SPATIAL ANALYSIS OF LITHUANIAN YOUTH TURNOUT: RESULTS OF 2016-2020 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

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Abstract

The paper analyses spatial differences in voter turnout during the 2016 and 2020 Lithuanian Parliament elections. The article delves into the problem of spatial differentiation of young voter turnout, paying special attention to the most segregated metropolitan regions. The relationship between youth turnout and changes in the support of individual parties in different polling units is also sought. The results show that the voting activity of young citizens depends on their political preferences towards right-wing parties. Political preferences and turnout are polarised in central and peripheral regions and new political players such as the Freedom Party can influence young residents' political behaviour.

Key words

electoral geography • Lithuanian elections • political parties • voter behaviour • youth turnout

Introduction

Elections are one of the most important parts of the complex mechanism of democracy. The principle of popular sovereignty is implemented only because of elections and voters have the leverage to keep members of parties or political movements within the framework of ethics, decency and responsibility. In this sense, the highest power belongs to the voters, who are equal and every vote is equally important. Unsurprisingly electoral studies become one of the most topical themes of social sciences in post-communist countries, where democratic regimes were established only three decades ago. The papers analyzing party systems (Lewis, 2006; Saarts, 2017), as well as voting preferences and their spatial dimensions, appear in various CEE countries and in the Baltic states as well (Zarycki, 1999a, 1999b, 2001; Kowalski, 2019; Meleshevych, 2006; Baranauskaitė & Tučas, 2014). However, not everyone exercises the right to vote and appear in the elections. For this reason, distortions in political representation can occur, which could threaten democracy itself (IDEA report, 1999). Though everyone has equal opportunities and only

a citizen himself is to blame for not fulfilling his duty, but in this case the political results do not reflect the real opinion of all citizens. The more passive groups of society would be pushed aside, therefore understanding the reasons for such a passiveness is important. Voter turnout depends on characteristics of individuals: gender, age, education, ethnicity, social or economic status, etc. (Gerber et al., 2003). Previous studies revealed ongoing redistribution of various social, ethnic and demographic groups inside Lithuanian territory resulting in growing socio-spatial differentiation along the centre–periphery axis (Lang et al., 2022). The growing socio-spatial segregation inside metropolitan regions has an obvious influence on political differentiation there (Burneika et al., 2017). We may hypothesize that such a spatial differentiation of society should cause visible differences in voter turnout geography. Voter turnout is also contingent on spatial factors, and the voting behaviour of similar social groups can differ in different places. Some social groups vote more or less actively in elections depending on a particular territory. However, in most countries, youth stand out for their passivity (Flickinger & Studlar, 1992; Gray & Caul, 2000; Dempsey, 2017).

This paper primarily aims to delve into the problem of spatial differentiation of younger voters' group turnout across Lithuanian territory paying special attention to the most segregated metropolitan regions. First of all, young people must develop the habit of voting, as this will determine not only the turnout rate but also the legitimacy of the authorities and the future of democracy. Besides, a politically engaged young person increases his knowledge of political processes, and democracy and also understands that he is an equal member of society and can influence policy making. However, it should be kept in mind that the interests of young people may differ from those of other age groups and less active participation in elections may result in a less important attitude of governing parties towards the problem of younger population groups and to the future of the country.

If youth vote more passively, less adequate decisions may be made in areas important for young people, or young people may be ignored in general. Young voter turnout is also important because it is a part of overall voter turnout (IDEA Report, 1999). Therefore, it is relevant to know how active young voters are. However, is the behaviour of young people the same throughout the territory of the state? What influences the turnout of young voters? Does the activity of young voters depend on the places they live? These are the questions that the paper aims to answer, primarily using data from the last parliamentary elections. The data on youth social composition is not available yet, therefore we can only hypothesize, what impact it makes on youth voting behaviour. Instead, we will try to relate changing youth turnout with the changing political field and namely with the support for various political parties during the last elections.

Overview of previous spatial studies of the Lithuanian electoral field

Almost all parliament elections in Lithuania resulted in the publishing of new books and papers, where political scientists and sociologists analyze party identification, and changes in voter turnout among different social groups (Žiliūkaitė et al., 2006; Ramonaitė et al., 2014; Jastramskis et al., 2018). However, these monographs mostly cover the general scale of the whole country and do not examine the more detailed level of constituencies or polling units. Sociological research revealed the dependence between the socio-demographic features of voters and their political preferences in Lithuania, though they were not as straightforward as in Western countries (Gaidys, 2004, 2014; Ramonaite et al., 2014). Younger residents as well as those with higher incomes and education level tend to support right-wing parties in Lithuania. Such a population is more common in bigger urban areas in Lithuania, where support for right-wing political parties is usually

much stronger than in the peripheries. Typical residents of rural areas have different political preferences and support centre-left wing or "alternative" parties, which could hardly be prescribed to certain traditional political wing (Gaidys, 2014). Under such circumstances, we could expect that the main differences in electoral behaviour (i.e. voter turnout) should be visible between rural peripheral and metropolitan areas and in urban areas under fast growth and segregation.

However, it is not enough to examine political phenomena only at the state level, it is important to take into account the territorial context; otherwise, we would fall into the "Territorial Trap" mentioned by John Agnew (Agnew, 1994). In his theory, the author notes that it is important not to reify the territorial spaces of the state as a permanent unit of secure sovereign space (Agnew, 1994). Besides, the territory of the state should not be viewed as a strict container of society, because sometimes there is a bigger sociocultural divide within the state than across the borders of the states. The inhabitants of the respective area have a unique value system, which is different from other citizens living in the surrounding areas. In addition, because of gender, age, ethnic or income differences within the country, different parties have distinct interests in certain regions of the state (Agnew, 1996). Thus, the social characteristics of the population only gain meaning and make the behaviour of voters unique in certain political-geographical contexts. Therefore, in this article, we analyze in more detail the spatial differences in youth turnout at the most detailed available level of polling units, to reveal the territorial context of this phenomenon as accurately as possible.

The studies of the Lithuanian political field have started to pay attention to its spatial features at a more detailed level at the beginning of the 21st century. V. Petrulis's doctoral thesis was the first major attempt to analyse the spatial structure of the political field at the local (LAU 2) level (Petrulis, 2009), but the author did not analyse voter turnout

and its factors. There are papers examining the dependence of voter turnout related to voters' party preferences at lower territorial units (Savickaitė et al., 2013; Baranauskaitė & Tučas, 2014; Baranauskaitė et al., 2015; Burneika et al., 2015; Burneika et al., 2017); however, they focus mainly on large cities or a specific region, but not on the entire country, concentrating mostly on spatial differentiation of political preferences, and voter turnout is only secondary topic of these studies. Some interdependencies between voter turnout and changing ethnic landscape were established in Vilnius suburban zone (Ubarevičienė et al., 2015).

Though this paper concentrates mostly on the correlation of spatial differences between youth turnout and the political field but the spatial analysis should bear in mind the socio-demographic differentiation of the country because political behaviour depends on persons socio-demographic characteristics, Many studies, carried out in former communist CEE countries and particularly in the Baltic's revealed the highly polarized trends of development (Lang et al., 2015; Lang et al., 2022; Ubarevičienė, 2018). These studies show that namely metropolitan areas are the main nodes of the redistribution of population, where more prosperous groups concentrate; however, these are spaces with the highest and growing segregation levels (Tammarru et al., 2015; Valatka et al., 2015). In Lithuania better-educated residents of higher professional (social) status concentrate in new suburbs (mostly located in the northern, north-western parts of cities) and more prestigious central areas. Socially less successful, often ethnically mixed groups concentrate in more industrialized, peripheral southern, south-eastern parts (old industrial satellite towns, working-class districts, more distant Soviet neighbourhoods). Such a social segregation has a visible impact on the distribution of political preferences when right-wing political parties are supported in more successful, while populist or alternative parties are in less successful areas (Burneika et al., 2017). All this goes in line with previous

studies, which revealed certain links between social and political segregation.

In general, the problem of young voter turnout received a lot of attention in various countries around the world (Onder & Karabulut, 2017; Hall, 2019; Hernandez, 2019; Holbein & Hillygus, 2020; Bekker et al., 2022; Bergan et al., 2022; Rekker, 2022). Not only researchers are interested in the behaviour of young voters, but also various institutions, such as the European Parliament (Deželan, 2023). Also, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement provides a detailed analysis after each USA election (Circle, 2023). Therefore, it is hoped that this article will also contribute to a more detailed understanding of young voters.

Methodology and data

This study covers all municipalities and polling units located in the territory of the Republic of Lithuania. Changes in voter turnout, differences between youth and total voter turnout are presented at the level of electoral units in order to see the territorial differentiation of these indicators in more detail (in different parts of district or city municipalities). The municipal administrations create new or abolish certain electoral units, and changes their limits taking into account changing demographic trends prior to each election. For this reason, the number of units and their borders change almost during every election but these changes are not fundamental (there were 1996 units in 2016 and 1938 units in 2020 in Lithuania). In order to facilitate the comparison between the two elections, this study uses a unified stratum of units. The territorial units were aggregated in those territories where the boundaries of polling units did not coincide in different elections. The new aggregated layer consisted of 1,800 polling units, of which 1,728 boundaries remained unchanged and 72 were created by merging two or more territorial units.

The article uses data from the 2016-2020 Seimas (Lithuanian Parliament) elections.

These elections were chosen because demographic data from previous elections is not available. We analyze only parliamentary elections because voter turnout is mostly associated with specific personalities in cases of the presidential elections (i.e. voter turnout increases in the village, city or region where the candidate comes from). The results of municipal elections are also highly dependent on local factors such as the reputation of candidates among the local community, so it is not accurate to compare the entire territory of the country. In the Seimas elections, especially when it comes to the proportional part of the elections, all citizens of the country have equal opportunities and the same lists of candidates.

There are two types of data used in this study: numerical and graphical. Graphical data – spatial (vector) boundaries of voting units and municipalities. This data is publicly available on the open data portal of The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania. The numerical data type includes electoral and demographic data, which are also taken from the database of the Central Electoral Commission. The article examines voter turnout from two perspectives: total voter turnout and the difference in voter turnout among different demographic groups. In order to understand the overall voter turnout better, two maps are presented that reveal the territorial differentiation of Lithuanian voter turnout in 2016 and 2020. To reveal the distinctions between demographic groups, the difference between young voters and total turnout is presented (total voter turnout subtracted from young voter turnout). In this article, citizens of Lithuania between the ages of 18 and 29 are considered young voters. The lower age limit is set in accordance with the "Republic of Lithuania Law on Elections to the Seimas" (E-Seimas, 1992), the upper age limit is based on the "Republic of Lithuania Law on Youth Policy Framework" (E-Seimas, 2003).

In order to determine the relationship between young voter turnout and party support, a correlation analysis was performed using the Pearson correlation coefficient

of the linear relationship. The strength of relationships is determined based on the classification proposed by Jacob Cohen (Tab. 1). Separate relationships were studied only with parliamentary parties since the support of parties that did not enter the Seimas was too low to influence the total turnout of young voters. When aggregating the parties, the "Social Democratic Party of Lithuania", "Social Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania", "Labour Party" and "Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union" were assigned to the left wing; to the right wing: "Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats", "Liberals' Movement" and "Freedom" parties, which formed governing coalition after 2020. The rest of the candidate parties were assigned to "Other parties". The parties were ascribed to the left or right wing according to the position they declared. Party variables used for analysis were presented as changes in support of a specific party or group of parties in the 2016 and 2020 Seimas elections. The variable of youth turnout is the change in youth turnout between the 2016-2020 Seimas elections. The analysis sample size is 1,800 units. In order to reveal the relationship between the support of the newly established Freedom Party and the change in youth turnout, maps reflecting these phenomena are presented. The maps are provided at the municipal level since the results at the unit level are highly heteroskedastic and it would be difficult to see specific trends.

Table 1. Jacob Cohen Methodology of Correlation Relationships (Cohen, 1988)

r value:	0.000–-0.099	0.100–-0.239	0.240–-0.369	0.370–-1.00
Relationship:	No relationship	Weak relationship	Medium relationship	Strong relationship

Abbreviations of political parties:
FP – The Freedom Party
HU – LCD – The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats
LP – The Labour Party

LM – The Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania
LFGU – The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union
SDPL – The Social Democratic Party of Lithuania

The main features of Lithuanian voter turnout in 2016-2020

Voter turnout in the parliamentary elections of the Republic of Lithuania is quite stable, except for the first elections after the restoration of the independence of the state when voter turnout exceeded 70 per cent (The Central Electoral..., 2022). After fifty years of repression by the Soviet Union, these elections were finally democratic and free, making it an important event, attracting a significant number of voters. The behaviour of voters stabilized in the 1996 Seimas elections and there had been no significant differentiation in voter turnout since then. The 2016 Seimas elections weren't an exception and the overall voter turnout reached 50.64 pct. (the average turnout in the Lithuanian parliamentary elections from 1996 to 2020 was 51.09 pct.). The turnout decreased to 47.81 pct in the 2020 Seimas elections. Although this change is negligible, but considering the entire period of Independent Lithuania it is the second lowest one in the whole history of parliamentary elections (the lowest one was monitored in 2004 – 46.08 pct.). It is possible that the COVID-19 pandemic was the cause but we did not analyse the reasons of general trends. The Seimas elections took place In October 2020, when the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic was about to break out, though the strict quarantine was not imposed yet and movement of population across municipalities wasn't restricted. Still, it is likely that some voters did not appear in the elections due to the fear of contracting the virus, especially in municipalities with higher infection rates. At the same time, restricted foreign trips could have played the opposite impact.

The spatial differentiation of voter turnout across different voting districts in 2016

and 2020 is illustrated in the maps (Fig. 1). The visual analysis of the picture indicates that in both cases the voter turnout had some obvious spatial differentiation. As the actual behaviour of voters depends on many local factors (i.e. the birthplace of a candidate or local political tensions) such a macro-level analysis cannot explain all the micro-level differences. However, we can clearly see that some obvious macro-level regularities exist. Generally, the voters' turnout is bigger in the Eastern part of Lithuania and western areas are less active. This trend goes in line with the previously mentioned general less active voting of younger population groups as the share of the older population is higher in the Eastern part of the country. On the contrary, the distribution of the population over 65 years old, which is the most active voting group, corresponds to regions with higher turnout (Ubarevičienė, 2018).

Though we can observe many similarities in the spatial distribution of voter turnout during both elections, there are obvious differences as well. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, voter turnout was high in the Eastern part of the country in districts located along the Belarus border. However, the higher activity of voters was monitored also in some parts of Central Lithuania (Fig. 1). The highest voter turnout was in the peripheral North-east municipalities of Ignalina and Švenčionys. The much higher turnout was also monitored in Eastern districts around the capital city (Vilnius district and Šalčininkai district municipalities), where the majority of residents have Polish identity and "Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance" is the most supported party. On the other hand, neighbouring areas with a higher proportion of Polish population outside these districts (South of Švenčionys, Širvintos district and Vilnius city municipalities, East of Trakai district municipality) are among the least politically active places. South Eastern Varėna district municipality and neighbouring Alytus district municipality finalizes the Eastern region of the most active voters. Apart from some smaller scale voting peaks (i.e. eastern part

of Pagėgiai municipality, Birštonas or the northern part of Naujoji Akmenė municipality), the much higher voter turnout compared to surrounding regions was monitored in Raseiniai district municipality. Raseiniai has no specific differences in social or demographic structure from surrounding regions, so this activity most probably is related to some local political events. The main news media reported a very tense situation in the local municipality, where problems related to rivalry between local political groups raised to the limit and the central government brought up the question of direct governance of the municipality in the spring of 2016 (Gudavičius, 2016). This assumption can be supported by the fact that the increase was very short-lived (Fig. 1, top map), though, of course, some other factors could have also played a role in both increasing or decreasing voter turnout in particular cases (such as a higher level of COVID-19 cases in this areas, what could reduce voters activity in 2020). Our macro-scale analysis is not suitable for the revelation of many small-scale differences, so we can only confirm that actual voter turnout is highly spatially differentiated and particularities could be explained only using different methodologies (i.e. local case studies).

Looking at the map, one may wonder if historical memory and phantom borders influence voters' behaviour because the Eastern part of Lithuania has a higher voting turnout than the remaining country According to the literature, the effect of phantom borders is common in the countries of east-central Europe, where state borders were changing in 20th century (Jańczak, 2015; Löwis, 2015). Although in Lithuania the region with high voter turnout partially corresponds to the territory that belonged to Poland before WWII, territorial differences in voter turnout can also be explained by obvious demographic, social or ethnic particularities of this region. It should be mentioned that the region of high voter turnout continues to include the northeastern part of Lithuania, which never belonged to Poland but has a similar demographic structure. Also, it would be very
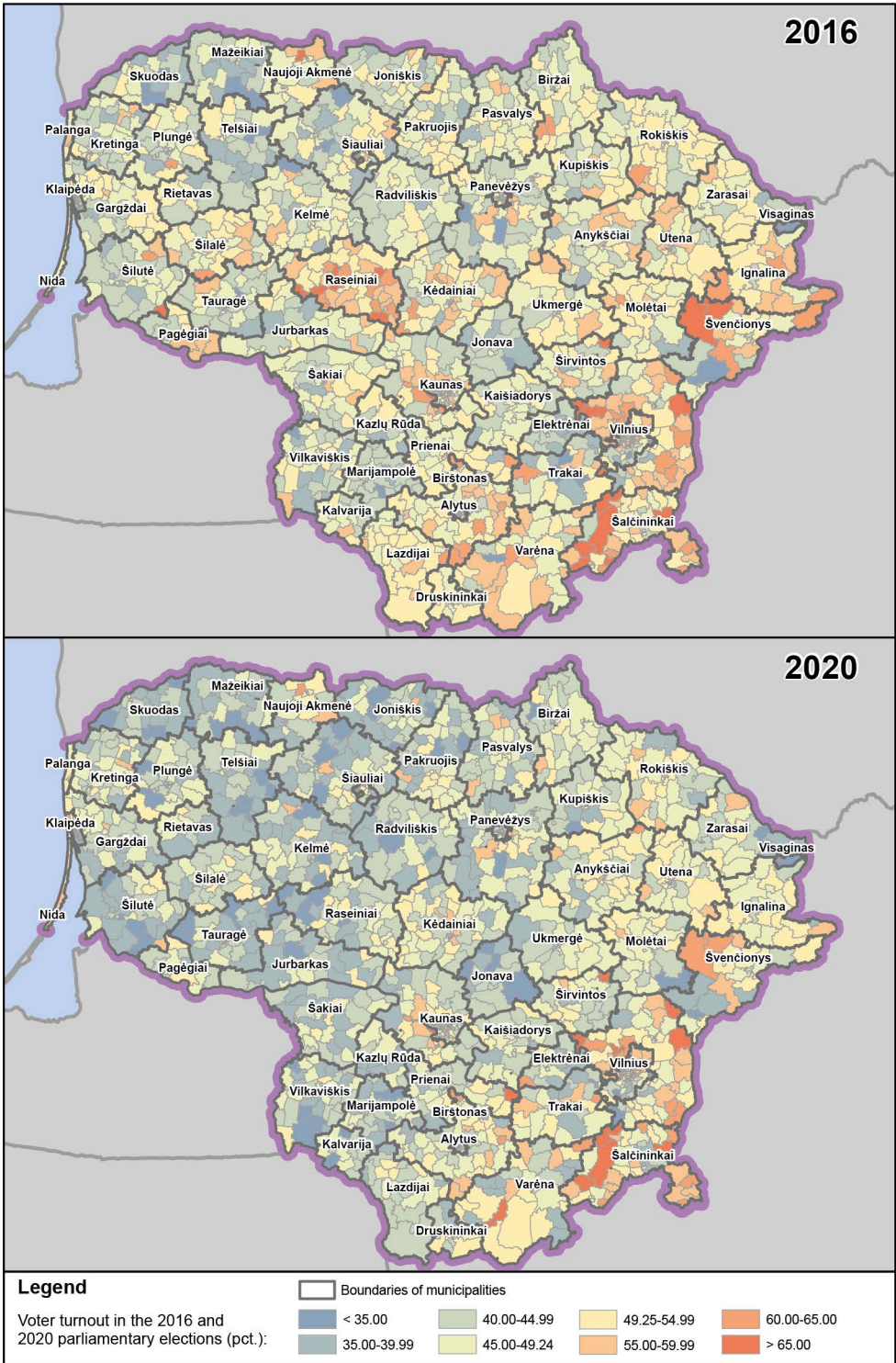
Figure 1. Voter turnout in polling units of Lithuania in 2016 and 2020, %

Source (Figs. 1-5) : Authors' maps, based on data of Central Electoral Commission (2022).

difficult to accurately assess the effect of phantom borders on the results of Lithuanian elections.

The lowest voter turnout was in the North-west peripheral municipalities close to Latvia and the South-west close to Russian border regions as well as Elektrėnai and Visaginas municipalities in the East. These are demographically younger areas but the lower turnout was also monitored in the region located between two main cities Vilnius and Kaunas. The lower turnout area stretches from Jonava to Trakai municipality, though we don't have obvious reasons explaining this situation in the periurban region between Kaunas and Vilnius.

Although the overall voter turnout decreased in the 2020 Seimas elections, the territorial differences remained largely similar (Fig. 1), just the macro-level differentiation between Eastern and Western parts of Lithuania became even more visible. We can only assume that apart from obvious socio-demographic or locally constrained reasons, regions at a longer distance from the capital city could be less concerned with central government issues. Also, we may have in mind that for this very reason (distance from major job providers) the emigration rates from more western parts were relatively much more numerous (easterners were choosing Vilnius city much more often). Not all emigrants declare their emigration so remaining on voters lists. The geography of voter turnout, apart from the central Raseiniai region remains basically the same, what suggests that there are quite stable factors determining the voting behaviour of citizens in different parts of the country. Distance from the metropolitan centre and older demographic composition are among the most plausible ones.

Spatial differentiation in Metropolitan regions

So far, our analysis has been targeted on the countrywide scale and we have indicated major regional trends there, but social and demographic changes in most of the country

are very slow. If there are no spatial political turbulences like in the Raseiniai district, major spatial changes in voting activity are also minimal. However, the different situation is in metropolitan areas where suburbanization, gentrification and segregation are taking place. As a result, we can see quite a distinctive social polarization at a small scale inside urban areas. With suburban sprawl, we may expect some political rivalry between newcomers and old residents, which have a different social structure and different political preferences (Burneika et al., 2017). If we agree that voting turnout depends on resident's social or demographic status and tensions in the political field, we may need to develop a closer look namely at urban regions (Fig. 2). Previous research revealed that all Lithuanian cities were sprawling mostly towards northern directions, which finally gained better-educated population with higher professional status and income. In all three biggest cities, these areas started to vote more actively for right-wing parties, while peripheral areas outside the suburban ring preferred alternative parties of various kinds.

The visual analysis of maps illustrating spatial differences in voter turnout confirms that high differences inside urban areas exist and we may not regard the urban-rural dimension as a major factor of voter turnout inside Lithuania (voting turnout differs inside cities more than between rural and urban places). The polarised picture of high turnout in the North and North-west corresponds to more prosperous, younger, less ethnically mixed (in Vilnius and Klaipeda cases) areas, while industrial southern (south-eastern in Kaunas case), soviet housing estate dominant areas are considerably less active in all three cities. We may see that the polarization is more evident in Vilnius city and Klaipeda city municipalities and this hypothetically can be related to ethnical differences as ethnic minorities concentrate more in the Southern parts, but this factor can only be of partial importance as differences are visible in Kaunas, where there are no corresponding ethnic
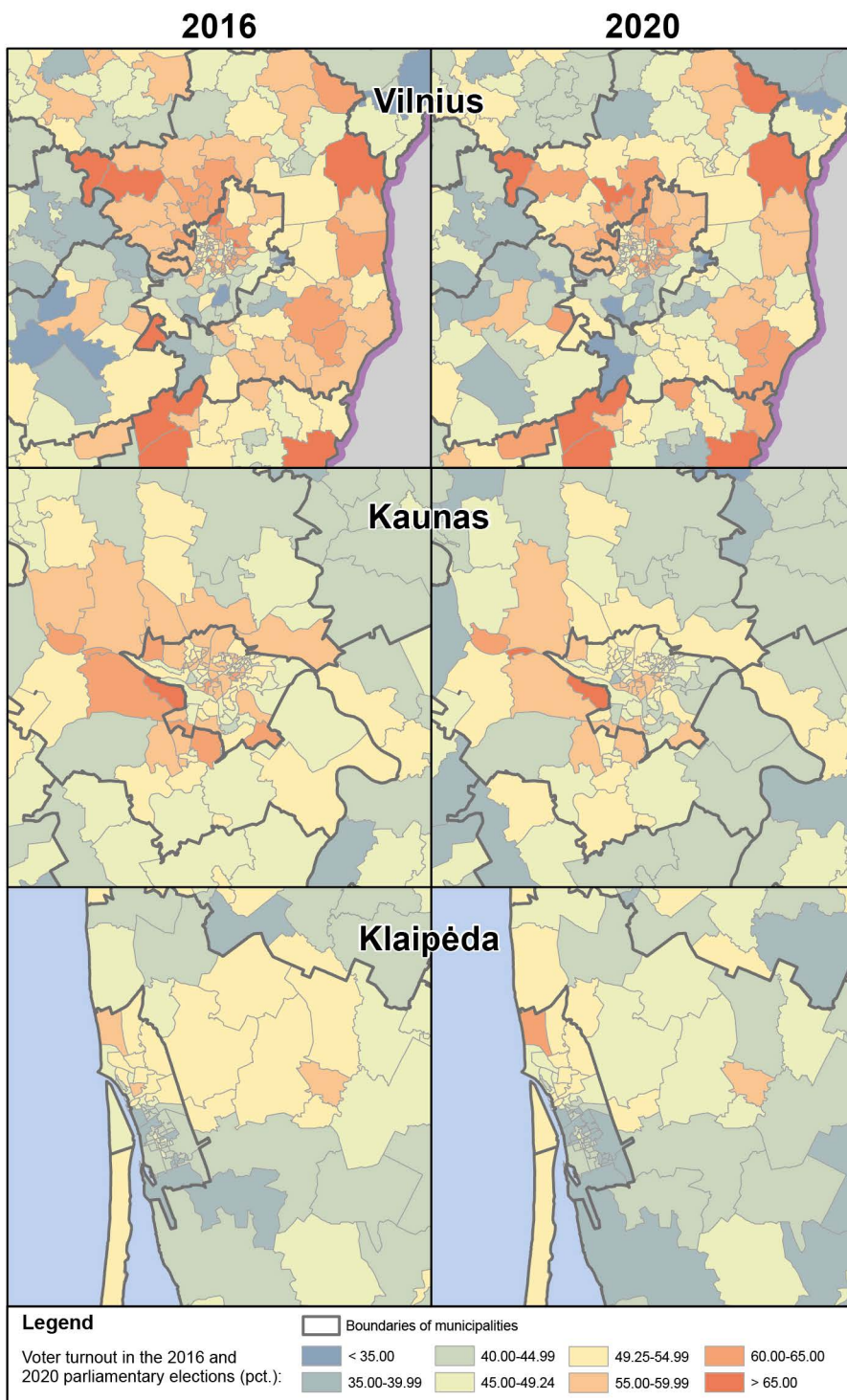
Figure 2. Voter turnout in pulling units of Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda in 2016 and 2020, %

divisions. In all three cities neighbourhoods with a lower share of residents with high professional status are less active. There were no major changes in spatial differentiation of voter turnout in 4 years period. In the northern suburbs voter turnout changed very slightly, but in the southern parts of the cities the turnout decreased even more. Voter turnout in most polling units of the Kaunas city municipality decreased evenly by about 5 per cent so general spatial differentiations remained stable.

Spatial differentiation of Lithuanian youth turnout in 2016-2020

Empirical studies of voter behaviour often include age as a demographic variable. The age variable is popular in research not only because it shows bio-physiological differences, but also reveals a person's life experience, and social and economic experience. Political changes also have different effects on voters of different ages. In democracies, sociologists and political scientists often observe that older voters are more active than younger ones (Green & Gerber, 2001; Opp, 2001; Darrow, 2003; Geys, 2006). Age is singled out as one of the most important variables in the study of the factors determining the turnout of Lithuanian voters (Gaidys 2014; Ramonaitė et al., 2014). As in most democracies, young voters in Lithuania are significantly more passive than older voters but this assumption is only based on Lithuanian wide-scale analysis. We may only state that age is an important factor and that in general younger population groups are less active but so far it was no evidence if this is true in all Lithuanian regions. We will try to find out if young age can always be qualified as a factor diminishing voter turnout and what spatial factors play a role here. We will also try to establish if there are considerable differences in voter turnout of younger population groups in different polling units and how the situation changed in 2016-2020.

Analyzing data on youth turnout we may notice that it was growing with each election during the last decade: in the 2012 parliamentary elections, it was around 18 per cent; in 2016 – 38.03 pct.; in 2020 – 38.17 pct. (data of the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania). Although the turnout of young voters increased by only 0.14% between the 2020 and 2016 parliamentary elections, this is still a positive trend in the context of the coronavirus pandemic and general trends of voting activity. Meanwhile, in the middle-aged groups, voter turnout decreased by 4.44% and in the retirement age group by 4.70%. A detailed analysis of the young voters' group shows that voter turnout in the 2020 parliamentary elections fell by 0.95% among voters aged 18-24, but rose by 1.41% among voters aged 25-29.

The relative differences in young voter turnout (as compared with the average one) are illustrated in the presented maps (Fig 3.). We may see that there were no major differences along the East-West axis neither in 2016 nor in 2020. On a countrywide scale, younger voters are quite evenly less active than other groups of the population. This once again confirms our assumption that regional differences in voter turnout depend on differences in age composition in different Lithuanian regions. We also can observe some relatively less active younger residents in the areas, where general voter turnout was higher (in the eastern part and around Raseiniai district municipality). Based on that, we may say that at the macro-level regional differences in youth activity are lower than those of other groups in general and this again confirms the assumption that voter age structure is one of the major factors of turnout differences across Lithuania. The analysis of voting activity and its changes in particular rural voting districts (which are bigger and visually dominant on the map) has little sense as the numbers of young voters are very small there. The personal decisions of a few residents can change general activity a lot in such a case. Anyway, we may observe that during the 2016 parliamentary elections, only
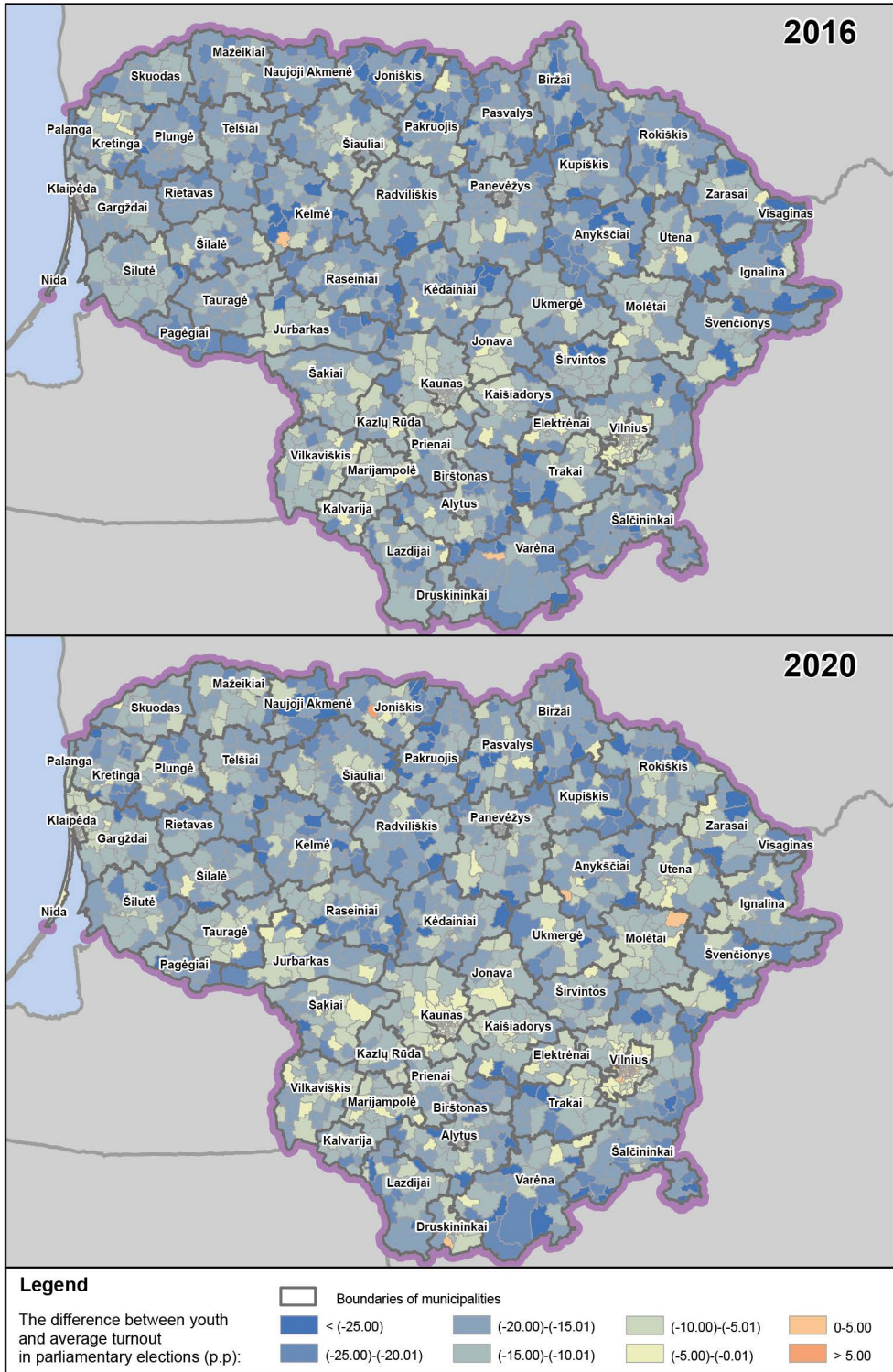
Figure 3. Relative turnout of young voters in Lithuania in 2016 and 2020, p.p. deviation from country average

in five territorial units from the entire country's polling units young people were more active than older voters (Fig. 3) and three of them are located, in Vilnius City (will discuss the situation inside cities later). Relatively smaller differences in voter turnout between the youth and voters of other age groups can be observed in most of the polling units of major metropolitan areas (Vilnius, Kaunas cities and suburban areas where more prosperous groups moved in during the last two decades).

As it was mentioned, the regional differentiation of youth turnout remains the same in the 2020 elections (Fig. 3), though young voters' turnout has increased while the overall voter turnout has decreased. In 2020 we may distinguish relatively more active youth voters in the economically and demographically more prosperous regions stretching around the main highway connecting two major Lithuanian cities Vilnius and Kaunas (Burneika & Pocius, 2019). Comparing the results of the 2020 and 2016 Seimas elections, youth turnout has also relatively increased in other urban and suburban municipalities with more positive socio-economic trends: Klaipėda, Palanga, Visaginas, Elektrėnai, Neringa, Marijampolė municipalities, Kaunas, Klaipėda and Panevėžys district municipalities. The biggest decrease is observed in the municipalities of Raseiniai, Zarasai, Lazdijai and Kelmė. All these municipalities are among the most peripheral in relation to the three major growth poles of the country.

Also based on the fact that younger voters' activity is even more spatially polarised than elders groups' turnout and on the presumption that social difference is an important factor of young voters' behaviour, we may hypothesize, the spatial differences of social status between young residents can be even bigger than among other groups of the population. This presumption goes in line with the results of previous studies indicating the selectiveness of inner migrations inside Lithuania when more successful younger residents leave for major urban centres (Ubarevičienė, 2018).

The spatial differentiation of young voters in Metropolitan areas

All three major cities (and especially Vilnius) stand out as territories where youth turnout is relatively high compared to the national average. This permits us to assume that the centre–periphery axis is an important dimension defining the political behaviour of youngsters, which either have different social characteristics (and previous research shows that they have) or behave differently in areas with various levels of urbanization. On the other hand, if the voting behaviour of youngsters depended more on their social status, we would have seen big differences in young voter turnout inside the cities (Fig. 4). If the major factor is an urban lifestyle itself, there should be no big differences of relative young voter turnout inside cities – differences between the voting activity of young and old residents should be more or less similar in different parts of any city.

The visual analysis of figures illustrating spatial differences in turnouts in 2016 and 2020 (Fig. 4) reveals that the young voters in cities are more active but the spatial differences of this activity in 2016 were much less evident than in 2020. Inner city areas had slightly more active residents but in general their tended to behave as the majority of voters in the city did (i.e., young voters were more active in richer northern and less active in the southern neighbourhoods). The major changes took place in 2020 when the spatial differentiation of electoral behaviour of young citizens substantially increased. The biggest differences can be seen in the most segregated Vilnius city, where young residents of the central and more prosperous suburban parts of the city become even more active than older groups. Young voters in peripheral industrial, more distant Soviet housing estate neighbourhoods with more mixed ethnic structure remain less active than the average voter in the country. The youth turnout also outweighed the overall turnout in several
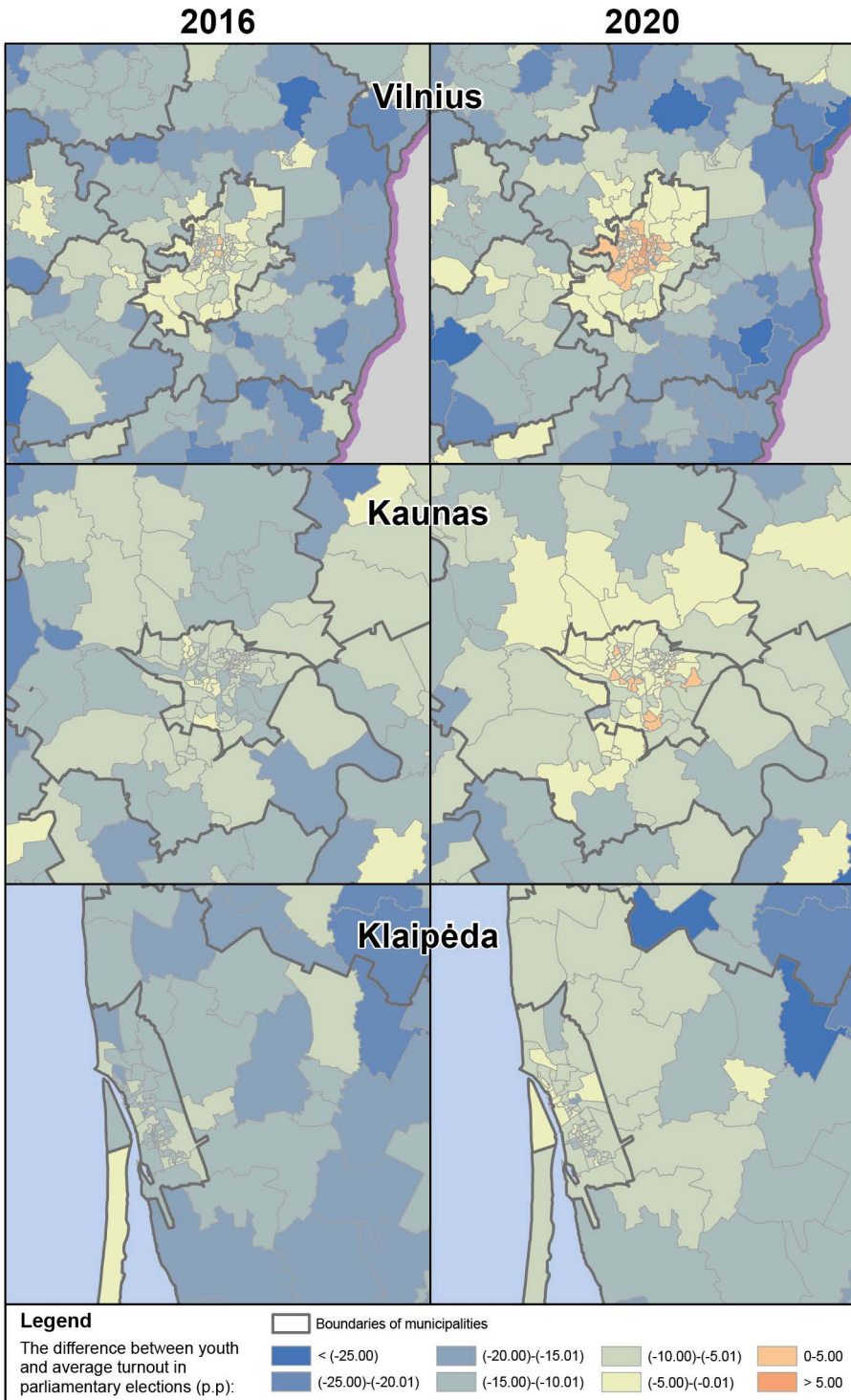
Figure 4. Relative turnout of young voters in Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda metropolitan areas in 2016 and 2020, p.p. deviation from country average

polling units of Kaunas, where spatial differences also increased but to a lesser degree. We may state, that some factor(s), influencing namely the behaviour of youngsters in richer neighbourhoods appeared. However, voter turnout of young citizens increased in Klaipeda as well but spatial differentiation remains almost the same. This could be explained by the fact that social differences in Klaipeda were smaller (at least in 2012). All these trends again suggest that factors, which facilitated the political activity of younger citizens have spatially differentiated impacts because this increase was very uneven. The youngsters residing in less prosperous, ethnically mixed, rural and peripheral areas, which tended to be less active during previous elections, as a rule, had been influenced to a lesser extent.

The influence of changing political field on the young voter turnout

This macro-level analysis cannot give exact answers about factors influencing the likelihood of participation in the election of particular persons in certain places, which can be influenced by many micro-level or local processes. The COVID-19 pandemic likely discouraged the participation of different age groups in elections differently but we cannot be sure that young voters were influenced less only because the disease is less dangerous for them. In this case, we can only analyze objective differences, which can be statistically reliable. Therefore, the question – what are the reasons that led to the uneven increase in youth turnout, can be answered only partially. We can only state that there were no major social, economic or cultural changes that would have a strong effect on the activity of young voters apart from the COVID-19 pandemic, which influenced the whole country. There were no other major social, economic or cultural changes, which could have strongly affected the activity of young voters during this period of stable economic growth, either in Lithuania's periphery or in the big cities. However, the party system has changed significantly since 2016.

The party system in Lithuania was under constant change since the restoration of Independence. New parties were established, and old ones merged or divided in between all parliament elections. However; all of these changes had very little to do with changes in parties' political orientation towards different age groups. New and old parties' elites mostly involved experienced politicians or other well-known persons. A major difference among right-wing parties, which in general were supported by urban and more prosperous population groups, appeared in the period between analyzed elections. Due to a major political corruption case, some younger members left the oldest and most influential liberal party "The Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania" and founded a new "Freedom Party". Thus, a new player in the political field stepped into the already fragmented Lithuanian party system, which had different demographic composition and started to address different problems offering new ideas and much younger candidates for younger groups of voters.

The problems addressed by the "Freedom party" – LGBT plus rights, the legalization of marijuana, climate change, clean environment, animal rights and similar are of great interest to young voters. No other party paid as much attention to youth issues in its electoral program as the "Freedom Party" did. Along with this, political advertising was mostly presented on the Internet, and on popular social networks, which are largely visited by young people. The average age of all party candidates was 38.55, while the average age of the second youngest party "Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats" was 47.31 (Table 2). The list of candidates of the "Freedom Party" was 11.6 years younger than the average age of all candidates. The "Freedom Party's" list of candidates had the highest number of young people (15 candidates aged 29 or under) representing more than 20 per cent of the list. The younger the candidate, the younger his social environment: friends, colleagues, neighbours, etc., who are easier to attract to come to the elections. This raises

Table 2. The share of young candidates in electoral lists of political parties of Lithuania in 2020 parliamentary elections

Party / Electoral list	Average age of candidates	Number of young candidates	Percentage of young candidates out of total candidates on the list
Freedom Party	38.55	15	20.27
The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats	47.31	9	6.38
Social Democratic Party of Lithuania	47.52	7	5.00
The Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania	48.06	4	2.84
Lithuanian Green Party	48.13	11	8.80
Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union	49.41	6	4.26
Labour Party	49.47	5	3.57
Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance	49.70	2	1.43
Lithuania – For everyone	49.96	2	4.17
National Alliance	51.19	6	8.57
Freedom and Justice	51.85	5	4.13
Centre Party – Nationalists	53.16	5	5.38
Social Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania	53.32	6	4.55
Christian Union	55.31	5	5.10
Union of Intergenerational Solidarity – Cohesion for Lithuania	55.89	0	0.00
Lithuanian People's Party	57.99	0	0.00
The Way of Courage	60.05	0	0.00

Source: Central Electoral Commission (2022).

the question of whether this political change could have influenced the turnout of young voters, which previously did not have any political alternative addressing namely their problems. As prior mentioned, the influence of political preferences on voter turnout has also been studied previously and certain relationships were established (Baranauskaitė & Tučas, 2014; Baranauskaitė et al., 2015; Burneika et al., 2015; Burneika et al., 2017). Nevertheless, these relationships were related to the correlation between both voter turnout and political preferences or to the correlation between political preferences and social or ethnic status. In this case in order to determine the links between youth turnout and parliamentary party preferences, a correlation analysis was performed (Tab. 3).

The analysis showed that the "Freedom" and "Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats" parties were characterized by a moderate positive relationship. It means that youth turnout was the highest in areas which supported these parties and we may

Table 3. The correlation coefficients between youth turnout and support for particular political parties in 2020 parliamentary elections

Variables	HU–LCD	LM	FP	SDPL	LFGU	LP	Other parties	Left-wing parties	Right-wing parties
Youth turnout	0.25296	-0.05725	0.32890	0.09028	0.18385	0.07767	0.11097	0.24880	0.34002

Source: Central Electoral Commission (2022).
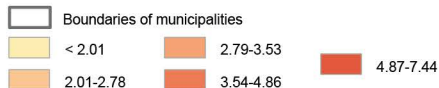
Legend

The difference between the turnout of young voters in the 2016 and 2020 parliamentary elections (p.p.):

Boundaries of municipalities

- < (-7.50)
- (-7.50)-(-5.00)
- (-4.99)-(-2.50)
- (-2.49)-(-0.01)
- 0-2.50
- > 2.50
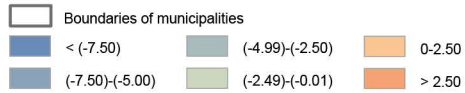
Legend

Freedom Party's share of votes in the 2020 parliamentary election of all eligible voters (pct.):

Boundaries of municipalities

- < 2.01
- 2.01-2.78
- 2.79-3.53
- 3.54-4.86
- 4.87-7.44

Figure 5. The differrnces of tournout of young voters and the support for the Freadom party in 2020 parliamentary election

state that the increase in voting activity is at least partly related to the phenomenon of the "Freedom" party. The correlation among other parties was less evident. "Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union" stood out with a weak positive relationship. The relationship between young voter turnout and the "The Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania", "Social Democratic Party of Lithuania", and "Labour Party" was not determined. All parties that participated in the 2016-2020 Seimas elections were generalized according to the Left-Right model. A moderate positive relationship was found between youth turnout and Left and Right parties. A weak positive relationship was identified between changes in youth turnout and support for other parties not classified as either left or right.

The 2020 Lithuanian parliamentary election is no exception to previous ones. As in the past elections (Baranauskaitė & Tučas, 2014; Baranauskaitė et al., 2015; Burneika et al., 2015; Burneika et al., 2017), the change in youth turnout in the 2020 Seimas elections correlates most strongly with the support to right-wing parties. The strongest connection (among parties) was established with the newly formed Freedom Party. Certain trends can be observed by visual comparison of the change in the turnout of young voters and the maps illustrating the support for the "Freedom Party" (Fig. 5). Youth turnout increased and the greatest support for the "Freedom Party" was found in the big cities of Lithuania (Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda) and their surrounding municipalities. In general, with very few exceptions, the higher increase in youth turnout can be observed in those municipalities, where this party was supported the most.

Conclusions and discussion

Many studies are revealing spatial differences in voting preferences, which are related to the territorial differentiation of society. This research has revealed that a similar trend is common for the will to participate in the elections, though these differences are less polarised than support for political parties. Our study suggests that the turnout rate similarly to many other socio-economic phenomena differs in central metropolitan and peripheral regions but there is little evidence of differences between less successful urban and rural areas. Apart from various locally bound reasons the major regional differentiation in Lithuania is most probably determined by the different age composition of voters and different distances to the capital and other major cities. Our research suggests so far that age is among the most obvious factors of different voting activity. Other social factors like ethnic or social status also have their role but it could be either increasing or decreasing activity depending on local circumstances.

The analysis revealed that young voters' turnout, which is generally lower in both Lithuania and many other countries, can vary even more than the general one. This suggests that age is not the only factor differentiating voter turnout across Lithuanian territory. The social composition of younger voters creates spatial differences in turnout inside the country. It also defines what influence on voter turnout can make such factors as the new political parties addressing problems, topical for younger population groups. The result of the 2020 parliamentary election not only reveals that new political forces can benefit from addressing groups' less active in elections. It also reveals that such an impact can be highly polarised as the relative increase is evident in the best locations of the country, while less successful, more marginalised areas largely remain out of the political field. The authors did not have data on voter's social status, but previous findings revealed that young and more prosperous residents were moving towards the central metropolitan areas (Ubarevičienė & van Ham, 2017) and it seems that the spatial differentiation of younger groups is even higher than among other population groups. If these trends persist, the Lithuanian

political field will become even more polarised along the centre–periphery axis and voting results will tend to overrepresent the will of a more prosperous population.

Editors' note:
Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors', on the basis of their own research.

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