

There are considerable variations in how local and regional elections are held throughout Europe. Some countries, such as Norway, hold the municipal and county elections on the same day. Other countries, such as Germany and the UK, hold municipal elections in different years for the individual regions. If Norway were to follow this electoral system it could mean a city council election being held in Oslo on 14 September 2015 and a municipal council election being held in Bærum on 7 February 2016, for example.

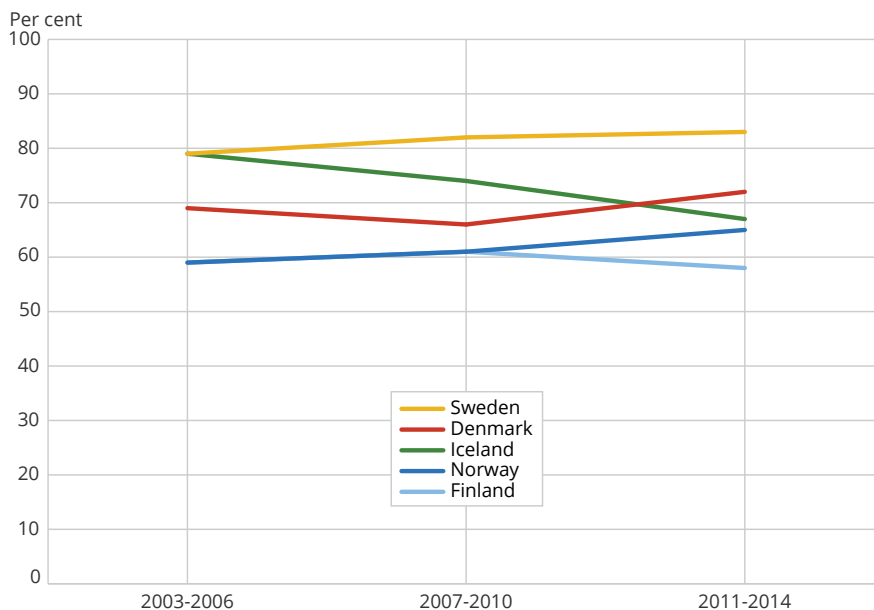
Figure 2 shows average figures for local elections held in various federal states and regions in countries such as Germany and the UK. At the other extreme, Sweden holds its local elections at the same time as its National Assembly elections.

There has been discussion about holding national, regional and local elections all on the same day in Norway, but a number of objections to this have been raised. The concern is that the dominance of national politics over municipal politics would become even greater, and local issues and local debates would be pushed into the background (Klausen 2005:368). There are also significant variations in how easy it is to join the electoral roll – the register of eligible voters. In Norway, a person is automatically included if they meet the voting criteria, whereas, in the UK for example, voters need to actually register themselves on the electoral roll.

### Second lowest turnout in the Nordic region

Comparisons of Norway and other Nordic countries show that only Finland had a lower turnout than Norway in the last local elections. In Finland, the turnout was 58 per cent at the last local elections in 2012. Since Sweden has the highest voter turnout in Europe, it also therefore has the highest turnout among the Nordic countries; 83 per cent at the last local elections in 2014. Denmark, whose election system is roughly the same as Norway's, was about

Figure 3. Voter turnout in the three last local elections in the Nordic countries



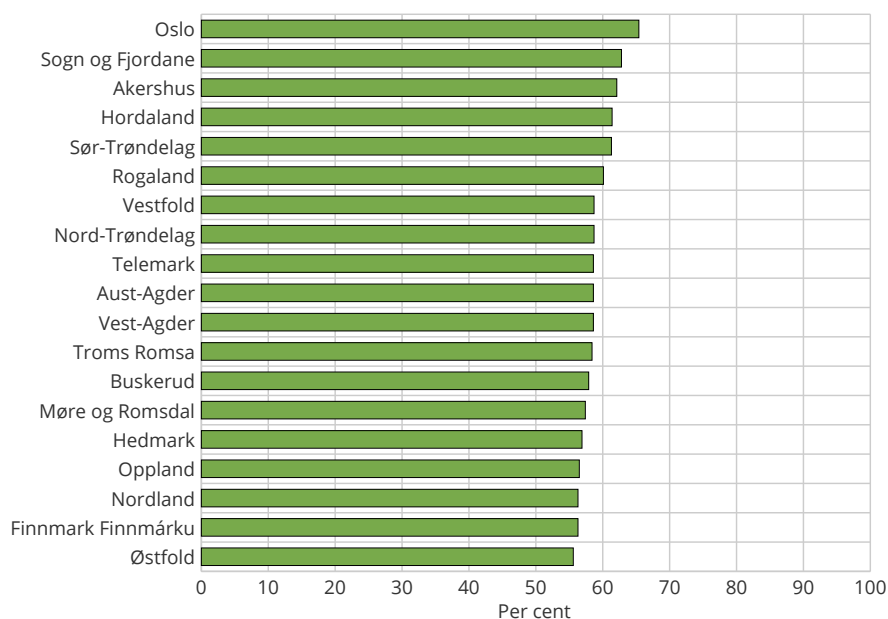
Source: Norway: Election statistics, Statistics Norway. Iceland: <http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Elections>. Finland: [http://www.stat.fi/til/vaa\\_sv.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/vaa_sv.html). Sweden: [http://www.scb.se/sv/\\_Hitta-statistik/Statistik-efter-amne/Demokrati/](http://www.scb.se/sv/_Hitta-statistik/Statistik-efter-amne/Demokrati/). Denmark: Bhatti et al 2014.

seven percentage points higher than Norway in the last local elections in 2013. Iceland has had a negative trend; their top ranking in Europe less than 10 years ago has slipped to almost the same level as Norway, with a 67 per cent turnout in the last local elections in 2014.

### Sogn og Fjordane – highest turnout in 2011 county elections

The overall voter turnout in the 2011 county elections was 60 per cent. Oslo leads the way with 65 per cent (see Figure 4). However, these figures are not fully comparable with county elections in other counties since the elections in Oslo are not county council elections as such, they are city council elections and district council elections. Excluding Oslo, Sogn og Fjordane has the highest turnout, with 63 per cent, and Østfold, Nordland and Finnmark are the lowest, with 56 per cent each; a difference of seven percentage points. Akershus, Hordaland and Sør-Trøndelag are also among the counties with the highest turnout in county council elections.

Figure 4. Voter turnout in 2011 county council elections, by county



Source: Election statistics, Statistics Norway.

Table 1. Voter turnout in county elections 1999–2007, by county. Per cent

	1999		2003		2007
Oslo	64	Oslo	62	Oslo	62
Akershus	60	Sogn og Fjordane	59	Akershus	61
Sogn og Fjordane	59	Hordaland	58	Sogn og Fjordane	60
Rogaland	58	Akershus	58	Hordaland	60
Vestfold	57	Vestfold	57	Vest-Agder	58
Hordaland	57	Rogaland	57	Rogaland	58
Nord-Trøndelag	57	Nord-Trøndelag	56	Nord-Trøndelag	58
Vest-Agder	56	Vest-Agder	55	Sør-Trøndelag	57
Sør-Trøndelag	56	Sør-Trøndelag	55	Telemark	57
Hedmark	56	Telemark	55	Møre og Romsdal	56
Oppland	56	Buskerud	54	Vestfold	56
Buskerud	55	Møre og Romsdal	54	Buskerud	55
Telemark	54	Oppland	53	Oppland	55
Finnmark Finnmark	54	Aust-Agder	52	Aust-Agder	55
Aust-Agder	53	Hedmark	52	Nordland	54
Møre og Romsdal	53	Finnmark Finnmark	51	Troms Romsa	54
Østfold	53	Troms Romsa	51	Finnmark Finnmark	54
Nordland	51	Østfold	50	Østfold	54
Troms Romsa	51	Nordland	49	Hedmark	53

Source: Election statistics, Statistics Norway.

Voter turnout in the last four county elections since 1999 (Table 1) shows a similar trend. Oslo, Sogn og Fjordane, Akershus and Hordaland are consistently high, while the counties Østfold, Nordland and Finnmark are relatively low.

**Large variation between the municipalities**

Municipal and county council elections consist of more than 400 different elections for different municipal councils, district councils and county councils. Voter turnout varies considerably between the municipalities, much more so than among the counties (see Figure 5). In Fedje, 87 per cent of the electorate voted, while in Moskenes the corresponding figure was about 55 per cent; a difference of 32 percentage points.

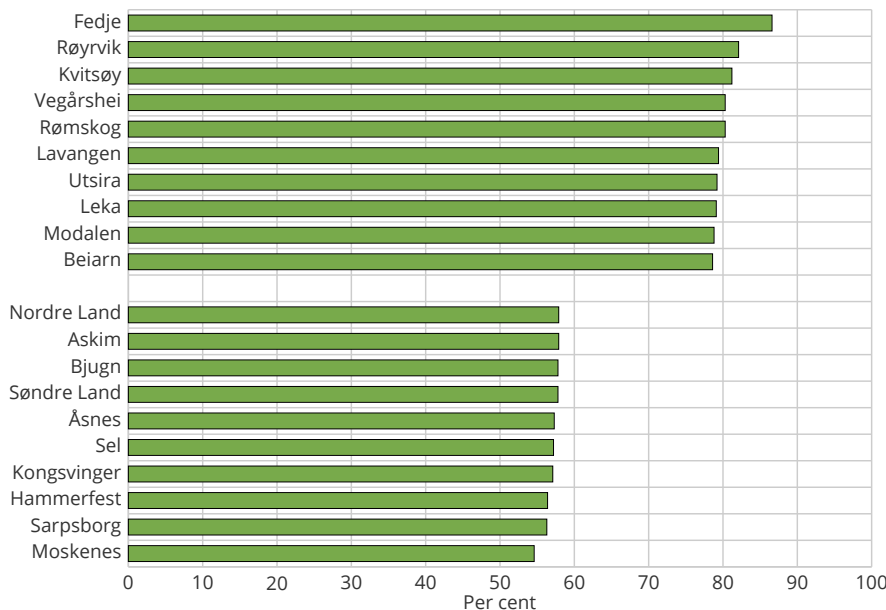
In the 2011 municipal elections, the county with the highest voter turnout was Sogn og Fjord, with 68 per cent. Østfold had the lowest turnout with 61 per cent; a difference of seven percentage points in the county breakdown. Turnout in local elections is relatively high in the populous counties Hordaland, Sør-Trøndelag, Oslo and Akershus. There is no clear geographic profile of voter turnout levels.

**Active member of society?**

In the literature on voter turnout (see Aardal 2002 for an overview), political resources are cited as a major reason why some people vote and some don't. The correlation is straightforward: the higher a person's social status and the more integrated they are in society, the more likely they are to vote (Aardal 2002: 24). This so-called integration perspective on political participation is linked to the degree of integration as a member of society. For example, the workplace is an important arena for political awareness and learning (Sigel 1989). When a person retires from working life, they no longer have the formal contacts they once had. Furthermore, as people age their family situation changes; children move out, spouse dies, etc. We have therefore identified an inverted U-shape when examining voter turnout by age.

The conventional view of the elderly and voter turnout suggests that turnout decreases when a person retires from working life and wants to 'enjoy their retirement'. However, this hypothesis ignores the fact that those who retire have undergone a political socialization and that political engagement has become a part of their personality. Analyses of time series regarding age and

Figure 5. Voter turnout in 2011 municipal council elections. By municipality, top ten and bottom ten



Source: Election statistics, Statistics Norway.

Table 2. **Voter participation in 2011 local elections, by sex, age and level of education. Per cent**

	Total	Men	Women
	65	62	65
<b>Age</b>			
18-19 years	49	46	54
20-24 years	40	36	43
25-44 years	58	54	61
45-66 years	71	71	72
67-79 years	76	78	75
80+ years	60	66	57
<b>Level of education</b>			
Primary/lower secondary	51	49	52
Upper secondary	66	65	67
University/college	79	78	80
Not specified	23	22	24

Source: Election statistics/Electoral roll, Statistics Norway.

voter turnout show that turnout is relatively high among pensioners, and only starts to fall when they reach 80 (Berglund 2005, Kleven 2005, Berglund and Kleven 2010).

The literature also shows that voter turnout has a correlation to education. However, as far back as the early 1960s, disparities in voter education were shown to be more closely correlated to education in the USA than in Norway (Rokkan and Campbell 1970). In Norway, many of those with a lower education were members of groups and organisations that had close links to political parties, which in turn meant they were mobilised to participate. Thus, there is not necessarily a direct correlation between low education and low political participation.

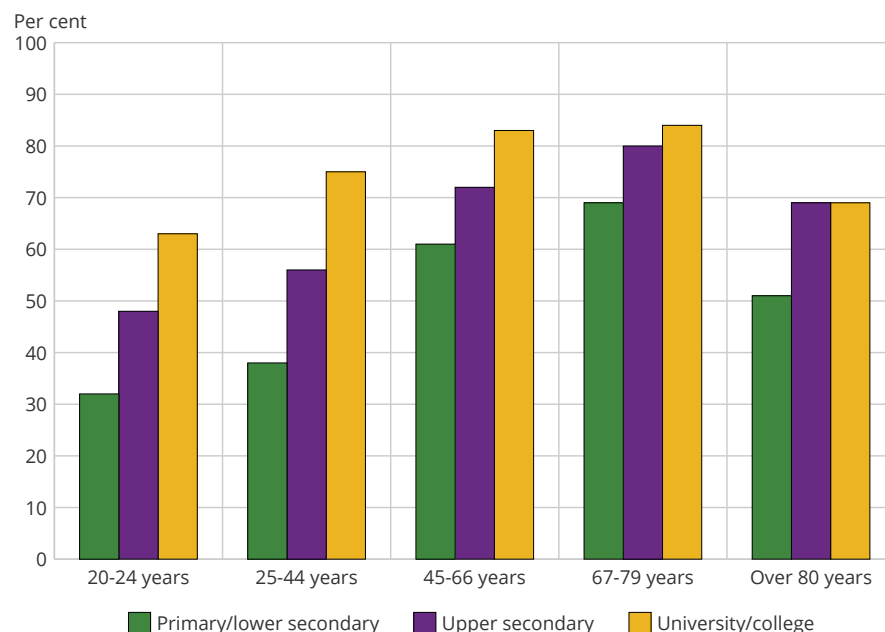
**Women with a higher education are most likely to vote**

In recent elections in Norway, the trend has been for women to participate to a greater extent than men. Sample surveys conducted by Statistics Norway in connection with elections show that the turnout tends to be a few percentage points higher among women (see Table 2). However, this is ambiguous when controlling for other indicators, such as age and education. In relation to age, the voter turnout has an almost inverted U-shape; a relatively low level for the youngest group, rising for the middle aged and falling again among the oldest group. This concurs with the so-called integration hypothesis; those who are most integrated into society will also show the greatest tendency to vote in elections.

Young people who are still living at home and not yet part of working life are less likely to vote than those in employment. Another group that is generally not in employment, is the oldest group, and here we also see a lower voter turnout. First-time voters (18-19-year-olds) are more likely to vote than those in their early 20s. School elections and the focus on first-time voters are no doubt part of the explanation for this. Another factor is that when young people are in education they often do not live in their home municipality, which can make it difficult for them to vote.

Research on elections shows that education is an important factor in explaining voter turnout. We see a clear correlation between level of education and participation in elections. Among women and men with a higher education,

Figure 6. Voter turnout in 2011 local elections, by age and level of education



Source: Election statistics, Statistics Norway.

eight out of ten vote, while among those with a lower level of education, the figure is only five out of ten (see Table 2).

Figure 6 shows voter turnout by education and age. We see that the age effect (the inverted U-shape) also applies here, with the youngest voting the least in every level of education. In the youngest age group (20-24 years) with a primary or lower secondary education, the turnout is 32 per cent, while the corresponding share in the group aged 45-79 years is approximately 84 per cent. The disparity in turnout based on education level is greatest for the two youngest groups. This may be an indication that Norway could end up in a situation similar to that of the USA, for example, where there are major disparities in voter turnout according to education.

**Only three in ten foreign nationals voted in 2011**

At the elections in 2015, around 310 200 foreign nationals will have the right to vote. This represents 8 per cent of the electorate, compared with 6 per cent in the previous local elections in 2011. The largest group of foreign nationals entitled to vote was the Poles, accounting for 18 per cent of foreign nationals. Swedes were the second largest group with 13 per cent. However, only around three out of ten foreign nationals actually exercised their right to vote in 2011 (Table 3). Norwegian citizens are therefore twice as likely to vote as foreign nationals.

**Voter turnout among foreign nationals increases with length of residence**

Voter turnout among foreign nationals increases with length of residence (see Figure 7). For those who have been in Norway for over 20 years, the turnout is significantly higher than for those who have been here less than 10 years. This has been the trend in the last three local elections. For those who have been in Norway for 30 years or more, voter turnout is on a par with that of Norwegian citizens.

**Large variation among foreign nationals**

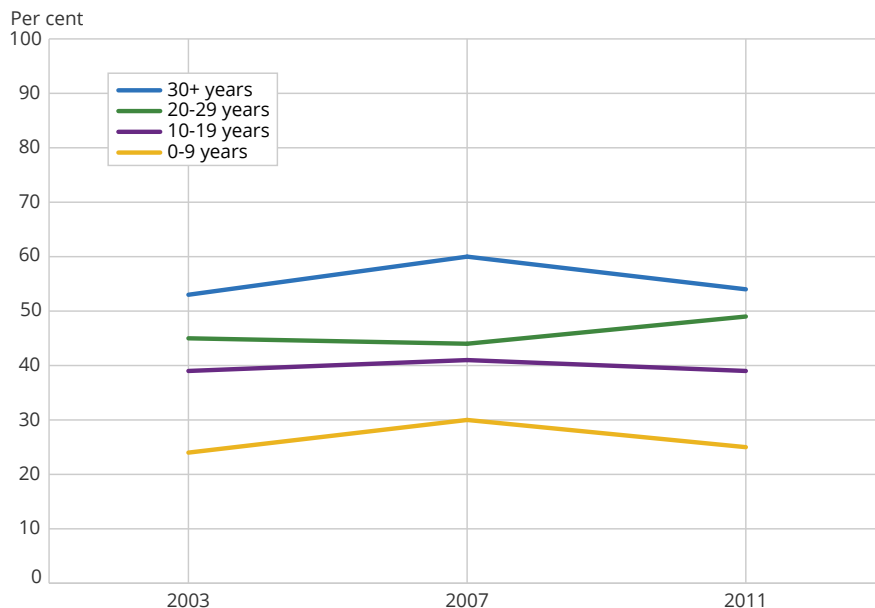
Voter participation is lower among virtually all foreign nationals than Norwegian citizens. This is also a feature we see in most other European countries, i.e. the country's own citizens are more likely to vote than the foreign nationals in local elections (see for example Bhatti et al 2014). In the 2011

Table 3. **Voter turnout among Norwegian and citizens and foreign nationals in 2003-2011 local elections**

	Norwegian citizens			Foreign nationals		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
2003	62	61	63	34	33	35
2007	61	60	62	36	34	39
2011	65	64	66	32	29	35

Source: Election statistics/Electoral roll, Statistics Norway.

Figure 7. Voter turnout in local elections among foreign nationals, by length of residence



Source: Election statistics/Electoral roll survey, Statistics Norway.



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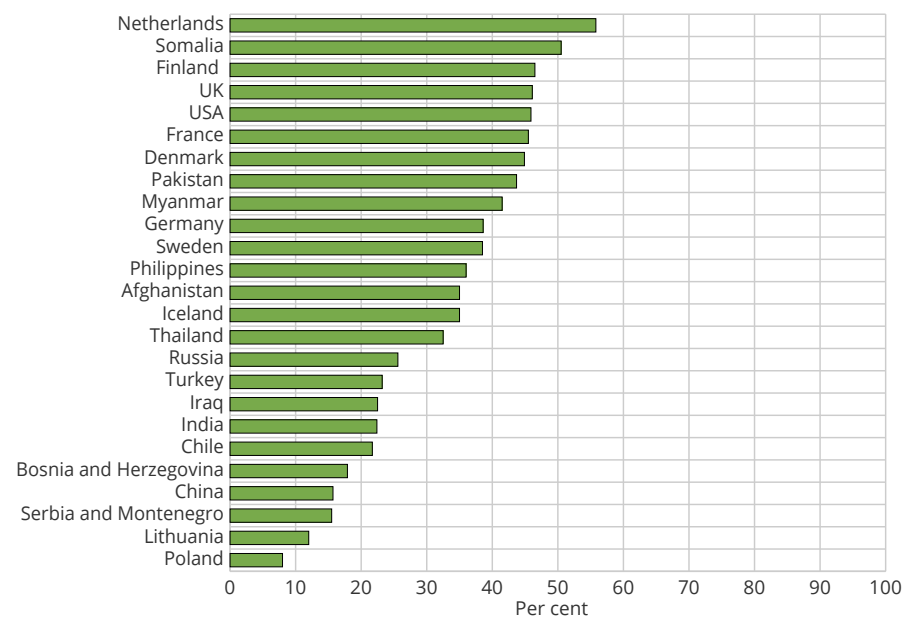
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election, Dutch citizens had the highest turnout, with 56 per cent, and around half of the Somalis exercised their right to vote. The turnout for Polish citizens was just 8 per cent (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Voter turnout in 2011 local elections among foreign nationals, by citizenship. Selected countries



Source: Election statistics/Electoral roll survey, Statistics Norway.